

James P. Lesh

Land Boom Advertising: a socio-spatial mapping of the 1885 subdivision of Cremorne

TO CONSIDER MAPS as objects of material culture, geographer Martin Brückner advises us to ask the question, ‘What do maps . . . want us to know?’¹ Maps, like any object, are not passive remnants of the past; rather they provoke numerous lines of potential inquiry.² When Cremorne, a suburb of inner east Melbourne, went to auction in January 1885, a land sale map was prepared to attract interest³

A part of material culture, the Cremorne Broadsheet⁴ is not only an article of commercial ephemera incorporating a subdivision map but also an aesthetic object, a product of print culture, a socio-spatial representation offering clues about the then booming metropolis.⁵ This article utilises what Karen Harvey calls the object-driven approach to material culture along with Jules Prown’s typology for studying objects to investigate the socio-spatial significance of the Cremorne Broadsheet. Prown advises students of material culture to describe, then deduce and finally speculate about objects – and so this article takes that approach to uncover the Broadsheet’s entanglement with Melbourne’s socio-spatial transformation of the 1880s.⁶

The Cremorne Broadsheet provides an abundance of internal evidence about its function and use. A lithograph printed by Troedel & Co. for Walstab & Son, the Broadsheet is both large, ca. 50 x 70 centimetres – and colourful – a six-colour palette of black, brown, mustard, aqua, moss and yellow. Neglect has left the Broadsheet in relatively poor condition; the top-right is severely damaged and marks of wear are visible throughout. Nevertheless, much is ascertainable. Divided into two parts, a heading – titled ‘Cremorne, Richmond’ – occupies a fifth of the space, and contextualises the subdivision map and bywords below. The map shows the suburb with its principal streets and the constituent lots and blocks: it is ostensibly accurate by virtue of the cartographic symbols, surveyor’s signature and explicit copy. A railway line, the Yarra River, and a series of assertions about the area and properties border the map. Fonts and contrasting colours emphasise the header, highlight particular claims and increase the maps readability. Its format and content imply an advertisement that was plastered on a wall, whilst the precise date and its condition suggest ephemera. The Broadsheet, per the embedded clues, outlines lots of property for sale and proposes attendance at their auction on 31 January, 1885.

Attracted to the Cremorne Broadsheet, the perceiver’s experience is at once predictable and incongruous. Passing by the hung Broadsheet, its large size, colours and puffery would have drawn the streetwalker closer. They might have approached the Broadsheet to examine its detail from up close, inspecting the messages and lots of land. Assumedly, the principal audience was property buyers who were enticed to firstly



Cremorne Land Sale Broadsheet, 1885, Houghton Collection, SLV.

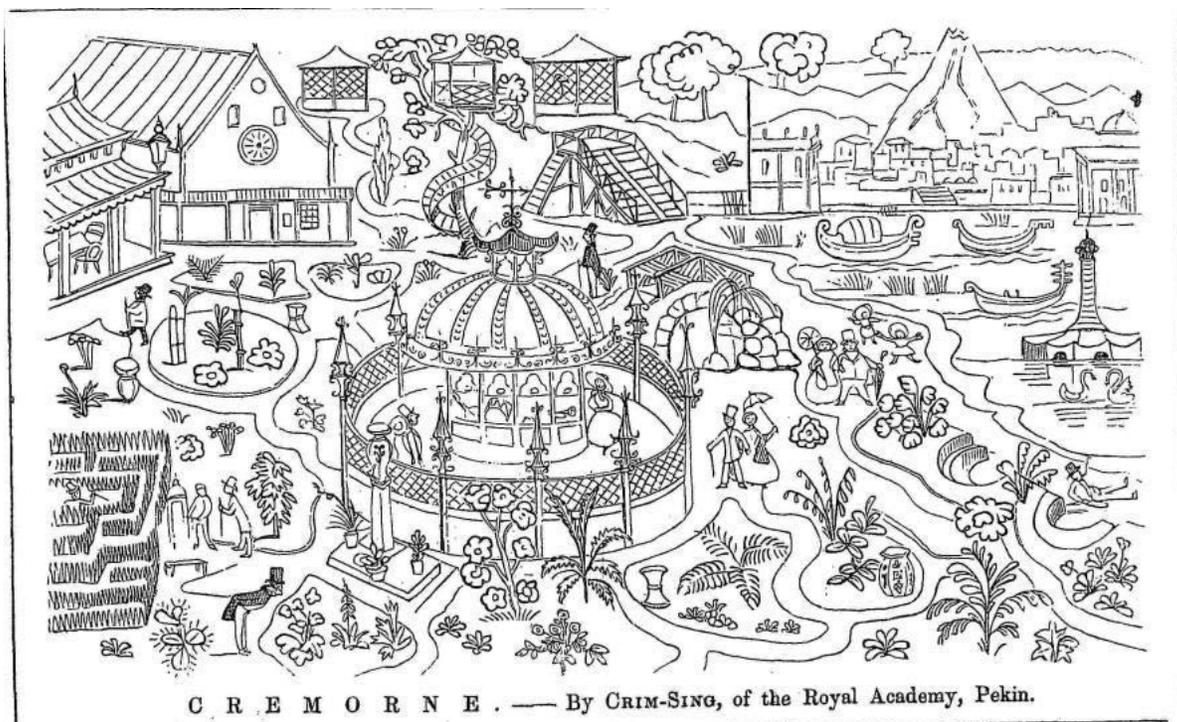


S.T. Gill, artist, Cremorne Gardens from near the residence of Col. Anderson, 1854.
Lithograph print. H12599.

this indigenous presence lingered in the local imagination into the twentieth century.

‘Bear’ had visited Cremorne soon after the area was named by James Ellis after the site of the same name in London. An aspiring although untalented entrepreneur who had arranged unprofitable public amusements in London, Ellis, on account of the gold rush joined thousands of other émigrés in sailing to the Colony of Victoria to seek new opportunities. Assisted by the colonial authorities, Ellis arrived at Port Phillip, Melbourne in July 1852, and then detoured to the goldfields at Ballarat to entertain the diggers who would thus be able to ‘combine pleasure with gold-seeking.’⁹ Having had little success in Ballarat, by January 1853 Ellis had returned to Melbourne, procuring a house and garden in Richmond from the colonial architect Henry Ginn.¹⁰

On the Broadsheet, the stately house was that very property – albeit with some later additions – and the lots divided the former gardens. Ellis selected the name¹¹ because of the pleasure garden in London that he had founded during 1845-46 on the estate known as Cremorne.¹² He was thus able to lay claim to have established what later became the



Cartoon from *Punch* (Melbourne), 6 November 1856, showing the amusements at the Cremorne Gardens.

most illustrious of London's Victorian era pleasure gardens – the Cremorne Gardens on the riverbank at Chelsea – and also to have brought its kind of modern entertainment to Melbourne. In reality, Ellis lacked entrepreneurial flair, and had ended his involvement in the London venture in 1850 after declaring bankrupt, over a decade before London's Cremorne reached the height of its success.¹³

Amidst the gold rush, with a growing population that demanded amusement and distraction, Melbourne was ripe for a pleasure garden.¹⁴ The Cremorne Gardens opened to visitors in December 1853. Ellis went on to manage the venture for just two seasons before again declaring bankrupt. For the summer season of 1855-56 Percival Scott opened the gardens.¹⁵ The showman and politician George Selth Coppin arranged the gardens for a further seven seasons until he shut the venture in 1863 to focus on other business ventures. Over its ten-year life Cremorne welcomed up to 10,000 visitors every day and night during its annual summer season.¹⁶ Visitors paid around a shilling to enter the grounds, and then enjoyed refined daytime entertainments such as promenading, tended garden beds, the theatre and other performances, an American-style bowling

saloon, a hedge maze and a menagerie. Although writer Louisa Ann Meredith did not attend, her husband and son did and returned with ‘marvelous accounts of the acrobats, dancers, gated lamps, fireworks, and pyrotechnic tableaux’.¹⁷ Yet Cremorne was most exciting at night. Once the sun had set, the gas lamps were lit and the day-trippers had left, young and unmarried women and men revelled into the early hours of the morning, provoking much controversy.¹⁸

After Coppin shut the pleasure garden, Cremorne was acquired by James Thomas Harcourt. He opened the colony’s first private lunatic asylum on the site in 1865.¹⁹ The buildings that Coppin had constructed for the purpose of entertainment were thus appropriated to house those interned at the institution.²⁰ The satirical periodical *Punch* commented, ‘Near the river is the Lunatic Asylum . . . [t]he place was formally called Cremorne, and was the resort of persons dancing mad - many of these unfortunates are still inmates. . . . The admission is free, the patient providing himself with six towels, a knife, and a fork and spoon.’²¹ Cremorne again emerged as a site of aberrant experience, a kind of heterotopia; a term theorist Michel Foucault used to describe non-hegemonic space.²²

Cremorne by the 1880s had become an increasingly valuable parcel of land, and so property speculators sought the property. As with the pleasure garden, the lunatic asylum closed not for lack of commercial interest, but because broader urban processes were stirring. A concerned Melbourne resident earnestly noted: ‘Great inconvenience had resulted . . . If a lady of Toorak became afflicted with any form of insanity, she must now be exposed to the contamination of mingling with questionable people at [the public lunatic asylum at] Kew.’²³ From indigenous camp to pleasure garden to lunatic asylum to speculative estate, Cremorne thus occupied an uncharacteristic place in the local imagination.

By the 1880s, there were indeed broader social and economic forces reshaping the fabric of the city. Melbourne was experiencing a period of extraordinary growth that included a speculative land boom. This boom coincided with the emergence of a ‘suburban ideology’, which historian Graeme Davison describes as the workingman’s moral duty to secure safety and security for their family by acquiring a ‘castle of his own’ on the ‘suburban frontier’.²⁴ In 1885, towards the beginning of the boom, Cremorne, part of swelling, industrialising and working-class inner-suburban Richmond thus emerged as a desirable location for housing.²⁵ Cremorne was not too far from the factories of Richmond or the new Richmond Station. With the huge expansion of the railways, Richmond became perceived as a convenient transit hub east of the central business district in contemporary newspaper advertising. ‘Madness was in the air’, wrote historian Michael Cannon.²⁶

The subdivision of Cremorne in 1885 was one of many speculative property ventures. The land was almost certainly acquired by the notorious Thomas Bent in partnership with his regular associate J. S. Vicery through an investment vehicle. From the 1870s onwards, Bent acquired properties throughout Melbourne, and then



Cox and Luckin, *photographers*, Cremorne Gardens, Richmond, 1861.
Photograph, albumen silver, 1861. H26075.

subdivided and sold them for a huge profit. Bent also entered the Colonial Parliament in order to advance his commercial interests, eventually becoming Premier of Victoria.²⁷ By the 1880s, Bent was approving new railway lines to increase the value of properties that ran along railway corridors for the benefit of himself and his associates. Whilst Bent's connection to Cremorne was not identified on the Broadsheet, he is named alongside Vickery in early newspaper advertisements placed for the land sale.²⁸ Perhaps because of his notoriety, his name was dropped from the later advertisements and replaced with the claimed attributes of the locality, as reproduced on the Cremorne Broadsheet.

At this point, the Cremorne Broadsheet thus again becomes relevant, with its intrigue amplified by virtue of its historical context. To begin, other contemporaneous announcements were placed in newspapers for the land sale, such as a particularly

descriptive one in *Punch*.²⁹ The Broadsheet was one of many land sale broadsheets fashioned by printers Troedel & Co and the auction houses during the boom, albeit a relatively austere example. Although many companies auctioned these newly subdivided plots, the majority of their accompanying advertising broadsheets were designed and printed by Troedel.

These broadsheets employed almost uniform layouts, language, and imagery, which might be labelled as ‘Troedel Iconography’. Like most of the broadsheet, despite the many assurances, the proportions and orientation of the Cremorne Broadsheet are factually inaccurate when compared to present-day maps.³⁰ The blocks and lots are out of proportion and not to the scale claimed. Whilst Geoffrey Serle notes the increasingly misleading maps and subdivisional plans from 1886-87 onwards, this Broadsheet, less overtly misleading, dates from January 1885 (or perhaps December 1884 given the lead time required for printing coupled with the need to advertise the auction well in advance), thus strengthening our understanding of the period.³¹

By 1888 there were sometimes up to 30 subdivision auctions on a single weekend, so similar broadsheets would have been proliferated throughout the city.³² On account of their repetition over the previous few years, each individual broadsheet would have become gradually less effective at capturing interest. Although the impact of this advertising is difficult to measure, its appearance early on in the boom period might have made it more effective. Interestingly, we do not know where these broadsheets were hung; perhaps in train stations or on hoardings at building sites, in the central business district, and around the local area. This Broadsheet is thus one of a few surviving objects of Melbourne’s material culture that exhibits how the boom’s irrational exuberance – which ultimately led to the huge bust of 1890-91 – pervaded everyday urban experience.

Having described, deduced and contextualised the Cremorne Broadsheet, it is now appropriate to return to the opening question – ‘What do maps want us to know?’ – in order to find the hidden socio-spatial clues. With built evidence from the period lacking, architectural historian Miles Lewis advises of the usefulness of the State Library of Victoria’s collection of land sale posters for studying buildings despite their cartographic impreciseness and commercial hyperbole.³³ Whilst they certainly help uncover Melbourne’s architectural heritage, they also enable an even grander quest into the metropolitan past. Intriguingly, the mixed social effects of the land boom are discernible from the Broadsheet. During the boom, every third male in Melbourne owned a block of land, one of the highest rates of home ownership in the world.³⁴

The large number of lots on the subdivision plan demonstrates how homes became smaller as working-class families sacrificed room to achieve home ownership. Moreover, the Broadsheet, when analysed cartographically, shows rows of effectively isolated houses at the lower parts of the map. The claim of a nearby station, not present on the map, is questionable (and in reality at least a fifteen minute walk). Spatially segregated from the wider community, many people living *and working* in Richmond, meant that movement became increasingly local. It became uncommon for families to venture much further

than the adjoining suburb.³⁵ Although the land sale was publicised widely – in numerous local newspapers, through the broadsheet, and perhaps handbills too – the features of the lots made them attractive to low income families; small blocks, suited to terrace housing, and ostensibly near to public transport. As recently as 1985, in the *Cremorne News*, a local resident surmised: ‘Cremorne was liable to flooding, but land and house were cheap and good enough for the working-classes.’³⁶ The Broadsheet demonstrates how workers were compressed into a demarcated, isolated working-class space, with potentially greater ramifications such as social isolation, tension and exploitation.³⁷

The sale on 31 January 1885 did not go as well as would have been expected given the claims made by the Broadsheet and other advertising. In all probability, they hoped to sell all 282 lots, but by 7 o’clock that Saturday afternoon, only 167 had sold.³⁸ The remaining 115 lots – including the river frontages and the Ginn/Harcourt estate – were still on the market. The asking prices may have been too great, and some of the lots lacked appeal. For instance, the Yarra River regularly flooded at that time, which made those riverfront properties an especially unattractive investment; in fact, they were never sold. They were also the farthest distance from the train station. Over the course of the next 18 months, numerous land sales were held for the remaining lots listed on the Broadsheet as well as for nearby properties. Other property owners were probably trying to cash in on the excitement generated by Cremorne and the general fervour of the land boom. Endorsing Serle’s account of the years 1886 onwards, later property advertising concerning Cremorne became increasingly dubious: ‘Buyers at the Sale will double their money [and] Richmond Station, fast approaching completion, will be the most important station in the colony.’³⁹ That said, some incremental improvements were made to the area including a walkway across the Yarra River to Toorak attached to the ‘nearly rebuilt Cremorne Railway Bridge of 1886’.⁴⁰

On that Saturday afternoon in late January 1885, those 167 properties sold for a total of £13,389/14/-, an average of about £80 per property. The second major sale the following September returned £1,648 for 26 lots, a reduction to approximately £63 per property. At the third and final sale in November 1885, in addition to the ‘Cremorne Estate’, 73 properties were sold for £2049, a mere £28 per allotment, and the value for property in the Cremorne and southern Richmond area steadied closer to the to September figure over the following twelve months. At least 16 properties were unsold.⁴¹ The claim made in the advertisements that properties in the area would double in price was plainly false. Interestingly, rental returns on similar properties in the area were upwards of £30 per annum. So for those in a position to purchase property as an investment, annual rental returns were 50 per cent or more, or so it seemed. In reality, the expense of finance inflated the total cost of purchasing a property well above the £60 to £80 range (and thus reduced rental returns, which conversely drew renters rather than buyers). A financially illiterate working-class buyer was forced by the property vendor into acquiring their mortgage from an unscrupulous broker that charged exorbitant interest rates. Many families lost their homes the following decade when the boom turned to bust.

Although much has changed today, by the twentieth century, Cremorne, Richmond and much of inner-city Melbourne had become undesirable for reasons that already existed in the 1890s. Transport was often inadequate, essential services were barely existent, and the properties themselves were of poor quality. The post-war boom of the 1950s encouraged another generation to move from the inner-suburbs to the outer-suburbs. When one walks the streets of Cremorne nowadays, remnants of the past as revealed by the Broadsheet and its history remain. The original terraces from the late nineteenth century, now admired for their aesthetic, are for the most part intact. Many of them are being renovated as the processes of gentrification spreads south from Richmond, making Cremorne a desirable address for the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Cremorne still holds a distinctive place in Melbourne's history. Its name was honoured in 1999 when the area bounded by Punt Road, Swan Street, Church Street and the Yarra River – extending the region shown in the Broadsheet in all possible directions – was promoted from a locality to a suburb. As of April 2013, there are plans in motion to rename the current East Richmond Station, Cremorne Station.⁴² Although this would not resurrect the original Cremorne Station – the last train passed through it in November 1863 and the spot is now a rail interchange – it would restore the name in spirit.⁴³

On the ground the area's history is celebrated. Because the southernmost lots between Dover Street and Cubitt Street, the riverfront lots, never sold, the area was made into a small park. Sadly, it no longer offers river views. During the 1980s, the Monash Freeway was built over the former Harcourt Parade, and a large concrete sound wall was then erected, which blocks views across the Yarra River to Toorak. Nevertheless, this park is a tranquil spot, with lovely tended garden beds and a children's playground. Amidst this park is a large rock affixed with two plaques. One of them records this area as the location of a pleasure garden, and the second celebrates the first balloon flight in the antipodes, which was launched at the pleasure garden in 1858. Named for the local figure and pleasure garden proprietor, Coppin Street is located nearby. The Richmond and Burnley Historical Society work to safeguard this area's history.

The Cremorne Broadsheet when considered using an object-driven approach to material culture opens underexplored and intriguing lines of enquiry into Melbourne's past, revealing an intricate mix of socio-spatial entanglements, many of which remain to the present day.