

# *The Iceberg's Remain Afloat*

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The Bondi Icebergs Winter Swimming Club has become a celebration of the national traditions that are inherent to the site. However the Club has redefined itself in contemporary society by adopting a 'heritage' discourse, where the traditions have in themselves a 'modern character'. This paper explores how this continuity of traditions represents cultural forms, and the impact of external pressures and progress in modern society, with a particular focus on the growth of consumerism. These traditions have also developed along with the growing personality of the Bondi area. The Swimming Club has attempted to maintain the traditions of the Club, retaining its position as the only licensed Winter Swimming Club in the world. Yet its transformation from a tin shed directed at improving fitness of the local surf club members, into a Swimming Club with a four-storey space, complete with club and restaurant facilities drawing local and international celebrities, has resulted in a focus on the aesthetically pleasing building in the heart of Bondi. This is opposed to the swimming facilities and activities it has to offer. Although the Club has remained a social hub over time, this hub is centred on the different interests in the various time periods.

The Bondi Icebergs Winter Swimming Club has adopted a 'heritage' discourse as a reaction to the modernisation of society and its accompanying pressures and ideologies. The divergent motives of the Club have ensured that traditions of the Icebergs gain a 'modern' character. This 'heritage' discourse has ensured that via the Icebergs, one can decipher what its heritage value is, where resources go and why, in relation to priorities; and what cultural identities matter in the context of particular times and places (Smith 2006). In the framework of this study of the Bondi Icebergs, the term 'heritage' is defined as: "a (re)presentation of the past in cultural forms that can hide some voices and confirm others" (Mayhew 2009) that "provides communities with a sense of identity and continuity" (Darvill 2008). This site represents the changing attitudes and demands in modern society, principally in the growing tourist attraction and changing personality of the Bondi area, whilst maintaining tradition to retain its position as the only licensed Winter Swimming Club in the world.

The Swimming Club's origin dates back to 1929, where "dedicated local lifesavers wished to maintain their fitness during the winter months" (Andrews 2004, p.21). They "probably never dreamed of the dynasty that they had created" (Bernie 1995, p.4). They shaped the Bondi Icebergs Winter Swimming Club, creating a constitution and electing office bearers. As memberships soared, the Icebergs became a licensed premise in 1960 with a Bar and Poker Machines. As the upgrades continued, the Club admitted female members in 1994 and the new premises were completed in 2002, drawing local and international celebrities. The Club now offers both social and swimming memberships. By using the Club as a starting point, and analysing from the traditional and modernist perspectives, one can decipher what influences the continuation of traditions in

contemporary society, and how this has resulted in the Icebergs attraction to increasing economic and social demand.

Modernity is fundamentally about order and rationality, and creating order out of chaos. Totality, stability, and order, Lyotard (1997) argues, are maintained in modern societies through the means of “grand narratives” or “master narratives”. These are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs. In such a way, the Icebergs tradition can be seen as being central to ones identity and continuity. Traditions have been upheld to maintain a sense of stability in the Club, yet these have been modernised over the years, apparent via the Iceberg’s heritage discourse. The most unique feature of the Club is the rule pertaining to the membership, better known as 15B, or “the concrete that holds an entire Club together” (Knox 2009, p.40). “You swim here [the Icebergs] three Sundays out of every calendar month [May to October] for five years, which adds up to 75 swims – then you’re a swimming member” (Knox 2009, p.40). If you miss out, you must show cause in writing, and if that explanation is not accepted by the swimming committee, you cannot come back for twelve months; not even as a visitor. This tradition of having no short cuts to becoming a “Berg” to join the ranks of “Active Reserve Members” has been maintained, however other traditions were forced to modernise due to the pressures of society.

It was only as time waned on that “social swimming and casual swimming was later made available, and females were finally allowed to join in 1994” (Stevens 2005, p.88).

During the 1980s, “the Icebergs, long known as the Ratbergs, were beginning to suffer from their reputation as an insular, cranky boys’ club at a time when the outside world had moved on” (Knox 2009, p.39).

Once the right to vote was established federally in 1902, the Women’s Suffragette Movement continued to lobby for equal political and civil rights between both sexes, with a focus on the emancipation of women. The Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 was established in NSW soon after. It was not only the women who were unimpressed by the Iceberg’s failure to modernise tradition. Waverley Councilor Paul Pearce was unwilling to replace the building with new premises for the Icebergs; “I can’t justify spending public money on a licensed bar for a men’s only private club” (Iveson 2007, p.196). The great principle was that “a publicly funded facility should not exclude half the population” (Iveson 2007, p.197). The Icebergs were late to react to society, and the men’s only Club eventually allowed female members in 1994. The Icebergs caved-in to society and its accompanying pressures and ideologies, modernising the tradition of the Club. People have a natural inclination to preserve their equality and independence, a feature of the Enlightenment. However Young (1999) claims that modernity “scrutinised groups with alternative values and suggested that they were simply lacking in the values of the established; it abhorred diversity.” Once the social world became simultaneously more diverse, it became impossible for the Icebergs to maintain these absolutist standards. Liz Andrews, the first female on the Icebergs board, noted that “they’ve broken through the traditionalism” (Olle 2002, p.5).

The Icebergs also maintains the tradition of ‘getting the temperature right’ in which ice cubes are thrown into the pool on the first Sunday in May to mark the beginning of the swimming season. The Chicken Swim also goes back to the days of the Depression, of which on Christmas, “wealthier members bought chickens for the event and made sure their less fortunate friends won the races so they had a chicken for Christmas day” (unknown author 2006). Society ideologies have shifted from rigid social hierarchy to self-directed, egalitarian individualism, and as a result, in 21<sup>st</sup> century society, the winners of the Chicken Swim are expected to share it with the other heat members. In addition to the altering of tradition, the new Iceberg’s pool is 50 metres long, in accordance with modern swimming pools in Australia. However there is still a black line drawn at the 40 metre mark in recognition of the original pool’s length. To serve this tradition, each winter Sunday, “members swim 30 heats of 50 metres and 30 heats of 40 metres” (Knox 2009, p.40).

The modernisation of Iceberg’s traditions parallels with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx & Engels 1848) formed the foundations of the Communist movement, and had economic implications for society, consumption and consumerism, as “in place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we want new wants” (Marx & Engels 1848, p.2). In turn, this led to the growth in respect of the Icebergs by the elite in society. Marxism incorporated the modern concept of the ideal of development as the form of the good life, and a “cosmopolitan character” was given to “production and consumption” (Marx & Engels 1848, p.2). This Marxist analogy can explain how the Icebergs became a heritage discourse. In feudal times, the work of peasants was tied to their actual survival, supporting the notion of work creating sustenance to support one’s family. According to Marx, “the animal [was] immediately one with its life activity” (Marx 1964, p.113). However the Industrial Revolution altered the relationship between labour and its reward (Goodall Lecture 2010, slide 4). Labour became a means of generating capital, with value only seen to lie with the commodities that labour was producing, rather than in individual labour (Goodall Lecture 2010, slide 4). The “civilisation” process that the Icebergs have experienced mirrors this. The Icebergs has, similarly, become a commodity; alienated from its past, yet projecting a discourse of the forces of history. This implies that the Icebergs has undergone what Freud (1963, p.32) has labeled the “decisive step of civilisation”: the “replacement of the power of individual” – or the Iceberg’s ‘original’ identity – by the “power of the community” and the modernisation imposed by the pressures of this social world; for example, through the social hub of the Iceberg’s bistro gaining greater publicity than the focal point of Sunday swimming.

Iceberg swimming “membership carries with it dedication and a sense of camaraderie” (Stevens 2005, p.88). Yet when plans were announced to rebuild the old Club, which was completed in 2002 by mastermind John Singleton, “there were fears its character would be trucked out with the rubble” (Stevens 2005, p.88). Waverley Council had relinquished trusteeship of the Bondi Baths in 1993 after a quarrel with the Club to knock down the building dwindling with “concrete cancer” (Knox 2009, p.41). This resulted from the Iceberg’s refusal to evolve with the times and to part from traditions. “The pool was then taken over by the State Government’s Bondi Baths Reserve Trust which tendered the

maintenance of the pool to the Bondi Icebergs Club” (Tanner 2006, p.3) due to overwhelming political heat. The decision to modernise the Iceberg’s was accompanied by great social change in the Bondi area. Bondi was a working class suburb throughout the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet is now a very eclectic mix.

“There is still a degree of original working class inhabitants, but it is very much a place for the rich and famous to hang out, to love, to be seen and to see” (Searle 2010).

These people have helped transform Bondi Beach “from a slightly tired tourist destination into the hottest postcode in town” (Thomas 2002, p.8). These people have also transformed the Iceberg’s Club, as the Iceberg’s has chosen to focus its appeal to A-listers, rather than its long-held tradition of attracting swimmers. Gillen and Ghosh (2006) emphasise that modernism views progress as monetary based, of which the Iceberg’s makeover parallels. In such a way, the significance of the present stems in society’s belief in the necessity of social progress. Bauman calls this the “consumerist syndrome” (Rojek 2004), defined by the desire for instant satisfaction. This breaks with the 20<sup>th</sup> century practice of regarding consumer preoccupations and activities as derivative of needs and suggests that consumption is now driven by infinite desire. Icebergs Secretary Manager, David Power, has a twenty-five year background with the Commonwealth Bank. He states, “That’s why they let me have the job; because I just look after all the money” (Power 2010, pers. comm., 30 April 2010). This is further established in the article ‘Ivy League Party Hits Iceberg’ in which this sought after New Year’s Day party filled with A-listers at the Iceberg’s gains much more public exposure than the beginning of the swimming season in May. A clear decadence has emerged via modernism, with Bondi’s personality impacting on the Iceberg’s, apparent through the desire in society of social status, fine-dining, and cocktails.

However a major change to the Iceberg’s tradition was to the responsible service of alcohol; “unlike the old days, when a few hardnuts went on the drink for ten hours at a time then crawled upstairs and home along Knotts Ave” (Stevens 2005, p.88). Mack (2006) saw Australians as “simply a nation of drunkards”. Iceberg’s Board Member, Gary Hardaker, said: “That’s completely gone through the law these days, and public liability; we stick to the rules of the Registered Clubs Association” (Stevens 2005, p.88). Traditionally, a race known as ‘13 heat’, if won, would enable the winner to drink as many schooners as they desired for the week. “We have to put a number on it and everything else now” (Power 2010, pers. comm., 30 April 2010). The 1960s brought the new Clubhouse and with it, two fully stocked bars, yet as new laws came into being, traditions faded. This was also apparent with the introduction of smoking laws. A total "enclosed space" ban was introduced in New South Wales on 1 July 2007, meaning Icebergs’ patrons were unable to smoke inside the premises. This break from tradition was a result of the development of society and its laws.

The Bondi Icebergs had a quintessentially consumerist mission in the “marvelous discovery of the new” (Ghosh & Gillen 2007, pp.19) resulting from society developments, and thus the Club was constructed with a typically modern character. On face value, it is clear the interior of the Iceberg’s has become “ordered” (Freud 1963,

pp.30); or more modern. The imposition of a heritage discourse upon the site saw that the Iceberg's exclusiveness was established, and its traditional homeliness was renounced. Although the continuation of the requirement of a pool and the inclusion of Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) headquarters would appear to provide a sense of continuity from the past, this progress is not historically genuine. Iceberg's Board Member Craig Short stated, "We're a swimming club and we want to keep it that way" (Thomas 2002, p.9), however the up-market restaurants with one of Sydney's most sought after views, cocktails, music and movie stars drag the attention away from the swimming aspect of the Club. The complete overhaul and renovations in 2002 did not enable the Iceberg's to maintain traditional architecture, for instance with the incorporation of a bistro, and a separate fine dining restaurant and cocktail bar. "The average man of to-day...is not yet conditioned to liking his objects dissected and viewed in section" (Stephen, McNamara & Goad 2006, p.13). In such a way, the original swimming members were unimpressed with the precisely laid-out four-storey structure and its modernised features; an emphasis on horizontal and vertical lines, rejection of ornamentation, and elimination of unnecessary detail, through the stark walls, and plain decor.

However, Power insists that this was the start of "a new tradition in the Club" (Power 2010, pers. comm., 30 April 2010). Tradition can be viewed as a response to the more recent developments and ideas (Newman Lecture 2010), identified as progress, which, as a result, interlinks with the foundations of modernity. Via this progress, the Club has become an "historic shell" of its former self (Smith 2006), and adopted a heritage discourse due to the impact of the social surroundings. The Icebergs has fundamentally realigned itself with the modern idea that 'later times are improvements over earlier times'. The progress accompanying this modernity manifested itself in material progress; the production of "things". Individuals lost direction and began to define themselves by what they owned rather than by their value as fellow global citizens (Baldwin 2002).

"The long-term growth of the consumer culture during modernism led to the belief in the rightness of the endless pursuit of new experiences and values via consumption rather than reliance on familiar and traditional, albeit imposed, values and dogma" (McGregor 2003, p.5).

The Iceberg's were therefore forced to develop this "endless pursuit" and progress via social pressures and ideologies.

In his piece, *What is Enlightenment?* Foucault (1984) saw modernity as an attitude rather than an epoch in history.

By attitude, he meant "a mode of relating to contemporary reality... a way...of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos" (Foucault 1984).

This is apparent through the Iceberg's desire of belonging to society, expressed through its increasing economic and material demand. He also cited Baudelaire to describe modernity as the "discontinuity of time; a break with tradition" (Foucault

1984). Modernism is constantly inventing and reinventing itself to create new cultures, which is in itself a critique of the traditional era. Newman (Newman Lecture 2010) paralleled modernism with Aboriginals. Similarly to modernity, Aboriginals are not a fixed identity, and are defined and re-defined. “Modernity has its stakes which are the...growing autonomy vis-à-vis power relations, homogeneity which organises the way and purpose things are done...and generality which bears the practices and discourses” (unknown author 2007). As a result, society may then refuse to accept the alternatives presented to us. To maintain the only licensed winter Swimming Club in the world, there remained a fighting-spirit of foundation in long-serving members, even when faced with the consumerist influences and ideologies of society.

It is essential that modern society constantly questions and poses historical inquiries that converges truth and liberty, and these must be tested and based on contemporary reality to understand the present moment we live in. This form of reflecting on the limits of knowledge should not hinder us from progressing, the foundation of modernity as established through the Enlightenment. Kant (1784) insists that reason requires trial, practice and instruction to allow it to progress. “Argue as much as you like, but obey” Kant (1784, p.1) contended, as resistance is required for development. This resistance was apparent to the Secretary Manager, Power, after the renovations in 2002. “A lot of members were dissatisfied, preferring the old building; the old ways. A lot of them don’t come to the Bistro, and only remain in the Club for the swimming” (Power 2010, pers. comm., 30 April 2010). Although this progress “may take the place of discontinuity or break from tradition”, “the idea of tradition then is itself a creation of modernity” (Giddens 1999). Giddens further said that traditions are invented to “give continuity,” and that there seems to be a “symbiosis between modernity and tradition” (Giddens 1999) – one needing the other to protect and justify its existence, as modernity can progress by reviewing past traditions. To create a heritage discourse, the traditions of the Iceberg’s were modernised to satisfy the consumerist drive in society. Progress became a meta-narrative and underpins the realisation of the full potential of the Club, or as Power materialistically claims, “as long as we keep making some dollars” (Power 2010, pers. comm., 30 April 2010).

Anthony Elliott’s sociological theories in relation to cosmetic surgery are akin to the Icebergs and its progress. Elliott (2008, pp. 132-3) states that “the individual forges a relation to itself and other people through loss”, and in such a way, ‘loss’ is at the core of an individual’s concept of identity. The Iceberg’s demolition of the original building and pool could be seen as a ‘loss’ as many members believed that it could threaten the community’s conceptualisation of the Iceberg’s character. Elliott suggests that society attempts to constantly ‘reinvent’ themselves with plastic surgery, to ensure that they can ‘go unnoticed’ in the crowd and retain their jobs. “It offers a temporary escape route from the end of line identities that come with being past one’s sell-by date” (Elliott 2008, p.114). This is similar to, and can also be distinguished from, the Icebergs Club. It has undergone a ‘makeover’ in its renovation process as it reached its sell-by date by not modernising and progressing earlier. In 1994, Waverley Council threatened to demolish the clubhouse, after an engineer’s survey had found that the building was “riddled with concrete cancer” (Knox 2009, p.41). However the difference was that the renovation

process was not to enable the Iceberg's to 'go unnoticed', but rather to appear as a typical 'modern' exhibit, all the while retaining some "continuity" of its identity in the form of its "historic shell" (Smith 2006). This has enabled the Icebergs to be rescued "from the terrors" of the "death" of its identity (Elliott 2008, p.139), and therefore contribute to its long term profitability.

Modernists are grounded in the belief that the traditions of the Club are holding it back from progress and prevent it's 'rescuing', but there is a common ground between the traditions of the Club and its contemporary significance that ensures its ultimate success, and thus is indicative of the present moment in which we live. Although some traditions play a role in modern society, the modernisation of traditions assists in this establishment and ensures that the Iceberg's are respected by society for progressing and socially adapting to modernist thought by means of a heritage discourse. This was apparent through the acceptance of women into the club from 1994 as the notion of equality was evidently customary in society. Modernity enabled the "Australian city [to] be dreamed and envisaged as never before" (Stephen, Goad & McNamara 2008). Berman (1982) insists that people's behaviour is influenced by the culture and "city" in which they are placed. This conforming to social practices insists that people act together in a conventional way to achieve an outcome that all members of the group desire, for instance the maintenance of swimming rules in the Club. Although members have moved from playing handball to playing the pokies, and "technology [has] raced ahead in leaps and bounds" (Andrews 2004, p.15), as Icebergs Swim Captain (1997-2004), Ken Spears, stated, "the rules that the original Bergs put in place still exist today" (Andrews 2004, p.15). Latour wants us to "retrace our steps" and "stop moving on" (Latour 1993 pp. 62), contending that moderns have pursued ideas into Nature and Culture, yet as these diverge, spanning them becomes exasperating. "The Iceberg's lost some character; whatever the old swimmers did every week, that was totally gone, because their little chair wasn't there, or their table wasn't there, as it was all demolished" (Power 2010, pers. comm., 30 April 2010). This led to the introduction of the 'Icecubes', the junior Swimming Club, with the hopes that these children will begin new traditions in the Club. This aligns with Latour, in which he insists that the Iceberg's, and all establishments in the present moment that we live in, need to decipher the fine line between maintenance and progress before the pursuit of consumerism and progressing becomes out of control.

It is increasingly clear that the Bondi Icebergs Winter Swimming Club has been subject to a constant modernising process since its growth from a single swimming club to the inclusion of a celebrity fine-dining restaurant and cocktail bar. With 1300 swimming members and 3000 social members, the Iceberg's feature a balanced mixture of females and males, of all ages. While the Icebergs contains some 'continuity' of traditional characteristics of the Club, it is apparent that Freud's "power of the community" ensured that the traditions were modernised in order to provide the Icebergs with this very progression and acceptance in the outside world. This consumerism has shaped the Icebergs dramatically. However the heritage discourse continues to serve as an anchor point that offers the Iceberg's stability in its own personal and cultural identity as it 'swims towards 2029', the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Club.

## Notes on Contributor

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