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NINETEENTH ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURE 2005
“Finding the Spirit of Darwin”
by Marilynette Paspaley

His Honour the Administrator of the Northern Territory and Nerys Evans, Ms Kerry Sacilotto MLA, Member for Port Darwin and other Members of the Assembly, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I was deeply honoured when the Northern Territory Library asked me to deliver this lecture. I’ll admit that I do not remember exactly when they asked me. At the time, I was most likely totally immersed in some point or other of the business that I am involved with. I have a tendency to focus on one thing to the exclusion of all else. So when I finally turned my focus to this lecture, I was somewhat surprised that I had the audacity to accept the invitation.

To be in the august company of those who have contributed in previous years - Manning-Clarke, John Mulvaney, Manduwuy Yunipingu, Sir Paul Hasluck and Ella Stack – is a daunting prospect. I am not a scholar, politician, historian or even a community leader.

I could never hope to compete with the level of scholarship implicit in some of those names, so have chosen instead to present something more personal. Whilst the series focus is usually on the Territory’s culture and history, my choice of title for this lecture is “Finding the Spirit of Darwin”.

Please don’t confuse this with the successful sunset cruise ship that moors currently in Cullen Bay.

The spirit of our town is much more elusive, but it underpins why so many of us either come back time and time again, or simply refuse to leave. It cannot be defined simply as lifestyle nor can we put it down to climate, especially at this time of year.

It is something more intangible, but I hope to sprinkle the dust of memory on it today so that it takes some shape, even if it remains wispy.

I’m a Territorian, and more precisely a Darwinite. Let me give you a brief summary of my connection with this town.

I attended both primary school and high school in Darwin from 1956 to 1968. After studying at the University of NSW and then living in mining towns in Western Australia for several years, I returned to Darwin in 1976 and successfully applied for the position of Executive Director of the Keep Australia Beautiful Council, a rather busy job if you remember post-Tracy Darwin.

There was a moment that illustrated this very well in 1977, when I was performing in the Darwin Theatre Group’s amateur production of “A Man for all Seasons”.

Her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh were taken on a tour of Christ Church Cathedral and the actors were asked to don costumes and make a static display in the cathedral.
The Duke stopped briefly for a chat and asked me what I did. When I explained that I worked with the Keep Australia Beautiful Council, he commented that I obviously had a lot of work to do! He was not wrong – beer cans littered the Stuart Highway all the way to Katherine.

A natural extension of this work was to become involved with "project garden city", a worthy goal and a much-needed focus in our town. Such memorables as Daryl South, John Lynne, Helmut Schimmel and David Astley were prime movers in this hugely successful community event which has now morphed into the annual tropical garden spectacular.

After a brief absence from Darwin in 1978, I returned once again, this time to work as an announcer and presenter on ABC Radio and television.

I revived my involvement with the Darwin Theatre Group, spending time on the committee as both treasurer and president.

The group entered a period of extraordinary activity and creativity under the direction of Robert Kimber, Ken Conway and Simon Hopkinson.

What an exciting time it was – troppo architects designed our theatre sets; teachers, wharfies, carpenters and electricians ensured the shows went on; and the community attended in droves – or not, depending on the quality of the performance.

In 1981, the company toured “Buffaloes can’t Fly” to the Adelaide Drama Festival. Written by Simon Hopkinson and set in the Territory, the play was named best original work that year and I was awarded “the finest performance in the festival”.

Following that, I became one of the first professional actors in the company, where I continued to work until I joined Playbox Theatre Company in Melbourne in 1985.

For the next ten years, I followed a career as a professional actress, working with the major theatre companies around the country.

I also joined my family company, Paspaley Pearling Company, in 1988 to open the doors of the first Paspaley Pearls Boutique in Broome, Western Australia.

Moving between Broome, Melbourne and finally Sydney, I carried on the two professions of general manager of retail and actress until I left my acting profession in 1996 to focus entirely on the development of the retail division.

This led to my return to Darwin in 1997 and I have made this my base ever since, despite a hectic domestic and international travel schedule.

I wasn’t actually born in Darwin, a fact I always admit to but which I follow very quickly with the words – “but my mother brought me up here as soon as she was out of hospital!”

I have no pleasure in saying that I was born in Sydney, but I have a great delight in saying that I grew up in Darwin, not just because it was a wonderful childhood, which it was and I’ll return to that later.

My delight is based on an awareness that growing up here gave me strengths, values and beliefs that I carry with me today in everything I do, no matter where in the world I am.

I had a very fortunate family upbringing, a good education and a normal exposure to religious beliefs, both Catholic and Anglican, but what I’m talking about is additional to that.
The best way I can express it is to ask you to remember the chalk boards at school, and the white pieces of chalk that were used. Do you remember what happened when the chalk was dipped into a pot of blue ink?

Well, growing up in Darwin was like being dipped into a pot of rainbow ink – you absorbed all of these differences that were around you, and they became a part of you as much as you were a part of them.

Speaking of chalk, my primary school education was at St Mary's Primary School in Lindsay Street, still one of the most popular primary schools in Darwin 45 years later.

It was a time when the education system believed in daily exercise, daily milk and, at a Catholic school, not only daily prayers but ‘on the hour’ prayers. You could always tell who went to our school – we all had dirty knees.

We had to march around the school grounds first thing in the morning to loud military tunes. Uniforms were compulsory. On the other hand, how many schools in Australia could boast a bomb pit in the school garden, I wonder.

There was a strong focus on performance, whether in school plays, orchestra or choir. Our teachers, the nuns, made time to include these things in our curriculum. They placed great emphasis on spelling, grammar, writing and arithmetic. Most of these disciplines are unfashionable in today’s education system, but I am interested in what those unfashionable disciplines achieved.

School was a melting pot – Australian, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Dutch and Aborigine. No private schools here - everyone in together. Physical activity first thing in the morning woke us all up. Uniforms made us all look alike, except for colour of skin and perhaps quality of shoes.

Performance pushed us to stand up in front of others, to find talents or confidence we didn’t expect, to have experiences that would otherwise have been totally foreign in many homes of the students. Emphasis on the basics of learning put us in good stead for our later choices in life.

One of the best statements about early childhood learning that I've heard is as simple as this: in the first three years of school, you must learn to read so that for the rest of your life, you can read to learn. The nuns made sure we learned to read. These standards that they insisted upon broke down the differences between our varying backgrounds – at school at least. Proximity broke down prejudices. Working together built respect.

I read somewhere the first impressions of a young policeman who had been posted to Darwin a few years earlier and he recorded his surprise at the cultural mix of the town. We all took it for granted and I think it’s one of the qualities that sets long term Darwinites apart – the fact that they’re more comfortable in a multicultural gathering than they are in a white Anglo-Saxon one.

Darwin in the 1950s had a population of around 8,000. It seemed to me that everyone knew everyone. When you married, you selected one of the main gathering halls in town for the reception. It didn’t matter which denomination you belonged to – you chose the venue based on how many guests you were inviting – the Chung Wah Hall for small, the Greek Hall for medium or the Palais for huge.

The Palais was a large corrugated iron shed with a concrete floor on the Catholic Church property in Lindsay Street – a more inappropriate name for such a building I cannot imagine.

Our first home that I remember was a shed, but a small one. It was situated on the corner of Daly and Mitchell Streets. Land tenure was a perilous concept in those days and our block was compulsorily resumed – supposedly to build a new post office.
I drive past that block every day on my way to work, and it still stands vacant – used as a parking lot for customers of the Top End Hotel! This was the first of many blocks that have been taken from my family over the decades.

Interestingly, Sir Paul Hasluck mentions in his Eric Johnston Lecture of 1991 the issue of unsatisfactory titles for town leases in post-war Darwin. No one had any long term title to land and therefore wisely made few improvements to their properties. This helps to explain the sheds, I imagine.

After that corner block, my father built a wonderful home in Malabar Street, Larrakeyah. He purchased two houses, moved them to this residential block that seemed so far away from town at the time, and joined the two houses as one.

I recently visited that home – it now belongs to Lynette and Ross Ainsworth. It has exactly the same layout that I remember as a child – only the décor has changed. I couldn’t help but admire my father’s cleverness in creating such a spacious and incredibly cool home so simply.

Of course, these were the days of mosquito nets – long before air-conditioning. Mosquitos were a real problem back then and it was common for the neighbourhood to be sprayed by a fog machine early evening during the wet season.

It was an appealing sight – the blinking yellow lights of the truck with the machine pumping mist behind it – all the children of the neighbourhood used to skip behind it for a block or two. Who knew it was a mist of Malathion.

It was a tremendous childhood. We roamed the neighbourhood with a sense of freedom and safety – feasting on cheeky plums and tiny wild passionfruit if we needed an energy burst, chewing rosella leaves if we were thirsty and of course in the wet, gorging mangos.

Every home was an open house, every neighbour kept a watchful eye on the comings and goings as we roamed in different directions. You didn’t dare do anything wrong under such watchful eyes. A code of conduct was implicit in this freedom. If you broke the code, there would be an evening gathering of the neighbourhood parents and great embarrassment for the culprit.

There was an activity, though, that today would be seen as delinquent, I’m sure. Land was released for development down in Kahlin Bay – a mangrove-ridden backwater that was being pegged out for the residential development of Kahlin Bay and the reclamation of what is now known as Kahlin Oval.

The survey pegs were wonderful props for many of our games and I don’t know how many times the surveyors had to return before they were able to define the blocks and create a village green atmosphere that now looks like it has been there since time immemorial.

With the development of Kahlin Bay imminent, my father realised that he would lose his sea view. He had earmarked a building block in Fannie Bay, with a sea view, for our future home. However, he was judged to have failed to meet development covenants on it – he didn’t put the fence up in time – and that too went the way of Daly Street.

Tired of being at the behest of the land administration authorities, my father set his sights on newly released land on Myilly Point. He was busy on the day of the auction, and so my mother bid. She paid the highest price ever at the time for a residential block in Darwin and this block became our family home until recently, when it passed to my nephew James.

Who would have dreamed of building a Harry Seidler house in Darwin in 1958? Darwin had moved away from the shed with the wonderful Burnett houses, but there was nothing modern
about those shady, colonial style residences. My parents had spotted one of Seidler’s early houses in Sydney during a family holiday and my mother somehow managed to entice this dynamic Austrian to Darwin.

I remember standing quietly in the background in my pyjamas while this stranger sat at our green formica table – itself a very modern touch in those days – sweating profusely while the three of them discussed the possible project. It amazes me today that he agreed to take on such a challenge. I wonder if he was captivated by the beauty of my mother and the romance of this young couple wanting to do such a thing in such a far-flung place. Maybe the green formica played a part as well.

It was his first tropical house and once completed, won international awards that later saved it from being compulsorily acquired by yet another government regime. He stayed a family friend and generously agreed to design a wonderful home for me in the early 1980s.

Unfortunately, I was not so lucky in saving my home from the clutches of the Everingham/Perron government. In fact, they razed our entire neighbourhood for the “public good” to develop – not a hospital, or a school, or an aged care facility – another casino to replace the one at Mindil beach.

It was the 1980s. Now that was a time when I think we began to lose the spirit of Darwin. What replaced it was a spirit of development, but it was development at any cost. Please understand, I am not against development - Darwin has always been about development and opportunity, and people who want to have a go.

But did we really benefit as a community by having a casino built on Mindil beach? What were the financial rewards? The high rollers never came, but the locals did and every small business in town felt the effect. Every specialty store disappeared as the household dollars were thrown on the two-up floor.

Was it our attempt at sophistication when we gave away the most beautiful beach in town to build a structure with no windows facing the sunset?

Mindil beach was the town beach. The mist on the dry season mornings would slowly rise as the sun came up to reveal water like glass and palm trees fringing the beach. There was a wonderful sand dune that changed shape every season – growing and shrinking depending on the tides and the storms.

A fast-flowing creek carved its way around and behind the sand dune to run all the way to what is currently the Gardens Park Golf Links. On the outgoing tide, it was a great thrill to launch from the sand dune into the creek and be swept rapidly away into the wider waters. Larrakeyah people would camp along the creek behind the sand dune, roasting sea slugs and other shellfish that we were too timid to eat, and teaching us to draw signals in the sand.

Most of the population today would wonder what I’m talking about. After all, there is still a beach, palm trees and now there are markets. But recently, I was in Broome, Western Australia and had a barbeque on the beach. Five minutes from town, you can sit with a sand dune behind you, no sign of any development, and watch a spectacular sunset and the brightening of a million stars. We had such a beach.

What do we value in our town today, I wonder? Are we determining our developments with our community in mind? I know I am distressed to find that, no matter where I go in our harbour now, I can see a petrochemical plant. Our harbour is larger than Sydney harbour. Is it going to become another Kwinana or Wollongong? Do we care?

In my teen years, Darwin’s reputation as a colonial outpost was well known, with all manner of civil servants, administrators, doctors, nurses and the like eking out their two year tour of duty.
Darwin was viewed as a hardship posting – much like a game of snakes and ladders, with the slide into our rough and ready town being rewarded by a rapid climb up the ladder of success on the triumphant return to gentler climes.

Many of these temporary residents had children and I made friends with some of them – only to bid them a heartbroken farewell when their time came to return to their homes somewhere in the south.

That pattern began to change in the 70s when some would refuse the promotion “down south” and instead take their chances with this town and its future. This was no longer a career choice, as many had to leave their employer to have this freedom. It was a value choice as to where they wanted their children to grow up, who they wanted to mix with and what type of community they wanted to live in. They had the courage to put their faith in the future of this town and in their ability to contribute to it.

I’ve always believed that one of the strongest attributes of Darwin is that we’re a population of people who choose to be here. We are not here because we were born here and don’t know any better. This town’s ability to attract people from around the world – to have them living harmoniously alongside one another – is, I believe, what defines the spirit of Darwin.

I am sure this was a factor in my father’s choice to make Darwin his home. Despite Broome’s reputation as a cosmopolitan utopia in the early 1900s, my father had experienced the strict class system where the pearling masters were king. A young Greek with aspirations that the colonial hierarchy regarded as above his station, was never going to be accepted by that society. He came to Darwin in 1927 and returned after the evacuations of World War II. However, when he returned, he brought with him his new bride.

I used to ask my mother to tell me time and time again how she met my father. It was a wonderful story of love at first sight, a passionate relationship that was still evident even to their last days together. My father was lucky that he found a woman who dreamed the same dreams, because the contrast between her life in Sydney and her life in Darwin could not have been greater.

My mother had spirit. She admitted that although some dear friends had wanted her to meet my father, she had no interest in meeting a Greek. She refused their invitations to small dinner parties or an evening concert.

Cupid must have taken the matter in hand because they met by chance at a large ball. Their attraction so immediate, she admitted they broke all protocol by leaving their dates dancing while he escorted her home. Their courtship was brief - their marriage inevitable. She agreed to make her home in this largely unknown part of the world. However, to move from the leafy suburb of Rose Bay to a corrugated iron shed in Darwin was something of a shock, I think.

We’re all familiar with today’s image of a frantic, time-poor woman in a lather attending to her family’s demands – blowing a lank tress of hair from out of her eyes as she goes about her daily chores.

That may have been my mother at home as she kept house and saw to our every need. But when she stepped out, she was so beautifully groomed, always with stockings, usually with a hat and often with a parasol – regardless of the discomfort tropical Darwin would throw at her.

These days, such behaviour is not so uncommon but in the 1950s, she stood out like a Bird of Paradise. She told me that the first woman she was introduced to when she arrived, greeted her in hair curlers, a house dress and thongs – and this was in town! From my mother’s point of view, just because it was Darwin was no excuse not to care.
She created a beautiful garden at each new home even though she had to pick-axe every inch of ground at the Myilly Point site before even a blade of grass would grow.

She was actively involved with many community groups. She cooked for the workers at every Rotary community event – her freshly baked sausage rolls and pavlova washed down with icy cold water flavoured with fresh limes from her garden.

She would discreetly deliver her home-cooked soup or baked egg custard to hospital patients she didn’t even know, because she had noticed during her hours at the Red Cross Kiosk that they did not receive many visitors. She had a strong sense of community spirit, but she was not alone in that.

We have only to look back over the last 50 years to see how quickly the people of Darwin embrace the less fortunate.

In 1961, it was decided that three unemployed Malays should be deported from Darwin – despite working for years in our pearling industry. They lost their jobs at a time when the industry was at an absolute nadir – there being no demand for mother-of-pearl shell in the plastics-led post-war era. Pearl culture as we know it today was in its infancy with only a few people – my father included – chasing the dream.

The day these Malays were due to be deported to Singapore, they went into hiding. Darwin’s wharfies – the same wharfies Brian Manning famously said 20 years later had turned the “go slow” into an art form – went on strike in sympathy.

Local newspaper reports criticised the injustice of immigration minister, Sir Alexander Downer’s deportation order and a goodly proportion of the town’s twelve thousand people signed a petition asking the minister to rethink his decision. I suspect the late Jim Bowditch, that old crusader at the NT News, may have had something to do with that.

However, Downer refused, which must have been like a red rag to a bull for the wharfies. You can imagine a hard-core group like the wharfies of the day – mostly self-avowed communists – relishing the opportunity to take on one of the Liberal party’s shining lights. In our time – the next generation of Downers on – I imagine things wouldn’t be all that different.

But back to the 60s, and a public meeting was held on Darwin Oval and hundreds marched on Government House – shades of the rebellion against Administrator Gilruth nearly half a century earlier.

More than 3,000 pounds was raised by public subscription to hire Melbourne lawyer Frank Galbally – who died only weeks ago – to take the case to the High Court. The men had their day in court but the immigration department dropped the case before a decision was handed down.

Paspaley has its own, similar story. One of the top men at our shipyard is Jose Martins, a Portuguese who fled his homeland and its compulsory army service because he didn’t want to be posted on active duty with the army to Angola – or possibly – even East Timor.

He eventually arrived in Australia and after working in Sydney and Nhulunbuy – without a word of English – he ended up in Darwin and has never looked back, loving Darwin for the life, the family and friends it has given him.

That sense of welcome worked too for evacuees and refugees from East Timor after the civil war and Indonesia’s subsequent invasion in 1975. Darwin – still only crawling out of the chaos created by Cyclone Tracy 12 months earlier – was the first port of call for more than two and a half thousand people who fled the country.
For the next 25 years – the length of the Indonesian occupation – there was a steady flow of Timorese through Darwin. While many have moved on and – since the historic proclamation of the world’s newest nation, a proportion may have returned home – the Timorese remain a significant part of the Darwin community.

At the same time as the Indonesian move on East Timor, Darwin started to see the result of the far larger and longer conflict in Indo-China. Long before the removal of Australia’s offshore islands from our immigration zone, Ella Stack as Mayor of Darwin, stood on the old wharf and welcomed boatloads of people who had fled Vietnam. How times change.

There’s a certain serendipity in the way people end up here. Why did the Greeks, Italians and others from a myriad of civilisations across the east - settle here? I have no answer other than that they saw the opportunity to make a good life for themselves and their families, despite the fact that it was probably an environment every bit as harsh as where they came from. Their arrival added colour to the fabric of our society.

The common thread appears to me to be that they were made welcome and shared a common work ethic. Engineering and construction through to housing and restaurants, these families identified what a growing community needed and supplied it. They relied on one another to fill the gaps – the vegetable gardens, grocery stores, haberdashery, furnishings and the later luxuries of frozen foods and pasteurised milk! Darwin grew.

At the 1991 census, we were a population of 76,700. Today, I believe we are more than 100,000. We have achieved a great deal for a population of our size. We are set for further growth with good infrastructure in place – the international airport and shipping port, the highways and road systems, the railway.

There are other major projects on the drawing boards – the Wharf Precinct development, a plethora of residential apartments and the expansion of the petrochemical plant. But as we grow and become more suburbanised, I sense that we begin to feel powerless in the hands of the “powers that be”, and I wonder: are we in danger of losing the very spirit that forged us?

It would be a tragic denial of our history if we did, so let us not allow it to happen.

We are generally speaking, a young, well-travelled and well-educated population. We understand the need for development. Our challenge is to balance the need for population growth to ensure a sustainable future for Darwin, with the need to conserve the environment that makes it so special. As a community, this is our goal.

We’ve had some success in conserving our social environment. Our suburban markets, such as Parap and Nightcliff, are a meeting place for the people and produce of Darwin.

Our small but distinctive Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, with its finely tuned collection, reflects not only our Territory but also our close ties with our nearest neighbours in Asia.

Our Tracks Dance Company recognises the links between community and art and integrates our Indigenous and multi-cultural neighbourhood into its unique productions.

These beacons are a celebration of who we are, where we are and what we bring to our town. Let us ensure they stay healthy, and let us focus on our natural environment with the same care.

As to our identity, our points of difference with the other states have come of age and gained a great value in Australia’s current political and social climate. We do not need to look south for answers to these debates – we can find them within our own experiences in our own community. We can be proud of our heritage.
We have an opportunity to be the most diverse and interesting city in Australia.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, I am not a politician or a scholar. I do not know the answers to the future issues facing this town, but I believe that together, as a community, we can find them. We have a responsibility to be part of that process, to make a contribution to our future, to determine who we will be.

If we can value where we have come from, and celebrate what we have become, we will understand what it is that we need to take forward.

It is unique.
It is what brings me home.
It is the spirit of Darwin.