



POSITIONING THE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA IN A WORLD THEORY OF ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Classical Australian Aboriginal cultures evolved over many tens of millennia, largely shaped around hunter-gatherer and fisher lifestyles with complex development in social organization, kinship, language, religious and philosophical practices. Four major periods can be differentiated in the recorded history of Aboriginal architecture. The first is the classical Aboriginal ethno-architecture as practised prior to the arrival of the colonists and at the time of their first arrival. Then during and following colonization, acculturated ethno-architecture occurred in the sedentary camps of the 19th and 20th centuries.ⁱ The third period comprised the outstation ethno-architecture during and after the 1970s, paralleled by increasing collaborative projects between Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal architects. The most recent fourth period is the architecture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries designed by the first Indigenous architects with western professional qualifications and training; cross-cultural collaborative projects also remain ongoing.

In this paper I briefly describe some of the most characteristic and noteworthy properties of the classical Aboriginal architecture. I shall also put the case that traditional Aboriginal architectureⁱⁱ has continued throughout the post-contact period. However to mount such an argument, a theoretical position needs to be advanced on the nature of 'tradition'. 'Tradition', in its primary or core sense means the



process(es) of the transmission of culture across generations (Rigsby 2002:10-16) which, if applied to the phenomena of buildings and architectural activity, implies processes of enculturation, conceptual encoding and decoding of meanings, as well as technological adaptation to sites and landscapes, socioeconomic contexts and user group needs.ⁱⁱⁱ These are all dynamic properties of traditional architecture. Far from reifying the concept of vernacular architecture, the current paper is concerned both with the dynamic qualities of the many dimensions of people-environment interaction that characterize the various cultural categories of architecture, and the position of building traditions within human cultural landscapes.

I shall present these finding such that they might contribute to a broader theoretical question of how can we configure a world theory of architecture that encompasses not only Western architecture as commonly taught within the University pedagogy, but also Indigenous and vernacular forms of architecture whose properties may appear to be of an opposite nature and indeed, to challenge the conventional paradigm of what 'Architecture' is.

Keywords : *traditional architecture, settlement properties*

Regional and Seasonal Diversity of Aboriginal Ethnoarchitecture

In the order of 300,000 Indigenous people were distributed across the entire Australian continent when the British colonisation began in 1788. Local groups were organized into larger regional groupings whose members intermarried according to strict rules, and shared some common aspects of language,^{iv} social organization, beliefs and customs. Aboriginal Australia was divided into a set of distinct cultural regions corresponding with natural land systems and geographic features, and we can recognize in each region a particular body of architectural knowledge employed in settlement life. Each such regional body of knowledge can be termed an 'ethno-architecture'.^v The dominant category of the



ethno-architecture was domestic, comprising a considerable range of shelter types used in residential camps. Particular styles were largely a function of the available structural and cladding materials^{vi} and the extent of dominant climatic influences; however Aboriginal ethno-architecture was also an expression of diverse and sometimes complex relationships between the religious, behavioural, social and physical environments.

For most of the seasonal year, small local groups or bands were scattered throughout their respective countries engaged in hunting, gathering and (except in very arid areas) fishing. Although people were nomadic in the sense that they moved between a number of contiguous ecological systems to effectively exploit seasonal foods and resources, the territorial range of groups of Aborigines was in most areas restricted by various forms of territorial rules as well as by the need to maintain local religious obligations in one's own estate (either land or sea estates) and those of one's grandparents and spouse(s). People were conscious of their place within their own local territory, intimate with its geography, and spiritually attached to its sacred sites and sacred histories.

The seasonal year was divided into a discrete number of climatic periods^{vii}, each with its own patterns of geographic focus, settlement use, food collection activity, domiciliary behaviour and ethno-architectural types.^{viii} Aboriginal bands occupied a series of camps in a permanent pattern of seasonal rotation. Most tribal or language groups employed a repertoire of up to seven or eight shelter types, one of which was selected for construction and use under particular circumstances of prevailing weather, availability of local raw materials, planned purpose and length of stay, and size and composition of the group to be accommodated.

Sociospatial Properties of Settlement

Domiciliary architecture was supplemented by a highly structured use of space as well as a complex geography of place. Camp size varied from a single family up to several



hundred people or more. The logistics of spatial organization were generated and regulated by complex social structures and associated behavioural customs and moral codes. For example, in a typical larger-sized settlement, separate shelters were commonly used for diurnal and nocturnal activities. Men and women congregated apart during the day, while family groups resided together at night. Unmarried men and women slept in separate domiciliary groups. Nocturnal domiciliary groups were spatially arranged in clusters according to a variety of social principles: age and gender identity, tribal or language group identity, as well as close family relationship and other classificatory kinship structures (Memmott 2002). These clusters were usually close enough for visual and aural communication. External orientation was a key attribute, but at the same time there were kinship rules which forbade specific relatives from camping in proximity to one another. Movement around camps was also restricted by prescribed avoidance behaviours and the existence of gender-exclusive ceremonial grounds.

Since camps were organized spatially and constructed by their residents, the types and distribution of physical structures displayed a ‘cultural fit’ with the activity patterns and settings contained within the settlement space. Space was “...a function of the forms of social solidarity, and these were in turn a product of the structure of society”; or put in an alternate way: “society [had] a certain spatial logic” whilst “space [had] a certain social logic to it” (Hillier & Hanson 1984:22). In Aboriginal Australia today such sociospatial behaviours may have been lost in some communities, whilst in others they have survived for contact periods of up to 150 years and continue to represent important social identity systems.

Classical Architecture of Short Duration

The mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle often resulted in relatively impermanent or semi-permanent dwellings which were occupied for periods from a single day to several



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months. In pleasant weather, preference was for open living with minimal structures. A widespread continental type for cold windy weather was the windbreak constructed of grass, foliage bark, or vines, together with warming fires. Shade structures were also widely used, and readily constructed (in the absence of shady trees) by implanting leafy boughs in the ground, or erecting a horizontal roof structure or making a lean-to with a ridge pole. In reflecting on these types, let us consider the idea of minimalist architecture. This is of special interest because Australian Aboriginal architecture has regularly been portrayed during the colonial and post-colonial periods as little more than primitive huts, and certainly not deserving of the label ‘architecture’. The nature of these short-duration forms of Indigenous architecture thus poses both a political threat to the conventional construct of ‘architecture’ and a theoretical challenge.

Perhaps the most striking example of culturally constructed use of domiciliary space which employs minimal (if any) structure, is that of a ‘travellers’ camp’. A travellers’ camp is a quickly-made camp, comprising domiciliary spaces, hearths and artefacts, and sometimes with windbreaks or shades, that is used overnight or perhaps for only a few hours (such as a ‘dinner’ or midday camp), by a group travelling through the country. As there is little time to invest in the construction of shelters, the natural qualities of the chosen camping site are of paramount importance in enhancing residential comfort. Although such travellers’ camps continue to be in daily use in many remote parts of Australia, there are few recorded examples. The following case study concerns two Central Australian tribesmen, Elder Paddy Woodman a revered ritual leader, and a younger man, Stephen Bob (Paddy’s nephew).

Paddy’s preferred campsite location is in mulga woodland. He will be grumpy if there are not any mulga tree communities available on the late afternoon route at which to camp for the night. In other types of tree communities, there is more likely to be prickles, burrs, grass and



ground cover which can shelter snakes, centipedes, scorpions or the nests of stinging ants; whereas the floor of the mulga forest is free of grass and easy to sweep clean of loose dirt and needle leaves with a branch. Mulga is also a superior wood for cooking and warming fires as it produces long-burning hot coals. In the mulga camp one notices the whirl of certain fast-flying flocks of birds that adopt the mulga as their habitat. There is also a constant familiar and secure sound of wind in mulga.

Campfire discussion ranges across many topics but includes reflection on local Aboriginal history in the region surrounding the campsite eg the totemic history and creation of sacred sites by Ancestral Beings, the history of mortals from past generations in perpetuating the Dreamtime history in ceremonial performance and sacred site maintenance, and the violent contact clash with white pastoralists who settled in the region during the period from the 1890s to the 1930s. P.W. tells gruesome stories of his boyhood during this 'revolver time'.

...Paddy and Stephen sleep side by side with a small mulga fire burning between them. Several mulga limbs protrude to one side of their sleeping area, and are gradually fed into the fire through the night. Paddy travels with a 'swag' of two thin frayed blankets - one blanket laid under and one over him. He always sleeps in his clothes and points his head to the east and feet to the west to prevent the infiltration of bad spirits during sleep. In the early morning, Paddy warms and smokes the inside of his hat over the fire; his first activity after sitting up. Stephen blows and fans the embers to produce flames for boiling tea.^{ix}



Consider the properties of this camp. There are comforts of surface, vegetation, sound, smell, warmth, security, spatial definition, customary domiciliary behaviours, and connection with nature. In the circumstance of a strong wind, a windbreak would have been quickly constructed of mulga limbs. If there was a rain-shower, the fire would have been stoked up; while persistent rain would have possibly resulted in the stretching of a plastic sheet or blanket over a tree. This is 'architecture' at its most minimal, yet the campers retain a certain level of comfort. Security partly stems from a shared understanding of the sacred meanings attached to the cultural landscape in which the campsite is located. There is a sense of the presence of Ancestral Beings from the Dreamtime having an active presence at the campsite, and linking the ancient past to the present. Indigenous constructs of time with their historical and geographical references pervade camp properties. Parallels have been drawn by Bill McKay for Maori architecture.

...the Maori space and time construct can be thought of more like a constellation with the past and the people of the past always felt in the present, like the constellations of the sky - enmeshing, surrounding - always before you, always behind, forming patterns that can be interpreted in various ways. (McKay 2002:2.)

More Durable and Complex Classical Architectural Genres

In a wide distribution of locations across the continent, there are reports of technologically crafted styles of strong, weatherproof shelters, sufficiently high to stand in, and supporting sedentary or semi-sedentary occupation. In some cases the structures covered large floor areas to permit occupation by several families or a gendered group and thus facilitated internal social interaction during the day. The



reasons for the development of such styles are varied, but seem largely limited to one or several of the following circumstances: (i) the occurrence of long periods of inclement weather, usually with continual rain, which may have also reduced mobility; (ii) the presence of an abundance of local resources to enable long-term local residence, and (iii) the social motivation to sustain large-scale gatherings for ceremony and initiating, arranging marriages, trading, settling disputes and executing forms of emotional reconciliation.

For example, in the largest and wettest tract of tropical rainforest on the continent, in north-east Australia, clusters of inter-connected domes were made of lattice cane or sapling frames and clad with layers of thatched grass or palm leaves or bark. In central Australia, where there are extremes of daily temperatures, the more durable styles were dome forms covered with a thick layer of spinifex overlaid with mud or clay plastering. Similarly, on the inclement parts of the south-eastern coasts, winter domes were up to 3.6m in diameter and 2.4m high, earth-clad, cupola-shaped, often fitted with a porch, and with a circular smoke vent at the apex, covered with a sod; and in certain areas low circular stone walls were also included to carry the reed or timber-framed rooves. These taller structures had to be of sufficient strength to bear the weight of an adult carrying out roof maintenance after bad weather. There are many more examples that could be cited.^x Ethnographers have reported tribal base camps which were continually occupied by at least some people all year round. (Memmott 2004.)

Symbolism and Meaning in Australian Aboriginal Architecture

All people encode meanings into their built environments and decode meanings from them. Such meanings can be analysed into 'high-level' meanings relate to cosmologies, cultural schemata, world-views, philosophical systems, and the sacred; 'middle-level' meanings communicating identity, status, wealth, and power; and finally, 'low-level' everyday



and instrumental meanings comprise mnemonic cues for identifying uses for which settings are intended as well as the associated expected behaviours of such social situations, making co-action possible. (Rapoport 1990:221.) We can refer to these three levels or categories of meaning as respectively ideological, socio-economic and behavioural.

Examples have been recorded in the ethnographic literature, of Australian Aboriginal domiciliary architecture having specific meanings. If we turn to northern Australia, we find that ethno-architecture is rich in high-level meanings and symbolism, so much so that structural forms and shelters were used as ritual components in a variety of contexts. In certain sacred histories, flaming dwellings act as ‘vehicles for change’ in which ancestral beings are metamorphosed into another state and then continue their respective journeys. In a *Wagilag* story from Arnhem Land, the shelter represents the womb and its regenerative qualities, amongst other meanings.^{xi} The evidence on the archetypal forked-post and ridge-pole in Arnhem Land and Cape York, indicates that these components were ritual symbols in these regions of Aboriginal Australia. This clearly corresponds to a high-level meaning category. Elsewhere (Fox 1993:14)^{xii} such architectural elements have been termed ‘ritual attractors’ and are usually a focus of ritual or at least acknowledged in ritual, and generally recognized as such from the time of construction. They represent the house as a whole in a concentrated or symbolic form.

We can turn to Aboriginal ceremonial grounds as a special category of architecture displaying the most sacred levels of meaning. In the secret religious life, it was, and still is in many cases, the Elders who are the holders of the sacred designs of ritual artefacts and their associated meanings, and hence who are the architects of the ceremonial ground. They oversee the preparation of the ground, the creation of the appropriate structures to be used in them, and the enactment of the songs and dances, all carried out in a highly ordered process (Fantin 2003).^{xiii} Painstaking energy is devoted to the



construction of artistic and symbolic representations of cosmological contexts used in the ritual retelling or re-enactment of the activities of Ancestral Beings. For many Aboriginal groups, the creative synthesis of song, dance, ground sculptures, ceremonial artifacts and shelters, is believed to imbue the ceremonial ground with ancestral presence and power, and constitutes a temporary religious architecture containing ancestral aesthetic qualities.^{xiv}

Post-classical Aboriginal ethno-architecture and cultural change

What can be identified as Aboriginal Architecture in the contact era of the 19th and 20th centuries is no longer readily discernable as regional styles. Nevertheless self-designed and self-constructed building persisted to varying degrees, with acculturated building materials and artefacts adapted to suit Aboriginal behavioural patterns and social organization. Divergent architectural genres have emerged, due to the dissimilar processes and differential impacts of cultural change across the continent, viz pastoral camps, mission camps, government settlement camps, and town camps. These settlements displayed the properties of the large camps which were described earlier as the more durable forms of the classical architecture. This customary origin explains the ongoing high degree of external living and the maintenance of structured sociospatial layouts and other spatial behaviours.

By the end of the 20th century, improved housing services had resulted in the provision of conventional Western housing or pre-fabricated huts to most Aboriginal people even in outstations. Classically traditional shelters and houses were no longer common, being predominantly used by remote groups on hunting and holidaying expeditions, whilst travelling, or at ceremonial and mourning camps. One may well ask whether the ‘tide of history’ had washed away traditional architecture? In considering the nature of cultural change of architectural traditions, it is useful to return to the construct of ‘tradition’ as defined earlier. A closer



examination of the anthropological literature on tradition reveals two competing theoretical paradigms of what 'tradition' is as a scientific construct. In the first, anthropological tradition is defined within an atomistic paradigm whereby:-

...culture and its constituents are regarded as entities having an essence apart from any interpretation of them; anthropologists may prescribe, for example, which traits are old, which are new innovations, and show how such traits fit together to make up the larger entities that we call a 'tradition' and a 'culture'." (Handler & Linnekin 1984:273.)

But if we return to the earlier point about change occurring to traditions within the processes of inter-generational transmission and enculturation, we note that a key reason for this is because "interpretations are made of the tradition presented" from one generation to the next. The alternate paradigm then, is that tradition is an interpretive process and that any tradition is continually re-interpreted. Unchanging traditional societies never existed (Shils 1981:13). Since all cultures change ceaselessly, there can only be what is new, although what is new can take on symbolic value as 'traditional' (Handler & Linnekin 1984:273).^{xv} If we accept this latter view of 'tradition', then we can find a continuity of traditional Aboriginal architecture albeit with a gradual process of cultural change, right up to the present time.

The emergence of collaborative Aboriginal architecture

What can be said about the architecture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. How have non-Indigenous architects who have undertaken Western professional training at universities, approached designing for Aboriginal clients? Is such design culturally distinctive? Can it be called traditional 'Aboriginal Architecture' in the sense of it being an evolved, but still separate genre?



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Up until the 1970s there was no Aboriginal voice in the design or management of government controlled Aboriginal settlements. The Commonwealth Government then facilitated a simplified procedure for Aboriginal community groups to form housing co-operatives and apply for Commonwealth funding. Many rural and urban-based groups exercised their rights under this new self-determination policy to take control of their own architectural projects. This brought some flexibility in design but, taken overall, government housing programs tended to stifle or suppress the principles of Aboriginal architecture. There were some important exceptions, especially within the work of a small number of architects who dedicated a decade or more of their careers to working exclusively with Indigenous clients. Thanks to these practitioners, the collection of specialist knowledge and skills related to the design of housing for Aboriginal Australians has emerged over the last 30 years as an architectural sub-discipline, comprised of three architectural paradigms; the cultural design paradigm, the environmental health paradigm and the housing-as-process philosophy, all of which contribute to its distinctiveness as a field of study and practice (Memmott & Chambers 2003).

The *cultural design paradigm* involves the use of models of culturally distinct behaviour to inform definitions of Aboriginal housing needs. Its premise is that to competently design appropriate residential accommodation for Aboriginal people who have traditionally oriented lifestyles, architects must understand the nature of those customary lifestyles, and their patterns in space and time, particularly in the domiciliary context. Such an understanding is a pre-requisite to achieving a design 'fit' between people and their built environment and aims to avoid stress in planned domiciliary environments and promote quality of lifestyle. This knowledge also increases understanding of the needs of groups who have undergone cultural changes, including those in urban and metropolitan settings, by helping to identify those aspects of their customary domiciliary behaviour that have been retained. The third significance is understanding that the continuity of a



traditional sociospatial structure may contribute to the contemporary maintenance of social identity and internal social control.^{xvi}

The second paradigm, *environmental health design*, aims to develop an understanding of the critical relationships between poor Aboriginal health and housing technology performance.^{xvii} These two approaches lead into a third architectural paradigm: *the housing-as-process philosophy*, which aims to firmly situate housing design and provision within the broader framework of an Aboriginal community's planning goals and cultural practices, as well as its socio-economic structure and development, and its housing management capacities. The integration of social planning and architectural design may be necessary in metropolitan settings rife with drug abuse, violence and police conflict, extending the role of the architect to one of social planner.

The sensitive working relation between an architect and his or her client Aboriginal community, as achieved in the housing-as-process paradigm can be termed *Collaborative Architecture*. Collaborative Aboriginal Architecture projects can be defined as architecture in which an Aboriginal client retains conceptual, stylistic and management control of the project but who forms a collaborative partnership with other professional and skilled personnel (eg funding agencies, architects engineers, tradesmen, manufacturers), resulting in 'Bi-cultural Architecture' which draws on ethno-architectural tradition.

In Australia, the collaborative approach has attracted most attention in the architectural media in respect to public architecture projects. For such projects there are extensive domains of Aboriginal environmental knowledge and cognitive styles and meaning systems, which provide great potential in generating semantic ideas for architectural expression. For a local Aboriginal group, despite the extent of cultural change, there will exist a number of traditional



signs (iconic, indexical, symbolic) which draw on visual references from the cultural landscape in the immediate environment of the building site (and are thus applicable to two or three-dimensional representation or reference). Apart from the classical base of environmentally and religion-inspired knowledge as a source of signs, there may be other domains of post-contact identity which Aboriginal clients may wish to express, drawing on the themes of resistance, oppression, and cultural adaption during the colonial and contemporary periods. The role of the architect is to offer ways in which such identity elements can be distilled and realised in architectural form (Memmott & Reser 2000).^{xviii}

21st Century Indigenous Architecture

In the late 20th century the first Indigenous graduates of University-based architecture and design courses in Australia emerged; nevertheless at the time of writing they numbered no more than eight or nine individuals. The only practice group with an Indigenous identity, partly formed due to this scarcity of Indigenous architects, was the Merrima Aboriginal Design Unit, within the New South Wales Department of Public Works and Services. This was established in 1995, by Dillon Kombumerri, a descendant of the Kombumerri people on the Gold Coast (Qld), who was joined by two other practitioners, Kevin O'Brien, of the Meriam Mer people of the Torres Strait and Alison Page, of the Tharawal people of La Perouse (Sydney).

At times we see aspects of the *cultural design paradigm* applied within Merrima's work; for example, a certain emphasis on external orientation and 'position in the landscape' in their Wilcannia hospital project where new spaces are created "between buildings, between river and town, between turn of the century and contemporary health practices" (Tawa 2002:76). Further, the site configuration and externally oriented architecture at Wilcannia...

...harbour(s) a way of being close to place



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and country – protecting and making room for memory and for stories...It contributes to cultural sustainment by reconciling person and place, community and country. Its function is not disembodied or abstracted from the socio-cultural, but grounded in it. Rather than being isolated, objectified, aestheticised or monumentalised, architecture exists primarily as a site of cultural practice... (Tawa 2002:76.)

Merrima has partly drawn from the tradition of the classical Aboriginal Architecture in casting its ideology. Alison Page writes of both low and high level meanings upon which Merrima draw.

Buildings were [traditionally] used as a *skin*, as living and breathing extensions of the body. No matter what form they adopted, they were receptive, flexible, sensitive, and constantly renewing. This concept is still applicable today, and new technologies can be adopted in its service. This is what will make buildings clever, and uniquely Indigenous...There is also in place an elaborate yet intangible organization of space, which is marked geographically, with spirits, totems, and songlines. Understanding both the tangible and intangible aspects of culture lends clues to the interpretation of identity and place in the modern world... (Page 2000:424.)

The Merrima Design Unit also works within a community relationship paradigm that parallels the *housing-as-process philosophy* as Alison Page also describes:

The way I see it, Indigenous architecture is not a style but a culturally appropriate process



based on communication, trust, and community development....From the moment a building idea is conceived to the moment it is realised, communication, in whatever form, and community involvement will determine the Aboriginality of the architecture. Within the process, there are many considerations which may not necessarily exist in a non-Aboriginal project. Designers are asked to consider culture, place and identity as well as employment and training opportunities, social justice, and health issues. (Page 2000:423,424.)

Thus, although the three above design paradigms emerged from collaborative housing design in the 1970s and 1980s, they are also being increasingly applied to public architectural projects, as indicated by the writing of the Merrima group in relation to its projects of the 1990s. Merrima itself is thus generating from traditional architectural principles with varying levels of meaning.

Summary of attributes of Australian Aboriginal Architecture

A number of the characteristic properties of traditional Aboriginal architecture have been outlined. Firstly, an outcome of lifestyle mobility was the variability of architectural lifespan and design complexity, with minimalist architecture for short periods of occupation at one extreme, to sedentary base camps and villages of more robust construction at the opposite extreme. Second was the influence of sociospatial structures on domiciliary and settlement use and configuration, which in turn drew from the multiple and complex systems of Aboriginal social organization. Third and fourth were seasonal regional diversities of architecture, which were partly a product of the diverse geography and climate of the Australian continent. But Aboriginal architecture was not simply a material response to climatic and environmental circumstances, it was



also generated by distinct spatial and cognitive rules, constructs, and behaviours. Cultural symbols encoded into the physical form provided another overlay of architectural meanings. Finally, both ethno-architects and more recently conventional professional architects have interpreted aspects of the classical traditional into contemporary architectural expression.

The emergence in the late 20th century of the various design paradigms outlined above, combined with the principles and practices of Indigenous architects, are all slowly evolving into a truly modern Aboriginal Architecture, one which will undoubtedly provide a substantial contribution to the future Australian identity as well as a cultural heritage of local, national and global significance. But how does this assist with a world theory of architecture?

A reconsidered definition of architecture more suitable for a world theory of architecture

The ‘travellers’ camp’ described earlier introduces the idea of ‘minimalist architecture’ in achieving a culturally distinct environmental ‘fit’, a level of comfort and a phenomenological position in the landscape; the idea of an ‘architecture’ without buildings. The ‘architecture’ is initially defined by the selection of the site and then by distinct spatial and cognitive rules and behaviours juxtaposed on the site or in many circumstances generated by the site. This idea of position in the landscape is not dissimilar to the recent philosophical writings of Christopher Alexander (2002:429,430) in which he argues that space and its surroundings can be alive, creating bounded centres in either the landscape or the townscape.^{xix}

From this there follows a definition of ‘architecture’ which is more appropriate for the cultural circumstances of many indigenous and vernacular people-environment contexts: *Architecture as a selected, arranged and constructed configuration of environmental properties, both natural and artificial, in and around one or more activity spaces or*



behavioural settings, all within a surrounding cultural landscape, and combined with patterns of behavioural rules and meanings as well as incorporating cultural constructs of space and time, to result in human comfort and quality of lifestyle...

This definition includes selected environmental features, mental and behavioural rules, spatial properties, hearths and artifacts. It can also include buildings, but not by necessity. It incorporates such concepts as socio-spatial settlement structure, avoidance behaviour, diversity of construction detailing and its impact on spatial experience, and ceremonial architecture imbued with meaning and theatrical moment. There are clear parallels here with Mike Austin's description of 'Pacific Architecture' as:-

...an architecture of spaces open to the sky rather than closed rooms, or sticks and grass as against mud and stones, poles as against walls, of single cell pavilions rather than labyrinthine complexes, of buildings raised in the air on stilts rather than sunk in the ground, of temporariness as against permanence, tension and weaving^{xx} rather than compression and building, an outdoor existence and ocean voyaging as against a life grounded in the land. (Austin 2001:17.)

Within this broad definition of architecture, we can still situate the entire genre of Western architecture, but there also may sit many other genres from all human societies and cultures, past and present. And within these diverse cultures there are a range of cognitive, invisible, ephemeral and symbolic properties that can instil architecture with a culturally distinct nature, in addition to the physical attributes of buildings. (Memmott & Davidson 2004.)

[word count: 5,080]



Figures

Figure 1: The repertoire of Yolngu shelters.

Figure 2: Sociospatial structure of an Arrernte Camp.

Figure 3: Paddy Woodman's overnight camp.

Figure 4: Rainforest houses.

Figure 5: Victorian village.

Figure 6: Sturt's village.

Figure 7: Burgess's Brambuck Centre.

Figure 8: Merrima hospital, Wilcannia.



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Endnote

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- ⁱ See Memmott (1991,1996) and Memmott & Go-Sam (1999) for writings on these types.
- ⁱⁱ It is to be noted that vernacular styles of building occurred in the Torres Strait Islands, which were distinctly different to those of Aboriginal Australia combining split bamboo, woven pandanus and coconut palm leaf, and grass thatch. Architecturally this is best classified with Melanesian styles, albeit with Polynesian influences. However there is an interesting transition zone in the Western Islands where there is a tribal group of islanders, the Kaurareg whose territory extends on to the tip of Cape York, and who identify as Aboriginal. Torres Strait ethno-architecture is a separate cultural study with a number of regional styles and is justified in having separate treatment. An outstanding study of the Torres Strait ethno-architecture, comparable with that of Roth's in mainland Queensland was made by Wilkin and Haddon (1912) of the Cambridge Expedition to this region. A more recent and a useful overview of all of the old data has been prepared by Gadke (2001).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cited at more length in Memmott & Davidson (2004:8,9). Compare Dell Upton's 1993 "The Tradition of Change" (1993:14).
- ^{iv} Altogether there were about 200 different languages spoken on the continent, but many of these had numerous dialects.
- ^v This term will be used interchangeably throughout this paper with 'Aboriginal architecture' and sometimes 'vernacular architecture'.
- ^{vi} A survey of the various cultural regions reveals such technologies as stone wall construction, flagstone roof cladding, grass thatching and plaiting, split bamboo, woven pandanus and coconut palm leaf, clay and mud plastering, excavated floors, earth platforms, sand-weighted rooves, split cane ties, and the weaving of foliage between wall rails.
- ^{vii} In Northern Australia, these five seasons are the cold south-east wind season, the dry transitional season (cool to hot), the 'first storms' season, the wet season proper, and the transitional season (wet to dry) (Thomson 1939:214).
- ^{viii} The anthropologist Donald Thomson was there first to document the roles and forms of seasonal shelter types and settlements in his 1939 paper, *The Seasonal Factor in Human Culture Illustrated from the Life of a Contemporary Nomadic Group*. His paper pertains to the Wik Mungkan language group. The Wik people reside along the west coast of Cape York from the Embley River near Weipa to the Edward River in the south. The Wik people became widely known in the 1990s, due to their winning an important and significant Native Title claim in the Australian courts.



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- ix A version of this was previously published in Memmott & Go-Sam (1999:237).
- x For example, a seasonal marine hunting village of rock-walled houses is also documented for High Clifty Island off the Kimberley coast. At *Pulan* or Amity on Stradbroke Island and opposite on nearby Moreton Island (Moreton Bay), large seasonal runs of fish supported inter-tribal gatherings. At the former, a 1.8 metre high and 15 metre diameter, dome was observed in 1824 adjacent to the seasonal, mullet-netting channel. The Aboriginal people were aided by dolphins in herding the fish towards the shore. (Memmott 2004.) Urgent investigation is required of the evidence on these locations of the more sedentary villages where socio-economic intensification and architectural elaboration are likely to have occurred, and a better understanding is required of whether specialist architect-builders were more widespread than what is understood at present (eg from the Lake Eyre region case study).
- xi Dwelling names can act as mnemonic devices to the ancestral histories in which they feature (Fantin 2003).
- xii In the analysis of Austronesian houses by the anthropologist James Fox, drawn from Malaysia and Sumatra in the west, to New Zealand and Goodenough Island in the east, and from south-east Asia to Melanesia and the Pacific. Ritual attractors in Austronesian houses are the post, the ladder, the ridge-pole, and the hearth within an encompassing roof.
- xiii Fantin (2003) builds on the work of others such as Donald Thompson and Joseph Reser, as well as her own fieldwork.
- xiv For example, in the case of the Yolngu of Arnhem Land (Memmott & Fantin 2004:Ch.10). This form of religious belief is also true for many other groups in Central Australia, the Western Desert and Cape York. Shaneen Fantin has written “that in particular Indigenous regions such as Arnhem Land contemporary Indigenous people continue to interweave their ethno-architectural, spatio-behavioural and religious traditions with Western architectural components in their commentaries and that this is slowly evolving into a truly modern Aboriginal Architecture, one which will provide a substantial contribution to the future Australian identity and global cultural heritage.”
- xv Austin (2001) has addressed the concept of ‘hybrid architecture’, as ‘bi-cultural architecture’, being a syncretisation of customary and Western elements. In his ‘Pacific Building...’, Austin examined the dynamic nature of the construct of ‘architectural tradition’: *In Aotearoa/New Zealand tradition is continually being reinvented, and every denial of tradition is a restatement of it while every representation of tradition is a modification of it...Modernism in constructing itself in opposition to its own tradition referred to the primitive. However the primitive was the invoking of another tradition...Elsewhere* Linzey (2001) has defined ‘biculturalism’ as the phenomenon of two cultures co-occupying one place.



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- xvi During the 1980s and 90s an interesting architectural concept emerged as a result of the application of the cultural design paradigm, particularly on outstations; that of the 'decentralized house'. The decentralized house is generated by upgrading an acculturated camp to satisfactory health and structural standards using Western construction and material technology, with the least disruption to the spatial fabric of the camp. This generic design type has now evolved from a design process which: (i) is informed on the subdivision of Aboriginal domiciliary space and behaviour in vernacular settings including night/day, dry/wet, cold/hot and gender-specific distinctions, and (ii), thereby generates the design outcome of different types of structures, forms, materials, and degrees of enclosure for different activities at different times. This results in a house as a set of separate structures, combined in a spatial field with other site elements, natural features and services, rather than the conventional concept of the house as a single structure containing a range of internal subspaces for different activities. Examples of the successful application of this collaborative approach have been documented for outstations at Palm Island, the Wik homelands in West Cape York, and Barkly Tableland (Memmott 1994).
- xvii This involves linking causally-related complexes of health problems with sets of design features and ranking them in a set of priorities based on the likelihood of improving health standards. See Memmott & Chambers (2003).
- xviii Critical writing on the creation of buildings which in some way aim to reflect or portray Aboriginality, alerts architects to the difficulty of this task. For example, a warning has been issued by Dovey (1996:101,102) that most architecture for Aboriginal people arguably has its source in a power structure in which "the native 'other' finds a voice only within the framework of a dominant discourse", and that "the State has an interest in seeing Aboriginal identity 'fixed' in built forms; its dangerous, amorphous power 'arrested'." There is also an ethical obligation for project architects to consult with and obtain permission from local Aboriginal traditional owners before using Aboriginal meanings drawn from local Indigenous knowledge. The traditional owners, through their intellectual property rights, need to be incorporated as stakeholders in such a project. In this regard, the architect must carefully differentiate between an Aboriginal client group and the local traditional owner group, as the two may not be the same. (Memmott & Reser 2000.)
- xix To illustrate how such a place can appear to 'have life', Alexander uses one example of a meadow in a hilly northern Californian brushland, identifying how the different types of visual symmetries, gradients and repetitions (echoes) within the flora combine to generate a sense of a live place.



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^{xx} We note the emphasis on weaving here, and the properties of texture and low relief that accompany such. (compare