

University of Hanover
English Department
Topic: Australia – The Arts SoSe 2005
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Australian Themes in Architecture

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Cultural Identity in Australian Architecture

When trying to describe what is typical of Australian architecture two problems are very quickly revealed: the first one concerns the available documentation and the other one the definition of “Australian-ness” in architecture. Australian architects have only recently begun to develop their own cultural identity. As a former colony and a nation of immigrants, Australian culture was strongly, and for a long time, influenced by European and American tendencies. Part of the architectural education was at least one trip around Europe and/or the participation in a course at Harvard or Yale¹. As Scott Frances points out in his introduction to the book “Contemporary Australian Architecture”, the first move towards the development of an architectural style came with internationalism. “[...] the 1970s commenced the cultural cycle of conscious reaction to international modernism. Questions of culture, identity, individuality and difference were raised against the uncritical development of the corporate world.”(3) Economic prosperity brought about a construction boom in the late 1990s which on the one hand enabled Australian architects to gain independence and to work very creatively and on the other hand drew the world's attention towards the fifth continent (Jackson. 8). This also explains the documentation situation. Unlike Europe or the United States, Australia has only recently discovered the marketing potential of big name architecture. Therefore only relatively few monographs and other coffee-table books about Australian architecture have been printed so far.

Another problem is that finding purely local tendencies has become very difficult in general. Since the triumph of the International Style there have hardly been any tendencies in architecture that can only be accredited to one local environment. Mass media and globalization have established a situation where it is hardly possible to keep commercially successful styles limited to a particular geographic region. Architecture is a trade that is highly dependent on economic constraints. Therefore designs that are not commercial play no major role in the architecture that is representative for a country in terms of amount. Post-Modernism, as well as Deconstructivism, Minimalism and the following “-isms” have been mass phenomena, that could be found in Europe as well as in both Americas and the rest of the industrialized world.

Nevertheless there are some themes that can only be found in the geographic and social context offered by the Australian continent. These are what differentiates Australian architecture from what is built in other parts of the world, what is special about Australian architecture and what makes it interesting for admirers and investors. This essay will present a random choice of the themes that are typically Australian to show that there may not be one particular local style, but there are themes one could describe as typically Australian. Philip Goad describes Australia as an 'archipelago of architecture cultures', due to its size and distribution of its major cities (12-18). The majority of these cities have direct access to the ocean and this waterfront can be used in various ways. On the other

¹ Cox, Philip. *As Hook Address, Philip Cox, 1984 RAI A Gold Medallist*. Online: 11.May.2005 <www.architecture.com.au/i-cms_file?page=/1/17/51/1984_Philip_Cox.PDF>

hand there is the vast area of the outback, with its exciting landscapes and rough living conditions. Finally, the Aborigines have conquered the political agenda and Australian architects try to define Aboriginal architecture in projects accompanied by a big and sometimes overrating media-echo.

Australia as Archipelago of Architecture Cultures

In his essay for the book "New Directions in Australian Architecture" Philip Goad quotes the architectural critic Philip Drew who described the Australians as 'Coast Dwellers' (12-13). He does so to underline the fact that more than 60% of the Australians live on the edge of the country (Goad. 12). All of the major cities, with the exception of the capital Canberra, are located on the coast. Goad adds however that each of these cities has a circumference of suburbs that spread out into the country. Due to the size of the continent, different climatic conditions, different landscapes and geographies, these cities are diverse centres of architectural tendencies and construction styles. Goad therefore concludes that Australia can be compared to an archipelago, where each of the major cities constitutes a main island, surrounded by the smaller islands of the suburbs that link the cities together to form a whole. This metaphor can be transferred into Australian architecture. There are common themes, but these find different forms of expression in different parts of the country.

The Waterfront

Australia has seven major cities; Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Hobart, and Darwin, six of which are located directly by the ocean, and the seventh – Canberra – is also not so far away. Considering this it seems quite natural to choose the coastlines as valuable ground for development. However this tendency is not so very old. Only over the last 25 years has there been an increase in the property value of water frontages. Before, these areas were occupied mainly by harbours and other industrial uses, with relatively little and modest housing². According to Paul Berkemeier there is now a large demand for up-market housing, and apartment building projects are being planned and built on former industrial sites. Another approach is to transform existing port-buildings into sites for public, cultural, and recreational uses. (Johnson. 96).

Outside of the cities another building type that can only exist near the water has been established: the beach cabin. These are places for temporary use as vacation houses. They are often built as very simple timber frame constructions. These rather small houses are open towards the ocean and integrated into the surrounding environment. A very nice example is the Isaacson-Davis holiday home at Balnarring on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, designed by John Wardle in 1997 (Johnson. 226). The cedar-wood and glass construction appears to be a wooden box floating above the beach. However the house is more than it seems. Johnson compares it with a 'suitcase to be unpacked for holidays'. The architect has given much attention to detail and arranged the interior to make the

² Berkemeier, Paul. "Sydney Waterfronts". Architecture Australia. Nov/Dec 1999. Online: 10.May 2005.
<<http://www.archmedia.com.au/aa/aaissue.php?issueid=199911&article=29&typeon=3>>

different rooms fit neatly into the small space. This makes the "supposedly humble beach shack into something akin to a jewel box" (Johnson. 226).

The Outback

Only the smallest amount of Australia's area is covered by the cities and their suburbs. Some of the rest is occupied by agricultural uses, but the main part is still untouched and unpopulated wilderness. There is however the romantic ideal in "colonial memories of living rough in the outback" (Jackson. 34). A number of architects have concerned themselves with building houses in the vast Australian landscape. The results follow the concept of the freestanding primitive hut, but with architectural design skill applied to it.

"While in Japan there is a cultural understanding of the space between things, in Australia there tends to be the reverse, a culture of objects, of the things themselves in space. Consequently the isolated object in an infinite landscape is not an uncommon occurrence. Nor is it an unusual conception from which to think about building in the Australian landscape."(Goad. 25)

This leads to a conception of architecture as autonomous structure that isolates itself from the surrounding landscape. One of the most famous Australian architects, Glenn Murcutt, who won the Pritzker Price in 2002, has strongly influenced and made popular this approach to building in the outback³. The minimalist design of his houses is accentuated by the backdrop of the wilderness of the landscape.

Another approach, described by Philip Goad, is to integrate architecture into the landscape by using materials and colours that can be found in the surroundings. To bring this even further there is also the attempt to create new landscapes by using built forms and reshaping the existing landscape.

Architecture for the Aborigines

When the white settlers came to Australia the land was declared "terra nullius" as there appeared to be no built structure in the wide landscape. The Aborigines seemed to have "invested little meaning in built form and rarely constructed fixed buildings."⁴ Today, after years of oppression 'Aboriginal architecture' is on the political agenda. Since there are hardly any Aboriginal architects these buildings are still built by whites, but often in close cooperation with Aboriginal tribes⁵. These architects have to find a form-language to convey Aboriginality, alluding to building traditions that have never existed like that, and they have to plan these buildings for use by Aborigines, which requires a high amount of cultural sensitivity. Recently a number of cultural institutions were built that have been controversially discussed. The Uluru (Ayer's Rock)-Kata Tjuta Aboriginal Cultural Centre built by Gregory Burgess in 1995 is one of them. Chris Johnson explains that the building intends to

³ Farelly, Elizabeth. "Tin sheds and Landscape Poems". Culture and the Arts. 18. April 2005.
<http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/arts_culture.html>

⁴ Dovey, Kim. "Architecture for the Aborigines". *Architecture Australia*. July/Aug 96. Online: 10.May 2005.<<http://www.archmedia.com.au/aa/aaissue.php?issueid=199607&article=13&typeon=3>>

⁵ *ibid.*

recreate two legendary snakes, Liru and Kuniya, who circle each other as they glide across the sand and spinifex grasses (157). The two parts of the building form a clearing in which the skeleton of an old oak and a group of mulga trees are located. This configuration conveys an old myth and translates it into architectural expression. The old oak is believed to be the ancient battleground of the snakes, and Uluru their dwelling place (Johnson. 157). The architecture of the cultural centre takes up the idea of the snakes in its shape, thus conveying this myth to the visitor. On the other hand the two parts of the building form a frame through which the view is guided towards Ayer's Rock (Johnson. 157).

Conclusion

Although not easy to approach, Australian architecture has a lot to offer. Themes that are unique to the country arise from its geography, history, demographic situation, and the contribution of highly populated areas. Architects are still struggling with their identity and acknowledgement as Australian architects. However there are many more themes in and influences on Australian architecture than presented in this brief overview. These are at the moment being discovered and exploited by Australian architects, which will make Australian architecture increasingly important and influential in the rest of the world.

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