

## Creating a Place for Mental Health in Callan Park, Sydney, Australia

*Speech given at Convegno: Musei, Memorie e Narrazioni per la Salute Mentale  
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Let me set the scene for you first of all, for those of you who have not been to Australia. I come from a land “down under”.

It is the largest island in the world and the smallest continent. Aboriginal people have lived there for approximately 60,000 years and are one of the world’s oldest living cultures.

We, white people, are latecomers to this land. The British, French, Dutch and Spanish all visited the shores of the great south land during the 1600s and 1700s. In the 1600s The Dutch East India company sailed their ships to trade in Indonesia, then called the Dutch East Indies, sometimes becoming shipwrecked on the western coast of Australia. In 1770 the British had already claimed the great south land for Britain, returning in 1788 with eleven ships and over 1,400 people, mainly prisoners, to set up a British colony.

When white people arrived to set up their colony in Botany Bay (Sydney) there were hundreds of aboriginal nations across the landmass of Australia. Within each nation there were hundreds of language groups and traditional cultures.

The site chosen by the British colonists for the first colony was Sydney Cove near where the Sydney Opera House now stands. It is not far from Iron Cove where Callan Park is now situated.

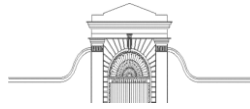
In this talk I will be using several names for the site of Callan Park. The original buildings of the psychiatric agency on this site are called the Kirkbride Buildings. These buildings are the proposed site for the future Museum of the Mind in Sydney. There are 2 parts of the site: Callan Park and Broughton Hall. These two psychiatric agencies combined to become Rozelle Hospital, on the shore of Iron Cove in Sydney.

“For thousands of years Iron Cove was a place of life, culture and consumption for the Wangal and Gadigal people. Their travelling pathways nearby and the mounds of discarded oyster shells” are still visible along the shoreline. They ate oysters, fish and vegetation and native animals in the surrounding bushland. (P5 Burge).

It is now common in Australia to “Acknowledge Country”, in other words, to acknowledge the aboriginal people who were the original custodians of the land and have never relinquished their rights to the land. If I were giving this talk in Australia, I would acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and their elders past, present and emerging.

Instead I acknowledge the words of an aboriginal leader, Noel Pearson. He said:

**‘THREE STORIES MAKE AUSTRALIA:** the Ancient Indigenous Heritage which is its foundation, the British Institutions built upon it, and the adorning Gift of Multicultural Migration.’ **Noel Pearson (Indigenous leader)**



The first white settlement of Callan Park (and Broughton Hall) was in 1819, just over 200 years ago. The land was privately owned for 50 years, when the government purchased it to build a lunatic asylum. In 1878 Callan Park officially became a hospital for the insane. (Luke)

From the beginning of the psychiatric hospital, gardens were important [Broughton Hall and Callan Park]. In the 1920s and 1930s extensive gardens were planted, providing work for patients as well as spaces for leisure. By the late twentieth century this hospital was called Rozelle Hospital. In 2008 Rozelle Hospital closed, moving the last 100 patients into a purpose-built facility on the grounds of a general district hospital several kilometres distant. From then until now, the fate of the whole site of the ex-psychiatric hospital has remained undecided. Some buildings are being used as premises for mental health non-government organisations (NGOs), some for a small university campus, some for a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility and some for a university college of the arts. But other buildings are disused and are gradually becoming derelict.

In 1873 when the government proposed building a lunatic asylum here, there were strong local community protests against it. This was the last time that local residents objected to having a psychiatric facility in this area (Burge). However in the past 20 years residents have objected to the closure of the psychiatric hospital. Mental health workers on the other hand, agreed with the closure of this large stand-alone psychiatric hospital. National mental health policies since 1993 have included the downsizing and closure of the large psychiatric hospitals across the country. A major problem in Australia is that many of the ex-psychiatric hospitals have been sold to developers to build apartments and shopping centres.

None of us want this to happen on the grounds of the ex-psychiatric hospital at Rozelle. Local residents and community groups have proved to be very effective in halting government plans to sell off Rozelle Hospital (Callan Park) to developers. And their protests have succeeded so far.

As a result of the objections of local community groups, the (NSW) state government passed a law in 2002 which prevented Callan Park (Rozelle Hospital) from being sold to developers. It further stated that the land and buildings could only be used for the “purpose of health facilities and educational or community facilities and must be not for profit” (Callan Park Act 2002).

The story of de-institutionalisation is very different in Australia than it has been in Italy. Australia has a federated system of government which means that we have a complicated mix of Federal laws and State laws. We don't have national mental health laws although we do have national mental health policies. Mental health laws vary from state to state, but are based on the national policies. So it is the state (NSW) government that is responsible for the future of Callan Park and it is to the state government that we put our proposals for a museum of the mind.

The development and reform of mental health services in Australia parallel those that were developing in many parts of the western world in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and after. Some states of Australia have succeeded in closing all the large psychiatric hospitals and some states still have a few remaining psychiatric hospitals. It has been very difficult to close all of the large psychiatric hospitals across Australia, despite enlightened national mental health policies. Like many other Western countries, community mental health services began to develop in the late 1960s and 1970s, however the focus of mental health treatment services was still hospital-based.



## **Aboriginal Land**

“Always was, always will be aboriginal land.” “Sovereignty was never ceded.”

I am not aboriginal, I can't speak on behalf of aboriginal people but I want to acknowledge the deep connection that aboriginal people have for the land on which Callan Park sits.

Aboriginal people have lived on this land for millennia prior to white colonisation of the site which is now known as Callan Park. They have a deep connection to land through their cultural practices and sacred sites. They were, and always will be, custodians of the land, passing down the stories of ancestors through the generations.

## **A Sense of Place**

We (white people) have superimposed our culture upon this aboriginal land - a 150-year-old history for mentally-ill people who were sent to the lunatic asylum for treatment or containment. This land has many layers. And this sense of place for people with mental ill-health also needs to be honoured and remembered alongside Aboriginal history. It was aboriginal land for millennia, it was mental health land as well for 150 years, and now it is a space in limbo.

We want to honour and remember the land as a place for mental health, to bring together all of the elements of a mentally healthy society. We want to make it a space for people to come to learn about the mind, the body, the arts, the history and the environment by creating a Mind Museum and Centre for Neuroscience, Arts, Heritage and Environment.

## **Museum of the Mind, Neuroscience, Arts, Heritage and Environment Park**

For the past 20 years a small local group of people from the mental health sector have fought to retain a mental health presence on Callan Park, but at the same time we do not want to see the return of mental health hospital services on the site.

We propose to develop a Museum of the Mind in the Kirkbride Buildings, something like the Museo della Mente here in Rome. The Kirkbride Buildings (heritage sandstone buildings on the Callan Park site) occupy approximately 2 hectares of the total 60 hectares of the overall ex-psychiatric hospital site. Callan Park is situated in an inner west suburb called Rozelle, approximately 5 kms from the city centre of Sydney.

The Callan Park site extends from the main road all the way down to the shores of the Parramatta River and is easily accessible by public transport, ideal for a learning centre consisting of a museum, a conference centre, gardening and food production, environment centre, café and artist spaces.

Kirkbride buildings are a historically significant place containing a mix of courtyards and heritage buildings comprised of a cohesive series of individual single, two and three storey sandstone buildings spread over approximately 2 hectares. The site is owned by NSW Department of Health. Under the Callan Park Act 2002 [law] the site must only be used for non-profit purposes and fulfil health, education and/or community outcomes. (Concept Paper, Bateman)



Our goal is to develop the Kirkbride buildings into an interactive *Mind Museum and Mental Health, Arts and Science Culture Centre*. This Centre will include a wide range of learning activities about historical and contemporary understanding and interpretation of the function of the brain, mind and body.

We have held a number of meetings, consultations and workshops to clarify the vision and the goals of the Centre. During this process we have gathered strong interest and support from many sectors: mental health professionals, consumers and families; artists, art galleries and museums; mental health services; historians; environment and gardening groups; local and wider community. We have visited numerous politicians and government agencies, including the Premier of the state of New South Wales, the Minister for Health and the Minister for Mental Health. We have succeeded in obtaining the interest of one of the large international accounting firms (KPMG) who will assist us to write the business plan for the Museum of the Mind Centre.

Some of the agreed principles for the Centre are:

- To acknowledge that this is Aboriginal land and acknowledge the past trauma of the place
- To develop a learning and healing environment where mental health promotion and mental illness prevention are integral to all aspects of day to day operations
- To develop a collaborative, sustainable, multipurpose social enterprise providing employment for people with lived experience of mental health disorders, as well as for artists, scientists, educators, gardeners, and people involved in heritage and environment
- To reflect and build on the heritage of the place as Aboriginal land, a mental health site, an art school and parklands
- To reflect the rich diversity of individuals and communities in the activities of the Centre
- To develop a place of belonging, learning and creating.

The three pillars of the Centre will be:

- Mind and Neuroscience
- Creative Arts, Culture, Heritage
- Nature and Environment

The activities of the Centre will reflect these three pillars and will focus on:

- Mind Museum – exhibits and activities that are interactive, artistic, creative, respectful, fascinating, relaxing; the mind, the brain, the body, mental health, well-being
- Conference and Learning Centre – events, conferences, concerts, art exhibitions, workshops
- Artists workspaces
- Café – healthy food sourced where possible from the local garden
- Garden and nursery producing food for the café and plants for sale
- Historical records and artefacts to preserve the story of the place and for research purposes

Some spaces will be for hire by external groups or individuals. School groups will visit the Centre on organised school learning excursions. Artists will hire inexpensive spaces to work.



BUT at present we are at an impasse, waiting for government to issue an official Expression of Interest for the use of the Kirkbride Buildings. Sydney University College of the Arts will vacate the Kirkbride buildings next year, leaving the building complex empty and neglected.

We know what should follow – a Mind Museum and neuroscience, arts, heritage and environment centre! We are still very hopeful that government will see the sense in this proposal.

### References

- Burge, Roslyn, 2018, **Broughton Hall Brought to Life**, publ Friends of Callan Park, Sydney.
- Luke, Sarah, 2018, **Callan Park hospital for the insane**, Australian Scholarly, Melbourne.
- Bateman, Jenna, 2017, Concept Paper