

# *The Quadrant*

Scott McInnes

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney*

This article discusses modern and postmodern readings of the Quadrant Archaeological site located in Ultimo, focusing on how the histories of the site are presented, and the different ways that modernism and post-modernism acknowledge and display the past.

The Quadrant Archaeological site is a very strange name for this space. The large paved courtyard is surrounded on all four sides by smallish cafés and apartment blocks. A long, elevated water feature slashes diagonally across the open courtyard. The smell of Thai food frequently wafts through the air from a restaurant in the corner, and uni students have been known to stumble drunkenly through the area on their way home after a big night out. The buildings shield most of the heavy Ultimo traffic from those living within. Only a series of small, narrow gaps between buildings connect the interior to greater Sydney outside. But this is an archaeological site. Where's the archaeology? The answer to this question is contained, if one would care to look, in large printed panels which hang on the wall of a tunnel-like passage between the Quadrant and Broadway road. They are the only remnants of a large archaeological excavation which took place from 2000 to 2001, and they detail the work which took place at the site, as well as a brief history of those who at one time or another lived on the land. However, no-one cares to look for this information. The large slabs of text are engraved in indigestible chunks, and outline in rapid-fire the facts and truncated stories of those who once inhabited the Blackwattle Creek area. The approach taken to communicating the history of the site is, in a word, ineffective. Both the location and content of the panels are at odds with its aim to communicate effectively the stories of the past to a casual audience who might wander past. This style of presentation can be seen as a direct result of modernist discourses regarding information, memory and history.

One of the key features of modernity is its favouring of constant progress. Each day must be better than the last, every progression brings us towards a utopian ideal – and if anyone were to exist outside this process of constant innovation, then they would be seen as different and inferior (Knauff 2002). Thus the past is inevitably viewed unfavourably – we are better now than we were then, so there is little to gain by studying its minute. Society, technology and innovation have all given our current state of modernity primacy over that which has come before. While we may not be perfect right now, our lives will surely propel us into a better tomorrow. From this modernist standpoint we must invariably view the past as primitive when compared to our actions and abilities in the present. This is not to say that the past is totally irrelevant, it is just denied a sense of actionable agency. We look at the past, acknowledge its existence, but quickly move on. This mindset of modernist thinking is crucial to understanding just why the information on the Quadrant's panels have been designed as they currently stand.

The three panels are titled 'Past Connections Present Lives' and they each attempt to link the site from its past occupants to their present descendants. The first panel involves the people of the Gadigal nation, discusses the Aboriginal habitation of the site, and includes some pictures of an excavation which took place in the Quadrant. The second panel contains

photographs of the descendants of Christopher Somerville and John Thomas Higgins as well as short pieces about their lives today, alongside primary historical documents. The third panel is all about the life, times and descendants of Thomas May, the builder and publican of an establishment called The Sportsman's Arms Hotel. It even includes quotations from his gravestone. It is the language of these panels, however, which reveal an inherent modernist discourse. When discussing the Aboriginal population of the land historically, the panel reads "The junction of woodland, creek, estuarine and marine environments in the area known today as Broadway would have supported an Aboriginal lifestyle based on hunting, fishing and gathering" and "Activities such as building a camp fire or making or discarding a stone tool leave physical traces which survive, usually in modified form, until excavated". Both the tone and the generality of these statements are readily apparent. The panels are worded as if straight from a textbook, and embody this modernist, all-knowing tone. By the third panel, this tonality of authority and truth remain, but the generality has been replaced by an incredible specificity regarding Thomas May.

Thomas May (c.1802 – 1973) is the most important figure of the Blackwattle creek area during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a successful and self made man who balanced his business interests with involvement in local politics, charitable works, horse breeding and racing, shooting and devotion to his large family.

These passages reflect just how deeply modernist theory and modernist ways of remembering history have shaped the panels and their means of communicating knowledge. The voice is one of absolute authority – all these things have happened. The Aboriginal and indigenous inhabitancy has left behind only general traces of tools and lifestyle habits, and the texts reflect this lack of detail by presenting a lacklustre view of the Aboriginal life. Thomas May, however, was an innovator who bought land and built an establishment. He embodied progress, innovation, capitalism and other traits crucial to a modern existence. Thus large portions of texts are ascribed to the detail of his experience on the site. There is also much more physical evidence of the impact and change he brought on the area, reinforcing the absolute truth that the text dictates to us – "Thomas May is the most important figure...". There's no room to argue.

Postmodernism deals with history through a different modality. One which focuses on a plurality of voices competing for primacy, as opposed to a modernist telling of history which would aim to link facts into a fixed linear historical narrative (preferably one containing an absolute truth). As Lyotard's cornerstone text described "A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" (Drolet p.132) In this respect, postmodernism heavily highlights the experiences of an individual by acknowledging their position within a context of social relationships. Perhaps the section on indigenous peoples was a little vague, but surely this is exactly what the information panels do when discussing Thomas May? It is true that we are presented with an individual's experience within his context. The panels indeed convey a partially postmodern approach by centring so much of the site's history on an individual, however, there is still something preventing them from achieving an overarching postmodern sensibility and connection with an audience. Santos-Lee (2001) distinguishes a postmodern approach from a modern one through "...a conscious and deliberate shift away from the ideal of a '*pure*' or '*authentic*' form... towards *pastiche*, *parody* and *the heterogenous*." (Santos-Lee p.22) And while she was indeed discussing the postmodern movement within the context of

art-history, her points remain valid when applied to a postmodern telling of history. Thomas May's story may be conveyed as the tale of one man in his time, but the tonality of the piece lays claim to knowing all there is to know about his life and times. A postmodern historiography would question who the author of the information is to know these things, as clearly they were not there to experience the life of Thomas May first-hand. The telling of Mr. May's history is thus rendered inauthentic to a postmodern audience, as the author can be seen to have no real claim over the truth of the history.

Yet this begs a question – why would the information present at the site need authenticity? Surely, as they stand now, the information panels are already capable of informing everybody of the various people and cultures which inhabited the land once before. Why should the crisp clarity and authoritative tone of the information be diluted and muddled by the inclusion of multiple viewpoints and the decentring of power which would inevitably result from a postmodern representation of history? The answer lies on the NSW heritage website. This website catalogues and outlines various archaeological sites and excavations which have occurred throughout NSW, and mentions the Quadrant site several times. Specific mention is afforded what they have deemed 'interpretation' sites, of which the Quadrant is listed as one. The website states, under the heading of "Archaeological Sites with Interpretation for the Public", that-

As part of its commitment to public access and participation, the Heritage Branch encourages the interpretation of archaeological remains. The best way to understand what archaeology is all about is to visit these special places and see how they can help us to understand our past. (Heritage Branch 2009, para. 15)

Herein lies a discontinuity. While they claim to be fostering participants to interpret the archaeological remains for themselves, the information present at the site instead only serves to dictate a pre-approved reading of the history. There is little room for the type of subjective interpretation which they aim to promote. Ironically, their mission is quite postmodern in its approach. From reading the online section one might expect the information at the site to be open to more subjective views than what is currently there. Perhaps some images of artefacts or architecture found at the site would be only briefly captioned, allowing the audience to extrapolate upon the evidence and imagine themselves involved personally in the history of the site. The text on the wall might be more evocative and sensory, recounting the weathered bricks and hearty fireplace of the Sportsman's Arms Hotel. Instead of this, any pictures of finds on the site are swamped with blocks of text recounting dates and practices – and the closest thing to a description of the Sportsman's Arms is a floor-plan and a transcript of a liquor license. Though perhaps the term 'Interpretation for the Public' means that only *their* interpretation of the history of the site is displayed for public viewing. Even if this were true, they nevertheless concede that it is only an interpretation – which, by definition, is a subjective experience.

This subjective approach to history has origins as far back as 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1846) first popularised the idea of a subjective existence and experience, proposing the idea that subjectivity is truth. He argued that we are all inexplicably linked to our contexts, and cannot help to view the world from a completely objective standpoint. Martin Heidegger (1927) then elaborated upon this idea when discussing the concept of being through the concept of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics involves at the broadest level the theory

of interpretation whereby individuals, who are strongly entrenched in their own contextual background, cannot simply know a truth. They must instead interpret evidence as best they can, knowing that their interpretation will be inevitably influenced by their own personal experiences. Perhaps the starkest difference between the postmodernist method of constructing an idea of history through context and evidence and the modernist method of simply relaying an ultimate truth is that postmodern texts force readers to actively participate in formulating an understanding, while the modernist texts assume that the reader is a passive recipient of information. The subjective act of interpretation is suppressed in histories which are presented in this modernist modality. This is particularly evident in the case of the Quadrant Archaeological site, which very rarely if ever entices a passing pedestrian for more than a cursory glance. The panels would suffice, however, if there remained on the site traces of the primary objects discovered through the excavation. The complete redevelopment of the site has removed all link with the history of the place, blanketing the ground with pavers and apartment buildings. If these traces were directly observable alongside the 'interpretation' panels, then this would give audiences an ability to connect with the site in this more subjective way. The panels now serve as the only link with the past, and their modernist tonality is preventing people from developing a connection with the site which runs deeper than a cursory understanding. But perhaps if the panels embraced this notion of a subjective history by offering us a subjective account of the site (using more evocative, sensory terms to engender a feeling of location and atmosphere), then we would be able to respond to this by formulating our own subjective opinions on the history of the area. Instead, the authoritative word-of-God that is used to detail exactly and all of what has occurred on the site succeeds only in reducing the tactility of the history – removing it from our grasp of understanding and marginalising any effect it might have on us as inhabitants of the site today.

In summary, the information panels at the Quadrant display a series of facts in a chronological order outlining the conditions of life on the site historically. There remain no observable traces of these histories, only the rigorous and unquestionable truth the information proclaims. As there is no human or subjective dimension to this information it fails to engage meaningfully with an audience and allow them to truly connect and interpret the tangible physical traces for themselves. The monolithic discourse (itself shaped heavily by modernist theories surrounding truth and history) suppresses alternate voices and readings of the site, choosing instead to dictate a blanket history via poorly placed and structured information panels. This prevents people from truly experiencing and embodying the history of the site. Postmodern alternatives could be seen to facilitate this kind of embodied experience, and breathe new life into a history now concealed beneath two feet of concrete.

Yet the Quadrant Archaeological site is far from atypical in its presentation of history. The approach it has taken to relaying information from the past is incredibly economical (another of modernism's core principles) and is not necessarily as awful as I may have described. Of the differing ways one can communicate a history outlined above, neither can be seen as 'correct'. Though this article is clearly advocating a postmodernist approach to historiography, the modernist theory is far more widely practiced. Short, clear, information-based nuggets of text will long be used to convey information regarding history for the sake of expedience. However, more and more sites are employing some of the non-traditional, involved, and subjective approaches in an attempt to connect places with their histories. Things such as guided tours, where people are taken through a physical space and allowed to interact with the guide and the location, or audio walks, where the history is experienced primarily through inhabiting the building or area in-person and secondarily through audio accompaniment, involve their audiences on the subjective level of experience. It is also true

that virtual tours on websites often hyperlink to corroborating (or divergent) accounts of history, allow the viewer to find a subjective compromise of truth amongst the multitude of documented voices. Even a thing like the Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb aims to educate those on tours by having tour guides tell stories of men who worked riveting the bridge while those taking the tour are experiencing first-hand the conditions those workers would have endured. Historical re-enactments operate on much the same principle. These alternative methods of conveying a past are becoming increasingly more necessary as institutions attempt to hold the interests of their prospective audiences who are more and more entrenched in the subjective practices of web 2.0. Things such as interactivity, verité and personal involvement are major practices engrained in the modern information consumer (Arthur 2005). Examples of other online history/culture/language projects developed with interactive subjectivity and education in mind include the Te Whanake online Maori project (Moorfield 2009) and Australian Indigenous language program Interactive Ochre (Beck 2007).

The Quadrant Archaeological site is a perfect example to take when discussing modernist and postmodernist historiographies. Modern ideas such as an absolute truth, linear histories and the economy of information are exemplified through the design and intention of the cumbersome information panels. Postmodern ideas such as an involved and sensory understanding of history, multiple personal histories, and active and subjective interpretation practices being used in the construction of meaning, are all absent from the site, detracting from the ability of a passer-by to connect on an intimate level with the site. Furthermore, these notions of history and understanding are seeing wider repercussions in the historical and teaching areas, as the children of the interactive digital age begin to shape information streams to their own personal methods of connecting and communicating with data. Ultimately this demonstrates a wider societal move towards a postmodernist and subjectivist notion of understanding – an embracing of alternative modes of communication, be it in history, socialising or education. When we walk through the Quadrant as it stands, the panels provide only a brittle link with history. A deeper, living connection to the history of the site is both absent and missed.

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