

Buildings and the Performance of Identity

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The sociologist Henri Lefebvre has noted, poetically, that 'like all languages, the language of things is as useful for lying as it is for telling the truth'¹ suggesting that the appearance of a thing, its material and shape languages, might conceal the conditions and processes that brought it into being. The idea that I extrapolate from this - that a building might lie - is somewhat fanciful but I'd like to take it up here to examine the ways in which two iconic Australian buildings refract ideas about identity. Both occupied the most prominent site in Sydney Harbour, Bennelong Point, a thin arm of land forming the southern side of the cove Sydney centres around. The site carries the name of the Aboriginal Australian man whose house occupied the spot for a short while from 1790, and that now the Sydney Opera House commands.

Looking just at a building itself is not the only way in which relationships between objects/artefacts and identity can be teased apart. Meaning can also be drawn from the symbolic acts buildings, especially major ones, are attended by, and from the processes by which an understanding of history is knitted into the fabric of public life by individuals and institutions. In looking for a way to describe such processes, Michael Edwards, in 'The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics', adopts the term public historical sphere to refer to: '... those institutions – from museums through national heritage sites to television historical dramas and documentaries – involved in producing and circulating meanings about the past'.²

Australia has been in British hands since 1788 when it was incrementally taken possession of - disenfranchising, on the whole, the Australian Aboriginal people in the process. Relations between the two broad cultural groups have been in negotiation since, inflected often by guilt on the part of those with colonial forebears and anger, sadness and humiliation, and sometimes good cheer, on both sides; a sometimes harmonious, sometimes exasperated, sometimes disinterested state of ease/unease.

The account of the small brick house that Bennelong requested be built for him is one of the nation's foundational stories. Bennelong was a young man at the time the British landed at Sydney Cove, a Wangal man from one of the seven clans who make up the population of the Sydney (Warran) area, collectively known as 'Eora', meaning 'people' or 'of this place'. Understandings of how relationships between the two groups unfolded have been the subject of much research though with interpretations primarily sourced from official records and early eyewitness accounts by British officers.

After the British landed in the country an initial period of interaction and exchange between members of both cultures was recorded, sometimes friendly but increasingly not and before long the Aboriginals had retreated to more distant parts of the harbour. The new arrivals had rapidly cleared Sydney Cove of much of its vegetation, a Georgian-style Government House had been built, fences and boundaries drawn, food gardens planted, storage facilities started, all dotted around by the wattle and daub or other rough bark shelters and tents used to house the new population. Although the numbers of Aboriginals living in and around Sydney Cove in 1788 is not known, the around one thousand new arrivals, with their brickmoulds and saws and shovels, their fishing nets and guns, must have had a great impact on the available resources.

Having failed to establish relationships with the Aboriginals by the end of 1788, Phillip had first one, and, after he died of smallpox, two further of their number kidnapped, one of whom was Bennelong. The motives he spelled out were clear; Phillip wanted to learn about the Aboriginals and gain information about the country and for this an interlocutor was needed. The accounts suggest that Bennelong and Phillip got along well, that Bennelong was sociable and entertaining and took part in life at Government House, but he eventually escaped, which underscores of course that he was there against his will.

Then in September 1790, while visiting Manly Cove and attempting to make contact with a large group of Aboriginals, Phillip was speared. Keith Smith³ and Inga Clendinnen⁴, both of whom have examined the period of first contact and written thoughtfully-argued interpretations of this incident, construe it as a ritual spearing, organised by Bennelong. Both consider him to have been a keen strategist and suggest the incident was aimed at spilling British blood in a payback for wrongs the British had committed, and thus consolidating his position amongst his own people.

This marked a turning point in relations and Bennelong was induced to visit Sydney Cove again and it was now that he asked that a house be built for him. Given the political manoeuvring that had been going on, this most likely was a politically strategic act on Bennelong's part. In 1790 only the highest-ranking British officials had even the most basic of houses to live in and living conditions, by all accounts, were quite dire. A brick house at this time would have conferred a great deal of status on its owner though whether Bennelong was hoping to impress the colonists or his compatriots is not clear. The site he chose for the house was separate from the British, who largely occupied the centre and north of the cove, but was a good vantage point. And, it was close to a ceremonial ground known to have existed in the next cove.

The cost of the house to the British at the time was most probably reasonably significant. Phillip had a gargantuan task to house his 1000-strong charges, and it is hard to imagine that his convict workers were particularly willing workers. It is not difficult to conceive how taxing the hard labour of splitting timber, digging clay, carting bricks, all by hand, must have been for those who were in all probability living in abject conditions, with inadequate shelter themselves.

Once built, Bennelong and his fellow countrymen and women used the house primarily as a gathering place until he went to England with Arthur Phillip in 1792. After he left it was little used, fell into disrepair and was pulled down after he returned in 1795; how Bennelong felt about this was not recorded. For such a short-lived and modest building - it was a 3 x 3 metre structure with a chimney, an opening for a window and one for a doorway - its place in the colonial narrative has been well cemented. Though built primarily for Bennelong, it formed a locus for Aboriginal Australians in a space the British understood, a house, and in a place that could now take form as the place they gathered and presumably could be observed. And, even if they didn't all make use of it, their fellow countrymen and women would get to see and hear of its advantage; a model home then, perhaps.

The house is documented, usually in very similar terms, in all of the accounts of the first years of the colony and while the language used casts it in terms of a gift, in reality it was bound up in a whole network of exchange taking place at the time. A much-quoted chronicler, the Judge-Advocate at the time, David Collins, recorded:

September 1790. . . . at length Bennelong solicited the governor to build him a hut at the extremity of the eastern point of the cove. This the governor, who was very desirous of preserving the friendly intercourse which seemed to have taken place, readily promised, and gave the necessary directions for its being built.⁵

And another eyewitness account, that of Captain-Lieutenant of Marines Watkin Tench:

Bennelong, from being accustomed to our manners, and understanding a little English, was the person through whom we wished to prosecute inquiry; Farther to please him, a brick house, of 12 feet square, was built for his use, and for that of such of his countrymen as might chuse to reside in it, on a point of land fixed upon by himself.⁶

It isn't recorded whether Bennelong asked for the land - his request was just for a house - he surely presumed the land his anyway and not Phillip's to give. Phillip, as far as is known, signed nothing over. In 1962, the historian Marjorie Barnard summed up, dispassionately but concisely:

The history of land tenure in Australia began very simply with one assumption: all land was the property of the Crown. The aborigines alone might have been supposed to have some claim upon it and they, probably, at that time no more thought of a right to the earth they trod than to the air they breathed.⁷

Although no trace of it remains, the house can be seen in early paintings of Sydney Cove by the convict painter Thomas Watling and by Fernando Brambila, an artist with a 1792 visiting Spanish expedition. These images, along with the frequent recitation of the facts surrounding its 'gifting' though have kept it present in the public imagination for over two hundred years.

Just as the house has disappeared, much of the long rocky promontory where it sat has gone as well, replaced successively by a number of buildings. First of these was a military fort and then, in an extreme act of banality for such a wondrous water-edged site, a Tram Depot; the most recent occupant, the Sydney

Opera House has completed the process. This building's substitution of itself for the Point is total, no trace remains, there is nothing that can be seen that might now be called 'the site'; there is only the building.

Despite this, over the years since its commissioning links between the building and an Aboriginal past have often been invoked to secure and cement a connection between the Opera House and national identity. At the ceremony in 1958 to mark the beginning of construction, the wife of the Danish Consul-General to Australia presented the building's architect, Jørn Utzon, with a didgeridoo. Further, the official souvenir of the opening on 20 October 1973 notes that Bennelong Point was the site:

of the first building constructed for aborigines by Europeans in Australia. It is named after Bennelong, a notable figure in Australia's early history with whom the founders of the country first made contact in 1790. Bennelong maintained a long and intimate association with the early settlers and the brick hut built by Governor Phillip became a recognised gathering place for aborigines at Sydney Cove. There the colonists saw a corroboree for the first time and Bennelong was one of the masters of ceremonies.⁸

A picture arises from this of place ordered and shaped by the Europeans and one of the ordering devices is the building of a house. We get a sense of Bennelong somehow being found rather than kidnapped, of the cultivating and sustaining of relationships without any hint of complexity, pressure or exchange. And the house – built by Phillip – in this telling, is neither model home nor, as Keith Smith casts it in 'Bennelong: the coming in of the Eora', Aboriginal Embassy. It has, if anything, the flavour of a community centre, a service provided by the government for what are now, through no agency of their own, its subjects.

The passage above also establishes the Point as a place where, historically, performances are conducted and so the Sydney Opera House seamlessly continues an ongoing tradition. At the opening ceremony on 20 October, 1973 one of the events in the official program was an appearance of the 'ghost of Bennelong'. The Aboriginal actor Ben Blakeney – playing Bennelong – stood on the highest sail for two minute seven seconds, dressed in a lap-lap and with 5 feathers in his hair, and mimed a short piece which ended: 'I am Bennelong – and my spirit and the spirit of my people lives, and their dance and their music, their drama and their laughter also remains'.⁹

In 2006 the Opera House website still sought to suggest a seamless transition between the two cultures, starting with Bennelong's return to Sydney Cove after the spearing of Phillip:

He later cautiously re- established contact with Phillip testing the Governor's intentions with numerous requests for favours, including a house to be built on the end of Bennelong Point.

In 1790 Bennelong took possession of the hut ordered for him by the Governor. The hut was used as a social centre by those Aborigines that frequented the settlement.

The first known concert on Bennelong Point was in March 1791. Bennelong provided an evening of entertainment at his house for the Governor and his party. '24 men, women and children danced to the accompaniment of beating sticks and hands'.¹⁰

Today, the website says less 'In 1791 [sic], a hut for Bennelong is built on the site where Sydney Opera House now stands'.¹¹ But, implicit in such phrases as 'requests for favours', 'ordered for him by the Governor', even 'a hut is built on the site', is an idea of government largesse that conceals the process of giving with one hand while taking with the other. Here, the Opera House traces its heritage back to the house not as the house requested by Bennelong, but as the house built for Bennelong and so apports a certain degree of status to the builder.

The casual sentences used to explain its circumstances link the house straight back to the giver, Arthur Phillip, and through him to the British government of the day and the attendant suggestion of generosity obscures what Bennelong and his compatriots were being made, covertly, to accede. Bennelong's house takes on something of the aura then of what anthropologist Annette Weiner terms an 'inalienable object'.¹² That is, those things whose value is primarily determined by their provenance, like old watches or cedar chairs, Captain Cook's cup and saucer or a petticoat once worn by Queen Victoria.

The Sydney Opera House is truly a wondrous response to its physical site – to the harbour, the harbour bridge and to the city despite its physical presence being shaped by an assorted collection of international architectural references. The podium owes much to Mayan and Asian temple architecture, and these inspired Utzon to conceptualise an elevated platform as a place where the concert-goer was separated from the ordinariness of everyday life. It was to mark the place apart from its earthy surrounds and prepare the user for immersion in the imaginative realm that theatre, concert, opera promises.

Working from photographs of the harbour, it seems it was the physical setting Jørn Utzon's design sought to balance. In this, he appears to have worked more in the manner of a painter or sculptor bent on finding just the right solution to improve upon the composition the natural topography offered. Of the design or material references of the Sydney Opera House it is only the shape of the building's roof that tie it to the identity of the place it so thoroughly occupies. In this there might be seen links to the boats that ply the harbour; or the name commonly used for the roof vaults, shells, might suggest - to those who know - the metres thick middens built up from thousands of years of mealtimes, and that once edged the Point.

The podium is encased in aggregated granite slabs whereas if identity inheres in any material in Sydney, that material is sandstone, the rock the city is surrounded by. Utzon is quoted as saying that he hoped the 'true stoneware' roof tiles would give Danish visitors, (even though the tiles were made in Sweden), a feeling of being part of the building.¹³ Particular clays can come to represent specific cultures, porcelain clay for example is emblematic of the East, and stoneware, a common product of Germany and the Scandinavian countries, has long been associated with northern European countries. As a material it is marked by toughness, it has a rock-like quality, and rightness for specific functional tasks. So the tiles, through their 'true stoneware'-like qualities establish a relationship to Danishness that is added to the myriad cultural references, as is Kronberg castle near Utzon's home at Helsingør (Hamlet's Elsinor) cited as being an analogue for the site in Sydney.¹⁴

Walking through the Opera House a short while ago I was struck by the way in which, as you move around the outside walks, climb the podium and travel through the interior, vistas open up, views are framed, the many facets of the Harbour are offered up to you. The spaces demand that you map them on foot, and, as the building leads you along and to its views, it can seem that your progress is being orchestrated, in a Capability Brown sort of way, through a series of picturesque events. And that it should be an 18th century gardening experience that comes to mind is a reminder that the identity Bennelong's house gave to the Point so long ago, was also British.

Styling Bennelong's small house as a 'model home' as I did earlier resonates with the Sydney Opera House. The earlier house, in colonial thinking, might have marked the place where Bennelong and his compatriots were rescued from a remote, uncivilized past. The Sydney Opera House too might model a more cultured Australia, distanced from its uncivilised (convict) past. And the identity fashioned here is one also firmly attached to a European past.

In a 1996/7 essay 'The Archaeology of Disaster'¹⁵, Denis Byrne takes heritage industries to task for identifying only two of Australia's historical stratigraphic layers, the 'classic' Aboriginal past, and the 'heroic settler heritage'. By ignoring the traces that might exist of post-1788 interactions between Europeans and Aboriginals, he argues, the processes by which the identity of one group is 'substituted' for another is overlooked or forgotten. So by linking itself on one hand to the traditions of Aboriginal culture, while calling up Phillip's generous provision of Aboriginal housing, the Opera House seems caught in this trap.

It's impossible to imagine how life must have been for Bennelong and his countrymen and women at Sydney Cove after January 1788 but it could be imagined that the first section of the title given to an influential book about the clash between the two cultures, *When the Sky Fell Down*¹⁶ might describe it. For the British, except perhaps for the very most swashbuckling amongst them, life must have been abject; far from home and family, an uncertain future, slave labour for many, taxing responsibility for others.

People don't always behave well in fraught times, Bennelong possibly had no claim over the Point and shouldn't have asked for a house to be built there; whether he had the right or not will never be known. Phillip, though he may have thought he was doing a generous act, shouldn't have claimed the right to build. He may have thought he asked permission, he may have thought it was given, again, it's impossible to know. What we do know we know from one side and primarily from reports and diaries made for the consumption of those who, on the whole, had a vested interest in the sovereignty of the British.

In the larger scheme of things, the circumstance of Bennelong's house might seem minor, it possibly is. Nevertheless, a type of complaisant disregard accumulates each time the standard narrative about it is aired. It was one of the many small acts that presaged, to use now the second section of Willey's title, the destruction of the tribes of the Sydney region, 1788–1850s.

In an interview given in 1994 as part of the National Library's Oral History Project of Australia, Ben Blakeney, the actor who played the part of Bennelong at the 1973 opening of the Opera House, was asked to recall the words he had repeated from its roof 21 years before. He couldn't of course remember them word for word but he paraphrased his speech:

. . . but what it boiled down to was Bennelong, and he came from the past to tell the people down below that no matter what they built on that point, the spirits of his people still live on that point, that's all it was.¹⁷

At the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, the American artist Jimmy Durham presented a performance on the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House involving a large marble boulder - onto which a face with a somewhat quizzical expression had been painted - held aloft above a small but sparkingly new red car. The performance consisted of the painstakingly slow lowering of the marble missile onto the car until it buckled under its weight. With its roof caved in and its chassis resting on the ground, the car sat there for the duration of the Biennale with its grotesquely obese passenger, the rock, appearing bemused by the devastation wrought by its weight.

In the exhibition's catalogue, the author Michael Taussig connects Durham's stone to the stone used in an Aboriginal initiation ceremony performed close to where the Opera House stands and documented in 1790 by Judge-Chief Advocate Collins:

... the young men were hoisted on the shoulders of the men to have a tooth knocked out . . . To complete the extraction, a wooden chisel hammered by a large stone was used, the man making a 'most hideous noise' as blood was allowed to freely run down over the head and shoulders of the man carrying the young man who would henceforth bear as part of his name, the name of the man carrying him.¹⁸

The most monumental building - with its own compelling narrative - now sits on the shoulders' of Bennelong's house. But seeping out from under, the small clay-brick house speaks of something undeniable. And in doing so it continues to haunt the place that still bears its once-owner's name, Bennelong Point and, insistently, to make its mark on Australian identity.

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¹⁴ *ibid*

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