

PLACING DARLINGHURST

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My personal map of Sydney has included Darlinghurst for as long as I can remember. When I was very little, our family summer weekends inevitably included a drive across town to swim at Nielsen Park in Vaucluse. The vinyl car seats would be so hot we'd lay out towels underneath our legs and wind the windows down, our heads craning out into the breeze as far as we could manage, while cricket on the radio broadcast to no one in particular. We drove from the inner west, where we lived, through Chippendale and Surry Hills, then across Darlinghurst to Edgecliff and along New South Head Road. I remember the dip behind St Vincent's Hospital along Boundary Street and under the Burton Street viaduct. It felt like a noticeable shift in landscape as we headed down towards the harbour, where the sandstone cut-outs seeped water after rain, and figs growing along the streets gave the place a cool, green hue.

I remember wonderful trips to the cinema in Darlinghurst with my mum to watch Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, seeing the fireworks from a rooftop apartment one humid New Year's Eve, and occasional outings to exhibitions at the Sydney Jewish Museum and National Art School. School trips to the Australian Museum are also etched in my memory, where gemstones, dinosaur fossils and shark teeth added a sense of immensity and magic to my understanding of the natural world.

I grew up in Newtown, so it wasn't as if I was travelling far, but there was a definite feeling that Darlinghurst was a distinctive *place*. My parents had lived above a florist on Oxford Street before they had children, so we heard lots of stories about this corner of Sydney around the dinner table. When I was old enough to travel across Sydney by myself, I'd meet groups of school friends at Central Station and catch the bus up Oxford Street to Bondi or Clovelly. Darlinghurst felt exotic and exciting. The Mardi Gras Parade was probably my first real experience of what I understood as a counterculture. It was so expressive and wild, and Oxford Street was unmistakably, proudly queer.

I'm acutely aware my own little history of Darlinghurst is just the tiniest piece of a complex and multilayered puzzle. Perhaps Darlinghurst is so dazzling precisely *because* so many of us carry these pieces with us: connections to its cultural institutions, or certain pubs, or streets; visits to student share houses, or Mardi Gras marches; perhaps seeing friends at a gig, or exhibition opening, or hospital ward; or maybe the memory is less comforting – like a period of housing insecurity, or ill health, or a run-in with the justice system.

There are so many stories and intersections that could be included here. In fact, teasing out those many threads of connection in turn prompts the question: if our own

Darlinghurst's Barcom Avenue has long been a place of overlapping histories and memories; print by Sarah Gilbert, 2022
Courtesy of Sarah Gilbert

sense of this place provides just the briefest snapshot, how might we tell the story of Darlinghurst more broadly? Individual lives and experiences populate our communities with stories, but the challenge of collating these into an actual ‘community history’ requires more than just a process of aggregation. Telling Darlinghurst’s history means bringing together understandings of its landscape and geography, along with stories of its people and a sense of time.

HISTORIES OF PLACE

When the urban historian Dolores Hayden described the ‘power of place’ in people’s connections to the past, it was the cityscape of Los Angeles rather than inner Sydney that captured her attention. But Hayden’s argument – that we make historical meanings from the places around us – resonates just as strongly here in Darlinghurst, where individual memories and memoirs intersect with community histories of people and place. ‘Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories’, Hayden insists, ‘because natural features such as hills or harbours, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes’.

Place literally *locates* our individual and collective histories in the world around us. As the public historian David Glassberg explains, ‘Our sense of place and of history are inextricably intertwined’. In other words, the Darlinghurst of my own history is tied to an actual place, one that is familiar to those who can also situate their histories there. But there are other historical layers stretching across the time and lived experience of this neighbourhood – much like the uneven strata of sandstone that make up its foundation. ‘My Darlinghurst’ is just one layer of many, at one particular moment in time, as this collection shows.

Darlinghurst has long been shaped by its geographies. Boundary Street, which marks the twentieth-century suburb’s eastern border, traces the route of the old Rushcutters Creek, which flowed through pools and cascades down to the bay and was used by Aboriginal people until at least the 1860s. Rocky ridges that are still visible today, along with its shallow soil, made the area unattractive to the early colonists until the early 1800s (although the sandstone, locally quarried by convicts and prisoners from Darlinghurst Gaol, did provide materials for many of the buildings of the expanding town). Streams ran down from the ridges towards the harbour, as reflected in some of the streets today (there is still a Stream Street behind the Australian Museum), and were the site for at least four of the colony’s first mills. The Darlinghurst landscape fashioned colonial connections to its terrain, as it had for Indigenous people over 60 000 years.

What we now know as Oxford Street was once a Gadigal pathway winding along the sandstone ridge that still reaches out towards the ocean. Mariko Smith and Laura McBride note in their chapter how ‘Gadi’ was the country of the grass tree. And the people of Gadi – the ‘Gadigal’ – produced knowledge of this place long before colonial buildings, suburb boundaries, and street surveys overlaid its natural topography with names like ‘Darlinghurst’, ‘Oxford Street’, or ‘Liverpool Street’. Even those colonial monikers are revealing for what they tell us about the uneven layers of Australian history more broadly, where naming rights were increasingly stripped from the Country’s Traditional Owners.

As you’ll read in this book, the songs of Gadigal fisherwomen could be heard gently sounding across the harbour just below present-day Darlinghurst by early colonists. Aboriginal fishing camps around Rushcutters Bay were still visible until the late nineteenth century – at places like Barcom Glen, the estate of the convict and landowner Thomas West. Colonial fishing practices also congregated in this area. Sydney’s first



fish markets were built in Woolloomooloo in 1872, although that commercial industry quickly put immense pressure on what had once been a sustainable Gadigal fishery.

As Aboriginal fishers were pushed further out from Darlinghurst and its surrounds by the growing colony and emerging nation, others came in. Labourers working on the wharves, warehouses and markets lived in narrow terraces that banked up the steep ridges towards the top of Darlinghurst like carefully wedged dominoes. In the early twentieth century, Italian and Greek migrants formed a small fishing community near the markets and were still fishing Sydney Harbour's waters and mending nets on the streets nearby in the 1930s. Ice Street, named after one of the city's earliest ice factories that supplied the fishing industry in the late 1800s, sits just behind St Vincent's Hospital and is another historical relic linking Darlinghurst back to older times.

The hospital itself is also an archive of Darlinghurst. Founded by the Sisters of Charity on its current site in 1870, St Vincent's is a local institution, reflecting the suburb's extensive religious and missionary history, as well as the intricate relationship between various religious orders and Darlinghurst's inhabitants. Each represented powerful historical and ethical narratives, and advocated distinct identities through their churches, charities and schools, as Tamson Pietsch, Clare Monagle and Cameron Logan explore in their chapters. Humility and virtue were inseparable from sectarianism, as churches vied for the community's moral and political attention.

Sometimes these physical or geographical historical markers of residential streets, churches, hospitals and institutions seem to sit in a curious conversation. I'm struck by

Nurse trainees at St Vincent's Hospital, 1934

Courtesy of St Vincent's Campus Archives

the way St Vincent's almost reaches across Darlinghurst Road to 'The Wall', for example, which was once a centre of male prostitution in Sydney. In his chapter of memoir, Garry Wotherspoon remembers how these adjoining Darlinghurst locations collide: The Wall stands across the road from Green Park (where HIV/AIDS vigils were held), and the hospital, where AIDS patients were lovingly cared for by the Sisters of Charity in Ward 17 South. While the Catholic Church has been unyielding in its judgement of homosexuality, St Vincent's provided unquestioning compassion and companionship during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. In a historical walking tour of gay Sydney curated by the City of Sydney, Oxford Street might be the epicentre of *Parade*, but St Vincent's is its beacon of care and humanity.

There are traces of other lively conversations, too, forged by the neighbourhood's proximity. The entire postcode takes up just 80 hectares – a tiny triangle still shaped by its geography and the institutions dotted across it, like the courthouse, gaol, Australian Museum, Maccabean Hall and St Vincent's, as well as its churches and schools. I can't help but imagine lines of connection between the old Darlinghurst Police Station and the ganglands of a notorious Sydney history, just a stone's throw away. Circles of crime (prostitution, gang violence, police corruption, and arrest) characterised these local streets and laneways, but so did the most mundane daily interactions – like bumping into each other in the milk bar or pub, seeing someone's kid walking to school, or sharing a joke on the steps of the courthouse.

These sites are more than just points on a map, however. While the topography and built environment of this suburb anchor our individual and collective memories of Darlinghurst, the suburb's history isn't fixed. We might walk the same streets and paths and notice the same landmarks, but do we see the same 'Darlinghurst'?

Sarah Gilbert's fascinating Darlinghurst Oral History project reflects the connectedness, as well as the diverse lived experience, of this village. There's a real sense in her interviews of the interrelatedness of people's lives here – as locals, teachers, friends, and carers. Together they describe a neighbourly narrative in which people watch next-door kids grow up, pop in on their friends, and seek out each other. Reading it feels like being introduced to a street barbeque. But, Gilbert reminds us, those ties of belonging can't hide the precariousness of some locals, who might be connected to Darlinghurst yet are disconnected from its upward mobility. Gilbert's collection shows how all might be included in Darlinghurst's 'story'.

A MULTILAYERED DARLINGHURST

Understanding its multilayered history shows how Darlinghurst is tangible and real as well as 'open and porous', to borrow Doreen Massey's famous theorisation of place. It reflects complex, changing social attachments and identities as well as being defined by an actual landscape and the people who live in it.

These layers of history are plainly apparent in the Old Darlinghurst Gaol. Built by convicts who chiselled their initials into the great blocks of locally quarried sandstone, the site has been a place of violence and incarceration, a gay beat, *and* an art school. Woods Lane, once the epicentre of criminal Darlinghurst – or 'Razorhurst,' as Alana Piper notes in her chapter – is now quaint, upmarket real estate. In 1978, a gay rights protest was infamously and violently broken up by local police; now the 78ers famously lead the annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. The waters of Barcom Glen and Rushcutters Bay once fed local fisheries, then Chinese market gardens, and are now the focus of calls for wetlands restoration. Each of these historical moments reaches

into another – the many experiences and identities of Darlinghurst shouldn't be seen as mutually exclusive, but layers that are at once overlapping and distinctive.

Part community, part place, part identity, Darlinghurst has been *an idea* as much as an actual postcode. How we understand those diverse, changing meanings and connections is an important focus of local history, and this one in particular. As such, this book brings together chapters about the lived history, community and place of Darlinghurst. But it also explores the history of Darlinghurst as an idea, and an identity – or perhaps, more accurately, several. While place is a vital 'way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world', as the geographer Tim Cresswell acknowledges, it also reflects the inevitable subjectivity and elision of our individual and social memories. 'The word "place"', Cresswell notes, 'hides many differences'. Despite its capacity to locate and consolidate our history, we need to be aware of possibilities for divergent and counter histories of Darlinghurst.

Take Leigh Boucher's chapter on queer Darlinghurst, for example. He could almost be describing an alternate suburb, with its own distinctive sites, sounds and even annual calendar. Reading it feels like we're being given a lens of 'queerness' through which to view the suburb's history, where streets are also beats, friends are also family, and collective memories (of AIDS and discrimination), which might have faded in the broader population, live on. Boucher offers us a community history of Darlinghurst, but in a new register – and one that might push against a conventional historical narrative.

Jason Anderson's reflections on being homeless in Darlinghurst are similarly revealing. Like many in this collection, Darlinghurst has provided a vital community for Jason that both grounds and connects. But his story of precariousness, mental health and dependency, paints a narrative that is by no means linear or neatly resolved.

In their reflections on the Australian Museum, Mariko Smith and Laura McBride also offer a vital counter history. Established in 1827 (and existing on its present site since 1857), the museum was created to exhibit specimens and curiosities of Australian science. Yet its role in the removal of First Nations cultural artefacts, its presentation of Australian science as a form of colonial 'progress', and its silence on First Nations knowledges represents an uneasy institutional legacy. As Smith and McBride explore, those uncomfortable truths prompted the 2020 'Unsettled' exhibition, which was the Museum's first Indigenous curation – nearly 200 years after its inception.

Paul Ashton's chapter on Darlinghurst's changing heritage also shows how the area's stories have been variously conserved and forgotten. Like the collections held within an institution such as the Australian Museum, what we value as 'history' shifts over time. Darlinghurst's history is subject to as much contestation and change as any other. It all depends on who's doing the remembering, what they're wanting to remember (or forget), and when. Ashton reveals how the uneven memorialisation of Darlinghurst's diverse community reflects changing values and understandings of memorialisation and heritage itself. As a 'site of memory', to borrow French historian Pierre Nora's famous phrase, the history of Darlinghurst is at once fixed and changeable, collective and contested, intimate and public.

In this book, we see Darlinghurst as a historical agent and an archive, as well as a site where history 'happened'. For some, Darlinghurst has been a beacon. This was certainly the case for Garry Wotherspoon in his search for gay identity and belonging. Fifty years earlier, it was also a destination for migrants, such as Andonis Piperoglou's great-grandfather. Waves of economic migrants from southern Europe came to Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, and many of them arrived in cosmopolitan, working-class suburbs like Darlinghurst.

348 Liverpool St
Darlinghurst
18/3/91

To The Mayor & Alderman
Sydney
Sirs

I would respectfully
draw your attention to the
drainage connected with
the house of which I am
tenant. During heavy rains
the water forces itself up out
of the sink, and sewage matter
with it, which floats about
my yard, and out through
the fence into Waverah
Avenue, and is directly
opposite the public school
it is very offensive, and
I would crave your attention

Letter of complaint about
poor drainage at 348 Liverpool
Street, Darlinghurst, 1891

Courtesy of the City of Sydney Archives,
A-00321620

Understanding the complex, overlapping history of these places demands considered research and attentiveness. Sitting among the records and in the community enables a deep, historical knowledge. For her chapter on the Sydney Jewish Museum, Gabrielle Kemmis immerses herself in a community of health workers, to examine the institution's education program for Holocaust Survivors. Meanwhile, Paula Hamilton and Lisa Murray are stimulated by municipal records of services which provide wonderful source material of Darlinghurst's noise during the 1920s. As urbanisation and modernisation grew, so too did the noise, which was often perceived as a threat. Machinery, lifts, radios and industrial noise clattered and clanged in new ways, alongside the sounds of high-density living, like crying babies, loud parties, and the weekend paperboys. Darlinghurst could be bohemian and entrancing, but its neighbours were often irate.

It was not just noises that caused offence. Foul smells and unpleasant odours aroused indignation, too. In her chapter on local urban history, Laila Ellmoos also follows the municipal paper trail, mining the extraordinary collection of the City of Sydney Archives to reveal a story of a rapidly changing and developing local suburb where real estate subdivisions were beset with drainage issues and where local politics collided with a swelling local population.

Other snippets of Darlinghurst's evolving history can be found in old newspapers, poetry, song and artwork, with the area serving as a prompt for a rich corpus of creative expression and story-making. The suburb's history is visible in the tangible relics and objects of its material culture we see around us – from faded old shop signs that still linger long after a business has changed its wares to the peeling murals on community centres and schoolyards. It can also be seen in the artefacts and ephemera of our day-to-day cultural life. Darlinghurst has been an epicentre of fashion and fortune, as Peter McNeil explores, where the very clothing people wear can signal class, profession, or school affiliation, as well as performances of sexuality and queer pride.

And if Darlinghurst itself is an archive, what better way to immerse ourselves than to walk its streets and lanes? Mark Dunn and Catherine Freyne do just that in their chapters. We might also tune in to local conversations, like the one between Donna Ingram and Nicole Endacott documenting the area's ongoing Aboriginal connections. At a time when the Uluru Statement from the Heart urges truth-telling about our history, Ingram and Endacott's chapter not only offers an important narrative of Darlinghurst, it also compels us to listen.

A DIVERSE HISTORY

In her sweeping environmental history of the Bering Strait, Bathsheba Demuth writes that 'Humans are of places; we sit deep in them and cannot help but change them'. Darlinghurst might be about as far away as you can get from the watery arctic of her study, but Demuth's message – that places make and are made by the people who live there – resonates throughout this local history collection.

If history is the business of telling stories about people and places over time, no single person or place will be viewed and recounted in the same way forever. An ordinary day in Darlo looks nothing like one from 2000, 200, or even 50 years ago. Waves of time have washed over this place. Climate and cultural change, colonisation and immigration, gay pride and gentrification, sectarianism and secularism have all left their imprint.

In thinking through some of this historical change, I'm reminded of Tom Carment's lovely essay about living in Darlinghurst's Womerah Lane. Prompted by his own family's

life there within a modern, bustling, diverse community, he also allows himself to imagine back in time to when his little row of terraces was built: the suburb that grew up on Gadigal land, the night cart men who walked the back lanes emptying outhouse cans of sewage, the Chinese market gardeners who laboured in the wetlands below.

And yet, despite all that historical change, Darlinghurst also repeats and recycles. Kids continue to roll down the hill to Darlinghurst Public School (established in 1883), koels pipe out their incessant pre-dawn whooping in early spring, jacaranda flowers carpet the streets every November, summer thunderstorms roll across the ridge and fresh water continues to trickle down the sandstone for weeks after rain.

We hope this book gives a sense of that curious historical time – which both connects us to the past and separates us from it – as well as providing the starting point for a conversation about Darlinghurst's history. We believe its story is one worth telling. In putting together this collection we have drawn on a variety of sources and approaches. There are reflective chapters of memoir as well as scholarly history, pieces written by locals and by experts. We have made use of the extensive written and local records, like those held at the City of Sydney Archives and the State Library of New South Wales, as well as cultural artefacts such as songs, artworks and poetry.

Between the covers of this book you'll find archival histories and oral histories, family stories and walking tours, institutional histories, along with place-based and Indigenous histories. Interwoven with these chapters are actual archival excerpts and relics from Darlinghurst's rich and diverse past. These mementos have been produced and curated by a diversity of local voices, artists and public institutions, such as the City of Sydney Archives, the State Library of New South Wales, the Sydney Jewish Museum and the Powerhouse Museum. We are extremely thankful for the representation of Darlinghurst's rich material culture these contributions bring to the chapters.

Taken together, this community history reflects the diversity of Darlinghurst itself: Darlinghurst is a place, for sure, but its history reflects multiple topographies. We hope this book offers ways to think about community histories more broadly, as well as prompting a rich, inclusive conversation about this community in particular. After all, Darlinghurst's past lives on all around us: we inhabit it and it inhabits *us*.



Narelle, Veronica and Sinead at the Exchange;
photograph by C. Moore Hardy, 1992
Courtesy of the City of Sydney Archives, COS A-00068945



Flanagan's Hotel, Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, 1890
Courtesy of the City of Sydney Archives, A-00033181