

Resorting to Cockatoo Island Resort

Lapping Shorelines and Overlapping Land Use in "The Least Known Island Paradise in the World"

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Paradise in the World”

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1.

Dambeemangaddee is contemporary nomenclature.

Its origins, meanings, and preferred spellings are detailed in Janet Oobagooma and Donny Woolagoodja, et al., *Barddabarada Wodjenangorddee: We're Telling All of You: The Creation, History and People of Dambeemangaddee Country* (Derby, WA: Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation with Fremantle Press, 2017). In this exceptional book, the late Mrs. Janet Oobagooma – the most senior speaker of the Woddordda language at the time the book was written – explains that

“the designation ‘Dambeemangaddee people’ has emerged as a result of the native title process. In this context, Dambeemangaddee people are those whose ancestors were connected to *dambeema* located within the Dambimangari Determination Area.” (27) Dambeemangaddee country sits within a broader Kimberley Aboriginal society, referred to as Wanjina-Wungurr Community in three related native title claims, all litigated and negotiated between 1996 and 2011. Relatedly, legal anthropologist Katie Glaskin details the (unsuccessful) 1983 Aboriginal Land Inquiry led by Justice Paul Seaman QC, within which the *Bardi* Aborigines Association “wanted ‘all the offshore islands in King Sounds, including Buccaneer Archipelago... to be included in the reserve under [their] freehold title.’” (71) Presumably, had this Inquiry been successful, Cockatoo Island would have been Bardi country. See: Katie Glaskin, *Crosscurrents: Law and Society in a Native Title Claim to Land and Sea* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2017).

Between late 1988 and early 1989, a series of gilded birdcages containing meticulously feathered fake cockatoos were hand-delivered by courier to VIPs – Very Important Perth-onalities – across the wealthy suburbs of metropolitan and regional Western Australia. In the beak of each cockatoo was an invitation to a party. On April 1, 1989, there would be an opening celebration for Cockatoo Island Resort: a luxury holiday destination in the Buccaneer Archipelago, 137 kilometres due north of Derby on what would eventually be called Dambeemangaddee¹ country, where tidal variations exceed ten metres, and where bubblegum pink bungalows and an oceanside infinity pool now perched alongside the deep ochre scar of an abandoned iron ore mine. This was, according to promotional brochures, “the least known island paradise in the world” (Figure 1).

These ostentatious animalic invitations had been sent on behalf of British-born Australian businessman Alan Bond (1938–2015) – “Bondy” – and his then-wife Eileen – “Big Red.” Formerly the site of an iron ore mine operated by Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd and its subsidiary, Australian Iron and Steel Ltd, Cockatoo Island had become the focus of a half-

decade state government campaign to rebrand a retired island mining settlement as a tourist destination – alongside a (dormant) defence training area on (then-unrecognised but still unceded) Aboriginal land. By 1986, the Bonds’ family company, Dallhold Investments, had acquired a tourism lease for the island through a corporate subsidiary, Segara Pty Ltd, after Perth-based developer Halcyon had been unable to secure finance for a similar venture. Under Big Red’s creative direction, AUD\$6 million was outlaid on renovation works: an infinity pool was installed to overlook the crocodile-infested turquoise ocean, and a cluster of prefabricated workers cottages on the island’s northwest hill slopes were painted pink.

At the time, Bondy was a boisterous and controversial public figure. In the three decades between 1959 and 1990, he built a multi-pronged, multi-billion-dollar business empire that held interests in beer, boats, homes, hotels, mining, and media, before declaring bankruptcy and being jailed for corporate fraud in the 1990s. In the tangled chronology of Bond Corporation, Bond’s other corporations, and other Bond-affiliated corporate holdings – corporations-

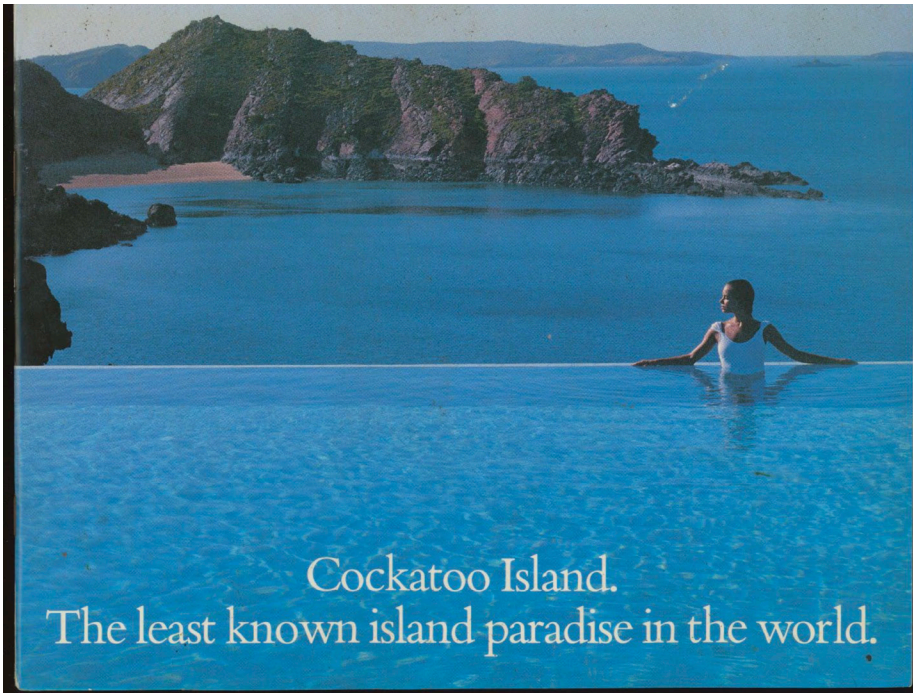


Figure 1:
FCB Shorter Perth (Producer) for Segara Pty Ltd. (1988 est.). Cockatoo Island. The least known island paradise in the world. Promotional brochure, colour.
(Photography by Noel Holly, private collection)

owning-corporations-owning-property, *ad infinitum* – Cockatoo Island Resort is a mere blip before the big collapse. It was operational for less than six months, shuttering in September of 1989 amidst escalating access challenges and a pilots strike. This remote island paradise was, paradoxically, too remote.

Why, then, does it matter to architectural history that the red-headed soon-to-be-ex-wife of a “True Blue” soon-to-be-bankrupt businessman painted old mining bungalows bubblegum pink on an island off the remote northwest Kimberley coast?

In this research, I use the Bonds’ short-lived Cockatoo Island Resort as a MacGuffin. It is a necessary-but-irrelevant plot device through which we can begin to unravel a long and ongoing history of land tenure tussles between tourism operators, mining interests, the military, and Aboriginal people. In particular, it demonstrates how the uses and usefulness of (island) land is branded and rebranded through state regulation and corporate intervention – with architectural consequences.

Using the audacious 1980s rebranding of Cockatoo Island as a case, I offer

land use as a useful legal fiction that creates and animates power, politics, products, and understandings of place. I do so as an outsider-researcher skirting the outside of this place from the inside depths of the archives, testing the outer limits of closeness and completeness, of partisanship and partiality.² Specifically, I will read “official” documents from the Western Australian Department of Tourism archives [SRO Files 141/83 and 193/83] alongside loosely held local histories and contemporary in-the-field observations, to make sense of the overlapping stories of land use in this “least known island paradise in the world.”

Historically, the architecture of Cockatoo Island has relied on two contradictory modes of engagement: left untouched (as a resort) or dug right up (as a mine). In the colonial imagination, it is an always-becoming site of logistics and luxury, excavation and exclusivity – sometimes simultaneously.

2.

Cockatoo Island is currently off-limits to visitors and embroiled in active litigation. This research therefore takes an arms-length archival approach, for now. A more expansive ethnographic study has been tentatively planned for the future.