Towards a Nineteenth-Century History of Australia and New Zealand from a Post-nationalisation and Post-colonial Perspective?

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We wish to position the nineteenth-century architectural and urban planning history of Australia and New Zealand as a historical field that exposes the limitations both of a centre-periphery model of historical transmission, assuming a once-direct and subordinate relationship with Great Britain, and a post-colonial model privileging the place of first peoples as the 'other' to the British meta-narrative.

Present-day Australia was settled as a series of colonies, which until 1901 and the Federation of Australia constituted a number of autonomous territories. The constellation began with the former penal colonies of Tasmania (1803, a colony from 1825) and New South Wales (1788), alongside (briefly) Norfolk Island (1788)—followed by the settlement of Western Australia (1834), South Australia (1836) and Victoria (1851). Queensland was separated from New South Wales (NSW) in 1858, and the Northern Territory (from South Australia), like the Australian Capital Territory (from NSW), were divisions of the twentieth century. These are the present-day states of the nation formed in 1901. Formerly, if briefly, governed by New South Wales, New Zealand was occupied by Europeans and Britons from the end of the eighteenth century and was formally established as a British colony in 1840 under the Treaty of Waitangi. Like Australia, it became a self-governing dominion in 1907, at which point it no longer held status as a British colony. And so we have two twentieth-century nations, Australia and New Zealand, comprised of a series of nineteenth-century colonies, all responsible to London: in order of foundation, New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, New Zealand, Victoria, and Queensland.

We encounter these colonies historically as a constellation of nineteenth-century territories given a corporate identity by the British Empire, while maintaining rhetorical and cultural points of distinction on a number of bases: geographical, historical (penal versus settler colonies, for example), economic, first peoples race-relations (between the Crown and Australian Aboriginals on one hand, and New Zealand Maori on the other), and so forth. Despite a series of notable attempts to sketch out early histories of both Australia and New Zealand, the more substantial historical assessment of the architecture and planning of the two countries has taken place later in the twentieth century: Australia from the 1960s, New Zealand from the 1970s.

Those histories tend to follow established historical practices of delineating New Zealand from Australia along national lines rather than along the colonial lines that shaped the more localised development of the region's architecture until the end of the nineteenth century. New Zealand architectural historiography largely fails to consider the Australian colonies, and Australian histories of architecture do not account for New Zealand buildings—all this despite the heavy mobility of individuals within this set of colonies and between Australasia, Britain and colonies in other parts of the globe. It is rare, though, to find acknowledgment of the Australian projects of an architect working predominantly in New Zealand to figure in New Zealand historical accounts, and vice versa. Even those post-colonial histories concerned with the relationship between colonial inhabitants and institutions and first peoples have pursued this nationalist framework in favour of a (now) state-focused historiography. There is some clear logic to considering the British-settler-Aboriginal interaction over building in Australia and the British-settler-Maori relationship in New Zealand as separable, but there is no comparative study, for example, of British relationships to these two circumstantially-proximate instances of race-relations insofar as it implicates architecture or the
formation of cities. We would propose, however, that when considered at a scale larger than that of the state, a post-colonial history undermines what we might, as shorthand, call the reality of nineteenth-century architecture, its attendant geographies, institutions and relations both between colonies (including extra-Australasian British lands) and with London. Rather than pursue a post-colonial historiography, we wish to propose that it may prove useful to cross this agenda with a post-national perspective that would seek to dissolve—for the sake of historical fidelity—the strong national division established at the start of the twentieth century.

We can briefly illustrate this claim with two representative examples. One concerns the limitations of a national division for this nineteenth-century history; the other treats limitations of a post-colonial perspective.

The first example concerns the reciprocated tendency, not universal, not to figure the New Zealand work of Australian architects in Australian historiography and vice versa—for New Zealand histories of architecture, of which there are fewer, to overlook the Australian work of New Zealand architects. Of course, in the nineteenth century many architects were British born, confounding the issue further. One of these, the Englishman John Verge (1782-1861), was a prolific architect in Sydney from his arrival in 1831 until his retirement, designing works that have assumed national importance in the history of Australian architecture. Among the works attributed to him, though constructed beyond his supervision, is the House for the British Resident in New Zealand, now commonly called the ‘Treaty House’ in reflection of the role of that property in securing the treaty between the British Crown and Maori that led to the establishment of New Zealand as a colony. Revised from Verge’s plans by Ambrose Hallen (NSW Colonial Architect 1832-1835), the Treaty House bears remarkable similarities to John Macarthur’s house at Elizabeth Farm, NSW (1793-1794), built three decades prior to Verge’s arrival and not to be confused with Verge’s later Elizabeth Bay House in Potts Point, but nevertheless a building that was certainly known to Verge. It is a founding building in the colonial history of Australian architecture of which we can identify an echo in Waitangi. There is something to be made of this exchange of architectural foundations across the Tasman Sea, but something else, and more, to be made of the dozens of other examples that could be more fully elaborated in a regional history of architecture and urban planning concerning the nineteenth-century experience of Australia and New Zealand. Treating colonial constellations along strong (later) nationalist lines does a disservice to the complexities of the history at stake. It permits architectural and urban historians to overlook rich veins of mobility—a permission reinforced by the postcolonial perspective on the relation of the coloniser to the colonised that has acted to confirm the strength of the national boundaries set in place in the twentieth century.

A second example reinforces the limitations of a strictly national paradigm complicated by post-colonial biases. The Brisbane Exhibition Building of 1881 by the British born and trained architect GHM Addison (1857/8-1922) demonstrates the stylistic eclectic eclecticism and hybridity common to much of Australia’s and New Zealand’s nineteenth-century architecture. As others have argued, Addison’s hall defies easy classification: it has variously been described as an exotic hybrid: Byzantine, Indo-Saracenic, Gothic, Romanesque, flamboyant Victorian eclectic and (more locally) Federation Romanesque. The evident fusion of several styles is explained on two counts. The first is as a climatically-inflected regionalism particular to sub-tropical Queensland attending to the (former colony’s) climate, topography and botany, and as such giving rise to a local vernacular. Addison’s original proposal for a Gothic arcade encircling the exhibition hall, doubling as a shaded verandah, has given some weight to this claim. The second explanation places the building as an expression of imperialism. Walker and King (2008) have recently demonstrated that Addison’s sources were not local and included such examples as TE Collcutt’s Imperial Institute (London, 1889), also built for the display of commodities and the promotion of colonial trade. They link Addison’s work to the imperial experience and to colonial discourse of difference.
We would like to argue in favour of a third reading, which replaces the vernacular and colonial/imperial frames with the cosmopolitan. While Queensland's settler society was predominately British, it was also notable for its 'heterogenous' ethnic character, as Evans observed:

An immigration agent at Ipswich would need to be conversant with German, Chinese, Indian, Spanish and Gaelic in order to conduct his affairs. One writer observed a Mexican overseer and German doctor there attempting to communicate with each other in Latin (68).

And on an occasion to mark the 1862 arrival of the new Governor, Lord Bowen:

At a Rockhampton banquet [Bowen] was toasted in turn by a French republican whose sang the Marseillaise, a former German military officer who performed a revolutionary song and an expatriate Greek noble from Corfu, 'who poured forth Count Salamon's beautiful *Hymn to Liberty* (89).

While the individual histories of the Greek, German, French, and Danish contributions to nineteenth-century Queensland architectural culture would be fascinating, this approach—a post-colonial redress to the overlooked 'other'—does little to attend to the inherent complexity of the interaction of ethnic groups in the colony. The significance of the cultural heterogeneity of this situation becomes apparent when this cultural mix is collectively considered as representative of an emerging cosmopolitan ethic inflecting nineteenth century architecture.

The cosmopolitan ideal is a well-documented component of the Victorian discourse of cultivation. Oscar Wilde argued (also in 1891) that the active cultivation of intellectual criticism would enable the average citizen to rise above the limitations imposed by racial prejudice and would be the starting point for the 'cosmopolitanism of the future'. This same agenda underpinned the late writings of Alexander von Humboldt and his conviction that a comparative analysis of natural objects from southern and northern precincts of the globe, an eclectic juxtaposition of the exotic with the local, could contribute to the aesthetic and intellectual enlightenment of the common man, and as such, circumvent more traditional modes of learning. Humboldt helps us understand the cosmopolitanism (rather than the imperialism) of nineteenth-century architectural eclecticism. William Lethaby's early writings, for instance, can be viewed as catalogues of 'exotic' architectural form and content made accessible to the English architect with the intent of encouraging their usage within an English context. Noting that the 'habit of historians of architecture' was to 'lay stress on the differences of the several styles and schools of successive ages', Lethaby identified the opposite as his intent, to demonstrate that 'behind every style of architecture there is an earlier style, in which the germ of every form is to be found.' Juxtaposition reveals what is racially common or universal.

What would a cosmopolitan paradigm offer to analysis of the stylistic eclecticism of Addison's Exhibition Building, where European, British and Middle Eastern styles meet in a single building, set in a garden boasting an equally-eclectic botanical collection of exotic and indigenous flora? The significance of this question lies in the subtle methodological shift from the current focus on difference (as meta-narrative) within post-colonial writings on architecture and culture, in Australia, New Zealand and beyond, to one where the motivation is comparative. A postcolonial historiography of the architecture and planning of Australia and New Zealand has made significant advances to our knowledge of its history. A cosmopolitan architectural historiography, like a regionalist historiography, would simply carve out a new space to tell another kind of history that would more clearly figure the architectural history of this geography into the European and global history of architecture.
SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY


