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"Remembering the Elizabeth Bay Reclamation and the Holocene Sunset in Sydney Harbour"

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Projects of coastal reclamation have allowed humanity to expand its terrestrial foothold, often quite dramatically, although the act of extension may be forgotten as we come to naturalize these new lands as timeless terra firma. Against this possibility, my investigation of the 1880s reclamation of the Elizabeth Bay foreshore on Sydney Harbour, Australia, is a work of recall or recovery. The introduction by British colonists in the late 1700s of the notion of "capital in land" both underwrote the dispossession of the bay's indigenous inhabitants and stimulated a thirst for land that led colonists and their descendants to want to push the shoreline out into the sea. As my inquiry deepens, other temporalities come into view alongside this colonial narrative. Formed around 300 million years ago in the Sydney area, the sandstone that was used to construct the seawall is found to be eroding in a manner that allows the sea to advance inland a millimeter at a time, back toward where it was prior to the reclamation. In doing so, the sandstone appears to be at least as amenable to the sea's impetus as it is to the human intention for it to defend the reclamation against the sea. Meanwhile, earthworms active in the "artificial earth" of the reclamation undermine and bury objects such as lost coins and cigarette butts, causing them to subside into the earth at a rate of a few millimeters a year. Haunting the essay are the specters of rising and falling sea levels and my personal history with this reclamation in the year 1980. On bringing together these diverse temporal threads and processes, this article argues that archaeology has a particular role to play in bringing reclamations and other things of the Anthropocene into view. (Text from author's abstract)

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