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The globalising and localising power of massive sporting events:
Sydney and the Olympic Games

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How did the 2000 Olympic Games and Sydney's design identity interact? To answer this question it is important to understand the city as a learning landscape.

The impact of the post-industrial waterfront renewal paradigm has sent waves and ripples along Sydney's great harbour. In these waves and ripples, informational content - intentions, ideas and successful responses to these ideas - pass on from one development stage to another, each time mutating in aim and meaning.

In this evolution, the Olympic Games were an opportunistic piece of a conscious strategy, very much like the Guggenheim Museum became an opportunity to be seized in the Basque Region's strategic design process. And as in Bilbao, such was the direction of causality in change: a conscious globalisation strategy resulted in the Games, rather than the other way around. It is also important to understand the Olympic Games of 2000 as part of Sydney's evolving waterfront development strategy.

The setting for Sydney's shifting waterscape geographies appears to 'learn' in uncanny ways, and indeed learn fast as it morphs from Aboriginal hunting grounds into pastures into industrial sites into waste dumps into high-value venues and desirable addresses - and 'back' into nature preserves. The story of Australia's new waterfront development is one of local de-industrialisation in the face of the globalisation of its economy as well as its popular imagination. It is a fascinating and familiar story, and deserves to be understood within the millennia-old saga of human cultural evolution on the continent.

Two centuries ago the new industrious white settlements along Australia's shores and further inland upset a slowly and painfully achieved balance between human occupants and the rest of the continental ecosystem. The continental flora and fauna had previously been thrown into disarray by the arrival of Aboriginal migrants, tens of thousands of years ago, as recently

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explained by the Australian bio-archaeologist Tim Flannery in his book The Future Eaters. Now this new wave ended the arduously achieved 'fire stick farming' management regime by Aboriginal peoples, some of which learned to set deliberate fires in controlled sectors to avoid conflagrations brought about by a disastrous, human-induced decline in large, flora-foraging mammals. It also threw a blinding stage light on their powerful, yet gentle and complex cultural perceptions, and drowned the nuances and meanings of *dreamings* in the clangs and clatter of the Western industrial machine.

The new invaders brought relished but fading images of their initially northern, Anglo-Celtic homelands. They installed these along the newly captured shores, staging familiar settings in this strange and often unsettling land. Early painters famously transfigured the realities of an alien shore into familiar figments - for example, Lloyd Rees' painting of Sydney's Lane Cove in the 1930's endows the flattish shores with steeper qualities, perhaps of Scotland, or of sub-alpine Europe. Urbanists, too, planted new realities that immediately took on lives of their own. Their evolutionary trajectories followed quasi-genetic principles in an evolutionary transmigration of the picturesque, as evidenced in the often carnival-like revitalisation of large and small inner-city urban waterfronts of this fast urbanising continent, from Sydney to Melbourne, from Brisbane to Perth, and from Geelong to Wollongong. The spectacle of the Olympic Games was to make a perfect addition to this culture of short-lived urban iconography.

Sydney especially displays the swift shift of shoreline stills - images and ideas that evolved from one stage of late-20th century global waterfront development to another. The city's heart is a particularly theatrical forum for the urban drama, an exciting act in the grand tragicomedy of continental assertion. Its post-industrial waterfront story begins at the site of the great site of early settlement, the Rocks, in Circular Quay, framed between the picture-perfect icons of Harbour Bridge and Opera House.

In 1999 the Opera and the city were being linked by a then-controversial redevelopment: a wall of luxury apartments. Opera House-bound tours and cultural expeditions traversing its base find themselves on a pilgrimage along a new classical portico, designed to appear biblical in length and paying hommage to Cecil B De Mille.

To many locals and visitors this house-of-postcards is the inner sanctum of the Australian urban soul. It epitomises the first stirrings of a post-industrial self-discovery - the global phenomenon of the experiential waterfront. From this iridescent setting for a rising service economy emerged Utzon's Serene Sirene: the popular operatic sculpture and civic entertainment palace, as un/natural and beguiling as a cultivated pearl.

Circular Quay, our mother oyster of an urban room, harbours the original genetic code from which all other urban waterfront developments in

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Sydney sprang, including the will to stage the biggest urban TV-show of all: the Games.

Once it had been discovered what powerful an urban idiom, what great mirror of civic pride had been almost inadvertently - some say accidentally - assembled here, and once it was learned from other cities such as Boston and Baltimore what a stunning tool for urban regeneration inner-city industrial waterfronts can represent in a time of rising popular desire for experiences, business and government leaders scrambled to replicate this success in the endearingly named 'Darling Harbour' just to the west of the inner city. At the time the place had languished as a neglected urban swamp and industrial backwater; it had been a wet paradise for water birds before the arrival of white settlers.

An instant package of entertainment, exhibitions and experience was assembled here, utilising the pioneering principles of the US festival marketplace. Rising as a veritable retail and entertainment phoenix from the ashes of the early industrial age, Darling Harbour was an urban mirage cloned from Quincy Market and Circular Quay genetic material, but unlike these, found itself ejected and cut off from its urban surroundings by access tarmacs and motorways, tethered to the city's womb largely by a toylike umbilical monorail. The result created somewhat of a shock of the new, when Sydney's cognoscenti realised that the first wave of media-enhanced globalisation had arrived with a colourful bang. While Darling Harbour was adored by tourists and suburban families alike, the professionals academics and literati predictably went wild in a fit of cultural cringe.

Today, twelve years later, Darling Harbour is coming of age. It is being upgraded and 'normalised' by becoming more tightly integrated into the larger city. A mountainous casino and entertainment complex, Potala-like, was recently erected on the western side, a new extravaganza of more residences and shops is about to be constructed on its eastern side. Darling Harbour has now been strongly attached to the city's body by the elegantly formulaic 1998 'Cockle Bay' restaurant-and-shop complex. As the harbourside bridge head of 'Darling Park', a successful city-side corporate refuge, it sets out to establish a new city edge beyond the chasm of the western freeways, reaching out and touching the city, building a generous foothold for the living city where ten years ago only few may have fathomed such golden opportunities. The simple spatial concept - a multi-level, shed-like, ornamented shell - has been literally learned: it has clearly benefited from fifteen years of riverside development experience in Melbourne, the pioneering Southgate and the later refined Entertainment City complexes extruded westward along the sweeping shore of the Yarra. The widths of the boardwalk, the animation of the street level, the mix of shops - all this has been perfected to an ever more idealised model, spanning right back to the simplicity of the Quincy Market typology, here

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split in half, terraced upward and berthed shore-side.

All this is sometimes ascribed to the maturing effect the Games had on the city, electrifying its imagination and charging a feverish flurry of initiatives, by lifting an enormous preening mirror. And yes, there was a commercial driver as well: during the Games, Darling Harbour became a massive temporary sports venue: the fifth largest Olympic sports site in history.

Meanwhile, other central areas followed suit. To the east of Circular Quay, the Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf, claimed to be Australia's longest maritime structure, has been filled with apartments, and to the west Walsh Bay's five wooden wharf digits and a great deal of adjoining territory have been sold to the best bidders and are now in part being transmogrified into more high-priced apartments.

Across from Sydney's Central Business District, on the western side of Darling Harbour, a 300 hectare peninsular renewal project is nearing completion, after a miraculously brief preparation period of less than a decade. Boosted in the early 1990's by generous infrastructure contributions - courtesy of a national Labour government under the now-defunct but enormously successful 'Building Better Cities' program - the peninsular inner-city neighbourhoods of Ultimo and Pyrmont have absorbed a virtual tsunami of dense residential construction, adding ten tens of thousands of new unit dwellers to an ever-swelling inner urban housing market, correcting many decades of suburban expansion.

Ultimo-Pyrmont has been the third stage of Sydney's fin-de-siecle waterside redevelopment, and institutionally and formally largely a reaction to the professional outcry against Darling Harbour. While Darling Harbour had been carved out of derelict waterside rail territory practically overnight, by a single authority for a single purpose, this sandstone quarry of a peninsula was to be tackled in a more egalitarian, brokering fashion for a cocktail of uses packaged into a variety of forms, by a host of private and public development purveyors.

The result is a fascinatingly eclectic world of part infill and part new, part fine-grained and part monolithic, part exceptional and part less remarkable and part traditionalist European and part openly opportunistic, quilted into a tapestry of urban remaking that tangibly expresses a professional and political concern with achieving renewal while avoiding the perceived pitfalls of single development vehicles. An infrastructure of parks, open spaces and community facilities was part planned, part negotiated and part serendipitously salvaged by the leading State and local agencies, and a special-purpose authority has now re-established a single tram spur across the peninsula, tying it to Sydney's central rail station.

This time period highlighted an extraordinary tension, between the brashly

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laissez-faire patterns that have characterised Sydney's development for decades and the growing realisation that accessible, quality space is fast becoming a scarce commodity. It has dawned on some decision-makers that it is high time to show concern for the quality and durability of development, and particularly the robustness of the public domain along the shores, Sydney's rediscovered redevelopment frontier.

Today, the fire of waterfront renewal jumps from cove to cove and headland to headland all along Sydney's sprawling foreshores. Water turns to gold, as aquatic real property prices soar. Today, even a distant water glimpse translates into a handsome surcharge on the basic value of a flat, house or piece of land. To some, the complex and green foreshores are in danger of becoming encrusted with homogenous residential structures, seemingly occupied by barnacle-like dwellers obsessed with waterviews. If unchecked, they could throttle the fine-grained diversity of what has come to be wistfully referred to as 'the working harbour'. At the same time, cultural heritage activists rally around what yesterday seemed like a marvellous myriad of industrial harbourside monuments, yet today has been decimated to a handful endangered artefacts..

Incidentally, the redevelopment of Ultimo-Pyrmont, part of the State's federally supported City West strategy, was also one of the first significant development enterprises in which another cry for durability was heard: that of environmental sustainability. In the early 1990's Greenpeace Australia officially adopted a fifth campaign, and added 'cities' to the causes of oceans, atmosphere, forests and toxics. At the time Greenpeace saw in the 2000 Olympic Games preparations a great opportunity: to promote saner regional development and urban design processes, and the issue of water management became particularly poignant here. It produced an influential transit-based and water-conscious 'strategy for a sustainable Sydney', and carried the day in exhorting the Games planners to live up to higher standard of environmental responsibility.

As the 'waterfront' notion, and its evolving concept of an inner frontier, began to advance deeper into the region and up the river, and as leading planners and developers seized on the inevitable and focused on a fast urbanising and de-industrialising metropolis of emerging urban centres as a source of great real property development gains, it was only natural that the main Games site came to be (a) located in the regional core relatively remote from the centre, (b) placed in a massively polluted waste area and (c) promoted as a water-edge event.

Early promotional design concepts indeed presented the Year 2000 Olympic Games site as a deliberate reincarnation of Circular Quay, virtually reproducing the concept like a postcard. The challenge became to imbue a necessarily instant and mass-media responsive environment with local meaning and a durable, 'future-proof' presence.

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During the Games, the city became transformed and transfixed, a location, a stage and an auditorium at once, and the global stage Sydney is well known to billions of TV viewers today. The lasting impact on Sydney's real estate market was enormous: the Games were the world's largest and most successful property commercial in history.

The site and its design challenge immediately took on an authentic face, as the staggering scale of the toxic waste management challenge emerged. Hence the leading idea of the site plan inexorably turned to water in a new sense: its cleaning, management and experience. Torn between the grand and the humble, between the bold and the beautiful, the monumental and the ephemeral, the Homebush Bay Olympic venues rise from industrial wastelands, signifying our soul-searching times perfectly. But more importantly, the important work by the Olympic Coordination Authority, supported by the Government Architect's Office and such important design contributors as US landscape architects George Hargreaves and Peter Walker is usefully focused on discovering the final water-frontier - the purification and rehabilitation of the urban water management system as an ubiquitous, life-sustaining web. It is featured here in the public domain as a celebration of the creek rehabilitation efforts, and in the expansive Millennium Parklands as a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek, played out in a universe of soil pollution.

These are expensive but necessary, ostensibly grand yet still humble beginnings, given the Herculean task that lies ahead. This task has not been made smaller by the fact that life after the Games had largely been ignored in the preparation for the Games, and that a post-Olympic master plan only now has sprung from the government's drawing boards. The promise of Homebush as a swiftly and lastingly rising urban Phoenix therefore has been somewhat delayed.

But like so many metropolitan areas of the world, Sydney is a watery region that is only beginning to discover the internal urban frontiers of the 21st century - industrially wasted lands and hidden watercourses. The Olympic Games helped just do that. It just may be that herein lies to be discovered the modern equivalent of Aboriginal fire-stick farming: secret to life in balance.

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