

## **The Redfern/Waterloo Project - What 'Other Eden'?**

A talk given by Elizabeth Farrelly on Sunday, 17 March 2005 to the NSW Chapter of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia ( <http://www.independentscholars.asn.au/> )

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I'm shocked.

Usually when people draw comparisons between Australia and apartheid (as visiting South African activist-musician Vusi Mahlasela did this week<sup>1</sup>) I think, perhaps a little defensively, 'it's not really like that here. Not anymore. Not now.'

And so I am shocked, shocked and ashamed, to hear a 21st century NSW government, and a labour government at that, arguing once again to move Australia's oldest kernel of indigenous urban culture out. Out of the way. Out of the centre. Out of sight.

We should all be ashamed.

We're not, though. Far from it.

On the anniversary of T.J. Hickey's death, the Sydney Central Courier (a new Redfern rag distributed in honour of the neighbourhood's achieved status as a serious property market) ran a story on the Block.

Like a lamb in spring, the piece gamboled happily through Redfern's recent history – drugs, riots, domestic violence – before ending with a quote from Frank Sartor, the new Minister for pretty-well-everything-including-Redfern.

"We've seen [the government's Big Commitment]" he said, '...in extra policing, extra health services and on top of that, we've set up the [Redfern-Waterloo] Authority and we're putting structures in place to move forward.'<sup>2</sup>

Extra police. Structures in place. Move forward. Yup. That'll do it. Problem solved.

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<sup>1</sup> 7.30 Report interview with genivieve Hussey, 15 March 2005, ABC-TV

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Walker, *Redfern reborn*, Sydney Central Courier Feb (??) 2005

Now sure, the story was probably written by a cub reporter straight out of school. She was probably up against a deadline. But, excuses or no, it replicated exactly the kind of apathetic she'll-be-right non-think that got us into this mess in the first sorry place.

In the same week, by contrast, a snippet appeared in the Herald, noting a little known public-space experiment in London. Dubbed **The Naked Street** (after an obscure 1950s film), the idea was being trialed in London's Exhibition Street but comes from the Netherlands. There, it seems, it has had considerable success. The problem was reducing traffic accidents. The novel solution – was removing (yes, removing) all road markings, barriers, lights and even curbs.

“If you treat people like idiots,” said the urban designer working on the London plan, “they'll behave like idiots.”<sup>3</sup>

If you treat people like the criminally insane, the Redfern version might read, they'll behave that way.

Of course I'm not suggesting that the Redfern Problem, for want of a better phrase, is the police or the government's fault. Not in any immediate or demonstrable way.

It's just that – and this should be tattooed on every politician and bureaucrat's forehead –you don't solve social problems with bulldozers.

It's always tempting to think otherwise. Social problems are hard and messy: bulldozers are easy, clean, bold. Cathartic even.

But demolition will only send the problem somewhere else (be it Macquarie Fields, La Perouse, Mt Druitt – or just round the corner in Waterloo).

Even rebuilding will only give the same old problem a new home. Clean wallpaper.

People don't stop beating up their families because the kitchen is new. They don't stop doing drugs because police are on the street. And they don't stop feeling dispossessed because you send them somewhere else – again.

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Hamilton-Baillie, SMH 10 02 05; Denver Post 14 02 05; Arizona Star 15 02 05

The only real difference is in the visuals. In what you see, and what you don't see. We so-sophisticated humans are so easily persuaded by what we can, or cannot, see.

And of course the government knows all this.

Why, then, does it engage in this redevelopment-as-social-panacea charade?

That's easy. The answer is a simple three-worder: growth, money, survival. The one word answer is simpler still: politics.

The thinking – if that's not too strong a word - is this. The Botany-to-CBD airport corridor is home to half the jobs in metropolitan Sydney. This makes it the economic engine of Australia, and the country's best hope for a globalopolis.

To do this, the city must expand. But it is a peninsula city, with water on three sides and North Sydney anyway a basket case.

So south is it.

Already the government has invested hugely in yuppifying the south-of-Redfern rustbelt (Green Square, the airport corridor, the world's newest ghost-railway, the rather sick-looking Cooks Cove tech-park scheme and now the M6).

But global Sydney is going nowhere unless it can connect all these on a string between the CBD and the airport.

What's taking them so long? The Block, Redfern.

The Block has become the blockage.

Everything else – industrial fabric, heritage, public park, wetlands – can be and has been swept aside. Leaving the Block as the last impediment in Sydney's race to full-on globalopolis status.

So however you cut it, from the government's point of view, the Block has to go.

This was not the rhetoric. Not at first. I was saying “the Block will go, it’s only a matter of time, mark my words.” And everyone else was saying “you’re so cynical, give them a break, they could be genuine, let’s see what comes.”

Well, we’ve given them a break, and what has come is the “no black faces” policy.

The Minister does not believe aboriginal housing is “sustainable” on the Block. He refuses to say why. He proposes to move these people a few blocks down the road to Waterloo. But won’t say why this is better.

So what is the reason, here, that the government is so reluctant to articulate? The reason is both simple, and shocking.

It’s this. Moving the blacks from the Block is necessary so that we can’t see them. So that new blow-in executives and lifestyle-residents of Redfern-to-be do not have to witness the street drinking, the bonfires, the in your face behaviour of Redfern’s traditional people.

Whether it’s a move of 50kms, or of half a km makes no difference. It’s the attitude that is shocking. And the fact that it hasn’t changed. At all.

Same old stuff. It’s why station owners put the blacks just over the hill, out of sight. And why country towns put the missions 5 kms out of town.

We don’t want to see them. It’s their country, and we do not want to be reminded of what our presence here has done to them.

There’s a lovely show on at the moment in Waterloo’s Utopia gallery. It’s called Big Shots, and it’s an exhibition of portraits of some of the top indigenous artists. At the opening in the weekend everyone was saying ‘what beautiful faces.’ But I couldn’t help thinking: sit them on a milk crate on Redfern or Eveleigh street, and we’d be getting the Minister’s new police force to move them along.

No black faces.

That’s the talk, and that’s scary enough. But the reality of the government’s intention lives in their deeds. Their structures. Their legislation. And that’s scarier still.

The Redfern-Waterloo Act, hustled rapid-fire through both houses at the end of last year, gave the precinct its very own, Thatcher-invented Development Corporation.

The development corporation is based on the 1981 prototype the LDDC (London Docklands Development Corporation). As a model, it is conflict-of-interest made manifest.

Dreamed up by Mrs Thatcher to 'sweep away inertia and red tape,' the idea was that, in deprived and degraded areas, funding for social services could be extracted from private corporations in return for huge development concessions. Ten or 20 storeys for a local kindergarten, say, or health centre.

But the reality was different.

The reality, according to UK writer David Widgery, was that the LDDC "proved to be a highly secretive engine of corruption, a government financed estate agent which has done to the Docklands what the Highland clearances did to the north of Scotland."<sup>4</sup>

The idea was simple enough. As sole planning authority and landowner, the LDDC could buy vast tracts of land at artificially low prices and, after some basic improvements, make huge windfall gains by selling-on to speculators at prices which were still attractive and use these to fund social benefits.

For London, the residue included such monstrosities such as the \$4 billion Canary Wharf Tower, where low prices and generous tax breaks allowed the developer to offer plush office space at half the rate of the City of London.

Which might have been worth it, had the promised social services actually eventuated. In the London Docks, though, of the 14,000 houses built, most are now occupied by stockbrokers. While the east London Borough of Newham remains the poorest (and most tubercular) in the UK, with 79 TB cases per 1000.

It's a bit like the incentive zoning push that was so disastrous for Sydney through the 60s, 70s and 80s – giving ten, or 12, or 15 extra storeys in return for a 'significant

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<sup>4</sup> Widgery, David, *Some Lives – A GP's East End* (Simon & Schuster)

public benefit' – a through-site link, say. Except that once the building is built, and the through site link is – good heavens! – not actually there – what's going to happen?

The same Development Corporation model has been applied here, with – surprise – pretty much the same results. In the Rocks, in Pyrmont Ultimo, the ATP in Redfern and Green Square - with its acres of unloveable units and unbuildable office space. All of them pretending exhaustive consultation, and practicing outright secrecy.

Most development corporations, though, are subject to some constraints. Boundaries. Heritage (eg Royal Docks). Scrutiny.

Not in Redfern.

The RWA Act 2004 specifically enables the authority – wearing its three-cornered hat as landowner, developer and consent authority – to exempt itself from such annoyances as development controls, heritage constraints, public debate and even boundaries.

It specifically allows the authority to expand at will – commandeering lucrative sites such as the CUB site on Broadway, or the Cooks Cove tech-park near the airport.

There are no requirements for decisions to be taken publicly, or even publicized once made.

Consultation has been promised (but is not required); and in expert hands is anyway seldom more than a placebo.

The new Authority can acquire, demolish and redevelop any property in (or indeed out of) its area, and will run a staff of 'authorised officers' whose only function is to serve penalty notices, either "personally or by post".

This, since the RWA has no independent income, gives it a direct incentive to maximize both development and penalties, simply in order to generate some cash. Public interest? What? Where?

Plus, in order to facilitate all this, the RWA legislation "disapplies" (their word) the Heritage Act, wherever and whenever the Minister sees fit.

Checks and balances? Sure. The Act requires the Minister to make the Redfern plan publicly available, but not before it is approved. Not even before it is built.

The Act requires the Minister to consult the Board in making said Plan. But they're all his appointees, and he can sack them if they don't like it. In a move as insulting, to all of us, as naming Bennelong Point after Bennelong died of rum in a gutter, the Bill requires one – one - indigenous board-member, but the actual person, too, is the Minister's choice.

The Act allows (but does not require) the Minister to take public issues into account, if he so chooses.

The Act requires the Minister-for-Everything not to engage in any boundary-stretching activity before consulting, well, himself. Um, help me here – is that a check, or a balance?

Then, in case that's all too constraining, the Bill entitles the Authority to “do all such supplemental, incidental or consequential acts as may be necessary or expedient for the exercise of its functions.”

You don't often see the word expedient in the statutes, not even in NSW.

Of course in some ways all this just spells out Sydney's fair-weather friendship with democracy: lip-service when skies are blue, summary abandonment at the first wisp of trouble.

But the issues at stake are not so abstract.

Even were their intentions honourable, the pressure on the RWA – just like pressure on any landowner – would eventually prove irresistible. Already there are proposals to develop both Redfern Park and Prince Alfred Park, since they too are in the way. Sooner or later, as The Block becomes surrounded by smooth apartments and designer office-space, land values will inflate beyond reistability.

With government taking so blatant an anti-Block position, you can expect it sooner rather than later.

What will result?

The aboriginal community, a national hub of indigenous culture since the 1930s, will go. The social problems will persist but not here, not on our streets, not in our global corridor, thank you very much.

The government, and selected developers, will be much, much richer. But Sydney as a whole will be the poorer.

Everyone knows this.

But people who don't live there don't care. While the locals care, but know no-one is listening.

That's why they throw bombs.

I must say I feel a bit the same.

Perhaps I shouldn't. Perhaps, as a landowner in the area, I should just lie back, enjoy it, and wait for my property value to rise.

But for some reason it seems important – to me, to the City - that the Block, as not just a centre but our centre of urban aboriginal culture – is not whitewashed over.

The human urge to make things – including cities – neat and clean and smooth and homogenous and above-all non-threatening is an understandable one. It is one of our best defences against chaos.

Understandable but, I believe, a mistake. We enforce conformity and neatness in our cities at our peril.

And there's another thing.

Redfern is often described as a "running sore". (The Brogden description, bulldozer solution). To me it is less 'running sore' than open wound – a lesion symptomatic of a much more serious underlying disease.

And as long as the disease continues, we need the sore where we can see it – not in the far out-burbs but here, in our faces, if only to keep us mindful that the disease, not just the sore, needs treatment.

You don't cure the disease by treating the symptoms. You don't solve social problems with bulldozers.

So what is the answer?

I'm not even sure there is one. But there's one thing I am sure of. It's time to start treating people like grownups.

We know this, really. So why don't we do it? The reason, I think, is fear.

Just as we fear that if we legalise drugs catastrophe will ensue, we also fear that if we allow the people of The Block any real self-determination, all hell will break loose.

We're not stupid to fear it. It is potentially scary – most of all, perhaps, for the community itself.

Then again, most of us probably fear that removing traffic signals would turn every intersection into a bloodbath. Whereas in fact the evidence so far shows the opposite; a significant accident reduction.

So maybe, before we destroy Sydney's only tangible remnant of indigenous urban culture, we should consider an experiment.

Take the French's Forest model. Give the local community freehold title so that they, like grownups, acting together or separately, can agree or not to stay or develop, or possibly both. And reap the rewards themselves.

You never know. It could work.