Architecture and national identity in an era of globalisation
The rise and fall of the Sydney Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour

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The Sydney Exhibition Centre by Philip Cox was conceived as an iconic building and recognised by the Sulman Award for its innovative steel technology, logical response to function and distinctive roofscape. It was one of a number of buildings constructed at Darling Harbour for Australia’s Bicentenary in 1988, intended to showcase the best in Australian architecture and symbolise Sydney’s cultural identity. Darling Harbour’s redevelopment from a disused shipping yard is an example of an urban environment constructed around the creation and representation of iconic forms, to be enjoyed by locals and tourists alike. This paper examines the iconic status of the Sydney Exhibition Centre through a brief review of the literature published at the time of its design. Using the framework established by Robert Adam in The Globalisation of Modern Architecture (2012), it interrogates the interrelationships between iconicity, identity politics and the complexity of the global condition that provide the context for the building’s demolition in 2014. Also considered is the role played by the Transnational Capitalist Class, which has been defined by Leslie Sklair (2005, 2006) and identified as crucial to the lifecycle of iconic architecture. The circumstances of the Sydney Exhibition Centre’s demise demonstrate the fragility of iconicity and the fluidity of symbolic expression, and provide insights into the remaking of built environments and heritage values.

Keywords: globalisation; architecture; national identity; Sydney Exhibition Centre.

Introduction

This paper examines the 1988 rise and 2014 fall of the Sydney Exhibition Centre, considered to be one of the iconic buildings of Australia’s Bicentenary. Using the framework established by Robert Adam in The Globalisation of Modern Architecture (2012.) and a brief review of the literature published at the time of the building’s design and demolition, the paper interrogates the interrelationships between iconicity, identity politics and the complexity of the global condition. Also considered is the role played by the Transnational Capitalist Class, which has been defined by Leslie Sklair and identified as crucial to the lifecycle of iconic architecture. (2005; 2006.)
Australia’s Bicentenary and the Sydney Exhibition Centre

The impending 1988 Bicentenary of the European settlement of Australia focussed attention on Australia’s past, its national identity and its growth as a multicultural society. Sydney had become a major destination for foreign investment and the headquarters of major foreign banks, multinational corporations and high-tech companies. The urban redevelopment of Sydney’s Darling Harbour, a disused shipping precinct of derelict storage facilities and railway lines linking the port, was part of a suite of federally funded architectural and urban projects initiated to mark the event. It was to provide the platform for the global spectacle of the Bicentenary celebrations that would consolidate Sydney’s claim to global status. It presented a new opportunity for Sydney to boost its cultural identity and encouraged Sydneysiders to seek ways to reconcile their local identity with national unity, cultural diversity and increasing globalisation.

Figure 1: Clockwise from top left are the National Maritime Museum, Sydney Aquarium and Sydney Exhibition Centre at Darling Harbour designed by Architect Philip Cox.

A series of heroic harbour side buildings were commissioned to showcase the best in Australian architecture. Architect Philip Cox designed three buildings, including the National Maritime Museum, with its “glorious feeling of billowing sails,” the wave-shaped Sydney Aquarium, and the Sydney Exhibition Centre, with its high-tech “white steel” vocabulary of masts and cables suspending the roof to create a column-free exhibition space. (Hawley 1988, Harrison, 2008.) (Figure 1) The other two buildings were the semi-circular, concrete Sydney Convention Centre designed by John Andrews and the Harbourside Festival Marketplace designed by Robert Perry Architecture Oceania with an international team that integrated public art, architecture and commercial development. (Figure 2)
At the time, it was predicted that Andrews’s Classicism would complement the Romanticism of Cox’s architectural reading of the ethos of the harbour. (Farrelly 1989.)

Figure 2: Sydney Convention Centre designed by Architect John Andrews (left) and Harbourside Festival Marketplace designed by Robert Perry Architecture Oceania (right).

Cox had already developed a reputation for his “unselfconsciously Australian” architectural approach and demonstrated a pragmatism that sought architectural innovation in response to specific project challenges. He was also a vocal advocate against the importation of architectural aesthetics and values from overseas. (Hawley 1988.) His prior projects draw upon the Australian “functional tradition” exemplified by vernacular structures such as wheat silos, rural sheds and cooling towers and feature the honest expression of structure to achieve spatial interest and architectural delight. There is often a sense of repose or languor in their horizontality in response to the landscape and the spirit of place, and climate is addressed by expressive roofs and integrated verandahs that acknowledge the early Australian homestead tradition. (Taylor 1988.) In 1987 The Australian published a commentary on Australian cities and suburbs that featured a picture of Cox in front of the half-constructed Sydney Exhibition Centre. He was quoted as saying that architects needed to understand the core sociological, economic and political forces at play and the “spirit” of what was being expressed in their buildings. (Brass 1987.)

Figure 3: The distinctive mast and cable structure of the Sydney Exhibition Centre.

Much was written in the late 1980s and 1990s about Darling Harbour in terms of its impact on metropolitan development. The discussion was generally led by planners, urban designers and
tourism scholars interested in urban governance and land use policy, waterfront revitalisation, sustainable place making, and the design of tourist precincts. (For example Proudfoot 1996; Dawkins and Colebatch 2006; Clark 1988; Hayllar, Griffin and Edwards 2008.) But architectural scholars kept their distance, apart from a short burst of architectural publications around the time of the Sydney Exhibition Centre’s completion. Jennifer Taylor described the building as “lively” with its “mast and cable system … successfully linking the building with the masts of the tall rigged ships by the adjacent harbour front.” (1988.) Neville Quarry described the detailing of the structural system as “delicious.” (1987.) (Figure 3) The architectural theorist Karen Burns took a more critical position, noting that the building had “barely entered the mainstream of the notoriously conservative Australian architectural discourse.” (1988.) The Sydney Exhibition Centre was subsequently recognised by a string of awards, including the Sulman Award in 1989, for its innovative steel technology, logical response to function and distinctive roofscape. One of its heritage values has been identified as bringing an “international focus to Australia and Australian architecture.” (Higham undated.) More broadly, the Bicentenary celebrations of 1988 have been attributed to Australia (and particularly Sydney) experiencing “a countervailing sense of its own uniqueness” as Sydney consolidated its place as a “global gateway city” and the financial and communications centre of Australia. (McGillick and Bingham Hall 2005; Rennie Short et. al. 2000.)

The heritage significance of the Sydney Exhibition Centre was recognised in the National Register Listing Report (Higham undated), which claimed the building to be of “high heritage significance as an exemplar of Late Twentieth Century Structuralist architecture” and aesthetically distinctive. However, it was not listed in the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority’s Section 170 Register, and its proposed demolition caused the architectural historian Noni Boyd to lament the lack of protection for recent award-winning Australian buildings. (2012.) The City of Sydney considered the significance of the building to warrant a proposal for its partial relocation to the Sydney Fish Market site, with other bays of the building to be reconstructed elsewhere as new community facilities. (Hasham 2013.)

In 2014 the NSW State Government moved swiftly to demolish the Sydney Exhibition Centre and neighbouring Sydney Convention Centre citing “capacity constraints” and too many “limitations which cannot be readily overcome” without redevelopment of the site. (McKenny 2013.) It claimed that $150 million in economic benefit had been lost over the four years to 2010-2011, and that the building was not iconic enough to attract foreign investment. (Moore 2012; Cox 2015.) Another motivation was the quest to improve environmental performance with a 6 star Green Star facility. Cox pleaded with the Government to reverse its decision, but to no avail as there was no upswell of public support. In the aftermath of its demolition he expressed the conviction that architecture in Australia is not respected as an art form but treated as “a commodity.” (2014.) He claimed:

We live in a trash society. We live in a throw away society ... Suddenly in the Twenty First Century we have developed a new syndrome where nothing is valued ... What are our cultural values and how do we see them? ... Rude timber buildings were the foundation of our Australian culture but that is something that is being eroded very quickly. Sydney had a prime example of something quite magnificent ... but it is being replaced by something that is inferior ... It is not a column free structure ... It is not able to host sport events ... It is being compacted vertically ... the destruction of a symbol of the Bicentennial is a shameful thing ... (Cox 2015.)
Identity Politics and the Complexity of the Global Condition

The architectural projects associated with the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988 were founded upon attempts to express a broadly shared national identity and to galvanise a large and patriotic population in the celebrations. The Wran Government’s brief for the Sydney Exhibition Centre was for a design that must be uniquely Australian and celebrate Australian culture. It was a publicly funded development, paid for by the Federal Government and built on public land. It effectively represented the power and authority of the state. The significance of place was a fundamental concern addressed at multiple geographical scales, serving both to ground the building in its immediate “local” micro-situation of Darling Harbour and to relate it to a broader “national” territorial construct of Australia.

However, Australia’s Bicentenary occurred at a turning point in world history as communism collapsed and capitalism gained momentum, transforming the world into a free-market system within a new international economic climate. This late twentieth century phenomenon is called “globalisation.” It extends beyond international trade and capital flows to effect significant social and cultural impacts. Economists have observed that the possibility “to produce a product anywhere, using resources from anywhere, by a company located anywhere, to be sold anywhere” has profound social and cultural consequences. (Adam 2012.) Expanded global horizons generally led to a break down worldwide in the traditional concept of “imagined” national communities and rendered many nationalist mythologies irrelevant. Sociologists agree that a common outcome is the tendency towards homogenisation of culture and place and a compression of the world. The separate pieces of the world’s cultural mosaic lose their “hard well-defined edges” and are no longer organised according to territorial logic and cultural rules. (Adam 2012.) Globalising market forces have led to the rise in recent decades of Public Private Partnerships favouring a universal architectural aesthetic independent of place, geography and territory and offering types of space and non-place to which anyone can belong. The scale and overwhelming force with which the global capital market operates leaves communities struggling with the relationship between national identity and globalisation; and between the expression of local architectural values and a universal architectural language derived from Modernism. Thus the demise of the Sydney Exhibition Centre, designed in a distinctively Australian style, might be regarded as fallout of larger forces and changing societal values associated with globalisation that find themselves reflected in architecture.

In response to globalisation, businesses of all types have established foreign branch offices to take advantage of new international market opportunities. This has led to the emergence of a distinct global elite of business leaders, traders and professionals, including architects, that transcends social and cultural borders. Sklair calls this elite the “Transnational Capitalist Class” and identifies four globalising cultures or “fractions” within it – the “corporate fraction,” “state fraction,” “technical fraction,” and “consumerist fraction.” (2005.)

Behind the new development in 2014 of much of Darling Harbour, including the International Convention Centre (ICC) Sydney, is the “corporate fraction” that calls itself Darling Harbour Live. It is led by the major development firm, Lend Lease, an international property and infrastructure group with head offices in Sydney, New York, Singapore, London and Milan. Lend Lease fits Sklair’s profile of a “corporate fraction” through its mission to become the “leading international property and infrastructure group,” combined with its strong delivery of leisure, retail, residential and
infrastructure projects and its high turnover of Public Private Partnerships (worth $AUD4.1 billion as at September 2014). (Lend Lease 2015.) Lend Lease is joined by its Australian infrastructure financing and development arm, Capella Capital; AEG Ogden, manager of the largest network of venues in the Asia Pacific region; Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), a leading international sports and entertainment presenter; Spotless, an Australian facilities management provider; and HostPlus, an Australian superannuation fund for the hospitality, tourism, recreation and sport industries. (ICC Sydney 2015.) The “state fraction” is Infrastructure NSW, a statutory agency established under the Infrastructure NSW Act 2011 to advise the NSW State Government and commission, oversee, deliver and coordinate infrastructure projects. The media release in September 2015 accompanying the attendance of the NSW Premier Mike Baird and Minister for Transport and Infrastructure Andrew Constance at the topping out of the new International Convention Centre Sydney, encapsulates the globalising mission of this agency by stating:

We’ll have a state-of-the-art convention centre that truly befits a global city and cements Sydney as the number one place to do business... the vibrant waterfront at Darling Harbour will ensure international delegates have an unmatched visitor experience. (Infrastructure NSW 2015.)

The “technical fraction” comprises the globalising professionals who are centrally involved in the design of new buildings, represented in this case by Hassell and Populous. Hassell is an architectural practice originating in Australia, now with eight other offices in China, South East Asia and the United Kingdom. (Hassell 2015.) Populous is a North American multinational architectural firm that specialises in the design of sports facilities and convention centres and describes itself as “a global collective of architects, designers, technical experts and industry veterans. We are the people who create the places where millions unite.” (Populous 2015.) Both firms fit Sklair’s profile as being “allied, through choice or circumstance with globalizing corporations and the agenda of capitalist globalization.” Finally, the “consumerist fraction” comprises those “who are responsible for the marketing of architecture ... and connect the architecture industry with the culture-ideology of consumerism.” (Sklair 2006.) In the case of the International Convention Centre Sydney, marketing is directly resourced through the corporate fraction, Lend Lease, and the state fraction, Infrastructure NSW, providing closure to the circle of fractions within the Transnational Capitalist Class involved with the Darling Harbour Live redevelopment project.

The Transnational Capitalist Class – comprising corporations, government agencies, architectural practices and marketing bodies – embodies a global agenda and an international culture “whose identity is not linked to any specific society but to membership of the managerial circles of the informational economy across a global cultural spectrum.” (Adam 2012.) Its members value continuity in their personal and business routines and strive for an uninterrupted lifestyle, irrespective of where in the world they happen to be, expecting a hotel chain to provide the same ambience and amenity in Shanghai as New York. The weaker attachment to local places has had a major economic and physical impact on global cities and encourages cross-national conformity. The resulting urban homogeneity is intensified by new infrastructure focussed on supporting the “hyperspace of global business” through duplication of progressive work environments in slick office buildings, luxury hotels, efficient international airports, state-of-the-art convention centres, etc. (Adam 2012.) Importantly the Transnational Capitalist Class now drives the production of architectural icons previously controlled by the state or church.
Figure 4: The Sydney Exhibition Centre (top) will be replaced by the new International Convention Centre Sydney theatre (bottom left) and multipurpose convention facilities and exhibition halls (bottom right).

Thus, the Darling Harbour Live redevelopment project, and within it the International Convention Centre Sydney, are motivated by a globalising agenda to create a precinct of “world class” facilities, comprising new convention facilities, exhibition halls, an ultramodern theatre, a 600-room hotel, grand ballroom and meeting rooms, all in a prime waterfront location. Unlike the Sydney Exhibition Centre and Sydney Convention Centre being replaced, the new International Convention Centre Sydney will be designed to provide a transnational social space that “could literally be almost anywhere in the world” (Sklair 2006.) – a deterritorialised hyperspace exploiting a neutral and universal architectural language that does not pretend to say anything about Sydney or Australia or cultural identity. (Figures 4 and 5) Its symbolism will lie in the “culture-ideology of consumerism.” (Sklair 2006.) The promotional material being pushed out by the consumerist fraction promises a “striking contemporary design” with “multipurpose spaces” wrapped in the largest glass and concrete envelope possible on the site. (ICC Sydney 2015.) The important change since 1988 is that the development is a Public Private Partnership in which the private sector is pulling most of the strings. Economics and business have become decidedly the main game, although the government still maintains Darling Harbour’s status as a place for the people.
Architecture and urban design are an important part of the economic strategy of nation states that seek to develop their major cities to attract the Transnational Capitalist Class. The demand for a supply of suitable buildings has sparked a building boom in many cities that seek to attract the expanding global corporate business sector.

For this architecture the surroundings constitute neither legitimation nor inspiration for these are derived from what goes on inside the building, from the programme. This autonomy is in many cases reinforced by the fact that the building has an inscrutable exterior that betrays nothing of what happens inside. (Adam 2012.)

This has resulted in the development of architectural styles derived from Modernism that are capable of cutting across geographical and political boundaries and that easily attach to corporate identity and speculative commercial development.

Another economic strategy is the hosting of mega events such as Olympic games or international exhibitions, accompanied by the construction of distinctive and innovative structures that add to the host city’s identity and assist its promotion on the world stage. (Roche 2000.)

Exhibition buildings are important because they are at the coalface of universal trading and the hosting of international trade shows and are therefore valuable assets for nation states and particularly vulnerable to globalising forces and changing architectural trends. Among other perceived deficiencies, the 1988 iconic architecture of the Sydney Exhibition Centre, with its expression of national identity, was of no relevance to the current Transnational Capitalist Class. The desire to reinvent Darling Harbour as a nexus of the global capitalist system was to enhance commercial interests and the resulting architecture is likely to revert to the universal symbolism of Modernism that has spawned countless gleaming exhibition and convention centres worldwide. The dissemination of global modernity has been observed to have led to a general homogenisation of cities, where the “experience of strolling through malls at Canary Wharf in London’s Docklands, at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin and at Manezhnaya Square in Moscow is fundamentally the same.” (Adam 2012.) This new uniformity gives rise to the phenomenon of the “non-place” in which unique spatial identity and native social, political or cultural practices yield to the deterritorialisation of “hyperspaces” with their monotonous qualities constructed from a universal palette of glass, aluminium, stainless steel, titanium and natural stone, as exemplified in the new glass and concrete structures currently under construction at Darling Harbour. This abstraction of the relationship between culture and place is designed to accommodate the boundary-less commerce of the global
era. The circumstances of the Sydney Exhibition Centre’s demise demonstrate the fragility of iconicity and the fluidity of symbolic expression in the fast-paced global era.

Although cities vying for global trade construct superficially similar built environments that are conducive to the business of transnational corporations, identifying a point of differentiation and promoting place-identity is also essential to attract transnational business and tourism. Importantly, place-identity must be easily accessible and legible to visitors and offer itself as a distinctive “experience.” This tension between standardisation and differentiation creates a dilemma in that “the specific features of local identities are among the most important resources available in the competitive marketing of tourism.” (Adam 2012.) Iconicity is one strategy increasingly employed to differentiate cities, particularly through the commissioning of buildings by “starchitects.” While the original Sydney Exhibition Centre achieved iconic status at a local level, it could not compete with the nationally and internationally iconic Sydney Opera House or the Harbour Bridge, both of which are “characterized by great legibility in terms of their monumentality and … representational sculptural features.” (Sklair 2006.) Given the enduring iconicity of these two structures it might be argued that Sydney does not require another iconic building to attract international exhibitions and conventions. This is affirmed by the current promotional videos for the re-construction of the Darling Harbour precinct, in which the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge feature front and centre to “fix our visual and emotional compass” (Sklair 2006.) even though they are located in another part of the harbour. (Figure 6) Darling Harbour is therefore not differentiated by the distinctiveness of its architecture although it can appropriate the proximate Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge. (YouTube.) It can, however, be differentiated nationally and internationally by its prime harbour side location, and the new buildings being constructed there seek to exploit every opportunity for water views.

Figure 6: The splash page for the International Convention Centre Sydney website features a panorama of the Sydney skyline with Sydney Opera House in the foreground.

Conclusion

Exhibition buildings have been at the forefront of globalisation since their invention as a typology in the mid-nineteenth century. The Sydney Garden Palace built in the Royal Botanic Gardens to house the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879-1880 was part of a deliberate strategy to globalise Sydney and connected the interests of the state with the commercial interests of an elite of business leaders, traders and professionals. (Proudfoot et. al. 2000; Orr 2006.) Likewise, the original 1980s
development that reclaimed Darling Harbour from the urban blight of its industrial past, and the Sydney Exhibition Centre designed by Cox, were part of a globalising strategy that was typically taking place in docklands around the world. (Sklair 2005.) However, this paper has explored how the Australian architectural style of the Sydney Exhibition Centre and its metaphorical references to ships’ masts and sails seem to have become irrelevant. Perhaps Australians now regard themselves as global citizens and no longer recognise the need for a national imagery rooted in a landscape or seascape tradition? Perhaps it is corporate branding rather than specificity of culture and place that now resonates with people in an increasingly consumption driven society? Even the significance of the building’s heritage values held little sway in the context of “urban boosterism” and the possibility of hosting commercially significant mega events. Nevertheless, it is important to keep sight of the public benefit that should be protected in the pursuit of private profit and to continually question the relationship between architecture, place and the needs and expectations of society in Darling Harbour’s redevelopment.

Australian architectural practices have been among those leading the charge to take advantage of new global business opportunities. Adams finds that by 2006, there were fifty-nine major international architectural practices with offices in more than one global region, including American (37%), British (25%) and Australian (8%) practices. (2012.) Cox Architecture has followed this trend and its business trajectory has seen the establishment of foreign branch offices in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Kuala Lumpur, and a broadening of the practice’s ethos to embrace buildings in places other than Australia that “complete environments” through an intensive examination of context, whether urban or landscape. (Cox Architecture 2015.) Despite Cox’s early concern “only with Australia” and “things Australian,” his discovery that his architectural talent is portable and can be applied in international settings has nurtured a more global outlook. As a result, overseas work has become an important part of his business model.

Cox’s ability to penetrate the essence of his own country, its spirit of place, is now being translated to other parts of the world. His quickness, his acute perceptions, can pick up the essence of Kuwait or Indonesia, or wherever, with comparative ease. His is a creative intelligence that can be applied anywhere in the world. (Towndrow 1991.)

The dilemma posed by the globalisation of architecture was examined by Rem Koolhaas at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. (2013.) He argues that it is no longer possible to talk about “Chinese” or “Swiss” or “Indian” architecture as national identity has been sacrificed to a singular modern aesthetic. Yet he suggests that unique national features and mentalities continue to exist within architecture and should not be overlooked by architects. Beyond seeking the iconic for its own sake and accommodating the forces of a market economy, architects should strive to maintain their core values and ambitions and open the way for new possibilities. Despite the flattening effect of globalisation these can still survive in the design of discrete architectural elements and details of buildings that respond to specific sites, climates and cultural contexts.

References


