Urban Island (n):

a post industrial site devoid of program or inhabitants;

a blind spot in the contemporary city;

an iconic ruin;

dormant infrastructure awaiting cultural inhabitation.
Describing Cockatoo Island as a post-industrial site is a little like examining a Joseph Cornell box and not noticing its contents. Without taking the analogy too far, for many Cockatoo Island stands as an empty shell, an echoing reminder of old uses, whether as a convict prison or shipbuilding yard.

Take a look inside the box and your imagination takes flight.

Cockatoo Island is all the things described in the Trust’s comprehensive plan: Sydney Harbour’s largest island, formed by natural forces long ago, occupied by Aboriginal people for thousands of years and over the past two centuries dramatically adapted by the colonial masters of New South Wales and later the Commonwealth Government.

The history of the island is undoubtedly part of its attraction. A more potent force in imagining its future is the possibility of creating something truly unique.

What’s the goal? Nothing less than a site as emblematic of the city as the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. Being an island in one of the world’s great inhabited harbours is a good start. What else? Free public access is a must. So too an eclectic array of businesses from maritime operations to artists’ studios to form the island’s population base. And people, tours and events daily to sweep the aprons, docks and precincts with colour and life. Park benches. Camping. Night life. Stories. Noise.

The glue, however, is the indefinable, unorchestrated collaboration between what’s there and what’s in people’s heads; the interplay between expectations and experience exceeding expectations. A day at work and a day full of surprises.
The Trust’s plan for Cockatoo Island refers to step by step re-occupation. This is simply good sense and wise management. There are limited resources with which to upgrade infrastructure and remediate the building stock. At the same time, there is scope for risk taking and trial and error; the opportunity to seed exciting initiatives in business and the arts; to explore partnerships with the city’s cultural institutions; to think big and to think under the radar.

The research articles and design projects in this book consider how post-industrial sites may be used as templates for new ways of energising cities with cultural activity. The Urban Islands Project on Cockatoo Island is a pointer to the possibilities.

JEFF BAILEY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SYDNEY HARBOUR FEDERATION TRUST
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* RESEARCH ARTICLE
The world turns...and leaves a rusting, empty swing in the shadow of a smokestack.

Shifting economies have left the world’s post-industrial cities with abandoned sites that are both functionally and culturally vacant. These brownfields are typically dislocated, contaminated, and often construed as a danger to be made safe or an economic burden to be made profitable. They exist within the urban fabric, though through disuse or disconnection, they exist distinct from that fabric.

They are Urban Islands.

In a climate of increasingly interconnected homogeneity, Urban Islands present new challenges and opportunities for the cities in which they exist. The unique conditions of these sites, relics from previous modes of production and distribution, demand responses that are more expansive and more flexible than conventional practices of urban redevelopment and regeneration.

Cockatoo Island, a contemporary ruin within the city of Sydney, is one such Urban Island requiring an innovative approach. Its formal complexity reveals its diverse uses over time: convict prison, girls’ reformatory, city jail, boys’ training facility, a naval and commercial shipbuilding site and, during these times, a work place of thousands of ship workers and administrators. Few sites in Australia have hosted such a diverse and intense range of functions as Cockatoo.

In addition to this heritage, surrounded by the waters of the Sydney Harbour, this place is geographically special - it is, after all, an island. Ominously, this
has made it an especially valuable piece of real estate, tagged with all the right commercial clichés: harbour views, water access, dress circle position, and more.

In 1992, Cockatoo Island’s industrial operations ceased and for some time its future was unclear – was there a viable alternative to sale for private development? Abandoned and derelict until now, the Island is under the stewardship of the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, a Federal Government agency created in 2001 (after much public campaigning) to rehabilitate and make public a number of disused naval sites around the Sydney Harbour. The Trust is dedicated to injecting Cockatoo Island with ideas, events and uses that uphold and extend its inherent magic.

The inaugural Urban Islands Studio on Cockatoo Island was conceived with these strategies in mind: to mesh making and reflecting, performing and installing; to interact with the island’s political, physical and ideological context, and to establish a continuity with the site and context outside the short life of the Design Studio. International guests from Costa Rica, Germany, Japan, Switzerland and the United States were invited to bring global knowledge and debate to this local context. Within the 12-day intensive studio period, participants were to inhabit the island, and within that time and space, develop real projects there. As it emerged, Cockatoo Island was an ideal host for a model of trial and error: interventions were immediate and the outcomes were impressive, low-impact and temporary. The diverse schemes produced were all at once possible and viable. Rather than a series of proposals for the same site, they were fragments, or cuttings, of a greater collage for inhabiting Cockatoo.

In parallel, we observed that the notion of cutting was a recurrent theme in Cockatoo’s past, not only evident in its diverse functions, but also in its physical form. Its sandstone core is a sculptural record of the impact of each era on its shape, cut and hewn to over time according to the requirements of program.

Cockatoo, stripped of activity, appears like a stone vessel of sheer sided sandstone, with a low-lying almost water-level apron surrounding it. It is a place of cutting. Cutting down to form the dry docks lying nose to nose. Cutting down to form a battery of silos deep within the body of the stone.
Cutting through to form tunnels. Cutting to form slipways and housings for heavy machinery. Cutting down the sides of the natural contours to form cliffs, like fortress (or gaol) walls, and spilling out beyond its old high watermark to form its promenades.²

REFLECTIONS ON A MARITIME CITY

But beyond a formal quality, the collation of cuttings of program is a responsive strategy for inhabiting Urban Islands. This book brings together ideas, research and designs that assemble a confederation of cuttings for Urban Islands, with Cockatoo Island as the experimental subject.

The first Part of the book addresses urban islands as a typology of the post-industrial city, and the following two Parts address Cockatoo Island specifically.

Above: the crown, sheer-sided walls and apron of Cockatoo Island. By Richard Leplastrier.¹

² www.urbanislands.info; Collaborations and proposals welcome.
All contributions are original research and represent an important step in developing academic and design discourse on Urban Islands in Sydney and around the globe. Part I presents theoretical approaches to conceiving new modes of planning, commerce and design for Urban Islands and urban dimensions of commerce and culture are reframed through themes of paradox, branding and ‘soft’ architecture. Part II presents theoretical and poetic reflections on the past and future of Cockatoo Island, portraying the complex state of intrigue that surrounds Cockatoo currently. Part III presents pedagogical critiques and design works from the Urban Islands Studio and situates the embedded urban studio as a model of urban intervention and social contribution.

One work that highlights the nature of the Urban Islands Studio is the temporary installation *Soft Inversions* that transformed the vast Turbine Hall on Cockatoo Island into a kaleidoscope of refracted light, sound and animated structures. Its immersive, ephemeral experience was just the first flickering of many such temporary ‘cuttings’, intended to bring forth from this ruin a vibrant, animated Urban Island.

Beyond Cockatoo, the Urban Islands Project is an innovative framework for dialogue, experimentation and participation in the remaking of cities. It is dedicated to exploring strategies of engagement with sites and cities across cultures and around the globe. From Mumbai to Tokyo, Bogotá to Berlin, Sydney to San Jose, Urban Islands collaborators are engaging with the conditions and contents of shifting cityscapes, facing the challenges of urbanism in an increasingly connected world.

Welcome to Urban Islands.

JOANNE JAKOVICH, OLIVIA HYDE & THOMAS RIVARD

URBAN ISLANDS PROJECT