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Rugby Leagues' Club Buildings in the 1960s

The Working-class Palace

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Football codes in Australia have many commercial and social extensions. In NSW the Rugby League football clubs fostered a distinctive and parallel entity: the registered social clubs which had the promotion of the game as their aim, but were most clearly manifest in the large venues they constructed from alcohol sales and gambling revenue. Building on a game which defined local Sydney loyalties, the modern rugby leagues' club grew from a facility attached to a sporting organisation into a significant Sydney entertainment and socialising typology in the late 1950s and 60s. The catalyst was the favourable legal status afforded to gambling and the serving of alcohol in clubs, but they came to assume a size and standing that exceeded this fortuitous treatment. Foremost amongst these were St George Leagues' Club in southern Sydney, and North Sydney Leagues' Club in the harbourside suburb of Cammeray. This paper places the rise of these clubs in the context of Sydney's urban expansion and growing affluence of the period. It argues that the specific architectural form that prevailed was indicative of a typology that was not wedded to an historical legacy, but instead was part of a general class shift among both football supporters and those who oversaw the management and expansion of the clubs themselves.

The threads of Sydney's expansion and transformation in the boom years of the 1950s and 60s intersect tellingly in the game which defines regional loyalties in the city—rugby league. As the dominant football code and winter sport in NSW since 1913, the game and its associated club facilities chart the development of Sydney, its suburban expansion and population shifts.¹

The game itself appears to contemporary eyes as a massive corporate entity, dominating television sports coverage and ubiquitous in its marketing, its player promotion and its inter-

1. See Andrew Moore, "Interpreting 100 Years of Rugby League," in *Centenary Reflections: 100 Years of Rugby League in Australia*, ed. Andrew Moore and Andy Carr (Melbourne: Australian Society for Sports History, 2008), 2.



state rivalries. In its expansion beyond the Sydney competition, the National Rugby League (NRL) has attempted to increase market share for the code, and to exploit small latent pockets of interest in Victoria, as well as strong interest in the game in Queensland. This move has obscured the early history of the game, and its development along lines markedly different in the two states which primarily play the game, NSW and Queensland.

The major division of football codes in Australia runs along the so-called Barassi Line, a division proposed by Ian Turner commemorating the achievements of Australian Rules player and coach Ron Barassi, which runs in an arc from the NSW-Victorian border to Arnhem Land, and separates Rugby League dominance from that of Australian rules.² Although entrenched, this divide is at most a century old. The fluidity of football codes in the late nineteenth century shows a population eager to adopt innovation. Rugby league is an outgrowth of Rugby Union, its rise in England in the 1890s well-documented as a response to the trenchant amateurism of the parent game which found injured players out of pocket for lost wages.³ The new game also reduced the number of players and eliminated some set pieces by which play is restarted, thus simplifying the game and increasing its pace.⁴

The game was introduced to Sydney in 1907, and immediately attracted players from Rugby Union clubs dissatisfied with the ban on player payments. The first competition took place the following year, its composition reflecting a city yet to expand beyond its late-Victorian extents. Founding clubs were Glebe, South Sydney, Newtown, Eastern Suburbs, North Sydney, Balmain, Western Suburbs and Newcastle. A Cumberland team joined later in the first year.⁵

The expansion of the game through the ensuing decades is instructive in a number of ways. Firstly it charts the development of the game beyond its parochial roots, and hence into a competition with commercial potential. Secondly, the amalgamation or disappearance of smaller clubs and the rise of new ones tells a graphic story of geographic and economic change in the city. Thirdly, as football clubs establish linked registered social clubs, the game becomes inextricably entwined with the significant differences in laws governing registered clubs in different states.

2. Bob Stewart and Geoff Dickson, "Crossing the Barassi Line," in *The Games Are Not the Same: The Political Economy of Football in Australia*, ed. Bob Stewart (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 72.

3. Gary Lester, *The Story of Australian Rugby League* (Paddington: Lester-Townsend, 1988), 10.

4. Moore, "Interpreting 100 Years of Rugby League," 2.

5. Lester's *The Story of Australian Rugby League* gives a particularly detailed social account of the early years of the game in Sydney.

The status of registered clubs in NSW is defined by several conditions. Clubs may be established for social, cultural or sporting reasons, but they are not-for-profit and need to provide a social benefit or objective. They are owned by members, but cannot distribute dividends to those members. Thus all money generated by the clubs must be ploughed back into club development or given over to community or sporting organisations. However NSW clubs are further distinguished by one important attribute: their virtual monopoly on non-racecourse gambling for most of the twentieth century through ownership of gaming machines, known colloquially as “pokies.”⁶

6. Nerilee Hing, “A history of machine gambling in the NSW club industry: from community benefit to commercialisation,” *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration* 7, no. 1 (2006): 81–107, accessed April 1, 2013, http://epubs.scu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=tourism_pubs.

The 1950s

Although gaming machines in clubs were only legalised in 1956, they had been tolerated by gaming authorities for many years prior. Legalisation, however, facilitated a massive increase in revenue for clubs. By 1956 the composition of the NSW Rugby League had significantly altered. The First Grade Premiership was contested by ten clubs, with Glebe, Newcastle and Cumberland replaced by St. George (1921), Manly-Warringah (1947), Canterbury-Bankstown (1935) and Parramatta (1947).⁷ In the following years the modern format of the clubs was consolidated: the football clubs were associated with social clubs devoted to the development of Rugby League in their local areas. Thus the profits from the social clubs funded the salaries and costs of the football clubs, and clubs often stipulated that directors of the social clubs be drawn from the board of the football clubs.

7. Ian Coliss and Alan Whiticker, *100 Years of Rugby League*: vol. 1 1907-1966 (Sydney: New Holland, 2007), 238.

The result was a wave of expansion of social clubs, including leagues clubs, in the early 1960s. The St. George club, for example, grew from a small 1952 establishment on the corner of Rocky Point Road and The Princes Highway consisting of “a basic meeting place with two poker machines, a couple of offices, a stage for the band and one long bar.” Nonetheless it made £3000 in the first six months of operation.⁸ Harnessing the opportunity presented by the legalisation of poker machines in 1956, the club embarked on a dramatic expansion under club chairman Baden Wales. The preferred site was a set of sports fields owned by the St. George Soccer Club, which were eventually acquired by the Leagues club and in 1961 construction of the new premises commenced.

8. Ian Heads, *March of the Dragons: the Story of St George Rugby League Club* (Paddington: Lester-Townsend, 1989), 90.





Figure 1. Main entry circa 1964 St George Leagues Club Archives.

The “Taj Mahal”

The new St. George Leagues Club opened in July 1963. Within days the chairman of the New South Wales Rugby League, Ben Buckley, visited and offered the throwaway line that it reminded him of the Taj Mahal.⁹ The name, half mocking and half proud, persisted as the popular reference for the club premises. It represented an astonishing transformation of scale in just eleven years of operation. But it also marked a significant period in Sydney history, as a new affluence lured families from the older suburbs around Marrickville and Tempe, to the new subdivisions opening up south of the city towards Port Hacking and the Georges River. The latter part of this migration is recalled by Lindsay Barrett, who grew up in Arncliffe in the 1960s:

Allegiance to St. George was literally baked into the local landscape, various points of which, like Earle Park—like the Arncliffe Scots Club whose junior teams had produced a series of St. George first graders—formed a particular grid of reference points by which you oriented yourself on a daily basis.¹⁰

Barrett’s reminiscence is noteworthy not only for its geographic subject, but also for the social dynamic it charts. The catalyst is the 1967 League competition, with Barrett travelling to his friend Ralph Gordon’s new home at Kangaroo Point on Sutherland, at the southern fringe of St. George’s traditional basin of support. The Gordon family become “upwardly mobile,” and

9. Heads, *March of the Dragons*, 90.

10. Lindsay Barrett, “Twilight of the Idols,” in *Centenary Reflections* ed. Moore and Andy Carr, 37.

11. Barrett, "Twilight of the Idols," 37.

moved to take advantage of the "clean waterways and virgin quarter-acre blocks of the newly developing Sutherland Shire."¹¹ But 1967 is more significant yet—it marks the end of the remarkable dominance of St. George in the Sydney competition.

The record established by the club remains to this day. Between 1956 and 1966 the club claimed eleven consecutive premierships. For Barrett this was more than a simple lucky confluence of players:

The St. George district was [the] postwar era made manifest. It was filled with self-employed tradesmen and small businessmen, the men who were building the actual infrastructure of the suburban boom as it spread out from the old city centre. To an extent, the social strength and authority that flowed from such proximity to the prevailing economic order spilled over onto the football field, as it did into all areas of cultural life.¹²

12. Barrett, "Twilight of the Idols," 38.

Crucial to this success was the leagues' club as the revenue generator that allowed the football club to retain players, as well as providing a social focus that gave football fans a place to drink and gamble, to eat and be entertained. An aerial photograph of the club at completion is instructive: the new building stands amidst sparse vegetation and equally sparse building, its dominance as an attractor evident.

Figure 2. Aerial photo, 1963. St George Leagues' Club Archives.

The scale of the club was part of its original appeal and fame. Initially budgeted at £500,000, the final cost was twice that figure. Designed by architects Kenwood Hoile and Allen, the building boasted a range of lounges, dining rooms, foyers



and bars. The main ballroom/auditorium, 140 feet by 80 feet (42.7m x 24.3m), could accommodate one thousand patrons and became a major venue for performers and live shows such as Jesus Christ Superstar. Six months after opening a trade journal described it as catering for “almost every recreational need of its 12,000 members, who pay but a small fee to enjoy its privileges.” Members were quoted as describing it as being “as glamorous as a luxury liner;” with the journal adding archly “Altogether a magnificent tribute to the efficiency of the poker machine as a revenue producer.”¹³

13. *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, January 1964, 25.



Figure 3. St George statue and fountain
St George Leagues Club Archives

As Barrett notes, the five acre site importantly could also accommodate significant car parking.¹⁴ The dearth of entertainment venues in the locality, as well as the provision of a games room with billiard tables, indoor bowls, darts and table tennis, drew patrons from a wide area who were reliant on cars. Yet this alone doesn’t account for the club’s success. At its opening it could also capitalise on the relatively recent granting of liquor licenses to clubs. The public bar, or pub, had been the traditional drinking and socialising venue, an extension of the male domain. In the cramped (by contemporary standards) house of the 1930s, the pub allowed a measure of separation between adult socialising and the family. However, as Hing notes: “by the end of World War Two, ordinary social drinkers were dissatisfied with hotel drinking conditions, the general shortage of beer, exploitation by the hotels and breweries, and the rampant black market.”¹⁵ The Leagues club expanded on the appeal of out-of-home socialising, in effect inventing a range of spaces that were less reliant on gender separation, and made appealing to men and women as

14. Barrett, “Twilight of the Idols,” 39.

15. Hing, “A History of Machine Gambling in the NSW Club Industry,” 10.

Figure 4. Main Ballroom circa 1968. St George Leagues Club Archives



an amalgam of the dance club, the restaurant, and the drinking lounge, as well as the casino. In deference to traditional drinking patterns it incorporated a male bar, a curiously utilitarian space with functional furniture and little of the apparent ambience of the traditional pub. Yet one crucial factor was meticulously controlled to induce both comfort and a sense of separation from the quotidian—lighting was soft and indirect in the male bar, and was tightly modulated throughout the building.¹⁶

16. *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, August 1963, 48.

The lighting design was part of an overall modernist sensibility that governed the building. Belying its apparent working-class origins, the club design shows little sentiment for the game's inner-city origins. Indeed, the modernity is an integral part of the redefinition of the club as not only suburban, but aligned with the ascendant middle class that populated the new suburbs. In Barrett's opinion the success of St. George both on and off the field in the decade from the mid-50s to the mid-60s lay in a professionalism borne from the entrepreneurial habitus of its directors. Media portrayal of the club directors as average men masked a "smooth and ruthless operation."¹⁷ They may not have specified a modernist idiom, but it nonetheless reflected their ambition of reconfiguring the traditional venues of socialising into a single edifice, with the functions themselves aestheticised as both contemporary and glamorous through their association with expanding leisure opportunities.

17. *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, January 1964, 38.

This was neither a neutral endeavour nor a-contextual. The Victorian city had been vilified since the early part of the century as overcrowded and harbouring malevolent influences, espe-



cially on children. The disaggregation of the city into suburbs and industrial or commercial zones drew on this anxiety. The St. George Leagues club rode this sentiment for the social realm, effectively de-historicising traditional areas of entertainment and reconfiguring them as accessible within suburbia. Equally importantly the stain of the inner city was effaced—the glamour of the venue rode on the back of the new, as growing prosperity allowed the reinvention of life and the reconfiguration of social class.¹⁸

Interestingly the end result is not too dissimilar to a modernist *gesamtkunstwerk*, as space, structure, furniture, lighting and decoration are pressed into the service of this ideal. The aesthetic space which opened up around suburbanisation is noteworthy for its lack of sentiment. Despite being skewered for its featurism, or excessive use of artifice, by Robin Boyd, the modernism underpinning the “Taj Mahal” cannot be dissociated from the prevailing optimism.¹⁹ This can be contrasted with the current appearance of the building. Clubs such as St. George are subject to extremely heavy usage. Thus they are subject to constant renovation, with areas reconfigured to maximise trading profit and fixtures replaced as they wear and are updated to conform to changing regulation. The ambience presently is mixed, with only the main stair partly original. The rest of the public spaces have been reshaped by post-modern *poche*, with the space defining *fitout* less evident than the lights and sounds of a gaming and gambling environment offering poker machines, off-course betting and Keno amongst other options.

The new club was a creation of mid-century rising affluence and urban expansion, but these same conditions further bifurcated league identity. In 1967 the Cronulla club was admitted to the Sydney competition, providing a separate nucleus of identification for the fast developing Sutherland Shire and its legion of traditional St. George supporters.

Norths

As one of the league foundation clubs from 1908, North Sydney (known generally as Norths) enjoyed something of a monopoly over players residing north of the harbour until the admission of Manly-Warringah into the competition in 1947. The post-war years brought many other changes to the club and district. The

18. See Harry Margalit, “Sources of Modernity: Urban Ideals in Sydney 1900-1945,” in “Reasoning to Believe: Aspects of Modernity in Sydney Architecture and Planning 1900-1960,” PhD diss., University of Sydney, 1997).

19. Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1960).

20. See Andrew Moore, *The Mighty Bears!: A Social History of the North Sydney rugby league* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1996), for a spirited account of this shift.

21. Moore, *The Mighty Bears*, 226.

22. Moore, *The Mighty Bears*, 271.

23. Moore, *The Mighty Bears*, 280.

opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932 had of course changed the nature and status of North Sydney. In its foundation years it drew many players from the harbourside trades and profession, including wharf workers, ferry workers and tram workers from the system servicing the lower North Shore. After a dominant period in the early 1920s, the club saw its tight-knit community base transformed and prised apart.²⁰ It was not only the five hundred houses demolished for the bridge's approaches that changed the area. The greater convenience of the bridge integrated North Sydney into the commerce of the city as a whole, and opened up the middle and upper north shore to middle-class development. Originally slated in part for industrial development, a concerted campaign by Mrs. A. G. Hillard and Harry Seidler led to the zoning of McMahon's Point for residential uses in 1958.²¹

While these developments may have cut into the working-class constituency of the North Sydney football club, they paralleled the legal and social changes which bred the Leagues Club. As noted above, the legalisation of poker machines in clubs was extremely significant. Equally significant was the Liquor Trades Royal Commission of the early 1950s, which recommended the granting of liquor licenses to clubs in 1954. Two years later the first North Sydney Leagues Club opened in a house bought for the venture at 2 Merlin Street, North Sydney. In part the instigators had been inspired by the small St. George club of the period, which had already proved profitable.²²

The club at Merlin Street prospered through the initial half-decade, but limited opportunities for expansion and ultimately the construction of the broad traffic ribbon harnessing the capacity of the Harbour Bridge, known as the Warringah Expressway, forced a relocation. The new premises, in the adjoining suburb of Cammeray, opened in July 1964 to the design of Gordon P. O'Donnell.

The Cammeray club is indicative of the enormous potential of Leagues Clubs. The club received compensation of £56,000 for its Merlin St premises, yet raised £450,000 to cover construction costs. The venture was underwritten by the security of poker machine and alcohol profits—a year after opening the club showed an operating net profit of £210,000.²³ The club also quickly moved towards fulfilling its social potential. As



institutions, clubs like Norths had management structures that could exploit their non-profit status and incorporate aspirations of social cohesion and self-improvement. Within the utilitarian modernist structure, characterised like many buildings of the age by a slenderness of fenestration using aluminium sections, were a range of activities. These included indoor bowls, darts, table tennis as well as a gym. The club also hosted cultural activities: a library was established, and formal groups came to include a band, a photography club, as well as classes in French and ballroom dancing. As Moore notes, “In their educative role the Leagues clubs continued the good work of the Mechanics Institutes that had dotted New South Wales in the late nineteenth century.”²⁴

24. Moore, *The Mighty Bears*, 282

Membership numbers also rose dramatically. Initially limited to 8,500, by 1970 numbers had climbed to over 27,000, all men. When a restricted category of associate membership was introduced for women in 1969, within months 5800 women had taken it up despite not being able to enter the members’ bar, “make dinner reservations, use the gymnasium, nor book entertainment.”²⁵ Only in 1984 could women access all club facilities and become full members, a reminder that the club started as one run by men for men.

25. Moore, *The Mighty Bears*, 286

The building itself encapsulates this restriction, but with a more subtle extension. As a men’s club it nonetheless needed an aesthetic extension, one compatible with both the expenditure and the vision of the guiding committee. As at St George, the experience of the ocean liner, whether real or media-driven, provided the referent. The large main foyer at mid-level leads to an expansive staircase to the upper level auditorium, its dark treads and risers highlighting the nautical utility of the steel handrails. The main bar with its large radius curves was described as resembling “an ocean liner.”²⁶

26. Moore, *The Mighty Bears*, 287.

The interiors were designed by a separate entity, Project Interiors. Working with the architect, they responded to the simple yet telling brief drawn up by the club management. A key point was that the building must be functional. This was further qualified by ensuing descriptors:

It’s interior design, furniture and furnishings should portray a masculine outlook, and give at the same time a definitive character to the Club itself, original in concept, and not a follow on to existing formats.

Modern décor must be a prime point of the building—
eliminating any tinsel or garish effects.²⁷

27. *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, July 1964, 32.

It is instructive that the committee were happy to forego sentiment or any historical dimension to the design.

The opening of the club is one bright chapter in the history of a club whose demise had commenced with the opening of the harbour Bridge. Despite commercial success, the club has become increasingly estranged from its role as a bastion of working-class leisure. The gentrification of its surrounds is almost complete, and the rival Manly-Warringah club continues to draw junior players from the tradesmen and small business owners who live along the northern beaches, parallel to the Pacific Highway that forms the armature of the North Shore but whose identity is a world away from sensuality of the beaches. The earnest professionalism of the North Sydney catchment, it's striving for academic achievement and awareness of status funnels its children towards the Rugby Union code associated with the area's numerous private schools, or to the happy parochial amorphism of grassroots soccer. In a final act of decline, after an ill-fated merger with Manly-Warringah in 1999, the club was excluded from the top tier of competition in 2002.

Contextualising St George and North Sydney Leagues' Clubs

Of the Leagues' clubs which opened in the early 1960, St George and Norths may have been the most costly but they were by no means the only ones. The Balmain club opened modest premises in 1963, centred around an eighty person dining room which proved popular for lunches. The building's scale prompted the trade headline "'Tigers' Cosy Lair". Other Rugby League clubs to expand into registered and licensed premises included Manly-Warringah, which commenced in an existing building in 1957, and Parramatta, whose reported building costs in 1959 were £30,000, a fraction of the published costs of £450,000 for Norths and £1,000,000 for St George.²⁸

28. *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, April 24, 1959, 41. Norths' costs from *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, July 1964 24, and St George from *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, August 1963, 43.

The size of the social club did not always reflect on the prestige of the club. Lower tier clubs were also building premises to cater for the demand for drinking and socialising facilities, as in the case of the £176,500 extension to Wentworthville Leagues' Club in 1965, or the £160,000 works for the Bathurst club.²⁹

29. *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, October 1965, 32; *Building: Lighting: Engineering*, March 1964, 68.



Within Sydney, the significance of St George and Norths as social facilities can be contrasted with the social club built in 1964 for Sydney's most successful Rugby Union club, Randwick Rugby. Built on the site of two terrace houses facing the club's playing oval at Coogee, its corporatist modernist façade, and lack of parking indicate a different intent to the League's clubs. Its purview is local, and shows little of the expansionist vision of its League counterparts. Similar remarks could be made for clubs built by organisations such as the Returned and Services League (RSL), which could be architecturally ambitious like the 1964 neo-Wrightian Granville RSL (architects Frank R. Fox and Associates), or the striking 1957 Kempsey RSL (architects H. Ruskin Rowe and Elmes). None of these approach the large Leagues' clubs in scale.

It appears that it was the Rugby Leagues Clubs which most successfully rode the wave of club expansion in the 1950s, with their entrepreneurial model and broad community engagement.

Conclusion

The wave of club building in NSW in the late 1950s and 1960s was, in one sense, spawned by the favoured legal status clubs had acquired which allowed them to host gambling and serve alcohol. However the typology of the leagues club as it emerged was a more complex affair. Conceived as amalgam of social club and facility for social betterment, along the lines of the mechanics' institutes and other worker oriented institutions, yet with some historical debt to the gentleman's club, the newness of the typology is attested to by the desire for a modernist expression.³⁰ The explanation for this is twofold. On the one hand, a palpable lack of sentiment accorded with a working-class game whose roots and constituency were being remade by the prosperity of the post-war years. Aspirant middle-class values, and entrepreneurial management, characterised the clubs as they sought to establish themselves as amalgams of social, sporting and entertainment venues that collected these functions from their inner-city localities and suburbanised them within an organisation subsidised by gambling profits. These entities assumed their own importance, and their success in many cases was not linked to the sporting success of the clubs but rather to their managerial efficacy.

30. Hing, "A History of Machine Gambling in the NSW Club Industry," 11.

The ensuing decades have seen the further separation of the relative success of the Rugby League football clubs and their respective social venues. A wave of expansion in the 1970s saw clubs like Eastern Suburbs acquire enlarged premises. But the registered social clubs have their own impetus, and the managerial skills which accounted for the success of St George and Norths in their heyday has flourished elsewhere. Despite their initial prominence, in contemporary terms both St George and North's Leagues' Clubs have been dwarfed by establishments such as South Sydney Juniors in Kingsford, and the enormous gambling, entertainment and leisure venue of Penrith Panthers, whose scale has placed it alongside large theme parks and convention facilities as an object of analysis.

