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Carroll Go-Sam, *University of Queensland*

Assimilating Problems: From Humpies to Transitional Houses

The Australian Government's policy of housing assimilation had multiple nationalist aims to improve Aboriginal futures. One objective was to shift Aboriginal housing values to align with suburban regimes and ideals. This paper examines the reformative goals of the Assimilation policy era (1939–72) shaped by government housing practices and supported by prevailing scientific theories. This relationship between policy, housing and science, is explored through architects working across sectors of government bureaucracies, architectural academia and practice. This research situates architectural practitioners close to the centre of policy execution. Their role is captured in the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA), Seminar Proceedings on "Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas" in 1972. Several Seminar papers will be used as a starting point to analyse the transitional housing design types and intentions, which government agencies presupposed would transition and 'uplift' residents from 'nomadism' to 'westernization'. This research summarises how the State and its architectural experts imagined Aboriginal social and economic worlds, culturally constructing them through the conflicting ideologies and motives of housing assimilation.

A small body of research by Manning, Memmott, Keys and Heppell, has located transitional housing in the formative decade of Aboriginal housing development, including its coercive and paternalistic intents. This historical context is expanded upon to incorporate the relationship between assimilation and scientific paradigms. Specifically, how global science influenced and authorised the architectural programme across Australian States. Both policy and practice, provided substance to quasi-scientific ideas, derived from biological, environmental and architectural determinism. Interest here begins with those Seminar presenters who blended deterministic beliefs with racial and evolutionary perspectives to constitute definitions of the Aboriginal 'housing problem' and its solution.

RAIA Seminar, Canberra

In February 1972, RAIA Executive in conjunction with the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) hosted several participants from diverse sectors to consider the Seminar topic: "Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas". The Seminar came at a critical time in Aboriginal[1] housing development. State housing programmes had increased due to Commonwealth funding injections and governments were eager to engage architectural expertise to develop cheap solutions, possibly using local Aboriginal labour across remote regions. The Proceedings are a composite of eight papers with six contributions from architects. They can be broadly summarised as retrospective studies that outline State or localised perceptions of Aboriginal housing needs and practices (1946–71).

Fig. 1. Map indicating locations identified as 'remote' in Heppell (1979) after Rowley's (1971) broad geographic line of distinction between 'colonial' (remote) and 'settled' (rural/urban) Australia. Note places mentioned herein are located above. (Map in "Introduction: Past and Present approaches and future trends in Aboriginal housing," *A Black Reality*, ed. Michael Heppell [1979:4].).

While the Seminar advocated housing as a panacea for Aboriginal deprivation, the causal factors of poverty and marginalisation were buried under assimilation ideology. Aboriginal culture, lifestyle, personal habits and morality were advanced by the State as key causes. Adopting terminology prevalent in welfare bureaucracies, the writers Morgan (Western Australia, WA), Laikve (South Australia, SA), Woolnough (Queensland, QLD) and the Department of the Interior (Northern Territory, NT), used biological and cultural constructs of race: "full-blood", "nomadic", "traditional", "tribal", "semi-nomadic", "part-Aboriginal", "coloured" and "mixed-bloods", that reflected population sub-divisions over which administrative regimes operated.

Three papers detail transitional housing programmes operating in WA, SA and NT, indicated policy recycling, somewhat differentiated by localised practices.[2] Contributors McPhee, Saini and Kent

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1   Aboriginal refers to Indigenous peoples in Australia.

2   RAIA, *Seminar on Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas*, (Canberra, RAIA, 10-11 February, 1972) np.

cover Seminar themes of low-cost, self-help and remoteness,[3] but their concerns diverged on issues of cultural and economic sustainability. Laikve, Woolnough and McPhee superficially described issues affecting housing management, such as residents' responses to death, health and sickness. They also recognised socio-spatial impacts of extended-kin households, yet their observations lacked empirical rigour.[4] Finally, the architect and academic, Hamilton argued against the prevailing view that self-constructed housing was inadequate. Based on his study of the Yankuntjatjara (South Australia), he reasoned, self-constructed designs were socio-spatially specialised and interdependent with physical environments.[5]

Government Policies to Protect and Assimilate

The history of Australian government interventions into Aboriginal lives is defined as successive policy eras that are not simply linear time progressions. They are more accurately described as overlapping periods that are complicated by the varying term lengths in each respective State. In reality, policy shifts were gradual and institutional development remained constrained by a continuum of government practices.[6] The Protection era (1897–1937), which preceded Assimilation (1938–72), is defined as a period of inconsistent protection with widespread population declines due to invasion, warfare, dispossession, starvation and disease. It is marked by unequal structural power exercised through government legislation resulting in institutional controls, segregation, indentured servitude and forced removals.[7] The purpose here is not to consider laws and statutory regulations that defined these eras, but to confine this examination to housing welfare practices and intentions.

During Assimilation, Aboriginal groups conspicuously resided both inside and outside institutional reserves and missions. Social marginalisation and poverty were not distinguished by geography and circumstances remained equally impoverished. Those outside were housed in city "slums" or

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3   See Heppell, A Black Reality (1979, 5) after Rowley (1971, 377), *The Remote Aborigines*, who employed a broad geographic line of distinction between 'colonial' and 'settled' space that corresponded with 'remote' and 'rural/urban' Australia (fig. 1). According to the paper, *ABS Views on Remoteness* (2001, 17), the word 'remoteness' and by default 'remote' is a loose geographic term that can have subjective meaning. Long concluded in, *An Audit Review of Australian Indigenous Housing Research*, (AHURI, 2007, 39–40) that the terms imprecision reflected post-contact history, rather than "service accessibility".

4   RAIA, "Seminar;" G. E. Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing in South Australia"; Andrew McPhee, "Aboriginal Housing"; Balwant Saini, "Low-cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas"; John M. Kent, "Constructing Low Cost Self-Help Housing;" (papers presented at the Seminar on Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas, Canberra, RAIA, 1972).

5   Peter Hamilton, "Aspects of Interdependence between Aboriginal Social Behaviour and the Spatial and Physical Environment", (paper, Seminar on Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas, Canberra, RAIA, 1972).

6   Will Sanders, "Towards an Indigenous Order of Australian government: Rethinking Self-determination as Indigenous Affairs Policy," Discussion Paper No. 230, Canberra, ANU, CAEPR, (2002), 3–5; Lester Thompson, The Indigenous Living Conditions Problem: 'Need' Policy Construction and Potential for Change, (PhD, UQLD, 2004), 40–41.

7   Mark Moran, Practising Self-Determination: Participation in Planning and Local Governance in Discrete Indigenous Settlements, (PhD, UQLD, 2006), 34–35; Jonathan Richards, *The Secret War, A True History of Queensland's Native Police*, (St Lucia, UQ Press, 2008), 5–7.

self-constructed camps on the fringes of townships.[8] Under Assimilation ideals, governments sought to amalgamate Aboriginal populations into mainstream society.[9] Concepts of assimilation were expressed across different administrative fields and had various meanings, such as "... the genetic dissolution of Aboriginals into white 'blood', or, the "breeding out of colour;" the cultural absorption of Aborigines or "part-Aborigines" into white society; or a combination of both biological and cultural visions."[10] The complex and contradictory motives of assimilation lay between humanitarian and nationhood goals. Benevolence was expressed as "doing something to 'uplift' those neglected", but it accompanied prejudiced exclusion that fed "the perception of the incompatibility, or undesirability of Aboriginality in the modern Australian nation." [11] Anderson described social judgements that dominated segregation as "invidious in representing Aboriginals not only as inferior peoples, somehow ill-qualified for the (high and low) culture that the 'city' came to signify."[12]

While the practice of housing assimilation, particularly from the 1940s to the late -50s, brought incremental increases in basic housing, in reality, most States were reluctant to provide access to land outside institutional reserves. When housing delivery commenced, social housing policy prioritised employed Aboriginal people.[13] In Western Australia, the housing bureaucrat, Morgan recalled: "difficulties occurred in the implementation of the scheme...building rates were especially slow in the early stages when up to two years could occur between authorization and completion." On Camping Reserves near townships, the State restrained funding for basic services and facilities due to "negative" reactions that created a significant, but not impenetrable obstacle.[14] Structural blockages came from both powerful quarters and common citizens: "Shire objections, petitions, individual protests, representations of Members of Parliament were common and tended to influence the programme and whilst not overall affecting it, did slow the implementation in some areas." Until the 1960s, the majority of Camping Reserve's remained "void of even the basic necessities of water, ablutions, laundry or toilet facilities."[15]

The practice of spatial segregation and containment on Northern Territory Reserves also reinforced negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people. According to Wells, segregation applied in "white"

8   Penny Tripcony, "Towards Aboriginal Management of Aboriginal Rental Housing, Melbourne, 1960–1989," in Settlement. *A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, ed. Peter Read, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 144-146; Jeff Collmann, *Fringe-dwellers and Welfare: the Aboriginal Response to Bureaucracy*, (St Lucia: UQ Press, 1988), 73.

9   Jeremy Long, "The Commonwealth Government and Aboriginal Housing 1968-81," in *Settlement. A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, ed. Read, P. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 103-104.

10 Anthony Moran, "White Australia, Settler Nationalism and Aboriginal Assimilation," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 51:2 (2005): 169.

11 Moran, "White Australia," 169.

12 Kay Anderson, "Savagery and Urbanity: Struggles Over Aboriginal Housing, Redfern, 1970–1973," in *Settlement. A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, ed. Peter Read (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 130.

13 Michael Heppell, "Introduction: Past and Present Approaches and Future Trends in Aboriginal housing," Heppell, M. (1979), "*A Black Reality. Aboriginal Camps and Housing in Remote Australia*" (Canberra: AIAS), 9-17.

14 K.I. Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, Western Australia, 1946-1971" (paper, *Seminar on Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas*, Canberra, RAIA, 1972), 2, 12.

15 Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing WA," 2, 12.

dominated spaces such as towns, schools, theatres, neighbourhoods and public areas.[16] The reasons
for racial separation vary, Rowse concluded, that "Australian colonialism sometimes created zones
of physical exclusion."[17] In urban centres, townships and across rural pastoral stations in New
South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, poor living conditions demonstrated little evidence that housing
was a political priority. In Victoria (1957), media depictions demonized fringe-camp deprivations
by framing them as sites of oppositional values that threatened dominant community standards.
Sustained public scrutiny eventually led to the policy of eradicating fringe-dwellings, coinciding with
the construction of transitional housing estates.[18] In 1968, McKay, debunked the perception that only
remote Aboriginal Australia lacked housing, in rural and urban centres in NSW equally high levels of
crowding were recorded. Aboriginal households in the inner Sydney suburbs of Newtown, Surry Hills
and Chippendale experienced density levels that ranged from 8–13 persons per single room to 20
persons across four rooms.[19]

In Queensland, Kidd revealed Aboriginal Reserve administrators were unable to adequately feed
residents, combat disease and ensure sanitary living conditions. Aboriginal poverty and dependency
were exacerbated by State agencies pilfering personal incomes for other responsibilities. Chronic,
crowded and diseased living conditions prevailed on Cherbourg, Palm Island and Doomadgee
Reserves. At Palm Island (1943), high mortality rates were attributed to "poor housing and lack
of clothing."[20] Overall, State policies increased social and economic marginalisation by initially
restraining housing supply. Little change occurred in Aboriginal housing until the late 1950s.

Perfecting Domestic Skills Through Transitional Housing

The National Native Welfare Conference (1961) provided impetus for the Commonwealth and States
to expedite assimilation through housing. Housing and its associated responsibilities symbolised
equality of "rights" and "privileges" for "Aborigines and part-Aborigines."[21] The government-
preferred solution from the late 1950s was "transitional" housing.[22] The term 'transitional' had
varied meaning in different periods and contexts. For example, during the Protection era, the name
referred to the 'transitional' function of government institutions. Government settlements were
established as "temporary institutions, training centres for people in a transition stage between

16 Samatha Wells, "Labour, Control and Protection: The Kahlin Aboriginal Compound, Darwin, 1911–38," in *Settlement. A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, ed. Peter Read (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 64, 69–71.

17 Tim Rowse, "Housing and Colonial Patronage, Alice Springs, 1920–1965," in *Settlement. A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, ed. Read, P. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 85.

18 Corinne Manning, "A Helping White Hand: Assimilation, Welfare and Victoria's Transitional Aboriginal Policy," *Labour History*, 87 (2004): 195–96.

19 Ian McKay, "Housing for aborigines in New South Wales," *Architecture Australia*, June, 57, No. 3 (1968): 493–94.

20 Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilize: Aboriginal Affairs the Untold Story* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997), 166–78.

21 Heppell, "Aboriginal housing," 8.

22 Frances Lovejoy, "Costing the Aboriginal Housing Problem," *The Australian Quarterly*, 43 (1971): 82–88.

primitive nomadism and western urbanisation."[23] The focus shifted in the late 1950s to housing being a transitional vehicle from "nomadism" and "semi-nomadism" to westernization. The transitional programme had several motives, pejoratively described as "normalization", "advancement", "absorption", "raising standards", and "uplifting residents".[24]
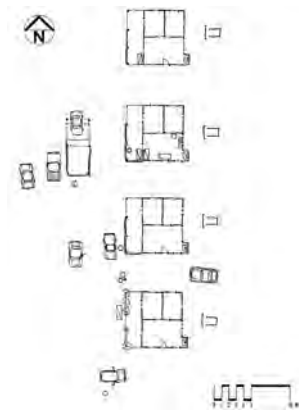

Fig. 2. Two-bedroom Transitional Housing at the Boulia 'Compound' (surrounded by broken-down second-hand cars), November, 1973. (Illustration by Paul Memmott. "From the 'Curry to the 'Weal: Aboriginal Camps and Compounds of the Western Back-Blocks," Fabrications 7 [1996]: 24.)

The concept of transitional housing first developed on Missions during the Protection era. The design type appeared at Geraldton, in Western Australia (1957) under government-controlled housing schemes. Other programmes were instigated in Victoria (1958), Northern Territory (c. 1958), New South Wales (c. 1958), and later in South Australia (c. 1966) and Queensland (c. 1968).[25] The District Architect, Woolnough attempted to elevate Queensland as a progressive administration, by asserting that "no transit housing as such is built on Aboriginal Communities in Queensland."[26] His false claim was countered by the State Aboriginal Housing Trust report that specified no more than 20 per cent of the housing allocation "could be invested in 'transitional' or inferior homes" on Aboriginal settlements.[27] Additionally, Memmott recorded State supplied transitional houses at Boulia, Camooweal, Burketown and Normanton built during the late 1960s and early -70s (see figs. 1 and 2).[28]

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23 Colin Tatz, "Aboriginal Administration in the Northern Territory of Australia" (PhD diss., Australia National University, 1964), 142.

24 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing in South Australia"; Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, Western Australia, 1946–1971"; B. M. Woolnough, "Low cost Self Help Housing for Aborigines" (paper, *Seminar on Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas*," Canberra, RAIA, 1972); Department of Interior, "Aboriginal Housing in the Northern Territory," (paper, *Seminar on Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas*," Canberra, RAIA, 1972).

25 Manning, "A Helping White Hand," 198; Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA," 3–4; Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 1; Kidd, *The Way We Civilize*, 252; Kurt Johansons, "Aboriginal Settlements and Housing in the Northern Territory" (BArch Thesis, University of Queensland, 1966), 56.

26 Woolnough, "Low cost Self Help Housing," 3.

27 Kidd, *The Way We Civilize*, 252.

28 Paul Memmott, "From the 'Curry to the 'Weal: Aboriginal Town Camps and Compounds of the Western Back-Blocks," *Fabrications* 7 (1996): 23.

Fig. 3. Type 64 or Conventional Stage 3 Transitional
Housing at Leonora Reserve, Western Australia,
(Photograph in "Introduction: Past and Present
approaches and future trends in Aboriginal housing,"
A Black Reality, Heppell, M (ed) [1979:12].)

The initial transitional model developed by the State Department of Native Affairs (WA) was
considered a significant design milestone by the Housing Superintendent, Morgan, who related, "the
prototype was popular with the coloured people, and met with the approval of the local authorities
at both Geraldton and Mullewa… ."[29] Designed specifically for residents on government reserves, the
single-skin, steel-framed structure was five squares (46.5m2). Refined over seven years, additional
models included, one, two and three-bedroomed structures that corresponded with the Stage-1, 2
and 3 types. These early housing types were not built to minimum Building By-Law standards and
subsequent conformity increased the floor area of the Stage-3 type to "more than seven squares"
(approx. 65m2.). Unlike the earlier Stage-1 and 2 types, Stage-3 featured: three bedrooms, a living
room, kitchen, laundry, bathing facilities and toilet under the main structure.

Fig. 4. Lysaght Kingstrand Transitional
House Stage 1 at Amoonguna, N.T., 1965,
(Photograph by Balwant Saini in "Aboriginal
Housing State of the Art, non-State of the Art,"
Architecture Australia, 77 [1988] 36.

In later years the appearance was revised in response to cosmetic concerns raised by local councils
(fig. 3), replacing the galvanized sheet material cladding with "conventional materials". [30]

29 Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA," 4.
30 Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA," 4-6.

In WA and NT, transitional Stage-4 housing were said to be equivalent to State Housing Commission issue.[31] Other States asserted Stage-3 corresponded with "conventional housing", or standard State Housing Commission homes.[32] Although in Victoria, Stage-3 transitional houses were considered sub-standard in design and construction compared to other social housing. Though criticised for construction defects, poor ventilation and thermal discomfort, one resident regarded the immediacy of standard house features, such as: running water, internal laundry, cooking facilities, bathroom facilities, as a significant improvement to the hardships of fringe dwelling.[33]

The staged concept remained integral to all transitional housing, although initially, materials and designs varied in the Northern Territory. Staging reflected governmental presumptions that former "nomadic", "traditional" populations were slow to adopting "sedentary", "European mores".[34] This notable reluctance to conform to internalised lifestyles and nuclear households, required a gradual unveiling of specialised housing services. Therefore, South Australian and Northern Territory Stage-1 shelters had compacted soil or sand floors without water or electricity connections. Up until the late 1960s, Northern Territory residents were provided communal facilities for meals, washing, bathing and toileting. Two-roomed, Stage-2 shelters included concrete flooring and some were connected to water and electrical services, with rudimentary food preparation facilities. Two or three-roomed, Stage-3 structures were claimed to be of higher quality, equivalent to "Housing Commission design standard".[35]

Due to the need for "speedy erection", the transitional type incorporated mass-produced, flat-pack technology. The approach reflected government driven agendas to maximise delivery regardless of unit cost or quality. At Yuendumu, two Stage-1 types, branded "Kingstrand" huts (1962–63) and "igloo houses" (1966–69) were employed at different times.[36] Memmott described "igloo houses" as a single room "concrete block house ... covered by a curved galvanized iron roof to include verandah space on three sides."[37] Delivery of igloo houses peaked to 100 units over four years, providing mass housing and the establishment of formal settlement for Warlpiri speaking people.[38] (figs. 4 and 5) The political historian, Tatz recalled official material promoting the domestic appeal of the Kingstrand aluminium prototype as "a room with a fireplace and open veranda on three sides". The huts were chosen for their ability to flexibly integrate new staged additions and were asserted to "reflect heat". The latter claim was refuted by standard temperature measurements, recorded at

31 Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA," 6; Department of the Interior, "Aboriginal Housing in the NT," 4.

32 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing in SA," 26–27; Heppell, "Aboriginal housing," 8–10; Johansons, "Aboriginal Settlements," 92.

33 Manning, "A Helping White Hand," 199.

34 Department of Interior, "Aboriginal Housing NT," 2.

35 Department of Interior, "Aboriginal Housing NT," 3; Johansons, "Aboriginal Settlements," 91–94.

36 Cathy Keys, "The House and the Yupukarra, Yuendumu, 1946–96," in Settlement. A History of Australian Indigenous Housing, ed. Peter Read (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 120.

37 Paul Memmott, "Aboriginal Housing: The State of the Art (or Non-state of the Art)," in Architecture Australia, June, 77 (1988): 35.

38 Keys, "The House and the Yupukarra," 121.

12.7oC higher than the interior of a spinifex-humpy. One Aboriginal resident likened the Kingstrand to a "fire box."[39]
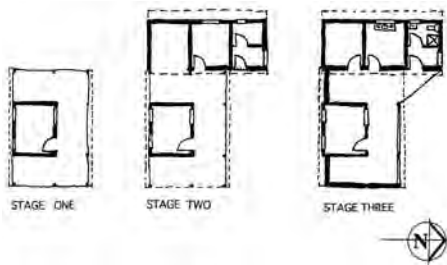

Fig. 5. Stage one, two and three "Igloo Houses" at Yuendumu. (Redrawn line illustration by Catherine Keys. "Tangentyere Housing Stock Assessment," Memmott, P. [1987].)

Transitional housing had a clear social and educative agenda to modify behaviours of "nomadic", "semi-nomadic" and "coloured" families into "nuclear arrangements". The transition timeframe remained unspecified, however, movement from one stage to the next was conditional. Eligible residents were assessed on their willingness to accept the commensurate responsibilities of household management. Residents who exhibited hygienic and domestic self-regulation could, "move through the three stages of (the) transitional house, perfecting its domestic skills."[40] In order to inculcate the complete set of values and responsibilities, Aboriginal female residents had to demonstrate their capacity to maintain domestic hygiene norms.[41] In the late-1960s, the transitional housing programme was supported with "homemaker" or "home management" courses. The transferred skill set included, sweeping, washing, scrubbing and polishing.[42] Due to remote geographies in Western Australia, "mobile Welfare clinics" were deployed to "assist natives to improve their living conditions in every practicable way."[43]

Conversely, Manning's Victorian account concluded, that from Aboriginal perspectives, gendered programmes created both positive and negative intercultural domains. Some residents fondly recalled instructions about hygiene, cooking, craft and crochet. They valued the skills transferred and saw these occasions as opportunities for social interaction with other Aboriginal women and white volunteers.[44] However, another example cited by Manning, demonstrates how welfare practices facilitated inter and intra-cultural tensions. The Welfare Board appointed local supervisors to closely

39 Tatz, "Aboriginal Administration," 143.

40 Heppell, "Aboriginal housing," 9.

41 Heppell, "Aboriginal housing," 9, Goodall, "Assimilation Begins in the Home," 85-87.

42 Keys, "The House and the Yupukarra," 121-25.

43 Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA," 4-5.

44 Manning, "A Helping White Hand," 202.

monitor household crowding, rental collection and lifestyle. Some residents resented such close scrutiny, where others co-opted the State's authority by complaining when kin overstayed.[45]

Transitional Housing and Pseudo-Science

RAIA papers by Laikve and Morgan subscribed to the belief that race influenced social and intellectual development. Representations of race and social-evolutionary theory find their beginnings in Australian anthropological practice in the nineteenth century, but have a much older global origin. Western scientific discourses and advances in medical science in the eighteenth century drew on evolutionary theory to create, what Bartfield describes as "folk idioms about social differences". Such differences were converted into an "ideologically charged cluster of contradictory meanings", where "universal categories were formally formulated and race became the focus of politically charged scientific and pseudo-scientific inquiry."[46] In the Australian context, British and European stratification prevailed, manufacturing disparaging comparisons from ethnocentric perspectives.[47] Cowlishaw's analysis of social anthropological practice in Australia, finds the profession subscribed to pseudo-scientific practices well into the twentieth century and influenced the negative conceptualisation of Aboriginal populations beyond their own discipline.[48]

In 1972 at the official end of the assimilation era, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia all had active transitional housing programmes.[49] The South Australian Housing Trust viewed its programmes continuance as necessary to "lift" Aboriginal status to "become permanent occupiers of the house .... anywhere in the community as a full-fledged citizen."[50] Aboriginal populations in South Australia, were classified by the architect and government official Laikve, as being more difficult due to their "cultural retardment" and "lack of intelligence".[51] Applying the construct of unilinear social evolution to champion transitional housing, Laikve predicted a long developmental timeframe, "... the approach to change housing must be gradual. Neither socially nor economically can an Aboriginal leap from his primitive wurlie into a modern house – nor does he wish to. He must be assisted to follow a slow evolutionary path as the standards of the various stages of his housing are far below that which is considered normal in an Australian community."[52]

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45 Manning, "A Helping White Hand," 199-200.

46 Thomas Bartfield, ed. *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 392-93.

47 Moran, "White Australia," 169.

48 Gillian Cowlishaw, Australian Aboriginal Studies: The Anthropologists Accounts, in *The Cultural Construction of Race*, ed. Marie de Lepervanche, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, 4 (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1988), 60-61.

49 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA;" Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA;" Department of Interior, "Aboriginal Housing NT".

50 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 25-26.

51 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 11.

52 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 4.

The writer and architect McPhee, advanced the proposition that solutions lay in designs which catered for "their way of life".[53] Environmental determinism has been critiqued as over-emphasising the effects the physical environment has on human behaviour.[54] According to Dostoglu, deterministic assumptions are based on beliefs that humans are "passive in the environment-behaviour relationship". Architectural determinism is defined as "the belief that the built environment is a major determinant of social life".[55] Richards described two dominant ideas advocated by architects, one being (i) that architecture and planning can reflect human nature creating a synergy with "how people are reckoned to be", and the other that (ii) designs can proposition "what people ought to become".[56]

According to Laikve, a "lack of exposure" to "advanced European cultures" was one probable explanation why desert-dwelling Aboriginal groups exhibited poor intellectual and low socio-cultural development.[57] He further advocated that geographic isolation in combination with a "difficult environment" constrained future improvement.[58] In order to judiciously direct State funds, he invented a synergy between "the rate of advancement of the Aborigines" and the "standard of housing to be provided."[59] Based on biology, geography and social exposure, five classes or levels of social development or "advancement," were matched by Laikve, with a corresponding stage of the three-staged transitional housing. Accordingly, "Class-1," were "close tribal, semi-nomadic people" described as "living a traditional, primitive life". This group showed potential to absorb civilised habits warranting housing. However, since "contact with white people [was] still very limited", they were considered suitable for "stage-1 housing". At the other end of the spectrum, "Class-V" were said to "maintain a reasonable standard of living, and have a desire for European luxuries". Laikve cautioned, that a potential inhibitor to progress was "their own reluctance to break with other fringe and reserve dwellings and indifference of the community is the main barrier to their assimilation". The overall strategy ensured maximum "improvements" would be achieved for residents, who demonstrated the greatest capacity to benefit.[60]

By 1971 the Native Welfare Department (WA) had been operating the transitional housing programme for twelve years. The Department provided programme funding and the State Housing Commission delivered the housing. Unacknowledged architects in the Commission were attributed with playing a central role in executing the transitional scheme. They made early design refinements, ensured the

53 McPhee, "Aboriginal Housing," 2.

54 Karen Franck, "Exorcising the Ghost of Physical Determinism, Environment and Behaviour," 16, no. 4 (1984): 412.

55 Neslihan Dostoglu, "Utopia and Determinism: Architectural Deterministic Thinking in Urban Utopias," *Journal of the Faculty of Architecture*, 8, no. 2 (1988): 144.

56 Simon Richards, *Architect Knows Best, Environmental Determinism in Architecture Culture from 1956 to the present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 154-57.

57 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 11.

58 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 11.

59 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 4, 25-26.

60 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 26-29.

model conformed to State building by-laws and supervised its ongoing delivery.[61] In summing up the socio-economic achievements of the transitional programme, Morgan recounted that:

"people who by opinion held ten years ago could not by any stretch of imagination ever financially, socially or hygienically occupy a conventional home are now doing so, having been educated through the three-stage system to become accustomed to structures of conventional building materials, the usage of toilet systems, electricity, gas, rental payments and home care requirements as well as learning to adjust to the demands of community life." [62]

His reflections reified transitional housing and exaggerated the programmes achievements. Hence, resident autonomy was rendered indistinguishable in his enthusiasm to elevate the State's success.

Under the framework of assimilation, yet diverging from support of transitional housing, the architect McPhee argued solutions lay in the fit between housing and culture.[63] He described transitional housing as a failed experiment for "full blood Aborigines in the Central Australian region."[64] The reason asserted was, "the aborigines …do not live in them". Observing resident preferences for externally-oriented living, McPhee concluded that design failure was the only possible explanation. Alternatively, he promoted, "a well-designed synthetic component which can be simply fitted together to construct a wilja [sic] (shade shelter)[65] preferably similar in shape and size to their traditional wilja."[66] Working under the assumption that rigid rectangular structures were a dramatic change for "semi-nomadic" residents who "do not wish to live in a house," McPhee proposed a modernized, prefabricated wiltja. His rationale for imitating the wiltja design, is that it would "suit their requirements." He imagined that this recognizable, newly improved wiltja would be more successful at facilitating sedentary living.[67] McPhee advanced one of the premises of architectural determinism, specifically, that his designs generated synergies with semi-nomadism. It is here we find the emergence of the culturally responsive design paradigm that became emphasised in later decades.[68]

Overall the reformative social objectives of transitional housing failed to acknowledge Australian inequalities. The programme demonstrated a lack of knowledge about causal factors contributing to Aboriginal poverty. Assimilation housing condemned Aboriginal lifestyles in its attempts to severe households from kin networks. The State and its agents imagined Aboriginal households as morally

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61 Morgan, "Aboriginal Housing, WA," 5–7.

62 Laikve, "Aboriginal Housing SA," 3.

63 McPhee, "Aboriginal Housing," 2.

64 McPhee, "Aboriginal Housing," 1–2.

65 The term commonly used in the eastern part of the Western Desert is *wilja* or *wiltja* and means 'shade' or 'shaded area'. It also applies to fully and semi-enclosed shelters. See Paul Memmott and Carroll Go-Sam, "Spinifex Houses of the Western Desert," in *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley. The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2004), 219.

66 McPhee, "Aboriginal Housing," 2.

67 McPhee, "Aboriginal Housing," 2–3.

68 Paul Memmott and Carroll Go-Sam, "Synthesising Indigenous Housing Paradigms: An Introduction to TAKE2" in TAKE2. *Housing Design in Indigenous Australia* ed Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers (Canberra: RAIA, 2003), 13–15.

and socially incompatible with mainstream values, justifying severe interventions. In reality, due to funding shortfalls, shifts in government policy and an insurmountable unmet housing need, many residents provided with Stage-1 housing remained in them indefinitely.[69] In Victoria, an emerging consciousness of self-determination shifted public views about the scheme. One welfare advocate reflected: "The settling of these dark people in one village is apparently not the answer [to the 'Aboriginal problem'] – and I hope that same mistake is not being made elsewhere." After one decade of implementation, transitional housing estates became associated with racist policies and were abolished in 1968.[70]

This paper discussed that during the assimilation era, the rhetoric of "raising" Aboriginal populations to westernised standards of living became synonymous with reconfiguring their place within the nation state. Yet, State interventions were often unable to reconcile the opposing aims of equality with widespread practices of segregation. The ill-conceived intentions of the transitional housing reinforced social hierarchies, rather than lay a pathway to integration. These objectives were contradictory from conception to completion, firstly by the State's inability to adequately fund the programme and secondly, complete the vision of improving living conditions.

This study of the *Seminar Proceedings on 'Low-Cost Self-Help Housing for Aborigines in Remote Areas'* (1972), contextualised how bureaucrats and architectural participants close to the administrative centre of housing assimilation, embraced the ideology of benevolence, yet perpetuated the inequalities of preceding decades.[71] The overlay of folk observations about the influences of the physical environment emphasised single elements as "the only factor affecting behaviour".[72] This suited the expediency of government, operating as punitive welfare agencies. The shift from notions of biological to cultural differences reinforced dominant prejudices that continued to influence architectural thinking mobilising new paradigms. The State's imaginings of the 'Aboriginal problem' facilitated positive and negative intercultural domains that Aboriginal residents strategically negotiated and resisted as new agendas developed.

69 Goodall, "Assimilation Begins in the Home," 86–91; Heppell, "Aboriginal housing," 6–10.

70 Manning, "A Helping White Hand," 206.

71 Kidd, *The way we civilize*, 347.

72 Franck, "Exorcising the Ghost of Physical Determinism," 414.