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Kay Anderson

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Place Narratives and the Origins of Inner Sydney's Aboriginal Settlement, 1972-73

Kay J. Anderson

Department of Geography and Oceanography, University of New South Wales, Canberra

Abstract

The district of Aboriginal residence in inner Sydney is familiar to Australians throughout the country, but its formative processes are much less widely known and certainly less rigorously understood. Using primary sources from three levels of government that have never before been released, this paper charts the story of the founding of the Aboriginal settlement in Sydney's Redfern in 1972-13. Its approach is to frame the quest for territory around the competing narratives articulated to it. It will be shown how the utopian concept of a "Black cooperative" became pitted against the defensive concept of a "Black ghetto" in a struggle for dominance that revealed the fracturing ideological regimes of the day and the contradictory practices of a divided polity. European control over the allocation of urban space was on this occasion intercepted by a social movement for a stake in White Australia that for two hundred years had been disempowering its indigenous peoples. It is a struggle that endures in Aboriginal Redfern to this day.

Few urban districts occupy so prominent a place in the minds and speech of Australians as the tiny pocket of Aboriginal settlement bound by the streets of Eveleigh, Louis, Caroline and Vine in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern (see Figure 1). Most Australians will have seen the area displayed on television screens or the pages of daily newspapers if they have not encountered it directly. "Redfern" is a deeply impregnated term, and its semantic depth extends a field of influence well beyond the state of New South Wales. At the university where the author of this article teaches Geography to officer cadets from all states of Australia, the mention of Redfern is guaranteed to send ripples of acknowledgement throughout the lecture theatre. Despite never having themselves set foot in the district, these Australians, almost all of them "White" European, have come to know Redfern as home to the full range of symptoms of social pathology. Although Aborigines¹ comprised less than five percent of the total population of Redfern at the 1986 census, it is widely held by

¹ The Australian census and Commonwealth accepts as an "Aborigine" those of some (not necessarily solely) Aboriginal descent who identify as Aboriginal. In this paper the term "Aborigine" is used not as a form of racial classification implying a discrete and essential Aboriginality but to observe the preference of most people of Aboriginal descent to refer to themselves as "Aborigines". That Aboriginality is a socially constructed category that owes no referent (except in the popular imagination) to a pre-given identity or stable heritage is by now well established in social science. See for example J. Beckett (Ed.), *Past and present: the construction of Aboriginality* (Canberra 1987).

White Australians that blight, crime, poverty and despair have found their natural habitat on that suburb's troubled streets.

Like most stereotypes, this interpretation of the Aboriginal section of Redfern (if not the whole suburb) possesses some degree of truth. The streets of Eveleigh, Louis and Caroline are certainly less neat than neighbouring ones. The number of vandalized homes—a few in Eveleigh Street are no more than shells – is high by metropolitan Australian standards. Alcohol and other substance abuse is more visible than in other districts, as is the legacy of long-term unemployment, boredom, truancy and disaffection among youths. Graffiti is abundant, and many of the cars parked on the rough, narrow streets are defaced. The tension created by high levels of police surveillance is apparent even to passing observers. And many of the tenants, especially those among them who are children, appear to bear symptoms of crippling poverty, inadequate nutrition, and crowded living conditions. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the district displays the collective injuries wrought on Aboriginal Australia by European policies of dispossession over the last two hundred years.

Such features make all the more noteworthy the persistence of this residential concentration, fitting all the descriptions of an underclass, and yet clinging to the edge of the rapidly expanding commercial frontier of Australia's premier city. With dramatic views north to the impressive skyline of Sydney's central business district, and within metres of the wave of gentrification sweeping inner city Victorian terraces, the streets of west Redfern increasingly appear as “matter out of place”, in the words of anthropologist Mary Douglas². Valued today at more than \$20 million, the block of some 70 terraced houses owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company occupies the kind of fragile zone that Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess once described as “in transition”³.

The contradictions inherent in this location arouse no small amount of curiosity in the renowned Aboriginal settlement. What formative processes served to mould this distinctive urban geography? What visions informed the settlement's creation, and what struggles surrounded its emergence? To date, official and folk perceptions of Aboriginal Redfern have cohered around popular commentaries, uninformed by careful investigation and analysis. Such treatments are for the most part based on images of a naturally evolved ghetto, a place that bears witness to the degeneration of the urban Aborigine. “He” (so the gendered and racialized representational mode has it) is the lost “primitive” whose “real” culture has been erased in the city. This version of Redfern has had important consequences for the area's residents, not only in feeding the stigma afforded by non-residents, but also in structuring over time the relations with police and governments. Yet far from being an incidental by-product of “detrribalization”, Aboriginal Redfern is in reality a deliberately created space, a settlement brought into being some twenty years ago by Australia's most senior level of government and a group of militant, local Aborigines. Back then, a hard-won fight was fought to secure this turf for Black residence. If for no other reason than to fill a gap in knowledge, therefore, there are sound reasons to attempt, as this paper does, to

² Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and danger*, Andover, Hants.

³ Burgess, E. W. (1925) ‘The growth of the city: an introduction to a research project’, *Publication of the American Sociological Society*, pp 85-97.

piece together a more rigorous account of Redfern than those currently circulating in Australian culture.

The empirical details of the housing project's beginnings in 1973 also open a window onto certain conceptual themes in contemporary cultural geography. Most notably, they demonstrate the power of languages surrounding group identity and place in the processes of urban transformation. It is certainly ironic that the Redfern settlement's visibility – so remarked upon by critics today was an aspect of the housing scheme that was foreseen by the Black and White activists who in 1973 successfully secured from the Commonwealth government a grant to purchase the block of terraces for Aboriginal housing. Twenty years ago, the founders of the housing scheme were acutely aware of the political mileage to be gained from siting a wholly Black settlement at the centre of urban Australia. Armed with a counter-hegemonic language of "Aboriginality", the activists mounted their subaltern challenge to the pressures of urban redevelopment at the core of the colonialist project in Australia. That their constructs of race and place had the capacity to intervene in such pressures is indeed testimony to the power of conceptual systems as they become embedded in structures of politics and space.

The cultural politics of race and place

This paper uses previously unreleased primary documents⁴ and interview data to chart the origins of the controversial Redfern housing project. Speaking to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people involved in the project's beginnings, I was struck by the range of cultural and political investments that had been placed by various groups in the Black housing proposal. The Aboriginal originators of the project and their White supporters cast the immediate problem of shelter for Redfern Aborigines in terms of a broader ideological agenda for Aboriginal "land rights"; the newly elected federal Labour government of the time saw an opportunity in the local agitation to cement a nationwide platform of reform on Aboriginal affairs; senior bureaucrats in the newly formed Department of Aboriginal Affairs had a stake in the scheme, as they did in the new Ministry of Urban and Regional Development into whose ambitious agenda for Australia's inner cities Redfern became drawn. Radical building unions imposed a self-styled emancipatory discourse on the project to mark their distance from more conservative unions, local priests at Redfern presbytery likewise saw an opportunity in the project to critique the conservative wing of Sydney's Catholic Church, while the European architect for the housing scheme invoked his own specialized rhetoric about "self-help housing". As we shall see, each of the above parties conceived of, and invested in, the utopian concept of a "Black cooperative" that was itself situated in Australia's countercultural ferment of the early 1970s⁵.

⁴ The following account is based on government documents collected from Commonwealth government bodies in Canberra and Sydney, the New South Wales Office of Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney, and Terry Murphy who was an alderman of the Council of the City of South Sydney during the time the Aboriginal housing project was launched and has in his private collection documents relating to the council which are no longer available in public archives. It also relies on oral sources listed in the Acknowledgements.

⁵ For a discussion of the climate of political and social unrest in Australia in the 1970s and its overseas influences, see the early chapters of Munro-Clark, M. (1986) *Communes in rural Australia: the movement since 1970*, Sydney, and Head, B. and Walter, J. (eds), (1988) *Intellectual movements and Australian society*, Melbourne.

The sense of purpose possessed by these interests was matched in intensity by other Sydney groups which campaigned hotly against the Black housing proposal. Vocal among them were residents of nearby streets in Redfern and Chippendale who had a receptive ear at the local Council of the City of South Sydney, the Redfern police station, and other influential arenas, including in New South Wales parliament. These groups framed their arguments in terms of defending a locality against the dictates of a senior government which would impose a “Black ghetto” in their midst. A number of councillors traded boldly in the discourse of race, invoking a pejorative “Aboriginality” and politicizing a notion of “segregation” that appealed to the sensibilities of the local electorate⁶. Thus evolved an angry conflict at Sydney’s Redfern in 1973 in which the utopian voices of change and “justice” clashed with the conservative ranks of blue collar racism in a struggle that was fitting for the day.

It would be easy in one’s account to interpret as irrational and reprehensible the stalwarts of White Redfern who energetically fought the Aboriginal housing proposal. It is tempting to identify with the homeless outcasts (and their Black and White sympathizers) who mounted a heroic practical and moral assault on the agents of White domination in Redfern. As we shall see, gaining a toehold at the core of metropolitan Australia was no trivial feat, and the chronology of the achievement does in itself warrant a place on the public record. But just as racism does not inhere in the Black/White encounter and rather is subject over time to challenge, change, and potentially even annulment⁷, nor does Black resistance stem from a natural or eternal source. It is not something that should be essentialized or sentimentalized. Neither racism nor resistance owe their existence to identities instilled at birth, but instead are historically-situated rallying points around which often virulent cultural and political movements are articulated.

In this paper I trace one such bitter struggle in which the voices of resistance – the Black “oppressed” and their European allies – were as prone to using rationalizing rhetoric as the racist “oppressor”. The vision of a Black cooperative became drawn into conflict with that of a Black ghetto in a struggle for imaginative dominance that revealed the contradictions of a moment in Australian history. These erupted in the early 1970s when some groups of Aborigines and non-Aboriginals began to politicize “Aboriginality” as an idiom of resistance while other (White) groups continued to manipulate the concept for racist ends⁸. Such an analytical approach to the housing project’s origins is not to invoke a relativist position of “equivalent voices”. To deconstruct the multiplicity of points of views and acts of speech embedded in the housing struggle is not necessarily to avert the responsibility of judgement between positions and political commitment. Indeed it is still possible to acknowledge multivocality while at the same time being wary of indulging textual explorations

⁶ On racial exclusivity as a political strategy, see Smith, S. (1989) *The politics of race and residence*, Cambridge.

⁷ See for example Anderson, K. (1991) *Vancouver’s Chinatown: racial discourse in Canada. 1875-1980*, Montreal.

⁸ See for example Brennan, F. (1991) *Sharing the country*, Ringwood. See also the discussion of the sympathies underlying the formation in 1967 of the federal Council of Aboriginal Affairs in Coombs, H. C. (1978) *Kulinma: listening to Aboriginal Australians*, Canberra.

inside the hermeneutic circle⁹. Thus, the primary objective in what follows is to take seriously the “local knowledges”¹⁰ implicated in the making of a place whose social and material construction has so far gone unchronicled in scholarship. That the voices in the story grew out of, and had been differentially empowered by, a history of cultural imperialism is an inescapable context for any such account.

This article now turns to an outline of Aborigines in Redfern in the period leading up to the agitation for housing, before then charting in detail the Black housing proposal until the time of commonwealth approval in April 1973. This analysis of the ideological roots of Aboriginal Redfern forms a preliminary phase in a more extensive theoretical and substantive project by the author of Redfern’s cultural history 1972-1992.

Aborigines in Redfern

Once a home of Sydney’s landed gentry, the suburb of Redfern evolved into an ethnically mixed, working class district during the twentieth century as middle class dwellers suburbanized and immigration from non-traditional sources increased. By the 1940s Redfern’s land-use character had diversified to take in a range of functions. The district within four kilometres of the city centre (see Figure 1) became a valued site for industrial activities, and many premises were redeveloped to accommodate non-residential uses or subdivided to house the employees of the growing manufacturing concerns to the south of the city. The quality of housing throughout Redfern fell into decline after the Second World War, and by 1970 much of the stock was comprised of century-old terraces. About that time, a study stated: “Redfern is an economically and socially depressed area. Sydneysiders, on the whole, regard it as a slum, an attitude shared by many of its residents.”¹¹

Quantifying numbers of Aborigines in Redfern is fraught with difficulties, as it is for any Australian centre. Before 1967 Aborigines’ vital statistics were not systematically collected, and since then, problems of definition, under-enumeration, and Aborigines’ high degree of mobility limit the usefulness of census records. It is well known, however, that Redfern attracted many Aboriginal migrants to Sydney from the 1930s when began to be dissolved the official management system that had herded Aborigines onto segregated reserves in the countryside¹². New assimilation policies designed to foster the integration of Aborigines into European society were implemented nationwide, and these, together with rural recession in New South Wales, forced other Aborigines to Sydney during the 1950s. Inner Sydney suburbs within easy reach of Central Railway station became a magnet to Aborigines of diverse communal and country origins who sought cheap housing, access to public transport, and unskilled employment in the Eveleigh Railway Yards and other industrial outlets.

⁹ See Barnes, T. and Duncan, J. (eds), (1992) *Writing worlds: discourse, text and metaphor in the representation of landscape*, London; Jackson, P. (1989) *Maps of meaning*, London; Anderson, K. and Gale, F. (eds), (1992) *Inventing places: studies in cultural geography*, Melbourne.

¹⁰ Geertz, C. (1983) *Local knowledge: further essays in interpretive anthropology*, New York.

¹¹ Jakubowicz, A. (1969) *Changing patterns of community organization*, Government IV Honours Thesis, Sydney University, p. 6.

¹² Parbury, N. (1986) *Survival: a history of Aboriginal life in New South Wales*, Sydney.

This in turn set the conditions for a migration pattern familiar throughout Australia¹³. Once Aboriginal settlers established homes in inner Sydney, the area became a base for the visits of relatives and other contacts from across the country¹⁴.

By 1960 approximately 10,000 Aborigines were estimated to live in Sydney, with some 70 per cent of them being under 30 years of age¹⁵. They were thinly dispersed in many suburbs, including outer suburbs where Aborigines were dotted throughout Housing Commission estates. There were also significant concentrations, including at La Perouse near Botany Bay (see Figure 1). The largest proportion of Sydney Aborigines, however, lived in the inner suburbs of Redfern, Chippendale, Newtown, Erskenville and Waterloo (see Figure 1) with estimated numbers for 1971 ranging between 4,000 by a government commissioned survey¹⁶ and 9,000 by Aboriginal estimates¹⁷.

Aborigines' sense of identification with Redfern dates from the 1930s, but it was made increasingly public during the 1960s. In 1964 the Aborigines Inland Mission applied successfully to the City of Sydney for permission to conduct open air meetings in the Lawrence Rest Area in Caroline Street¹⁸. Such expressions of Aboriginal community in Redfern, with a territorial focus in the blocks to the west of Redfern Railway station, were to grow considerably through the 1960s and early 1970s. They also became increasingly militant, as Redfern Blacks distanced themselves from conservative welfare organizations such as the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, established near Haymarket in 1959. By July 1972, thousands of Aboriginal demonstrators met at Redfern Park to launch a national land rights march that would attract nationwide media coverage. In the same year, a group of young articulate Aborigines, many from Redfern, organized the erection of a Tent Embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra to express frustration at the poverty of commonwealth policy-making in relation to Aborigines.

Strength in numbers did little, however, to alleviate the chronically depressed living conditions experienced by most Aborigines in Redfern. In September 1970, the welfare organization known as South Sydney Community Aid applied to the commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs for funding for an Aboriginal field officer to cover an "area which contains the heaviest concentration of Aboriginal people, living in the worst housing conditions"¹⁹. The commonwealth Office's own survey of 1971 stated: "There are a great many Aboriginal families living in very

¹³ Gale, F. and Brookman, A. (1972) *Urban Aborigines*, Canberra.

¹⁴ Burnley, I. and Routh, N. (1984) *Aboriginal migration to Sydney: interim report*, Kensington.

¹⁵ Logan, P. *The Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs*, Sydney (unpublished document in Murphy papers).

¹⁶ W. D. Scott and Company, (1973) *Problems and needs of the Aborigines of Sydney: a report to the Minister of Youth and Community Services, New South Wales*, Sydney.

¹⁷ Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, Aborigines in Sydney (unpublished document 1971, in Murphy papers).

¹⁸ City of Sydney Archives, City of Sydney, Record of Council Resolutions, 5252/64, 579.

¹⁹ South Sydney Community Aid, submission to Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs, 30 September 1970 (unpublished document in Murphy papers), p. 1.

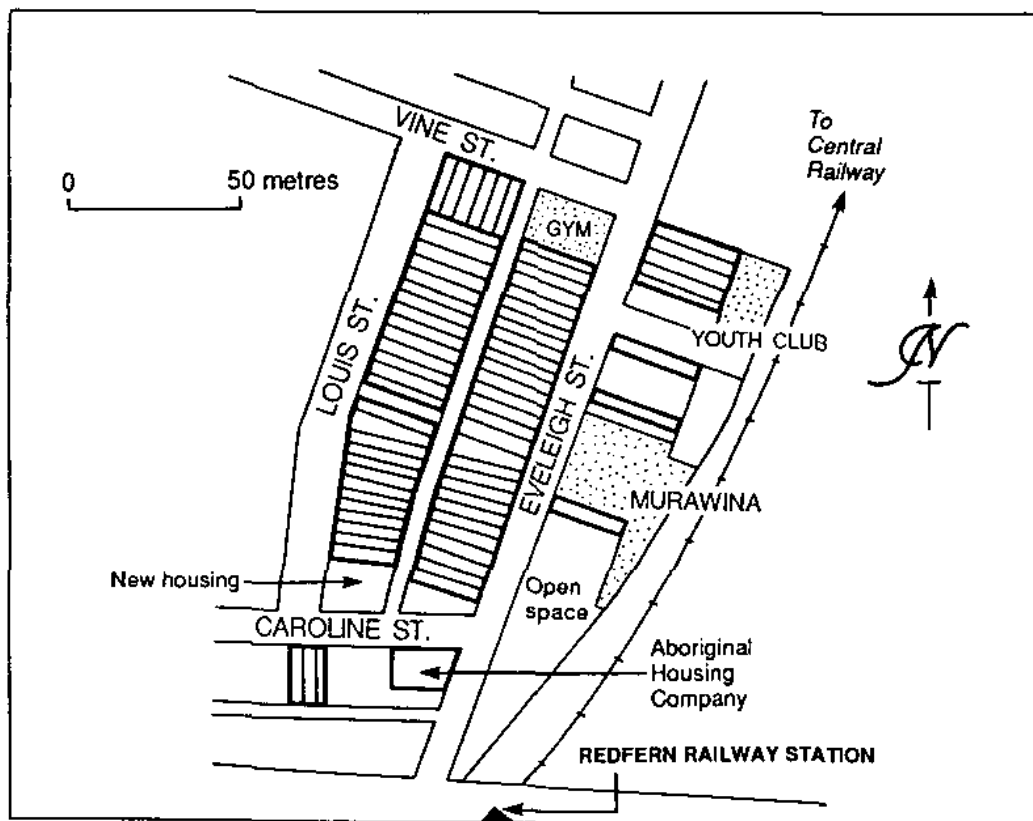
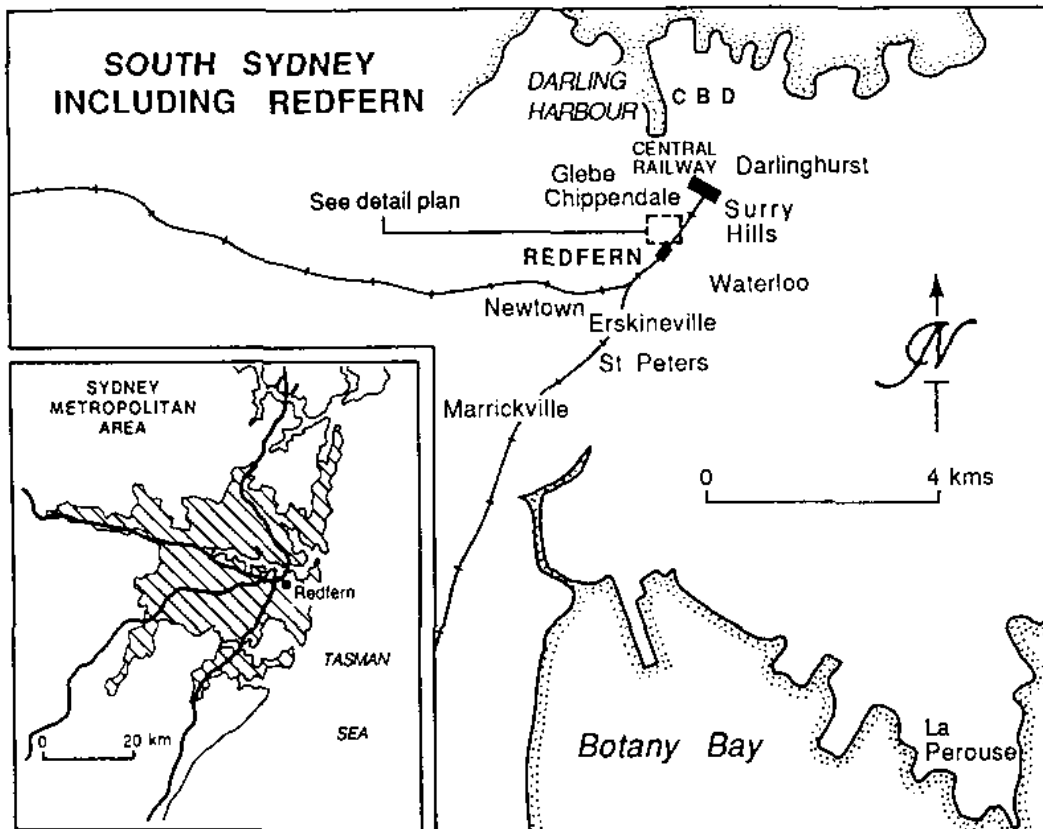


Figure 1: Location of Sydney's Redfern and the properties owned by the Aboriginal Housing company, 1992.

degrading and unsanitary conditions in the South Sydney area”²⁰. One household of six members whose “desperate plight” was said to “resemble many other Aboriginal family situations throughout the municipality” was suffering from malnutrition induced by crowded, dingy living quarters and flooded communal amenities. One sink doubled as a laundry and kitchen facility, and a naked light was the sole illumination. Another reportedly “typical” case was provided by a family from a New South Wales coastal town which had obtained a two bedroom house in Redfern in 1968. In time relatives arrived, either for brief holidays or to board while they searched for employment, so disrupting the household and its ability to fend for itself.

If certain cultural commitments in relation to the extended family aggravated the material circumstances of Redfern Aborigines, so did the frames of mind of many non-Aboriginals. A government survey of Aborigines’ living conditions in Redfern in August 1971 noted that the major problem facing residents was not lack of employment, but discrimination in the rental market. Most of those surveyed complained of “exorbitant rents, plus high rates of bond money”, leading the researcher to conclude: “The people who are exploited most in South Sydney are those least able to defend themselves. Most Aborigines fall into this category and are at the bottom of the social ladder”²¹. A 1973 report drew similar conclusions: “Aboriginals believe, as do many objective observers, that they encounter discrimination when they seek to rent, lease or buy housing in the private market, especially in and around Redfern and the inner city area”²². In response to these and other indicators of Aborigines’ grave circumstances in Redfern, the commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs saw the need in 1971 to “mount a substantial welfare exercise in that area”. However, despite such awareness about Aborigines’ living conditions, no formal action was taken by the Office before 1972.

The material difficulties confronting Redfern Aborigines were compounded by problems of access not only to housing but also to health services. A medical service catering to the special needs of Aborigines was established by Black community workers and White doctors in Regent Street in Redfern in August 1971 (and used by 40 per cent of inner Sydney Aborigines within its first year of operation). The service’s establishment was, however, by no means automatic. The Council of the City of South Sydney (about which we shall hear more) obstructed and delayed its development application on numerous grounds believing as it did that “a total approach should be made by the [federal] Department of Aboriginal Affairs to house and educate aborigines in modern buildings, preferably at a location such as La Perouse”²³. The following year, in June 1972, a Black women’s group set up the Murawina pre-school organization in Redfern with a breakfast programme to help correct the vitamin and protein deficiencies found (according to numerous observers) in the many starving local Aboriginal children. The rise of Aboriginal self-consciousness in Redfern was also evident in the establishment of cultural institutions, especially the Black Theatre. These services provided a local nucleus of agencies

²⁰ Saunders to Director, 22 July 1971, in Department of Aboriginal Affairs, file number R76/89, (hereafter DAA R 76/89).

²¹ Lawrie to Director, 20 August 1971, in DAA R76/89.

²² Scott, *op. cit.*, chapter 12, 2.

²³ Orr to Mayor, 25 May 1972, Municipality of South Sydney, Town Planning and Development Department, minute paper, in Murphy papers.

which had the confidence of Aboriginal clients, such that by August 1972 Aboriginal activist Gary Williams could say: “Redfern is the heart and Redfern is the community. . . . Before, about 4 or 5 years ago, Redfern was a place to be shunned. At the moment, Redfern is where it’s happening”²⁴.

It had been the Aboriginal Legal Service, however, that had set the model for community-based services for Aborigines in Redfern and, indeed, across Australia. In June 1971 a group of concerned White lawyers and Black activists joined forces to fight police harassment of Aborigines in Sydney. Of particular concern was the growing problem of Aboriginal arrests for offences such as drunkenness, vagrancy, “offensive behaviour”, use of “unseemly” language, and other crimes involving police discretion²⁵. The legal service-located near the medical service in Regent Street-sought strenuously to improve relationships with law enforcement agencies. It also lobbied the State government for funding for an Aboriginal Development Cooperative to purchase housing for Sydney Aborigines²⁶. However, that proposal was pursued no more actively than those mooted in federal government spheres, and it grew increasingly apparent to members of such organizations that the initiative for reform on all issues affecting Sydney’s Aborigines, including housing, would need to come from themselves.

The oppositional culture emerging in Redfern was to supply the impetus for further grass-roots action in late 1972. This we shall see in the remainder of this paper, which, having briefly outlined Aborigines’ material circumstances in Redfern, now turns to the empirical details of the struggle out of which evolved a nucleus of Aboriginal residence in the suburb at the core of modern, metropolitan, European Australia.

Redfern’s “bottle brigade”

In October 1972, a young Aborigine by the name of George Lacey was caught by police stealing from a store in Redfern. George fled the scene in the direction of his refuge in Louis Street with the police hard on his heels. But when the two parties reached 17 Louis Street the police turned their attention from the solitary offender to George’s ten room-mates who apparently were living under the one roof in the otherwise empty and abandoned house. Next door at number 19 Louis Street were found another five Aboriginal squatters. The “goomies”, as the men and women called themselves and other Aborigines who routinely drank methylated spirits or “goom”, were squatters whose mode of existence consisted of moving from “empty” to “empty” in a suburb whose many derelict premises were awaiting redevelopment. The goomies also had in their care a couple of Aboriginal runaways from foster homes who helped acquire food, drink and intelligence about homes that might shelter the group when next it was moved on by police. On this occasion, however, the squatters were dealt a heavy hand. Each one was arrested, charged with trespassing, and taken to more secure shelter at the Redfern police station.

²⁴ Cited in transcript of radio interview by P. Briant, 10 August 1972; Station 2FC in Murphy papers.

²⁵ Council of Social Service of New South Wales Special Issue: Aboriginal People in the Greater Sydney Area Social Service 23 (1971-1972).

²⁶ Briscoe to Waddy, 28 August 1972, in Office of Aboriginal Affairs of New South Wales, file number F107 (hereafter OAA F107).

Some weeks later, the goomies faced trial at Redfern court house. Their lawyer, Peter Hidden, who worked for the Aboriginal Legal Service and had already dealt with complaints about uses by Aborigines of premises in Redfern, was well known locally, including at nearby St Vincent's Presbytery where he attended church. The long and bitter trial was heard by a reputedly tough magistrate who found the squatters guilty of trespassing and sentenced them to jail²⁷. However, the trial was also observed by Hidden's preachers, two Catholic priests who had moved to St Vincent's Presbytery in 1972 out of concern for Redfern's social problems. The priests were uneasy about the apparent lack of responsiveness of Sydney's Catholic Church to practical matters relating to welfare, human rights and, in the words of one priest, the "many problems [that] have escaped the normal parish system"²⁸. The young priests believed Sydney's Catholic establishment had grown immune to the plight of its own constituency, and in their eyes it was an indictment on a privileged institution in need of its own internal critique.

The Aborigines whose future seemed to reside in a futile sequence of squats and jail provided the priests with precisely such an opportunity. At Hidden's request, Fathers Ted Kennedy, John Butcher and Fergus Breslan offered the magistrate an alternative form of accommodation to jail for the Aborigines. This came in the form of the school hall at the rear of St Vincent's Presbytery in which an emergency arrangement, the priests suggested, could be effected²⁹. The priests were moved to act as Father Breslan later informed the mayor of the Council of the City of South Sydney: "These Aborigines came to us as an alternative to going to gaol. We could not turn them away. They had no place to go or to stay"³⁰. The sources of Breslan's commitment extended beyond Christian charity, however, to political pressures inside the Catholic Church: "The Altar is being re-arranged to face the people", Breslan said. "The emphasis is now back to the people, back to communities, back to the Last Supper. At St Vincent's we are trying to get to the people. The Church must now open its doors to the people. This is the World Catholic Movement". The language through which the radical priests sought to delimit their critique of Sydney's Catholic establishment had, as its object, Redfern's homeless Aborigines, and after some argument they convinced the magistrate to drop the jail sentence, though not the verdict.

Within days of being opened, the church hall became home to some 50 people, most of them Aborigines occupying vacant houses in the vicinity. Another 80 or so dropped in each day for meals. The numbers of those assisting also swelled, and notable among them was Kaye Bellear, a nurse at the Rachel Forster Hospital, volunteer at the Aboriginal Medical Service, and wife of local Aboriginal activist, Bob Bellear. Kaye tended the medical needs of the goomies – supplying meals, vitamins and also dilantin for fits suffered from alcohol withdrawal – while others such as Ingrid Sandberg communicated insights from emergency housing operations in Europe³¹. The group used as its model the Emmaus Movement which had been formed in Paris in 1959 by Sandberg's colleague Abbe Pierre, a Catholic priest, also known personally to Father

²⁷ Kennedy, personal communication with author, June 1991.

²⁸ Cited in *The Sun*, 14 January 1972.

²⁹ Kennedy, personal communication.

³⁰ Minutes of meeting with mayor and priests, 15 November 1972, in Murphy papers.

³¹ See L. Repland, *Abbe Pierre speaks* (London 1956). Translated by C. Hastings and G. Lamb.

Kennedy. In Paris, Abbe Pierre had organized homeless people into teams of rag-pickers whose collective responsibility it was to raise individuals out of destitution. At St Vincent's Presbytery, the concept quickly took hold in the form of what became called a "bottle brigade". The squatters collected beer and wine bottles and sorted colours of glass into drums for sale, the proceeds from which were given to the priests to buy food, beds, gas and electricity.

It was not long before the Redfern presbytery's unconventional hostel operation attracted the notice of residents, including members of the local council³². Twelve members of the Australian Labor Party had in August 1971 been elected unopposed to this solidly Labour council. Most were employed in blue collar occupations, and included a butcher, truck driver, lift driver, shop steward in the metal trades industry, harbour cleansing officer, and as mayor, a panel-beater. Many were also affiliated with labour unions, including Alderman Terry Murphy who sat on the executive of the conservative Australian Workers Union³³. Aldermen Murphy and Keith Challenger took a particular interest in the Aboriginal presence in Redfern, and in Mayor Bill Hartup they found a receptive colleague. The support of the electorate of working class Redfern was their mandate, and in the "Aborigines" they were to find (and politicize) an effective rallying point.

Inspections of the Catholic school hall by council health inspectors in early November 1972 were followed by swift official action. Council served a notice of closure on the Trustees of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of Sydney. The unorthodox use of the school hall was the professional concern of Alderman V. Treffery who as chair of council's health committee took particular issue with the use of alcohol in the hall, the "threatening attitude" of the lodgers, and what was said to be inadequate facilities for the number of occupants³⁴. Not all health officials, however, shared this view. Municipal Health Surveyor T. Hall, for example, claimed after visiting the hall on 9 November 1972 that the bathroom, lavatory, kitchen and dormitory were "clean and well kept"³⁵. Regardless, council went ahead with the eviction notice on the grounds that the necessary lodging house by-laws were being inadequately observed, the "itinerants" presented a "danger" to the school children (using a separate floor of the school hall), and the "offensive behaviour" of "scantly dressed persons" had been a source of complaint³⁶. The trustees of the church were given seven days to cease residential use of the hall, so precipitating an agitation whose rallying call was the utopian concept of a Black commune.

A "Black cooperative": the rhetoric of "resistance"

³² O'Grady to Colman, 14 November 1972, in Murphy papers.

³³ Halloran, C. South Sydney Council (unpublished undergraduate essay University of Sydney, in Murphy papers), pp 4-7.

³⁴ V. Treffery, St Vincent's Church, Redfern St. Redfern, unpublished report, 3 November 1972, In Murphy papers.

³⁵ T. R. Hall, Inspection of ground floor of school hall, St Vincent's Church, Redfern Street, Redfern (unpublished report, 9 November 1972, in Murphy papers).

³⁶ Cited in O'Grady to Mayor, 9 November 1972, in Murphy papers.

Paul Gilroy, perhaps more effectively than other social scientists, has argued that “race”, in addition to being a construct of (White) imagining and exclusion, is an idiom of (Black) resistance³⁷. It is an organizing principle through which domination is legitimized from “above”, as well as a locus around which action and identity are forged from “below”. At Redfern in late 1972, Aboriginality was constructed in multiple ways, not least by groups of people defined as Aborigines who when faced with an adversarial local council sought to mobilize militantly and resurgently. In this agitation they were joined by European allies who, as we have seen in the case of the priests, had their own stake in an empowered Aboriginality. The priests answered council’s eviction notice with decisive action and turned the goomies into a political issue. At a meeting between South Sydney council mayor and the priests on 15 November 1972, Father Butcher stated: “We wish to bring to the notice of the authorities the plight of these people, their severe housing problem The Hall and Presbytery is not meant as a lodging house. We are using it as a crisis house What is the Council going to do about this? What are the politicians going to do? What is anybody going to do about the Aborigines?”³⁸ Butcher also asked whether the Aborigines might be moved to Erskineville Town Hall from where, he reminded Hartup, the elected officials governed over a Labour constituency. The mayor deflected the line of questioning by offering to arrange for the priests to address a committee of council. Meanwhile the priests pressured the New South Wales housing commissioner and State government member for the seat in which Redfern was located, neither of whom felt moved or able to assist the Aborigines.

At a meeting with council in late November, the priests were joined by Aboriginal spokesperson of the squatters, Bob Belliar. Father Kennedy reported that the Housing Commission could not solve the problem because it owned spatially dispersed properties whereas the “Aboriginal group regards itself as one family”³⁹. Kennedy invoked constructions of Aboriginal community to abundant political effect, arguing: “They do not want to be broken up but want communal housing”. Belliar supported the point, stating that 50 per cent of the Aborigines occupying the hall had lived all their lives in Redfern. The concept of communal housing was described in detail to council by the priests and Bob Belliar who met with aldermen again in early December to ask “for assistance in getting another place so that we can vacate the Church Hall”⁴⁰. Council members in attendance took issue, however, with the implication that housing for Aborigines should be provided in their constituency. One alderman argued against the proposition “for the reason that encouragement of this nature would bring others into the municipality”. Also rejected by the aldermen was a request from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra for a stay of proceedings in respect of the notice served on the Catholic trustees⁴¹.

³⁷ Gilroy, P. 1981-2, ‘You can’t fool the youths ... race and class formation in the 1980s’, *Race and Class*, XXIII(2/3): 207-222.

³⁸ Minutes of meeting with mayor and priests, 15 November 1972, in Murphy papers.

³⁹ Report of meeting between members of council and representatives of the Catholic Church, 29 November 1972, in Murphy papers.

⁴⁰ Report of meeting between members of council and Ingrid Sandberg, Bob Belliar and Peter Bradley from St Vincent’s, 5 December 1972, in Murphy papers.

⁴¹ Noted in O’Grady to Mayor, 18 December 1972, in Murphy papers.

By this time, the squatters had formed an Aboriginal Housing Committee to take into their own hands “an immediate solution for people at present homeless”⁴². One of the priests (Father Butcher) joined the committee of five members who scoured Redfern for possible hostel locations. Interestingly, their searches took them back to the abandoned refuge of George Lacey in Louis Street, where it became known that a single developer had purchased the row of terraces in which the “empties” were situated. Some enquiries on the part of the presbytery intelligence revealed that the construction company Tierra del Fuego, owned by developer Ian Kiernan, had bought the tenement dwellings in June 1972 with a view to upgrading them for medium income residential use. As part of a more extensive inner Sydney investment project, Tierra del Fuego had purchased some 27 (later 41) derelict terraces in Louis and Caroline Streets, Redfern⁴³. The possibilities afforded by these holdings were quickly apparent to the priests who began to envisage showcasing an Aboriginal settlement in full view of passing White train passengers to Central Station⁴⁴. The political significance of the location was not lost on the Aboriginal Housing Committee either, which decided to approach Kiernan for permission to occupy a couple of the vacant houses while opportunities for the squatters were explored with more senior authorities.

In December a delegation consisting of Bob Bellear, Fathers Kennedy and Butcher and Ingrid Sandberg visited the Sydney branch of the commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs. The group met with a Dr H. C. Coombs who listened attentively as the priests (known by this time in commonwealth circles as “a problem to their church hierarchy”⁴⁵) described the open house they had been operating in Redfern. In particular they emphasized the need for extended housing to enable the Aboriginal group to live from, and work collectively at, self-supporting activities such as bottle-collecting. In a later written submission to the Office (solicited by Coombs himself), the Aboriginal Housing Committee insisted that the need was acute in Redfern because “developers are buying houses – in fact taking over whole areas – and the Aborigines are being evicted from areas they have occupied’ for years, leaving them nowhere else to go”⁴⁶.

A strategic contact was also made out of the presbytery network to elements within the New South Wales trade union movement, at the time engaged in an ambitious effort to subvert the alliance between Premier Askin’s conservative State government and the developer interests which had been transforming the skyline of Sydney since the 1950s. Just as the destitute Aborigines had been a cause celebre for the priests seeking distance from the establishment wing of the Catholic Church, so was the radical Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) looking to make its mark in the labour movement. Their strategy lay in imposing what later became known as “green bans”⁴⁷, where labourers ceased work on development projects that the union believed threatened low income housing and environmentally sensitive sites. The mix of

⁴² Aboriginal Housing Committee to Mayor, 5 December 1972, in Murphy papers.

⁴³ Kiernan to Bogard, 15 February 1972, copy courtesy of Ian Kiernan.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, personal communication.

⁴⁵ Cited in Moy to Dexter, 15 December 1972, in DAA R76/89.

⁴⁶ Cited in Bellear *et. al.* to Coombs, 17 December 1972, in DAA R76/89.

⁴⁷ See Roddewigg, R. (1978) *Green bans: the birth of Australian environmental politics*, Sydney.

ideology and practice proved to be immensely influential, and by the end of 1972, green bans were exerting a powerful check on modernist urban planning in Australia's major cities.

Not only did the radical union elements bring to a standstill development which they found contrary to the interests of low income people, they were also pro-active in the sense of assisting select projects to completion. Among them came to be included the proposal for Aboriginal housing in Redfern. In early December 1972, at the urging of a layman of the Redfern presbytery with connections to the labour movement, the Building Trades Group of Unions asked the federal secretary of the newly elected Australian Labor Party to bring the Redfern dispute to the attention of commonwealth parliamentarians. "It is on this question of retaining and redeveloping Redfern as a balanced suburb which includes low income housing", the Trades Group representative wrote, "that I believe the building unions can express some views to the new federal Labor Government and in so doing assist the Aboriginals concerned"⁴⁸.

Among the BLF's green ban listings for Sydney in 1972 were a number of projects in which Ian Kiernan had an interest. The Federation, and especially its president, Bob Pringle, saw the vulnerability of the developer to green ban pressure and decided to use it to the advantage of the Redfern Aborigines whose cause he adopted. In a somewhat unorthodox move even in terms of green ban morality, Pringle threatened Kiernan with a work ban on his redevelopment project in Caroline and Louis Streets, and all Kiernan's other Sydney sites, in return for making some of his terraces temporarily available to the homeless Aborigines⁴⁹. Kiernan pleaded the case that he was a "conservationist" who restored homes, not a "rapacious developer" who destroyed them, but the distinction bore little truck with Pringle for whom the project's communal theme was as politically significant as the preservation of the terraces themselves⁵⁰. Kiernan eventually capitulated to the pressure, and in a move which was to provide the very territorial base the agitators had been seeking, he offered two houses for the presbytery evacuees to occupy pending the commencement of his investment project in Louis Street. In the bargain, Kiernan signed a notice permitting squatters to occupy the homes in order to help deflect police.

The Aboriginal Housing Committee was by this time galvanized to action and disinclined to accept what could be construed as charity from the developer. The homes were "uninhabitable", Bob Bellear told the press, and in an act of considerable defiance and fearlessness in the face of intense police scrutiny, the committee set about selecting two of their own homes from Kiernan's Louis Street holdings. The BLF and Plumbers Union joined forces with the committee to bring up to bylaw standard the houses chosen for occupation. The Aborigines themselves formed what they called a "mop and bucket brigade" with the proceeds of the ongoing bottle operation, while the majority of helpers gave up drinking alcohol to help clean the houses⁵¹. Also on hand was a Catholic Order of Brown Nurses who supplied food,

⁴⁸ Vaughn to Cahill, 8 December 1972, in Murphy papers.

⁴⁹ Ian Kiernan, personal communication, June 1991.

⁵⁰ Freney, D. 1973, 'BL's back Aborigine housing scheme', *The Builder's Labourer*, August: 33 & 35; copy in Murphy papers.

⁵¹ Kaye Bellear, personal communication, June 1991.

blankets, toiletries and medical assistance. “We are making a stand for Aboriginal land rights”, announced Bellear to the press. “This will be Sydney’s Aboriginal Embassy”. Other houses would be “taken over”, Bellear threatened in a series of public statements invoking a resurgent Aboriginality, “until the Labor Government gives the group better homes”⁵².

If the emancipatory visions of elements of the union movement helped prepare the conditions in Louis Street for an Aboriginal settlement, so also did the aspirations of the Labor government that took federal office on 2 December 1972. The newly elected government’s priorities were to enlarge the agenda of the national parliament and develop a practical programme of reform in fields such as social welfare, foreign policy, urban affairs, education, the constitution and Aboriginal matters⁵³. After 23 years of unbroken conservative rule, the prevailing mood in Australian political circles sought change, and few areas seemed as ready for it as Aboriginal affairs. The Office of Aboriginal Affairs, formed under the (Liberal) Holt government, had begun the momentum for reform by compiling information on the conditions of Aborigines throughout Australia (those of which existed in Redfern we have already seen). But neither Holt nor his successor Gorton had felt moved to actually implement policies that would promote health, training, employment and land rights for Aborigines⁵⁴. By late 1972, members of the Office including Dr H. C. Coombs (whose interest in the Redfern issue was noted earlier), had grown immensely frustrated by the administrative marginalization of Aboriginal affairs in Canberra. Such men looked eagerly to Gough Whitlam who lost little time when elected in December in forming a separate Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs and (somewhat in contradiction to that move) elaborating a discourse of Aboriginal “self-determination” that would apparently grant freedom to Aborigines to determine their own futures. The new Minister, Gordon Bryant of the Victorian Left, was for one soon heard in policy speeches rejecting the assimilationist strategy that for some 30 years had so problematically drawn the country’s indigenous people into a foreign economic and cultural framework.

In Redfern, Whitlam and Bryant had a ready-made issue through which to register the government’s reformist stance and articulate the slogan of “self-determination”. Not only that, but the Redfern housing initiative afforded the opportunity to cement a second Labor platform—the “rehabilitation of the inner cities”, in the words of the prime minister⁵⁵. A new Ministry of Urban and Regional Affairs headed by Tom Uren was created to implement a mandate for the sprawling fringes of Australia’s cities and what was seen as “the decay and desolation of inner-city life”⁵⁶. In its earliest phases the ministry’s solutions to inner city problems lay with a mix of strategies, including wholesale clearance to make way for welfare housing and restoration of existing homes. Before long, however, the language of “rehabilitation” came to prevail in

⁵² *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 30 December 1972.

⁵³ Whitlam, G. 1985, *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, Melbourne.

⁵⁴ See Coombs, H. C. 1978, *Kulinma: listening to Australia’s Aborigines*, Canberra, pp 1-26.

⁵⁵ Whitlam to author, 18 July 1991.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

architectural and government circles over that of “slum clearance”⁵⁷, as it did in other Western countries where critiques of modernist urban design were circulating. The proposals in Redfern could thus be assimilated into another, more inclusive agenda that revealed distinctive political and cultural investments like those we have already seen for the priests, unions, and local Aborigines.

On 3 January 1973, Minister Bryant visited Redfern to see the mounting agitation for himself. By then, some 40 Aboriginal squatters were occupying three of the developer’s houses⁵⁸. The Aboriginal Housing Committee, which by this stage consisted exclusively of 13 Aborigines, was sufficiently encouraged by the minister’s response to submit a formal request for commonwealth funding of a “cooperative housing scheme” for Aborigines⁵⁹. The proposal included purchase of the whole block between Louis, Caroline, Eveleigh and Vine Streets, renovation and erection of houses for the use of homeless Aborigines, and the erection of factories for Aboriginal employment and training.

The growing alliance between the community and Commonwealth government did not go unnoticed, however, by the vigilant aldermen of the Council of the City of South Sydney, one of whom reminded Bryant after his visit that “the location and type of housing for Aboriginal people in or adjacent to the Metropolitan Area of Sydney is a most sensitive question”⁶⁰. What ensued was a campaign of local resistance of a rather different kind to the one we have seen for the squatters, but one likewise informed by a politicized representation of the housing project and one no less strenuous in practice. Its guiding idiom was the defensive concept of a Black Ghetto.

A “Black ghetto”: the rhetoric of “segregation”

Two weeks after Minister Bryant’s visit to Redfern, in late January 1973, a meeting of representatives was held at the commonwealth parliamentary offices in Sydney that brought together the rival Labor government players in the unfolding conflict. In attendance were Bryant, five aldermen of the Council of the City of South Sydney, including Mayor Hartup, the federal member for the electorate in which the project was located, Jim Cope, and Labor opposition leader of the State government who represented Redfern in New South Wales parliament, Pat Hills. Each of the Labor parties sought to make known their opposition to the alliance that had bypassed them. Bryant attempted to defend his position by invoking the scenario that another tent would be erected outside Parliament House if he were to ignore the appeals of a place increasingly identified with activists and militants⁶¹. However, none of the State

⁵⁷ See the submission to Bryant by Strachan, A. 1972, ‘Redevelopment or rehabilitation? an argument in favour of policies for conservation in older areas of Australian cities’, *Civic Design Society Occasional Paper 2*, copy in Department of Aboriginal Affairs, file number 73/1103 (hereafter DAA 73/1103).

⁵⁸ *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 2 January 1973.

⁵⁹ Belleair *et. al.* to Bryant, 28 January 1973, in OAA FI07.

⁶⁰ Challenger to Bryant, 2 January 1973, in Murphy papers.

⁶¹ Noted in “Aboriginal commune; chronology of events and correspondence”, unpublished document, in Murphy papers.

government members or councillors were prepared to see politics from the Commonwealth government's vantage point, and vigorously denounced the principle of intervention in local affairs. The meeting closed in bitterness and division.

The minister received another deputation early in February 1973. This was comprised of representatives of the Aboriginal Housing Committee, the building unions, St Vincent's Presbytery, and South Sydney council. The council spokesman did not mince words: "What is being proposed in Redfern", said Terry Murphy, "is an Aboriginal ghetto ... and the establishment of the legal aid service and medical service and the Black theatre have only compounded the problem, encouraging Aboriginal people who are disadvantaged to come into South Sydney which lacks suitable accommodation"⁶². Bob Bellar interjected that Redfern was "the place selected because it is the area of the Aboriginal people", a view supported by the minister who stated that in Redfern a "concrete proposal" had arisen because a need existed there. As a district officer of the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Welfare later stated: "It is well known that South Sydney council opposes the bettering of facilities for Aborigines in Redfern, their opposition being on the premise that to create more facilities for Aborigines would only serve to attract more people with the end result that Redfern would become a 'Black ghetto'"⁶³.

As for politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra, they were alert to the political and professional capital to be gained in backing Redfern's Aborigines at a time in Australian history when the "White Australia" concept was coming under its first serious internal scrutiny. The once unified (negative) morality and rhetoric surrounding "Aborigines" was slowly fracturing into multiple voices that heralded a more complex and contradictory politics of race and nation. In distant Canberra, far from the scene of the Sydney agitation, the state acted as a "force of emancipation", in Giddens' terms, and bureaucrats from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs set about trying to purchase the Redfern properties⁶⁴. Closer to the scene of the agitation, at the local and state scales, the state sought to defend the interests of White Redfern. The councillors grew increasingly determined to protect the ratepayers that were their hold on electoral power. On 2 March 1973 council placed an order on Ian Kiernan's company to clean up its buildings in Louis and Caroline Streets within seven days. It also approved the development application submitted by Tierra del Fuego for renovations to its Louis Street properties, but on the condition that building applications for each property provide in each case for single family occupation⁶⁵. This stipulation was designed to outlaw precisely the style of living arrangements – a mix of single person and extended family housing – proposed by the Aboriginal Housing Committee. The council also suspended its funding of South Sydney Community Aid, the major organization committed to Aboriginal welfare and cultural activities in the area and whose council grant was used to employ Dick Blair, member

⁶² Cited in minutes of meeting between Bryant and representatives of AHC, unions and council, 8 February 1973, in Murphy papers.

⁶³ Trotman, P., 1973, 'Circumstances in Louis/Caroline St., Redfern', unpublished report, 23 March, in OAA F107.

⁶⁴ The contradictions in the capitalist state's management strategies are mentioned in: Giddens, A. 1981, *A contemporary critique of historical materialism*, Berkeley, p. 220.

⁶⁵ Noted in O'Grady to Mayor, 9 March 1973, in Murphy papers.

(and by March 1973, president) of the Aboriginal Housing Committee⁶⁶. In this vendetta, council sought to quash not only the movement for housing, but Aboriginal assertiveness in South Sydney across a wide range of issues.

By mid-March 1973, the number of houses in Louis Street that had been renovated by the AHC (with Kiernan's tacit acceptance) had grown to seven. In them, and other nearby condemned terraces, lived some 150 Aborigines. The growth in numbers was a call to action for police and also local residents who in March formed the South Sydney Residents Protection Movement [SSRPM]. Representatives of the movement, which included two aldermen, drafted a detailed petition for circulation throughout Redfern and Chippendale. This indelicately worded document, signed by 226 local people and sent to Mayor Hartup, local federal member Jim Cope, and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, stated as follows: "We, the undersigned residents of South Sydney vociferously protest, object and condemn the establishment of the ghetto in Louis and Caroline Streets by the Aborigines who have squatted in these properties"⁶⁷. Its grounds for protest against "this festering sore" included sanitary and moral factors, fear for life, property and land values, and opposition to single-person accommodation. In conclusion it reiterated: "We want the Aboriginal ghetto stopped now – for if allowed to continue it will spread like the plague throughout the entire South Sydney area". The covering letter appealed to the goal of "assimilation" to justify its position: "We wish to make it quite plain that no Black settlement in this area can be tolerated. Once any Black ghetto has been established there is no possibility of assimilation..."⁶⁸ An association letter to the editor of the South Sydney Advertiser on 17 March 1973 likewise held up a mirror to the organization's own sense of cultural identity which it sought to protect from apparently contaminating influences. "S.S.R.P.M. does not want anyone race or creed confined to one small area as this can only lead to violence and hatred ... So long as persons of different races are distributed evenly – with no large bodies of any one race – they will assimilate with the majority."

Other critics of the housing proposal traded in the ghetto concept. Mayor Hartup assured the SSRPM that "your protests have had my fullest support", and that council "has taken all the action it can, within its powers"⁶⁹. Federal member for the area, Jim Cope, similarly wrote to Minister Bryant: "I believe it is entirely wrong for any government to imagine that they can benefit the Aboriginal cause by creating ghettos which would, in my opinion, defeat the ultimate goal of true assimilation between Aborigines and White people"⁷⁰. Encouraged by Hartup's support, another group of local residents wrote on Good Friday 1973: "We the undersigned, living in Eveleigh Street, Redfern, fully support you sir, and the South Sydney Municipal Council that a ghetto and human zoo should not be allowed in this area"⁷¹.

⁶⁶ Noted in Eland to Bryant, 28 March 1973, in file Redfern-NSW, Bryant papers (hereafter Bryant papers).

⁶⁷ South Sydney Residents Protection Movement to Mayor, 10 March 1973, in Bryant papers.

⁶⁸ T. and M. Baccon to Hartup, 10 March 1973, in Bryant papers.

⁶⁹ Hartup to Hunter, 29 March 1973, in Murphy papers.

⁷⁰ Cope to Bryant, 23 March 1973, in Bryant papers.

⁷¹ Mann to Hartup, in Murphy papers.

Needless to say, the nucleus of Black settlement meant far more in the minds of these residents and their elected representatives than the mere presence of people of Aboriginal origin. Such a settlement possessed a baggage of negatively racialized associations. It was constructed as a “problem” holding out the spectre of “segregation” at a time when in some popular (and scientific) circles, “assimilation” of Aborigines into European society was still seen as an ideal. And if assimilation was not a deeply cherished ideal of local Whites, nor segregation a heart-felt evil, both clearly were languages that could be utilized when specific (exclusionary) ends required them.

A public meeting held in Redfern on 25 March 1973 brought into open confrontation the diverse local views surrounding the Aboriginal housing project. Alderman Challenger spoke for council, claiming that the project would “create an ‘Aboriginal Reserve’ which could easily develop into a Black ‘ghetto’”⁷². The field officer of the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Welfare who attended the meeting summarized the council position as one that “has as its images of Aborigines, age old stereotypes such as lazyness [sic], drunkenness [sic], immorality, lack of self and community pride It seems that the greatest amount of opposition towards the project stems from the aldermen themselves”⁷³. The project’s advocates were also present in numbers, however, including meeting chair Father Butcher of Redfern presbytery. Butcher’s colleague, Father Kennedy, appealed that the project was in every local resident’s interest. It would stem the “tide of development”, he said, in an area that was increasingly falling into the hands of developers. Speaking on behalf of the Aborigines concerned, he stated “it seems to them that in order to make some sort of claim regarding their own rights, it would be a good thing to appeal to the Australian Government to help them make a stake in this area so sentimental to them”⁷⁴.

There were other European allies at the meeting who countered the ghetto concept with alternative constructs of the housing proposal. Architect Colin James, who had been recruited by Dick Blair, supported the notion of a Black cooperative from his own discursive source. He stated that the project had “national, even international significance in terms of community planning”⁷⁵. James, a graduate of Harvard University who had studied “Negro housing” in Boston, invoked the “self-help” rhetoric that was beginning to attract the architectural profession of the day. “Surely the way out is to get them together so that they can provide their own help... It is very natural for Aborigines to share their resources,” said James. This construct of Aboriginality fed into the design concept which – despite the diverse backgrounds of Redfern’s Aborigines – proposed combining all the backyards of the terraces in the block into one communal area (see Figure 2).

⁷² Cited in Trotman, Public Meeting re Louis Street Development Programme, 25 March 1973, unpublished report, 26 March 1973, in OAA F107.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Cited in transcript of settlement meeting, 25 March 1973, copy courtesy of Kennedy.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* Nearly twenty years later Colin James continues to assist the AHC in an architectural capacity and by mediating between community and bureaucracy.

Throughout March 1973, letters of support and condemnation from all parts of Australia flooded Minister Bryant's office, demonstrating once again the multiple projections cast upon the Black housing concept. Most critics opposed the "proposed commune" on the grounds that it would be, or become, a "racial ghetto". Letters of support, on the other hand, found novel and progressive the "community concept" and the "principle of housing rehabilitation"⁷⁶. Criticism did not deter commonwealth officials, however, one of whom informed Mayor Hartup that the Federal government was committed to the project "whether council liked it or not"⁷⁷. Other critics were deflected with appeals on Bryant's part to "the re-awakening in Redfern of Aboriginal confidence and determination"⁷⁸. He also criticized the term ghetto: "It is simply another group of Australians continuing to live where they are already living in miserable conditions"⁷⁹.

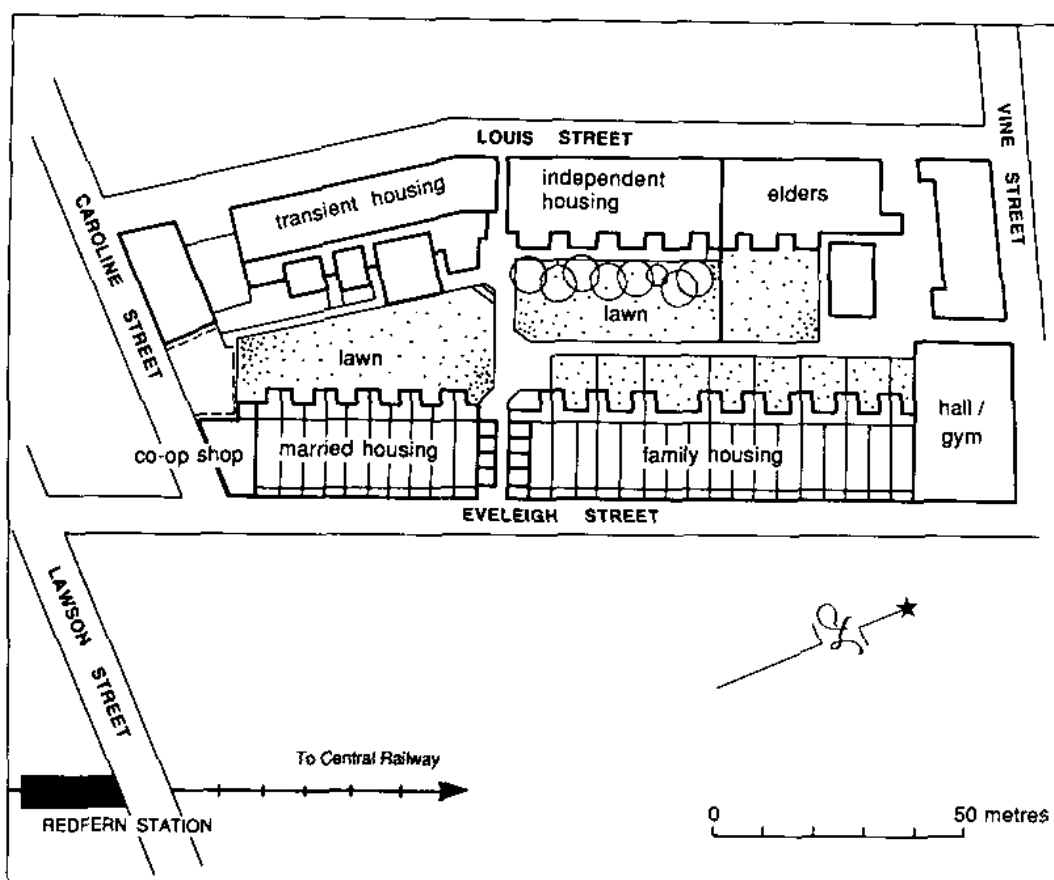


Figure 2: Architect's sketch of the Aboriginal housing project, Redfern, 1973.

Final deliberations surrounding the project reveal the extent to which the commonwealth minister was prepared to push the project through. On 5 April 1973, the mayor and local State government member Pat Hills reluctantly agreed to support the idea of a pilot project of approximately ten houses at the corner of Caroline and

⁷⁶ See DAA 73/1103.

⁷⁷ Noted in "Chronology of Aboriginal commune" for 19 March 1973, *op. cit.*, in Murphy papers.

⁷⁸ Bryant to Hunter, 30 May 1973, in DAA 73/1103.

⁷⁹ Bryant to Mann, 18 May 1973, in DAA 73/1103.

Louis Street (where Aborigines were already squatting). The pilot idea belonged to Bryant's adviser Dick Hall who claimed "we should limit our approval to ten houses due to the political circumstances"⁸⁰. The developer Ian Kiernan never had any intention, however, of selling to the Commonwealth government a portion of the properties. In a letter to the mayor on 5 April, Municipal Health Surveyor T. Hall reported he had learned from Kiernan that "he would not agree to sell the seven properties (now being used by Aborigines) as a separate packet and the sale would have to be all or none"⁸¹. Moreover the Aboriginal Housing Committee which met with senior commonwealth officers on 12 April 1973 stated that its "minimum preference" was to seek assistance for the purchase of the total 41 properties owned by the construction company.

The Council of the City of South Sydney lost little time when it learned of Kiernan's bargaining power with the Commonwealth government. It resolved to scrupulously apply the time allowed in notices served on Kiernan in relation to his Caroline and Louis Street premises⁸². It also recommended that "the situation in the Louis and Caroline Street area be referred to the Commissioner of Police with a recommendation that the area be regularly and frequently patrolled to ensure that the local residents are free from molestation and from the impact of anti-social behaviour". Minister Bryant, however, was not one to let a show of council strength deter him. Indeed he finally found the moment to call a halt to it on 14 April 1973, when – in a move which was to mark one of the first land rights victories for Australia's Aborigines – he announced he would approve commonwealth funds for the purchase for Aboriginal housing of not ten, but 41 houses, in Sydney's Caroline and Louis Streets⁸³. An Aboriginal Housing Company would undertake the rehabilitation of houses using Aboriginal labour where possible, and act as landlord, being responsible for screening tenants and renting the houses. In a letter of explanation to the federal electorate council some weeks later, Bryant stated: "I had some misgivings about the [pilot] proposal which would have left more than 30 houses unoccupied for an indefinite period of time"⁸⁴.

South Sydney councillors at the forefront of the campaign were infuriated, and Mayor Hartup was not slow or shy in informing Prime Minister Whitlam⁸⁵. The aldermen retaliated by refusing building applications for further renovations to houses in the pilot section of the housing project, now portrayed by Bryant's office as a "showcase" of what was to come⁸⁶. Also hostile were branches of the Australian Labor Party in constituencies near Redfern, such as Hughes and Redfern West⁸⁷. The issue of consultation was apparently not so pressing, however, for branches of the party at

⁸⁰ Hall to Minister, 12 April 1973, in Bryant papers.

⁸¹ Hall to Mayor, 5 April 1973, in Murphy papers.

⁸² City of Sydney Archives, South Sydney Council, item 17 Health and Recreation Committee Agenda, 4 April 1973.

⁸³ Bryant to Belleair, 14 April 1973, in DAA R76/43.

⁸⁴ Bryant to Law, 25 May 1973, in DAA 73/1103.

⁸⁵ Hartup to Whitlam, 16 April 1973, in Bryant papers.

⁸⁶ See building applications for 2, 4, 6 Caroline and 49-59 Louis Street, in Murphy papers; Sydney Daily Telegraph, 17 April 1973; Bryant to Hartup, 13 April 1973, in Murphy papers.

⁸⁷ See correspondence in DAA 73/1103.

locations further removed. The member for Banks, for example, notified the minister of his branch's support for the "admirable scheme", while the secretary of the Hornsby Electorate Council made known council's backing of "this constructive and enterprising experiment"⁸⁸. In a press release following the announcement of the grant, Minister Bryant proudly proclaimed the Redfern initiative while trumpeting his government's missions of self-determination and urban rehabilitation: "It [the scheme] will be a model for inner city communities who wish to preserve their homes and the identity of their areas Small groups like this give strength to one another without developing a total separate existence"⁸⁹. Later in the year he assured a party member that in Aboriginal Redfern "there is little likelihood of a ghetto being established"⁹⁰.

Conclusion

For George Lacey, whose flight from Redfern's police set in train the events charted in this article, strength in numbers had served him well. Out of the solidarity he sought with fellow destitutes in Sydney's Louis Street had grown a social movement for a stake in a society that for two hundred years had been actively disempowering and dispossessing its indigenous peoples. An entitlement at the metropolitan heart of White Australia was the challenge of Redfern's Aborigines and their European supporters (including the priests and union members) who aligned their own ideological battles against entrenched power with that of the squatters. The convergence of critiques in space and time was the fortune of Redfern's Aborigines who emerged from the struggle with access to housing, community, and freehold title to a piece of valued land.

In the course of the contest, "Aboriginal Redfern" became politicized around competing images of the housing project. The constructs of "Black commune" and "Black ghetto" became the discursive contexts for a struggle into which were drawn three levels of Australian government whose contradictory practices contributed to the conflict over this settlement's founding. Charting the connections between neighbourhood images and practices in the period leading up to April 1973 has been the objective of this paper. In so doing it has also sought to demonstrate the more general theme of cultural geography that "places" – for all that they appear to be pre-given and pre-arranged – are constructed out of historically-situated frameworks of meaning, agency and power. Certainly in the case of Redfern, the intense deliberations surrounding the housing project give the lie to popular images of the area as a naturally evolved slum.

What the founders of the housing project perhaps neglected to consider was that strength in numbers could equally be a source of strategy for opponents of the Aboriginal presence in Redfern. In the three months, March to May 1973, there were some 410 arrests in the Caroline and Louis Streets area, most being of Aborigines who were charged with drunkenness and disorderly behaviour⁹¹. Later in the year, in August, a number of Aborigines were charged with trespassing on properties that by

⁸⁸ Martin to Bryant, 3 July 1973, *ibid.*; Dyer to Bryant, 26 July 1973, *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 April 1973.

⁹⁰ Bryant to Vince, 2 August 1973, in DAA 73/1103.

⁹¹ O'Grady to Mayor, 7 May 1973, in Murphy papers.

then had been formally transferred from Tierra del Fuego to the Aboriginal Housing Company⁹². In addition to the prompting of the Council of the City of South Sydney, there was support for police action in the area from figures of no less authority than the Premier of New South Wales⁹³. The Empress and Clifton Hotels in Redfern became the focus of angry confrontation, and by October 1973 the relations between police and Aborigines had grown “appallingly bad” in the words of Minister for Aboriginal Affairs adviser, Dick Hall⁹⁴. The relations today, some twenty years later, justify similar descriptions. Like those with the media, the relations between police and Aborigines continue to engender tension in a place that still carries the label of “ghetto”⁹⁵. Such encounters mark the extension into the present of a struggle whose contested beginnings in 1972-73 foreshadowed the inexhaustible pressures on the Aboriginal Housing Company that lay ahead.

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⁹² *Tribune*, 14-20 August 1973.

⁹³ See letter of Premier Askin to Callaghan, 19 April 1973, in OAA F J 07.

⁹⁴ Hall to Cavanagh, 12 October 1973, in Bryant papers.

⁹⁵ c. Cunneen, Aboriginal-police relations in Redfern: with special reference to the ‘police raid’ of 8 February 1990 (Sydney 1990).