

[Transcript] Conversations / The Big Pineapple, The Big Merino, The Big Gumboot: how big things captured Australia

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The big merino. The big prawn. The big bogan.
Our nation's highways and country towns are littered
with an astonishing number of big things.
As a kid growing up in Queensland in the 1980s,
my family made a pilgrimage to the big pineapple.
I remember loving the size of it, the kitsch weirdness of it
and I do also remember a very good tropical fruit parfait we had there.
A few years ago though, I took my own kids to the big pineapple
and I don't know if I'd overhyped it, but they were not impressed.
And to be fair, what was inside was now just a series of dusty displays
of tinned pineapples and old cans of golden pash,
and there was certainly no parfait to be found.
This is one of the ways that big things can go.
Being loved, then falling into disrepair,
then maybe spruced up and loved again,
and if not, well big things by their very nature
can be pretty challenging to get rid of.
Dr Amy Clark is a serious historian
who unexpectedly became an expert on big things.
Hi Amy. Hi.
So mine was the big pineapple.
What was your first encounter with a big thing as a child?
I was fortunate to grow up in the Adelaide Hills
and in the Adelaide Hills have, I think, the best big thing,
not just in Australia, but in the big bold claim to start with.
I feel qualified to make that statement.
We have the big rocking horse in Gumaraca and it is spectacular.
I've never seen it, tell me.
Well, it's sort of sitting in this bush.
You kind of come around a bushy kind of road,
just looms out of nowhere.
It's white and red and you can climb up.
You used to be able to climb up.
Insurance may now have gotten in the way.
You used to be able to climb up
and there was a couple of different platforms
that you could look out from
and you got given a certificate to confirm that you'd done it,
that you'd climbed and there used to be a little toy shop underneath.
So it was heaven as a kid.
And why is there a big rocking horse?
Is this something that South Australia was famed for?

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The production of rocking horses?

They roam freely on the hills outside of Adelaide.

Absolutely. Let's perpetuate all these strange myths.

No, I think that in particular was a toy maker that was already in the business of making toys and he thought, why not offer this extra thing to get people coming to visit?

And he built it, it was 30 or 40 years ago now.

So the magic of that struck you as a kid.

But what about now as an adult

when you see a big thing on the landscape?

What does it do to you?

I mean, I'm probably still quite childlike in my wonder of big things.

Even the ones that are quite run down and the ones that look a little bit scrappy,

I still feel a sense of joy when I see them.

But there is definitely that adult part of my brain that says, this is a bit silly, you know?

Why did they bother to do this

instead of something far more serious?

I guess that's part of the appeal, isn't it?

There's something just by definition quite strange about building a big thing of something.

And I think that's why we all love them so much, you know, because they are in many ways completely unnecessary.

They're not saving the world.

They're not doing anything spectacular in terms of scientific discoveries.

And often, you know, the reaction we have to them, I think, is just pure joy.

Like that reaction of surprise

and, you know, you almost want to giggle when you see them.

You can't not point it out if you're in a car like, what is that? Look at that.

And that's why that's their whole point, you know, they're meant to be so big and so silly

and you're meant to feel compelled to pull the car or if you're a kid, you know, you're meant to feel like you're just going to hassle your parents until and sometimes you'll hassle them.

They'll have driven past and you'll still be hassling them,

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you know, half an hour down the road
and they'll then kind of turn the car around
just to make the kids shut up.
Feel like that you're speaking out of personal experience there.
Absolutely.

This expertise in big things is not what you intended for
in your career as a historian.

What did you research for your PhD?

So, I'm actually an architectural historian
and I did my masters in Edinburgh in Scotland
in architectural history and then came back to
Brazil to do my PhD here in Scottish heritage.

And this was, you know, ten years ago now.

So, I was looking at how different groups in Scotland,
the government, were manipulating Scottish heritage sites,
battlefields and so on to try and kind of promote
a particular historical narrative in the lead-up
to the Scottish independence referendum, which was in 2014.

Give me an example of that. That's fascinating.

Yeah, so, you know, the Scottish government was investing
in, say, a really big new 40 or 50 million pound
visitor centre at the Battle of Bannockburn.

And, I mean, it's a legitimate heritage site,
but it was interesting they chose that to invest in
in the lead-up because that is the last place in Scotland
that the Scots beat the English.

So, there was definitely that kind of narrative of,
let's remind everyone, as they're kind of coming into that
moment of voting in this referendum to leave England,
that we've beaten them before.

And so, I was very interested in that.

Well, I guess, you know, as that example illustrates
that what we choose to preserve and fund as heritage,
it shines a light on what we value as a society.

It can. I think there's also a risk of the opposite
in that we can also ignore things that we probably should save.

So, I was also interested in what wasn't being protected
and funded by the government at the time.

And, of course, back then it was anything that showed,
you know, maybe some kind of cooperation with England.

They were not putting money towards,
because they didn't want anyone to have this idea
that they'd been friends, I guess, at any point, historically.

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So, it is interesting the sort of, I guess, the decisions we make, the way that we push certain places or sites or landmarks to the forefront and ignore others. It's really actually been the kind of connecting narrative of my career.

When you say heritage, is that the same for you as history?

Or how are they, how about two terms, sit together?

I mean, they sort of sit next to each other.

I think heritage is very open to change and manipulation.

So, what we might now think of as important and worth saving may not be what people 20 years ago thought was important and needed saving.

So, it's quite a sort of shifting, evolving thing.

Whereas history, well, I mean, I teach my students

that history is also very malleable and flexible,

but I think that's more about, you know, the true,

or as close as we can get to the true, you know, event of what actually happened.

A record of fact rather than just how it's remembered.

So, Scottish independence, heritage sites,

how did that go into big things?

How did big things first come across your professional radar?

Well, so I'm a member of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand, an esteemed establishment.

And we have an annual conference and each year someone picks a theme

and it's meant to be quite a broad, vague theme

so that everyone going can, you know, manipulate it

to suit whatever their research is.

And the University of Canberra was holding it in 2017

and the theme they picked that year was quotation,

which was probably a great theme, but I thought, oh, God,

this is going to be so boring, you know.

And to be fair, I had, like, my PhD was,

it's an exhausting experience for anyone.

So, I was still a couple of years, you know,

I was still recovering.

Let's put it that way.

I still had your PhD hangover.

That's right, yeah.

And I just didn't feel that I, I was in my wild, you know,

graduation era of just doing silly things.

And I thought, everyone else is going to talk about Frank Lloyd Wright

who quoted this earlier architect.

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He quote, oh, how boring.

I'm going to talk about how big things are essentially quotations of real world objects, but huge.

And I fully, I'm not kidding.

I absolutely was hoping people would be offended and annoyed.

This was your punk rock moment.

You went in as Sid Vicious.

Yes, yeah, I didn't have a mohawk, but I definitely should have in hindsight done that.

And so, yeah, I was, I was thinking this is going to irritate people.

I was hoping people would walk out.

They didn't.

And so I was trying to be provocative.

And yeah, I came off stage and lots of really, you know, my, my seniors, you know, colleagues that I really look up to said, that was great, you know, what are you,

what are you going to do with this research?

What had excited them about it, do you think?

I think it's the same thing that everyone finds exciting.

And that is just the sheer silliness and joy of big things.

And I guess one of the points I made in that original paper was that no one else had taken it seriously.

No one else had bothered to do a history of it, to sort of think about it as something worth studying.

And I guess in many ways I sort of fell into that trap myself, because I was expecting everyone else to laugh at it.

And I think that sort of resonated with people, that tendency that we've had in academia to focus on the serious, the higher class, the more elite, you know, in architecture, we've certainly stopped doing that as much as what we might have been guilty of in the past.

But I think big things are much more, I won't say low class, but you know, they're quite an egalitarian sort of structure.

You don't need to be an architect or someone with an art history degree to understand what a big thing is doing.

It's a big pineapple.

That's it.

It's pretty straightforward.

So what makes a big thing a big thing?

I mean, is there a working definition?

You know, it has been my dream.

This just goes to reveal how completely boring my life is.

But when I was doing my PhD, I said to some friends and to my parents,

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I want to invent a word.

Like, I want to come up with a word no one else has come up with, that everyone in going forwards is going to have to use.

And that didn't happen, unfortunately.

But then big things, it turned out, there was no clear definition.

And so I've grasped that and I've developed what I like to think of as Amy's big rules.

Other than with us, please.

So a big thing has to be 3D.

So that sort of separates it out from a roadside billboard, like a 2D.

That doesn't count.

It has to be man-made.

And that kind of eliminates all of the, you know, there's a giant Mali route, for example, in Victoria that some people say, does that count?

You know, an Uluru, for example.

So it has to be man-made.

And it has to be so overwhelmingly large that you,

much larger than the real world thing,

but so overwhelmingly large that you feel compelled to look at it.

You feel compelled to, you know.

So I think it's not so much about scale

because if we were to say it just has to be bigger than the real world thing, we'd fall into the trap of, say, a mosquito that's the size of a Coke can.

That would count as a big thing.

And that's not a big thing.

That's a really unimpressive big thing.

Yes.

I have seen a big cane toad in Serena in North Queensland,

which is bigger than the cane toad, but it's not that big.

It's not huge.

I mean, there's an interesting sort of subcategory of big things that started out as pageant floats and parade floats.

And it's one of them.

So it was made by the local community.

Originally, they kind of paraded it through town on the back of a truck.

So it's not just purely because of that.

You know, it's not as big as the others.

It's a sort of big thing.

Yeah.

And I mean, sometimes the big thing is actually even smaller than the thing itself.

What did the Leyland Brothers build at Leyland Brothers World on the New South Wales coast?

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You know, this research is so fun for me
because I often get told off by people.
And the Leyland Brothers World had until recently,
it sadly burnt down a couple of years ago,
but they had what everyone referred to as the Big Uluru.
And I made the point a few years ago on TalkBack Radio
that that doesn't count as a big thing
because it's smaller than the real Uluru and...
Significantly smaller.
I mean, I did not think that was controversial.
I've got to say, I was...
I thought that of all the things I was saying on the radio that day,
that was the least offensive.
And yeah, the next person they put through just was...
I write and he said,
that is you are an Australian.
Oh, that's the big guns.
And I...
Ever since then, I've been trying to...
You know, I try to come up with Amy's rules
but then also say, you know,
these are open to interpretation.
And because big things are everyone's, you know,
that's really important.
I think everyone has the right to say
what they think a big thing is.
And it speaks to the affection with which people hold these objects, doesn't it?
So who am I, you know, to come in
and really force my rules down other people's throats?
And I don't want to be accused of being un-Australian again.
I learnt my lesson.
We respect the now sadly deceased little big Uluru.
I mean, some of the most beloved big things
are a little wonky looking.
And is that a common element too
that there's the kind of hand of the maker in these objects?
They're not seamless public art.
There's an amateur side to them.
I think, especially in the early era of big things,
you know, we're talking sort of 60s, 70s, 80s in Australia.
There was definitely a lot more of that kind of grassroots vernacular
people that just thought,
hey, I've got this great idea for a weekend project.

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I'll get my mates over, we'll drink some titties and we'll, you know, and so I think you do get that lovely sort of amateur.

They do look a little bit shoddy.

I love that though, you know,

and I think the sort of imperfection

that you can see it wasn't a professional artist

or that it wasn't manufactured in, you know,

a fiberglass, you know, factory or whatever.

I actually, I mean, that sort of type of big thing falls,

in my opinion, very firmly into what we would call folk art.

And I think we should be taking that quite seriously

and maybe, you know,

splitting it into a distinct category of big thing

away from those others that have been more professionally made.

What about statues?

I mean, where do they fit in Amy's rules and categories?

You know, that's a really great question

because there are some big things

that some people would describe as statues and vice versa.

So we used to have a big Captain Cook in Cannes.

He's actually been dismantled, I think,

and taken down last year or two.

I mean, he was just a big Captain Cook.

With a weird arm silhouette.

Yeah, making it a slightly unsavory gesture.

Yes, apparently he was modelled off of a painting

from the turn of the century,

turn of the 20th century.

He was also in that painting, apparently,

was gesturing hello to the First Nations peoples,

but it looked an awful lot like a sig hail.

Yeah, it was not, it was not great.

Yeah, so there'd been a lot of controversy around him

in the same vein that there has been a lot of discussion

in the last, say, 10 years, 15 years

about other Captain Cook statues.

So he's no longer there.

To me, he was very clearly a big thing

because he was very brightly coloured.

He was not made by an artist.

He was not made from metal.

He was largely ferro-concrete.

He actually had concrete cancer in his legs,

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and there was risk that he might disintegrate at the shins
and fall into oncoming traffic,

which would have been horrible, but hilarious.

So to me, he was very clearly a big thing.

But statues, I mean, you can apply my rules

and I guess classify statues as big things.

Personally, I think if it's not brightly coloured

and if it's not got that obvious sort of wow factor to it,

it doesn't count.

If it's not at risk of killing passing motorists,

it does not count as a big thing.

So do you know when and where the first big thing appeared?

Well, unfortunately, I hate to break Australian hearts,

but we did not come up with the concept of the big things.

We do it better, I will say.

That's not Australian.

I know.

Oh, no!

Oh, no.

It's like flashbacks.

No, we definitely do it best.

Let's get that out of the way.

The first obvious big thing was built in 1881

in New Jersey by a man named James Lafferty

and he built a series of big elephants

and he was a real estate developer.

So he was trying to get people to come out from New York

to look at his beachside properties and sell them.

So he was using the elephants as a kind of sales gimmick.

Which is interesting because that's kind of a big thing

that makes sense in the sense that an elephant is already big.

You just make it bigger as opposed to a pineapple.

That's exactly right.

Yes, and maybe there was...

I hadn't thought about that before,

but maybe there was some kind of showmanship in that as well.

We associate elephants with circuses

and that kind of fair ground atmosphere.

So I can see how he got to that point.

So he definitely kind of kicked that off.

People then realized this was working for him.

He was getting lots of publicity

and so the idea slowly spread around North America

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in the next couple of decades.

With what kind of objects?

What do they tend to make big things of in the States?

In the first era, the sort of 1880s, 90s into the 1920s,

it was a lot of big fast food.

So lots of strange ice cream cones and donuts

and all sorts of things advertising.

Essentially whatever you could buy on the side of the road.

Because that was...

It was a very straightforward sort of gimmick, really.

I mean, you're trying to advertise something that's right there.

So you want to have that immediate sort of recognition

of a motorist that gets them to pull it off.

So they were really close commercial kind of imperative to those.

Absolutely.

We then sort of see in the 60s in the States,

there was a sort of appearance of a couple of manufacturers

that made lots of the same kind of had molds

that they would pour fiberglass into.

And so we see at that point this appearance of the sort of...

I guess people in the States that collect these now call them muffler men, which I find is a really strange name for them.

And people go, yeah, so they were holding car mufflers,

car tyres, anything that would sort of advertise a roadside business.

So you would know that's a mechanic or that's a gas station or whatever.

And there were, at one point, there were thousands of these.

And we're talking like really, really huge men that all look the same

and they were all holding things.

So there's this very obvious kind of commercial fast food,

let's sell as much as we can on the roadside

and then sort of shifts into let's use these generic people type big things.

But again, still advertising in the States.

What about in Canada, which is somewhere you in your tireless research

into big things, Dr Clark you've travelled to,

what's their attitude to big things and what's popular there?

I do think it's interesting that Canada in so many ways

tries to differentiate itself from the United States.

And big things are no exception.

I don't know whether they've done this on purpose

or whether it's just a quintessentially Canadian thing.

They are much more like Australia in their kind of approach to big things.

So they have picked, you know, the regional sort of produce

or an animal or a fish or a bird that's specific to their location

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and that's what they've opted to build.

I mean, they do still have some of the commercial sodas Australia.

I mean, we have big golf balls and big beer cans and things.

So what sort of, like bears or?

Bears and there's, I did not know this until I went to Canada, but apparently the most fearsome creature in Canada is the Canadian goose.

So they have big geese.

So many.

And there's one town in Ontario, Wawa, that has three of them.

Wawa, yeah.

And they, they, here they just, they've become really, you know, fascinated by let's build all different types of big birds, lots of big fish in Canada as well.

Tell me about the, the stash between Canada and Norway over a big thing.

The time when big things became a major international incident.

So, you know, I mean, this, this is not the, I will say this happens in a lot of places.

Big things get used as ways to compete with one another,

ways to sort of settle disagreements, historic disagreements.

This one though is really interesting because I think the people of Saskatchewan, in fact, the town of Moose Jaw in Saskatchewan have had for many years, the biggest moose in the world.

His name is Max, the moose, very austere looking, he's huge.

And they were very proud of this.

And I think they just were going about their business, not thinking.

Canadian business.

Yeah, you know, thank you very much.

Sorry, thank you very much, you know, as Canadians do.

And a few years ago, they got wind that a town in Norway had built a slightly bigger moose called the Millennium Moose for some reason, because it was not the millennium it was after.

And this blew up very quickly, the Canadian press and the Norwegian press.

So it became an international incident just between those two countries.

And the Saskatchewan people decided, well, we've got to dismantle ours and rebuild him bigger.

So they created slightly bigger antlers for him and they put him up on a slightly higher plinth.

And in the end, the Norwegians were sort of so concerned that they'd upset the Canadians that the Norwegian ambassador to Canada went to Moose Jaw for the unveiling of the rehabbed, like, you know, he had plastic surgery, so Max the moose version two.

Yeah, so the Canadian, the Norwegian ambassador to Canada was there to sort of smooth everything over

and say, look, you win.

You win.

You win.

Arms down.

You can have it.

You can be friends.

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What is that about?

Why would it matter for goodness sake whether the Norwegian moose had?

Isn't that so strange, though, that, you know, that's such a low stakes thing, right?

Like of all the things that we could be really, really passionate about.

Global leaders in.

Yeah, absolutely.

But, you know, we've got a really great local example of this.

The town of Tully in Queensland claims to be the wettest town in Australia.

But it shares that title each year with the towns around it.

And Tully thought, right, well, we're going to fully claim that we're going to build the big golden gumboot.

And that way everyone will know we are officially, you know, without question the wettest town in Australia.

And one of the neighbouring towns was so offended by that that they said, we're going to build a big umbrella.

It didn't happen.

I guess it maybe wouldn't have been safe in psychotic winds.

I guess it's a way to really, you know, stamp your claim on something, isn't it?

It's the full stop at the end of the sentence, you know.

So what was our first big thing here in this country, Amy?

I mean, I can be very, very provocative here and upset a lot of people.

I'm from Adelaide originally.

So proud to say that I think the first big thing was the big Scotsman still standing.

You cannot look under his kilt.

I've tried.

He was built in 1962.

He's an Adelaide.

He's on the side of a hotel and he's spectacular.

But the big banana is perhaps the more famous early example.

He was built in 1964.

So it's a little over two years after the Scotsman.

But they, you know, they're very keen to promote that idea that they were the first.

The big banana is?

Yes, yes.

Yes, yes.

So I've had to sort of be very careful in the past.

And now I realize I'm saying this, you know, the entire world.

The nation is hearing you claim as a South Australian that it's the big Scotsman.

I stand by that.

You know, I'm proud.

I'm proud that we did that one thing.

You know, the big banana is definitely the most, the far by far the most famous and is definitely the one that kicked off the trend.

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You know, the big Scotsman is far less unknown.

The big banana, I think there's, there's obvious evidence of other communities becoming aware of the big banana and then saying we should do that too.

So I think in that sense, it's the pioneer.

So Amy, you were saying just before that although the big banana might count as the iconic big Australian thing, it's actually the big Scotsman that was the first.

What other would be in your kind of top 10 or what are the, what are the items that have made it from just local curiosity into national icon when it comes to big things?

I mean, there are a couple that I think most people have either seen themselves or know about.

I mean, you mentioned the big pineapple.

I think that's right up there.

Interestingly, there used to be a second big pineapple just up the road in Gimpy.

It was built at largely the same time and there's a local rumor that one of the construction companies

stole the plans off of the other Skull Duggery in the big thing world.

Yes.

Yes.

So I think the big pineapple that's still standing, one in Nambu is, is one of those.

I mean, you just can't help but love it.

It's just beautiful.

There's no, no other way you could describe it.

I, I'm quite drawn to, you know, I guess the really silly big things that perhaps the lesser known ones that people don't know about.

There is a big rolling pin in Aubrey Wodonga that at one stage did actually rotate.

It was advertising a bakery and it's that quirkiness that I love.

I really love that.

A lot of our big things are based on food like the pineapple, but there's the, the, the big mango.

There's the big potato in New South Wales, often referred to as something else.

Yeah, it doesn't, it's got an unfortunate look, that big potato, doesn't it?

Why is that wise food so popular with our big things?

Do you think?

Yeah, I think, well, I mean, in Australia at least, we've, we've always sort of gravitated towards big things when we're trying to promote a region, trying to promote a local business.

But it's, it's often we're trying to think about, well, what do we do in this particular part of Australia that's different to everywhere else?

Or what do we want to be known for?

And it often is sort of fresh produce or, you know, other primary industries, cows, bulls, for example, there's bulls in Rockhampton.

So I think it's, it is about that.

It's about sort of celebrating our, our primary industry in a strange way.

But foods, you know, I think is also often what is trying to be sold at the business.

So it makes sense to be marketing that component.

I've never seen it.

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And now, sadly, I never can.

Tell me about the big, in fact, the giant earthworm in Victoria.

What was the story there?

I've never seen it either.

And I, it's tragic because it'd be like Romans talking, like the, the library of Alexandria or the, you know, the hanging gardens of Babylon.

We missed this.

It's, it's, it's truly tragic that it is no longer with us.

So it turns out that Gippsland has a very unique, it's called the giant Gippsland earthworm.

The giant is actually part of its name.

And it's, it's isolated to this one tiny part of Victoria.

And several decades ago, a couple of businessmen had some property on the side of the road, the Bath Highway going down towards Phillip Island.

And they thought, well, what can we build here that will get people to stop?

And they thought, well, why not build a couple of hundred meters long giant, giant Gippsland earthworm

that will get people sort of pulling over, but will also be educational.

So you used to be able to walk through it.

And it was designed to make you feel like you were actually inside the worm.

So I have been told the walls were sort of squishy.

The floor kind of had a squelchy sound to it.

They had got a botanist who was an expert in the worms had recorded the sound they make or their stomachs make.

And then when you got to the stomach part of the giant, giant earthworm, it would play that sound.

So you'd be like, you were hearing you were inside its stomach.

I mean, just so people told you their memories of visiting.

Oh my gosh.

Yes.

So anyone, anyone that either has lived in Victoria or Melbourne in this era or went on holidays down to Phillip Island will have this really clear memory of.

And I imagine from the road to it must have looked very strange

because it would have just been this really long brown, you know, upright or on the ground on the ground.

You could walk all the way through it.

I mean, how cool is that?

There are a sad litany of other big things that have been lost to time.

What are some of the others that now only are only kept in history and memory?

I mean, it's funny because some of the ones that we've lost in my view are the ones that are so quintessentially Australian.

We've also recently lost a series of big wool bales, which doesn't sound very interesting, but they actually were quite fascinating.

They were quite spectacular.

They looked amazing.

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They were in Victoria as well.

We at one stage had a big wine cask, which again, how Australian, like a big goon bag, basically, that's gone.

You know, the big Captain Cook's gone.

We've sort of let go, I think, particularly the last five, 10 years.

We've seen quite a few disappear or be at risk of being lost.

And then it seems to me that it's not uncommon for big things to be moved or resold, which can't be an easy task.

But there used to be a big cow in the Sunshine Coast.

It's been moved somewhere else.

And the big kangaroo Matilda from the Commonwealth Games is now somewhere outside of Gympie.

A lot's happening in Gympie, really.

That keeps coming up.

It's true, isn't it?

I hadn't thought of that.

Yeah, the big cow was in Yandina.

And I think the problem with some of these big things is that they work as a gimmick initially.

And then everyone sort of knows what they're doing and they're not surprising anymore.

So they're a bit sort of one trick pony.

And then the business, the original business, perhaps fails and you're left with this giant object and it becomes a question of,

well, can we put another business in there?

So this is what happened with the big cow.

They kept trying to make it work in Yandina.

They put different unrelated to cows businesses in it.

In the cow.

Yeah.

Used to be able to climb up into it.

Yeah.

They used it as offices at one stage.

And it just never really...

Yeah.

I guess it just didn't make sense after it wasn't representing the dairy industry.

It doesn't make sense.

Yeah.

And I guess once you've had your photo taken in front of the big cow once, maybe you don't feel compelled to have it taken again.

That's it.

Yeah.

So it's actually quite a serious sort of business theory component to big things.

And again, I'm a historian.

I never thought I'd be talking about business theory and regional branding or whatever.

But yeah, I mean, in order for a big thing to be successful long-term,

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it needs to have more than just the bigness to offer people.

So you see the big banana is a really good example where they've added, you know, indoor skiing and...

Well, that makes sense.

That's a logical connection.

That's a logical connection.

In Coffs Harbour, of course, the well-known ski destination of Australia.

But, you know, things that will keep people on site.

So they're quite complex once you get beyond the bigness of that first impression.

Do you have any sense of how they move these big things?

Like how did the cow get moved from...

On a truck.

Just like in one piece.

It can, yes, sometimes.

Yeah.

Although there is a great story about Larry the Lobster before he was actually assembled in Kingston SE in South Australia, he was manufacturing an Adelaide and then shipped on the back of a truck in pieces.

And at the time, a journalist interviewed some motorists that had just happened to catch glimpses of these sort of red alien, like, you know, tentacles and legs and things just on the back of a truck.

You know, it would have been quite alarming to see that.

So that's an example of a big thing that hit hard times.

Tell me more about Larry the Lobster and his evolution.

Good old Larry the Lobster.

I mean, I think he is one of our true icons.

I'd like to see him being given, you know, some kind of national recognition.

True Aussie battler.

He was built in, you know, the last couple of decades in the 70s to market just sort of fresh produce of that part of the South Australian coast.

It was quite popular and then as many big things do, sort of everyone had seen it already, everyone had already taken their photo.

It changed hands a few times.

It then was on the market for ages.

I think in 2015 it was up for sale for like \$200,000, which to me sounds like a bargain, especially now.

I was going to say that sounds like a lot of money.

Well, I think the problem, the reason why it was for sale for so long was that it had a significant amount of work that needed doing to it.

I mean, these are really complex structures in many ways.

Larry the Lobster is a really good example.

Lots of spines and legs and many places that it could go wrong in terms of its construction.

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And so repairing them or keeping them in good repair can be quite expensive.
So he fell into hard times and was looking very shabby
and no one really wanted him and the owners didn't have the money to look after him.
There was a period of time there where the locals were trying to get him heritage listed.
There was a crowdfunded campaign national to sort of raise money for him.
None of that worked.
And then news sort of spread that maybe there was a buyer in Western Australia
that was going to take Larry.
And you would think that if you were a local,
you'd be glad that he was just going to go to a new home and leave.
Does that remind you that it's not a real lobster or animal?
He is, he's got a name.
Sorry, but your feeling was that people of South Australia
should be glad that Larry was being cared for.
I think so.
I mean, if they care so much about him,
that wasn't their response.
Their reaction was over our dead bodies.
We would rather him.
We can't have Larry. Nobody cares.
That's exactly right.
I mean, and again, it goes back to that whole un-Australian,
like how dare you suggest we would let go of this.
So at the very last minute, a local businessman stepped in
and purchased him and he's still Larry.
He has been fixed up a little bit.
So yeah, he's escaped being boiled over in WA.
Sometimes the big things don't look as the creator may have hoped.
There are some big dinosaurs near Stanthorpe that have that experience.
Tell me what they look like and how they maybe don't look like.
I mean, I like to think of them as primary school art projects gone wrong.
I mean, you can sort of tell what the creator or creators.
In this case, it was a local community project.
I think they were trying to market some sort of fruit and veg festival.
This is several, a couple of decades ago now anyway.
And they thought, well, why not build a giant dinosaur?
It's unclear to me to this day what type of dinosaur it is.
I think it looks like a stegosaurus, but it's not.
And why they chose that to market fruit and veg?
Who knows?
I mean, I guess a dinosaur is shocking when you see it on the side of the road.
Yeah, why do we build anything?
Yeah, so when you drive past it, especially at nighttime,

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I've driven past it at nighttime.
It sort of just jumps out at you from the side of the road
and it's sort of misshapen and lumpy.
And it's not entirely clear if they were going for like a kind of dragon appearance
or they were trying to replicate something much more accurate.
Yeah, it's beautiful because of how disheveled and unkempt it looked.
It looks, you know, it's the weirdness is what makes it attractive.
Are there other big things whose charm for you lie
and the fact that they don't look quite like the thing they're meant to look like?
I mean, I love it when it's close enough
that you can see what they were trying to achieve,
but not so close that you think this is the work of a professional.
In land from Kos Harbour, there is a little town called Glenray
and they have this giant golden dog that sits out the front of a pub there.
It's actually fairly recent.
It was built, I think, in the last 10 years.
And I believe that they've had to renovate it a couple of times
because the first few times they made it, it looked weird.
It sort of looks like a 2D drawing of a dog done by a 7-year-old
that they've somehow made 3D.
Yeah, it's a very strange looking thing.
Well, as you're saying, it's not usually professional artists.
It is passionate individuals who are constructing these big things.
Like it's one thing to make a little mistake on a drawing,
but to make something of a massive size, it can become very clear.
There are a whole lot of challenges in constructing something of a size like that.
Tell me please about the big lawn bowl in Lake Hathi.
It is truly representative of that kind of grassroots vernacular spirit of
we don't need to be professionals in this way.
In fact, the main man that was responsible for it was a jeweler by training.
So he was at the very opposite end of the spectrum.
Yes, exactly.
There's a bowling club down there they wanted to promote
and I guess they'd sort of seen success elsewhere in New South Wales
with, for example, the big banana and they thought,
well, why don't we build a big lawn bowl?
And he started doing this underneath his house in like a weird sort of...
Under his house? What house?
How do you construct a giant bowl?
Well, that's a very good question.
I don't think he knew the answer either.
I think he sort of just made it up as he went along.
So he kind of had a, he created his own rig for it

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because apparently it's quite difficult to create something spherical that gets to a certain size because all of the weight wants to pull down to sort of the bottom part of the shape so it becomes very uneven.

So he created a rig that would slowly spin for him so that he could make sure the layers were applied evenly.

And yeah, it just got to a point where it was too big for him to easily get it out of the house or from underneath the house anyway.

They did get it out eventually.

I'm not sure whether they had to take bits and pieces of the walls down or, and then they kept adding more layers to it outside.

And it's been given a renovation recently, so they love it.

That's beautiful. I love that.

I did once have on conversations a man who'd built a hovercraft in his own living room and then he couldn't work out how to get it outside either.

So this is not a one-off.

Yeah, build it.

Big vision and then the next step can be...

Build it and they will come to this very specific room where it is existing.

How many big things are there?

I mean, what number have you been able to put on this in your years of research?

Yes, my very scientific count.

It's actually quite difficult because it depends on what you include and exclude.

So, you know, I've tried to be somewhat flexible

and I've tried to include, for example, the big Uluru,

even though in my humble opinion it doesn't count because it's not big.

It's in there, so I've had to be a bit flexible,

but most people assume we've got, say, 100, 200.

I think we've got around a thousand.

What?

Which is a huge number.

Yes, and we are continually adding to that list.

Are we? So they're still being built today?

Absolutely, yes.

What are some of the newer big things?

There's a big watermelon slice out west Queensland near Chinchilla.

The big Bogan was built in 2015.

Tell me about that because that was a controversial one, the big Bogan.

Yeah, I mean, I think most people would instinctively, you know, understand why.

So Ningin in New South Wales is in Boganshire.

It's near the Bogan River.

And it was an Anglican minister and a couple of his local friends on the council that wanted to have something to draw people out to Ningin.

And this is often, particularly more recently,

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it's more remote towns that are wanting to convince people to get away from the coastline and drive a couple of hours out west. And so they thought, well, why not just really lean into that Bogan, you know, and we'll build a big Bogan.

And most people I think in the area were on board with it, but there's definitely, there were definitely at the time, people that were riding in and were protesting and saying, you know, this is going to give people the wrong idea.

You know, we really don't want to encourage this perception of Ningin and the people of Ningin as quote unquote Bogan's.

Nonetheless, got built and he's amazing.

I mean, he's wearing a singlet and stubby shorts and he's got a Southern Cross tattoo and he's holding a fishing rod and he's got one foot up on an eski.

And I love him.

I just, I love him.

Humans, it's harder to make people look realistic as a biggie than even a banana or a mango, isn't it?

Yeah, we're comp and we're often sort of moved, you know, humans move.

Banana doesn't tend to move.

So it's perhaps easy to capture.

Yeah.

I mean, he definitely looks comical, but he's meant to.

So I think they've achieved what they set out to achieve.

He has been quite helpful for them in pulling people out to take photos with him.

So tick, tick, tick, you know, it's done the job.

And you visited to have your photo taken.

He's on my bucket list.

Oh, he's on your bucket list?

I haven't, I haven't, no, but my...

It's a long distance love affair for you.

Absolutely.

I mean, I have lots of those sort of unrequited loves of big things because I was, I was all set.

I'd been doing this research 2017 onwards.

I was all set sort of end of 2019.

I was going to spend all of 2020 driving around Australia, taking photos with them.

And of course we all know what happened in 2020.

And so that opportunity passed me by, unfortunately.

So besides the, as well as the big bogan,

what else is on your bucket list when you get a chance to go and visit

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the big things of your dreams?

There is a big rabbit trap in Albert.

I don't think I'd even know what a rabbit trap looks like.

Neither.

No.

And that's part of why I want to see it.

It looks like a medieval torture instrument.

It sits on top of the rabbit trap hotel in Albert in New South Wales.

It's also fairly recently made.

And yeah, they're very proud of it.

And when you look up photos online of what it looks like,

I think that it's great because if you were a local or sort of living

in that area where they do have problems with rabbit plagues

every now and then, or if you'd grown up in an era where,

you know, the 30s, 40s, where rabbits were much more common,

you would know what it was.

And then you've got people like me who would absolutely have no idea,

but still want to stop and look at it.

So it's sort of working in both ways.

And I love that.

So big things are being built again,

but I feel that there would have been a period 10 years or so ago

where they weren't so common.

There was this real rush of building in the,

maybe the late 60s and then the 80s,

and they fell out of favor.

How, with your historians had on Amy,

how do you map those changing,

the changing view that we have of them and the appeal of them?

Why does that shift?

You're absolutely right.

I mean, we built a lot of them in the 60s, 70s and 80s.

And I think in the 90s, I mean,

there's definitely a noticeable dip in the 90s, early 2000s,

where we're still building them, but nowhere near as many.

I think it's perhaps, I think in the 90s,

we generally as Australians had a bit of a cultural cringe moment
of either 80s were a one of excess and crocodile dundee.

And, you know, we really, that was what we were doing then.

And we wanted to move away from that

and be taken seriously as a country.

And I think perhaps that was part of why we stopped building so many.

But we have definitely really picked up steam again.

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You know, 2010s, 20s, we're building a lot more.
And I mean, I have a few theories as to why that might be.
I think in the more recent period,
there's been a lot of negativity,
a lot of sadness in the world,
generally feelings of, you know, hopelessness.
We've had September 11 happened, the GFC, 2008, 2009.
Then of course, we've had just the rolling chaos of climate change
and then COVID.
And I think that combination of things has made us all want or yearn.
We wanted to sort of go back to a quote unquote simpler time.
And I think big things, it's not just big things.
I think we've seen resurgence of other, you know, more innocent TV shows.
You know, there's things that we're wanting to watch
and spend our time on, people returning to baking during COVID.
You know, it's about, I think, something that's familiar, comfortable,
childlike, nostalgic.
And I think also, you know, the fact that there is so much that's mass produced
or that we might be watching the same TV shows
or wearing the same clothes or eating the same food in New York
and in Shanghai and in Sydney,
there's something so beautifully idiosyncratic and eccentric
and personal about these objects.
That's right. You know that that misshapen dinosaur is the only one of its kind.
There is zero question about that.
And I think there's perhaps something about that moment of being in time and space
with that thing that you know no one else is seeing
or, you know, you're the one that's having that experience.
It's very sort of centering and it sort of makes you feel quite present.
And you can feel special, I think, with big things as well.
It's a special out of the everyday life sort of experience.
For you as a historian though, Amy,
do you sometimes wish that people cared as much about other kinds of heritage
as they do about these bloody big bits of fruit and weird kangaroos and koalas?
I mean, two minds, actually, I've got to say because, yeah, I mean, there's lots.
I mean, we could talk for hours about all of the things that we should be protecting
and looking after from a heritage perspective.
But I think really my view, I mean, I do a lot of work in the heritage space.
And my view is if we are saving anything, we should be saving the things
that have the most appeal to the most people, you know,
that everyday people have seen, have experienced, you know, have interacted with,
that they understand that they have some sense of connection to,
they feel that there's value there.

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And I think if we're really honest with ourselves, we can't say that of some of the grander residences of the 19th century, that we are already protecting.

So I think the question for me is who are we protecting that for?

And I don't know that we are really protecting that for anyone anymore.

Whereas I suspect with big things, it's such a, you know, it's such a broad sweeping sort of group of people that love them.

We perhaps should be saving them a little bit more than some of the things we already have on our heritage registers.

And so how are you going to go about getting people on board with this, Amy? What's your vision?

Well, this is step one, you know, just speaking to the nation.

Yeah, I mean, I think making people aware of their own role in heritage, you know, we academics are certainly part of the conversation, but everyone has a say in what we preserve.

If anyone is allowed to write into their local council or to their state government and say, I want to nominate this for protection.

So we should be actively encouraging that, I think.

I think there's going to be a lot of letters written out of this conversation.

Amy, it's been just fascinating and delightful.

And as you said, there's an element that's just about joy when it comes to big thing.

And I feel very joyful after this conversation.

Thank you.

Thank you.

My pleasure.

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