



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

# **SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES**

## **SESSION 4B**

### **THE COUNTERFACTUAL**

#### **Feedback Loops: Architectural History's Impact on Architecture**

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# **WHAT TO DO WITH ‘THIRTY BLOW-INS’ AT A HOUSEWARMING PARTY: PERIPHERAL FIGURES AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY**

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*Architectural history has always relied on multiple voices and agents closely involved in the architectural process to construct a narrative – architects, clients, engineers, institutions and political figures. But what happens when you expand the field to include more peripheral figures? And more precisely for this paper, what happens if your research comes to depend on these peripheral figures for information. This paper is a tentative exploration into the possibilities that exist in looking outside what might be considered the traditional voices of architectural histories. It looks at the potential insights these accounts can offer, revealing networks and details otherwise obscured. Not simply passive observers, they were actively involved with, and provide a perspective on practice and culture removed from the architects themselves. These are people that were intimately involved, or moved within architectural circles for decades, and yet at present there is little space for them to be accounted for or participate within the broader historiography. This paper follows the paths of some people who might be considered as marginal, or outside the discipline, and considers what effect providing them with agency and a position has on the construction of architectural history.*

## Introduction

Recent scholarship, much of it centered on the role of media in the making architectural history, has looked at the reconfiguring of the 'peripheral' figures in architectural historiography, a list that Jessica Kelly has suggested includes "journalists, writers, photographers and critics".<sup>1</sup> These figures have been excavated as part of a broader effort to highlight "places, practices and people that were hidden in most conventional discussions of architecture and design...the complex relationships and interactions that occurred in the background of architectural and design culture."<sup>2</sup> The interest in 'peripheral' figures and the complexity of design culture can be viewed as an extension of a project which has sought to highlight the contributions of marginalized and excluded figures within history most clearly seen in the excavation of female architects and clients from historical margins.<sup>3</sup> Janina Gosseye describes this project as it developed from the 1990s with its imperative to "include different voices and to tell alternative stories" ... "to broaden the discourse of modern architectural historiography, in an attempt to dismantle modern architecture's master narratives."<sup>4</sup> Together, this focus on marginalized and 'peripheral' figures and the hidden complexities of architectural culture, might together be viewed as part of a project which seeks to view architectural history from a cultural studies perspective. In this manner, Elizabeth Darling has recently called for the examination of "wider contexts" in which architecture "like any other cultural practice" was embedded.<sup>5</sup>

This paper looks at one particular architectural site or event – the overseas working holiday – and uses it to explore the potential in the inclusion and privileging of accounts from peripheral figures. Through research done as part of my PhD thesis, this act has emerged as a clear example of where professional and personal networks were developed and overlapped, and a site of discourse that would lead to transformations both the profession and a broader social setting.

This paper looks at the act of travel and uses it to explore a methodological approach developed within my thesis which led to an interest in the importance of social sites in the formation of an architectural culture. The paper draws on recent instances from my research project which led me to reevaluate my sources and the way I approach architectural history. It is also partly a reflection on oral history methods which are integral to the inclusion of peripheral figures and feature heavily in my project.

## Starting the Research

My interest in the diversity of networks and relationships that developed within the social spaces of architecture initially grew out of a recent aspect of my research project, which looks into the working holidays taken by West Australian architects upon graduation from the recently established Perth Technical College (PTC) course in the early 1950s. The project attempts to chronicle the adventures and itineraries of these students, capturing the routes they took, the practices they worked for and projects worked on, and the names of buildings visited or sought out along the way. I was also interested in the kind of cultural experience that they would have had, arriving in London at a time of enormous change and excitement driven by events like the Festival of Britain, the coronation summer of 1953 and a general feeling that "the nation was beginning to emerge from the shadow of war."<sup>6</sup>

Given the nature of this information, one which straddles both the professional and personal lives, putting together these itineraries was a difficult task. This kind of personal information is rarely published or even written down. Most accounts simply note that they went overseas with the specifics rarely mentioned. There were some key details published in the local institute journal *The Architect* which ran a student column every issue which provided updates from those abroad, but while an invaluable source, the information was scant. Typical notes like these reveal some information: the Penzance firm was Bazeley and Barbary, the High Voltage laboratory was designed by Cecil Handisyde. But beyond this and other similar notes in the journal there were few clues to be found in traditional sources. Necessarily then, this kind of research required a different approach to data collection, and any reconstruction of the daily life of these travelling

students meant access to material of a highly personal nature. The kind of information I desired was located in personal archives, family photo albums, old diaries, and the ephemera collected while travelling – menus and catalogues from restaurants or exhibitions visited, old bus tickets, boarding passes, letters of recommendation from employers.

Typically, a project which leans on family history approaches would rely heavily on oral history accounts, but for many of the architects I was interested in are unfortunately no longer with us, further complicating the issue. This meant other avenues had to be explored. Alongside journals and newspaper reports a key avenue to follow was the family of these architects to see if there was an archive available or other ephemera that may help in constructing the picture. In some instances, this meant calling in vein and asking unanswerable questions of a family like “where did your husband or father work in London”? But through making these calls, and the generosity of those that answered it became quickly clear that this was not just an architectural story. Through endless discussions and phone calls predominantly to the partners and friends of those graduates – often a highlight of a research life spent in lockdown – recorded with hastily scribbled down notes, it became clear that the people I was interviewing were not just passive observers but were an inseparable aspect of the story.

Indeed the further I probed the parallel lives of their partners and friends, and the increasingly tangled knot of connections and networks I discovered, I found that I needed a methodological approach which Jessica Kelly describes, “reveals narratives beyond those of individual creativity and instead considers the networks and collaborations that make up the complex web of architectural culture.”<sup>7</sup> Through focusing on a number of perspectives, both inside and ‘outside’ the profession, it could allow me to consider the personal and professional relationships together and how together they operated within a “fluid cultural network”.<sup>8</sup> In this way, following the work of Kelly and Robert Proctor, through collecting the stories provided by partners and friends it would provide me with the tools to write “a different kind of history’ about modern architecture”.<sup>9</sup>

I realized that what I had built up was a kind of collective biography, which as Krista Cowman has described, aims “to use individual lives to explore collective experiences”.<sup>10</sup> Through this methodological approach, it enabled me to explore the lives of both the architects and their broader social circle simultaneously, exposing the wider structures that shaped their travels.

This paper now provides a short narrative sketch drawn from these phone conversations by way of illustrating the kind of complex networks and overlapping stories I uncovered, and an example of this ‘different’ kind of architectural history I could produce. The story is primarily drawn from the recollection of Barbara Hill (nee Miller) and I would like to acknowledge her time and generosity in sharing her story with me.

### **The Trip**

In March 1954, Barbara Miller, a recent arts graduate from UWA, and her sister Pamela, a kindergarten teacher, set off aboard the SS Orontes from Fremantle port, headed for London. They were joining their friends June Eggleston, her cousin Audrey Craike, Anne West and Jennifer Flintoff, who had travelled together aboard the SS Otrano to London, arriving just a few months before on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February. A mix of teachers, journalists and recent arts graduates from UWA they were following in a long line of young west Australians headed to the UK and Europe for some adventure and to explore the world. Barbara had recently begun a relationship with Alexander (Lex) Hill, a recent graduate from the architecture school at Perth Technical College having met at a number of the architectural ‘do’s which were regarded as some of the leading social events in the city for young people. Lex had just won the W.H Robertson Travel Grant and was also preparing to make his way to London to meet a group of fellow graduates. The journey to London was a four week boat trip and along the way Barbara and Pamela met Sydney architect Bruce Rickard and his wife Mary. The four became friends on board, attending events like the fancy dress balls together.

Bruce and Mary disembarked in Naples,<sup>11</sup> while Barbara and Pamela stayed on, arriving in London on Easter Tuesday, 1954. The pair met up with their friends, and found themselves accommodation and purchased an Austin station wagon – essential for a trip abroad. The earlier group had been flatting together near Hampstead but five of them including Barbara, Pamela and Jennifer found a house with a number of rooms going at 39 Redcliffe Road, Kensington. The chief tenant of Redcliffe Road was the Sydney photographer David Moore, who was also sharing it with another Sydney photographer David Potts, and the five women each paid one pound a month for their own space within the terrace.<sup>12</sup>

Once established in London there was a variety of part time work to be picked up. Barbara and Jennifer both worked for a time as nannies, then an easy to find and well-paid job, but the emphasis was on travelling which they did as often as they could. Barbara, Pamela and her friends, now joined by Pamela Mawby, Joanna Ainslie and June Milne, drove across the countryside in the Austin and around the continent staying mostly in youth hostels along the way.<sup>13</sup> Trips were made around Europe, going up to Norway and across to the Edinburgh festival. Between trips they soaked up the cosmopolitan and free atmosphere of postwar London, enjoying the new coffee shops, late night venues and exotic delights like mulled wine. In July, Barbara travelled to Italy where she met up with Lex, who had recently arrived on the continent having sailed from Perth to Athens, and in Venice he promptly proposed. Back in London, Lex moved in with fellow PTC graduate architect John White who had been working in London for almost a year. By the time that Lex arrived in London there was already a well-established line of West Australian architects that had spent time in London. When he moved in with John White there were at least 10 other PTC graduates living and working together in close proximity, many of them living together at 48 Hogarth Road, a terrace house in Earls Court which acted as a kind of home base for WA architecture graduates abroad. An example of the kind of dense social network that was present then comes from this update published in *The Architect* and makes mention of the house in Hogarth Road:

Whilst not motoring, Jack [John White] shares a flat with Dunk, Leunig and Whitaker in an exclusive part of Kensington. The housewarming they put on attracted no less than thirty blow-ins, mostly Westralians. That was the night that Toscanini refused to wave his baton in the Albert Hall until the Australian party next door cut out singing 'I'm Jolly Jack the Ripper'.<sup>14</sup>

The kind of almost dizzying level of overlap between Australians in London at this time becomes evident through plotting the interactions and relationships formed. When Lex and Barbara Hill were married in Sussex in 1955, David Moore was their wedding photographer and gifted the photos to the pair as a present. Also at the wedding was Bruce and Mary Rickard, their friendship with the Millers having continued in London as they moved in around the corner from Redcliffe Road.<sup>15</sup> At around the same time, Bruce Rickard and John White began working together at Wallis Gilbert and Partners, an occurrence likely organized through the contact established on the boat ride across.

In July 1955 Barbara and Lex Hill, together with John White rode home from London broadly following the 'overland' journey, ending up in Colombo before sailing home. White rode on his BSA and the Hill's on their Vespa, with their tent, cooking gear and prized copy of Banister Fletcher stowed in the saddle bags for the journey. For some of the trip home they were joined by another Sydney architect, William (Bill) Burrows, who had also been working together with Lex in London, the four meeting up at the Unite d'Habitation in Marseille before continuing eastward. Burrows left them part way through the journey, and the trio ended up in Colombo before sailing home to Fremantle.

### Home again

The experiences of Hill and her friends demonstrate just how intertwined and enmeshed the social and professional networks were in London at this time. The trip to London was a phenomenon that cut across a number of social and professional groups, and architects were

just a part of this mix. Through discussions with those that undertook the same journey, it became clear to me how significant this journey was in the formation of professional and social networks that would go on to have major effects on the lives and careers of those who went. But it is also important to acknowledge these so-called peripheral figures are not of interest to simply bolster a central narrative, to add some 'meat on the bones' of the architects' journey. Through exploring these recollections, they began to reveal perhaps an alternative way to understand architectural history, one which would allow for a further distancing from the singular or heroic architectural narrative and reflect the complexity and richness of the architectural culture in a small community like in Perth.

By working through the parallel trajectories of these 'peripheral figures', I became aware that these were not stories that were just valuable for the details they added to the story or the polyvocal lens, adding in the account of women involved at the time. It did much more, it changed my perspective and understanding of architectural culture and practice, particularly in underscoring the social nature of the profession in Perth. Through the lens of people like Hill, architects became but one branch of working professionals, alongside journalists, teachers and nurses, together a group of young people looking for adventure and experience sharing in a moment of cultural and societal transformation. Their time overseas was a period when key personal and professional relationships were formed, relationships that would have long lasting consequences, and played a central role in the construction of an architectural culture once back home.

To me, separating out or distinguishing between social and professional worlds, particularly in a tight knit community typical of a city like Perth, became impossible. Pursuing these individual stories, compiling a kind of collective biography, lay bare the complex web of social networks that underpin the more privileged and visible professional networks and highlight how valuable and necessary these figures are to the construction of an architectural culture, and an architectural history. Through talking to people like Barbara Hill, and building up a kind of collective biography of the broader cultural and social milieu of this period it became clear that she was a part of the broader Perth architectural community – someone who made active contributions to its culture, and so the inclusion of her story is vital in order to tell the wider collective experience.

Through a collective study of individuals across professional boundaries it allowed me to build up a better, more informed picture of the period in which they worked, and provided a framework through which to better understand and situate the practice of architecture and the formation of architectural culture, particularly in a setting where information and traces of practice are scarce and patchy. Considered together these individual but entwined stories provided key insights into the "motivations and experiences"<sup>16</sup> of those people living and working together in Perth in the mid-1950s.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jessica Kelly, "Discourses, Ephemeral Sources, and Architectural History: Personality and the Personal in the story of J.M. Richards", in *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research*, ed. Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, Deborah van der Plaats (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019), 78-79. Kelly provides a useful summary of this work covering recent contributions by Beatriz Colomina, Elizabeth Darling and Andrew Higgott.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Kelly, "Anonymity and Hidden Mechanisms in Design and Architecture," *Architecture and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2018): 7.

<sup>3</sup> Janina Gosseye, "A Short History of Silence: The Epistemological Politics of Architectural Historiography," in *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research*, ed. Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, Deborah van der Plaats (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Gosseye, 'A Short History of Silence,' 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Darling, *Re-Forming Britain: Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Billy Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World* (London, Faber and Faber, 2017), 99.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly, "Discourses, Ephemeral Sources, and Architectural History," 90.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, "Discourses, Ephemeral Sources, and Architectural History," 82

<sup>9</sup> Kelly, "Discourses, Ephemeral Sources, and Architectural History," 77, quoting: Robert Proctor, "The Architect's Intention: Interpreting Post-War Modernism through the Architect Interview," *Journal of Design History*, 19, no. 4 (2006): 296.

<sup>10</sup> Krista Cowman, "Collective Biography" in *Research Methods for History*, eds. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 85.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Drew, "Drinking from the Fountainhead" in *Bruce Rickard: A Life in Architecture*, ed. Julie Cracknell, Peter Lonegran, Sam Rickard (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018), 93.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Barbara Hill and author, 5 November 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Hill note to author, 13 January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "Student News" *The Architect*, 3, no. 34 (December 1953): 20.

<sup>15</sup> Drew, "Drinking from the Fountainhead," 96.

<sup>16</sup> Cowman, "Collective Biography", 94.