

City of Epitaphs

By Megan Hicks

Abstract

The pavement lies like a ledger-stone on a tomb. Buried underneath are the remains of fertile landscapes and the life they once supported. Inscribed on its upper side are epitaphic writings. Whatever their ostensible purpose, memorial plaques and public artworks embedded in the pavement are ultimately expressions of civic bereavement and guilt. The pavement's role as both witness and accomplice to fatality is confirmed by private individuals who publicize their grief with death notices graffitied on the asphalt. To walk the city is to engage in a dialogue about death.

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City of Epitaphs

Nothing exists except by virtue of a disequilibrium, an injustice. All existence is a theft paid for by other existences; no life flowers except on a cemetery.

Remy de Gourmont
1899

Green fields

I am visiting a colleague who works at Macarthur, on the south-western fringes of Sydney. At lunchtime we go for a walk. The landscape here is undulating and a grey concrete path links the university and the technical institute to the railway station. It curves across a wide, grassy recreation area that was once agricultural land established in the early days of the colony. Near the top of the rise – where the path becomes a footbridge over both the railway line and a creek-bed overgrown with saplings and bent shopping trolleys – neat inscriptions in black felt-tipped pen decorate the edges of the concrete. Alongside various jokes and romantic messages there are some dedicated to “Alex 1993-2008”: “Rest in Peace ... Your our angel ... I miss u so much babe!”



Figure 1: *Rest in peace Alex!*, Macarthur, NSW, near the railway station.

On the opposite side of the station there is a shopping square, with a fountain, outdoor eating areas and café umbrellas. It is paved with synthetic granite tiles in geometric patterns, and set into these are long metal plaques carrying quotations cast in shining brass. “all the paspalum everywhere that would stick to your legs”, they read, “driving home with the sun setting in your eyes”, and “It was my father’s, and my father’s father’s, before that”.

I take photographs of all these things because I am interested in footpaths and roadways, plazas and parking lots. I habitually study their surfaces; I record any writing I find there; I am looking for revelations about the city. Gradually I am learning how the role of the pavement transcends mere functionality. And here in Macarthur, this green-field-development-becoming-a-city, I find evidence of something I have already suspected.

Now I revisit my photographs of other inscriptions, taken in different places, and I search through them for confirmation. This is what I have discovered – that the pavement is an active participant in city rituals of sacrifice, mourning, remembrance and guilt.¹

Death sentences

To begin with, the pavement itself is an inscription, the script for a morbid ceremony performed at the formation of a city. This is apparent on development estates like Macarthur, where roads, kerbs and gutters precede other construction works. The interlocking strokes and loops of streets and cul-de-sacs form giant characters imprinted on the otherwise bare land. Translated, this lettering spells out sentences like “The pastures here have been flattened and the livestock removed. The orchards that once grew at this place have been felled. The woodland that covered these hills has been bulldozed.”

Two centuries ago, the formation of Sydney-town preceded any formal survey. Its layout was determined by the course of a little stream running into a cove of the harbour, around which the initial dwellings were clustered. But within a short time, the valley and its sandstone ledges would be branded by the same surveyor’s gridiron that was to mark the site of Melbourne and of other frontier towns of the New World. A seal impressed on the living landscape, the grid signified civilisation’s appropriation of wild regions.²

Burial

As Sydney developed from a town into a city, the Tank Stream would be covered over, becoming a stormwater drain and sometime sewer, running below the streets. Sydney Cove would be filled in and a semi-circular quay would be built in its place. By the late 20th century civic embellishments would see the original shoreline of the cove commemorated by an irregular arc of decorative brass studs set into the paving surrounding the quay. The course of the stream would be

marked by a series of glass and stainless steel pavement artworks, inscribed with quotations from the journal of First Fleeter, Captain Watkin Tench.³

On the streets themselves, footways would be paved with flagstones, and later the carriageways would be surfaced with woodblocks. Over time these materials would be replaced by asphalt, concrete and smart bluestone flagging. Beneath the paving lie sandy inlets, reclaimed marshes, hewn trees, trampled wildflowers, and the remains of exterminated animals. Beside these covered remains there also lie middens, rock carvings and other vestiges of the lives of Indigenous people, left behind as those people were driven away.⁴ All sacrificed in the name of progress.

In the 1890s workmen repairing a city street would dig up a paving slab and find it to be the gravestone of Boatsman George Graves, who had been a crew member of the First-Fleet ship the Sirius, and who had died in 1788.⁵ In 1936 road works would uncover an ironbark pile from a bridge built over the Tank Stream in 1802.⁶ These are just some of the archaeological relics revealed by re-paving.

The making and maintenance of streets and footpaths in a city is a process of burial, disinterment and re-burial. The pavement is the ledger stone on a tomb.

Civic monuments

In graveyards we are accustomed to looking downwards to read because, among the standing headstones there are also horizontal slabs of stone or marble. We must bend over to study the life and death details inscribed on these ledger stones. It is the same in lawn cemeteries. As we walk the rows we bow our heads to read the plaques at our feet.

On city streets civic authorities, recognizing the tomb-like qualities of the pavement, have transposed the tradition of the funereal inscription from cemetery rows to cement sidewalks. So, although our eyes are generally drawn to shop windows, tall buildings and vertically mounted signs and advertisements, if we instead glance downwards we will find death notices beneath our feet. Memorial plaques and pavement installations in the city, whether miniature monuments, digests of historical information for tourists, or commissioned public artworks, are epitaphic. They have turned the pavement-as-ledger into a roll call of lost lives.

Let me offer some examples. Occasionally small memorial plaques are fixed to the pavement. These mark the association of a particular place with a local identity, a demolished building, a past event. Inconspicuously tucked against walls, they are probably only noticed by the most committed of pavement readers. Whatever the motivations and machinations that resulted in the production of any particular plaque, commemorative obligations are often discharged at the time of its laying.⁷

But not all memorial plaques are licenses to forget. One exception is located in Newtown, on the fashionable *inner* fringes of Sydney. Syd "Black Santa" Cunningham was a philanthropist who used to sit outside the Woolworths supermarket collecting money and toys for rural children.⁸ After he died in 1999 a bronze plaque was installed at the spot where he set up his folding table, complete with a depiction of his plastic money bucket. Syd's plaque has since become the focal point for beggars who keep his memory alive by collecting for themselves.



Figure 2: Syd (Doc) Cunningham ... *Black Santa* plaque,
King Street, Newtown, NSW.

The existence of such beggars is made more poignant by a set of five municipal footpath mosaics just around the corner in Church Street, all but one representing local churches in ceramic words and pictures. In essence, the four religious works memorialise the dead, whether victims of a shipwreck buried in St Stephen's churchyard, or Baptists who are "Buried with Christ" and "Risen with Christ". The incongruous fifth mosaic is a gaudy representation of two lizards in the style of "Aboriginal art". Intended as a gesture of inclusion, it is supposed to acknowledge the original inhabitants of the district. Instead, it further marginalises Aboriginal people by committing them to the ground amongst the dead memorialised on the other mosaics.

Unlike small memorial plaques, pavement installations commissioned by city authorities are intentionally conspicuous, but whether their ostensible purpose is to provoke reflection, historical awareness, congratulation or admiration, the ultimate effect is the same. Wittingly or unwittingly, they are all obituaries.

Such is the case with the Writers Walk on the promenade at Circular Quay, the tourist precinct where day trippers catch ferries across Sydney Harbour. The stated purpose of this series of plaques is to demonstrate the "evolutionary process [that] continues to channel the thoughts and perceptions, the hopes and the fears of writers who have known this great city and its people".⁹ Perceptions of the

Here on the walkway at Circular Quay – and also in Kings Cross, where one hundred plaques eulogise that quarter of the city for its retrospective reputation as a bohemian and "colourful" place – bereavement for lives lost or left behind is the underlying theme, and the literary quotation is the secular equivalent of a reading from the scriptures.

In other pavement artworks, transcribed fragments of all-but-lost Indigenous Language substitute for the literary quote. There is such an installation beside the wall that separates Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens from the harbour. In it "figures from Sydney rock carvings – some of which no longer exist – are depicted in terrazzo and stained concrete ... [and] along the kerb, the names of women, men, places, animals, tools and rituals from the many Indigenous clans in the Sydney area are etched in red".¹⁴



Figure 4: Part of the *Wuganmagulya* pathway installation, Farm Cove, Sydney, NSW.

There is a comparable sculpture across the harbour at Manly Wharf, where the ferries from Circular Quay arrive. Radially arranged stainless steel plaques introduce seaside holiday-makers to Manly's municipal self-image, with references to decommissioned ferries and dead historical figures.¹⁵ In a section of the sculpture that depicts now marginalised or invisible flora and fauna – the latter including “local clans (1788)” – rock-art motifs have once again been appropriated for public art. And once again, these “Aboriginal” pictures are accompanied by nouns salvaged from the debris of European contact.



Figure 5: *darangarra ... cabbage tree*, part of the *Shell* installation, Manly Wharf, NSW.

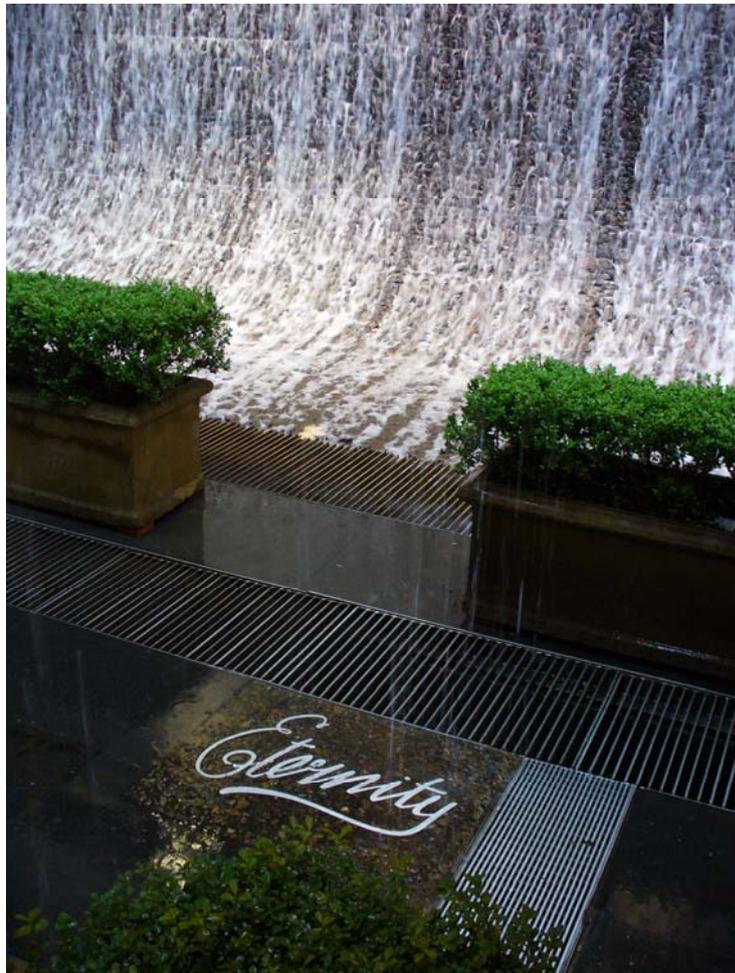
Mortality

Sydney is not the only city where official decorations on the ground have an elegiac quality. Around the world, either deliberately or unconsciously, civic plazas, community mosaics, commemorative plaques, and interactive light installations mark the passing of previous existences. But in Sydney especially, the epitaph is a persistent feature of the pavement.

Reproduced on one of the "Writers Walk" plaques at Circular Quay is the quote: "The majesties of nature and the monstrosities of man have a cheek by jowl evidence in Sydney more insistent, I think, than in any other city in the world".¹⁶ The beaches, the harbour, the remnants of natural bush are unavoidable reminders of what else has been destroyed by the city's spread. It is guilt that drives civic authorities and commercial interests to memorialise on the pavement what the pavement itself has obliterated. Often praised or condemned by more sober cities for the fun-loving or shallow-minded lifestyle of its citizens, Sydney is in fact haunted by death.

It is significant that this city should have adopted as its motto the one-word sermon of an eccentric evangelist who chalked his message on its footpaths for 30 years. That iconic word, "Eternity", flashed on the Harbour Bridge in 2000 Olympic fireworks displays, and now preserved in stainless steel on the pavement of Town Hall Square, offers the hope of redemption but only by calling attention to the certainty of death.¹⁷

Figure 6: *Eternity*, Town Hall Square, Sydney, NSW.



Public mourning

The role the pavement plays as tomb or cenotaph is continuous. The events commemorated on its surface may be distant in time or recent. In the city, public death is always a possibility and the pavement can be both witness and accomplice to fatality. We are reminded of this by the marks and stains that daily appear on the pavement's surface – stencilled body-outlines at danger spots warning pedestrians to "Cross carefully", dreadful skid marks at intersections, spray-painted symbols where police have marked out accident sites, and perhaps even splashes of blood on cement or asphalt.

These marks extend to death notices posted by mourners after someone has died unexpectedly. With spray cans, chalk and felt-tipped pens, their private anguish is made a matter of public announcement. It is evident that the pavement's epitaphic inscriptions are not only cast by commissioned artists – they are also scrawled by amateur graffiti artists who deliberately choose the pavement as their noticeboard.

Sometimes I have been able to learn the stories behind these public-private memorials. A few years ago, for example, a temporary shrine for Edison Berrio appeared in Sydney's central business district near the place where he had been shot twelve months earlier. Suspecting him of theft, police had surrounded and fired on him before he could get out of his car. Angry at official inaction, Edison's friends held a vigil on the anniversary of his death.¹⁸ They tied flowers to a tree and wrote messages on the asphalt: "Rest in peace Edison", they chalked, "Cops kill ... No justice!". For several days the incongruously large letters chalked across the footpath drew the attention of office workers, reminding them of the unresolved fatality that had happened so close to the district's legal offices and courthouses.



Figure 7: *RIP Edi ... Cops kill ... Rest in peace Edison*, King Street, Sydney, NSW.

A different kind of graffiti memorial, but with similar political intent, was chalked on Newtown's shopping strip after teenager TJ Hickey died. A few kilometres away TJ had been impaled on a fence as a police car followed his bicycle.¹⁹ A protest riot broke out in Redfern, a largely Aboriginal suburb, and body outlines were drawn on Newtown footpaths, where local social activists would see them. Slogans written beside the body shapes read "Stop racist police brutality ... Cops kill children ... To kill an Aboriginal is to kill history".²⁰



Figure 8: *To kill an Aboriginal is to kill history*, King Street, Newtown, NSW.

Less ephemeral was an unofficial plaque fixed to the asphalt at another spot in Newtown's main street. It lasted some years until the footpath was resurfaced with synthetic granite pavers. Just two words were engraved on this small oval sign, "Alison Gooch". It marked the spot where Alison had been killed early one morning when a car mounted the kerb and struck her as she was walking by the shops.²¹

And again in Newtown, a district renowned for its wall art, one of the most enduring pieces of graffiti is a floral tribute, not on a wall but on a busy traffic island. The flowers were painted under the direction of Kathy Jones during a day-long "Reclaim the streets" demonstration. Kathy was an artist and social activist who worked with disadvantaged people in the Newtown area. When she died a few months after the protest party her friends turned the island into a memorial, reasoning that she would have wanted local people to know why she wasn't around any more. They cleaned what remained of the pavement artwork and coated it with marine varnish, and they taped a notice with her photograph to a light pole.²² Years later the flowers are only now beginning to seriously fade.



Figure 9: Flowers, King Street, Newtown, NSW.

Death notices and spontaneous shrines appear on the ground in other parts of the city.²³ If I have not written about them here it is because I have not yet found out their background stories. But it is clear that when mourners use the pavement to publicize their grief it is not simply because asphalt is a conveniently blank slate to scribble on. They choose the pavement for their graffiti because of its active role in the fatality or its aftermath. It is the site of that very public death (a city street, a suburban footpath); it is the conveyance that bore the vehicles involved (the cars, the bicycle, the police vehicles); it is the footway where members of a particular audience will pass by (the legal workers, the activists and

street people); it was once significant to the person who has died (the contested ground over which Reclaim the Street protestors struggled).

Or it holds importance, not for the death event or the deceased, but for the mourners themselves. Those felt-tip farewells in the sub-city of Macarthur were for former local teenager Alex Wildman. Alex had moved with his family to a distant country town, but committed suicide after being bullied at his new school.²⁴ Denied the chance to attend his funeral so far away, his former classmates must have met on that footpath near the railway station to share their feelings. Judging from other graffiti on this pavement-over-a-paddock, it is a favourite place for teenagers to sit around and talk. It would have been natural for them to choose this spot to write their epitaphs for Alex.

Passage

Without the pavement there is no city. It both suppresses life and supports it. It is a durable slab that barely contains the dead, and its epitaphian inscriptions are a constant admonishment to the living.

Far from being a passive backdrop, the pavement is an active player in the drama that is the city. The symbolic importance of its role is appreciated by civic authorities who know that its appearance is a reflection of the city's self-image.

When Sydney was preparing for the 2000 Olympics, central city streets were resurfaced, kerbs rebuilt, asphalt footways replaced with bluestone flagging. A series of sculptures was commissioned, several of them embedded horizontally in the pedestrian precincts of the city, the airport and the Olympic site. Reviewing this bloom of public installations, art analyst Susan Best noted her approval of those that engaged with the history of their site, remarking that "because many of the artists involved in these recent programs work with the space of installation itself, their work is most effective when it can enter into a dialogue with the surrounding space".²⁵ Indeed. Except that, with pavement inscriptions, there is no "when" or "if". The pavement and the tracings upon it, from commissioned art to spontaneous graffiti, *always* enter into a dialogue with the surrounding space. Nor is that dialogue only between the pavement and its locale – the people passing by are included in the dialogue as well.

The pavement, the place, and the people of the city are engaged in a conversation, and the overriding topic of that conversation is death.

Megan Hicks is undertaking a postgraduate research project at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, based on her photographs of pavement inscriptions in urban and rural areas. Her blog site, Pavement Graffiti, is at www.meganix.net/pavement. Megan was a curator at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney for many years and now works as a curatorial consultant.

Notes

- 1 This essay is dedicated to Noel Sanders, formerly of the University of Technology Sydney, who showed me how to see dead people.
- 2 Brown-May (1998: xxiii, 1-3) refers to 'the gridiron pattern of the surveyor' that preceded Melbourne and other frontier towns, and discusses the symbolism of the grid. Johnson (2008: 28-31) describes how the plan for Sydney was a grid layout, pre-prepared in England and imbued with sephic symbolism, superimposed on the slopes of Sydney Cove.
- 3 *Tankstream - Into the head of the cove* by artist Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, described in City of Sydney (2005).
- 4 Woodford (2008: 55-56) writes: 'Underneath your shoes, past the asphalt, concrete and ruins of buried colonial and twentieth century buildings lies a place called Weerong ... From a few holes under one building have come a thousand stone artefacts. The implication is that under the whole of the central business district it is likely that a treasure trove of Sydney's prehistory is entombed'.
- 5 Howard (1984: 12).
- 6 Powerhouse Museum collection D10331 (Sydney).
- 7 Murray (2008:150) mentions how understandings of cultural history can be enhanced by knowing the story behind the erection of particular official memorials. She also asks whether the commemorative process of installing a memorial or plaque becomes "a self-fulfilling prophecy, externalising the memory so it can be forgotten".
- 8 Jopson (1999).
- 9 *Writers Walk* plaque, Circular Quay East, Sydney.
- 10 Clive James, *Unreliable memoirs* (1980), quoted on Writers Walk plaque, Circular Quay, Sydney.
- 11 Rudyard Kipling, *Something of myself* (1937), quoted on Writers Walk plaque, Circular Quay East, Sydney.
- 12 Judith Wright, *Two dreamtimes* (1973), quoted on Writers Walk plaque, Circular Quay, Sydney.
- 13 Germaine Greer, *Journal of the plague year* (1988), quoted on Writers Walk plaque, Circular Quay, Sydney.
- 14 *Wuganmagulya (Farm Cove)* by Aboriginal artist Brenda L. Croft, described in City of Sydney (2005).
- 15 These plaques are associated with the mist sculpture *Shell* by Urban Art Projects, described by Manly Council Public Art Committee (2006).
- 16 George Johnston, *Clean straw for nothing* (1969), quoted on Writers Walk plaque, Circular Quay East, Sydney.
- 17 For discussion of Arthur Stace and his 'Eternity' inscription see, for example, Kirkpatrick (1997) and Hicks (2006).
- 18 Anonymous (2001) and articles in the Sydney Morning Herald and other Sydney newspapers, 2000 and 2001.
- 19 Anonymous (2004) and articles in the Sydney Morning Herald and other Sydney newspapers, February-March 2004.
- 20 I speculate on the use of 'crime scene' body outlines in protest demonstrations in Hicks (2009).
- 21 Anonymous (1996).
- 22 Lisa Jackson Pulver and Mark Jackson Pulver, pers.comm. 2009.
- 23 Santino (2005: 5ff) coined the term 'spontaneous shrines' for public memorials erected by mourners after a sudden or shocking death, and pointed out the political nature of these shrines.
- 24 McDougall (2008) and articles in this and other Sydney newspapers, July-August 2008.
- 25 Best (2000).

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