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The Nurses Walk: Colonial Hospitals and Postmodern Symbols

Within contemporary Australian society there lies a potent contrast between its modern, colonial foundations and the radical changes of postmodernism. In many ways, this contrast marks the Nurses Walk in the Rocks, the site of Australia's first hospital. As with much of Sydney city, it is historically significant due to its connections with Enlightenment era values of the early nation, imbued with ideas of progress, development and science. Yet, as we move into an era of growing consumerism and cultural symbolism, sites such as the Nurses Walk can be viewed as markedly postmodern, challenging and subverting typified notions of what makes a historical site today. This paper will draw together academic theories and historical events to critically examine these changes in the Nurses Walk, and how they reflect on cultural juxtapositions within Australia.

Much of Sydney's past lies entrenched in colonial and modernist roots; the suburb of The Rocks, in Sydney Cove, is no exception. The "Nurses Walk" in the Rocks is a small alleyway threading behind several buildings on George Street and is bordered by Globe, George, Harrington and Argyle streets (Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, 2012). As a historical site, it derives much of its significance from Sydney's colonial history, reflective of modernist ideas of social improvement and scientific rationalism. Yet, it exists as part of a broader, postmodern age of consumerism and commodification, challenging typical notions of a historic site. It represents, at its core, a juxtaposition between both its modernist, colonial past, and the ever changing subversions of postmodernity.

Modernism was a movement which became particularly historically prominent during the Enlightenment era of the early 19th century, breaking from feudal, hierarchical society through championing ideas such as universal equality, freedom, progress, individualism and the "perfectibility" of humanity (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 2). Such progress would rely less on traditional institutions such as the church, but instead rely on empirical knowledge, scientific rationalism and technology (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 3). Against the backdrop of American, French and British revolutions and the burgeoning Industrial age, modernism, conceivably, produced an entirely novel social trajectory that inspired contemporary leaders and thinkers to dedicate themselves to these ideas of achievement. Gascoigne (2002, p. 6) describes it as "the confidence that it was possible to put humanity at least on the path to perfection".

Colonialism, the process of expansion of one society into another territory, often establishing political dominance or settling people in that territory, and often displacing its original inhabitants, was another key movement. The fundamental idea of Australian colonisation; establishing a new nation in a hitherto "unknown" and "undiscovered" land, was modern in its roots (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 7). For the colonialists, the Australian colony was an opportunity to establish a novel society that remained fundamentally British, yet drew upon their beliefs for an altogether

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improved, more advanced society. Even the term of *terra nullius* for Australia, “No Man’s Land”, suggested a blank canvas upon which the British could strive for progress – agriculturally, economically, socially (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 10). It was such ideas that became critical for colonial society, and, as described by Gascoigne, “the ethic of improvement took deeper and deeper root in a society that became more...attuned to the possibility of progress” (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 11).

The evidence of such ideals comes to light when examining the broader colonial history of The Rocks. For Governor Phillip, leader of the First Fleet arriving in 1788, Sydney Cove was the starting point for what he saw as a great and progressive society, which was “to become an outpost of English civilisation” (Kelly, 1997, p. 20). This would have been contrary to the physical and topographical evidence of the area, particularly The Rocks, with rough and seemingly inhospitable terrain (Karskens, 1999, p. 28) and its distance from England. Yet such was the sheer determination and idealism of Phillip that he saw it, instead, as a place of opportunity.

Convicts were seen not as merely there for punishment, but were seen as the beginning of a new society full of “improved humans”, “good and useful citizens” (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 11) who were immediately put to work constructing infrastructure, institutions and developing novel and progressive forms of agriculture. From 1788 to the early 1800s, The Rocks was marked by such new constructions - attesting to the desire for a fully functioning society (Karskens, 1999, p. 29). In contrast to descriptions of convict life as a “gaol”, interestingly, Enlightenment ideals of individualism, liberty and self-improvement became a large part of convicts’ daily life. Rather than experiencing the authoritarianism of a conventional “gaol”, convicts were the ones who built The Rocks, both literally and figuratively (Karskens 1999, p. 29). Indeed, convicts experienced the modern liberty of choice and even self-governance - buildings were built, architecture was improved and goods and services developed according to the needs and efforts of convicts (Karskens, 1999, p. 31).

Among the developments made by the colonial settlers was the establishment of Sydney’s first hospitals. They were linked intrinsically with the progressive mentality of the Enlightenment, with the hallmarks of reason, science, rationality and human improvement. The idea of egalitarian healthcare for the masses, provided in a novel institution such as a hospital, pushed the boundaries of traditional medicine (Israel, 2007, p. 6). As the site of the first hospital in Australia, the Nurses Walk represented a crucial integration of such Enlightenment ideas in this colonial setting. The construction of the hospital demonstrated the trust of the new colony in the benefits of rational scientific fact, and the role in which they had to play in improving human society.

In January, 1788, a mere week after the colonists had arrived at Sydney Cove, Surgeon General John White wrote that “The sick have increased since our landing to such a degree that a spot for the general hospital has been marked out and artificers already employed on it” (Flannery, 2000, p. 53). Governor Phillip wrote in 1789 that “fevers of a malignant kind may make it necessary for a second hospital” (Britton, 1978a, p. 51); he later wrote the same year that “one of the transport ships

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may be converted into a hospital ship" (Britton, 1978a, p. 82). By the 7th of July, 1790, White again wrote that the "portable hospital was completed and immediately filled with patients" (Cobley, 1962, p. 234). In 1810, Governor Lachlan Macquarie wrote that there was "an absolute necessity for building a new general hospital...present one being in a most ruinous state" (Britton, 1978b, p. 306). Thus, it was highly evident that leaders of the colony, particularly Governor Phillip, John White and later Governor Macquarie, saw the erection of medicinal facilities as crucial to the stability of the new colony. Indeed, the haste and importance in stressing the construction of the hospital and its running emphasises that Governor Phillip saw the hospital as an important institution to be integrated into the community.

In 1970, in order to facilitate its redevelopment and "renewal", the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority was provided with the majority of the State-owned property within The Rocks (NSW State Records, n.d.). The initial plan for The Rocks involved an entire "renewal" of the suburb, with its largely historic buildings to be replaced with modern, urban infrastructure (NSW State Records, n.d.). The crucial modification to the Nurses Walk, however, was its conscious, sanctioned designation as a "historic site" in 1979 (Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, 2012b). It became distinguished as not merely a physical location but, instead, as something to be recognised and respected for its importance in Sydney's past. As a "historic site", it arguably no longer remained an anonymous location, but now existed within the continuum of recognised Sydney history, with corresponding political, social and academic significance.

This is evident in the changes to the site and its continued promotion of early surgeons, nurses and hospitals. Several signs installed at the Nurses Walk from the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority in 1979 detail the history of the hospitals at the site, emphasising their necessity – "sickness was rife due to the lack of vegetables", "it was necessary to pitch about 100 tents around the hospital", their development from 1788 to 1816, and the historic figures involved. Alleyways at the site have been renamed, some called "Surgeon's Court" and "Nurses Walk". Another plaque from the Rocks Discovery Museum details the role of the first surgeons, particularly Surgeon General John White, in establishing the country's early medicinal practice. This plaque was "presented by the surgeons of New South Wales in 2002...to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons". Interestingly, yet another plaque from the Sydney Hospital Graduate Nurses Association in 1999 commemorates Lucy Osbourne, the "First Lady Superintendent of Nursing" during the latter part of the 19th century.

Thus, at the Nurses Walk there has been a powerful and implicit acknowledgement of the importance of medicine, hospitals, surgeons and nurses in Australia's colonial history. There is, moreover, a significant, if underlying, association with modern ideas; these signs promote notions of progression, scientific research, improvement and advancements in Australian society. It is thus implied, that from the beginning of its foundation, Australian society has been based on these principles of achievement.

However, despite its strongly colonial and modernist roots, the Nurses Walk can be seen as also uniquely postmodern. Postmodernism can be defined as a movement

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beginning in the late 20th century and arose as a critical response to modernist ideas within fields such as philosophy, history and art. Lyotard (1997, p. 4) defines it as "incredulity toward metanarratives"; these metanarratives include those of Enlightenment universality and equal progress. Postmodernism criticises powerful existing social discourses and seeks to subvert, challenge or reinvent them. Moreover, Jameson (1997, p. 24) notes key links between consumerism and postmodernism due to its erosion of "key boundaries or separations". For Jameson (1997, p. 35), such new patterns of social consumption from the post-war period are defined by extreme rapidity, the high proliferation of media and technology and the dissolution of cultural, geographical boundaries.

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In examining the Nurses Walk it reveals a proliferation of consumerism and commodification in a manner that challenges typical notions of a historic site. The Nurses Walk is not separated from its environment in a high-traffic urban area. Instead, the Nurses Walk itself houses several high-end cafes, restaurants and stores, all of them housed within the historic, sandstone buildings of the colonial period. Within the Nurses Walk itself there are three art galleries which are indicative of the thriving art scene of The Rocks, which houses numerous art installations (Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, 2012a). The site is entirely open to members of the public and, like a typical commercial area, encourages activities of consumerism. Within a fifty metre radius of the walk itself there are a multitude of tourist shops, clothing stores, cafes, restaurants and luxury brands, as well as advertisements and promotions.

Historic sites are typified as places of respect, to be set aside from surrounding environment and kept within the context of their times or, at times, considered sacred (Nasr, 2001, p. 3). Yet the Nurses Walk exists as a more recent type of historical site, one that is incorporated into and coexists with its inhabitants and visitors (Levi Strauss, 2001, p. 377); it accommodates the current activities of its urban location with its colonial roots. This key contrast between its historical status and its highly urban integration can be justified as postmodern, as it subverts the usual perception of a historic site. Furthermore, the proliferation of consumerism within and around the site of the Nurses Walk can be seen as postmodern due to its resulting commodification.

A postmodern view of commodification, as argued by Featherstone (2007, p. 83), sees consumerist societies as consisting not of "material values", but of "signs". The urban "reality" surrounding the Nurses Walk and The Rocks is formed of pervasive symbols and images; goods and services for sale all come with inherent social value and meaning, other advertisements and signs also form what Baudrillard considers a "hallucination of reality" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 83). Such signs and images, are, ostensibly, spread widely by technology and by the mass media, further degrading the barrier between the "real" and the "unreal" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 15).

The presence of art galleries within the Nurses Walk also promotes its postmodern interpretation through their exhibition and sale of contemporary art. Art here is not limited to be displayed in a formal institution but has also become a commodity and an image with social value. Crucially, this commodification is linked to the postmodern idea of lifestyle, of self-conscious consumption and structuring of self-image and social signs in order to present particular realities (Featherstone, 2007, p.

84). Interestingly, such a “hyper-consciousness” of lifestyle is present within the Nurses Walk, largely given the significantly high-end, luxury nature of the surrounding stores.

This evidence, when taken together, shows that the Nurses Walk exemplifies notions of current Australian society through ideas of progress and modernity which remain prevalent within a postmodern era. The site’s acknowledgement of early medical progress and advancements in Australian history centuries after they occurred strongly implies a continued, present valuation of the principles of modernism. It directly connects inhabitants and visitors to Sydney with the city’s colonial past through its status as a historical site. Such ideals – of progress, science, universal human improvement - originated from as early on as the 17th century, yet remain prevalent discourses within Australian society today.

In conclusion, as the site continues its promotion of these ideals it exists within an age that contrasts with the universalist (and plausibly essentialist) notions of modernism. Within and around the site there are clearly the influences of postmodernism, including the increasing prominence of mass media, the influx of images and signs and their relation to commodification. Moreover, the site itself can be seen as challenging what is seen as a typical historic site; rather than being segregated from its surroundings there has been a removal of barriers between the historical and the present. Arguably, much like contemporary Australian society and Sydney itself, the site forms itself on the backbone of modernism and cannot be divorced from its colonial origins. Yet the Nurses Walk clearly remains a part of a postmodern era of semiotic meaning and continual commodification that is integral to broader Australian society. Evidently, then, it is this amalgamation of the two movements of modernism and postmodernism which defines the complex influences and history underlying the Nurses Walk.

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Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority. (2012b). *The first hospital*
<http://thedirton.therocks.com/2012/03/first-hospital.html>



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