

# *Utility, Sexuality, Creativity: The Search for Meaning in a Public Loo*

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This article uses the subterranean public toilets in Taylor Square, Darlinghurst to explore the social constructs of modernity and postmodernity. Based on Enlightenment theories, discussion of modernity's progress through renewal and experimentation will reveal its impact on constructing moral parameters over time. Examination of the dynamic use of the toilets from one of utility to a meeting place for Sydney's male homosexual subculture illustrates the intersection of modern and postmodern thought by questioning the dominant narrative of the period, transforming social mores. Hobsbawm's concept of 'invented traditions' proves a useful tool to clarify the value of symbols and ritual in unifying individuals with regard to the development of the gay community in Sydney. A look at the present-day use of the toilets as an exhibition space for the art installation *A Leaf From the Book of Cities* reflects postmodern sensibilities by questioning of prevailing social values and instigating an open conversation with the public on what it is to be a sustainable community.

## **Introduction**

The history of use of the underground men's public toilets in Taylor Square, Darlinghurst facilitates an examination of the interplay between the concepts of modernity and postmodernity and their profound impact on society. Initially built in 1907 to improve sanitation, construction of the toilets was one of the hallmarks of a city council attempting to cultivate the advancement of society via the civic environment, a concept of societal progress which borrowed heavily from the American 'City Beautiful' movement. This concept has its roots in the Enlightenment period and emphasises the faith in progression and renewal that typifies modernity. In subsequent years the toilets' use as a homosexual 'beat', or meeting place, for men fearful of persecution and imprisonment based on their sexual preference provides the setting for an examination of modernity as it is fractured by the concept of postmodernity. The modern process of change and renewal intersects with Lyotard's postmodern questioning of the 'grand narrative' of the modern via the homosexual community's fight for equal rights and protections under the law. In this fashion the toilets also serve as a symbol of the consolidation of traditions and practices that unified, empowered and legitimised Sydney's gay community, an example of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'invented tradition'. Further exploration of the concepts of invented tradition and postmodernism is invited by the toilets' current use as an art exhibition space and the recent installation of Makeshift Art Group's 'A Leaf from the Book of Cities', which promotes communal questioning of the current 'grand narrative' of society and offers community-based solutions around the topic of sustainability.

## **Modernism: the City Beautiful**

The concept of modernity is one that evokes the energy of constant change in pursuit of a higher truth or state of being for humanity. Gascoigne describes this process of progress as a 'willingness to accept change for future advantage and a confidence that the application of reason would ultimately mean a better world' (2002, p10). While the foundations of

modernity reach back to at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment period of great scientific discoveries and advancements in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Berman, 2010 p16) exploded the monarchical and religious strictures which had dominated society. This scientific and philosophical development inspired a new approach to propel societal improvement through analysis and experimentation (Gascoigne, 2002 p6). Berman refers to a vision of modernity which 'holds that the groups that are most dynamic and innovative in economic and political life will be most open to intellectual and artistic creativity- it sees both economic and cultural change as unproblematical progress for mankind' (2010 p136).

The city of Sydney at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one grappling with the trials of population management. Expansion, combined with lack of comprehensive building regulations throughout the 1800's, resulted in unsafe construction and unsanitary conditions (Ashton, 1995 p22). This chaotic urban environment was not unique to Sydney at that time; cities in America were similarly engaged with expansion, construction and sanitation issues. The battle with this environmental manifestation of modernity, a 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' (Berman, 2010 p15) ultimately led American civic planners to harness the approach of the City Beautiful movement. The movement envisaged behavioural control and improvement by environmental means in order to elevate society as a whole (Boyer in Wilson, 1981 p316). To support this concept, civic planning promoted the creation of parks, handsome civic buildings, and the development of greater sanitation facilities such as public toilets.

The issue of sanitation in particular sparked Sydney's civic reform after an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1900 created havoc in the densely populated inner-city. City planning up until this point had suffered from 'individualism gone mad' (Sulman in Ashton, 1995 p29); the threat of plague and other diseases eventually consolidated planning power within the City Council, empowering them to improve the civic environment (Ashton, 1995 p31). One of the projects used to tackle sanitation was the construction of men's toilets, or 'conveniences', one per year, over the course of the succeeding decade. In 1907 the men's subterranean toilets on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst were built to complement a redevelopment of the area, which included the creation of Taylor Square as a central intersection of tram and bus services (Heritage NSW, 2011). While adding to the vision of the city as a progressive urban environment, it also increased efficiency by its utility, another trait of modernity (Gordon, 2012). This project, in concert with other beautification efforts, reflected the City Council's intention to use the environmental determinism of the City Beautiful movement to improve and influence the behaviour of its inhabitants. As a social experiment it also reveals the pervasive influence of Enlightenment philosophy on modernity and the nature of the unquestioned 'faith in progress' which forms part of its character (Wright, 2004 p4).

The public toilets were designed by City Building Surveyor and Architect Robert Hargreave Broderick in the Edwardian style. Suggestions of Art Nouveau throughout the stylised iron work and internal tiling expose the influence of Parisian civic architecture, a city lauded as an exemplar by the City Beautiful movement (Peterson, 1976 p419). In 1938 a women's convenience followed, spurred by the Women's Progressive Association of Sydney to promote equality of access, another indication of the progression of social thought. The conveniences serviced the burgeoning transport area for decades, but also came to symbolise another type of progression; that of recognising the legitimacy and rights of homosexuals in society.

## **Modernity subsumed: transition to postmodernity**

The world of the 1950's sought to regain a sense of security within society after the catastrophic consequences of World War 2. The effect of the Cold War on Western countries stimulated social repression and paranoia as efforts were made to preserve and promote traditional societal ideals (Wotherspoon, 1991 p109). Jean-François Lyotard, in examining and defining the concept of postmodernism, first defined the modern as something which legitimates itself by virtue of a 'grand narrative'(in Jenkins, 1998 p36). This tendency of the modern to think in terms of a narrative, or progression, towards an ultimate reality or truth is evidenced in the attempts of those in political power to shape and control that narrative by way of legislation.

The criminalisation of homosexuality, enshrined in amendments to the NSW Crimes Act 1951, mirrored the view of then NSW Superintendent of Police Colin Delaney that it was 'the greatest social menace' facing the nation (Phillips and Willet, 2000 p68). The law formed part of a 'grand narrative' intended to serve as a pathway for the development of NSW society towards an ultimate reality, pruning and shaping social mores for optimal development, echoing the motivations of Sydney's city planners at the turn of the century. This socially repressive period marked a change for Sydney's male homosexuals, who suffered an increased level of oppression by the vigilant policing of known homosexual 'beats', or meeting places. These 'beats' were public bars, cafes, parks, or even public toilets. By virtue of its location in Darlinghurst, an area historically known as a relative safe haven for homosexuals, the Taylor Square underground toilets provided a place where homosexual men could meet and identify each other discreetly (Wotherspoon, 1991 p70). Cracking down on the use of 'beats', in concert with the growing use of empirical findings to examine human sexuality, ironically brought discreet homosexual behaviour out into the arena of public debate (Wotherspoon, 1991 p178).

The rigid strictures of the 1950's began to crumble in the 1960's as people began to question the promulgated social narrative. The generation of post-World War 2 'baby boomers' created a large oppositional group to the social mores of previous generations, spawning a 1960's counter-culture intent on political change (Wotherspoon, 1991 p141). Evidence of this public questioning with regard to homosexuality is found in an article from the 'Australian Humanist' magazine of the late 1960's, which described the true threat to society as inhabiting the laws against homosexuals, as opposed to homosexuals themselves (in Phillips and Willet, 2000 p69). Later emboldened by the election of the socially progressive Whitlam Government in 1972, the homosexual organisation Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) attempted to shift the discourse of homosexuality from one of private preference to one of publicly acknowledged sexual orientation and equality. While these arguments conform to the modern cycle of 'disintegration and renewal', the postmodern shift towards a deconstruction of the prevailing 'grand narrative' had begun, allowing for a cacophony of narratives to be heard. One of the new narratives to emerge was the fight for homosexual rights. The Taylor Square men's toilets became the epicentre for the homosexual community in their attempts to gain equality and discrimination protection under the law, and a symbol of homosexual identity and pride.

## **Mardi Gras: an invented tradition**

Historian Eric Hobsbawm's definition of invented tradition 'is taken to mean a set of practices... of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of

behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past' (Hobsbawm, 1993 p1). The use of invented tradition to unify communities ranging from nations to Boy Scout groups provides a means, Hobsbawm argues, of ameliorating the constant process of change and renewal wrought by modernity within society (1993 p2).

A greater sense of unity within the homosexual community was forged by adversity, resulting from police brutality to participants of the first Gay Mardi Gras Parade held in Darlinghurst on 24 June 1978. The term 'Mardi Gras' was chosen by parade organisers to evoke a sense of joy, pride and celebration for its participants. It also connected the marchers to an invented tradition, utilised in countries like the United States and Brazil, celebrating indulgence and revelry. By the 1970's the homosexual community had truly 'come out' of the private subculture basement to which it had been relegated. Gay-friendly nightclubs, shops and suburbs reflected the progression of social thought in the wider community. However, the harsh treatment by police on the 1978 parade participants galvanised what was meant to be a parade of revelry into a lightning rod of protest for a community weary of being treated as second-class citizens (Marr in *The hidden history of homosexual Australia*, 2004). The invented tradition of Mardi Gras in this instance was transformed from one promoting fun and frivolity to one inciting political activism within the homosexual community and beyond. It has now also become ritualised within the community as a means of 'imparting the practice to new practitioners' (Hobsbawm, 1993 p3) by virtue of the annual nature of the parade. The significance of the Darlinghurst area and the Taylor Square toilets in particular as historic symbols for the gay community is evidenced by their Heritage listing (Heritage NSW, 2011):

'(the toilets) mark the town square that holds important associations with the gay and lesbian community, as the centre for the recognised homosexual community since the 1960s, and as the birth place and development of gay pride activism in Australia. Taylor Square provided the starting point of the first gay pride march in 1978, formed the focus of subsequent rallies, demonstrations and confrontations with Police, and continues to play an important role in the annual Mardi Gras, a highly popular and internationally recognised event.'

### **Postmodernity: deconstruction and process**

Applying the construct of postmodernity to the current use of the Taylor Square toilets engenders an understanding of contemporary societal values. According to Lyotard's conception, postmodernity is described 'as the deconstruction of the metanarratives of modernity'(Rose, 1991 p173). This deconstruction, Lyotard argues further, delegitimises the function of the 'grand narrative' as the provider of truth, which is 'being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements- narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on... that only give rise... (to) local determinism' (Lyotard in Jenkins, 1998 p37). Postmodernity acts to critique the grand narratives of modernity and encourages a proliferation of views and perspectives. This fragmentation of truth reflects societal insecurity and doubt regarding the constant changes incurred by progress and encourages conversation instead of the passive acceptance of the narrative.

After spending over a decade closed to the public, the toilets at Taylor Square have been appropriated to a new purpose. In 2009 the Sydney City Council, in an attempt to reinvigorate what had once been a centre of community activity, began to use the above ground area around the toilets as space for a growers' market, as well as using the toilets

themselves as an art exhibition space. The connection to the history of the city provides a sense of continuity and attempts to unify the disparate tribes of people living in the area, a concept with similar characteristics to Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition (Hobsbawm, 1993 p1). However, the utilisation of a public toilet to promote art and encourage community cohesion is certainly a postmodern application of planning. Postmodern planning, according to Allmendinger, is about increasing community participation 'to encourage plurality... there needs to be an active approach to encouraging radical citizenry' (2001 p237). This approach values the diversity of the community and encourages an open conversation between the full spectrum of citizens and local planners.

A recent exhibition in the Taylor Square toilets, *A Leaf From the Book of Cities*, utilises postmodern concepts to challenge notions of progress by creating a 'subterranean "dark market" trading instead in radical economies, growing cultures and craft futures' to promote discussions of sustainability and community (Khoe and Zettel, 2012). The themes explored in the exhibition hearken to Malpas' concept of the postmodern as 'the threat of the obliteration of all existence... (which) has weighed on ideas of what it is to be a part of a community or society... forcing thoroughgoing reconceptualisations of some of the most basic categories of philosophical, social and political thought' (Malpas, 2005 p34).

The art installation sets up the 'dark market' in the old cubicles of the men's toilets with signs designating the purpose of each 'stall'. One contains a 'librarium' of books on topics such as microeconomics, international trade and sustainability, while another encourages a homemade jam collective amongst those who grow fruit and vegetables at home. At the rear of the toilets a hand-operated printing press sits arrested in the act of recording, in print form, the discussions generated by those involved in the exhibition. The postmodern values of process and performance over a completed product are reflected in the nature of the installation, in addition to its questions regarding the sustainability of current economic strategies. However, *A Leaf From the Book of Cities* also seems to suggest that while we impact our environment, our environment impacts upon us; a striking parallel to the modernising aims of the city planners over a century ago.

The men's public toilets in Taylor Square not only provide an opportunity to examine the social constructs of modernity and postmodernity, but also reflect the history of the influence and interplay of these constructs on society. Acting as a generator of social progress in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Sydney, the toilets improved the civic environment for the community and confirmed the faith in progress generated by the Enlightenment and modernist thought. They further bore witness to the social tensions and upheavals as society grappled with mores regarding homosexuality, acting as both a refuge and a unifying symbol of the homosexual community. In its latest incarnation as an art exhibition space the toilets provide a postmodern environment, evoking fragments of past conversations, to support the work of artists engaged in conversations of their own as they attempt to find meaning in a postmodern world.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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