

Iconic Redfern

The creation and disintegration of an urban Aboriginal icon

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While the idea of urban icons might be about producing iconic buildings in terms of form and shape, the specific use of high-end materials, or a particular strategy for the organisation of urban spaces, places often have significant meanings through very different – and often underappreciated – means. Significantly, the people who inhabit them and live in them thus give the place a distinctiveness that contributes to its iconic status.

Considering the above, this paper will look at a particular example of this – The Block in Redfern, Sydney – which is considered to be significant for Indigenous people. Yet while many recognise the contribution of Australia's Indigenous population toward the making of this iconic place, at the same time other forces – such as gentrification, rental prices, political power struggles, etc. – are actively working against the long-term formalisation of this place. This paper will thus analyse the past, present and prospective future of The Block, and consider how is Redfern and The Block considered to be an iconic place for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people? Also significant is the notion that The Block has been demolished, and the majority of its Indigenous population have been forced out or relocated, and that there is a current approved proposal to rebuild The Block with undefined plans to re-house a portion of its previous Indigenous community. Given this, what is the potential future for The Block in terms of retaining its meaning as an Indigenous icon and establishing appropriate community values?



[1] Redferns, 'The Block', an Icon of Sydney

Introduction

While the notion of the urban icon might be about producing iconic buildings in terms of an attractive form or shape, the specific use of high-end materials to create an iconic visual effect, or a particular strategy for the organisation of urban spaces, however, places often have significant meanings through very different – and often underappreciated – means. Significantly, the people who inhabit them thus give the place a distinctive quality that contributes to its iconic status. Redfern in Sydney is a significant example of this where the Indigenous people of Australia have had a long standing involvement with Redfern and have thus imprinted their identity on the place through continuous presence and is therefore considered 'iconic' due to this presence. As such Redfern is considered by many to be "...the most famous and iconic Aboriginal place in Australia second only to Uluru" (2014 NIT- pg. 13)

Yet is this the type of icon cities want? Is this kind of icon marketable for cities? Would this type of icon attract people to visit Redfern or the city of Sydney? These are questions that we as planners, historians, architects etc. must think of for ourselves.

While Redfern is important to Australia's Indigenous people as being one of the only significant or palpable urban Aboriginal sites in Australia, Redfern's meaning as an urban Aboriginal icon is under threat from disappearing. While many aspects have contributed to the pushing out Redfern's Aboriginal population, this paper will focus on two main points: the first being the overwhelming forces of gentrification sweeping through the area, and the second being political infighting or jostling between key members of Redfern's Aboriginal community based around plans for the

proposed redevelopment of The Block, a small piece of land owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC).

In short, this paper will consider how Redfern constitutes as iconic place for Indigenous as well as non-indigenous people. And lastly, the continuation of Redfern's iconic status which is under threat.

An Urban Icon

First, let us briefly consider what constitutes an urban icon. Examples may come to mind such as Frank Gehry's Bilbao or Sydney's own Opera House by Jorn Utzon, both of which has contributed to their cities iconic status and also contribute to the economic value of the city. As Andrew Walker (Pg 2. 2010) notes "The opening of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in 1997 seemed to transform that city's cultural status overnight, luring tourists and opening doors to sustainable economic development."

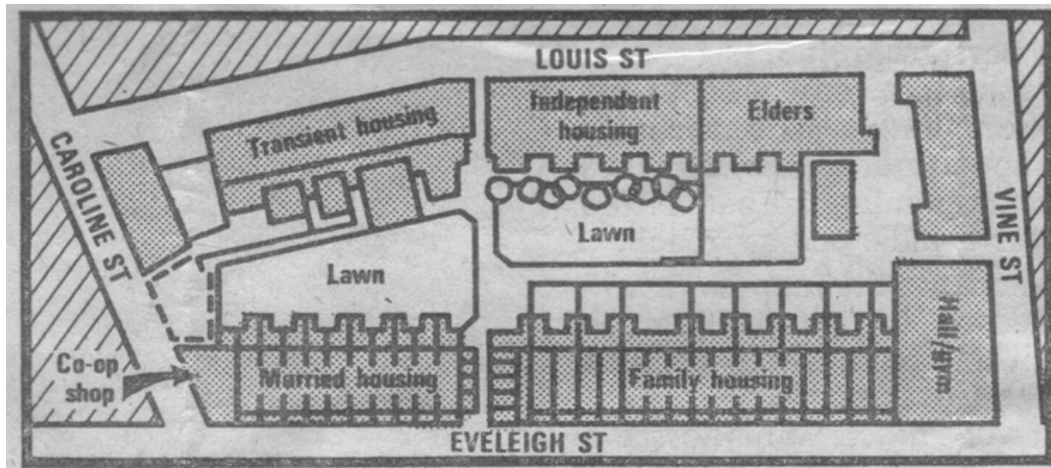
Here architecture and building serve as a kind of marketing device or advertisement that helps promote or sell the city to the world, and which is perpetuated by the media through the reproduction and distribution of images of these iconic buildings. On this, Peter Eisenman (2005. pg 166) notes that:

"The media's search for fantastic imagery, as well as precedent set by the 'Bilbao effect', perpetuate an ever-increasing need for the spectacular. And since the media also demand the continual staging of the new, the 'famous' are forced into creating ever-more spectacular and outrageous images - signatures of their success - lest they be consumed and tossed aside like yesterday's news."

In this way cities today are in a global jostle to receive the next 'starchitect' building, with hopes this desired iconic building will provide a rejuvenating effect, or act as an agent in potentially revitalising the city through tourism.

So while this focus above may produce an icon of sorts, and while this notion of the 'Bilbao effect' is certainly significant in the way a single building was able to revitalise a stagnant city - however can the urban icon go beyond the visual? Beyond the qualities of its form or shape?

Iconic Redfern



[2] 'The Block' was carefully laid out with individual and community needs in mind. Material from the Gary Foley Collection

At this point Redfern will be introduced as an example of how in some urban locations, the nature of the people and the community that inhabits the location are what constitute its iconic status.

Redfern has had a long standing history of Indigenous occupation, starting with the local Gadigal tribe who inhabited the area for thousands of years. More recent times saw the construction of vast railway lines across Australia, and with it came an influx of Indigenous people coming into Redfern from country or regional areas by rail. By the 1960's and 70's as more Indigenous people moved in, Redfern witnessed the creation of key Indigenous related services, such as the Aboriginal legal, medical and housing services - as well as the emergence of sources of employment for Indigenous people, such as the Eveleigh rail yard.

In 1973 a formal submission for federal funding was approved, and the government bought 41 houses on a block of land in Redfern that would become known as 'The Block'. The Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) was then created to manage the grant. This was a significant moment for all Australian Aboriginal people as it was to become the first successful land rights claim made by an Aboriginal community. (Pollock, 2007)

Redfern began to formalise as a positive Aboriginal place and, according to Robert Bellefleur (1976, Pg. 4) founder of the AHC, was a place where Aboriginal people were "able to do their thing without interruption from the so-called normalcy of the dominant culture".



[3] Members of the Aboriginal Housing Company 1974 including Robert Belleair (far right) - just after the acquisition of The Block, made possible by a grant donated by the Whitlam Government.

With strong foundations in place, Indigenous presence on the site continued into recent times and to this day Redfern has taken on board the 'flavour' of these Indigenous people through various forms, such as the mural of the Aboriginal flag on the wall of the Elouera-Tony Mundine Gym which has become a de-facto icon for the Block.

The Problem of Iconic Redfern

Yet while many recognise the contribution of Australia's Indigenous population toward the making of this iconic place, at the same time other forces – such as gentrification, rental prices, political power struggles, pressure from governmental or local organisations with vested interest in Redfern etc. – are actively working against the long-term formalisation of this place as an urban Indigenous location.

Also significant is the fact that as of 2011, The Block has been completely demolished, and all of its Indigenous population have been forced out or relocated. There is a current approved proposal to rebuild The Block with undefined plans to re-house a portion of its previous Indigenous community. Given this, what is the potential future for The Block in terms of retaining its meaning as an Indigenous icon and establishing appropriate community values?

From this paper's perspective, Redfern's ability to retain its meaning as an Indigenous iconic place depends on two significant aspects: firstly it depends on how the forces of gentrification formalise within the suburb, and secondly, it depends on how The Block is re-developed.

Gentrification

The first aspect is the issue of widespread gentrifying forces affecting cities today which are actively working against the long-time formation of Redfern as an Aboriginal icon. As the City of Sydney Council website states:

“Redfern and Waterloo's working class heritage and vibrant Aboriginal community provide strong foundations for this iconic Sydney area. Combined with a flourishing surge of cutting-edge galleries, a buzzing food and bar scene, vibrant local cafes and a string of vintage stores, this area continues to evolve and fascinate.”

Hidden within this glowing report of the suburb are the physical outcomes of gentrification. Along with these vintage stores and buzzing food and bar scene comes higher rent prices, higher property taxes, more demand for accommodation, inflation of prices for goods and services etc. all of which contribute to pushing out the majority of Redfern's Aboriginal community. Aboriginal elder Les Poletti an ex resident of The Block mentioned “when we were all evicted from the place, we were told by the company (AHC) it was going to be built for Aboriginal housing and we’d get the first OK to get back in there” but “..they’re trying to pretty up that area and not have any Aboriginal people there.” (Karvelis, 2014)

A point substantiated by a 2011 report from the Bureau of Census and Statistics which establishes that Redfern’s Indigenous population constitute a mere 2.4% of the total redfern population of 12,034 - which is equivalent to 288 people. Yet from a historical perspective, in the 1960’s Redfern had a substantially larger Indigenous population which comprised of approximately 12,000 indigenous residents. These statistics effectively contradict Redfern as being an essentially Indigenous community, and yet the fact that the place still is considered an important urban Aboriginal icon is relevant.

The Pemulwuy Project



[4] An architectural render of the proposed 'Pemulwuy' Project

The second aspect as to whether Redfern will retain its meaning as an Indigenous icon depends on how The Block is developed. Since its creation, the site has been subject to many architectural and planning design proposals through the previous few decades. When the demolition of the final terrace house on The Block occurred in 2011, the current plan to redevelop the land, known as The Pemulwuy project, surfaced with a promise to re-house some of the existing community that was evicted before its demolition, as well as the construction of a significant commercial and student accommodation component.

Yet the timing and staging of the housing component is causing some controversy and disagreement within Redfern's Indigenous community. The National Indigenous Times reported on this tension claiming that the main concern was that the Aboriginal housing component of the redevelopment was being quietly dropped from the scheme (Bagnall, 2014). While the CEO of the AHC Mick Mundine denies this is the case, reports have surfaced that the latest version of the plans no longer allow for the establishment of the promised 'Elders units' in the redevelopment.

This has prompted claims from a representative of the tent embassy that the hidden agenda "was to clear the land so the AHC could drive out the Aboriginal population and commercially develop the land" (Bagnall, 2014)



[5] Redfern Tent Embassy, protesting against the Pemulwuy Project

These accusations reveal a split within Redfern's Indigenous community as well as those concerned about this piece of land. On one side the AHC own the land, and have every legal right to develop what they wish on it. On the other, potentially because of Redfern's iconic status as a significant urban Aboriginal place, there is a group of people, some of whom camped on the vacant land for 15 months in protest, who feel the proposed development is inadequate, insensitive or dismissive towards the needs of the existing Indigenous population, with claims that the lack of any actual housing for Indigenous people on the Block will destroy Redfern as an iconic place for Australia's Indigenous people. Thus the Indigenous presence that is still palpable today, may fade away.

Many people from the Redfern Tent Embassy are there because they believe the AHC has been hijacked by the current board and members, an allegation Mr Mundine vehemently denies. According to Bagnall (2014), "...there have been allegations in the Redfern community for almost a quarter of a century that the membership rolls were manipulated to purge anyone who opposed Mr Mundine's leadership."

This issue came to a boiling point with the supposedly accidental claims made by Deicorp, the builder the AHC has engaged to construct the student accommodation component. Deicorp stated on their company website: "Dei Cota (Deicorp's subsidiary company) has good rental return and convenient location. The Aboriginals have already moved out, now Redfern is the last virgin suburb close to city, it will have great potential for the capital growth in the near future."

While the company has since removed the article from their website, and have apologised for any 'unintended' racism, many were "...outraged a company would use the removal of Aboriginal people from a suburb as a promotion to sell their properties in that same suburb," (Karvelis, 2014)

Just how dedicated are Deicorp is to retain this places meaning as an Indigenous icon?

To finish this point, and in fairness, two additional aspects should be noted. First is that the AHC aspires towards an autonomous mode of operation without reliance on government handouts. And second is that the AHC is dedicated to the 'housing' of Indigenous people in general and that their aspirations towards this aim may go beyond The Block. As such they are quite rightly concerned with how this piece of land can be used to leverage other locations that might then house more Indigenous people in need. Yet what is lost by conceding this piece of land to commercial development? And would Redfern retain its iconic status as an urban Aboriginal place, in the absence of any actual Aboriginal people living there?

Art Gallery on The Block

The issue of rehousing Indigenous people back onto The Block aside, the second aspect that may help Redfern remain an iconic Indigenous place might depend upon the commercial component of the Pemulwuy project, and more specifically, the proposed gallery and artist spaces planned for the site, which may in itself help contribute to Redfern's iconic status as an important urban Indigenous place.

Internationally Australian Indigenous art is held in quite high regard, a fact highlighted by recent estimates that the sales of Aboriginal art from Australia is more than \$50 million U.S dollars per year, which outstrips that of non-Indigenous Australian artists three to one, an extraordinary statistic given that Aborigines constitute less than 2 percent of the country's population. (White 2000, Pg. 105)

This international interest is consolidated and formalised through events, such as the use of painting in Jean Neuvells buildings in Paris, and the highly popular 2013 exhibition of Indigenous art displayed at the Australian Embassy in Paris. It should serve that "the scale and prominence of this project is a reflection of the growing interest in contemporary Aboriginal Australian art among museum visitors across Europe and internationally," (Guivarra, 2013)



[6] The Quai Branly Museum, Paris. Just one of the many French institutions that have embraced Australian Indigenous art.

This interest in Australian Indigenous art, according to Jane Goodale (1965, Pg. 2) “is achieving a prominence of appreciation among the literate peoples of the world amounting almost to a cult. Partial evidence of this is the exhibition of such art in increasing numbers of art galleries, in the fantastically rising prices in the curio market, and last but not least, in the rapidly increasing numbers of expensively produced art books that deals with such art.”

As such, what if The Block was considered to be part of this serious art notion as regarded in international art circles? What might this mean for Redfern as an icon? While we are yet to see just how the gallery will develop, if it went beyond catering for the tourist market (ie. selling didgeridoos, boomerangs etc.) and was instead a gallery that displayed significant Indigenous art pieces - with perhaps connections to the Nation’s art institutes, such as the NGA and NSWG, then suddenly this would be iconic in itself, as more people might come to Redfern and The Block - Indigenous and nonindigenous - which may raise Redfern’s status as an urban Indigenous place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, and to summarize my argument, i argue that an urban icon can be the living presence of a people, and it’s their continual occupation of an area, that give a place an ‘iconic’ status. From my perspective, I would like to stress the significance of Redfern and The Block as an icon due to three reasons.

First, it is iconic because The Block and Redfern is a significant urban place for all Indigenous people in Australia. It is the center for Indigenous related services, and was the place where campaigns for the rights of First Nations Peoples have often been born. So while we can look at other urban locations that have an Indigenous presence, such as Fitzroy in Melbourne, or Inalla in Brisbane, neither of those are unanimously considered to be as significant a place as Redfern for Australia’s Indigenous peoples.

Second, is the iconic nature of Indigenous art and how the proposed art gallery on The Block may raise the notion of Redfern as a serious urban Indigenous place.

Lastly, this paper stresses the iconic nature of Australia’s Indigenous peoples themselves. Before the colonists came to Australia in 1788, before our cities were built, they were the first people here. Their history is Australia’s history. It is a unique history that belongs only to us, and this in itself is extremely iconic. Yet with the increasing spread of global culture, Aboriginal culture is under threat from diminishing or fading away. Thus retaining Redfern as a unique urban Aboriginal place should be a priority to all Australians. If the Indigenous people on The Block disappear due to the aforementioned forces pushing them out, or if the gallery is not taken seriously etc. then Redfern will lose its iconic status. And while we are all here talking about what makes iconic places and cities, we as planners, architects, historians etc. - should take this notion on board, and consider how different people and communities can make places unique, valuable, or iconic.

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