



introduction

by Gary Deirmendjian

Sydney is well recognised and admired internationally as a picturesque modern metropolis blessed with natural beauty. The energy that has transformed it from a late 18th century penal colony to one of the most diverse and bustling capitals in the world is simply overwhelming.

When Sydney is viewed at some distance, one's gaze is dominated by the density of its high reaching skyline of extruded geometric prisms, featuring strict elemental order and reflective surfaces – at times blinding in the sun. The image of a crystalline outcrop emerging from the waters of the surrounding harbour may serve well as a first impression.

With imposing scale and boldness of form, these sky-scraping structures help deliver statements of ambition, confidence, vibrancy and success through a universal architectural language, with roots extending to early 20th century Manhattan, New York. Supported by backbones of concrete and steel they offer facades that are common in material, thus allowing only hints of local accent to be deduced from external appearance alone.

Approach the city from almost any angle and allow the eyes to slide down along the numerous verticals offered by the new architecture. It is highly likely that glimpses of straw-yellow to deep honey brown tones will become apparent at eye level and entice closer inspection - such natural tones seemingly misplaced amongst the forest of greys. Sydney's 19th and early 20th century stone architecture will more often than not unveil itself as the source of this colouring. Literally hewn from beneath the city's feet, the medium is Sydney Sandstone and the Yellow Block of Pyrmont its finest offering.

Frenzied building during the first 150 years of European settlement, driven by the vision of a few and the sweat of many, quickly gave birth to a Sydney largely golden in tone. The sandstone architecture, crustacean-like in comparison to the later high-rises, is certainly of European inspiration, with forms ranging from the humble to the sublime. Scattered throughout the centre and inner suburbs of Sydney is a plethora of remaining sandstone works of both crude and exquisite masonry. Such works include ecclesiastical, educational, commercial and public buildings, as well as homes, gate posts, walls, bridges, monuments, pavements, gutters, wharves and sea walls. Some are badly weathered, while others are well maintained, painstakingly restored or redeveloped.

Sandstone gave early Sydney the gift of a unique and overriding aesthetic character. The great lessons of western architecture, including the proportions of Greek antiquity, the load-bearing efficiency of Roman arches, the grace of Gothic vaulting and Palladian harmonies, are all represented. However, they are stated with a strictly local accent through the extensive use of sandstone - the city's own medium. The surviving sandstone structures now stand as proud monuments of a past era and are increasingly filled with a dignity bestowed by the passage of time. A strong sense of place is conveyed by such works, particularly once the stone itself is appreciated.

It is a stone of many moods, readily sparked by even the slightest climatic change. It can be bright and cheerful in dawn's light or melancholic and tearful in drizzle or rain. Under the midday sun it can appear harsh and unyielding, while dusk lends it deep and soulful expressions. At times, due to iron oxidation near the surface, it may even seem mortal with hues of deep red becoming evident in low light – sheer stigmata.

A sedimentary stone of largely sand and clay, each hunk, whether naturally weathered or hand carved, whether large or small, is rich with individual expression – surprisingly so for a material of such modest constitution. Incapable of being polished it remains forever humble. In comparison igneous and metamorphic types, such as granite and limestone, appear superficial, with frozen expressions which remain so even under extreme external influence.

Because of its rich textures and colours, sandstone is beautifully photogenic. In architecture it can be found happily complemented by detailed masonry, stained glass, wrought iron lacing and varnished timber joinery. Nature finds this architecture a worthy companion, as declared by the harbour waters that gently lap the retaining sea walls, by the moss that protects the shaded portions like a blanket, and by Sydney's dark foliage that provides an ideal backdrop to highlight its features. It is interesting how the earlier, unrestored structures have come to resemble weathered rock formations. Collectively, the sandstone heritage is Sydney's truest man-made icon.

The purpose of *Sydney Sandstone* is to portray the city's stone and its architecture in the hope that it may warm the hearts of the unaware and inspire increased sensitivity to its many charms. Intimate photography is coupled with an introduction to the stone's origins, usage and effects, to provide an insight into a Sydney which is often obscured by the city's more modern and imposing architecture. The work focuses on the City of Sydney and its immediate surrounds, with the exception of the last chapter which includes examples found throughout greater Sydney.

Sydney Sandstone is heavily indebted to four eminent Australian experts, Tim Flannery, Shirley Fitzgerald, Philip Cox and James Broadbent. They, respectively, provide expert insight into the geological birth, social impact, architecture and heritage values of Sydney's sandstone. A fifth chapter by Debby Cramer provides an invaluable discussion on masonry. An act of pure indulgence, this book is offered in the name of those who appreciate our sandstone works, who preach their value and who endeavour to protect them for generations to come.