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Reflections on Martin Place

Martin Place is commonly referred to as 'the heart' of Sydney. This 'place', which runs from George Street to Macquarie Street, constitutes of a series of open spaces framed by major public buildings, such as the nineteenth-century Sydney General Post Office and the twentieth-century Reserve Bank of Australia. A significant ceremonial and recreational node, it is a vital site of public gathering. The space accommodates diverse events of national and social significance, as well as more marginal cultural gatherings. It has hosted celebrations marking the ends of wars, as well as numerous anti-war demonstrations; nationalist commemorations, as well as protests for a broader conception of the nation; mass crowds, as well as dispersed clusters of public gathering. A giant Christmas tree, ephemeral lights and outdoor movie screens all regularly make this grand civic court a popular site of spectacle.

This paper focuses on the importance of social activity to the creation and meaning of public space. I consider the physical qualities of Martin Place and the adjacent institutions for both their capacity and their limitations in supporting public engagement. In particular, I examine the tensions between public monuments' architectural and ideological uniformity and the more ephemeral and labile cultural diversity that is apparent through action and interaction. I argue that the importance of Martin Place as public space is produced through social discourse and engagement rather than exclusively through the disciplinary domain of architecture.

Reflections on Martin Place

"Arguably Australia's most iconic public space", Martin Place is commonly defined as "Sydney's civic heart".[1] This urban space accommodates rallies, protests and peaceful demonstrations, and provides shopping facilities and provisions for the substantial volume of pedestrians that use it. Martin Place's connection with Australian military involvement, through pro- and anti-war gatherings, ensures its symbolic place in the development of Australian national identity. It is a place of official ceremonies and processions, public celebrations and, more recently, collective mourning, with the community coming together in a wake of what was considered an act of terrorism.

Contemporary discourse on history, memory and identity suggests the impossibility of a fixed relationship between place and meaning. Political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue that "articulation" – that is, "a relation between elements" – renders all social practices relative. Their views come from "renouncing the conception of 'society' as founding totality of its partial processes".[2] The diversity of social order is founded, they argue, on "failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences" through the practice of "articulation".[3] Thus "identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practices" that attempt to fix meaning and construct "a centre".[4] Such attempts to stop continuous changes, or metamorphoses, and to stabilise a site's meaning are constantly undermined by the open and negotiable character of identity formations.[5] Any discourse that aims to "arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre" does so only temporarily.[6] The transformations, which are often prompted by changes in the social conditions, release a site of the specific collective memories attached to it or build upon those memories allowing other meanings to emerge.[7]

This paper explores the relationship between Martin Place and the events and public gatherings that take place there. Analysis of broader cultural and political contexts provides the framework within which the meanings associated with Martin Place emerge, gain significance and affect the cultural and political life of the city. The paper presents specific "articulations" that shape the site's meanings – namely war remembrance, anti-war protests, culture and commemorations – and considers their capacity to connect broad public events and sentiment with the specifics of Martin Place.

Peace bonds and protests

As a distinct space and a site of public gathering, Martin Place has a long history. Its origin stretches back to the establishment of the Sydney General Post Office (GPO). The block of land on which the first half of the new GPO was built faced George Street and had a lane to the north, which ran from George Street to Pitt Street.[8] Although numerous attempts to widen and expand the lane failed, the completion of the second half of the GPO, towards the Pitt Street, resulted in opening the building's northern street front to the public.[9] It was, however, the erection of the Commonwealth Trading Bank building on the corner of Martin Place and Pitt Street, in 1916, that initiated large public gatherings in the area.[10] The building represented the newly acquired financial power the Commonwealth government invested in

the bank following the federation of the Australian colonies.[11] By the time the bank opened for business, Britain had already requested Australia assist in financing allied efforts in World War I.[12] As the country's central financial institution, the bank managed and promoted the sale of war bonds and, as the war concluded, peace bonds for the returned soldiers.[13]

The promotion and sales of war bonds were commonly undertaken in the public area in front of the bank. The surrounding buildings were hung with banners and bunting, and provided a setting for these events. Commenting on the bank's continuous efforts to engage with the street and attract public support, a *Sydney Morning Herald* article published on Saturday 28 July 1917 praised the improvements of the street decorations presented on that occasion:

> Compared with the attempts to round up recruits in the city during the past six months, the rally in Martin Place yesterday might be described as enthusiasm in excelsis. Not only was there a large crowd, but the responses to the appeals broke the record in this regard. It is the due of the organisers of the Spoitsmon's Rally to acknowledge that the spectacular element was not overlooked.[14]

Numerous rallies were held in Martin Place during the Commonwealth Bank's promotion and sales of war bonds. Women came together to support the cause during the second peace loan, with the founder of the Junior Red Cross, Mrs Eleanor McKinnon, addressing the crowd.[15] A photograph of the event shows women holding a placard that refers to Villers-Bretonneux, France, where many Australians lost their lives during the war.[16]

Promotion of the seventh war bond required the presence of a large war ship, and so a model of the destroyer HMAS *Australia* was erected in the area in front of the Commonwealth Bank. The opening ceremony was from the bow of the destroyer on 16 September 1918, with guns firing from the ship.[17] The destroyer served as a bank, with the public boarding to subscribe to the loan. The Central War Loan Committee was established to coordinate and manage the efforts to collect loans. The model ship stayed on display, fully equipped with "a whistle and functioning funnel that sent smoke into the air".[18] The campaign was a success and the public contribution exceeded expectations by four million pounds. The collective involvement in and support for the nation's military efforts rendered the site of national importance. There, thousands of soldiers enlisted, money was collected for war bonds, and lost soldiers were remembered.

Recognising the importance of Martin Place, Jack Lang, then-premier of New South Wales, requisitioned it to commemorate Australia's war effort.[19] The erection of the cenotaph in 1927 – an "empty tomb" that "mourns and commemorates the communal sacrifice of lives lost at war" – made tangible the site's significance to the nation.[20] Stating the rationale for the cenotaph's erection in Martin Place, the Returned Soldier League (RSL) New South Wales said it "had looked on Martin Place during the war as the heart of the nation".[21] The monolithic stone block erected in memory of fallen soldiers has two inscriptions: one, facing the GPO, reads "To Our Glorious Dead"; the other, facing Challis House, reads "Least We Forget". Two bronze sentinel figures – one an Australian Imperial Force soldier, the other a

Royal Australian Navy sailor – guard the cenotaph at its two shorter ends.[22]

The cenotaph's importance to commemoration was formally recognised in 1928, with the lifting of a ban on holding ceremonies in the area. The decision to allow "certain patriotic and sentimental celebrations" followed a request by the British Empire Union to allow Anzac Day and Armistice Day events to take place in the area between Castlereagh and Pitt Streets.[23] Since then, commemorations have been held here annually to mark the end of World War I (in the signing of the armistice) and to remember those who lost their lives in war. The cenotaph is the focal point for the thousands that regularly attend Anzac Day ceremonies.

Support for military involvement has frequently been tested in Martin Place by public protestation against war. Large protests occurred in response to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. On 3 May 1965, a crowd of more than 200 students gathered in front of the US Consulate and marched to nearby Martin Place. There, demonstrators carried out one of the earliest "sit-down" demonstrations.[24] During another large protest, held on 23 October 1965, some 60 protestors were arrested. A *Sydney Morning Herald* article described the day:

> The Minister for Labour and National Service, Mr McMahon, was leaving the Commonwealth Bank Building on Martin Place, where parliamentary offices are located, as the demonstrations began. The demonstration began peacefully, but soon home-going city traffic was backed up to Circular Quay in the north and the Central Railway Station in the southern end of the main city area. Demonstrators paraded along the footpaths. They carried posters, on which were written anti-American slogans, and photographs of Vietnamese civilian casualties. They marched into Pitt Street during the peak hour and were blocked by police. Some demonstrators sat and lay across the road ways. They still held aloft their banners, and chanted slogans protesting the Vietnam War. Fights broke out, and extra police moved in.[25]

The anti-Vietnam War and anti-conscription protests continued well into the late 1960s. Violence and conflict with the police frequently interrupted protests, and the media declared 1967 as the year of most protest-related activities in Australian history.[26]

Martin Place has been a forum for expressing political opinion on a diverse range of issues. In April 1969, 25 university students "battled the elements while taking part in a vigil outside the Commonwealth Offices in Martin Place". They supported the land claims of the Northern Territory's Yirrkala Aboriginal people.[27] The *Canberra Times* also reported on the quiet dissent of a mother on a hunger strike, protesting against her son's murder conviction. For 13 days she "put on a good dress for Mother's Day and went, as usual, to sit in the cold shadows cast by city buildings over Martin Place".[28]

From the 1960s onwards the US Consulate, at the time located in Wynyard Street, emerged as a potent focus of political protest. The protestors typically marched to the consulate via Martin Place, or used the space as a public extension of the limited public frontage

of the consulate. The consulate's move to the MLC building, mid-way along Martin Place, presented the protestors with more immediate access to it.

The prominent placement of the war ship during the war bonds collections, the lengthy and numerous rallies, and the substantial public participation in events surrounding the collections all shaped the connection between Martin Place and Australian military involvement in World War I. Subsequent protests compounded the relationship between Martin Place and public debates over war. Even when it was no longer necessary to gather around 'objects' that symbolised the past, Martin Place's major public, institutional and financial buildings provided the facades that would associate the space with Australia's war engagements.

Martin Place's central location and historic significance has been crucial in attracting banks, international corporations and global businesses to the precinct. Major Australian banks, large and prestigious law offices, and major financial institutions, both Australian and international, have in the past or still reside in Martin Place. The presence of such big financial players became the backdrop against which anti-globalisation movements such as Stop Bush have emerged over the last decade or so.

The Stop Bush protests, organised in response to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum held in Sydney in September 2007, made Martin Place a "poignant symbol of the resistance".[29] Stop Bush – a coalition of student activist, union, environment and human rights groups – used the APEC forum as a platform to protest against the Iraq War and for action on climate change and workers' rights.[30] The coalition's request to march though Martin Place to deliver their message was denied on the grounds of security. In preparation for the event, the state government introduced the *APEC Meeting (Police Powers) Act 2007*, which allowed police to "(re)categorise large swathes of its public space".[31] Under this legislation, police designated Martin Place a "declared area". These areas were open to the public, but police had powers to stop or search people and to issue fines.[32] As a consequence, Stop Bush had to negotiate access to Martin Place with the New South Wales police rather than the civic authority, City of Sydney Council. Stop Bush deemed Martin Place an important venue for the expression of its concerns. The lengthy negotiations between protesters, police and the court ultimately resulted in the protest changing route at the last minute to circumvent the Martin Place area. Although unable to access Martin Place or the US consulate area, the protestors considered the event a success. Human geographer Adam Tyndall suggests that this sentiment drew on "the city's collective memory about the latent political capacity of Martin Place".[33] By not being allowed to access the place, the organisers heightened the public awareness of Martin Place as a significant public space that *should* be open for public activity. The tension between the public's right to participate in a protest, on one hand, and the need to maintain civic order, on the other, demonstrates the power and presence of underlying structures that determine the use of public space and "articulate" its public perceptions.

The architectural expression of major institutional buildings and international corporations

contributes to the "articulation" of Martin Place as a "high end" of town, the place of the one per cent. But while their formal appearance and symbolic meanings help frame Martin Place as a site of economic power, they also make it a legitimate site for counter-narratives, a place for public expression of individual and collective views.

Festivities and collective trauma

Although historically Martin Place has been used for various celebrations and commemorations, only relatively recently has it been used as a stage for the city's large cultural events. In 2014, Vivid Sydney used Martin Place as its main location. The "heart of the city CBD", the promotional brochure suggested, was transformed by the festival's light and sculptures.[34] The cenotaph was transformed into a lively contemporary structure by a "gentile lightening treatment [that] honours this solemn memorial and pays homage to those who have given their lives for their country".[35] The play of light softened the appearance of the surrounding buildings. The overlay of light on civic buildings transformed their formal architectural qualities into living organisms. Changed by the light and colour, the buildings lost their political potency and became a background to a space of family entertainment and play.

Fig. 1 Sydney Vivid Festival, 2014. Photograph by Dijana Alic.

Monday 15 December 2014 added another "articulation" to Martin Place. It also marks a significant and tragic day in the site's calendar of events: a lone gunman, Man Haron Monis, took 17 people – customers and employees of the Lindt chocolate cafe – hostage. Soon after the siege began, the police declared an exclusion zone around Martin Place. The Lindt cafe, located at 53 Martin Place, on the corner of Phillip Street, was the centre of the exclusion zone, which stretched between Elizabeth, Hunter and King Streets in the CBD. The negotiations with the gunman unfolded throughout the day, with frequent updates provided by both traditional and social media. The continuous reporting was compounded by the cafe's proximity to another Martin Place landmark: Channel 7 Sun Rise studios. The hostage crisis lasted until early on Tuesday 16 December, when the police stormed the cafe and killed the gunman. Unfortunately, two hostages died in the siege, one man and one woman.

The event marks a significant addition to the narrative and collective memory of Martin Place. It brought closer to home the horror of violence and its random nature. No longer do horrid acts of politicised violence occur only in faraway places; they also happen in central Sydney, at the very "heart" of the city – Martin Place. Though the siege was a random act of violence, the political connotations of the perpetrator's request linked the event to the broader political context, the wars in the Middle East in particular. Inadvertently, the event highlighted global connectivity and increased the importance of public discussion about Australia's military involvement in conflicts around the world. This new political "articulation" of Martin Place underscored the volatile nature of public space and the difficulties of controlling it.

The aftermath of the siege brought an outpouring of community emotion. The area in front of the Lindt cafe became a memorial to the victims from the afternoon of the siege's conclusion. The following day, the *Daily Telegraph* stated: "Martin Place – the scene of so much destruction and despair during the Lindt cafe siege was transformed yesterday as mourners created an extraordinary floral tribute to the victims of Sydney's hostage crisis".[36] Martin Place became a makeshift memorial to the victims: "By sundown the air, which just a few hours prior had been filled with gunshots, was thick with blossoming scent. People of all faiths, backgrounds and ages mixed like the mountain of gerberas, lilies and peonies on the piazza."[37]

Fig. 2 Martin Place Memorial, 2014. Photograph by Dijana Alic.

As the day progressed, dignitaries, politicians, office workers and the general community poured into the area to pay their respects. Palpable sorrow was recorded in the daily press and in online sources. The feeling of collective sorrow unified diverse communities: from a tweet #illridewithyou, offering to support Muslim community members feeling threatened on public transport, to taxi drivers offering free rides to Martin Place to those wishing to pay their respect at the makeshift memorial.[38]

The many "articulations" of one place

In his *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that the "pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse".[39] "Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors"; it is the "texture" of place that provides "opportunities" for social engagement.[40] In the context of Martin Place, prevailing socio-political discourses

intersect with the architectural "texture" of place and the social events that occur there, and through this triangulated relationship Martin Place provides a complex environment that enables the activation of public space. As this paper has discussed, Martin Place has become a site of war-related commemoration, anti-war protest, political demonstration, cultural celebration and communal grieving, accommodating both community and individual expression through a complex web of social and architectural relations. By understanding the social and architectural histories associated with the buildings and the public space they bound, we gain a better understanding of the often-invisible structures that organise our daily engagements with the city. But this paper has sought to demonstrate that the diverse articulations and narratives of place that give shape to Martin Place also reveal its resistance to fixed meaning; as a public space, it can accommodate various meanings and be a site of relational importance. It serves as an example of the role architecture and place play in producing meaningful narratives, myths and memories.

1   Steve Meacham presents a review of the civic and public importance of Martin Place in "A city's heart builds on a sense of place," *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 1, 2007, www.smh.com.au/news/national/a-citys-heart-builds-on-a-sense-of-place/2007/09/30/1191090943420. html (accessed January 28, 2015).

2   Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 95.

3   Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 105.

4   Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 112.

5   Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 112.

6   Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 112.

7   Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 95-112.

8   G. P. Webber, ed., *The Design of Sydney: Three Decades of Change in the City Centre* (Sydney: Law Book Company, 1988), 72. The construction of the first half of the General Post Office took place between 1866 and 1874, with the entire building completed in 1891.

9   Webber, ed., *The Design of Sydney*, 72.

10 Originally, the building accommodated the headquarters of the Government Savings Bank of New South Wales.

11 Australian Heritage database, www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place_detail;place_id=1837 (accessed January 29, 2015). Sydney architectural firm J. & H. G. Kirkpatrick designed the bank. The family's relationship to the bank's governor, Mr Denison Miller, placed his professional integrity in question.

12 *Reflections of Martin Place*, brochure published to celebrate 50 years of the Reserve Bank of Australia. The bank holds a photographic collection of some 15,000 images. These record the establishment of the Commonwealth Bank and the Reserve Bank, and the financial events in which the banks were involved, www.rba.gov.au/about-rba/history/anniversary/reflections-gallery.html.

13 A total of 416,809 Australians enlisted from a population of about four million.

14 "Martin Place," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 28, 1917, 13.

15 *Reflections of Martin Place,* n.p.

16 *Reflections of Martin Place*, n.p.

17 *Reflections of Martin Place*, n.p.

18 *Reflections of Martin Place*, n.p.

19 "Sydney Cenotaph," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_Cenotaph (accessed January 26, 2015). The cenotaph was completed two years ahead of schedule. http://rslnsw.org.au/commemoration/memorials/the-cenotaph (accessed April 18, 2015).

20 www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5060966 (accessed April 22, 2015).

21 http://rslnsw.org.au/commemoration/memorials/the-cenotaph (accessed April 18, 2015).

22 Returned Soldier League NSW website states the model for the soldier was Private William Piggot Darby and for the sailor Leading Seaman John William Varco. See http://rslnsw.org.au/commemoration/memorials/the-cenotaph (accessed April 18, 2015); https://www.warmemorialsregister.nsw.gov.au/content/cenotaph-martin-place-sydney (accessed April 18, 2015).

23 "Martin Place proposed celebrations ban removed," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 5, 1928, 20.

24 "Labor will force troupes debate today," *Canberra Times*, May 4, 1965, 1.

25 "60 arrested in Vietnam War protest," *Canberra Times*, October 23, 1965, 1.

26 "Protests! 1967 was the year," *Canberra Times*, January 1, 1968, 13.

27 "Students protest in bleak vigil," *Canberra Times*, April 15, 1969, 1.

28 "Mother's Day, 13th of mother's fast," *Canberra Times*, May 14, 1984, 8.

29 Adam D. G. Tyndall, "A Mall, a Mosque and Martin Place: Publics, Publicness and Urban Space" (PhD dissertation, University of Newcastle, 2013), 214.

30 Tyndall, "A Mall, a Mosque and Martin Place," 214.

31 Tyndall, "A Mall, a Mosque and Martin Place," 215.

32 Tyndall, "A Mall, a Mosque and Martin Place," 215.

33 Tyndall, "A Mall, a Mosque and Martin Place," 228.

34 Martin Place: Sydney Events at Vivid Sydney, www.vividsydney.com (accessed December 12, 2014).

35 Martin Place, www.vividsydney.com.

36 Miles Godfrey and Andrew Carswell, "Sydney siege: Amazing scenes as Sydneysiders empty florists to fill Martin Place with flowers," *Daily Telegraph*, December 17, 2014, www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/sydney-siege-amazing-scenes-as-sydneysiders-empty-florists-to-fill-martin-place-with-flowers/story-fni0cx12-1227157698015 (accessed February 2, 2015).

37 Godfrey and Carswell, "Sydney siege."

38 Godfrey and Carswell, "Sydney siege."

39 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell: Oxford, 1991)*,* 57.

40 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* 57.