Sydney, Australia: Since 1788 Sydney has been built, unbuilt and rebuilt as it has grown from Georgian town to Victorian city to the global urban centre it is today. Demolitions have been a constant part of the city’s evolution – sometimes welcomed as a sign of progress, and at other times reviled as a short-sighted obliteration of culture. But behind every demolition is a fascinating story of a changing city and its people.

The Museum of Sydney’s newest exhibition, Demolished Sydney opening 19 November 2016 remembers a variety of Sydney’s lost buildings, from the Garden Palace to the Kent Brewery, surveying some of the most significant demolitions of the past two hundred years.

The exhibition reflects on how demolition has, at times, made way for the city’s most iconic buildings: the Fort Macquarie Tram Shed would be replaced by the world-famous Sydney Opera House, while the convict-era Commissariat Buildings would allow for a modernised Circular Quay. It also looks at the demolitions that signalled the end of eras and the beginning of others: both the Pyrmont Incinerator (demolished 1992) and the Kent (Carlton United) Brewery (demolished 2008) were demolished as industry moved out of the city fringes and people moved back in, while the demolitions of the Hotel Australia and Rowe Street in 1971-2 were part of a CBD office boom that spelled the demise of the once vibrant nightlife in this part of town.

Demolished Sydney explores how Sydney’s buildings have risen and fallen as technologies have changed, populations moved and industries diversified. Some buildings, like tram sheds and cinemas, were made obsolete by cars and television, while others were felled for city improvements, land values, environmental legislation or demand for housing and offices. Some demolitions have sharpened an appreciation of Sydney’s built heritage and led to a push for its preservation.

Demolished Sydney is a fascinating tour of Sydney’s past and present, allowing visitors to trace the city’s evolution and better understand its mix of Georgian, Victorian, Art Deco, industrial and Modernist architecture.

“Like cities across the world, Sydney has been in a constant state of building development and urban change. Some city improvements have come at the cost of familiar landmarks, such as the Hotel Australia and Rowe Street, which have fundamentally changed Sydney’s culture and character. Others have erased structures to create places that are now an intrinsic part of the city landscape, such as Martin Place and the Sydney Opera House, as a reminder that
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“Demolition can have a positive impact on a lively and changing city landscape,” said Mark Goggin, Executive Director, Sydney Living Museums.

“As our urban environment changes, so too has our idea of heritage and our understanding of what should be preserved for the future. The ways in which we navigate the tension between the dynamism of urban change and the need to protect the past will continue to be a complex but fascinating process which will evolve as our city journeys into its future,” said Curator Dr Nicola Teffer.

Significant building demolition projects explored in the exhibition include:

FORT MACQUARIE TRAM SHED AT BENNELONG POINT: 1902–1958
Before Bennelong Point embodied Sydney’s modernity and artistic ambition, it was the site of the Fort Macquarie Tram Shed. Prior to that, it was a place for lime production, naval defence, transport and, finally, entertainment. Earlier still, it was Point Bennelong, named for the Wangal man who befriended the British colonists. To the Gadigal people, the traditional owners of this land, this spit of sandstone is Dubbagullee. The dramatic transitions of this rocky outcrop mirror Sydney’s own evolution from bushland to international metropolis.

COMMISSARIAT BUILDINGS: 1809–1939
The Museum of Contemporary Art today occupies the site where once stood the two oldest government buildings in the state - the convict-hewn Commissariat buildings, built in 1809 and 1812. In 1938 The Royal Australian Historical Society urged that these heritage buildings be retained as a museum of Australian history. However, they were demolished in 1939 as part of a plan to beautify Circular Quay with an overhead railway and expressway and a new Maritime Services Board building. Sydney was to have an impressive new gateway, and old convict structures were not consistent with the proud future ahead.

GARDEN PALACE: 1879–1882
The Garden Palace was built for the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition and was one of the city’s most significant buildings until it turned to ash in a spectacular fire in 1882. A southern rival to London’s Crystal Palace (built for the Great Exhibition of 1851) and a testament to the industry and resources of the colony, it was framed in timber and clad in bricks and glass. Had it been made of sandstone and iron, like its memorial gate that now stands at the

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entrance to the Palace Garden, Royal Botanic Garden, it might have survived the inferno that consumed it three years after it was built. Whether it could have survived the 20th-century modernisation of the city is another question.

Opened in 1967, the State Office Block was known as the ‘Black Stump’ until its demolition in 1997, when it was replaced by Aurora Place. Part of the 1960s renewal and modernisation of the city, the State Office Block was, briefly, the tallest tower in Sydney. It will be remembered as one of the city’s earliest examples of the modern office layout, complete with revolutionary open plan and modular spaces and Scandinavian design. When government policy shifted to leasing rather than owning office space in the late 1980s, the building was proposed for sale, leading to its demolition in 1997.

RURAL BANK: 1936–1982
The Art Deco-style Rural Bank in Martin Place was torn down and replaced by the Colonial Centre in 1985, despite vehement opposition from 7000 Sydneysiders. Built in 1936, the bank was an important element in the harmonious Art Deco streetscape of Martin Place, where a number of commercial buildings complemented one another in style and size. The campaign to save the Rural Bank galvanised a new appreciation of Sydney’s Art Deco architecture and saved many now iconic CBD buildings.

ST STEPHEN’S CHURCH: 1857–1935
From 1857 the steepled St Stephen’s church stood cheek by jowl with Victorian terrace houses and colonial shops on Phillip Street. Almost 80 years later it was requisitioned for the creation of a broad thoroughfare that would become Martin Place. The massive development was envisaged in 1891 but not completed until 1935. St Stephen’s was just one of the buildings swept aside to beautify the city and improve traffic flow at a time when Sydney was undergoing a rapid transition. The construction of the underground railway (1926), the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge (1932) and the completion of Martin Place entailed the loss of old landmarks. But for many, they were pleasing signs of progress.

PYRMONT INCINERATOR: 1937–1992
The Pyrmont Incinerator stood on a high sandstone promontory overlooking the Blackwattle Bay, now occupied by a Meriton apartment block. Designed by architects Walter Burley Griffin and Eric Nicholls in 1937 it was a remarkable building, as stylish as it was functional. It was decommissioned in 1971 and progressively deteriorated until the late 1980s, when the site was sold. Despite protests the incinerator was demolished in 1992 – one of many local landmarks swept away by urban consolidation.

HOTEL AUSTRALIA: 1891–1971
The Hotel Australia, once the city’s grandest hotel, was a landmark for 80 years. When it opened in 1891 its Belle Époque opulence ranked it with the best hotels in Europe and America. But, as new city hotels were constructed in the 1960s, the Hotel Australia went into decline, unable to compete with international ‘jet-set’ standards. The last guests checked out in June 1971, and most of the buildings on the block were demolished for Harry Seidler’s award-winning MLC Centre.
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ROWE STREET: 1875–1972
Before its demolition in 1972, Rowe Street’s tiny shops with their swinging signs created a lively, artisan atmosphere. The laneway was absorbed into the plaza beneath the MLC Centre tower and most of the shops demolished. Its loss continues to be mourned by many Sydneysiders, who relished the street’s cosmopolitanism.

REGENT THEATRE: 1928–1989
The arcade and apartment tower of Regent Place stand where the Regent Theatre, built 1928, demolished 1989, once screened Hollywood’s finest films. This part of George Street was an amusement mecca in the 1930s and 40s, with the Trocadero Palais de Dance next door, the Century and the Plaza theatres across the road and the Victory Theatre three doors down. Cinemas struggled after the arrival of television in 1956. The construction of the first Hoyts multiplex cinema in 1976, on the site of the demolished Trocadero, marked the end for single-screen theatres. The Century was demolished in 1983, the Victory in 1984. The Regent, the grandest of them all, was the last. But it did not go quietly, with public calls for its preservation from the National Trust and builders’ and actors’ unions.

KENT BREWERY: 1835–2008
Central Park near Broadway is an award-winning development of apartments, shops and offices, enlivened by vertical gardens, parks, galleries, restaurants, public spaces and historic laneways. Its centrepiece is the 1911 Irving Street Brewery and its 62-metre chimney, a relic of the old Kent Brewery complex that occupied this 5-hectare site for over 170 years. This landmark anchors the memory of the city’s last major industry, and its workers, in the new development. When the Tooth brothers opened the Kent Brewery in 1835 it was located on the outskirts of the city, on swampy land near the paddocks of Newtown and Redfern. By the 21st century, this island of industry in the centre of Sydney was no longer profitable.

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First page, from left to right: Fort Macquarie tram depot, rear view, photographer and date unknown. State Records Authority of NSW: 17420_a014_a0140001128; The AMP Tower and Sydney Harbour Bridge, photographer unknown, c1960s. City of Sydney Archives: 026/026384; Pyrmont refuse incinerator, photographer unknown, late 1930s. City of Sydney Archives: NSCA CRS 538/254. Second page, left to right: Rowe Street, photographer unknown, 1929. City of Sydney Archives: 037/037868; Demolishing Hoffnung’s building, Pitt Street, Sydney, Ernie Bowen, 1939. State Library of NSW: hood_19948; West side of Circular Quay, looking south [Commissariat building], E G Shaw, 1923–24. State Library of NSW: a7813005.

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