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Loyalty Square, Balmain

Public Space and Sydney Urbanism

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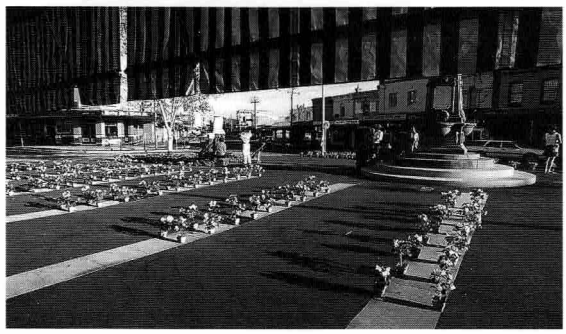
A funny thing happened a while before writing this article. I was walking down Campbell Parade at Bondi Beach and came across a public demonstration protesting against the expansion of public transport, in the form of an extension of the railway line from Bondi Junction to an underground station at the beach. This sort of oxymoronic attitude to the public realm has been displayed on a number of occasions of recent times. Just a few voices of protest made themselves heard before the first stage of the CML development on East Circular Quay was a third complete. Only then did the multitudinous hue and cries of anguish resound in the media and at on-site protests. Some of those responsible for approving the development later publicly recanted and expressed guilt and sorrow for their part in the debacle.

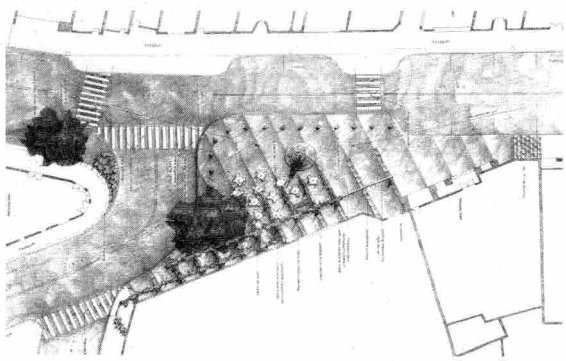
Urban debate in Sydney seems to have stopped dead in bitter public examinations of right and wrong and levelling the blame at those 'responsible'. Not much is said about spatial qualities, texture, light, least of all urban political economy. Even at the level of theory, discussions to create a critical framework for the built environment in Sydney seem difficult to start and even more difficult to maintain. The whiff of provincial-style politics hangs in the air: Whilst millions are spent on more and more mega-projects that carve up and divide the city further, the public, rallied by well connected and vocal shibboleths, cry foul mostly over less consequential works, indeed over some works that would otherwise appear to be positive urban gestures that transcend the normative action of 'problem solving'.

A recent and, indeed, continuing episode of this oxymoronic soap opera is the story of Loyalty Square in Balmain. This story begins simply enough. Leichardt City Council and Balmain & Rozelle Chamber of Commerce (Barcham) interviews four short-listed tenderers for the design of a small public plaza on Darling St in the shopping heart of Balmain. The landscape architect chosen was the office of Oculus.

The proposal Oculus came up with was simple and direct. A left-hand turn lane that divided the site was removed, thus taking the space out as far as a traffic island that held a local war memorial obelisk. The obelisk was then placed in the centre of the space on a new, stepped pediment. A 'Mexican wave' steel and sandstone pergola, with overtones of Calatrava, was constructed and has partially ameliorated the deleterious effects of a standard Woolworths facade on a Victorian Balmain street. Once the climbers planted cover the structure the facade's impact will certainly be reduced much further. The artist/architect Richard Goodwin was



Impatiens installation.



Plan (Oculus).

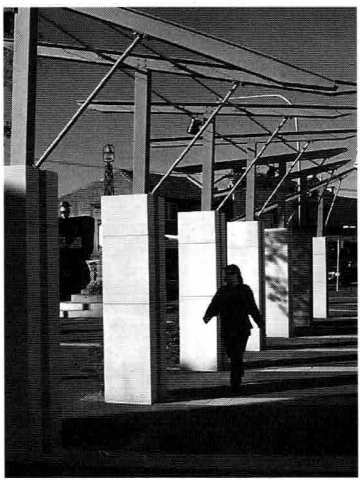
commissioned to produce a seat for the site. He chose Balmain's waterfront history as the trigger for his piece, using old wharf timbers and an old piling for the structure. A Goodwin signature in the form of a stainless steel frame arcs up from one seat end and flies over the piling. In behind the seat a *Ficus hillii* (Weeping Fig) has been planted and, in ten years, will grow to nearly cover a third of the space. All in all, a well considered and detailed contemporary styled space, but by no means radical.

Despite the addition of a new public square where there was none, a six metre high tree, a more accessible war memorial and a seat, a Balmain resident, Mr Tony Gilding, amply assisted by *The Balmain & Rozelle Village Voice,* began a visceral campaign against the design of the new space. Indeed, this 'outrage' has actually led to some letter writers to call for the reinstatement of the original road pavement (B&RVV, p. 64 May 1998). Since Gilding started his assault at the beginning of 1998 every issue of the *Voice* until the June issue has carried at least six pages of diatribe directed against the design, the designers and Leichardt City Council.

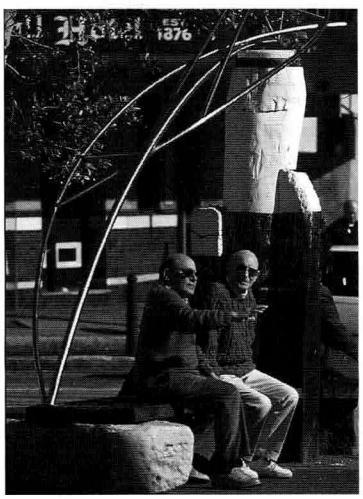
Meanwhile, a stone's throw away beside White Bay, Balmain and the Iron Cove Bridge, Rozelle (the two sides of the Balmain/

Birchgrove peninsular), massive quantities of 'high' commercial apartments are being erected without so much as a whimper. Perhaps a short examination of the May's issue of the *Voice* will reveal a glimpse of the cultural and political economy of Sydney at a local level. The property section of the *Voice*, as with most property sections of Sydney's print media, emphasise the value of a harbour view. Whole apartment estates, several hectares each, are being built on the harbour.

The Rozelle, Balmain and Pyrmont foreshores are the innermost developments close to the Sydney CBD, and Balmain and Pyrmont are the largest waterfront residential developments in Greater Sydney. The magic element in these developments is Sydney's topography, whose spectacle, even with a seemingly overwhelming carpet of bad architecture, *ad hoc* street layouts and band-aid landscape 'design,' seems to stay in place. There were also a significant number of industrial buildings which spanned the built century that have been demolished in order to construct noteless apartment blocks.



Pergola (photo: Brett Boardman).



Richard Goodwin's seat (photo: Brett Boardman).

Place in this outward view, this endless expression of the vacant stare out into space, a public space outside of the Balmain Woolworths that has no view except the inwardly cultural (not topographical) spectacle called the public. The square is Cartesian, objects punctuating its surface. This is a strongly traditional ordering device: Buildings and street form a horizontal and vertical envelope to the space and objects are sparsely placed inside. The objects themselves may be inventive and contemporary, however, their selection and ordering remains stoutly old. In this context people in the square form the topography and the objects are triggers for interaction.

This kind of urbanism certainly seems alien (or generally not present) in Sydney as a city. The topography that the harbourside parts of the city are laid out on, however, suggests that perhaps it should not be, for two reasons: Firstly, patterns of habitation of this topography both pre-white settlement and pre-WWII, show that it is these Cartesian spaces that become the most used and among the most celebrated. The Sydney architect Ric LePlastrier has frequently spoken about the influence of a pattern of ridges (i.e. the flat areas) originally used by the aboriginals, that form the street layout. Oxford, McQuarie, King and Darling Streets, Glebe Point Road and so on all stretch themselves along the ridges. Indeed, so does the Great Western Highway across the Blue Maintains. LePlastrier has given this organic layout the anthropomorphic equivalent in the form of backbones, limbs and fingers. These 'backbones' are the flat areas where movement was (and still is) expedited, terrain could be surveyed from and where European development first occurred in Australia, enclosing these flat areas forming the physical spaces for new colonial society to operate in.

This brings us to the second point which is, people, however mechanically mediated they may be, form the expressed social topography of architecture and city building and inhabit and interact in this architecture and built city. From the 1950s onwards Sydney has not been reinventing itself in this manner, rather ignoring the interaction of social topography and scrambling for high-priced views of the natural topography, however totally built out and ecologically devastated it may seem.

Rather, Sydney has been reinventing itself as an icon, or series of icons; myths about its cityness that bear no relationship to the lives of most of Sydney's inhabitants: A representation of space rather than lived-in space. These are expressed in rhetoric such as 'Sydney: World City' that gets trotted out by MLAs, Quango and corporate chiefs, press releases and other civic leaders. At the same time living costs such as rent have skyrocketed, public transport funding, in real terms, has dropped dramatically and large freeway projects and the Olympics site have taken over the urban spotlight.

In this context the sheer volume of blame-levelling and acrimony surrounding Loyalty Square seems oxymoronically disproportionate to the physical size and iconographic potential of the square. Perhaps the most revealing episode in this bizarre saga occurred during an installation of 430 flossy white *Impatiens*. This action, conceived and executed by the directors and some staff from Oculus, was designed to draw attention to the fact that this was a new public space, free of concessions (read cafés). A few passers-by who sat on the more numerous steps of the relocated WWI memorial were verbally abused by an RSL member for not showing the proper respect. The icon displaces the lived city on a micro scale.

This scenario is certainly not unique to Sydney on any scale. However, as a city, Sydney seams bent on this neologistic path of representing mythic space. Loyalty Square is one break in this path.