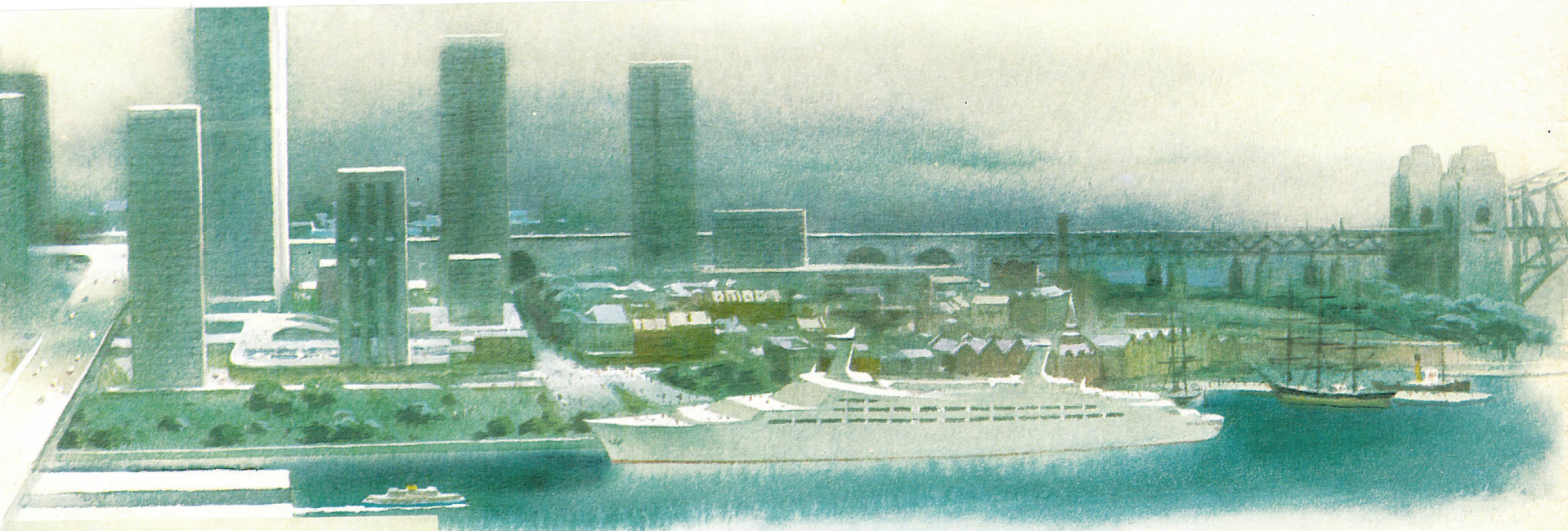


The Rocks—New Role for the Cradle of a Nation

By Anthony M. Paul

Reprinted from The Reader's Digest, May 1973



John Allcot's painting of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove, with The Rocks area on the right

The Rocks—New Role for the Cradle of a Nation

ANTHONY M. PAUL

Long notorious for its tosspots and fleshpots, Sydney's lusty old quarter will soon be a model of modern urban planning

THE ROCKS, that fabled area of Sydney, always seems to have been associated with Australian "firsts." Indeed, some members of the Royal Australian Historical Society, disputing the government viewpoint, insist that the nation itself was founded here. The first flag-raising by Governor Arthur Phillip took place at nearby Loftus Street, on January 26, 1788, now celebrated as Australia Day.

Whatever the truth of this moment of conception, there can be no doubt about The Rocks' central role

during the nation's foetal stages and birthpangs. Through the 19th century this glorious jumble of pubs and churches, terraces and bond-stores, crouched around the massive southern reaches of Sydney's Harbour Bridge, kept step with Australia's changing fortunes.

At various times, it has been the site of our first fort, warehouse, wharf, flour mill and bakery, tavern, brothel and jail. On to the beaches below what was then a rock-strewn, sparsely scrub-covered ridge, the First Fleet disgorged our convict

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forebears and their warders. Contemporary paintings of the craggy headland with its massive sandstone outcrops explain why The Rocks is aptly named.

Here Governor Phillip placed our first hospital (now the site of the local police station), half a mile away from the centre of the new colony of tents and huts, today roughly in the area of Bridge and Grosvenor Streets (see map). The cluster of shacks around the hospital became, therefore, Australia's first suburb, and the irregular track linking The Rocks with "downtown" our first street. (Originally known as Sergeant Major's Row and then Spring Row, it was, in 1810, renamed in honour of George III.) When the colonies were on hard

times, The Rocks became our first slum. Later, when the first gold shipments left The Rocks for London, mansions sprouted on its heights.

Over the next decade or so, as we face the daunting task of making the late 20th-century city a fit place for Australians, this promontory west of Sydney Cove will have a new role—and another "first" to chalk up. The Rocks is being recreated under an ambitious scheme launched by the Sydney Cove Re-development Authority. In a \$500-million rehabilitation adapting the most advanced ideas from similar historic-centre projects in San Francisco, Paris and London, this former slum will be turned into a city quarter blending the best of Australia's contemporary hotel, office

and residential architecture with faithfully restored buildings evocative of our colourful, if raffish, past. Says architect and town-planner Walter Bunning, "The Rocks could become the prototype of a new pattern for urban development, an embodiment of the hopes and aspirations of the ordinary Australian."

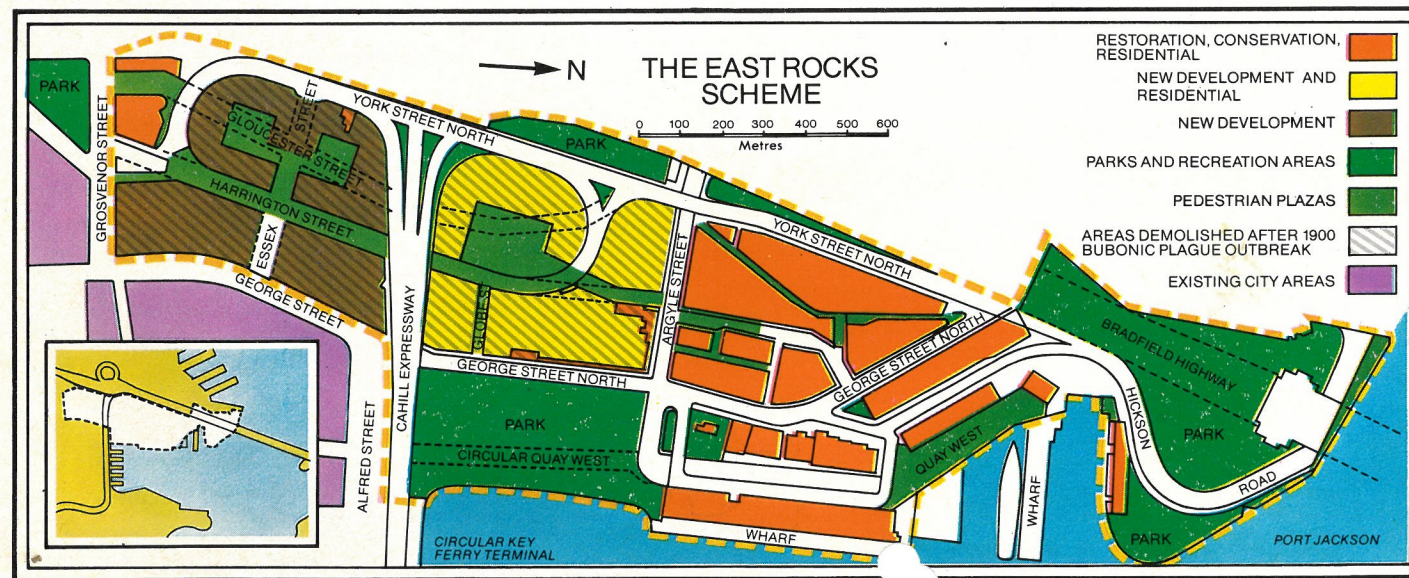
Gallows Hill. No matter what kind of an Australian you are—who your parents or priests are, what you do for a living—you'll find some fragment of your origins in The Rocks. You're a businessman? Well, Australian business began here—at the Commissariat Store, where, as the 19th-century chronicler J. M. Forde noted, "the first storekeeper was His Most Gracious Majesty, his general manager, one Arthur

Phillip." At first housed in tents, these stores were later transferred to a fine sandstone building erected in 1812 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie. The Commissariat's foundation stone survives, resting beside The Rocks' memorial to Phillip.

An incident concerning Phillip's stores has a special significance if you're a lawyer or policeman (or a criminal). From a tree a few yards south of the point where the Circular Quay railway emerges from its hillside tunnel, the first man was hanged just one month after the First Fleet's arrival. He was a young convict called Thomas Barrett, who had been caught stealing food.

One of the earliest buildings in The Rocks was the jail. In the early 19th century, Sydney had a fair claim to being the most blighted place in the kingdom, and the jail, on the corner of George and Essex Streets, was the most blighted spot in Sydney. Built to accommodate 200, by 1834 it was holding 284 males and 42 females. Respectable citizens complained that the jailyard gibbets, which could hang seven at a time (or, as one jailer observed, "six comfortably"), presented an unseemly spectacle in the centre of the town. Soon the jail was closed, the prisoners moved elsewhere. Today the Commercial Hotel stands on the site. Nearby is a tiny square of lawn and trees, a tranquil remnant of the grassy slopes of Gallows Hill, a popular picnic spot on good hanging days.

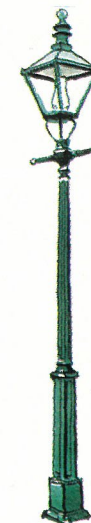
jail may have been banished



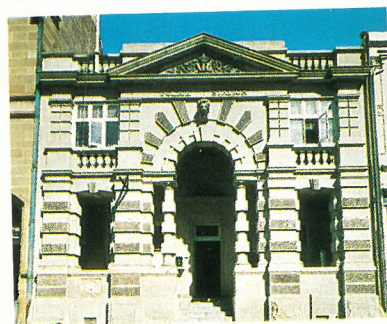
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PHOTOS: ROBERT M. MCINTYRE



Examples of period street furniture which will be re-erected in selected parts of The Rocks



Top left: The Argyle Bond, which now houses an art centre, Australiana museum and restaurant. Top right: The Metcalfe Bond, begun in the 1820s, will be preserved as a significant architectural site. Above left: George Street North police station, built where the nation's first hospital once stood. Above: Restored town and terrace houses in George Street. Left: Part of the craggy promontory behind Playfair Street that gave the area, Australia's first suburb, its name



Left: The old Ordnance Stores, one of the links with our past that survived razing to eradicate bubonic plague. Below: Previously derelict terrace houses in historic Playfair Street, now restored and occupied



from The Rocks, but through the whole of the 19th century the low life remained. Of the scores of pubs which once stood in The Rocks, some of the most interesting remain, among them the *Lord Nelson*, the oldest licensed premises still operating in Sydney, and the *Hero of Waterloo*. The latter hotel is a fascinating reminder of the days when Australia's eastern seaboard was notorious for the press-ganging of ships' crews. At the *Hero of Waterloo* today, favoured guests will be shown a tiny room beneath the bar. A trapdoor in the bar's floor, it is said, dropped many a rum-sodden customer into night-long oblivion when the barman pulled a lever. About mid-morning, the victim would wake with a terrible hang-over in the hold of a ship which had just cleared Sydney Heads. The abductees would then learn the penalty for a night on The Rocks—join the crew or rot.

Some social historians believe that The Rocks furnished the world with nothing less than our national image. "The careless raffish scrounger, resistant to authority and independent as a native porcupine, is much more typical of The Rocks than of The Bush," says author Olaf Ruhen. "There's no doubt that this tough little quarter did much to create the reputation in which Australians have self-consciously basked for a long time."

Rocks larrikinism reached its high point late in the last century, when a notorious gang of delinquents

roamed the area. The Rocks Push, they were called, immortalized in Henry Lawson's ballad, "The Captain of the Push," the tale of a youth

... bottle shouldered, pale and thin:

He was just the beau-ideal of the Sydney larrikin.

E'en his hat was most suggestive of the place where Pushes live, With a gallows-tilt that no one, save a larrikin, can give.

Rats and Fleas. As the new century and Federation arrived, and suburban rectitude became our life-style, this Sodom-within-Sydney paid for the past century's sins in an appropriately biblical fashion. On January 19, 1900, a Rocks resident, a van driver named Payne, was taken ill. Five days later, sombre doctors informed the New South Wales Premier that the man was suffering from the plague.

In the near-panic which followed, the government resumed the whole of The Rocks. Over the next decade or so, block after block was razed, as officials sought to exterminate The Rocks' rats and their plague-carrying fleas, and to make the area more suited to burgeoning 20th-century Sydney.

But though some rebuilding was carried out in George Street, The Rocks languished for decades. In the twenties, the southern approaches to the Harbour Bridge split The Rocks in two; many fine colonial buildings had to be cleared from the top of the ridge. As we entered the

affluent sixties, Sydney had begun to change into one of the world's leading metropolises. North and east of the Cove, glittering new skyscrapers sprouted yearly. On neighbouring Bennelong Point, the grand white sails of the Sydney Opera House began to billow. Only The Rocks remained unchanged, somnolent, grubby.

Then, three years ago, an event scarcely noticed by the public began to alter this situation. The N.S.W. Government formed the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (SCRA), placed the East Rocks in its charge and called on the newly appointed executive director, Owen Magee, a young retired army colonel and history buff, for a rehabilitation scheme which would do justice to the area.

The project, now well and truly under way, emphasizes preservation of the most significant historical and architectural sites in the East Rocks, including Cadman's Cottage (Sydney's oldest building still standing), the Argyle Bond and the Metcalfe Bond, all of which date from about 1820. In the principal conservation area north of Argyle Street, the buildings are being preserved where possible, and in some instances extensively rebuilt. The scheme will not cost taxpayers a cent: rents from new shops, office and apartment blocks and hotels to be built in the area south of Argyle Street will provide more than enough for the most ambitious redevelopment. By the end of the 1980s, in fact, the

SCRA should be returning up to \$10 million annually to the government.

"Fifteen years from now," says Colonel Magee, "The Rocks will be the liveliest spot in Sydney, a place of galleries, bistros, wine bars and theatres." In and around the Argyle Bond, the first historic building redevelopment, the new vibrancy is already apparent. Once the colony's customs building, the sandstone bondstore now houses a restaurant and café, Australian museum, and arts and crafts shops. A garage opposite will be converted into a theatre. The adjacent Argyle Terrace, a row of semi-detached cottages erected by a spec builder some 100 years ago, has been restored and is occupied by fashionable boutiques.

Newest Australians. When most of the East Rocks has been redeveloped, the SCRA is expected to be given control of the West Rocks, at present administered by the Maritime Services Board. Here there are so many buildings of architectural importance that the National Trust has given whole areas its "A" classification in the hope that they will be preserved intact—Observatory Hill, the Fort Street School complex, Argyle Place's village green and surrounding early colonial terrace houses.

Although this is Sydney's project, all Australians will benefit from the rebirth. Already authorities in Brisbane and Melbourne have sought advice from the SCRA. As Professor Derwent Johnston, head of the Depart-

ment of Town Planning at the University of Sydney, says, "The Rocks will furnish our town-planners with a fine example of what imagination and community effort can do to uplift old, often slum-ridden sections of our cities."

Recently, I stood near the spot at which Phillip came ashore from the *Sirius* and I watched the *Patris* bring her latest load of immigrants to the East Rocks ocean terminal. Down these gangplanks and on to The

Rocks, hundreds of thousands of people, very much the builders of the next Australia, have come since World War II.

"In a quite extraordinary way," says Walter Bunning, "The Rocks has always been at or near the heart of things in Australia. What an appropriate place to begin planning the shape of city life in the 21st century!" Who, contemplating the hopeful faces of those newest Australians, could disagree?



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