

ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

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Becoming Ultra-Civic: The Completion of Queen's Square, Sydney 1962-1978

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Abstract

Declaring in the late 1950s that Sydney City was in much need of a car free civic square, Professor Denis Winston, Australia's first chair in town and country planning at the University of Sydney, was echoing a commonly held view on how to reconfigure the city for a modern-day citizen.

Queen's Square, at the intersection of Macquarie Street and Hyde Park, first conceived in 1810 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie, remained incomplete until 1978 when it was developed as a pedestrian only plaza by the NSW Government Architect under a different set of urban intentions. By relocating the traffic bound statue of Queen Victoria (1888) onto the plaza and demolishing the old Supreme Court complex (1827), so that nearby St James' Church (1824) could become freestanding alongside a new multi-storey Commonwealth Supreme Court building (1975), by the Sydney-based practise of McConnel Smith and Johnson, the civic and social ambition of this pedestrian space was assured. Now somewhat overlooked in the history of Sydney's modern civic spaces, the adjustment in the design of this square during the 1960s translated the reformed urban design agenda communicated in *CIAM 8, the heart of the city (1952)*, a post-war treatise developed and promoted by the international architect and polemicist, Josep Lluís Sert.

This paper examines the completion of Queen's Square in 1978. Along with the symbolic role of the project, that is, to provide a plaza as a social instrument in humanising the modern-day city, this project also acknowledged the city's colonial settlement monuments beside a new law court complex; and in a curious twist in fate, involving curtailing the extent of the proposed plaza so that the colonial Supreme Court was retained, the completion of Queen's Square became ultra – civic.

Introduction

1. Denis Winston, *Sydney's Great Experiment: The Progress of the Cumberland County Plan*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1957), 26.

2. Paul Zucker, *Town and Square: From the Agora to the Village Green*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 1.

3. Josep L Sert, Jacqueline Tyrwhitt and E. N. Rogers (eds), *The heart of the city: towards the humanisation of urban life*, (London: Lund Humphries, 1952).

4. Gordon Stephenson, *On a human Scale, a Life in City Design*, (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992), 200.

Having declared in the late 1950s that Sydney City was in much need of a civic square, the Professor of Town Planning at the University of Sydney, Denis Winston, was responding to a modern-day civic problem.¹ This observation was also shared by the international critic Paul Zucker, when he stated in the anthology *Town and Square* (1958), a text available in Sydney roughly at the same time as Winston's remark, that a modern city square was "a gathering place for people, capable of humanizing them by mutual contact, and providing them with a shelter against haphazard vehicle traffic."² In fact, both Winston and Zucker were echoing the reformed urban design agenda identified in the publication *CIAM 8, The heart of the city* (1952). Developed and promoted by the international urban design theorist Josep Lluís Sert, this urban design concept was simply described as "The Core".³

This paper examines the completion of Queen's Square. First conceived by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1810, this urban space was redeveloped during the 1960s by a joint planning committee, which included the Commonwealth and NSW government, to become a social instrument for humanising the government precinct of the city. Involving the realignment of Macquarie Street and closing a section of Kent Street, the urban design strategy entailed the demolition of Francis Greenway's Supreme Court building (1827) so that his St James' Church (1824) could become freestanding within a new urban core. The project also included the relocation of a statue of Queen Victoria and the construction of the Commonwealth Supreme Court (1967- 1975), a multi-storey tower designed by the Sydney-based practice McConnel Smith and Johnson in conjunction with the Commonwealth Department of Works to spatially define the northern edge of the plaza.⁴

By focusing on the morphological aspects of Queen's Square, the aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the changes in civic ambition enabling the completion of Queen's Square. Amended at the "last minute" to retain the colonial Supreme Court, this project came to represent the intersection of two civic aims, that is, a need to make the city more humane through the provision of pedestrian only plazas while at the same time acknowledge the city's cultural traditions, including the retention of its colonial settlement monuments.

Unrealised Town Making, Colonial Style

5. Isadore Brodsky, *The Streets of Sydney*, (Neutral Bay: Old Sydney Free Press, 1962), 92.

6. James Broadbent and Joy Hughes, *Francis Greenway Architect*, (Glebe: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 1997), 14-15.

In the setting out of Macquarie Street by Governor Lachlan Macquarie, a new north-south street positioned on the eastern ridge of Sydney Town between Hunter Street and Hyde Park, was envisaged to terminate at Chancery Square.⁵ (Fig. 1) With the construction of the colonnaded General "Rum" Hospital (1816), which incorporated naively detailed Doric Order columns⁶ and occupying the eastern edge of Macquarie Street, the proposed town making experience was to conclude in the embellishment of a town square spatially defined by two temple fronted public buildings designed by Francis Greenway. While the buildings were constructed the space remained nameless until 1888 and incomplete until 1978.

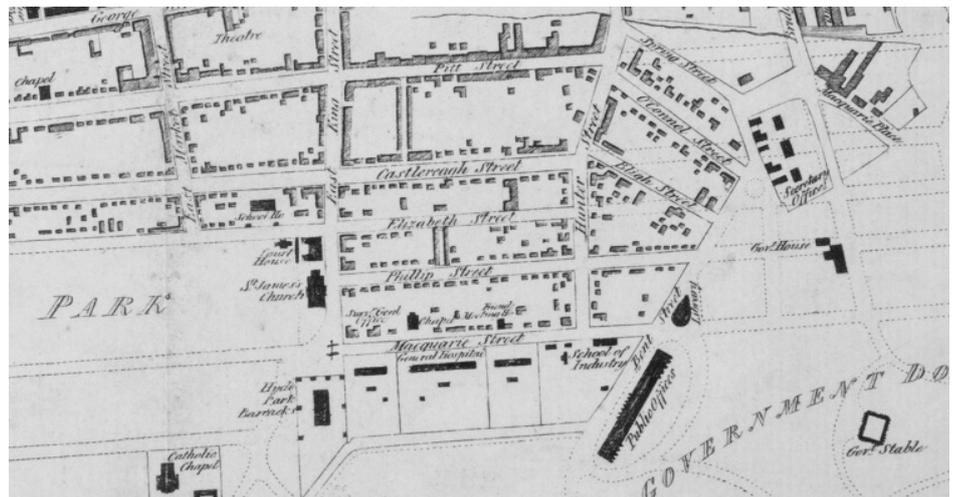


Figure 1: Macquarie and King Streets public buildings, 1837. Image: taken from Tegg's NSW Pocket Almanac, Carolyn Simpson Library, NSW

7. Michael Makeham, *The Macquarie Townships of the Cumberland Plain*, (Undergraduate Thesis, University of Sydney, 1985).

8. James Broadbent and Joy Hughes (eds), *The Age of Macquarie*, (Carlton Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1992), 61.

9. Initially designed as a school, the Courthouse use was made under decree by Commissioner Briggs. The arcade was added in 1868 to a design by the NSW Colonial Architect, James Barnett.

10. Commissioner Briggs, sent from England to assess Governor Macquarie's ambitious building programme of works, chose to simply his Macquarie Street project, see Alasdair McGregor, *A forger's progress: the life of Francis Greenway*, (Sydney: NSW New South Publishing, 2014).

Promulgated by Governor Macquarie in 1810 were the proposed civic squares located within the five proposed Hawkesbury River towns.⁷ Here, a courthouse, a church and a school were sited so that each antipodean township had "a moral function in the encouragement of a new society".⁸ Meeting this civic ideal were also the Macquarie Street public buildings. Portraying law and order and the temporality of religion, these buildings, now an important landmark, were ornamented by colonnades and porticos to facilitate genteel circulation. With an arcade and ornamented parapet later added to the King Street elevation of the Supreme Court, a most unassuming and compromised building,⁹ each of the Governor Macquarie town buildings were presented as a public symbol in a town without a civic square. The first of the temple fronted buildings was Hyde Park Barracks (1819), an enclosed Roman-like camp for convicts. This was formally balanced by a second building, St James' Church (1824), detailed to include two porticos and a west facing tower. Later, and compromising the composition, was the construction of the Supreme Court (1827), positioned immediately to the west of St James'.¹⁰ With these ornamented buildings located within an incomplete square the precinct nevertheless proclaimed importance through use. Founded on public virtue, this detached group of public buildings, however, were separated by palisade fences and any civic engagement was by invitation through a lockable gate.

Monumental Axes

11. See watercolour view of Hyde Park looking towards the Supreme Court, St James' Church, Sydney Hospital and Hyde Park Barracks, c.1844, artist unknown, Carolyn Simpson Library, NSW.

12. Sir John Kerr, *Matters for judgement: an autobiography*, (London: Macmillan, 1979), 205-207.

Completion of the town square at the southern end of Macquarie Street stalled after Governor Lachlan Macquarie left Sydney in 1822. When this area was illustrated in the 1840s it was shown finishing abruptly against Hyde Park.¹¹ Not until the later part of the nineteenth century, and after the northern edge of Hyde Park was replanned with a roadway detailed to intersect with Macquarie Street, the Banco Court (1896), an extension to the Supreme Court, and the Registrar-General's building (1913), were designed to address the park with no engagement with Macquarie Street. Now the centre of Sydney's legal activities¹² the civic importance of this area was amplified when a statue of Queen Victoria was installed in 1888 on a pedestal of Moruya granite on axis with the centre line of St

James' Church and Hyde Park Barracks. With the unveiling of the statue to celebrate the centenary of European settlement and the official naming of "Queen's Square" any commemorative and citizenry use required road closure.

13. Robert Freestone, "Preserving Sydney's Built Heritage in the Early Twentieth Century", *Australian Historical Studies* (29:112, 1999), 44-60, DOI:10.1080/10314619908596086.

14. Peter Webber (ed), *The design of Sydney: Three Decades of Change in the City Centre*, (Sydney: Law Book Company, 1988), 146.

15. Pamela Barnett-Spies, *The Early Years of the Preservation Movement in NSW, 1900-1939*, (Master's Thesis University of Sydney, 1987), 147.

16. Robert Freestone, "Preserving Sydney's Built Heritage in the Early Twentieth Century", *Australian Historical Studies*, (29: 112, 1999), 60. DOI:10.1080/10314619908596086.

A Royal Commission for the improvement of Sydney City and suburbs reported in 1909 that Macquarie Street be widened and extended into Hyde Park.¹³ This civic axis, perhaps modelled on London Road Constitution Hill rather than Avenue Champs-Elysees and shown complete with a miniature version of Wellington Arch rather than Arc de Triomphe, adopted imperial planning strategies with little regard to Governor Macquarie's town making vision. Included in this unrealised project was the demolition of Hyde Park Barracks and the Supreme Court. This enabled St James' Church to be appreciated as a stand-alone city landmark. Another State Government study and dating to 1935 again reported on the demolition of Hyde Park Barracks and the Supreme Court but included a new Law Courts building in a stripped classical aesthetic. Described as "a worthy contribution to the architectural beauty and civic dignity of the city",¹⁴ this building was shown positioned on the site of the Hyde Park Barracks. While concern was voiced on the proposed demolition of the barracks, there was no objection to the removal of the Supreme Court at a time when interest in the preservation of Sydney's colonial settlement buildings was emerging.¹⁵ As Freestone pointed out, the retention of any colonial period building, however, owed to their continual use, a lack of public money and apathy, as to any organised preservation campaign.¹⁶ (Fig. 2)



Figure 2: Queen's Square as a roadway intersection, 1969. Image: City of Sydney Archives, 023577

A Civic Problem for a Modern-Day City

17. Florence Taylor, "Sydney's Need for a Civic Square – Martin Place Extension affords opportunity", *Building*, (August 12, 1933), 34b.

18. Judith O Callaghan, Paul Hogben, Robert Freestone, *Sydney's Martin Place: A cultural and design history*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2016).

19. Peter Webber, *The Design of Sydney*, 146.

20. The closure of King Street was made possible after the removal of Tram route 10. The statue of Queen Victoria was also relocated a third time.

21. Josep Luis Sert (International Congress for Modern Architecture), *Can our cities Survive?* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1944), 232.

22. Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia*, (Sydney: New South Publishing), 14. Accessed June 30, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

A civic square for the city was the subject of much discussion among commentators in Sydney during the 1930s.¹⁷ By the time of Winston's remark in the late 1950s the discussion for a new city square had shifted from an aesthetic proposition to one about social and civic need. Prior to the completion of nearby Martin Place, under a local government initiative in 1968,¹⁸ the completion of Queen's Square proceeded under a joint planning committee in 1962 to include a new civic plaza and law court building. This scheme was later modified in 1964 by the NSW Government Architect to encompass the government precinct along Macquarie Street.¹⁹ The pedestrian only plaza, with relocated statue of Queen Victoria, was positioned to the west of Macquarie Street and extended across a section of King Street.²⁰ Acknowledging Sert's reformed urban design agenda,²¹ Queen's Square was envisaged as the first stage of a public landscape, a symbol of liberal democracy, that extended across Macquarie Street to include a sequence of interlinked plazas with new public buildings detailed with a wrap-around colonnade alongside many of the city's remaining colonial settlement monuments.²² (Fig 3)

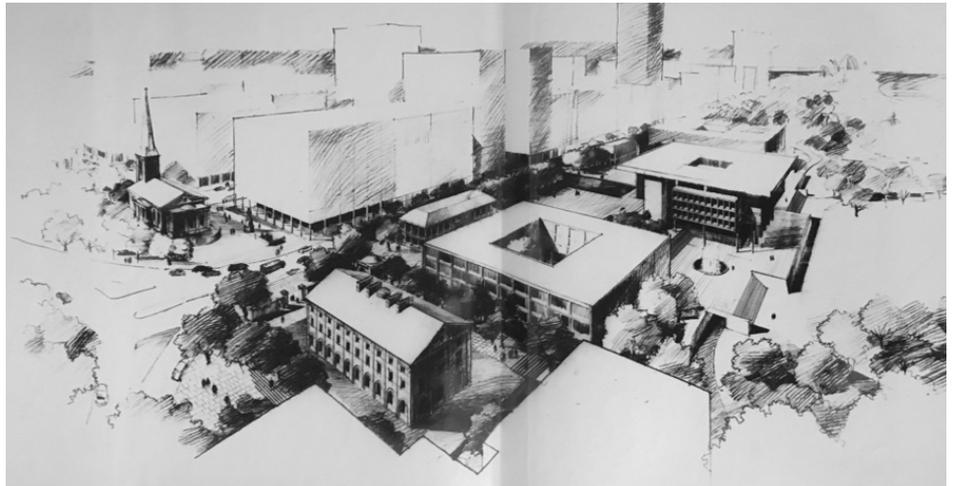


Figure 2: Queen's Square as a roadway intersection, 1969. Image: City of Sydney Archives, 023577

23. The Queen's Club, on the corner of Macquarie and King Street, was a female only club operating since 1906.

24. Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture since 1960*, (Red Hill ACT: The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 1990), 24 and 63.

25. The drum staircase of the Supreme Court was shown retained and adapted to provide an underground link to the nearby St James Railway Station.

26. Isadore Brodsky, *The Streets of Sydney*, (Neutral Bay: Old Sydney Free Press, 1962), 91.

A new multi-storey law court building was designed to house both the Commonwealth Court and the Supreme Court of NSW and positioned on the corner of Macquarie and King Streets, the site of the Queen's Club.²³ Incorporating an expressed structural grid clad in exposed aggregate precast concrete panels and coloured to match the stone on the nearby public buildings, was spaced to equal two column bays of St James' portico. Being six bays long and three bays wide the building was detailed to incorporate a double height colonnade. The plaza, now also edged by the recently completed University of Sydney School of Law (1969),²⁴ was detailed as an unencumbered plaza with large format concrete pavers, shade trees and low height retaining walls set out to follow the outline of the soon to be demolished Supreme Court.²⁵

In the anthology *The Streets of Sydney* (1962), King Street was described as a street loved by all.²⁶ When the government led Queen's Square project, positioned at the eastern end of King Street, was discussed in the professional journals at the time, a celebratory tone

27. "Cities are for People", *Construction Review* 43.4 (November 1970): 44-45.

28. Hugh Streeton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1970), 237.

29. Paul Ashton, *The Accidental City, Planning Sydney since 1788*, (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1993), 98.

30. *Constructional Review* 43.4 (November 1970): 42.

31. Ted Farmer, "St James' Place in the Queen's Square Plan", speech given at St James' Church Sesquicentenary Dinner, Wentworth Hotel, 7 October 1969, (SLNSW: MLMSS 7703).

was adopted.²⁷ As Hugh Stretton noted, Sydney during the early 1970s was a city with a public focus and had many architectural projects designed by government as well as private consortiums.²⁸ This observation correlated to the number of public focused city projects underway, including the pedestrianisation of Circular Quay (project 1962), the pedestrianisation of Martin Place (1968), Australia Square (1968), the Sydney Opera House forecourt (1973) and Sydney Square, beside Sydney Town Hall, (1975). Formalising this strategy was the City of Sydney Council town planning document, *The Sydney Strategic Plan* (1971). When commenting on the document, the Sydney based émigré architect, Harry Seidler, thought it did not properly "encourage a city full of pedestrian plazas associated with soaring development."²⁹ In a city congested by vehicular traffic, Seidler was arguing for the integration of the plaza with private development. But in contrast with this remark was the completion of Queen's Square, a government endorsed project enabling the eastern portion of the city to be publicly "reclaimed for the people."³⁰ In the lead up to the sesquicentenary celebrations of St James' in 1974, Ted Farmer, the seventeenth NSW Government Architect, reiterated the need for a public "plaza". Adopting the language of CIAM, he confirmed the civic ambition of the project, that is, to provide a civic space which not only embellished St James' Church through the demolition of the colonial Supreme Court but to provide a "great city place [where].. the dignity of the individual...will not be impaired and in which he [or she] will find an environment likely to enrich [them] spiritually."³¹ (Fig 4)



Figure 4: Perspective of the Queen's Square project with the Sydney University School of Law (1969) and Law Courts (1975), both buildings by McConnel Smith and Johnson. Image: NSW Government Architect, 1973, SLNSW

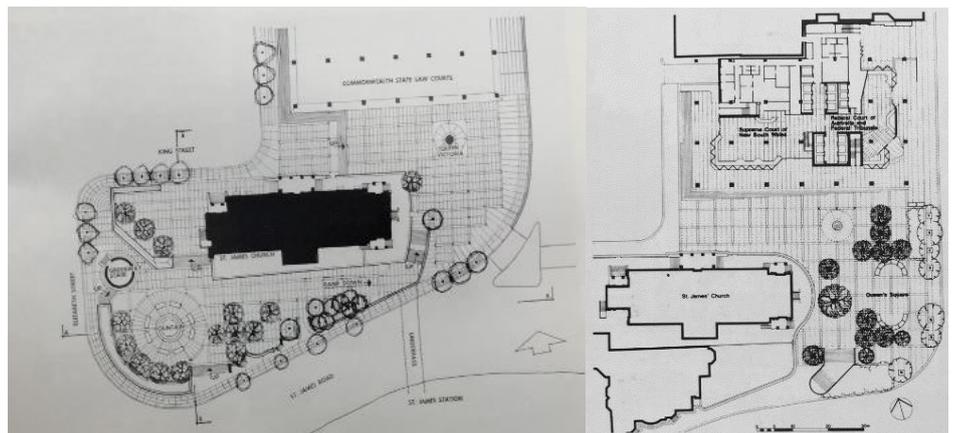
A City with a Colonial Settlement Legacy

32. Leon Punch had himself photographed with a model of the project, see "New plaza for City", *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 13, 1975). The model included the Supreme Court and a smaller plaza.

33. See, John C Maddison, *J. C. Maddison - Papers, 1913-1982*, (SLNSW: MLMSS 4178). One study investigated relocating the colonial brick building by jacking it up and sliding it south and away from the western elevation of St James' Church.

34. Gordon Stephenson, *On a human Scale, a Life in City Design*, 201.

With funding provided by both the Commonwealth and State of NSW, the Ministers responsible for the completion of the project were the Federal Attorney General, Tom Hughes, and the NSW Minister for Justice, John Maddison, including the NSW Minister of Public Works, Leon Punch.³² With the NSW Chief Justice replaced by Sir John Kerr in 1972, as judicial head of the NSW Supreme Court and thereby client, and with the retirement of Ted Farmer, the NSW Government Architect in 1973, a more conservative approach developed. With Kerr ruminating on the potential loss of Greenway's Supreme Court, which he recognised as an important NSW legal symbol, and with Maddison instructing the new NSW Government Architect to explore how the old Supreme Court could be relocated,³³ the Joint Planning Committee then decided to retain the colonial Supreme Court and reduce the size of the plaza. Heroically, Sir John Kerr, aided with a reassessment of the building's importance by the architectural historians J M Freeland and Morton Herman,³⁴ challenged the established view on the insignificance of colonial Supreme Court building, which in its removal would have expedited a government endorsed proposal to modernise the eastern part of the city with the first part of a dignified civic realm.



Figures 5a and 5b: The extent of Queen's Square, as first conceived in the late 1960s, then later revised in the mid-1970s. Images: *The Constructional Review*, November 1970 (left) and *The Architectural Review*, September 1978 (right)

35. "Sydney", *The Architectural Review* 564. 979 (September 1978), 143.

36. Sir John Kerr, *Matters for judgement*, 205-207.

In the retention of the Supreme Court, the civic agenda of the project became multi-dimensional. Interestingly, this shift in focus was not discussed in the print media at the time, and when information of the completed Queen's Square project was published, the relationship between the city's colonial settlement buildings and the new plaza was not elaborated. In the September 1978 issue of *The Architectural Review*, an edition devoted to Australian architecture, a published plan excluded most of the colonial Supreme Court.³⁵ (Fig 5) Even an image, which established a vital connection between Sydney's new civic realm and the city's colonial public landscape, looked east through the colonnade of the new Law Courts to Hyde Park Barracks and St Mary's Cathedral rather than west to St James' and the Supreme Court. It seems that any contemporary discussion on the completion of Queen's Square project avoided explaining how it was adjusted by political intervention as theoretical ideas about the city's cultural traditions were viewed with equal importance with the need for a civic square.³⁶ (Fig 6)



Figure 6: View looking south-east through the foyer of the new Law Courts to St Mary's Cathedral. Image: *The Architectural Review*, September 1978

Conclusion

37. Hardy Wilson did not illustrate the Supreme Court, see Hardy Wilson, *Old Colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania*, (Sydney: Union House, 1924).

38. Morton Herman, *Early Colonial Architecture*, (Croydon, Vic.: Longmans, 1963). The Supreme Court was described but not drawn. Stacey did not publish any photographs on the Supreme Court.

39. Max Dupain, *Francis Greenway, a celebration*, (Sydney: Mead Beckett, 1980). Dupain photographed the Supreme Court after 1978.

As an interest in Sydney's colonial settlement monuments developed, first during the 1920s through the work of William Hardy Wilson,³⁷ and then during the 1960s and 1970s in the writings by Morton Herman and photographic essays by Philip Cox and Welsey Stacey,³⁸ the cultural importance of the Supreme Court was examined in more detail.³⁹ As a joint project by the Commonwealth and NSW Government, Queen's Square, first conceived as a Georgian Town Square in 1810, was later redesigned to become an inclusive civic realm representative of international urban design thinking. When completed, the plaza, edged by a colonnaded Law Courts building and a School of Law, and containing a historic monument to Queen Victoria, remained socially important although its civic character was altered by the retention of many colonial settlement buildings with their palisade fences. This curtailing of an ambitious project to pedestrianise Queen's Square demonstrates how the scope of Sydney's civic landscape was re-adjusted as the value of the city's colonial settlement architecture was acknowledged; and as an awareness of Sydney's culture expanded during the 1970s, which included an understanding of various local historic traditions, Queen's Square was reshaped transcendentally and thus became ultra-civic. (Fig 7)



Figure 7: Part view of Queen's Square showing the Commonwealth Supreme Courts. Image: WEB