

## Architecture at the Ragged Edge of Empire (Brisbane, 27–28 Jun 13)

Brisbane, Australia, Jun 27–28, 2013

Deadline: May 10, 2013

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### Call for Papers

Architecture at the Ragged Edge of Empire:  
Race, Place, Taste and the Colonial Context.

In his *History of Queensland* (2007), the historian Raymond Evans described the penal outpost of Moreton Bay (est. 1824 and later to become the colony of Queensland in 1859) as existing at the “ragged edge of Empire.” Initially a site of secondary punishment for reoffending convicts, ensuring it was both geographically and morally remote from the imperial centre, the later colony was also climatically diverse (ranging from the sub-tropical to the tropical), racially conflicted (the Indigenous population at times outnumbering convicts and settlers four to one) and ethnically diverse (having the highest percentage of mainland European migrants within the Australian colonies). Undermining the ideal of a homogenous (British) settlement, such contingencies also effectively threatened, in the words of Evans, to undermine the creation of a new Britannia in the Southern semi-tropics.

The aim of the symposium *Architecture at the Ragged Edge of Empire: Race, Place, Taste and the Colonial Context* is to consider factors or contingencies of the colonial experience that challenged, worked against, or sat alongside the more formal (governmental) representations of colonisation. It will also consider their impact on, or expression through, colonial and/or settler architecture. While colonial architecture is often assumed to approximate that of ‘home’, especially in formal and material terms, a question regarding architecture’s disciplinarity – its conceptual framing as an aesthetic or a high art - is often difficult to reconcile with the climatic, geographical, ethnic and racial complexity of the colonial context. By attaching architecture to philosophical and aesthetic concepts of beauty (such as the sublime or picturesque) and artistic agency (imagination, association, genius or judgement), western architecture

has also been historically linked to specific climatic, racial and social ideals. Building on Kay Anderson's thesis (2002) that European contact with Australian Aborigines generated a "crisis" for Enlightenment ideals of humanism, the symposium seeks to consider whether the climatic, geographical, racial and ethnic variations presented by the colonial context also challenged and/or altered western conceptions of architectural practice.

Papers that consider factors or contingencies that challenge the colonial context and its architectural representation are invited. These may explore but are not limited to the following topics:

- Place

While the deterministic role of climate and landscape on colonial architecture is commonly argued, the disciplinary positioning of architecture within the colonial context is rarely considered. How was the practice of architecture framed or viewed by architects working in colonial settings? Could the entanglement of taste (architecture as a cultivated rather than mechanical art, painting instead of engineering) be maintained? What effect did the topographical and climatic diversity revealed by colonisation have? Was architecture rendered mute or reduced to a technical practice in such circumstances? Was it possible to cultivate an artistic practice or architectural culture within tropical/sub-tropical/arid settings? Did the aspiring artist/architect need to leave for more temperate climes in order to develop an aesthetic sense or could these concerns be addressed locally (southern versus northern colonies, or east versus west)? Or, from a slightly different perspective, did colonial communities view climate as degenerate or redemptive, and did climate theorists explicitly address the arts/ architecture alongside the problems of labour and national character?

- Race

While British colonial institutions governed the early penal and settler societies of Australia, the populations of these new communities were often heterogeneous, ethnically diverse, and racially conflicted. In Australia, this was perhaps made most explicit by the imbalance of settler and indigenous populations and the conflict and dispossession that resulted, and further complicated by the ethnic diversity of settler populations themselves. Such conditions were often mirrored in colonial settlements the world over.

While racial and ethnic diversity and conflict are acknowledged as attributes of the colonial condition, their impact on the architecture of white settlement is less considered. How did issues of race, ethnic heterogeneity, hybrid populations or racial conflict impact on

colonial architectural practice? Did architecture participate in broader agendas of cultural representation, racial division and/or 'reform'? Did ethnic and racial diversity challenge the authority of colonial institutions and/or Enlightenment and humanitarian values of universality and equality? Were "hybrid" communities viewed, in accordance with nineteenth century theories on race—as potentially infertile, unproductive and lacking in character (Young 1995, Beasley 2010)—or did they make explicit and support alternative models, such as cosmopolitanism? Was the 'other,' external or internal, framed by discourses other than that of colonisation or 'empire'?

#### - Taste

A final issue to consider is the problem of taste. Within Australia, colonised initially under a penal system and later through free settlement and migration schemes, significant proportions of early populations were often illiterate or semiliterate, valued for their physical labour rather than their intellectual capacity. Cultural refinement, as Evans has suggested, though not entirely lacking, often remained somewhat at a discount—at best a luxury and at worst a distraction. What role did the concept of 'taste' play in these societies? What was the impact on the practice of architecture of such a demographic mix? How was architecture viewed by such communities (technical practice or higher art) and was it valued? Did architecture, and the broader arts, play a role in the lives, education and 'improvement' of such communities or was it the sole domain of government and a wealthy elite? Was a culture of architectural taste developed and if so how and by whom?

This symposium invites papers that consider the above and related issues, both within Australia and other colonial contexts. We invite abstracts of up to 300 words for 20-minute papers.

Please submit abstracts to Deborah van der Plaats (d.vanderplaats@uq.edu.au) no later than May 10.

#### Reference:

CFP: Architecture at the Ragged Edge of Empire (Brisbane, 27-28 Jun 13). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 20, 2013 (accessed Apr 25, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/5132>>.