

CITY OF SYDNEY

COMMERCE AND WORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Gavin Harris

Date: 27 April 2006

Place: Kings Cross

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

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TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **MB:** This is an interview with Mr Gavin Harris. It's taking place in his bookshop in Roslyn Street in Kings Cross. The date is the 27th of April 2006. Interviewer is Margo Beasley; the project is the City of Sydney Oral History Programme.

O.K, Gavin. One of the things I wanted to talk to you about just to begin with is I think it's a quote from something that you've actually written, where you said that Kings Cross has always been the face of Australia's engagement with modernity - - -

GH:

MB: - - - which is a very nice claim, a big one, but I'm sure you have your reasons for thinking that. So I wonder if you could just talk a bit about that before we get more into your ideas about the general themes that run through this history.

GH: I think at least from the 19 – well, no, even from the 1830s it was the first suburb of Sydney or at least the first – people built on the ridge of the hill and they were the administrators of the colony and so it was a

posh place then. Then it was subdivided at different times so that it had different sort of building stock coming in; the estates were broken down. The first place to have things like skyscrapers or residential apartment blocks.

MB: First in Sydney - - -

GH: In Sydney, yes.

MB: - - - or Australia, does that mean Australia?

GH: I would think Australia, yes. Yes, certainly Australia and it also was innovative in terms of music culture, art culture, food culture, migrants came here before the war, WWII, they felt at home here.

1.56

It has had a lot of the not necessarily the positive or progressive things of modernity, it's also been sort of the arsehole of Sydney as well, and - is that the word? – of Sydney. So, I think it actually has also been the space that has taken modernity but also protected a lot of Australia from modernity.

MB: Can you elaborate on that?

GH: Through suburbia or through the bush.

MB: How do you mean “protected” other parts of Australia?

GH: Well, it sort of sucked a lot of modernity in, you know. I mean, I'm thinking of one stage. I don't know if it's there but a very short piece one day when they were going on about the neon lights, protecting the neon lights at Kings Cross and this was the Soho or, you know, the Times Square space of Sydney, was space where suburban and country people have come to experience what the city is. If the city is modernity and this is the residential city as against the industrial city or the commercial city then it has taken a lot of the brunt of or been an expression of modernity and I think you've got to use a lot of nouns and adjectives and verbs to, you know, qualify what I'm saying.

MB: But I guess, to use a bit of a cliché it's always been a bit of a cutting edge kind of place - - -

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - socially - - -

GH: Socially, yes.

MB: - - - architecturally - - -

3.57 GH: Visually, visual arts, literature and it hasn't been systematically documented. I think there's a list there of something that I tried to pull together from the sources I had two or three years ago and just to find out that Henry Lawson or whatever just lived around the corner for maybe six months or whatever but they've all lived here some time or other, you know.

MB: Yes. And is there an explanation for that? I mean, does it start with its density and its multiple uses?

GH: I don't think so. Sydney, of course, was very small through the nineteenth century, smaller than Melbourne by the end of the nineteenth century, as I remember it. Peter Fitzpatrick [Kirkpatrick?] wrote a book called the 'Seacoast of Bohemia' and he talks about bohemian elements being disparate through the city until the mid '20s, 1920s, and then coming into this space and I think it was for a good whack of the twentieth century through till the '70s or later the antithesis of civility, I think, and people have fled here from suburbia or, you know, come from the bush or internationally to be here; it's been a refuge for people in terms of tolerance and stuff. Have I got off the track?

MB: No, not at all. You said until the '70s. What do you mean, what changed then?

5.48 GH: Well, I probably wondered when I said that. I think it got displaced in terms of sophistication and things by Paddington, you know, with the gentrification of Paddington in the '60s and '70s and I think it probably – I'm not sure what the Cross is or where we stop because as I talk a bit of it's going down the hill into Elizabeth Bay which always, you know, had some sort of elegance in apartments and things. I suppose the other aspect of it in terms of its modernity is unlike most Anglophonic cities and parts of cities and more of a European model, the rich and the poor have lived on top of each other here. And as I remember my design history an English model was and was taken up in America and most of Australia that the rich moved away from the poor and here - - -

MB: As part of the process of urbanisation?

GH: Urbanisation, yes, yes, they equated the poor with social disease and moral disease and so they fled from industrial sites, created their own suburbias and commuted in and that process began in London with people like William Wilberforce in the late eighteenth century and I think that was the model for this space in the 1830s. But Kings Cross also seems to me to be unique because it doesn't have a town hall and it doesn't have many churches or a sustainable economy in its own right because it's so close to the city and I suppose other spaces.

MB: You mean like other suburbs would have?

8.03 GH: Yes, well yes, and yet it has its own strong identity and Alexandria's got a town hall and, you know, other places have, Marrickville or whatever, Newtown; it doesn't have some of the things that one associates with a suburb, probably because of its proximity to the city and yet it has things that suburbs don't have, you know, like nightclubs and sexy places and, you know, so it's got those uniquenesses of absence and presence.

MB: Just before we go any further, you were talking about how you sort of just floated away down there into Elizabeth Bay or Potts Point's similar, I guess.

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: Is there a way that you can define the boundaries of the Cross or is it really an amalgam of several different areas or precincts?

GH: Well, it didn't have a – it began in the late nineteenth century as Queens Cross and in 1907 became Kings Cross and never was supposed to have had a post office until a certain time, so there was that myth that it never existed, it was just a state of mind and, you know, that was Darlinghurst and that was Potts Point and that was Rushcutters Bay. I'd say that this is Kings Cross although the address is - - -

MB: Where we are now?

GH: - - - Rushcutters Bay.

MB: This is technically Rushcutters Bay?

GH: Yes, or Elizabeth Bay.

MB: Right.

GH: And my brother who lives upstairs, his address is Rushcutters Bay. We chose to call it the Cross and to get away from any Christian allusion we insisted on "Kings Cross". I've actually lived down, very much down in Potts Point in a good building but - - -

10.09 **MB: By which you mean -?**

GH: By which I mean an art deco treasure.

MB: A nice old one?

GH: Yes, and I've lived there for twenty years but I've always told people I've lived in the Cross and that's been to upset them, mainly. You know, I taught out at the University of Western Sydney; people were

scandalised by the place and people won't come here now still because of the reputation of the druggies, etcetera.

MB: Yes, I suppose that in the last few decades - I wonder if in the popular imagination if the reputation for drugs has superseded the reputation for sex. It's like the sex is almost like the tame side of it now - - -

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - the drugs are the really scary part.

GH: Well, I think that this is another thing of modernity. Whatever is the bad of society has been here. When it was gambling, illegal gambling was here, sex after that, booze, you know, in the '20s and '30s, blackleg booze and then of course it became heroin and, you know, cocaine and whatever the bad drug was, ice this week. So that's, you know, another shape or face of that index of modernity. And it's meant that good people, nice people can have their illusion that things happen here and not their home or next door for a long, long time.

12.02 Of course, the other thing about it is that it's that, you know, maelstrom of modernity, it's always changing unlike most suburbia which ossifies or something.

MB: Or at least seems to.

GH: It seems to. Yes, exactly, yes. This, you know, this changing its character all the time.

MB: Yes, and the change is always very visible, isn't it?

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: Well, I suppose not always but it seems to be visible - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - and I suppose a lot changes under the surface that we can't be eyewitness to.

GH: Yes, yes. The other thing is so many people have a nostalgia for the place - - -

MB: Yes.

GH: - - - that, you know, people will say to me "Oh, I used to go to the Piccolo Bar in the '60s and, you know, I haven't to the Cross for forty years" or whatever. Or, you know, "I met my wife there" or somebody

actually did, John Hewitt walked around – was that only last year? – with a little video camera and got people to talk for two minutes and compiled a thing of two hundred people. That was the project but I think it got to a hundred and something and that was burnt onto a CD and the bit that he showed me that I actually paid attention to was somebody saying “I tried to have my first sex in Kings Cross but I went to a prostitute and she kept asking for more and more money and it just turned me off and I walked out the door” or “paid her and, you know, didn’t get what I wanted”. So, a lot of people have memories of the Cross and - - -

MB: Well, it would be vivid even if you’ve only come here once - - -

GH: Exactly, yes.

MB: - - - because in your imagination you’re expecting something - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - that may be rewarded or not rewarded but you have an idea about it before you come, so naturally you’ll also remember it.

13.59 GH: Yes. And kids still hoon up here now on Saturday night, you know. And, of course, what’s in the back of my head all the time, surprising me is the idea of New Zealand, that, you know, people have come not only from the hinterland or suburbia but they’ve come - - -

MB: From New Zealand to have a look.

GH: - - - New Zealand and, you know, the Pacific and all those sorts of things. So it’s been the centre of whatever for the whole Pacific, you know, and - - -

MB: The whole Pacific?

GH: - - - yes and the sailors coming in too, I suppose, yes.

MB: I suppose there’s always been – there’s a constant infusion of new people.

GH: They didn’t want to repeat that Kings Cross album book, although they are going to republish it, apparently.

MB: This is the Elizabeth Butel one?

GH: Yes. Because they said the population of Kings Cross is transient. I don’t think it is at all and especially now with people buying expensive or even not too expensive apartments. And there are – you know, twenty years ago I’d say that you didn’t see many kids around here but my apartment block now which has ninety apartments does have

a significant number of babies and kids and things now. So, I think people have the expectation – well, they don't have the expectation of bringing up a kid in a detached cottage the way they used to. And some of those people are very comfortably off so it's not only a - - -

MB: It's a choice in other words.

GH: Yes. And it's that sort of lifestyle choice of the coffee shop and all that which is, to my mind, pretty nauseating but, you know, you go into the bank and they're promoting "Keep your lifestyle and your mortgage", you know, all that sort of stuff, welcoming.

16.10 **MB: When you say it's that kind of way of life is a bit nauseating to you or the idea of pursuing it, what do you mean by that, because you're obviously very much an urban dweller yourself?**

GH: I suppose I like to think I'm above that sort of sitting in a coffee shop and being cool and all that sort of stuff. It actually bores me to tears and I don't drink coffee.

MB: But you like the other amenities in urban living?

GH: Oh, I suppose – well, basically I've never driven a car. I finished university and went to a country town and lived in the town and I suppose that could have been a time, then I went overseas and lived in the centre of cities and so coming back here it was the only place I considered living and, I suppose, been here for thirty years. Yes, somebody asked me – I was talking to on the weekend somebody I'd known who came into the shop – said "Oh, I've been in Sydney for four years and it's the first time I've been into this area. It's really quite interesting, isn't it?" and I thought "Well, where else would you be in bloody Sydney?"

MB: So what is it that keeps you here?

GH: I don't know - habit now. I mean, I don't actually go anywhere much; I don't even use the theatre or the cinema or anything that one would expect; I don't use restaurants or any of that. It's, I suppose, just that everything's close, I can sort of go everywhere, everything's habitual now, I mean I just walk everywhere.

18.09 **MB: You also are pretty strongly networked into aspects of the local community.**

GH: I am. That's only in the last three years.

MB: That's only the last three years.

GH: That's only since I've started here.

MB: Since you started the bookshop?

GH: Yes, yes. Before that I – no; well, it was almost like a dormitory suburb for me.

MB: While you went out to work somewhere else?

GH: Work, yes, yes.

**MB: Nevertheless, you now know a great deal about the history here
- - -**

GH: Yes. Well, I do.

**MB: - - - and have a lot of ideas about the themes that are running
through it.**

GH: Yes.

**MB: Some of them, I guess we probably don't need to really talk
about the most obviously like sex. I mean, everybody knows
about prostitution in the Cross and strip clubs and that kind of
thing but I think there are some others that you're a bit more
interested in. One of the things that you mentioned to me was
the history of music here and live music and so on that people
don't really – it doesn't fit the stereotype of the Cross, I guess.**

GH: Well, I'm not much of a music person at all but there is documentation
of a lively jazz scene here through the '50s and '60s. Before that,
people, classical performers actually stayed here in them, you know,
like – and who am I trying to think – Horowitz and those sorts of
people would come to Sydney and they'd stay in these apartment
blocks.

MB: In the apartments, not in hotels?

GH: Yes, initially in the apartment blocks – that one on the corner of
Macleay Street and Greenknowe, there was an apartment there
where opera singers were sort of stationed.

MB: Has that building got a name?

GH: I want to say Kingsclear but I get them confused, yes.

20.02 **MB: Not Manar?**

GH: No, no.

MB: No.

GH: It is in fact the oldest high-rise apartment block in Australia, 1913. Also you've got the history of rock and roll here in Surf City and Whiskey A-Go-Go.

MB: And Surf City itself had a number of incarnations, which I suppose a lot of these venues do.

GH: Yes.

MB: Surf City became the Sound Lounge, I think - - -

GH: Exactly.

MB: - - - or vice versa.

GH: Yes. And I've met people who – because I grew up in the suburbs and I went to university and had my head stuck in a book till I was twenty-something and then went off somewhere else but, you know, I meet people who sort of talk about, you know, leaving school at fifteen or whatever or still being in school and coming up here and seeing Johnny O'Keefe before he was a tele star or Col Joye or - those sorts of people had, you know, their audiences here and then they merged into television and mainstream culture. And I'd be just the kid in suburbia watching Bandstand and not knowing where these people came from or had no notion of the history of them, you know, or an economy that sort of supported them. And I found that curious, when people would say "Oh, yes, went up the Stadium every Friday night and I saw so and so there or so and so there" or, you know, "I saw Billy Thorpe at whatever it was".

MB: The Stadium also technically in Rushcutters Bay.

GH: Yes, but just like a block away.

MB: Very close.

GH: Yes, very close. I mean, you'd catch the Kings Cross buses, probably, to get to it, and that of course had the international stars.

21.56 **MB: The Beatles played there.**

GH: The Beatles, and the Beatles at the Sheraton and all that sort of stuff, yes. Well, I just saw that on tele and I imagine, you know, there would be, what, two million people who received the Cross through that mediation and I find that interesting, yes. I was just going to say and also sort of like not being part of history but receiving history, you know - I'm not sure if that's logical. I lot of the social histories of Australia and entertainment histories are based on a mainstream of television, etcetera, that performers had their origins around here or the inner suburbs, that's what I suppose I'm trying to say.

MB: And what about other themes of interest. I mean, you've mentioned architecturally. Well, there is quite a strong interest in architecture around here because of quite a few significant buildings.

GH: Well, yes, I don't necessarily see them as significant but what I do see – and I was thinking of it this morning as I walked here from my home – is just the mish-mash of styles. You know, like within one block you've got the history of Australian architecture from 1830 through to the retrofits of 2006, yes.

MB: So which block are you thinking of when you say that?

23.45 GH: Well, I'm talking – I live in Macleay Street, I walk along there. I see Tusculum, for example, the John Verge buildings and Rockwall. They are, you know, amongst the first great houses that were built on the ridge here and then you have the infilled terraces, you have – in crude terms there's an arts and crafts building just over from me which was built in 1895. I live in a deco building; there are a dozen of those along the way. Then there the international modernist buildings of the post-war period.

MB: Such as?

GH: Such as, I think, some of the ones, I suppose the ones that come into my mind are the sort of just the very austere apartment blocks, the honey-coloured brick, light coloured brick with the slab infill and flat roofs and they may have a little bit of tizz on the balconies or whatever but they're pretty minimalist. Of course, some of the ones have been knocked down, the old Florence Bartlett Library and the Village will probably be knocked down soon - they both won architectural award in the '60s – the Rex building. The old Rex building's been knocked down but what else is there along there? The cop shop, I suppose, is a '70s number.

MB: And you're also talking about retrofits for 2006?

GH: 6, yes.

MB: So, what were you thinking of there?

GH: Well, the Gazebo Hotel is one which, you know, was fairly controversial. I mean, it was an icon in its day, of sophistication. You know, they used to park Holdens outside it and, you know, say "This is modernity", and then it had its troubles in getting refitted but now, of course, it plays on high modernism as, you know, a retro of high modernism after post modernism, etcetera, with iconic chairs in the foyer and all of that sort of thing.

26.20 And there are two or three other buildings like that; I mean, the Sebel Townhouse is another one which has had a façade put on it. The building that has Woolworths downstairs used to be the Chevron Hotel; it was a big hole in the ground for such a long time and basically on that site was a house which was a boarding house which people remember still and it's talked about in that memories book, with tennis courts that people used to be allowed to go in and play on. It then became again a sophisticated space where nightclubbing happened in the '60s and '50s; I as a teenager and university student went to balls there. Then it had a couple of incarnations: it was rebuilt, knocked down and rebuilt again as a hotel and now is an apartment block. So, you know, just on that site you've got layers.

MB: Like Troy.

GH: Yes.

MB: Can you characterise the Cross now? I mean, it's always been a tremendously complex place but it goes through waves, doesn't it?

GH: Yes. Well, if we're talking about the Cross as Darlinghurst Road and a stone's throw from that, the inner Cross or the sanctum or something, there must be still quite a bit of drug dealing there but it doesn't seem to be as pronounced as it used to be even a couple of years ago.

28.12 When we were getting this place renovated I used to come two or three times a day, wandering around here, and I was always being harassed by people, smoko or whatever, and I don't get that now from one week to the next; I'm surprised when someone – I get jolted. There are signs that, you know, the nightclubs now have spruced themselves up. The next generation, I suppose, is more design cultures or has to be; you have to put money into those spaces whereas the Abe Saffron generation or whoever they were – I'm thinking primarily the gay spaces and the culture of that. They used to say that a bar had three years of life and you just trashed it and didn't put anything into it and just ran it down and have a fire and, you know, that's the end of it and you move on to the next one.

MB: Finish it off.

GH: Now I think they have to put a million dollars into a space to draw the sorts of people they think they need or want.

MB: The big spenders, I guess.

GH: Well, yes, or the kids that will go.

MB: Kids who will spend ridiculous amounts on a cocktail.

GH: Exactly, yes. I'm not privy, of course, to town planning ideas but I understand that there'll be two new hotels of the size of the Empire there sort of diagonal corners, the Westpac Bank corner and the Hungry Jack's as it's been recently. So I think there'll continue to be a night economy and there are places around here, some of which are not particularly conspicuous.

30.17 **MB:** **Yes, I was just going to interpose there that there's also mixed in with all of that, though, you were saying it's actually almost become or is becoming a desirable place to live in the sense that there were always people who liked it but it was not a place where people would bring young children to live or only rarely.**

GH: No.

MB: **You couldn't say that was a feature of life, I suppose, a couple of decades ago.**

GH: No, no.

MB: **But you're saying now I think it's probably something to do with the fashionability of apartment living in general - - -**

GH: Yes - - -

MB: **- - - means that when people who are looking for somewhere to live and are thinking about apartments, this is a natural place to come?**

GH: But also if you're comfortable enough, apartments have changed - - -

MB: **Yes.**

GH: - - - so that in the building next to me the apartments are probably twice the size of the family home that I grew up in with, you know, six people in it. So what an apartment is has changed; they used to be a flat or a, you know, bedsit or whatever and I suppose land has just become extraordinarily expensive and a whole range of things. But, of course, people live, more people live alone now or people live without children now and – what else can I say about that? I don't know, yes.

MB: **Well, I guess what I was really meaning is that it sounds to me as though it's undergoing another kind of transition - - -**

GH: Yes, yep, yep.

MB: - - - and another period of not exactly gentrification but where the kind of excesses are being toned down or there's also a generation of people who are not so worried by that.

32.02 **GH:** I think so. I think these people would like to see themselves as the creative class and I did get that book to read. It sort of suited some of the other literature that I was reading at the time; I never did get 'round to reading it and somebody knicked it.

MB: This is the book about how creative people actually generate healthy urban economies?

GH: Yes, exactly. And this seemed to be the best argument you could use for pouring money into this place or whatever and I think that's quite right. I mean, also the creative classes of the '20s and '30s were writers and painters but of course now they're animators and marketing people and advertising people and whatever, as well as those things and while a lot of artists feel as though they've been pushed out of this space I'm not sure whether they're sort of cutting at an edge of creativity at all now.

MB: And they, I suppose, I imagine most artists of the traditional kind wouldn't be able to afford the kind of rent - - -

GH: Yes, yes, exactly.

MB: - - - or mortgage they'd have to have to live here.

GH: Or there were studios around here too, of course, and some nice North Shore ladies came in one day recently and said, you know, "They've sold our studio, so where can we go?"

MB: What, they used it for painting?

GH: Painting, yes, and where could they go? I don't know, yes. So there were those sorts of down-at-heels places, spaces that are now being taken over. Another icon of the sort of the '50s style, with the old post office that now it's been boarded up for three or four years and now there's a sign up last week, saying "We love this neighbourhood", something about "We're going to have boutique shops here and, you know, the world's going to come to Kings Cross".

34.17 **MB:** No doubt there'll be more coffee shops to keep you happy.

GH: Yes.

MB: O.K. Well, let's talk a bit more kind of the long term historically. We could talk, I suppose, about the more what you might think of the kind of high end aspects of the Cross. Like it's had a very strong literary tradition - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - and not only as a place in which things happen, a place to write about - - -

GH: Exactly.

MB: - - - but a place for writers to live.

GH: Yes.

MB: I guess those two things would naturally - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - feed off each other but there are writers who live in Pymble who write about Indonesia or whatever.

GH: Yes.

MB: So, here there does seem to be a really fantastic cross-cultural thing happening.

GH: Well, yes, it's that "I am a writer, I am bohemian. This is the bohemia of the antipodes" and some of it might be very poor and some of it might be very navel gazing but again "This is where I was down and out in Sydney, did my drugs, did my rock and roll, did my sex" or whatever "was a bad boy or girl or am a bad boy or girl". So there are obviously still young and successful and not so successful writers living around here quite a lot.

MB: Living here?

GH: Yes.

MB: I suppose Mandy Sayer and - - -

GH: Well, they get a lot of flack from people because they're seen as the professional Crossites or whatever.

MB: Yes. Because they write about the Cross and they, I guess, promote it?

36.03 GH: Yes, yes, and they do the tours – yes, exactly. I mean, Frank Moorhouse is living around the corner at present and Murray Bail and others, you know.

MB: In a self consciously bohemian way, do you think?

GH: Well, I don't know Frank very well but he comes in here and other people say to him – somebody said to me he basically has no property, he rents, “Well, he rents my flat” the person says, “he doesn't have any objects, he's not materialistic”. And that's pretty good, I think, you know, and there are – I used to think I was by far the most materialistic of the people I was friendly with here. I've sort of lost that through my impecuniousness of late. But, yes, no, people I know just don't buy things or have much. They spend a lot of money on entertainment or on consumption of travelling and stuff.

MB: But is that really a Kings Cross thing or just happens to be the kind of people you associate with?

GH: I think it's pretty much a not necessarily a Kings Cross thing but a sort of an anti-suburban thing, you know, I think an inner city thing, yes, yes.

MB: So, yes, well just speaking about anti-suburbanism, I suppose the Cross was always really contrasted with the idea of suburbia as a really dreadful, barren, lonely place.

GH: Yes. But I'm trying to – what's that man's name that used to teach at – he wrote a book - - -

MB: Not one of the Boyds?

GH: Craig McGregor.

MB: Craig McGregor, yes.

37.53 GH: He wrote a book somewhere along the line, talking about how Australian academics or intellectuals or wannabes or whatever have always been hostile to suburbia and they've always, you know, done it a grave injustice. Now, he wrote that in, I think, the '70s or early '80s and that stopped me in my tracks a fair bit and there had been, I suppose, exhibitions celebrating suburbia or at least identifying the fact that, you know, people actually create things in suburbia and the whole western suburbs sort of cultural movements and stuff. The art schools, of course, were around here. That's one reason that, you know - - -

MB: East Sydney.

GH: Yes, Sydney, yes. If you look at that Kenneth Slessor book of 1963 you see pictures of, you know, beatniks and arty types, etcetera, which look incredibly quaint now but, you know, that was very – well, not even necessarily subconscious but that's what it meant to be engaging with the present, I suppose, at that time, yes.

MB: So if there are areas of the Cross' that you'd like to see brought out or more attention focused on what would they be? Are there particular areas that you think are neglected, that are not well celebrated in the public imagination?

GH: No, I think they're probably all there but they're not – is the word theorised? They're not understood. You know, if I'm a muso I know about the Cross in music terms, if I'm a rock and roller I have a nostalgia for it, if I'm a drug addict or whatever but I suppose reading that Mandy Sayer and Louis Nowra book - which I'd actually thought that the, you know, introduction to each of the decades was quite good - but I suppose there needs to be some sort of higher level of theorisation, like a notion of what the city is.

40.25 And I think, you know, international literature has that, you know, and obviously you've got to temper it and understand it in Australian terms and what's not there and, you know, it's not Montmartre or whatever.

MB: But none of those places, I suppose none of those, for want of a better word, bohemian areas like Soho and Montmartre or Greenwich Village, they have similarities but they're all different in their own way - - -

GH: Exactly, exactly.

MB: - - - as they must be.

GH: Yes.

MB: So there's never any direct comparison to be made but presumably there are broad comparisons to be made.

GH: The city needs a space or used to need a space like this. I'm not sure if it does need that, even the red light district. I don't want to get to the specifics, I want to try and say it does need that sort of negative, disreputable or louche space or, you know, quite what the word – I mean the words would probably change over the decades and whatever medium you're talking in but it is, I suppose, just that negative or antipathetic or difference is probably as broad and as neutral a word as you can get, you know, "a space of difference".

42.00 **MB: Yes. You're saying that that's possibly less needed now - - -**

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - because we're living in a very liberal age or have been?

GH: Well, I was going to say when we talked about the creative classes, there is the book called the 'Bohos', bourgeois bohemians, and it theorises that the baby boomer generation had some values of their

youth of the '60s but then they went out and made money and, you know, respectabilised themselves or, you know, lost their steam so that they are a combination of bohemians and middle class values and whatever. So they've married the two and that's sort of the ethos of the late twentieth century and early twenty first century America and probably Australia so that it's impossible to shock the bourgeoisie now because the bourgeoisie is doin' it.

MB: Yes, or there's a general kind of "live and let live" sort of philosophy?

GH: Yes, exactly, yes.

MB: Although it feels like that to us. I wonder, I mean there'd be huge areas in America where that's not the case.

GH: Oh, probably, yes.

MB: And probably in rural Australia.

GH: Yes.

MB: But, yes, you are living in a place – like for instance gay culture, you know, used to be confined to very strict kind of areas, I mean, unless it was extremely underground - - -

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - because the tolerance level was so low.

GH: Yes.

MB: But that's much less so now.

GH: Yes.

MB: I mean, there are whole areas of the inner city that might be regarded as gay. It doesn't mean that they're explicitly gay - - -

44.01 GH: No.

MB: - - - or even majority gay, it's just that there's a visible presence there - - -

GH: Exactly, yes.

MB: - - - and it's a bit of a non-issue - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - in the way that wasn't the case thirty or forty years ago.

GH: Of course, yes.

MB: So you could that argument that there's less need for a place like the Cross - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - if you can go and live in Surry Hills or - - -

GH: Well, you know, in the past you came to the Cross for your sex or your porn or whatever and you get that on the net or every suburb has its brothel now, supposedly; you can get your drugs most other places as well. What else are the bad – booze is bad; you can get booze anywhere. Gambling. Well, that's institutionalised now, of course; every suburb has its TAB and you've got your casinos and things.

MB: And sophisticated eating which was another - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - element of the Cross' history, you know, I don't know, perhaps somewhat overrated.

GH:

MB: But anyway - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - well, you virtually don't come here to eat really, not really fancy eating – a few places.

GH: Well, this weekend there's, you know, "Rediscover the Cross. This is the food capital of Sydney". Well, it ain't, you know, and like I said to the guy who was it, I said "Look, you know, people move out of the Cross to get a feed, they don't come here. You know, we go through it, that's all". Just one little thing that came into my head was – what was it? It was about, oh, something I read or heard last week about New York and its sort of notions – oh, the delicatessen, that's right, there's a lot of fuss being made that the first delicatessens in Australia were here and the first coffee machine and the first this and the first that.

46.05

And I was reading that, you know, that's usually identified as the late '30s and the '40s and people used to go into those shops and buy their cooked meal and take them to their bedsits. Precisely the same thing was happening in America at the same time in New York. So,

you also get that usual idea that, you know, we're twenty years behind or whatever, but people were living those lives contemporaneously, you know, which I think's just a little bit interesting.

MB: It is, yes, and probably the same forces are producing it - - -

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - in different places across the world, the same sorts of forces.

GH: Yes, yes. Shirley [Fitzgerald, historian], you know, the plaques on the street – there's one that I'd never read or anything that she put there that says that after WWI there was a superfluity of women and they were the people that moved into these small bedsits here. I don't know what evidence she has for saying that but some of the people who actually talk, you know, the memoirs and - - -

MB: Memory Lane, these are the Memory Lane talks?

GH: - - - these sort of people. But not only that – I can't think where - but people talking about women, women writers talk about the Cross in those terms of being independent and having their own space and struggling and the camaraderie of the place.

MB: And where perhaps it was possible to be a youngish - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - or perhaps not so young, single woman without it being regarded as some kind of a bizarre oddity.

GH: Yes, yes. Oh, well it's either that or living at home with mum and dad, possibly - - -

MB: Yes, I suppose - - -

47.59 GH: - - - and or, you know, coming from the country too, with the farms not doing too well or just wanting to get out, you know.

MB: Yes, well I suppose there'd be probably a book in just the Cross and gender - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - because of the place where gender has also had kind of had - - -

GH: Been played with, yes.

MB: - - - fairly extreme manifestations.

GH: Yes, yes, yes. I think that's, you know, really important. There's a sort of, you know, excessive femininity in the prostitute or that sort of, you know, hetero sex. There's the sort of the hoonie men and the bloke culture. The last Memory Lane we talked about – we were supposed to be talking about Garden Island and I was trying to get out of them but nobody would take it up - you know there must have been, at one stage there in its glory there were twenty thousand people. Well, they have to sort of get in and out of that space and a lot of - - -

MB: I'm sorry, where were there twenty thousand people?

GH: Garden Island.

MB: On Garden Island, right, yes.

GH: Yes, and so some of them, there were buses that took them to the station or whatever. Many of them must have just walked through the Cross and, you know, used the pubs and had a pie and, you know, bought their fags up here; there must have been a sort of a wave of these people twice a day.

MB: As there were waves all over Sydney in industrial areas.

GH: In Sydney.

MB: If you go around South Sydney - - -

GH: Yes.

MB: - - - they will talk about that, the waves of people would go in and out at shift change.

GH: Oh really, do they?

MB: Yes.

GH: Yes, yes. Well, nobody had ever said anything like that to me before, you know, and nobody had said it. The other thing that somebody just mentioned, interestingly, was – and this is, I suppose, the loneliness too of the Kings Cross – that people used to have a weekly meal ticket that they would get at a restaurant and I don't know if they got the seventh one free or whatever but they would - - -

50.01 **MB: Like a loyalty card or something?**

GH: Yes.

MB: Or a discount for having every meal in one place?

GH: Yes, yes. So, I mean there are a lot of people here that just don't cook and I suppose that's happened more around Australia but, you know, I mean people have just eaten in these cheap eateries. They're talking about doing a film documentary project about the New Yorker [local restaurant].

MB: Yes, I've heard about that, which is still a very, very cheap eating place.

GH: Yes.

MB: Same owners, I think, for several decades.

GH: Somebody told me that, well they've been Greek people always and I think somebody bought somebody out and there's another generation or something like that but yes.

MB: And they still have an extremely regular clientele, I think.

GH: Oh, yes, yes.

MB: And very what we would think of as old fashioned food because the menu hasn't changed - - -

GH: Yes. No, not at all.

MB: - - - so you'd still get, I think - - -

GH: Three courses for ten dollars and that sort of stuff.

MB: Yes, and that would include soup and I think probably things like - - -

GH: Yes, rice pudding.

MB: - - - rice pudding or steak and kidney pie, that kind of - - -

GH: Exactly, yes.

MB: - - - you know, very kind of 1950s' food.

GH: Yes. I won't go there. People have sort of suggested to go there for a meal because it just seems to me like really down and out land.

MB: Does it?

GH: Yes, yes. That's just me. You know, I would feel totally defeated by life if I ended up there, eating.

MB: And the other reason to go would be to not exactly slum it, I guess, but to treat it as a curiosity.

GH: Yes. Yes, exactly, yes. But a lot of bachelor men, whatever that is, or men just living in boarding houses or rooming houses around here just eat there twice a day or whatever. And there were others. Apparently, that same family also owned the Astoria which was closed down about probably ten years ago; that was the same.

52.05 **MB: Was it a café also?**

GH: Yes, mixed grill sort of place on Darlington Road, you know, with the old veneered booths which are – no, I think it had the booths. It might have actually ended up with chairs and tables. And, you know, we haven't really talked about migrant waves in the Cross and the Jewish thing or whatever.

MB: Well, the Jewish thing's been a very big influence, hasn't it, in food and clothing shops, I suppose, and other kinds of businesses?

GH: I think so but it's never really been talked about.

MB: No.

GH: No, yes.

MB: But certainly what's talked about is the immigrant - - -

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - influence here and Middle European kind of influence.

GH: Exactly, yes.

MB: So that's a big one.

GH: And the strange food, of course.

MB: Exotic food.

GH: Yes.

MB: And also, of course, the American influence - - -

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - which is all over the place, like the New York Diner.

GH: Yes.

MB: And I think there used to be a restaurant called the California, something like that.

GH: Exactly, well that was famous. That was another – I think that was another sex, drugs or rock and roll place. I can't remember what it was, I get them totally confused but yes.

MB: Yes. Well, there's also the Bourbon and Beefsteak, famously.

GH: Yes, yes.

MB: I think the California's quite a lot older than that, though.

GH: That was, yes, yes.

MB: But that might have related – it might be from WWII, might have dated from that.

GH: Yes, I'm pretty sure it was the WWII one. Well, that again is that modernity, I think, is actually quite central. I mean, I hate the word because it's sort of overinflated but it does mean and say a lot, you know, it's a good umbrella word for that. So that I think if the American influence was felt in Australia it was felt here more, more intensely and earlier than anywhere else in terms of, I suppose, clothes and music and - - -

Interview ends