

History of John Northcott Place and the Northcott Estate



Figure 1: The Northcott Estate being built in 1961, City of Sydney Archives, SRC1797

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John Northcott Place and the Northcott Estate

Perhaps the most enduring Surry Hills landmark in the eyes of most Sydneysiders, ... is John Northcott Place, the monolithic 14-storey tower block once seen as the exemplar of modern housing policy for the working classes in Australia. Since 1961 Northcott Place has been the target of many tabloid headlines and sensational TV grabs. It is home to almost 1,000 people but was simplistically branded as a 'Housing Commission Hell' by the press.¹

John Northcott Place and the Northcott Estate includes Ward Park and is bounded by Devonshire, Marlborough, Landsdowne and Clisdell Street. In contemporary heritage terms, John Northcott Place is wholly unsympathetic to its surrounds. Samuel Lipson's massive red-brick 1961 Modern Movement tower looms above a suburb that is filled with nineteenth century terraces and quaint winding streets. The behaviour of some of the estate's inhabitants also casts long shadows.

John Northcott Place and the 'star plan' flats on the Northcott Estate were never intended to be sympathetic to the local area but were constructed with a specific purpose: to root out social problems and provide a new vision of housing for working people. The irony is that the Northcott Estate has centralised poverty and social problems – not because of where it is or the buildings but because the tenants themselves have changed. Recent projects have revived a sense of community on the site and, because of this progress, it is recognised as a World Health Organisation Safe Community.

Main themes

- Gadigal land and Sydney's Aboriginal History – Colebee the sea eagle, Nanbaree and Cora Gooseberry
- A working-class community that has welcomed people from all over the world
- Social experimentation
- Architectural innovation
- Unexpected consequences
- Community resilience
- Rendering stories
- Using spaces and places to connect lives
- A Safe Community

¹ Melinda Ham, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 2004 and Graeme Blundell, *The Australian*, 17 February 2007, cited Christopher Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, Sydney: Halstead, 2007, pp 134–135

Gadigal land – The Sydney Tribe

Surry Hills is on the land of the Gadigal people (also spelled as Cadigal and Caddiegal). The Gadigal were one of the 19 language groups that made up the Eora nation of the area Europeans called Port Jackson, which is now known as Sydney. Gadigal country stretched from Port Jackson and South Head south through what is now Surry Hills and Redfern to Petersham and Marrickville to the Cooks River. Midden and campsites like Yurong Point (Mrs Macquarie's Chair), Tinker's Well at Pyrmont, Moore's Wharf at Miller's Point, Lilyvale Camp in The Rocks, Blackwattle Creek at Sydney University and Ultimo and Junction Lane in Woolloomooloo speak to deep time.² This all changed when the First Fleet arrived in Port Jackson on 26 January 1788:

Governor Arthur Phillip estimated there were about 1500 Aboriginal people within a 10 mile radius of Port Jackson in 1788 ... historians have reported that the population reduced dramatically with the introduction of smallpox into Sydney's Aboriginal community in the first years of European contact, with reports of bodies floating in the harbour and found in foreshore rock shelters. It is estimated that almost half of Sydney's Aboriginal population died in the smallpox epidemic of 1789. Melinda Hinkson's *Aboriginal Sydney* says that the Gadigal, 'the recognised owners of Sydney Cove – were reduced in number from about 60 in 1788 to just three in 1791' ... Val Attenbrow, in *Sydney's Aboriginal Past*, indicates that two of these three were Colebee and Nanbaree.³

The third man was Caruey, of whom little is known, but Colebee and Nanbaree were well-known indeed: Thomas Watling sketched their portraits and they feature heavily in the colonial record.



Figure 2: Colebee, c1792-97 (image courtesy Thomas Watling Collection, Natural History Museum, London - 022030), <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/colebee/>

Colebee had met the First Fleet and was captured with Bennelong in 1789. He was a notable figure in Sydney until 1806, when he probably died. He had a ritually scarred chest and bears many names in the English records of the early colony – Gringerry Kibba (rock-scarred) Coleby. Historian Keith Vincent Smith links his name with the white-bellied sea eagle 'goo-le-be'. Colebee married Daringa, half-sister of clan-

² Paul Irish and Tamika Goward, Yurong Cave and Yurong Midden, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/yurong-cave-yurong-midden/>, Tinkers Well, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/tinkers-well/>; Moore Park, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/moore-park-campsite/>; Lilyvale Camp, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/campsite-lilyvale/>; <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/blackwattle-creek/>; Junction Lane Camp, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/junction-lane-campsite/>

³ Anita Heiss and Melodie-Jane Gibson, Barani, Aboriginal People and Place, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/aboriginal-people-and-place/>

leader Moorooboora, after whom Maroubra is named.⁴ Nanbaree (Nanbarry) was also a well-known figure in Sydney. He was a small boy when the smallpox epidemic killed his parents and he was raised in the household of Surgeon John White, though maintained relationships with senior men like Colebee and Bennelong. After White left the colony in 1794, Nanbaree became a sailor on HMAS *Reliance*. He was initiated on the site of the Royal Botanic Gardens in 1795 and was a spy amongst the British for Aboriginal people but continued working as a sailor and travelled with Matthew Flinders and Garigal man Bungaree on HMAS *Investigator* to the Great Barrier Reef in 1802. He died after a battle in 1821 and is buried with Bennelong on James Squires' property at Kissing Point – he left a wife, Sophy Buckenbah, and at least one daughter.⁵



Figure 3: In the foreground, Colebee applies grilled fish to Nanbaree's jaw after the latter's tooth was struck out during initiation. From the collections of the State Library of New South Wales, a1341021, see Greg Blyton, *The colonial observations of Surgeon John White*, Dictionary of Sydney, 2016, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/the_colonial_observations_of_surgeon_john_white

The colonial focus on Aboriginal men obscures the survival of Aboriginal women and it is clear that Cadigal women married into other language groups and bore children. Cora (Carra or Karoo) Gooseberry, for instance, was one of the wives of Bungaree and mother to some of his children. She was the daughter of Moorooboora, leader of the Murro-Ore (Pathway Place) clan, named from *murru* (pathway) and Boora (Long Bay), so was related to Colebee's wife Daringa.⁶ Cora lived until 1852 and was buried in Devonshire Street Cemetery, near where John Northcott Place stands today.

⁴ Keith Vincent Smith, Colebee, Dictionary of Sydney, 2008, <http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/colebee>

⁵ Keith Vincent Smith, Nanbarry, Dictionary of Sydney, 2010, <http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/nanbarry>

⁶ Keith Vincent Smith, Bungaree, Dictionary of Sydney, 2011, <http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/bungaree>



Figure 4: Pencil sketch by Charles Rodius of Cora Gooseberry in April 1844 (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW - PXA 1005)



Figure 5: Tomb of Queen Gooseberry of the Sydney Tribe of Aborigines showing the old Sydney Railway Station in the background, George J Reeve, State Library of New South Wales [a1555001 / PXE 1296]

Despite European invasion and the depredations of illness, Gadigal people remained living within Sydney, on their own terms, often by the water where they could fish. While Governor Macquarie tried to persuade Aboriginal people to farm at Elizabeth Bay people formed a substantial independent campsite at Barcom Glen, near Rushcutters Bay.⁷ People lived at Circular Quay until 1881 and camped at Moore Park and Watson's Bay into the 1890s, until they were forced by government intervention to settle where Dharawal people were living at La Perouse.⁸ A reserve and mission were later established at La Perouse and have become a mainstay of urban life for Aboriginal people in Sydney. A large camp developed at Cleveland Street, on the site of Prince Alfred Park. That camp was displaced by the arrival of the railway in 1855, but railway work also supported a bustling Aboriginal community around Central Station and, after it opened in 1886, the Eveleigh Railway Yards at Redfern. The area around Redfern Station – 'The Block' – became the first stop in the city for Aboriginal people from all over the state. Another important centre of culture in Sydney was the Native Institution site at Plumpton near Blacktown, where Darug matriarch Maria Lock was schooled in the 1810s. Surry Hills, Redfern, La Perouse and Blacktown remain significant Aboriginal

⁷ Paul Irish, Barcom Glen, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/barcom-glen/>;

⁸ Aborigines Welfare Board records cited by Naomi Parry, "Such a longing": black and white children in welfare in NSW and Tasmania, 1880–1920, PhD Thesis, UNSW, 2007, p 169; see also M. Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where histories meet*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), pp 45–50.

communities and are all significant Housing Commission sites. Gadigal families, like the Maddens, still live in Surry Hills, Redfern and Marrickville today.⁹

European arrival



Figure 6: By Joseph Lycett From the collections of the State Library of New South Wales [a928334 / ML 54]

The Surry Hills area was described by early European arrivals in disappointing terms: it was ‘occupied by a wood ... beyond that, is a kind of heath, poor, sandy, and full of swamps’.¹⁰ Sand drifted over it from the vast dunes at Botany Bay.¹¹ The north was a sandstone ridge while at the southern end, where Devonshire and Cleveland Streets now run, was an enormous sandhill (Strawberry Hill). The line of what is now Crown Street was a plateau of sandstone overlaid by a shale cap that weathered into a hard, blue clay which was highly suitable for brickmaking.¹² The area where Northcott Place now stands was originally a gigantic white sandhill stabilised by blackbutts, bloodwoods, angophoras and banksias, which was known as Strawberry Hill.¹³ It was the highest hill in Surry Hills.

The first land granted in Surry Hills was in 1793 to Captain Joseph Foveaux. George Palmer received the area around Strawberry Hill, but this was sold in 1814 to settle Palmer’s debts and subdivided. Although the area had been laid out by government surveyors, the landowners who bought into the Palmer subdivision

⁹ ‘Gadigal people have a unique affinity with Sydney’s harbour and lands’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 2017, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/gadigal-people-have-a-unique-affinity-with-sydneys-harbour-and-lands/news-story/e51e9e1d95ac5b07b781fbf74b0162ae>; Word Up: Lille Madden, AWAYE!, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/features/word-up/word-up/8051114>

¹⁰ A Phillip, *The voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay: with an account of the establishment of the colonies of Port Jackson & Norfolk Island*, Sydney 1982, p 51; cited Garry Wotherspoon and Chris Keating, *Surry Hills*, Dictionary of Sydney, 2009, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/surry_hills

¹¹ Paul Irish, *Hidden in Plain View: The Aboriginal people of coastal Sydney*, Sydney: UNSW Press 2017, 34

¹² Garry Wotherspoon and Chris Keating, *Surry Hills*, Dictionary of Sydney, 2009, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/surry_hills

¹³ City of Sydney, Eddie Ward Park, <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/sydneys-history/people-and-places/park-histories/eddie-ward-park>

ignored these ideals and the result was a jumble of streets, market gardens, quarries and brick kilns. When landowner Edward Riley suicided in 1825 the commission that decided his estate drafted boundaries that entrenched the line and fall of many of the streets of the area.¹⁴

The first substantial buildings in Surry Hills were erected in the 1820s. At the southern end was Daniel Cooper's Cleveland House, which still stands; John Terry Hughes' Albion House; and Samuel Terry's Albion Brewery, which used water from the creeks that drained the Devonshire Street (Sandhills) Cemetery.

Strawberry Hills was, by this stage, recognised for its beautiful, elevated position:

That beautiful estate at the end of Elizabeth-street, called Strawberry Hill, commanding a complete view of Sydney and its harbour, is positively to be brought to the hammer by Mr. Bodenham, to-morrow evening, at Sandwell's large room. The proprietor, we hear, has refused £2,000 for it before the sale.¹⁵

In 1832 Strawberry Hill Estate was subdivided and John Terry Hughes developed the Marylebone Estate around Marlborough and Lansdowne Streets. The area soon became an enclave of small wooden houses, generally owner-built. With the passing of the new *Building Act* in 1838 timber houses were banned from the City of Sydney and small-scale investors and owner-builders moved into Surry Hills to evade the controls. In 1842 John Frederick Hilly bought some of the villa sites on Strawberry Hill and subdivided them.¹⁶

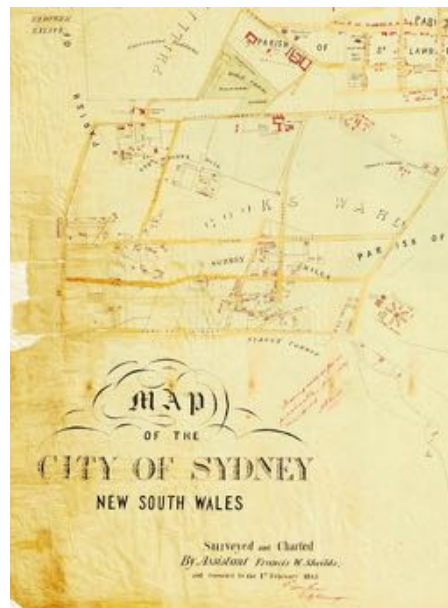


Figure 7: the site of John Northcott Place in 1845, *City of Sydney, Historical Atlas of Sydney*, <https://atlas.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/maps/city-of-sydney-sheilds-1845/>

The small villages began to coalesce into a suburb. The area became a desirable place to live, although Devonshire Street and Elizabeth Street suffered from proximity to the poorly-maintained Devonshire Street Cemetery, which was in operation from 1820 to 1867 and by the 1880s was extremely neglected.

¹⁴ Christopher Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*; Garry Wotherspoon and Chris Keating, *Surry Hills*, Dictionary of Sydney, 2009, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/surry_hills

¹⁵ "Eclipse Of The Moon." *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 9 March 1830: 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2194653>.

¹⁶ City of Sydney, Eddie Ward Park, <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/sydneys-history/people-and-places/park-histories/eddie-ward-park>

A suburb of working class terraces

In the 1860s the tangled streets were beginning to fill with the terrace houses that define the housing stock of the area to this day. Building activity coincided with pulses in the economy but by the 1890s, there were nearly 5,300 houses in Surry Hills and 30,000 residents. In 1891 Cook Ward, which covered Surry Hills and Moore Park, held 28 per cent of the population of the Sydney municipal area.



*Figure 8: 153 Devonshire Street. These terraces were demolished to make way for Northcott.
Sydney City Council Demolition Books NSCA CRS 51/1743.*

Surry Hills was a popular suburb for mechanics, skilled artisans, shopkeepers and the respectable working classes. The area was filled with flour mills, builder's yards, biscuit factories, steam laundries, blacksmith's workshops, saddleries and tanneries and women did piece work in the clothing trade. The public schools – Cleveland Street, Crown Street and Devonshire Street – and St Francis' and St Peter's Catholic schools were crammed with children. The northern end had a large Chinese population. Wharf work was a popular profession and many Aboriginal men worked as wharfies. Aboriginal women living in South Sydney worked for the Federal Match Factory in Alexandria, which was affectionately known as Wellington Matches because so many of the Aboriginal workers were originally from the NSW country town of Wellington. Other local industries where Aboriginal people worked were the Henry Jones & Co IXL Jam Factory on Golden Grove Street in Chippendale, Francis Chocolates on Stirling Street in Redfern, and the Australian Glass Manufacturers on South Dowling Street at Waterloo.¹⁷

As the population increased and houses became more closely packed, the quality of life for residents in Surry Hills began to dwindle. Landlords were reluctant to connect houses to the water supply and there was slow progress in providing sewerage and drainage. The 1890s depression exacerbated these ills and by 1900 large parts of the area had become a typical Edwardian slum, where illness and crime flourished. Large areas of the northern end were demolished to combat plague in the early 1900s – it so happened this removed most of the Chinese population from the area. Devonshire Street Cemetery was resumed in 1901 to make way for Central Station. The plague resumptions and the extension of Central Station did not improve the suburb's

¹⁷ Anita Heiss, Aboriginal labour in Sydney, Barani, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/aboriginal-labour-in-sydney/>

reputation. In the 1920s the area was rife with larrikinism, sly-grogging and razor gangs centred on Frog Hollow, on the corner of Albion Street and Crown Street, where Kate Leigh reigned.



Figure 9: A typical timber house. Little Devonshire Street, March 1901, Sydney City Council Demolition Books, NSCA CRS 51/72

Local charity networks

Despite the more nefarious elements of the suburb, or perhaps because of them, from the 1880s Surry Hills was the base for a substantial proportion of the charitable networks of Sydney. The Benevolent Society was based on Devonshire Street until its buildings were resumed for Central Station in 1900. The Sydney Rescue Work Society, which ran charities for unwed mothers, ‘fallen women’ and prisoners, was based nearby, in Commonwealth Street. The Sydney City Mission and St Vincent De Paul Society were active in the area. The Sisters of St Joseph set up St Margaret’s Hospital and Home for Unwed Mothers in Strawberry Hills in 1894. Government institutions followed – Crown Street Women’s Hospital moved to the area in 1897 and in 1912 the NSW Government built the Metropolitan Children’s Court and Shelter on Albion Street. These charitable and service networks have remained a feature of life in Surry Hills.

The deterioration of Surry Hills

Council continued trying to clean up Surry Hills, although the Great War interrupted development. The Sydney City Engineer embarked on a plan to reduce ‘unnecessary streets’ in Surry Hills in 1927, such as the Brisbane Street resumption, which disposed of a network of narrow streets with a bad reputation. By the 1930s Frog Hollow was largely demolished and its residents were relocated to the suburbs. However, The Depression of the 1930s brought new troubles that were documented in popular fiction by Ruth Park and Kylie Tennant. Kate Leigh had hung on and was ready to welcome the American soldiers brought to Sydney by World War II. The area remained troubled.

Still, the bustle of the wartime economy suited a workforce of wharfies, garment-makers, and factory workers and bulked out the pay packets of many breadwinners. Those who could afford to moved out to the suburbs and their departure weakened local community networks. The late 1940s was perhaps the lowest point in a long period of deterioration in the suburb and its population fell to 19,000. Its population continued

to fall, although it was held up by 1950s postwar migrants from Greece, Italy, Portugal and Lebanon who bought up the houses and the shops vacated by the older families.¹⁸

The advent of the NSW Housing Commission

The NSW Housing Commission was established in 1941 to address housing shortages and overcrowding. At the end of the war, McKell's Labor government estimated that New South Wales was short of 160,000 homes that should have been built but were not because of war and depression. The 300,000 homes in Sydney and the suburbs were 90,000 'short' of what was needed to house returning soldiers and the resulting baby boom, let alone displaced persons migrating from Europe, people from regional and rural areas relocating to the city, and a new wave of British migrants. These population pressures coincided with a chronic unavailability of rental properties and large-scale slum clearances in the inner-city. People crowded in with family members or found shelter in shanty communities at Narrabeen, La Perouse, Sutherland, Botany, Engadine, Riverstone, Manly Vale and Mt Colah or houseboats on the Parramatta River. They camped at Central Station and turned to emergency providers like the Salvation Army People's Palace.

The lack of housing affected a wide cross-section of ordinary Australian society and was not seen as a welfare issue – it was simply part of the postwar experience of living in Sydney. The Housing Commission set to work building new suburban developments and created temporary 'Community Housing Centres' on former defence force camps at Herne Bay (Riverwood), Hargrave Park (Warwick Farm) and Bradfield Park (West Lindfield).¹⁹ They also rapidly added new stock in the far western suburbs – Mt Druitt, Campbelltown and Green Valley. They were social laboratories but their failings were inbuilt – poverty ended up travelling to the west with those who left the inner-city to take up the new fibro and timber cottages.

Slum clearance – the Devonshire Street Remodelling and Housing Scheme

While the Housing Commission was busy providing houses, Sydney City Council was targeting slums, particularly in Surry Hills. The City Engineer identified O'Sullivan, Pearl and Pottery Streets as the 'pre-eminent area of decay'. There were 241 houses in the area and 21 business or factory buildings crammed into streets so narrow there was no light. Council officers declared 93 per cent of the buildings were substandard and the majority had inadequate lighting, ventilation or plumbing – the people lived with outdoor bathrooms, laundries, and dunnies 'down the back' and heated their water in coppers.²⁰

Council proposed demolishing all existing buildings in the area bounded by Devonshire, Marlborough, Landsdowne, Belvoir and Clisdell Streets and erecting 198 'healthy domiciles' that would house at least 900 people in four-storey blocks of two-bedroom flats, with three-bedroom twin houses for larger families. The flats would surround a central parkland with a children's playground and community centre.²¹

The problem was Council lacked the funds to realise its vision. In 1946 Council informed JJ Cahill, Minister for Public Works and Local Government that the area was inhabited by council and waterfront workers, pensioners and people with young families who paid rent as low as 10 shillings a week. Lord Mayor RJ

¹⁸ Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 117

¹⁹ Michael Hogan, Postwar emergency housing in Sydney - the camps that never were, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 97, No. 1, June 2011: 7–24.

²⁰ Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 103, 108–109

²¹ Sydney Council, *Devonshire Street area remodelling and housing scheme: area in vicinity of High Holborn, Devonshire, Clisdell, Belvoir and Lansdowne Streets : report*. City of Sydney, [Sydney, 1945]; Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 103, 108–109

Bartley said 'it was not possible to take these people to some other area. The only decent thing we can do is rehouse them.' The New South Wales Housing Commission took over the scheme in late 1947.²²

The Housing Commission redrew the plans into a bold, almost utopian vision.²³ In April 1948, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on plans for 'the Devonshire Street slum pockets' which 'sociologists regard as Australia's prime example of bad housing.' The Minister for Housing had visited England, Sweden and Denmark and was most impressed with the "star plan" of apartment layout favoured in Sweden.²⁴ The next month it reported 'Sunny flats will replace ... a congested slum block':

The flats have been designed on the "star plan," a recent development in Swedish architecture which, it is claimed, gives each flat maximum sunlight, air, and privacy. In the "star plan" the unit is a staircase with three flats grouped round it. This unit is repeated in various forms throughout.²⁵

Demolitions began in the 1950s, not just in Surry Hills but also in Redfern, where 1725 houses were cleared. The 'star plan' buildings were erected on Devonshire and Clisdell frontages in the early 1950s.

Dolly Wilson, one of the first residents of Northcott, lived in the area prior to the clearances. She said the tiny houses were often beset by sewerage and other problems: 'they were slums but it was home. A place to live. You never complained.'²⁶

Lipson's tower

By 1957 the NSW Government was considering erecting a 10-storey tower on the rest of the Devonshire Street site.²⁷ The tower was designed by Samuel Lipson, a prominent early Modern Movement architect.²⁸ Lipson was born in Leeds to Lithuanian parents and trained at Glasgow School of Arts and with Keppie and Henderson and Sir John Burnet before coming to Australia on an assisted passage in 1925. He joined the Commonwealth Department of Works at Customs House, Circular Quay and worked on Sydney University's Schools of Tropical Medicine and Veterinary Science and designed the Commonwealth Bank head office in Martin Place. In 1932 he set up his own practice, before going into partnership with Peter Kaad as Lipson and Kaad. They specialised in art deco cafes but were also influenced by Dutch architect Willem Dudok in their designs for the Hoffnung Building and Temple Emmanuel in Woollahra. During World War II, Lipson was seconded to build air-raid shelters and hostel buildings for war workers. Lipson claimed Northcott was the biggest project in Australia at the time.²⁹

²² Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 103, 108–109

²³ Fayroze Lutta, 'Sirius and the failed utopianism of brutalist architecture', *Overland*, 15 September 2016, <https://overland.org.au/2016/09/sirius-and-the-failed-utopianism-of-brutalist-architecture/>

²⁴ "'Star-Plan' Flats Will Replace City Slum" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April 1948: 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18069571>

²⁵ "Sunny Flats Will Replace..... A Congested Slum Block" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 1948: 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18071355>.

²⁶ *The Making of Modern Australia*, E02, 'The Australian Dream', ABC TV 2010.

²⁷ "Commission Flats for Surry Hills" *The Cumberland Argus*, 30 October 1957: 9. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article132131264>.

²⁸ Tanner Kibble Denton, *Modern Movement Architecture in Central Sydney, report prepared for City of Sydney*, Issue D March 2019, https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/316408/Modern-Movement-Architecture-in-Central-Sydney-heritage-study.pdf, 73

²⁹ Davina Jackson, Samuel Lipson (1901–1995), <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/samuel-lipson/biography/>

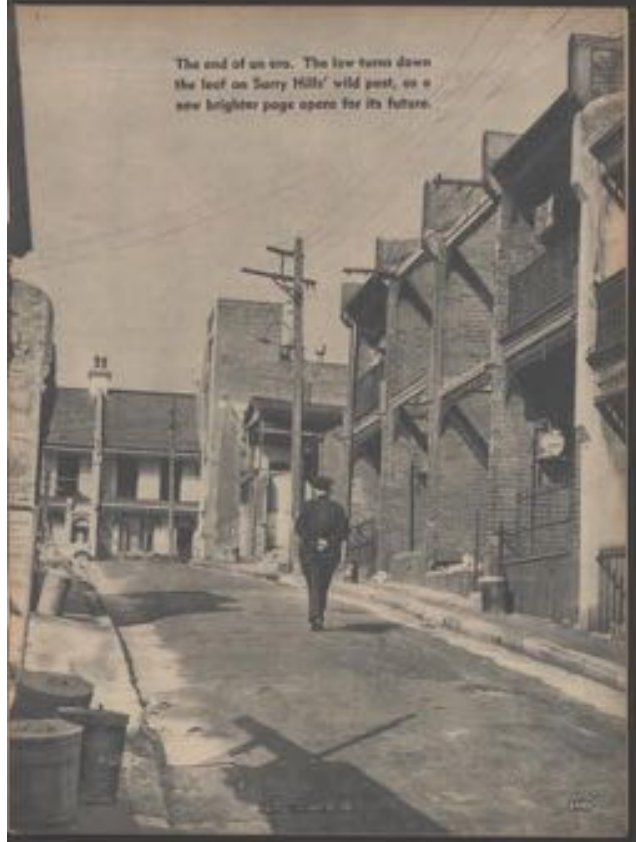


Figure 10: 'Death of a slum', Pix Vol. 24 No. 20 (20 May 1950)

Concrete Constructions won a £1.5 million contract to build the flats – then intended to be 15-storeys high – in 78 weeks.³⁰ When John Northcott Place tower opened it was 14-storeys high and had 428 flats. The Minister for Housing, Abe Landa, claimed it was ‘like a lot of houses I saw in Stockholm, Sweden, very beautiful indeed’.³¹ He considered the scheme was an outstanding example of what could be done in slum clearance and the ideal for Surry Hills.³²

Christopher Keating notes Northcott preserved Surry Hills as a residential area but at great cost:

The networks of support and sense of community were demolished along with the houses, and in the flats that replaced them the intangible values of community were never wholly revived. The new tenants of Northcott Place came from all over the metropolis and lacked the shared history and sense of place that had helped to sustain their predecessors. The people displaced from the terrace houses were scattered across Sydney: of the 288 families residing in the area only 43 were rehoused in the same locality.

The point that was lost on post-war planners and politicians was that the problems associated with slum neighbourhoods were not caused by housing conditions and could not be solved by pulling the houses down ... it was the symptom not the cause that was being attended to ... the social, economic and educational inequities that had dogged the residents of Pearl and Pottery Streets still flourished: the slum had not been eradicated, just modernised.³³

The beginnings of John Northcott Place

The foundation stone for John Northcott Place, named for the first Australian-born governor of NSW, was laid in 1959 and the building was opened to residents on 15 December 1961 by Premier RJ Heffron.³⁴ One of the first tenants, Mrs Dolly Wilson, remembered cutting the ribbon. She had experienced life in the slums of Devonshire Street but was elated by her new flat:

“... it looked like Hollywood when we came in here the way it was done up ... we’d never had a place like it in our lives, we both liked it, we moved in the next day ... we loved it.”³⁵

The first residents who lived in Northcott were low-income families, including war veterans and their dependants. The majority came from outside the local area.

The residents were surprised in March 1963 by a visit from Queen Elizabeth II. The original, bright 1960s colour scheme – cream, yellow and blue – is clear in the footage of the visit. She visited people on the fourteenth floor on Block B and inquired about housekeeping in the new flat and life on the model estate. The Queen seemed alive to the social impact of the new building. As Keating writes:

Resident Shirley Joyce remembers Queen Elizabeth ... surveying the remainder of Surry Hills from the 14th floor rooftop, coolly comment[ing] to NSW Housing Minister, Abe Landa, ‘You have a lot more slum clearance to do here.’³⁶

³⁰ “Tender Let For Giant Flat Block” *The Canberra Times*, 30 April 1959: 1. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128814392>.

³¹ *900 neighbours* [videorecording] / Big hArt production ; presented by Film Finance Corporation Australia, <https://vimeo.com/118093051>

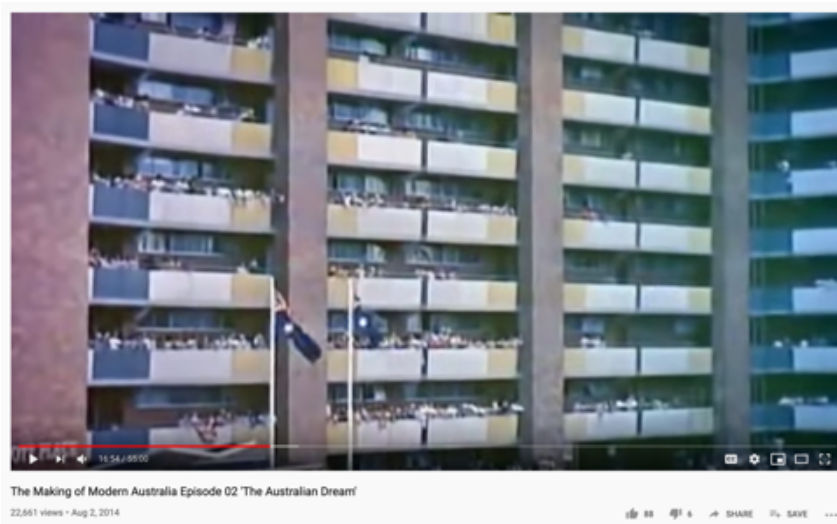
³² Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 111

³³ Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 113

³⁴ Government Printing Office images of these events are in the collections of the State Library of New South Wales but are blurred by their digitisation – better quality images can be ordered through their copying service.

³⁵ *The Making of Modern Australia*, E02, ‘The Australian Dream’, ABC TV 2010.

³⁶ Melinda Ham, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 2004 and Graeme Blundell, *The Australian*, 17 February 2007, cited Christopher Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 134–135



Aboriginal people's access to public housing

The Surry Hills slum clearances removed many of the houses occupied by Aboriginal families but there was little alternative accommodation. Aboriginal families received few of the government benefits awarded to non-Aboriginal families (such as child endowment and pensions) and suffered extreme discrimination by public housing officers. Those outside of Sydney who needed housing were subject to the repressive control of the Aborigines Welfare Board and obliged to live in reserves and managed stations outside of country towns or seek Exemption Certificates ('dog tags') to become non-Aboriginal citizens – no small task when racism remained rife. The Welfare Board began building new Aboriginal housing off major reserves in the early 1960s but the effect in many places was to create ghettos of substandard accommodation. The terrace-housing in 'The Block' – Caroline, Eveleigh, Vine and Louis Streets – had been an important base for Sydney families since the Great War and the Depression and it was a safe harbour and a welcoming community for country people during the worst years of the Aborigines Welfare Board.³⁷ It was also a home for people expelled from the slum clearances in Surry Hills and Redfern.

In 1965 a Joint Committee of the NSW Parliament recommended the responsibility for housing Aboriginal people be removed from the Aborigines Welfare Board to the Housing Commission and that Aboriginal people should be encouraged to live alongside non-indigenous people in the cities and towns. The 1967 Referendum effectively ended the reserve system in NSW and the exodus of Aboriginal people from reserves and stations put pressure on housing. The Housing for Aborigines Program was commenced by the Housing Commission in 1969, in an attempt to address the historical difficulty Aboriginal people had in accessing Housing Commission properties.³⁸ As a result, Aboriginal families, from Sydney but also wider New South Wales, began to take up public housing. Aboriginal people moved into John Northcott Place and the towers in Redfern and Waterloo. It is Gadigal land but it is shared with Wiradjuri, Darug, Dharawal, Gandangara, Gamilaroi and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all over Australia.

The Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) was formed in 1974 to protect The Block from developers. With Commonwealth Government funding, the AHC repaired The Block, attracting more Aboriginal people to the area. The result was overcrowding, and a concentration of social, economic and substance abuse problems that resulted from colonisation. The NSW Government formed the Redfern-Waterloo Authority in 2004 to develop the Redfern, Waterloo, Eveleigh and Darlington areas which include many complexes of high-rise public housing.³⁹ The Block is all but demolished now and many residents have moved into social housing in other parts of Sydney, including Northcott.

From 'Hollywood' to a failed experiment

Shirley Jones told Christopher Keating that Northcott Place did not remain a model for housing or anything else for long – the deinstitutionalisation of mental health care and integration of former patients into the community in the 1980s changed the population of Housing Department tenants. It also changed Northcott Place forever, bringing drug addiction, mania, crime and suicides. On 30 August 1990, Northcott resident Paul Evers killed five of his neighbours with a pump-action shotgun. Severely mentally ill, he was found guilty of manslaughter owing to diminished responsibility. 'The Surry Hills Massacre' lived long in people's

³⁷ Aboriginal Housing Company, Barani, <https://www.sydneymarani.com.au/sites/aboriginal-housing-company/>

³⁸ Morgan, George. Assimilation and resistance: housing Indigenous Australians in the 1970s, *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Aug 2000: 187-204.

³⁹ Zoe Pollock, Aboriginal Housing Company, Dictionary of Sydney, 2008, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/aboriginal_housing_company

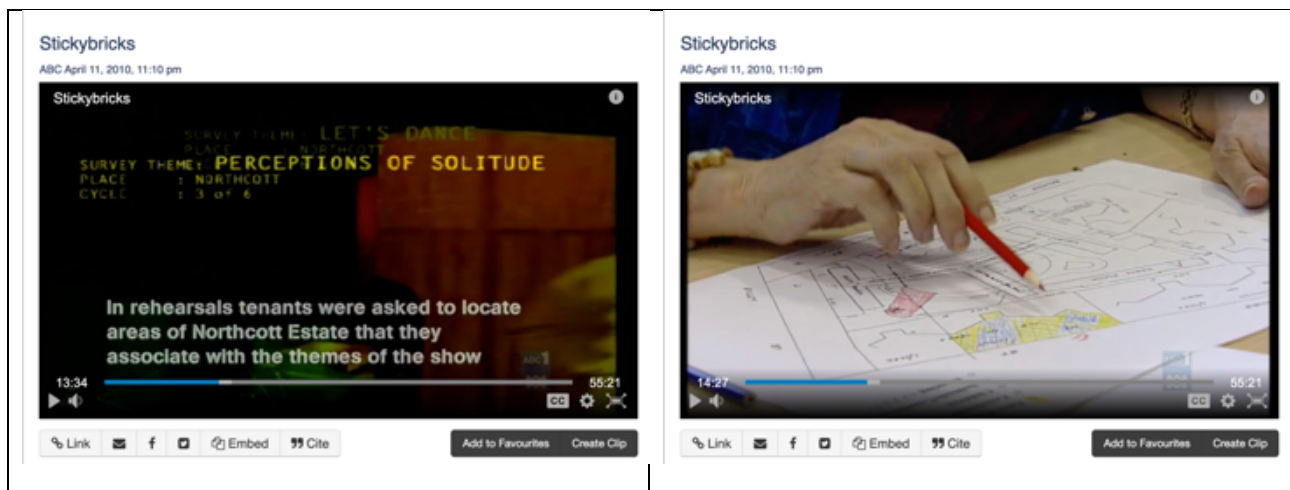
memories. In the 1990s, taxi drivers called John Northcott Place ‘Suicide Towers’ and drug addicts called it ‘the old bitch.’⁴⁰ The vertical suburb of 1000 residents had become severely dysfunctional. In 2001, the towers were the site of a gruesome double murder. Northcott was in a state of trauma and dysfunction and many tenants were fearful of leaving their flats. Some suggested the only solution was to bulldoze the site.

Building A Safe Community with art

From 2002, Sydney City Council, NSW Police, NSW Housing at St Vincent’s Hospital collaborated to address the issues in John Northcott Place. They employed community development workers and contracted a national arts and social change organisation called Big hART, led by Scott Rankin, to break down some of the negative perceptions of Northcott and rebuild a sense of spirit and place. The project culminated with a 2006 Sydney Festival performance piece called *Stickybricks*, which brought together Northcott tenants and high-profile actors and musicians to create a kind of utopian space in the centre of the estate.

Big hART took a community development approach to the project.⁴¹ There were certain challenges, such as the diversity and conflicting needs of tenants and the difficulty of engaging Russian and Chinese speaking tenants, and the need to work through chaos, conflict and turmoil. At the end of the project residents of Northcott felt grief at both the departure of Big hArt and the Crime Protection and Community Development officers. The installation and the project were both temporary and ephemeral, but the outcomes were measurable and positive.

Rankin and his team settled into Northcott for three years and used an ‘open crowd method’ of drawing people in, where workers moved through the building and were constantly present, but allowed residents to approach in their own time. Rankin likened this to the process of speaking and dancing that is part of corroboree, or coming together.⁴² The project based itself in the community centre and encouraged residents to reflect on the process of living in Northcott. They sat with workers and coloured in the zones in the building where residents knew there was love and caring, loneliness, loss, dancing, and where they had faced death – yellow for love and caring, “blue for a little bit of sadness.”



⁴⁰ Ham, Blundell, cited Keating, 134

⁴¹ Peter Wright and David Palmer, ‘People now know me for something positive’: An Evaluation of Big hArt’s work at the John Northcott Estate, Murdoch University, 2007, <http://www.peterwright.net.au/pdf/People%20now%20know%20me.pdf>

⁴² Wright and Palmer, p 60

A number of short films were produced during Big hART's residency and all residents received a kit called *Northcott Narratives*. A follow-up production, *900 Neighbours*, premiered at the Sydney Film Festival and was screened on ABC TV.⁴³ Its producer Brendan Fletcher described the work as a 'biography of this extraordinary building, whose present calm doesn't deny its past'.⁴⁴ The past was everywhere – even while *Stickybricks* was being made one of the tenants of Northcott Place died alone in his flat and no one noticed for six months.⁴⁵

900 Neighbours presents a lot of the darkness of living in Northcott. Resident Sara said televisions and microwaves were often thrown off the top balconies and she recalled a person suiciding from the top on the night of the 2000 Sydney Olympics: 'what was most disturbing is people saying "you'll get used to it" ... I don't want to get used to it.' Another resident, Pete, found a woman lying on the pavement dead, surrounded by coins: "She'd come from the tenth floor and she was robbing vending machines. She had been trying to make peace with someone with a bag of coins and they didn't want any part of it and over she went." A resident called Connie who had lived at Northcott for 46 years felt the area was haunted. She had been told by her parents, long-time residents of Surry Hills, that the site of Northcott was 'Hangman's Hill' and children were buried there – there were gallows on Elizabeth Street, at the eastern corner of the Protestant burial ground in Devonshire Street Cemetery, until around 1821.⁴⁶

The program also makes it clear that Northcott has positive elements. Sandy, from the Tenants' Association, said, "you don't have to be on your own in a building like Northcott – you've got 900 neighbours!" A child called Sasha said the place had a bad reputation and was called 'death flats' but she loved living there. She liked being able to call up to her mum to get her to throw down the things she had forgotten. Her mother Charmaine said that for a 500-metre radius around Northcott everyone knew Sasha, and felt she was safer in Northcott she would be in a suburb like Hurstville. Another young male resident spoke of being abused during his childhood, but said the older people in Northcott had taught him there was nothing to fear from them or others.⁴⁷

The feeling of living in the building came through these productions. The building looks like it's 'either a mental institution or a public hospital' or 'Starship Enterprise.' It has a particular sound:

'The building whistles from the wind and depending on the direction from which it comes from you can hear Colonel Bogey's March from the Bridge on the River Kwai.'⁴⁸

Many agreed there was a fabulous view from the top – as Scott Rankin says, the site is the highest point of Surry Hills and is exquisite real estate, coveted by the city's real estate developers.⁴⁹

⁴³ *900 Neighbours*

⁴⁴ Ham, Blundell, cited Keating, *Surry Hills: the city's backyard*, 134

⁴⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 2006, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/horrible-a-blokes-got-to-die-like-that-20060214-gdmyjc.html>


⁴⁶ "Execution of Alfred Reynolds." *Evening News*, 8 October 1886: 5. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article107320447>.

⁴⁷ *900 Neighbours*

⁴⁸ *Stickybricks*, ABC TV, 11 April 2010, <https://www.enhancetv.com.au/video/stickybricks/1026>

⁴⁹ *900 Neighbours*


Stickybricks
ABC April 11, 2010, 11:10 pm



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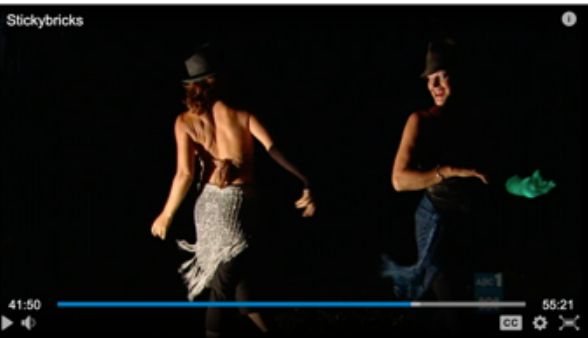
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The language of Northcott: sticky bricks and rendering stories

The social policy recommendations that emerged through the making of *Stickybricks* were:

1. Make people feel welcome
2. It's harder to hurt someone if you know their story
3. Say hello
4. Play is the work of childhood
5. You can't always get what you want
6. Hello, let's dance.

The program picked up the language of Northcott and rolled that into all its production. Key phrases included:

'It's harder to hurt someone if you know them'
'Say hello'
'Stickybricks'
'The grand old lady of Surry Hills has seen her fair share of dark days and shady characters'
'Right in the heart of Sydney, abutting the CBD, there's a little village we call home – Northcott'
'We're the audience'
'I moved in with six milk crates, a blanket and a black and white portable TV'
'I grow red geraniums along the corridor'
'My next door neighbour is marvellous, I don't know what I'd do without him'
'I mean there's always been stories flying around in the past ... Suicide Towers and you know. I used to call Northcott 'The Mausoleum', the death house. That was before I started to work at the Community Centre.'
'I'm gonna live to be a hundred and get me a telegram from the Queen. So I hope this old place is still here.'⁵⁰

Wright and Palmer found the monolithic Northcott building was inescapable but the project located strengths and positives in the fabric. The idea of 'Stickybricks' drew on the 'beautiful metaphor of rendering'. Project worker Chris Saunders said:

"We look at these bricks and this mortar that's been here for 45 years and we sort of thought, well, there's a lot of story stuck to the walls here, so that idea of the sticky bricks that have got these stories and narratives stuck to them".⁵¹

Wright and Palmer say Big hART's work involved rendering: rendering help, rendering language, rendering performance, (sur)rendering control – strengthening foundations with an extra coat to complete the process of building. The space and places were used to connect lives.⁵²

The project concluded in 2006, but crime was falling and for the previous two years there had been no suicides at John Northcott Place. The place was also reimagined, for residents as well as for the attendees of the four sold-out *Stickybricks* shows. The project led to a renaissance in the community centre, as well as positive outcomes like the formation of the Surry Hills Tenants' Association.

⁵⁰ Wright and Palmer, 56–57

⁵¹ Fitzsimmons 2006, cited Wright and Palmer, 57

⁵² Wright and Palmer, 57–58

A Safe Community

In 2006, as a result of the positive social outcomes generated by this community-building exercise, John Northcott Place became the first public housing estate in the world to be recognised by the World Health Organisation as a 'Safe Community'.⁵³ Sydney Mayor Clover Moore celebrated this success:

... tenants have blossomed and grown, and the results show in the well-used community room, the groups and classes running. Many tenants now say hello to their neighbours where they were previously fearful. Crime and vandalism are still challenging, but there is a real strength and positive spirit, reflecting tenants who care about their community.⁵⁴

Keating notes that Surry Hills has gentrified in the last 20 years but community spirit has returned to the area. He notes the important place for Northcott residents within that community:

[Chairwoman of the Surry Hills Tenants' Association Sandy] Henderson says it is still difficult to keep the community spirit going at Northcott Place ... But what all these lives attest to is that Surry Hills has achieved something truly remarkable: it has survived and is now prospering as a valued residential community within the heart of a rapidly changing global city against enormous odds and determined efforts to pull it down brick by brick. The residents of Northcott Place are perhaps the bravest survivors of all.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ham, Blundell, cited Keating, 134; A Spinks, C Turner, J Nixon, RJ McClure, The 'WHO Safe Communities' model for the prevention of injury in whole populations. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2009, Issue 3. Art. No.: CD004445. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004445.pub3

⁵⁴ CLOVER'S eNEWS – Friday 15 December 2006 - No. 327, cited REDwatch, <http://www.redwatch.org.au/media/061215clover1/>

⁵⁵ Keating, *Surry Hills: The City's Back Yard*, 134