

Newtown - from rural gentry to 'yuppiedom'

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The focus of this article is the historic and recent development of Newtown, one of Sydney's inner city suburbs. Newtown has developed from a rural outpost in the early 19th century to a suburb at the end of the 19th century to an inner city suburb after World War II. Referring to Newtown's socio-demographic development the inner city suburb presents something of a 'revolving door', with one social group moving in as another has moved out.

Rural outpost to inner city suburb

In the 1830s, Newtown was "a rural outpost" (cf. Cashman and Meader 1990), a new 'town' established almost a day's journey beyond the city of Sydney (cf. Cooper 2000). Newtown and other rural outposts housed the country estates and weekend hunts of Sydney's elite. From the 1830s onwards these focal points of settlement expanded sufficiently to be called villages as wealthy families moved to Newtown and other areas to build large villas on large estates. Thus, "living in grand homes and surrounded by their large estates they lived like the English *country gentry*" (Cashman and Meader 1990:19 emphasis added).

The villages, in turn, became centres of population services, including shops and hotels. The name 'New Town' has been recorded as early as 1832, possibly coming from the New Town store that opened on the corner of Eliza and today's King Street (Whitaker 2002:103). By 1838, Newtown had a population of 1243 persons (id.).

The introduction of the Western railway line from Sydney to Parramatta in 1855 with Newtown as one of four stations *en route* helped to ensure Newtown's growth as a retail centre (Cashman and Meader 1990:20). In 1862, Newtown became a separate municipality (Whitaker 2002: 103). By 1870, Newtown has been gradually transformed into a mixed suburb supporting a greater population and experiencing more intensive development of land (Cashman and Meader 1990:17, Burke 1994:Preface).

The boom of the Australian economy in the 1880s led to working class residential boom and commercial expansion. Many of the terrace and row houses in the Newtown area and the retail buildings lining almost the entire length of King Street and Enmore Road these days are dating back to this era. By the end of the 1880s, Newtown was one of the main shopping centres outside Sydney with excellent transport by train, tram and omnibuses (Whitaker 2002:103). From 1871 to 1891, Newtown doubled its population each decade and became a densely settled and developed suburban community of skilled workers and self-employed small traders (id.).

"Compared with Newtown of eight years ago, modern Newtown must be considered a remarkable place indeed, and the progress it has made in that very limited time little short

of marvellous. It now possesses a population of 20,000; there are 4,000 houses within the borough; it boasts numerous places of worship, has half-a-dozen banks, many really fine shops, hundreds of villas and middle-class dwelling-houses, a courthouse of striking appearance, a town-hall, several other public halls, a market-place, a huge school, two or three skating rinks, and – nearly 30 hotels” (Illustrated Sydney News 1889, quoted in Whitaker 2002:111).

From the 1890s onwards industrial development in nearby areas had significant social implications as factories provided thousands of jobs (Cashman and Meader 1990:24). Employment opportunities, cheap housing and efficient public transport attracted more and more workers, whereas the rich and influential who had built grand homes in the late 19th century deserted Newtown for more salubrious areas further afield (id.:17). Thus, in the late 19th and early 20th century middle class suburbs like Newtown became primarily working class residential areas (Spearitt 1978:215).

During the 1930s depression the unemployment rate for males in Newtown was 43 per cent compared to Sydney’s average of 28 per cent and eviction battles were common (Burke 1994:Preface). It was in those days, that suburbs like Newtown had been labelled as ‘slums’ (Spearitt 1978:215).

After World War II Newtown became one of the most multicultural areas in New South Wales. Originally Newtown was a mix of English, Irish, some Scots and a few people from other countries; from the late 19th century to the 1940s there was a significant increase in the number of Irish in Newtown, only post-war and later immigration led to an increase in other ethnic groups, in particular the Greeks and to a lesser extent the Yugoslavs (Burke 1994:Preface) – all attracted by cheap housing, factory jobs and good public transport facilities. Ironically, the very factors which brought migrants to Newtown have been reason for them to leave: Many Greeks who had moved into the area prospered materially and chose to move on to other suburbs imagined to be of higher social status (Cashman and Meader 1990:29).

By the late 1970s many large industrial concerns based in Newtown and its neighbouring areas had closed or moved further afield. The decline of heavy industries coincided with the rediscovery of the inner city. A symbolic turn of sudden appreciation of Australian architectural history and heritage and a revived interest in Victorian and Federation housing led to new demand for inner city living and the desire to live in an old terrace or row house. Renovating an old terrace presented a different image from buying a home unit; it was an opportunity of self-expression. The new residents made these terraces into a fashion symbol of urbane life-styles, community diversity, architectural charm and historical significance – a rejection of the suburban stereotype (Kendig 1979:126). From the 1970s onwards the ‘new middle class’ has partly moved ‘back’ to Newtown, property costs began to increase, the number of owner occupations rose whereas the number of tenants declined. Thus, with its rediscovery in the 1970s Newtown regained much of the social prestige, it enjoyed in the 19th century – the cycle of Sydney’s establishment has turned full cycle (cf. Cooper 2000). Since then, the gentrification process in Newtown has been ongoing.

The new middle class: Yuppies and DINKS

Sydney and nation wide trends of economic restructuring – the ever quoted shift from an industrial to a service economy – are reflected by the changes of Newtown’s employment structure. Over the period 1991-2001 Newtown’s employment numbers in manufacturing continued to decline, falling from a proportion of 10.9 per cent in 1991 to a proportion of 7.5 per cent of total employment in Newtown in 2001; whereas over the same period, employment numbers in the sector of finance, property and business services doubled from 1121 employees in 1991 to 2368 employees in 2001, becoming the area’s largest employment sector with a share of 25.3 per cent of Newtown’s total employment (ABS 1991:B21, 2001:B26).

The changes of Newtown’s industrial structure are mirrored by the changes in its occupational class structure. Over the period 1991-2001, the proportion of persons employed in high-status, white-collar occupations (defined as managers & administrators, professionals and semi-professionals) increased by 65.1 per cent, from 3236 employees (43.5 per cent) in 1991 to 5344 employees (58.7 per cent) in 2001. During the 1990s the share of female employees of employees in high-status, white-collar occupations grew by 68.5 per cent, accounting a share of 47.3 per cent of all employees in high-status, white-collar occupations in 2001 (ABS 1991:B22, 2001:B27).

These significant trends of professionalization with an increasing proportion of female employees are also reflected by a rising level of higher education. Over the period 1991-2001 the share of degrees/diplomas of higher education (defined as postgraduate degrees, graduate diploma and graduate certificate and bachelor degrees) grew by 74.1 per cent. In 2001 34.9 per cent of all Newtowners held a postgraduate degree (6.5 per cent), a graduate diploma or graduate certificate (3.2 per cent) or a bachelor degree (25.2 per cent) (ABS 1991:B16, 2001:B23).

The data for Newtown’s household structure reveal two significant trends: from 1991 to 2001 the number of lone parent households (- 15 per cent), two parent family households (- 15.1 per cent, 1991-1996) and group households (- 11.6 per cent) declined whereas the number of single households (+ 28.5 per cent) and childless couple’s households (+18.6 per cent, 1991-1996) increased (ABS 1991:B33, 1996:B22, 2001:B14). It is likely that the missing data of ‘two parent family households’ and ‘childless couple households’ for 2001 would confirm these trends. In fact, in January 2004, it was reported that actual ABS data revealed a higher proportion of young couples without children living in inner city suburbs than in other areas of Sydney (The Sunday Telegraph 2004:35).

Demographic characteristics of Newtown support the trends towards single and childless couple’s households as 97.1 per cent of all persons living in Newtown in 2001 were older than 15 years. Over the period 1991-2001 the proportions of persons ‘speaking English only’ (+ 20.3 per cent) and ‘born in Australia’ (+ 7.5 per cent) rose whereas the proportion of persons ‘speaking other language’ (- 29.6 per cent) declined. In 2001, 16.9 per cent of all persons living in Newtown spoke another language than English compared to 25.2 per cent in 1991. The people speaking Greek

have significantly become a minority in Newtown with a share of just 3.3 per cent of all persons living in Newtown in 2001. According to more detailed data people speaking Greek are the biggest group in the category of all persons speaking another language than English in Newtown in 2001. (ABS 1991:B01, 2001:B01)

Thus, the 'winners' of economic restructuring processes, singles and childless couples - popularly described as Yuppies (young urban professional people) and DINKS (*double income no kids*) employed in high-status, white-collar occupations, well-educated and well paid seem to be overrepresented among Newtown's residents.

Newtown's hub: the King Street

According to Greg Khoury, the manager of Enmore Theatre which is located on Enmore Road, an artery that feeds of King Street opposite Newtown railway station,

"the essence of Newtown lies within its name, a new town. Newtown continues to provide a defiant antidote to the confinement and expectations of a corporate and materialistic metropolis ... Newtown is visibly about the new and the inventive while layered in a rich historical context: architecturally, socially, culturally and most vitally in its incredibly diverse populace. The area has a lingering bohemian atmosphere with eclecticism as its signature style" (Khoury 2003).

Similar to Khoury a commentator of one local circulating paper states: "I always enjoy going to Newtown because it has a style all of its own. It offers an artistic and creative edge that sets apart from all other suburbs of Sydney" (Montgomery 2003:29).

However, 'going to Newtown' mostly means frequenting King Street. King Street - Newtown's 'aorta' - stretches for about more than two kilometres from Forbes Street, Newtown at its northern end to Mary Street, St. Peters at its southern end; its centre is focussed around Newtown railway station. King Street is composed of relatively unspoiled two and three storey Victorian and Federation-style commercial buildings with continuing awnings and a regular rhythm of retail frontage width which line both sides of the curving ridge. Thus, the road creates a sense of unity and a coherent visual closure. The buildings themselves display a diversity of architectural and decorative features. With its relatively unspoiled and large scale Victorian character King Street is one of a few areas with such an exceptional quality in New South Wales. Therefore King Street is classified as an Urban Conversation Area by the National Trust and is listed by the Australian Heritage Commission on the Register of the National Estate (Marrickville Council 1993:2). The *King Street & Enmore Road Heritage and Urban Design Development Control Plan*, launched by South Sydney and Marrickville Councils in August 2002, aims to preserve and enhance this play of unity and diversity that gives the streetscape a unique and very attractive visual quality.

In 1889, King Street, Newtown's hub had been described as follows: "King-street, Newtown, is always more or less busy" (Illustrated Sydney News 1889, quoted in Whitaker 2002:111). This description holds true today although the shops full of satins and ribbons have been replaced by art deco treasures and books, galleries, gifts, designer cafes, restaurants and over-priced second-hand furniture, all frequented by urban trendies, students, gays and yuppies (cf. Cooper 2000). As showed before,

Newtown has lost most of its ethnic population. However, its reputation of ethnic diversity persists, increasingly constructed through King Street's variety of international food flavours, which are dominated by a density of Thai restaurants. In other words, the area's multiculturalism has been replaced by a *multiculturalism à la carte*, which can be consumed on King Street.

Newtown's King Street has a long tradition of housing entertainment venues. The first live theatre outside Sydney opened in Newtown in 1908 and "Sydneyiders arrived by tram and train to laugh away their sorrows" (Whitaker 2002:106). Nowadays Newtown has the city's highest concentration of theatres, eight theatres, each with its own distinctive creative vision. Unlike many other counterparts throughout the country none is owned or operated by corporates. King Street also houses several venues for local sub cultures. Newtown has become one of *the* places for gays and lesbians in Sydney. A lot of venues for gays and lesbians are offered on King Street. Not surprisingly, that King Street, Newtown was recently voted the 'Best Gay Street Australia' (van Reyk 2003:11). There is evidence of a political left-wing subculture within the area as public discussion rounds organized by groups with respective names are announced regularly on flyers pinned at lampposts and the like on King Street.

Newtown = 'yuppiedom'?

All these historical, physical, social, economic and cultural features of the Newtown area are composing Newtown's image of uniqueness, liveliness, diversity, charm etc. But what was initially quaint has become actively trendy and consequently more and more upmarket. Rents and property prices have increased incredibly during the last twenty years. "Something you might have bought for 50.000 A\$ in 1980, you would now pay 600.000 A\$ or so, in the same condition, you know, unrenovated" (Interview with the Managing Director of a graphic design business, Newtown, 18.12.2003). According to a representative of Marrickville Council (Interview with the Manager of Communication & Cultural Services of Marrickville Council, Petersham, 11.12.2003) Newtown's theatres are at risk to get closed and artists and gallery owners within the area are about to leave due to unaffordable rents. As one interviewee described the situation:

"All the people who ... move[d] here because they think it's interesting ... they end up pushing out all the things they came here for originally ... the artists, the base creatives, I think, will definitely start to move out into cheaper areas ... Newtown has changed ... it's no longer challenging or no longer, you know, it has become mainstream in a way, so some people, I guess, wouldn't like it ... it's kind of hard, because I am part of that gentrifying set, I don't deny that and I don't like it in some regards, but I moved here because I liked Newtown because it's so interesting and you can't really expect other people not to do the same, and it's a bit of a shame when you've seen all little restaurants leave, and the sort of porn shops leave, that kind of made it, kind of exciting, interesting in the first place, I guess, that's the way of things" (Interview with a graphic designer, Camperdown, 16.1.2004).

The *Newtown Entertainment Precinct Project*, a recent initiative of Marrickville Council in partnership with the Newtown Entertainment Precinct Association, aims to preserve the arty, different feeling of the area through maintaining and marketing

Newtown as a cultural centre. This project will support artists, art workers and performers living and working in the area, enhance business opportunities for local retailers and promote Newtown as a centre for new and emerging independent artists and performers. Furthermore the project with all its 'subprojects' aims to strengthen Newtown's profile as an alternative entertainment precinct to the city.

However, it will to be seen whether Newtown's unique character can be preserved. Undoubtedly Newtown has changed already and may be on the best way to become 'yuppiedom':

"Suddenly there are BMW convertibles and Audi A4s and shiny Beetles lining the streets – and a general air of moneyed contentment prevails ... [as] the smart set descend like locusts: soapie stars, designers, brash young men in Advertising and (a recent addition) New Media types, the fickle tribes of dotcom entrepreneurs who have to come to constitute New Money. Filling the restaurants and crowding the streets, they sustain this miniature economy" (Danielsen 2000).

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