

LOCATING SUBURBIA

MEMORY - PLACE - CREATIVITY

EDITED BY

PAULA HAMILTON & PAUL ASHTON

Locating Suburbia
Memory, Place, Creativity

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Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton



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INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

Murder in the suburbs isn't murder technically at all really is it? It's a justifiable reaction to aesthetic deprivation and golf.¹

Suburbia has been satirised and mocked by the best of them from George Orwell's 1939 caricature in *Coming up for Air* to Dame Edna Everidge from the 1960s and TV's Kath and Kim in twentieth-first century Australia. For many of the generation growing up in the twentieth century, suburbia is, on the one hand, the remembered nightmare from which the human chrysalis escaped to experience adulthood and its pleasures *elsewhere* – the stifling, conformist sameness which nonetheless hid evil deeds like murder. Others hold dear the wistful nostalgic memories about growing up in a domesticated cosy world of backyard games so effectively mobilised by conservative Prime Minister John Howard during the 1990s in relation to Earlwood, a suburb of Sydney.²

It is certainly the case that for the older generation who lived through depression and war in the twentieth century, the suburbs represented safety and peace – 'a roof over our heads'; 'a place to call our own'. Like the soldier who came back from Changi POW camp, kissed the ground at Narrabeen, a suburb in Sydney, and said: 'this'll do me'!, the expanding suburbs after the 1950s were the retreat for many men after

time abroad in global conflict; a place to replenish the spirit and build again – individual lives, families, homes, garages, sheds, gardens, lawns. Suburbs have also been long hated,³ and more recently loved,⁴ by writers and intellectuals. They have also been perceived with an uneasy ambiguity, as ‘being neither town nor country, but an unwilling combination of both, and either neat and shining, or cheap and nasty, according to the incomes of its inhabitants’.⁵ This was the ‘half world between city and country in which most Australians lived’ that architect Robin Boyd decried in his elitist work on Australia domestic architecture.⁶ Recently, however, there has been a strong and growing interest in delineating the complexities of the suburban experience rather than simply denouncing or defending it.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, suburbia has had a make-over. How it is remembered and what place it has had in our lives has also been reconfigured. Many now accept that the nostalgia relates only to a childhood dream of the white Anglo-Saxon part of the population that obscured a great deal more than it revealed. Certainly the historian Andrew May argued in 2009 that ‘the reliance of the twin fictions of the novelist’s pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives’.⁷ Even before the impact of the massive post-war migration, the suburbs were more culturally and socially diverse than we have previously understood. Class and religious divisions, if not always race and ethnicity, have a long history within suburban communities.⁸ Nowadays, the articulation of that nostalgic memory in public forums is strongly contested, as suburban places are made and remade over time.

In March 2013, for example, Peter Roberts wrote a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which had the heading: ‘What happened to the suburb I used to know? His particular suburb was Greenacre near Lakemba in Sydney and his article juxtaposed a suburban past and present. He remembers a suburb where he grew up during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a place of peace, sparsely populated, filled with boys sports and games:

Lakemba? Sure that’s where we went to the Sunday matinee at the Odeon every week and watched such pearls as the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis and Ben-Hur.

Roberts does not mention that Lakemba is now the site of a mosque and one of the biggest Muslim communities in Australia. But most of the *Herald* readers will have this in mind. In his (Anglo-Saxon) memory, there was no violence as there is now, which he blames on the ‘enclave of Little Lebanon’. Greenacre and Lakemba now, he says, have been ‘turned into a minefield, or a battlefield, or a refuge

of drug dealers, criminals, drive-by shooters and terror'. His elegaic tone is one of sadness and loss:

That was my home – the place where I once simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else – transformed to the place where I could never imagine living again.

There were several responses to this letter which seemed to strike a Sydney nerve and gave readers a sense of how the media mediates our collective memories. At least two letters accused Roberts of cloaking racism in nostalgia. Omar Sakr replied in the same edition of the *Herald* with an awareness about the public prominence of such views and how they need to be interrogated. Sakr is particularly critical of the assumption that all of the problems are the result of another ethnic group, as though murder and rape were not part of any other suburban culture. This view, he says, absolves one group for taking responsibility for the problems of the community as a whole. For him, growing up in this area probably twenty or thirty years later, the most important element was the camaraderie of his diverse delinquent friends.

One letter, though, was from someone who had lived for eighteen months in Lakemba until recently and also spent time there on a regular basis now. Con Vaitsas, now of Ashbury, claimed that Roberts' vision was 'way out of whack with reality' and very outdated. He argued that Greenacre and Lakemba were no longer predominantly the home of the Lebanese but a mixture of very different nationalities living peacefully side by side: 'my neighbours were Filipinos and Colombians on either side and Africans opposite us', he wrote. So his perception was one of a successful multicultural community.

Such an exchange does little to recognise the complexity of current suburban life but it does juxtapose the memories from different generations and cultures against one another as alternative experiences of belonging to particular suburban localities.

What is Suburbia?

Suburbs are geographically defined areas on a map, spatially located in our memories and also an idea: they colonise our imaginations as both inside and outside the pale. But beyond the government defined boundaries, how are they delineated? Are they anything beyond the city central? Inner city areas such as Surry Hills or Balmain are certainly not brought to mind by this term. Spatially the suburbs are seen as 'out there' away from the inner city which somehow don't meet the criteria for single story occupation on a block of land which we think of as characteristically suburban. But where does the inner city begin and end now? Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Drummoyne,

St Leonard's? 'As a state of mind and a way of living', Humphrey McQueen has observed,

Suburbia is not confined to certain geographic areas but can thrive where there are no suburbs... It is pointless to lay down a criterion for suburbia that includes duplexes, but excludes a row of terraces. Where it survives outside its natural habitat, suburbia still aspires to the ways of living that are most completely realised by nuclear families on garden blocks with detached houses.⁹

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.¹⁰ Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.¹¹ But in the twenty-first century this static view has to be modified somewhat. And it is evident from this collection that suburban dwellers themselves have redefined being cosmopolitan as house prices in the inner suburbs skyrocket and push people further afield.¹²

The study of suburbs is often viewed as separate from the city or the urban as a whole. But in fact not only are suburbs obviously integral; they are now part of the networked city, reinforcing much older electricity grids, transport and water services with contemporary communications networks, especially the internet and mobile telephony which has facilitated greater interaction between suburbs and across the urban generally. Suburbs are always relational in this sense and though we tend to throw a light on the local or the small concerns within the suburb as case studies, this collection does not argue for their isolation from the wider urban landscape, for we know that local knowledge too, has the power to change lives.

This collection was set up as a collaborative project by members of the Research Strength in Creative Practices and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, is in the first instance a testament to that range and complexity of twenty-first century responses to city suburbs, predominantly in Sydney, though with a nod to other suburban contexts on the most-populated eastern seaboard of Australia, such as Melbourne and Brisbane. Secondly, the collection showcases the lively engagement and interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual culture in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, from the more traditional scholarly approaches of Humanities scholars to the range of cultural forms which make up Creative Practice in the academy, especially in this

case, Creative Writing and Media Arts.¹³ We had many seminars and discussions which took place in 2011 and 2012 about the ideas for the collection. We began by viewing it from the perspective of lived experience, always believing it possible that new technologies can create different spaces for collaborative scholarship within the traditional frame of a book.

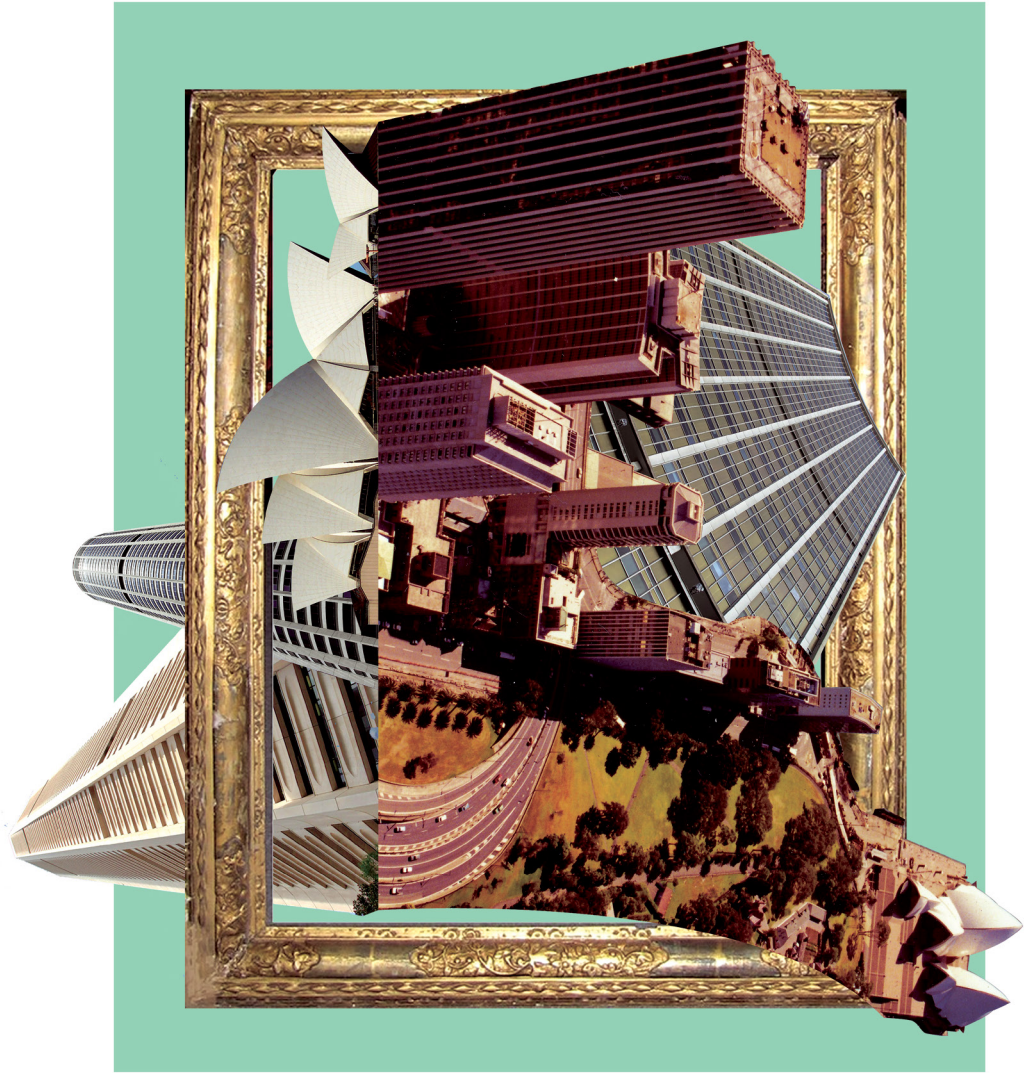
And so it proved. We found that the tension between representing how a world was experienced while keeping that detached critical eye on its form and nature could work very well through a range of artistic and scholarly practice that spoke to each other. Karen Till, writing about her own engagement with memory studies as an artist, argues that more traditional scholars have a lot to gain by heeding the work of artists 'who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds'.¹⁴

Three distinct themes emerged in relation to the central concept of re-imagining the suburban which people researched and made for this publication. As our title indicates these became remembered suburbs anchored either by our own personal past or those of others, suburbs as places that were made and remade across time and suburbs not only as the subject for various creative representations but also increasingly where creativity as an identified practice or industry takes place.¹⁵

Some of our essays take as their subject particular suburbs such as Bondi, Manly and Campbelltown. Others range across time and the space of the urban and suburban. Others focus on those inner city in-betweens, subject of urban renewal and consolidation, such as Marrickville, Pyrmont and Balmain. Some utilise the concept of the even more local through a focus on the park, shops, the backyard or the suburban house. And still others explore what took place in the homes of these areas there that came to be identified with suburban life.

Referring to the suburbs of England, Roger Silverstone previously commented in his 1997 book *Visions of Suburbia* that 'An understanding of how suburbia was produced and continues to be both produced and reproduced is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century, an understanding above all of our emerging character and contradictions of our everyday lives'.¹⁶ Whether his argument for the centrality of suburbia to historical understanding still holds for the twenty-first century remains to be seen given the many different shapes it now takes in our imaginations.

MEMORY



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THE CONCRETE REMAINS

Sarah Barns

THE CONCRETE REMAINS

THE ART OF THE MODERN DOWNTOWN SYDNEY

Sarah Barns

When you walk the streets of central Sydney today, you'll see what a difference the 1960s made to the city. The AMP Building at Circular Quay, the MLC Centre at Martin Place, Australia Square on George St; countless more, all built during a decade that lifted the city skyline to dramatic new heights. It was a golden age of property speculation and reinforced concrete.

After 1957, when the Sydney City Council removed the restrictions that had kept buildings to a maximum height of 150 feet (45.7 metres), the CBD was fair game for investors, and anyone else with loose change who knew there were profits to be made in the sky above the city streets. The value of new building stock soared, from an estimated £3 million in 1956 to almost £51 million in 1964.¹ The city's new Tall Buildings didn't only monetise this empty airy space above the city; they also required large blocks on the ground for their foundations, and that, in turn, meant razing much of the city's existing Georgian and Victorian era building stock. Walking downtown today you'll see a few remnants of this earlier phase of Sydney's modernisation, but much was smashed down: the Hotel Metropole, the Hotel Australia, Rowe St, the Remington building, the Regent Theatre – and on it goes. It was, according to one horrified onlooker, like a bomb had gone off.² 'Like a fishing ground, everyone came in from everywhere', reflected Joe Owens, one of the leaders of the Builders Labourers Federation, which later intervened to protect historic buildings. 'They thought this market for office space was never ending'.³ It did end: by the mid 1970s there was a glut of new office space, with one-third unoccupied – and Sydney would never be quite the same again.



Alfred Street, Circular Quay. View from Pitt Street towards Phillip Street, showing the new AMP skyscraper (Photo: NSCA CRS 48/2877, City of Sydney Archives, 9 October 1962)

It's a story well known and often told. John Birmingham popularised tales of property speculation and corruption in his book *Leviathan*, characterising Sydney's development history as the epitome of the Australian will to power, operating 'bestially, without history or long-lived institutions or a moral centre'.⁴ Robert Hughes, who was also drawn to Sydney's dark soul, told an audience at the National Trust's Heritage Lecture in 1998:

In order to support the idea of Australia as utopia, there had to be one curse among the blessings: the curse of amnesia. Quite early in our history we became good at forgetting in the interests of what we interpreted as progress.⁵

In downtown Sydney this sense of erasure, of something being lost, is etched out in the forms of the city's concrete elevations, which today serve as display pieces from this decade of radical vertical growth. The spirited nature of Sydney's transformation during the 1960s was of course not unique to this city, but was in step, if perhaps slightly behind, the trajectory of other cities across the developed world, which saw modernisers such as New York's Robert Moses radically re-engineer urban environments to reflect the supremacy of the automobile. It's a period well known perhaps as much for the scale of urban reconstruction as for the strength of the protest movements that resulted, as communities built new alliances to defend the values of connectedness to place.⁶ Soja has called the 1960s a 'transformative moment in the geohistory of modernity', a time of accelerated change when seemingly all that was solid and dependable in the recent past melted into the unsettling 'air' of the present.⁷ By the time we'd reached the 1970s, in Sydney, resident communities of the inner suburbs had begun to organise themselves to bring a halt to the scale of development, eventually aligning with the Builders Labourers Federation to stall millions of dollars of demolition and construction activity across town. The 'Green Bans' were Sydney's own version of the new urban politics of the 20th century, and saw 'the right to the city' recognised as both a social and environmental issue.⁸

The 1960s are remembered today as a time of radical change, a decade in which starkly divergent 'visions of the city' were made plain out on the streets. But the nature of its crisis is also emblematic of the very condition of urban modernisation, which has had a tendency to shock and destroy all in its path. When Walter Benjamin wrote about Paris and other European cities during the first decades of the 20th century, he cast this shocking experience as a crisis of memory, bringing to light the writings and experiences of those such as Baudelaire and Fournel, who had written about the destruction of ancient Paris during the 1850s. Baron von Haussmann's 1853

clearance of the alleyways and tenement slums of Paris is widely recognised as the first decisive act to modernise a city, in reaction to the disorderly nature of the 19th century.⁹ As cluttered slums of pestilence gave way to composed spaces of civilised order, the city was to be revealed as a ‘work of art’,¹⁰ projecting an aestheticised vision of industrial modernity to the world. The monumental and iconographical gestures of Haussmann’s Boulevards and Place de la Concorde in turn cemented an idealized image of the city as a space of harmonious arrangement and scenic composition, thus highlighting the civilizing role of the modern bourgeois state.¹¹ This approach to urban design served to reinforce a sense of the city’s permanent, eternal existence, in which ‘the typical became more important than specific historic circumstances’.¹²

By the 1880s, the Haussmann pattern, of boulevards of sweeping vistas, was generally acclaimed as the very model of modern urbanism.¹³ Haussmann’s intervention has been described as one that reconstituted the modern metropolis through ‘memory maps’, whereby the city is reconstructed through a memorialised version of itself.¹⁴ In the act of imposing a unified, memorialised spatial order within an otherwise messy, inchoate and disorderly terrain, Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris also embodied industrialisations’ creative destruction, epitomising the scale and speed of modernity as it utterly transformed everyday spaces and environments, creating a terrifying sense of socio-spatial dislocation. As Vidler argues, following Haussmann, ‘the very word for urban reconstruction, once “embellishment”, was changed to “transformation”’.¹⁵ Modern urbanisation, seeking order out of disorder, thus came to be linked to a profound annihilation of the old city:

In the previous century, to write the annals of the monuments of Paris was to write the annals of Paris itself, from its origins up through each of its epochs; soon, however, it will be ... merely to write the annals of the last twenty years of our own existence.¹⁶

Benjamin drew from writers such as Fournel, and Baudelaire, to show how, during times of radical change in the city, the place of history and memory becomes dislodged. For Benjamin, modernity forced a shift away from memory’s attenuated forms as physical monuments or objects: ‘The great reminiscences, the historical frissons: these are all so much junk to the flâneur’, he wrote, ‘who is happy to leave them to the tourist’.¹⁷ Time could no longer be read in the spaces of the city – Baudelaire, after seeing one of Haussmann’s first projects, wrote, ‘no human heart changes half so fast as a city’s face’.¹⁸ Equally, placing too much meaning on the artefact, as in a monument or historical

plaque, could also ‘historicise’ a site in relative space, thus fixing its meaning and prompting the public at large to disengage.¹⁹ Seeing this shift in the form of memory in the modern city, Benjamin ‘assayed his spades’ in new territories.²⁰ He became a collector of out-of-date artefacts – what he called *denkbilder* or ‘thought images’ – such as warnings, buildings, amusements, signs and throwaway leaflets. He wove these thought images into prose pieces, disrupting narrative flow, and mimicking the experience of lost continuity in the city. As with an archaeological dig, ‘fragments’ and ‘traces’ took on special meanings. According to Benjamin, ‘he who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding’.²¹

Benjamin was no sentimentalist. The digging and the searching, the aimless wandering, the thought images: these techniques were used not simply to retrieve relics commemorating earlier times, but rather to rupture the very experience of temporality; to erase distinctions between past and present, order and clutter, modern and pre-modern. Throwing time’s arrow off course, new ways of experiencing, navigating and narrating the modern city could deny the mythic potency of the present, and all that this meant.

In this sense, memory practices serve to dispute the emptying out of time in the city. Lefebvre, in his 1960 essay ‘Notes on the New Town’, wrote, ‘Here I cannot read the centuries, not time, nor the past, nor what is possible’.²² At stake is the ability not simply to ‘return’, to retrieve a sense of that which is now obsolete, or smashed up, but instead to read within the city a sense of the potentiality and mutability of the present. Speaking of modern urbanism today Richard Sennett has made a similar point, reflecting that what is so often lost is the sense of time – ‘not time looking backwards nostalgically but forward-looking time, the city understood as process, its imagery changing through use, an urban imagination formed by anticipation, friendly to surprise’.²³

Returning to Rowe St

The image above shows the scene at the corner of Rowe Lane and Lees Court, site of an earlier Rowe St in Sydney, demolished in 1971 to make way for the ambitious MLC Centre. With its 67-story tower, this landmark icon was, at the time of its completion in 1978, a marvel of structural engineering by Civil & Civil (later Lend Lease). Not only was it Sydney’s tallest building by a wide margin, it was also the tallest concrete office building in the world, and heralded a new era in the building of high-rise complexes.²⁴ Replete with vertiginous elevations and brutalist obstructions, the MLC Centre today also presents us with evidence of the Sydney’s joyous love of total destruction. Before

the redevelopment, this little corner had been the centrepiece of Sydney's social life, the jewel in the city's cultural crown. No trace remains today, except in the cold, dark storage rooms of the city's libraries and archives. Delving into the writings of Walter Benjamin, and knowing a little bit of the site's history, I found something quite fascinating about those concrete walls; they spoke so eloquently of an urban memory crisis – in this city, in any city – and seemed so very ready for someone to do a little dance on them, to dislodge a piece of time from out of the blank expanse of pure space.



The street scene outside the MLC Centre, corner of Rowe Lane and Lees Court (Photo: Sarah Barns, 2008)

And so I imagined whether these blank walls might be just the place to retrieve and to recollect, to dig and to re-navigate, to deploy the resources of the past to dispute the territorialism of the present. Rowe St wasn't any ordinary 'little lane' in Sydney's past, but, in fact, the original *ur*-laneway that all contemporary Australian cities today covet. Sydneysiders who lived through the destructive years of the 1960s still mourn the loss of what toppled down to make way for these concrete elevations: here lay the birth of Sydney modernism, a cultural mecca for lovers of literature, fine arts, intellectual banter, beer, coffee and fashion. This place had been, in the words of an ABC radio documentary, 'technicolour in a monochrome world'.²⁵ For many years Rowe St has had its own Society, comprising a group of former Rowe St shop owners and others with affection for the street. By 2012 the Society was keeping the entirety of its collection – a rich archive of memorabilia, fragments of old shops, drapery and interior fittings, newspaper articles, oral histories and books – in a private lounge room in Bourke St, Surry Hills.²⁶

I began to make regular visits to this lounge room, in search of the traces of the former street. I wasn't only wanting to venerate the past – though one does sigh amongst the newspaper cuttings, and weep at hearing today's City of Sydney Council talk of 'activating Sydney's

laneways', given what was smashed, and given how cold and, let's face it, unwell, laneways such as Rowe St are today.²⁷ Rather, I wanted to use the concrete elevations of the laneway as an environment within which a relational spatiality might be *practiced* and revealed. The practising of memory was intended to be deliberately spatial, that is, for the placement of the historical stories and the bric-a-brac of the past to at once connect us with a forgotten past, as well as dispute the present day built form of the laneway as being the only layer of meaning present at the site. In search of the identities, the stories and the archives of this street, I was drawing on Massey and others' conception of spatiality as a relational field of action, which recognises and values the geography of the event as much as the contemporary built forms of the spaces we live in.²⁸

In this way the spaces in and around Rowe St became for me a kind of *memory topi*, triggering a searching for historical images, sounds, recordings of the former life of this precinct. Once retrieved, such traces were to be reinscribed into the present day city, the former sounds of the street pouring from behind its garbage bins, the images and the films projected large across those blank walls. I wanted this research to facilitate not only a piece of writing, but also a different way of *experientially* navigating the terrain. Thrift urged his students of human and cultural geography to 'make something' and not just write, because geography is a spatial, as well as cursive strategy.²⁹ In line with this approach, returning to Sydney's spaces of forgetting has been also an exercise in leading audiences astray, to the spaces they might not otherwise trundle down. And with iconic thinkers like Benjamin in my back pocket, I went in search of the materials I might use to realise this spatial memory practice. I was slightly apprehensive that only minor traces might remain. But I need not have worried.

Discovering Time in Rowe St

[A]nd each time I remember, I discover and I reveal something else.³⁰

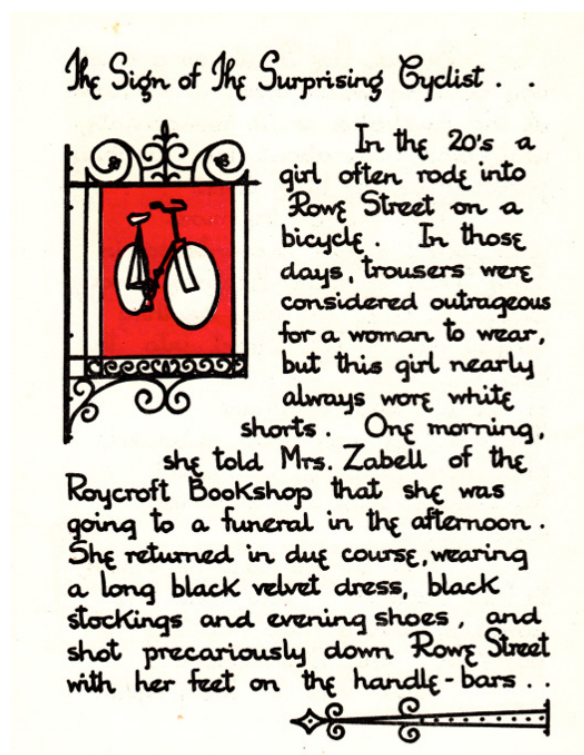
'Bijou', Isadore Brodsky said in 1962, was just the right word to capture the 'sparkle that caused the street to glow in the darkness'. He called Rowe St 'a street of the savant employing each of the five senses to understand thoroughly what is to be tasted, savoured, and slowly enjoyed in art and literature, theatre and music, in legend and fact and anecdotal bric-a-brac'.³¹ Described as a narrow 'wiggly lane of a street' crushed up against the very fine Australia Hotel, Rowe St was 'just wide enough for a car to bump down'.³² It was to Rowe St that Europeans arriving in Sydney after the war would converge. Henriette Lamotte sold her much-desired French hats here. It was on

Rowe St that Carl Plate set up his Notanda Gallery, and introduced Sydneysiders to the wonder of colour prints. The Roycroft Bookshop and Lending Library, run by Mrs Frances Zabel from the 1920s, ensured that keen readers in Sydney were able to get hold of books by Mary McCarthy and Virginia Woolf. Infamous interiors designer Marion Hall Best also established an offshoot to her Woollahra store here in 1949. Unique in Sydney, it was in Rowe St that 'shoppers took their time to window gaze... in a city where everyone seemed to be in a hurry'.³³

The cultural significance of Rowe St and the Australia Hotel means it is richly documented: in books and magazines, including in the early publications of Sydney Ure Smith; in photographs by iconic photographers such as Harold Cazneaux, Sam Hood and Brian Bird; and in paintings and etchings, by Lloyd Rees, William Dobell and others such as Australia's first animator, Harry Julius. The life of the precinct was recorded on radio; its speeches, its parades, its famous personalities and its scandals televised and filmed for mass audiences. Perhaps the most charming of the books is Margaret Mary Pearson's *Tales of Rowe St* from 1947.³⁴ A handwritten booklet, it begins:

Everyone has a story about Rowe Street, of some curious incident or oddity seen there, for it is a little street so full of personality it just can't help attracting adventures to itself.

The many adventures of the street this little book does so faithfully tell



Whether it was the curious lunchtime incident, or the tales of nighttime abandon and the mad excesses of coffee and nicotine, the place seemed to percolate with ideas. ‘From the Long Bar to the Lincoln’ was a cherished refrain, as creatures of the night finished their drinks at the Australia Hotel’s Long Bar and absconded down to the Lincoln Coffee Lounge & Café, a hop, step and a jump away on Rowe St. It was to gatherings at the Lincoln that Sydney’s ‘early Push’ members would migrate, come sundown, and it was at the Lincoln that artists like John Olsen, hoping to get noticed, would exhibit their sketchings.



[Left] Scenes of Rowe St (Photo: Harold Cazneaux, 1912)

[Right] Happy times in the ‘Stinkin Lincoln’ in Rowe St (Photo: Brian Bird, c.1948–51, courtesy of the State Library of NSW)



Rowe St in the 1960s

Much of Rowe St’s character and esteem, I soon discovered, was due to the presence of the Australia Hotel – for eight decades the centre

of Sydney's social life. The more I learned about the hotel the more it seemed this had been the place in which Sydney had vested its dreams of progress. During a ceremony in 1889 to mark the laying of the hotel's foundation stone, the NSW Premier Henry Parkes used the occasion to reflect on the great progress of the city, now evidenced by the construction of this 'palatial structure... about to rise in the city of Sydney'.³⁵ When the Australia Hotel was completed, he claimed, Sydney could claim to have become a truly global city. Once opened for business, 'the Australia boasted a sought-after guest list: it began with Sarah Bernhardt, and included Mark Twain, J.C. Williamson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London, Dame Nellie Melba, the Ballet Russe, Alfred Hitchcock, Kathryn Hepburn, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, Marlene Dietrich, President Johnson and General Douglas MacArthur.

And so I learned that 'the Australia' was where Sydney had dreamed itself into a city of international standing: hopes of grandeur were made real here in stone and glass – and electricity. When it first opened, the hotel was a towering seven stories high – the largest structure in the Australian colonies – and had been completed at a cost of £220 000. It was capable of accommodating up to 300 guests at a time.³⁶ Designed by the Mansfield Brothers to 'bear favourable comparison' with America's finest palace hotels, colonnades of iron and granite flanked the hotel's entrance on

Castlereagh St, with balconies on every floor. A pair of ornamental iron gates opened onto the vestibule that featured polished granite columns and a floor of mosaic tiles, followed by what the *Sydney Morning Herald* described as a 'magnificent chamber 72 ft long and 35 ft wide [22 x 11 m] covered in at the first floor with an ornamental wrought iron and glass roof'.³⁷ No expense was spared on its interior fittings: all woodwork was of the finest quality colonial cedar, the ceilings were made of ornamental zinc work, while the central court featured a floor of marble tiles.

The entire hotel was bathed in electric light, and, with two lights on the flagstaff 200 ft (61 m) high, it could be seen at night from all parts of the city and by every steamer entering the harbour. And what's more, it didn't smell! The most up-to-date methods were used to extract 'foul gases' through ventilating shafts that emerged well above the roof of the building. Hot water was available to guests to use as they



The Australia Hotel (Sourced from *The Australia Hotel Handbook*, March 1934, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, NSW)

pleased. Hydraulic machinery, fuelled by two multi-tubular boilers in the basement, powered the operation of the lifts and, perhaps as important, the production of ice.

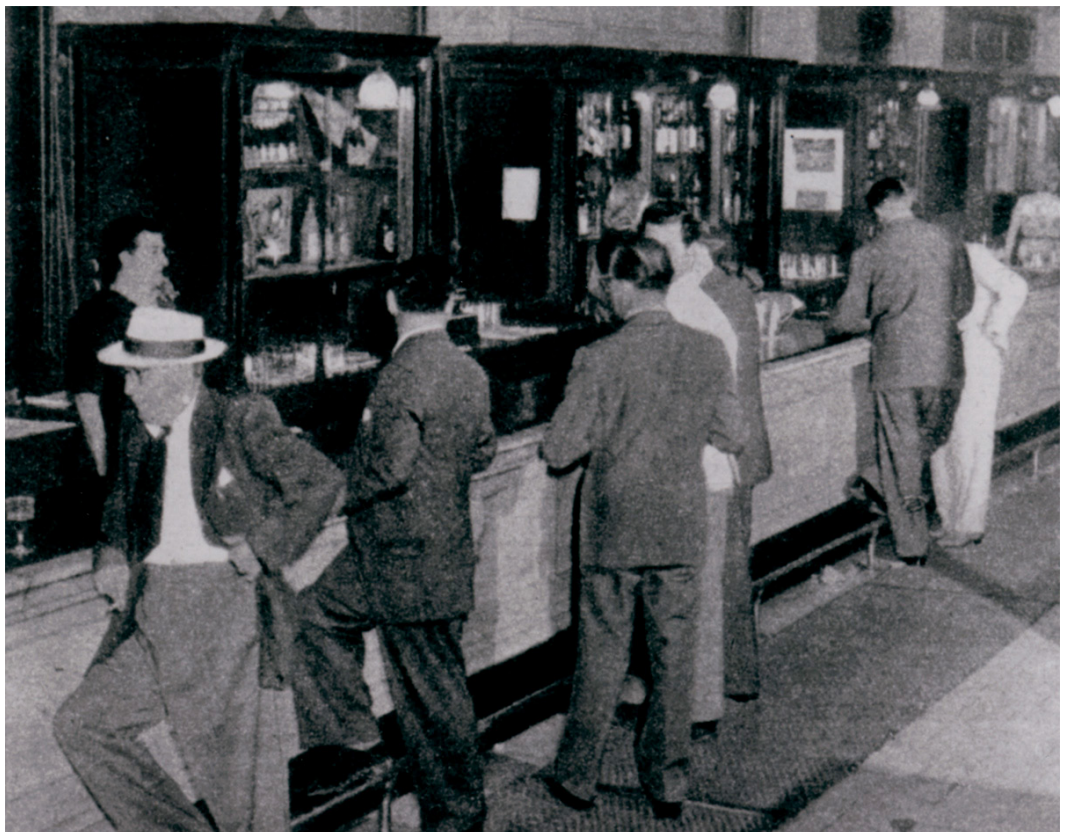


Main entrance, Castlereagh St (Sourced from an Australia Hotel publication, H. Edwin Moore, 1893, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, NSW)

Among its lavish appointments was a Reading Room, described by the *Herald* as being ‘furnished and decorated in Jacobean style, with dado of English oak, and elaborately carved fireplace fittings to correspond’; a Smoking Room, presenting ‘an aspect of great comfort and snugness’; a Central Court, equipped with comfortable lounges upholstered with specially prepared buffalo-hide and decorated in Mauresque style; a Bar accessed from Rowe St; and separate Billiard Room with notable walnut fittings. Well renowned too was its grand staircase made of marble: ‘the steps of white Sicilian, and that used for a handrail and balusters of deep rouge and dove, from Belgian quarries’. At its head was a main corridor, 16 ft (5 m) wide, ‘massive, with Doric columns, and richly lighted, like the staircases, by windows of stained glass’. From here it was to the main dining room, featuring Corinthian columns ‘fluted and gracefully carved’, and mirrors with ‘sprays of electric light’ lining the walls. There was a Ladies’ Drawing Room, Turkish Baths, a hairdressing salon, and a photographic studio on site. Quite the ‘modern caravansery’, as the *Herald* aptly noted.³⁸

The Australian was the social centre of a fast-growing city, attracting writers, artists and other professional observers of Sydney life. Epitomising Sydney's march into modernity, it was also a place of many firsts. The first licence to operate a wireless station in Australia was granted to the Australasian Wireless Company, which operated out of the Hotel's rooms, with an aerial mast attached to a chimney.³⁹ Later, the company merged with Marconi's own company to become Amalgamated Wireless Australasia (AWA). Its chairman, Ernest Fisk, would later hold the Radio Foundation Day's Inaugural Foundation Day Dinner at the hotel in December 1936 – an occasion made noteworthy for the special message written by Marconi, read out and broadcast around the world, making international headlines at the time. Later, the Shell Corporation would sponsor Australia's first demonstration of television, here at the hotel in 1949, as part of a series of events staged across the country. The closed circuit broadcast televised images of performers from one room to another: comedy duo Ada & Elsie appeared in the Sydney transmissions.

Technologically modern, a place for high society, a centre of European style and sophistication, the Australia was also home to some seven or more bars keeping Sydneysiders in good company and fine spirits. The hotel's Long Bar (later Sportsman's Bar) happened to be the most popular gay bar in Sydney. 'Long may the Australia Hotel flourish!' sang Frank Clune.⁴⁰ But as it turns out, the Australia's days were numbered.



Australia Hotel Long Bar (Sourced from the Auction Book of the Australia Hotel, 1971, copyright unknown)

Discovering the city during the reign of a bustling Rowe St, I realised the loss of this precinct – the annihilation of these city blocks during the 1960s and early 1970s – was entirely in keeping with Sydney’s nature as a modernising city. Sydney lost its Australia Hotel, with its nearby Rowe St and Theatre Royal, for the self same reason it was built in the first place: *because Sydney has always desperately wanted to be modern*. In February 1970 the Australia Hotel was sold at auction to the MLC Group for \$9.6 million. It operated until lights out on 30 June of the following year. After its closure, the F.R. Strange company held a marathon auction, described as ‘the biggest yet seen in the country’.⁴¹ Of course the grandest hotel would also have the grandest of auctions. Prospective purchasers could bid on everything from the chairs, the chandeliers, the silverware and the folding doors, to the bath taps, the ashtrays and the plastic potted plants. And so the remnants of the Australia Hotel were scattered across the city. The only part that would endure with the new redevelopment was the hotel’s liquor licence.

With the Australia went Rowe St and the neighbouring Theatre Royal, all demolished to make way for the new MLC Centre. An eleventh hour protest in 1972 by supporters of the Theatre Royal, backed by Jack Munday’s Builders Labourers Federation, ensured the old structure was replaced by a new theatre.⁴² Those who later became involved with the Green Bans remember the intervention as the first of many such protests in the city over the coming years.⁴³

Re-Inscribing Time in Rowe St: *Last Drinks*

But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.⁴⁴

The recent installation project *Last Drinks* made use of the recordings, the traces and the fragments that remain of the former Rowe St and Australia Hotel. It converted the still images, the sound recordings, the memorabilia, the songs, the celebrated televised moments and the everyday moments of life in and around Rowe St and the Australia Hotel from catalogue records in the libraries and archives into a multi-site video and sound installation. Supported as a major commission for the City of Sydney’s 11th annual *Art & About* festival, the installation saw the traces and fragments of this former precinct reinscribed onto city streets every night for a month. A ‘pop-up’ memory space perhaps, the placing of the installation in Martin Place, Rowe Lane and King St was determined primarily by proximity to the former buildings and laneway.⁴⁵



Projected images of a couple at their wedding reception, Australia Hotel (Images contributed by community member for 2012 Art & About Sydney, location 5 Martin Place, Sydney. Photo: Sarah Barns, 2012)

The installation project featured recordings of life in and around the Hotel from the collections of the ABC, the National Film and Sound Archive, the State Library of NSW and, not least, the private holdings of the Rowe St Society. During the research and development phase Sydneysiders were also invited to share their recollections and stories. Through this community call-out I discovered old knick-knacks like spoons and ashtrays from the Australia Hotel can be often found at vintage markets, and some of its light fixtures are known to be at restaurants around town. One lady has a cabinet full of liquor from the hotel – she’s never touched a drop – and another gent reports having most of the mirrors from the Mirror Lounge in his own lounge room, lucky for him.

During the month of the installation you could wander the area and see large scale projections of the former spaces of the hotel – its grand Central Court in the 1890s, the ballrooms, its Gala Nights; editions of the seminal *Australia Kat* magazine produced by Sydney Ure Smith while in his teens – used to light up those concrete elevations, ghost-like, some would say. You could watch, and listen to, the sounds of the first television broadcast in Australia. You could listen to the sound of the Hotel’s auction, the sound of its demolition, footage of its last day. You could watch the ABC journalist Peter Luck warn viewers what they were about to lose. There were staged events and tours during the month of the Festival – times when former workers, community contributors, design historians and enthusiastic onlookers would share stories of the place – but the majority of people would have simply wandered past after work, looking upwards and wondering. I hope they were friendly to surprise.



Large-scale projection, Rowe St, *Art & About Sydney* (Photo: Sarah Barns, 2012)



Large-scale projection, King St, *Art & About Sydney* (Photo: Sarah Barns, 2012)

The Last Drinks Project negotiated spaces of memory within the public domain of the city, working with reinforced concrete as its canvas, beholden to favours and goodwill from building owners, as well as a great deal of support from the City of Sydney. It mobilised a suite of contemporary media technologies spanning film and sound editing, animation, digital projection and mobile publishing, to suggest an experience of portals or wormholes to other times, other spaces – and other possibilities – in the city. It took the blank surfaces of the MLC Centre and re-imagined the terrain as encompassing not only the perpetual present, but also the archives of the city, its recordings and its living memories. It found that, as the central part of Sydney's social life for much of the century, the Australia and the neighbouring Rowe St remain *on the record*, if not on the street. Its history reveals

itself through an archaeology of sorts – an archaeology of recorded action and surviving artefacts scattered across town. Certainly the project reminded many people of the days of the good old Australia, and educated younger Sydneysiders of the existence of a once fine hotel they'd never heard of.

'Activating Sydney laneways' is now a key strategy of the City's, as a new wave of urban strategists look to places like Melbourne, with its bustling laneways acting as cultural hubs, as a means to bring people, and their wallets, back into this precinct after dark. This installation came down one month after it went up, and the website containing the digitised archives of the street remains mostly without visitors. Institutional collections remain uninterested in archiving the project, so it too will come down before too long. But those concrete elevations remain, for now.

Turning down Castlereagh St today and peering up to where the Australia Hotel once stood, we might recall the glorious moment, captured on film by Charles Kerry in 1892, when the place exuded the greatest hopes of a hopeful city, and consider its passing a steady reminder of what it means, in the city, to be modern.



Australia Hotel, looking north along Castlereagh St (Charles Kerry & Co, 1892, sourced through the Rowe St Society)

Sarah Barns is a digital media practitioner and research consultant whose work sits at the intersection of digital design, arts installation, cultural heritage and place making. Currently working through creative collaboration ESEM Projects and an Associate of the Creative Practices Group, Sarah was awarded her PhD through UTS in 2011 and has produced a series of creative projects for organisations such as the ABC, the Powerhouse Museum and the City of Sydney. She loves to immerse herself in the past times of Sydney's places by incorporating sound, film and photography archives, which she imaginatively re-interprets using digital and physical environmental interfaces. See <http://esemprojects.com>

Chris Caines is an artist who has been working internationally in a wide variety of digital and electronic media for over twenty years. His work has been collected by and seen at many festivals and Museums including ACMI, The Queensland Art Gallery, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Tate UK, the Art Gallery of NSW and the Berlin, Venice, Cannes and ISEA festivals. This work has been supported by numerous arts grants, commissions and international residencies. He is currently Director of the Centre for Media Arts Innovation at the University of Technology, Sydney.

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John Dale is the author of six books including the best-selling *Huckstepp*, two crime novels *Dark Angel* and *The Dogs Are Barking*, and a memoir, *Wild Life*. He has edited two anthologies, *Out West* and *Car Lovers*, and co-edited a third anthology, *Best on Ground*. His novel, *Leaving Suzie Pye*, was published in 2010 and translated into Turkish. He is Head of Creative Practices at UTS and his research areas include narrative fiction, creative non-fiction, crime narratives and the novella.

Chapter 12: The Concrete Remains

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