

1 The Changing  
Role of Home  
During Crisis

Sarah Pink  
Shanti Sumartojo  
Yolande Strengers  
Melisa Duque  
Kari Dahlgren

FUTURE  
MATTERS

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Future Matters is a place for speaking critically about pressing socio-technical developments and showcasing the vitality of engaged scholarship. Edited and compiled by Monash University's Emerging Technologies Research Lab, our world-leading scholars tackle important subjects in ways that are empirically-grounded, theoretically-guided, and outcome-oriented.

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## Contents

- 6 Introduction  
Jathan Sadowski
- 8 #stayathome  
Sarah Pink
- 12 When Worlds Collide  
Shanti Sumartojo
- 16 Smart Wife in Crisis  
Yolande Strengers
- 22 An Image of Home  
Melisa Duque
- 26 Strange Solidarities  
in Stranger Times  
Kari Dahlgren

6

1

# The Changing Role of Home During Crisis

7

## *Introduction*

Sociologists have described modern life as consisting of three main places. The first place is our home, the second place is our work, and the third places are the local pubs, public parks, community centres, and other locations where we go to socialise, have fun, and share experiences with others.

Now, however, that list is shrunk. As we endure lockdown and isolation, our homes have to become everything. In the shift from first place to only place, how has the home, and our relationship to it, changed? What does home mean now? In the first Constellation of Future Matters, we consider various aspects, from different perspectives, of the home during crisis.

The home has never been a simple thing. It has always been dynamic, filled with life, prone to changes—but rarely do our relationships to home undergo such rapid and meaningful transformation. With particular attention to the role of technology, this collection of work helps us make sense of the home.

– Editor, Jathan Sadowski

8

# #stayathome

by Sarah Pink

9

## *Being in an uncertain place.*

COVID-19 has created a moment of deep uncertainty about what will happen next, a step-change in how we see the world and an awareness that our futures might not be what we expected. When things are 'normal' uncertainty is easy to dismiss. We evade it by immersing ourselves in the quotidian routines and banal joys of everyday life. We trust that we know what awaits us in the days, weeks, and months that lie ahead. These familiar everyday actions and feelings happen at home, and at the same time are the very things that make us feel at home. But now, during this pandemic, home and its material, digital and social components are being reconstituted.

The mandate that we should #stayathome—a slogan that can be found posted everywhere, whether on twitter or in a cafe window—has a simple message: only go out for essential items and activity, as defined by your government. But nothing is as obvious as it sounds, not least the question of what home is. In vernacular English, home refers to a house, an apartment, a room, or some other built form. But this direct association of a house with home, the assumption we know what home means, is more complex—more contextually and culturally specific—than we give it credit.

For over 20 years I have collaborated with researchers across the world to understand how people live, sense, feel and use technologies in their homes: in [England](#), [Spain](#), [Australia](#), [Indonesia](#), and [Brazil](#). The single most important insight for the coronavirus crisis, drawn from this diversity of cases, is that home is best described as a feeling of familiarity and certainty. Home cannot be simply reduced to, or automatically tied to, the four walls of a house. The home is a sensory and emotional place, something we feel and sense in ways we cannot even describe in words.

10 My research about homes often starts with a simple question: “What do you need to do to make your home feel right?” People have told me this can be when they fill a room with music and dance alone, when the sunlight streams in through the window, or when they smell the same laundry detergent their mum used. Home can be found when we wake the house up in the morning, with music, radio, the smell of coffee brewing, letting the cat in, checking social media, and reading the news. Such mundane moments invoke feelings of familiarity, of a place that is stable and comfortable. Home is created through our everyday actions and relationships, through the meanings we invest in a place, through the sentiments that are tied to the home, and through the digital technologies that now mediate how we make homes.

Framing home as a feeling, rather than a house, helps us to understand why new houses rarely ‘feel like home’ until we’ve settled in, and it complicates, without eliminating, the existence of the home in a house characterised by inequality, violence, isolation, depression or worse. Home can be fleeting, shifting, and momentary—carved out and saved from the chaos that might surround it. The dissonance between house and home also provides us with some key messages for understanding the implications of #stayathome.

COVID-19 intensifies both the consistencies and the ironies of attempts to conflate house and home. The necessity to self-isolate has shifted how home feels and where it can be experienced. The pieces of this Constellation offer different ways to engage with the home and what it means now. #stayathome endorses the false belief that home is found in a circumscribed physical site; it has forced us to retreat into the built environment, while creating parallel uncertainties that we cannot quell through everyday routines—which, as [Melisa](#) tells us, even disrupt the grammars that previously structured our writing. For some, it has brought the conflicting socialities of family, work, and school into contact with each other, as [Shanti’s](#) experience suggests. For others, it has meant social isolation that technology cannot compensate for, or on the opposite end, a necessity to keep working in ‘essential services’ even at the risk of community health. [Kari](#) draws our attention to a labour force working on the frontlines of the energy industry: coal miners. #stayathome provides a prism through which to view old power

11 relations and technological inequalities in new ways as [Yolande](#) argues by investigating the smart wives we share our homes with, and as Larissa demonstrates by considering what crises like this one mean for the systems that energise our homes.

ETLab is running a number of [projects](#) that investigate the future of homes. In the forthcoming months and years, we will be reflecting on the lessons of COVID-19 in our work, engaging these insights to make recommendations for future scenarios.

12

# When Worlds Collide

by Shanti Sumartojo

13

*Lockdown means the spaces of our lives are folded together in new ways. How do we adapt to these digital domestic atmospheres?*

Long before all the Zoom memes circulating now—of half-naked partners wandering through the background, of people forgetting to turn off their video in the bathroom—the most famous incident was when two young children marched into the middle of a 2017 [BBC interview](#) with an expert on North Korea. The comedy escalated as the mother frantically slid into the room in an attempt to wrangle the kids on live television, causing yet more hilarious chaos. We laughed at the absurdity of the scene then. To be fair, it's still absurd, but it's also now deeply familiar. We all, at different moments, now play the parts of the father, the mother, and the kids.

With COVID-19 compelling many of us to do everything from home, such visual reminders of the private realities of our homes have become commonplace; all viewed through the gaze of the webcam. Pets jump into laps, children clatter dishes or toys onto the floor, flatmates respond to overheard remarks.

Private, domestic spaces now host the public world of work like never before. But this is not totally new. Mobile phones introduced different norms of privacy as intimate conversations were suddenly shared on streets and public transport. But what is new is how visible these private aspects of our homes have now become. Since many of us now live inside video conferences for much of the day, the activities of domestic life are on show to our colleagues—and students for teachers, clients for counsellors, and so on—who have been invited into our homes. This new intimacy can be interesting as we get a voyeuristic peek into other interiors, or endearing as we build new social bonds. But it also has other, more profound effects, as it drags the home's private corners into public view. Even with the 'virtual backdrop' function of software like Zoom, we still see glimpses of others' domestic spaces

14

which they might not always want us to see.

These once-separate realms have folded together in ways that create new domestic atmospheres where old spatial rules no longer apply. We are not in each other's physical homes, but we are nevertheless in each other's spaces. The emotional and sensory atmospheres of the virtual home are as powerful and intimate as their offline dimension. This is characteristic of an era when we can no longer disentangle digital technologies from all aspects of our lives, and everything we do is ["more or less digital."](#) For many of us, the home is now characterised by different kinds of atmospheres than before, which conflate the private and the public. This leads to a new level of ["context collapse,"](#) as Jenny Davis and Nathan Jurgenson call it, that requires new ways of reckoning with its implications.

How do we begin analysing, and adapting to, these new digital domestic atmospheres?

How our homes feel to us, and thus how we inhabit them, is shaped by how we regard the people, animals, spaces, technologies, and objects that constitute their atmospheres. The delightful energy of pets and children, for example, become a form of liability when their own lives clash with our professional spaces. Broadband connections make our domestic spaces feel connected, functioning and calm when they work smoothly, or fractured and tense when they don't.

In response to this, some of us are attempting to redesign aspects of our life/work/social spaces and curate intentional environments so the windows into our homes frame exactly what we want them to display. This means finding new ways to configure our homes' spaces, new ways to live in them, and new tools like virtual backgrounds that retain privacy. But this doesn't really maintain the privacy that used to characterise the home—instead, it often masks the everyday multi-tasking of childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic labour. We try to perform focused attention and maintain professional atmospheres, even though, in actuality, our attention is fractured and atmospheres are multivalent.

COVID-19 has forced us all to adapt. Perhaps we should not reach for a return to pre-corona ways of living and working, when many of us grappled with the impossible bifurcation of 'work' and 'life'. 'Public' and

15

'private' have always just been different ways of thinking about the same lives, not different realms perfectly sealed off from each other. Instead, if we recognise the emergence of new digital domestic atmospheres—and how they blur public and private space—we can also see the rise of widespread and creative responses to our homes and what we do in them. We need to embrace the adaptations that have been forced on all of us and embed them in the new normal.

Rather than maintaining the fiction that we can somehow separate 'work' from our domestic spaces—keeping out children, pets, and partners at all costs—we should adopt a more fluid approach. This does not mean that work takes over everything. Instead, if digital domestic atmospheres now characterise our working lives, it means treating ourselves and our colleagues as whole people with priorities and responsibilities that reach far beyond the workplace. These require our attention and care, and our empathy for others, especially when these spaces erupt in hilarious chaos.

16

# Smart Wife in Crisis

by Yolande Strengers

17

## *Outsourcing wifework to digital voice assistants during the pandemic.*

Alexa is in her element. With more of us working or staying at home, we've never been more in need of her wifely services.

Want some coronavirus-free grocery shopping done? Trying to source some precious toilet rolls? Need help [teaching your kids how to wash their hands for 20 seconds with a fun song?](#) No problem. You only have to ask.

Alexa, Siri, Google Home and other “smart wives”—feminised technologies that take on the duties and traits of stereotypical housewives reminiscent of the 1950s—are on hand to help in this emerging crisis.

But “helping” might not be all they are doing. As Jenny Kennedy and I argue in our forthcoming MIT Press book, [The Smart Wife](#), the increasingly mundane and insidious presence of these digital domestic assistants in our everyday lives is also cause for concern.

### *A soothing feminine presence*

For a start, this digital feminised workforce provides continual reinforcement of an age-old assumption that a woman's place is in the home, taking care of the occupants' physical, mental, emotional and health needs.

In this regard, outsourcing and delegating [wifework](#) to smart wives serves multiple purposes. It dodges questions about whose job it is to do that work (mostly women, if smart wives are our role models), and cloaks other corporate objectives and biases, privacy issues, and security concerns behind a thinly veiled veneer of feminine likability and friendly servitude.

More specifically, for the “[Big Five](#)” companies in the business of producing smart wives—Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple and

18 Facebook—Alexa and her entourage present opportunities to sell us advice, products, and services; or sell our data to others for the purpose of further manipulating our lives. The aim, writes Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, “is no longer to automate information flows about us. The goal now is to automate us.”

At the same time, smart wives compound growing inequities, masking the problematic ways they are stepping in to fill the void left by declining public and private services.

### *Alexa, do I have coronavirus?*

While coronavirus testing remains low or relatively inaccessible for most people, many are turning to their smart wife—and the search engine powering her brain—for advice and comfort. [Coronavirus “screening”](#) and related advice is on the rise, [despite some concerns about the advice they provide](#) or their ability to answer questions.

Online deliveries via Alexa and Amazon’s associated services are also booming, for those privileged enough to be able to afford and access them. However, for Amazon’s fulfillment centre employees, already living with reputedly terrible pay and working conditions, their additional exposure to coronavirus has left them even more vulnerable.

Likewise, the role of digital voice assistants in remedying against isolation during the crisis, and providing mental health support or even “therapy,” may seem like an important antidote to loneliness and depression. But it is also concerning: not because nobody will benefit from these forms of digital care, but because this care comes with an agenda that extends beyond the person’s immediate wellbeing.

This agenda includes extracting data about each individual or household for the purpose of generating future products and services targeted towards them, as well as selling them goods and services they may not be able to afford or need. It can also involve pushing these companies’ political or social bias (or algorithmic blind spots) about a topic rather than relying on trusted sources of information and facts.

The Big Five already have a troubling track record with how their assistive technologies respond to requests about other health and social issues, such as Apple’s reputedly reluctant support for people trying to find an abortion centre (which took [over four years to fix](#)), or

19 smart wives’ indifferent and sometimes encouraging attitude towards [sexually abusive and harassing comments](#). Should we really trust that the smart wife has been programmed to provide only helpful and accurate advice in a time of crisis? Previous experiences suggest otherwise.

### *And how does that make you feel?*

More worrying, the loneliness of self-isolating and social distancing offers an opportunity for these companies to capitalise on our vulnerability. Just imagine telling your intimate thoughts, desires and coronavirus anxieties to your smart wife of choice. As the history of chatbots shows us, it’s easy to fall into a familiar rhythm of conversation and forget that, not only is the technology a piece of software, but the smart wife’s digital ears are connected to a cloud server.

The first chatbot, ELIZA, was a “psychiatrist” built by computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum in the 1960s. Based on Rogerian psychotherapy, ELIZA posed “And how does that make you feel?” questions back to her “clients”. Weizenbaum was surprised to learn that those who interacted with ELIZA took her insights personally and seriously, and developed a relationship with her as if she were their therapist, rather than a computer program.

The companies behind smart wives might not be interested in tracking or listening to you personally, but how might they use the data they collect about you and others? What other services or products might they try to target at emotionally and mentally vulnerable people? For instance, we know that advertisers have intentionally targeted women at times when their self-image was at its lowest and they were most susceptible to manipulation. While we’re all stuck inside, many of us with little choice but to order essential things online, that sounds like the perfect opportunity for the smart wife to nudge us with some self-serving suggestions.

On the surface these smart wives’ eagerness to help during a pandemic is applaudable. It could even be considered “AI for social good.” But such a conclusion would be too hasty.

Alexa, run by the largest e-commerce company in the world and headed by the wealthiest man in living history, isn’t just motivated to

20 help around the home. Amazon is embarking on a global experiment to transform the home itself, and privately colonise and supplement many services—including healthcare information, diagnosis, and treatment—that were previously delivered by governments, communities, and families. The smart wife may be modelled after a stereotype of a feminine domestic helper, but rather than just treating it as a harmless device, we must also ask who else's interests the smart wife is really serving.

By all means, get Alexa to help you wash your hands, but spare a thought for the other ways her makers might be getting their hands dirty.

*Yolande and Jenny provide a “reboot” manifesta in their book on [The Smart Wife](#), which lays out their proposals for improving the design and social effects of digital voice assistants, social robots, sex robots and other AI arriving in the home.*

22

# An Image of Home

by Melisa Duque

23

*When words fail, when thoughts won't flow,  
how do we articulate the shock of living  
through collective crisis?*

Welcome.

This is an entry into my feeling-thinking, or the Colombian concept of [sentipensando](#). On a sunny afternoon, from the living room, in late March 2020. When the [global count](#) was 42,107 dead people and 857,487 'confirmed cases'. Here is a glimpse of my disrupted thinking. Affected by unarticulated emotional shock. Which turned my writing from its usual flowing paragraphs with no regard for punctuation into a staccato of single word sentences. The common thread that runs throughout is about how home—understood broadly as familiar sites, things, languages, emotions, relations, and routines—is changing, has changed, now.

*Home spheres. Earth. Souths. Norths. In-betweens. \_\_\_\_\_.  
Family. Colombia. Medellin. Home matters. Origins. Etymology. Matters.  
Mother. Wood. Meanings. Language. Home. Makings. Feelings. Sites.  
Relationships. With others. With oneself.*

*Australia. Melbourne. Time-zones. Home screens. Windows.  
Outdoors. Indoors. Technologies. Working. From home. Cushion  
desk. Ergonomic. Routines. Schedules. Spaces. Security. Purposeful.  
Economic. Social. Safety. Comfort. Wellbeing. Hwansho. Lámpara.  
Monstruo. Delfin. Homeliness.*

*Boundaries. Domestic politics. Closed borders. Limited  
movements. Muted microphone. Doors closed. Distancing. Home  
choices. No choices. Rent. Unemployment. Losses. Blurred. Focus.  
Home. Risks. Domestic violence. Mental health. Tensions. Rising.  
Curves. Peaking. Restrictions. 'Care army'. Quarantine. Pandemic.*

*Flight home. Cancelled. At home. Connected. Stage 3. Denial.  
Home. Feels. Unfamiliar. Novelty. Shaken. Shifting. Spreading.  
Containing. Death. Grief. Care. Everyday. Designing. Wellbeing. Forward.*

24 *Hope. Uncertain. Pause. Moving. Fast. Internet. Slow. Year. Spirals.  
Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathing as home.  
Short breath. Cough. Fever. Fear. Viral. Crown. Green. Red. Ruby  
Cruise. Black. White. Earthy. Fire. Lungs. Burn. Amazon. Australia.  
Temperatures rise. Fever. Discomfort. Accepting. Changing.  
Washing. Hands. Clothes. Shoes. Laundry. New rules. Lift says.  
Indoors. Balcony. Risky. Living room. Messy. As usual. In use. Overuse.  
Cleaning. Door handles. Home. Boundaries. Invisible. Dirt. Lively.  
Refresh. News. Stop. News. Noise. Diet. Truth here. And there.  
Who knows best. Who's wrong. Do this. Do that. Don't. Hairdressing.  
From home. Breathe in. Breathe out. Pause. Sense. Present. Home.  
Indoors.  
Within. Oneself. Fridge hum. Home. Ohm. Yoga. I should. I don't.  
Care. Sleep. Less. More. Resting. Waiting. Flattening. Slowing.  
Zooming. Deadlines. Meetings. Backgrounds. Routines. Creating.  
Everyday. Different. At home. Designing. Improvising. Making do.  
Cleaning. Again.  
Walk. Air. Sun. Sky. Awkward interactions. Over smiles.  
Compensate. Loss. Normality. Gone. Walk. Shop. No touch. Washing  
food. Cleaning. Again.  
Meme. Humour. Cynical. Critical. Soft. Mixed feelings. Disrupted.  
Homes Spheres. Clinical. Silence. Dog Barking. Baby crying. Neighbours  
chatting. Happy birthday singing. Balcony expressions. Home  
gardening. Everyday. Designing. Well. Being. Home-making. Baking.  
Writings. Readings. Social media. Mediating. Anti-distancing.  
Watching. Neighbours. Birds. Clouds. Music. Dishes. Tea time. Home  
break. Coffee. Popcorn. Chocolate. Kitchen. Cacerolazos. Chats.  
Whiskey. Arepa.  
Home screens. New window. Safe as. Desktop. Furniture.  
Appropriation. Contingent. Participatory. Negotiated. Home spheres.  
Changing. Confining. Stretching. Blending. Functions. Meanings.  
Smarting. Technologies. Uncertainty. Exposure. Virus. Scam.  
Losing. Safety. Future. Fears.  
Care. Breathe in. Breathe out. Present. At home. Pause. Rest. Silence.  
Tinto time. Miao.*

25 By the time of publication, the global count was 285,445 deaths and 4,168,427 confirmed cases, and counting. In their memory as they go 'home', a moment of silence.

26

# Strange Solidarities in Stranger Times

by Kari Dahlgren

27

*How coronavirus makes mining communities more vulnerable to fly-in-fly-out work.*

Our lives are now, more than ever before, mediated by digital technology. Every friendly chat, every work meeting, every happy hour, every family catchup, even weddings and births, are happening through a device, a screen, and an internet connection. Because they must. Social distancing makes digital socialising the only safe option. In certain ways, coronavirus is revealing how far technology has come, how much it enables. Still, simultaneously it is demonstrating exactly what it cannot do, and the [human labour](#) on which it depends.

While for most of us our homes have become every place—the office, the daycare, the cafe, the pub—there are still many others who must go to work in increasingly hazardous conditions outside of hospitals. The pandemic is making the importance of these professions increasingly evident: rubbish collectors, grocery store workers, home delivery drivers. We are recognising these workers now as ‘essential services’, performing the physical labour that an isolated life needs to function.

It's about time we take more notice of the service workers who are vital to a semi-functioning economy. There are deeper layers of hidden labour that must still work to produce and maintain the material foundation of everyday life. Let's consider the coal miners.

Coal miners are contentious characters in Australian political and social life, for they represent the Australian left's polar tension between its labour heritage rooted in mining and its increasing concerns over climate change and the energy transition.

I want to bring attention to the role of coal miners and their figuring as essential in the times of the coronavirus because in doing so I hope that this opportunity might bridge a political and ethical divide, which is often played up in politics around climate change to all of our

28 detriments. For just as coronavirus is shining light on which services are essential, it is also bringing attention to a crucial vulnerability in the Australian extractive sector, one that mining communities have been critiquing for several years.

The Australian mining industry is heavily reliant on fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workforces who, the story goes, must be brought in from elsewhere because mining takes place in remote locations. While this is true for certain mines, many of these so-called 'remote' locations are surrounded by local communities who call these places home. FIFO has often occurred at the expense of these communities.

The poster child for this tension between established mining communities and FIFO workforces is the central Queensland coal mining town of Moranbah, where I spent October 2015 to July 2016 doing ethnographic fieldwork. The area primarily mines coking metallurgical coal—used in the production of steel—which, unlike thermal coal for energy production, is not replaceable by renewables at scale.

The town itself was founded in 1971, specifically to house the workforce and families of the men coming to work in the newly built mines. However, particularly since the end of the 2008-2012 commodities boom, the limited number of jobs in the mining industry are going to FIFO workers rather than residents.

This employment strategy has several benefits to the mining companies. Overall, it enables greater control over the workforce through several tactics. Companies can hire beyond the community so they recruit workers without family histories in mining and thus no attachments to the labour unions. FIFO reduces absenteeism as workers are separated from the demands of family life—no need to worry about work-life balance when you live at work. Moreover, FIFO is a systematic strategy across the industry to reduce companies' needs to invest in the local communities which surround mines.

But the consequences of, and response to, coronavirus are testing the FIFO model. The actual process of flying into work means that miners board small regional planes, ride together in buses, and sleep in camps with shared dining facilities. Since they are deemed essential, miners have so far been exempt from the 14 day isolation

29 period for interstate travellers. In Central Queensland, the majority of FIFO miners travel within the state, primarily the surrounds of Brisbane, so interstate restrictions won't substantially affect the movement of Queensland's mining workforce. Mining companies want to avoid endangering the health of their workforce, but the structures of FIFO make social distancing extremely difficult to enforce. Further, because the mining industry has been casualizing their workforce, often through [outsourcing](#) operations to labour-hire firms, workers without job security are less likely to raise safety and health concerns.

Coronavirus raises new challenges to the reliance on FIFO in the extractive sector, making this model [more hazardous](#) to the lives of miners, their families, and broader communities. Rural areas are already vulnerable places, and flying mine workers into and out of them, excluding them from quarantine requirements, is a potential disaster waiting to happen. In addition to the increased risk of infection, places like Moranbah receive state services based on their residential population numbers, not the numerous FIFO workers that come into and out of the region. The nearest Intensive Care Unit, nearly 200km away in the town of Mackay, has only nine beds—to service the entire mining region.

The local community in Moranbah has been resisting the use of FIFO workforces for many years, and coronavirus has raised the stakes of this strategy for local communities. The public health crisis further highlights that the major threat to coal mining communities, like Moranbah, comes not from climate change policy or the increasing affordability of renewable energy, but from exploitative employment policies that are slowly eating away at the communities who call these places home.

Bringing attention to the plight of coal mining communities reveals a space for social solidarity and a need for a political coalition that recognises and respects coal mining communities even as it criticizes the mining companies which exploit them.

Many miners hold what anthropologist Jessica Smith has [called](#), an "ethics of material provisioning." That is, they take pride in, and maintain an ethical commitment to, their labour's role in providing the materials that enable the comfortable lives most of us have become

30 accustomed to. As coronavirus invigorates a new appreciation for those who provide the essential services on which we rely, so too should it remind us of the material commodities that make modern life: the energy that powers the internet, the coking coal and iron ore that make the steel holding up our apartment towers or wind turbines, and the rare earth metals in our laptops and phones.

This is not to say that climate change isn't a crucial issue or to ignore the environmental damage of mining. However, it is also critical that we acknowledge our mutual dependencies. Coronavirus has forced us into self-isolation, but when we emerge from our homes we should do so together, ready to build a better world, with and for everybody.

**Emerging Technologies Research Lab**  
Monash Art, Design and Architecture &  
Faculty of Information Technology

Monash University  
Building B, Room 6.035,  
Caulfield Campus  
900 Dandenong Road  
Caulfield East, VIC 3145  
Australia

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