

Excerpt from:

Anna Davis' catalogue essay for *Primavera 2011: Exhibition of Young Australian Artists*  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

*Impossible Utopia* (2011) is a site-responsive project made for *Primavera 2011* that re-frames the social history of The Rocks from the perspective of the built environment. The work investigates a range of ongoing issues in the local area, including land grabs, real-estate speculation, community displacement and commercial greed. As the artist describes, the work looks at significant historical moments through the lens of 'Rum, Rebellion and Rats, and discovers they all point back to one thing: Real Estate'.\*

Taking American inventor and futurist Buckminster Fuller's potent symbol of utopian architecture—the Geodesic Dome— as a starting point, the work's centerpiece is a multi-coloured hand-stitched inflatable structure, made from hundreds of discarded and donated umbrella skins. Symbolic of a communal way of thinking, its patchwork surface suggests ideas of the network, group effort and shared space.

Lightweight, easily moved and able to be used as an instant refuge, the dome's soft pneumatic structure feels out of place in the hard-edged urban environment. It aims to inspire audiences to ask questions relating to the preservation of the local neighborhood, and more broadly the accommodation crisis we currently face in our cities. Like a speculative thought bubble, it encourages us to imagine a different kind of urban living, evoking ideas of modularity, instant housing and mobile shelters. A call for social and spatial liberation, the dome also functions as a proposition for alternative uses of public space.

Inside the air-filled structure, visitors find a hand-drawn illustrated map tracing a series of political flashpoints in The Rocks' history, printed onto Perspex and paper. From the ultimate land-grab when the area was taken from its traditional Indigenous owners during European colonisation, the Rum Rebellion of 1808; large-scale government slum clearances after an outbreak of Bubonic Plague in 1900, the formation of The Rocks Residents Group and Green Ban clashes of the 1970s and most recently the selling off of long term public housing and the controversial Barangaroo redevelopment; The Rocks has been the site for numerous clashes between various interest groups over issues of housing versus real estate, the commercialisation of public space and the preservation of local communities. de Souza's printed maps are designed to facilitate self-guided tours during and beyond the exhibition, and enable visitors to rediscover the area's controversial history through a first-hand experience of The Rocks.\*\*

During the exhibition, the artist will also lead a one-off tour event titled *Ramble through the Rocks (2011)*, where participants listen to guest speakers discuss the local community's ongoing struggle to live in a city that continuously places commercial imperatives above people's housing needs.

Informed by a tradition of experimental air-filled architecture and utopian urban designs from the 1960s and 70s, such as the fantastical art projects of Ant Farm and Archigram, *Impossible Utopia* attempts to stimulate people's imagination in order to promote alternate models of living. Fictional utopias and propositional designs have historically been used to visualise humanity's dreams and fantasies, and to put forward ideas and concepts that reflect notions of a perfect society. Sources of wonder and immersion, these autonomous worlds are often detached from our everyday lives and just like de Souza's sculpture, are not functional in reality. Reminiscent of a fall-out shelter, a space capsule, an Antarctic research module, an igloo or a biosphere, the artist's sculpture embodies the ambition and failure of many utopian visions. Slightly lopsided, noisy and comically bulbous, its umbrella clad surface is ironically not suitable for use in the rain.

Architecture surrounds us, its structures and frameworks influence nearly every aspect of our lives. de Souza's *Impossible Utopia* proposes a re-thinking of architectural forms and the way we currently inhabit our cities. Focusing on issues of neighbourhood, home and housing rather than the commercial forces of real estate, it raises a number of questions surrounding the endurance of The Rocks' community, Sydney's notoriously unaffordable housing market, and the current rental crisis in urban centres."

\* Artist Statement, July 2011

\*\*Keg de Souza's map was a *Perambulators* commission by Performance Space as part of the year-long project *WALK*

\*\*\* Artist Statement, July 2011