

## Aboriginal Housing in Australia - An Architect's View

### Comments by the author 2017

Stan Grant's Quarterly Essay *The Australian Dream*, reminded me of an article I wrote in 1967 nearly half a century ago when Grant was a mere toddler.<sup>1</sup> The difference is that I am an outsider observing from the sidelines while Grant is an insider who has experienced first hand the oppression and humiliations of Australia's patronising welfare policies in action.

My article *Aboriginal Housing in Australia – An Architect's View* attempted to make my fellow architects aware of the appalling housing conditions of Aboriginal communities in remote locations of Northern Australia.<sup>2</sup> It was my fervent hope to interest at least some of the more socially conscious members of my profession to assist these communities at grass roots level. As an educator I was also interested in exploring how their architectural training could be broadened to incorporate additional subjects in management, planning, and community development.

Now in 2017, as a matter of historical record it may be useful to review the context in which these ideas originated and to see how far we have come since 1967.

During 1967 I was very fortunate to meet Colin Tatz of Melbourne's Monash University who greatly impressed me with his infectious enthusiasm about Aboriginal issues.

Tatz had already finished his PhD on *Aboriginal Administration in the Northern Territory of Australia* at the Australian National University. At Monash he had successfully established a Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs now known as the Monash Indigenous Centre. 3

The article *Aboriginal Housing in Australia* had been the result of my advisory role to mining companies. It was a by-product of my research into design, construction and planning in hot climates especially those in single industry towns that were being built during the early 1960s. Mining companies were anxious to reduce large turnover of skilled manpower by making these 'new towns' attractive and comfortable. Thanks to a timely financial support from the Nuffield Foundation I was able to make several trips to Central and Northern Australia where I could extend this field work beyond a few main centres to include communities in remote and inaccessible areas. 4

This was happening at the time when physical comfort in the tropics was seen a major problem - a problem that was highlighted during the Second World War when Australian soldiers battled in the jungles of Malaysia and New Guinea in hot and sweaty conditions. After the war politicians and others felt strongly there was a need to populate the North. But how to attract new settlers posed many challenges.

Physiologists Ken Macpherson of Sydney University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and

Victor Macfarlane of South Australia's Waite Institute became actively involved with our work on tropical environments at the University of Melbourne.

They told us about the results of their post war research which found that the human body was quite remarkable—it took no more than 4 to 5 weeks to adjust or acclimatise from an extremely cold to an extremely hot climate, or vice versa. They came to this conclusion by measuring the changes in cardio-vascular activity, increased sweating at lower body temperature and endocrine activity that reduced salt loss by lowering the salt content in urine and sweat.

Despite this evidence, it was difficult to convince and attract people who preferred to blame the heat for everything that was wrong with their lives. They refused to accept that the root cause of their dissatisfaction might be in their minds rather than their bodies. 5

In the 1960s, we at the University of Melbourne toyed with the idea of what architects could do to provide mental comfort in buildings. No one took up the challenge because it meant hard work pursuing an entirely new line of work involving what were then the emerging disciplines of psychology and behavioural sciences.

Hostility to living and working in hot climates could be traced back to Australia's early settlers who coming from a world of long winters and reliable rainfall, found the new

environment highly confronting. It was in utter contrast to attitudes and perceptions of the Aboriginal people, who as a result of evolution over thousands of years, had not only come to terms with their environment but had learnt to live in total harmony with it. For me it was refreshing to meet people who had such a close physical and spiritual association with their country. I couldn't understand why these well-adjusted and acclimatised people had not been used as a valuable resource and given the training and skills for increased employment and work opportunities. 6

The article also included interesting responses from four people who were concerned with the Aboriginal issues one way or the other. Ceb Barnes who was Minister of Territories in the Holt Government was more interested in the fortunes of Australia's racing industry than the welfare of the Aboriginal people. He defended his government's record but agreed with me that the progress was far too slow.

Gough Whitlam who was the Leader of Opposition at the time was brief, critical and to the point. He thought I was too 'modest' in my approach which, as he saw it, in Australia ends up as combination of 'general benevolence with partial indifference.' In other words it is the kind of thing that is often used as an excuse for (achieving) relatively little'. The critical response of Charles Rowley who during mid-1960s worked for Social Science Research Council of Australia was much more detailed. He made many valuable observations and considerably extended the discussion of

some of my key assertions.

The only response from an Aboriginal perspective came from Charlie Perkins who managed the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney. He not only strongly supported my assessments about issues of assimilation versus integration but also considered their understanding as fundamental to any action on Aboriginal development programmes.

### Aboriginal Housing Panel

The article did generate some interest among socially conscious architects for whom it was aimed in the first place but nothing much happened until 1971 when I had a phone call from Nugget Coombs asking me to help organise a seminar where architects and others could discuss matters raised in my article. Coombs had been appointed chairman of the Australian Council for Aboriginal Affairs, set up in the wake of the 1967 referendum that gave the Commonwealth Parliament power to legislate specifically for the Aboriginal people.

Formally sponsored by The Royal Australian Institute of Architects the seminar held in February 1972 in Canberra concluded that an Aboriginal Housing Panel (AHP) be established to advise and co-ordinate the work of government and non-government organisations concerned with Aboriginal Housing.<sup>7</sup>

Headed by management consultant Michael Heppell the Panel finally started its operations later that year. Its membership was essentially confined to architects and developers including a few leading members of Aboriginal organisations brought in an advisory role from time to time.

The record of AHP's achievements was mixed with most of the funds going to professionals who jetted their way to far off locations producing very few runs on the board. Some houses did get built in places like Fitzroy Crossing mostly at astronomical costs and with little or no participation from the local Aboriginal communities.

As Fabian Hutchinson, a professional archivist & librarian aptly put it:

*The quality of Consultation with Aboriginal organisations and communities varied. Throughout, there appears to have been some inbuilt structural tension between the AHP's role as a small Canberra-directed National agency offering advice, and the determination of the needs and desires of Aboriginal community bodies (on the one hand) and locally-based service organisations & professionals (on the other hand) at the regional & local levels.*

Towards the end of its short 6 years' existence the Panel did appoint an Aboriginal chairman. But it was too late. By September 1978 the Panel folded up when the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Fraser government Ian Viner decided to stop funding altogether.

The following year in 1979 Michael Heppell edited a book

*A Black Reality – Aboriginal Camps and Housing in Remote Australia.* 8 He successfully brought together a highly perceptive group of anthropologists and sociologists who threw useful light on the Aboriginal people's life style and cultural foundations all of which was most useful for formulating policies.

Most agreed that we know enough about what needed to be done but the greatest challenge lay in how to implement this on the ground. In his *Epilogue* Heppell 'regretted the absence of contribution from experienced and highly articulate Aboriginal people'. While reviewing Heppell's book I said, "As things stand it looks like the *Black Reality* is likely to remain no more than a *white illusion*."

During 1950s and 1960s there had been a steady movement of people from remote rural communities to urban areas. Many failed to adapt to these changes. In the towns, there were many conflicts between different ethnic groups, people became addicted to alcohol, and many of them died of one cause or the other. As Athol Chase explained to me, during 1970s and 1980s many of these highly demoralized people started to move back to remote areas and establish small, decentralised and relatively permanent communities of kin on land that had social, cultural or economic significance to them. They felt more secure. They monitored and cared for their very fragile and pristine landscapes. Most important they took matters into their own hands, for example setting up community-managed stores, schools or business enter-

prises such as weaving and art works for tourists. 9

The main lesson from this *outstation* (or *homeland* movement as Aboriginal people prefer to call it) is that there can be no universal solutions. Since each community is different and unique, any action for improvement must be viewed on the basis of community-by-community, settlement-by-settlement.

The movement has also seen many changes in the design and construction of remote Aboriginal dwellings. These have mostly been funded from State and Federal moneys. There have been some notable examples of architects and others associated with universities and Aboriginal tertiary institutions that have and are conducting important interdisciplinary research into housing for the Aboriginal people. Paul Memmott, Paul Pholeros, Peter Sutton, Peter Ucko, Joe Reser and many others come to mind. But the answer to the question: Can mainstream architects and other professionals help? I don't think so – not as long as they are constrained by their current training and practice.

What is required is the kind of grass-roots work that fails to attract most of our architects and planners. Usually from middle-class families, and reared in a well-serviced environment, they lack the motivation to engage professionally in this nationally important, critical, yet unglamorous work.



## References

1. Stan Grant *'The Australian Dream –Blood, History and Becoming'*. *The Australian Quarterly Essay, Black Ink. Publishers Issue 64. 2016. pp.1-80*
2. B.S.Saini. *'Aboriginal Problem - An Architect's View' Architecture in Australia. RAlA Jl. Oct. 1967. pp.782-799.*
3. C.M. Tatz, *'Aboriginal Administration in the Northern Territory of Australia', 1964. Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, p. 142 (un- published).*
4. *Strangely until this trip my only introduction to an Aboriginal person was a picture on the Pelaco shirt company's poster advertising with the words 'Mine tink it they fit'...pidgin English for 'I think they fit'. The eye-catching image of a black man with no pants selling a clean white shirt was powerful. The model was Mulga Fred who was hit by a train and died in 1948, the year I arrived in Australia to study Architecture at Melbourne University. Throughout my stay during early 1950s except for Pelaco shirt advertisement I never met even one Aboriginal person in the streets of Melbourne.*
5. R.K.Macpherson, *'Tropical Fatigue, University of Queensland. Department of Physiology', Vol 1, No.10, 1949. And 'Environmental Problems in Tropical Australia'. Report of a Survey of Living conditions in Tropical Australia with special reference to the Northern Territory and New Guinea. Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra. October 1962,P.25 Also see: W.V.Macpharlane, 'Thermal Comfort Zones', Tropical Building Studies, Vol 1, No.2, Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne. 1962. And 'Life in the Dry Two-thirds of Australia', Hemisphere, Sydney, Vol. 10, No. 10, Oct. 1966, pp. 19-26.*

6. *The degree and extent to which Aboriginal people's ability to adapt to stresses and strains imposed upon them by the harsh climate in remote locations is difficult to assess, but it would seem that adaptability tends to decrease with the increasing contact with European society. According to Victor Macfarlane, the factors that give the aborigine an advantage over the European include 'his capacity to drink and retain large quantities of water, his low blood pressure and his ability to conserve salt in his body'. Macfarlane maintains, however, that there is no clear evidence that the aborigine has a racially different physiology from that of the European. Probably all the differences that have been observed arise from the exposure of children to the foodstuffs, pattern of life, and seasonal temperature changes of the desert throughout their lives. The adjustments that take place are those, which any human being could make under these circumstances.*

7. [http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/catalogue\\_resources/MS3254\\_partA.PDF](http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/catalogue_resources/MS3254_partA.PDF)

*The Aboriginal Housing Panel, a Committee of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects was established in 1972 with the objective: "To provide assistance, advice and co-ordination to Aboriginal, Government, professional and community organisations in the planning, development and construction of housing for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, taking account of environmental, physical and social parameters in the best interest of the local community."*

8. *Michael Heppell, "A Black Reality – Aboriginal Camps and Housing in Remote Australia' Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra Publishers Black Ink 1979, pp.250.*

9. *Athol Chase. Personal communication. 2016*