

What world can learn from Australia: A critical review of the trend of internationalism in architecture

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Abstract

The speed and scale of urban development around the world on both regional and metropolitan scale, is disturbing the sense of community and leading to the loss of cultural values. This especially is a concern considering the high impact associated with weakening resilience around these new built environments. This, accompanied with the internationalization of the profession and the use of internet platforms such as Pinterest as a design reference without considering the context and culture on which the architects are designing in, has led to a universal and form-based architecture that relies more on fashion, than the social values. The product is getting more and more away from being culturally significant and sensitive towards the users. This paper is attempting to bring attention to the importance of conscious design towards the sense of identity and local connection in the built environment, taking the experience of the imported architecture by European settlers who ignored, and miss judged the importance of the Australian Indigenous culture as a starting point. The paper emphasises the possible consequences of ignoring the culturally sensitive architecture.

Keywords: *Culture; sensitive architecture; internationalism, Indigenous Architecture, native architecture, Vernacular Architecture;*

Introduction

The way architecture accommodates people of different cultures is an important element in developing a holistically sustainable future. A sensibly built environment targets a sense of belonging and involves the community. Architecture intervenes, maps, signifies and constructs identities. We as a profession, have an important role in promoting and restoring the cultural identities. The Australian architect, Philip Cox believes that architecture helps to shape how we know the world by mediating power, social relations and cultural values.¹ Despite the significance of the cultural values on creating many aspects of architecture and design, it seems that the importance of these values in creating the built environment has been forgotten. While for many around the world, the ignorance of contribution of the local social values and their cultural heritage in the built environment is quite recent, Australia's ancient sovereignty that has existed more than sixty millennia had ignored, whitewashed, and disregarded for almost two hundred years of colonial development by invaders that didn't appreciate or understood the social and history of First Nation people.

Today, the desire to reconciliation is widespread in Australia and willingness on creating an architecture that is authentically Australian that would bridge the culture is strong, but the progress has been painfully slow due to misleading information by early settlers to an extent that most people convinced that the Aboriginal and Torres Islanders were primitive hunter-gatherers. The disturbance of unexperienced imported techniques, materials and knowledge without considering the values and context, is continuing today. This paper is a reaction to the current trend of internationalism on using inappropriate material and knowledge to create a built environment that does not

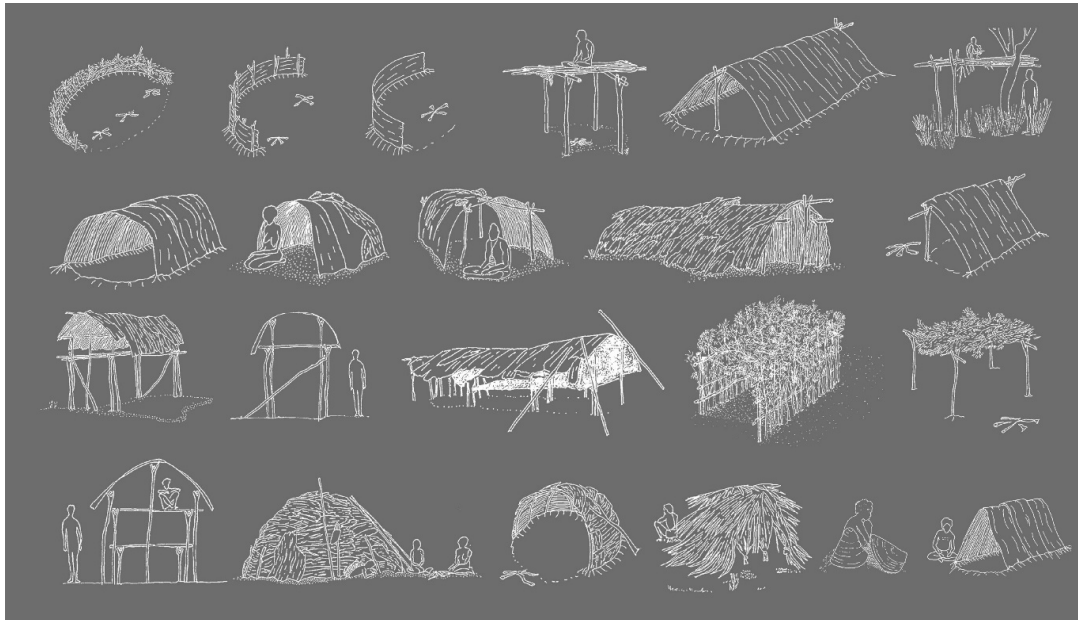


Figure 1. Modified Image from Gnyah, Goondie + Wurley book.²
The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia. Courtesy of UQ.

connect to the culture and context by giving Australia's experience on this matter.

The impact in Australia

Despite Australia's profoundly significant Indigenous culture and history, little evidence of these is visible in the local architecture. The Australian architecture and urban planning were developed by the Anglo settlers, who applied the planning and construction theories of western society and did not respect the socio-cultural characteristics of the First Nation people. Until 1992, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were considered as hunter-gatherers with no concept of land ownership. This is due to the development of the false view by the first European settlers that Aboriginal people occupied in temporary camps, sheltering in makeshift huts or lean-tos of grass and barks. For the first time, Memmott detailed Australian Aboriginal architecture in his valuable book, *Gnyah Goondie + Wurley : the Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* is 2007.² In his book, he categorises the First Nation people architecture to three-phase including 'Aboriginal ethno-architecture', 'acculturated ethno-architecture' and 'the government supplied housing'.³

The ethno-architecture refers to the time before the Europeans first reached Australian shores. In the book, *Dark Emu : Aboriginal Australia and*

the Birth of Agriculture, Pascoe provides numerous evidence from the first-hand reports by the earlier settlers on the advancement of Aboriginal society and economy. The observation from all around Australia at the time of colonisation states that clan and dialect groups had shelter types houses in many cases capable of accommodating between 40-50 people.⁴ From the short descriptions provided in the early settler's reports, the houses shaped typologies were different across the continent. Memomott suggests that except some elements such as a windbreak, the architectural type and material of the construction were determined by the climate and purpose of shelter.² Soon after the colonisation, the depopulation of the whole districts removed most of the evidence of the existing built environment in a way that after 1860 most people saw no evidence of any complex civilization.⁴

As per Memomott in a period from nineteen century right into the twentieth century which he categorises as Acculturated ethno-architecture, Aboriginal and Torres Islanders that survived the colonisation adopted the invader's imported tools and materials. According to Grant et al, the adopted structures were a blend of traditional construction technologies with imported forms. The materials used in this period was a mix of bush and second-hand materials. The adoption

of the Aboriginal people with non-indigenous society has formally occurred in 1951.³ Eventually, the states and territory provided 'transitional' housing to aid the indigenous people to move from their traditional camp settlements to conventional European housing. Not surprising that the majority of aboriginal communities in this period didn't have a say in the design and procurement of these houses. Consequently, the Indigenous voices, identity and knowledge system hasn't been represented in these buildings, places, spaces and designed experiences.

The absent of the indigenous culture and heritage in Australian architecture is a tragedy and restoration might not be ever possible. Ideally, Architecture in Australia would eventually incorporate, consider or actively connects to the deep history of the people who occupied this continent for millennia. Although architects were upfront of many other parts of the society in contributing to the research and identification since the 1970s (main research was based on housing and not interpreted in the context of urban and public architecture) of 200 years of ignoring the Aboriginal and Torres Islanders cultural input, the damage has been done for many years and as many thinks, it has deeply discontinued and disturbed the understanding of this continent vernacular architecture. One might question the importance of these connections and the reasons for the consideration of creating a space that reference sense of belonging of cultural and historical narratives even with the current damage to places such as New Zealand, Canada, America and Australia.

Internationalisation in a global stage:

Over the last decades, we have witnessed a growth in the impression of homogeneity in the built environment across the globe at a hard-to-imagine level. The development of globalisation, endless possibilities of the invention of forms and availability of materials in all locations are reaching new dimensions. This together with the advancement of technology is creating a constant tension with traditional local identities. While, using the knowledge gained in other regions and many possible opportunities brought to local level are welcomed and exciting, the international fashion of designing a unique and unusual form especially by star architects, influencing the profession around the world. Wherever one



Figure 2. Government settlement at Warrabri. Photograph W Pedersen National Library of Australia. Image Courtesy of the Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture.

looks, there seems to be often a disturbing and disappointing non-place identity as a result of off-site decision makings. The British architect and urban designer Robert defines the creation of uniformity and special kind of an identity that belongs to nowhere in particular as the definition of non-place.⁵ Designing a culturally sensitive environment that offers a sense of belonging to the user, responds and integrate the users cultural and behaviour needs are fundamental on creating a sustainable place.

Identity and Sense of belonging

The Canadian human geographer, Relph states that the sense of belonging to a place is a trustable and emotional relationship with a place which meets an essential need of the human being.⁶ The relationship between person and place relies on many elements including memories, knowledge and concepts that the user would designate to the place and would recognize them. The personal level consists of individual relations which the person associates to a place. For example, the connection to a place is more profound where the user's personal memories were evoked. The sense of place has become a public process and the group members belong to a place where they are familiar, and their culture remains intact. This type of space encourages people to be together, to be united, to feel belong. An architecture that empowers the effect of social change to create an entirely new model for public space. Experience with Australian issue states that creating a sense of belonging for the Aboriginal community has been extremely hard considering the history of displacement occurred during the colonisation. The world can see that Australia now need to go to a social change to create a sense of belonging to the citizens both Aboriginal and new citizens.



Figure 3. Impact of internationalism, A typical house design advertised in the Australian Market.
<http://architecture-design-place.com/architecture/justin-everitt-design-australia/>



Figure 4. Impact of internationalism, A typical house design advertised in the Russian Market.
<https://www.10stunninghomes.com/villa-v-spacious-contemporary-house-sochi-russia/>

Culturally sensitive design

Architects need to value the social and cultural diversity within the built environment they are designed for. A library located in the Middle East in a warm-dry climate would need to be responsive to the cultural and social needs of its users as well as its landscape and environmental requirements. The architectural form of a library designed for Fins, located in the cold climate of Finland would not be the same form as the Middle Eastern library as the users and climate are different. A successfully built environment is beyond a beautiful form and material and will be required to respond to the cultural values of the user from different races and backgrounds. This also can help to create a sense of belonging for the communities occupying the space. Lesson from Australia emphasis on the fact that rejuvenating the conscious and unconscious of society to where has started is not an easy task and almost impossible. Restoring the cultural and social memory in a lost generation is almost impossible even if all data are recorded.

Generating more waste

Increased international trade in the last few decades has increased the use of imported materials around the world. Limitation of local materials, environmental constraint and cultural desire have led to many examples of structural and material innovation in architectural history. However, the availability and lack of research in the local knowledge is impelling the use the preferred technology and product by multinational corporations rather than the project's specific needs. Looking back to the earlier colonisation in Australia, the invaders had ignored the local possibilities and imported and comfortable-to-them equipment and technique without considering the local context and materials. Apart from the fuel waste of transporting some of these materials, these products in many cases are not compatible with the local conditions and context. The intense industry's production across the globe get us to think on if the world is facing a worth situation by transporting many non-native products between the continents.

Conclusion

While researchers are trying to find as much information as existing after nearly 200 years of colonisation in Australia, creating a bridge is not as easy as might seems. The process of healing from this tragic division is already advanced in

our veins. The lost identity rooted in the culture, social and architecture of not only the First Nation people but also the rest of the Australian citizens. For Australia that lost a bit of their memory and history, focusing on the field of people environmental studies such as action research, ethnography and phenomenology might be the only solution in many areas but the world still has a chance to wake up and re-embrace the importance of their context and we as architects are responsible for that.

With all the photographs and the data collections, the world might not ever be similar to how Australian consciousness lost the Aboriginal cross-cultural significant from their memory. However, when the disconnection occurs, it won't be an easy fix. The fear of abandonment and a lost opportunity, even that we know it won't be as painful as Australia but will always be fragile. A question that always will be asked. What would have been if it never happened?

Endnotes

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6. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).