From Emergency Reception Centres to Housing Experiments: Migrant Accommodation and The Commonwealth Department of Public Works

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Abstract

The Commonwealth Department of Works in conjunction with Commonwealth Hostels Limited oversaw the design and construction of two migrant hostels, the Endeavour and the Enterprise during the late 1960s. These two hostels were distinct in a new generation of on-arrival migrant accommodation as they were erected on newly obtained sites and designed within the department rather than tendered out to private firms. This paper explores the Endeavour Hostel, which opened in Randwick, Sydney, in 1970 as an experimental site for housing technologies used historically for migrants and refugees in Australia. Accommodating up to 1000 people, the design’s provision for temporary, collective living aimed to be aligned with motels rather than the ex-army facilities that housed migrants throughout Australia in the late 1940s. Testing domestic arrangements to maximise efficiency in accommodating migrant workers has a lineage in the Commonwealth Building Experimental Station that advanced innovation in construction technologies. In 1949 the program carried out investigations into alternative emergency accommodation with suggestions of constructing house shells that were divided into dormitories for migrant workers and then subsequently transformed into permanent houses. This paper reflects on domestic settings for construction experiments as a platform to examine how the design strategies employed in this hostel relate to the Commonwealth’s shifting agendas with accommodating incoming populations during the 1960s and 1970s. The constant pulse of national tensions surrounding migration and ethnicity surfaces in this period due to policy changes from welfare services based on notions of assimilation to the emergence of multicultural policies. In addition, successive federal governments debated the number of refugees Australia should resettle that were displaced by the Vietnam War. By focusing on the development of the Endeavour Hostel, the paper reflects on how the design is informed by these political tensions in relationship to the push for maximum utility in government subsidised housing.
Introduction: The Endeavour

The Endeavour, referencing the colonial investigative ship, is commonly recognised as a street name replicated in cities and rural towns across Australia. However, it was also the chosen name for the development of a new Commonwealth Migrant Hostel located in Randwick, Sydney that was opened by the Minister for Labour and National Service in March 1970. This absurd name selection deliberately flagged the British cultural heritage of colonial Australia to incoming migrant and refugee populations during the 1970s and 1980s, when the Endeavour was in operation. The application of this administrative formula of selecting colonial objects to name infrastructure also signals that migrant hostel accommodation had by this point in its evolution become a government institution. The Endeavour was an unlocked but self-sufficient complex that included housing, dining, entertainment and child-care facilities in separate buildings spread out over a portion of the former Commonwealth Rifle Range. Located in a heavy industrialised area in Sydney’s southeast, the Endeavour was designed to accommodate 1000 new migrants in radial planned, brick-faced housing blocks that were connected by walkways to sports fields and landscaped gardens. This institutional complex provided transitory accommodation for migrant families arriving from European nations as well as Turkey and subsequently housed and provided English language programs for large numbers of refugees from Mainland South East Asia from 1976 onwards.

This paper analyses the hostel development in the context of the broader nationwide program led by the Department of Immigration and the Department of Labour and National Service in conjunction with Commonwealth Hostels Limited. The Endeavour had a Melbourne counterpart that also recognised another colonial relic in its name – The Enterprise located in Springvale that opened later in October 1970. Again, this was located on the fringe of suburbia and near established industries in Western Melbourne. Original projects designed within the Commonwealth Department of Public Works, these hostels were unique within the government’s vision for future generations of migrant accommodation; they were not redevelopments of existing hostel sites populated with adapted ex-military huts as in the past. Prominent local firms undertook extensions and redevelopments that occurred at other sites such as Villawood Migrant Hostel in Sydney. At Villawood, it was Bunning and Madden and like, the Public Works Department, the firms associated with these new redevelopments publicly celebrated their housing designs.
This paper examines the process behind the design brief for the Endeavour alongside asking how this new generation of hostel developments were internally described and promoted in departmental publications. In these publications, the Endeavour is upheld as representative of a “completely new concept for Australia’s new settlers,” in that it represented a new era in hostel accommodation that provided modern forms of domesticity. The incarnation of the domestic in social housing was a site for innovation in construction technologies and programmatic arrangements but also a site where design experimentations collude with social experimentation. Federal Government research into different methods and technologies to accommodate large transitory populations begins with the Department of Works and Housing’s Commonwealth Experimental Building Station that investigated prototypes for earlier migrant worker accommodation in the 1940s. Trajectories of hostel sites were defined by a constant renewal of provisional housing practices and experimentation with form and construction practices that drew on diverse spatial models from military barracks to the motel. Early incarnations employed mobile structures that acted as emergency reception centres that were used frequently to filter migrants per their ethnicity. However, in the later more permanent incarnations seen in the design of the Endeavour, the architectural model borrows from both planning seen in suburban neighbourhoods and the temporary lodging associated with the motel. This merging of spatial qualities associated with public institutions, motels and houses reflect the anxieties around the forms of hospitality offered to incoming populations and about how these modern forms of domesticity should be received.
The Endeavour is the focus of this enquiry as it was an approximate architectural template for the Enterprise and consequently the departmental records are more comprehensive surrounding its inception. Drawing on departmental committee reports and debates about the appropriate forms and standard of facilities, this paper examines the design strategies employed in the hostel and the subsequent management of facilities in relation to the federal government’s shifting agendas with accommodating incoming populations during the 1970s. These new domestic experimentations through social housing occurred in an environment where debates about ethnicity and cultural affiliations were informing political agendas in relation to immigration policies and on-arrival accommodation. The inter-departmental discourse surrounding the development of the Endeavour’s design brief was grounded in policy that aimed to substantially bolster migrant recruitment from a competitive market in Europe due to its increasing political stability and economic prosperity. This placed pressure on Australia to market itself as an advantageous destination and resulted in the Department of Immigration’s acquisition of new sites and construction of modern hostels with improved and subsidised accommodation for migrants. However, the Endeavour’s completion and ensuing occupation marked the decline in the government’s recruitment drive for migrants and the beginning of settlement programs for refugees from non-European backgrounds. During the late 1960s and 1970s successive federal governments debated the number of refugees Australia should resettle arriving from non-European countries including nationals leaving Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile and displaced persons from the Vietnam War arriving from Mainland South East Asia. This paper is informed by these recurrent tensions surrounding migration and ethnicity in Australia and looks at the programmatic, functional and formal objectives pertinent to economically efficient social housing in light of this divisive political context.

Modern Domesticity: The Commonwealth Department of Works and Migrant Hostels

The Endeavour and the Enterprise both featured in the annual publication, Works Review, produced by the Commonwealth Department of Works that reported on the department’s major projects both underway and complete. Set up after Federation, the department went through successive name changes. In 1945 it became the Department of Works and Housing, partly in need to address Australia’s housing shortage, and then in 1952 took on the title, Department of Works, and by the late 1970s the projects it oversaw were gradually decreasing.
format had a publication life from 1957 to 1973, reflecting the emphasis on nation building through infrastructure development during this time.\textsuperscript{12} The periodical showcased through extensive photographic documentation the building achievements in industry, education and large-scale municipal buildings both in Australia and through its governmental mandate in Papua New Guinea prior to the processes of independence.\textsuperscript{13} The inclusion of hostels in this documentation of nation building suggests that the accommodation and resettlement of migrants had become another division of public housing in Australia - rather than only provisional barracks for a temporary workforce. The two new hostels are always referred to with the prefix ‘modern’ and stood alongside airports, post offices and schools in this building catalogue of a new Australia.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2}
\caption{The Endeavour Hostel, Randwick, Sydney: Accommodation blocks, view between two wings. Date Unknown: 1966-69, Source: NAA: MP1760/1, M1966/46354.}
\end{figure}

During the 1960s and 1970s Sydney was producing itself as a modern, world-class city, one that was artistically and culturally informed and in part, through its architecture, a coveted destination.\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Works Review} there was an emphasis on the new international terminal in Sydney constructed over marine mud and billed to bring “world class air travel facilities” to the region.\textsuperscript{15} Sydney’s emergence as a world-class city coincides with changing polices to the welfare services offered to incoming refugees along with bipartisan political criticism for assimilation based resettlement policies. During this period, new methods of articulating national identity in regards to Australia’s developing diversity emerge as attitudes around Multiculturalism shift from ideas based on integration to assertions that individuals and groups have a right to maintain their cultural and/or religious distinctiveness, approaches and practices.
These policy changes arguably contributed to a slow shift in conceptions of nationhood from being anchored in British allegiances to one that situated Australia independently in the global exchange of economies and people. This position of Australia, via Sydney, as a progressive nation, striding towards a cosmopolitan future is important when considering the role played by hostel designs, such as the Endeavour, in advancing national ideals. In examining the narratives that bracketed and contextualised hostel design in government sponsored publications, it is possible to consider how their architecture was used to promote Australia as a destination built anew but also how past allegiances continued to resurface.

Experiments in housing incoming migrant and refugee populations after the Second World War can be traced back to the Department of Works and Housing’s Commonwealth Building Experimental Station. The Station was set up between 1944 and 1945 and was initially under the jurisdiction of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction and then moved shortly after to the Department of Works and Housing and relocated to North Ryde in Sydney. Fundamental to its inception was the housing shortage that occurred during the Second World War and continued into the 1950s and in early cabinet propositions for a building station the impetus for housing construction research is outlined:

“The Commonwealth Housing Commission has indicated to this department that to build houses more economically than before the war, new methods of construction will have to be developed and existing methods rationalised. This will require research and experimentation with both existing and new construction methods. Much of the investigation cannot be undertaken without facilities for constructing experimental buildings which can be subjected to weather conditions and other practical tests. For this purpose, there is a need for an experimental building station.”

The earlier incarnation of the station aimed to develop technologies directly connected to housing such as prefabricated mechanical equipment for low cost housing and prefabricated concrete housing due to a shortage of the traditional materials of bricks and timber after the Second World War. The station was conceived and practiced with the cooperation of industry, professions and in collaborative partnership with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.
Featured in Volume 4 of the *Technical Memorandums* by Department of Works and Housing is a selection of diagrams that show a variation on emergency accommodation for single-men migrants. The aims of this research conducted in early 1949 is outlined: “Attached are sketches showing how the basic shells of permanent houses could be used economically to serve as hostel for single-men immigrants, and subsequently completed as permanent houses of normal standard.” At this early stage of the post-war drive to populate, the recruitment emphasis was on young, single men to generate a workforce for infrastructure projects and to satisfy the emerging need for industrial labour. In the early hostels, referred to as migrant camps, genders were frequently segregated into men and women with men often separated from accompanying partners and children. The plan for this adaptive re-use of housing advocated six basic shells per community unit with four being occupied as dormitories and one consisting of part dormitories, part laundry, and another as the dining hall and ablutions block. This basic arrangement was shared by early built hostels that would be defined by divisions between dormitories and eating blocks that resembled in planning military barracks and were frequently assembled from left over army materials. In this scenario, the plan was for 38 people. A notable feature of this adaptive plan for hostels was the efficiency in materials, with most materials planned to be reused in the second housing incarnation with the only foreseeable waste being the plywood screens between cubicles. This dwelling strategy was not to replace the network of hotels emerging throughout Australia towards the end of the 1940s, as the project report states:

“It is not suggested that this type of development is suitable for the housing of all immigrants, but it is suggested that it is a practicable and economical way of providing for single men in areas where permanent housing will in due course be required, i.e. adjacent to large factories, mines etc.”

The project was advocated on the economic platform that “completing the house shells at a later date for permanent occupation should not be greater than if carried out originally.” This housing experimentation generated a simple and innovative way to generate adaptive housing solutions for large incoming populations and could be viewed as a very early manifestation of the adaptive housing discourse that is prevalent today. Although the Building Station’s main aims were to investigate new construction technologies along with developing substitute materials, the drive to maximise the efficiency of migrant accommodation can be linked to wider political motivations.
This research was initiated at a time when housing shortage concerns was occupying government at all levels and had arguably contributed in part to the fall of the Federal Labour government in 1949. In the first phases of post-war European migration, there was a political need to reassure voters that incoming migrants would not compete with Australian-born citizens for housing. This experimentation with housing models that can adapt to be reused after the immediate influx of temporary workforces dissipates fits with this political agenda. In the later housing incarnations of hostel experiments such as the Endeavour, these concerns about reassuring the existing Australian-born population about housing competition dissipates in intensity. Instead new concerns emerge about projecting an image of a modern Australia to recruit dwindling migrant numbers from desired countries in Europe. The later projects were undertaken by the Public Works Department in conjunction with both the Department of Labour and National Service and the Department of Immigration. In the administration of these departments it was deemed necessary for the new dwellings to be convenient and comfortable to help project Australia as modern, open and flush with possibility. The negotiation between ideas about what constitutes home and unsettlement can be seen in the architecture, which exhibits design strategies that draw from both the house and the motel.

Figure 3. The Endeavour Hostel, Randwick, Sydney: New communal laundry facilities, 1971. Photograph Credit: Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs which at the time the photograph was commissioned was titled the Department of Immigration. Source: NAA: A12111, 1/197/22/20.
From the Motel to the House

Sarah Treadwell in her article “The Motel: An Image of Elsewhere,” offers a useful image of the motel: “Away from the architecture of the metropolis, situated in suburbs and wastelands where hotels will never be sited, constructing both the margins and the marginal, the motel is a transit form that mediates between a fixed address and vagrancy, between home and the car.”24 The Endeavour, like most city based migrant hostels was situated in the suburban margins. Hostels occupied Commonwealth land that was either associated with industry or leftover from the war effort such as former munitions factories. In the architecture of the Endeavour there is an interplay between the motel, the hotel and the house that was consistently re-negotiated through subsequent changes in facility management. This programmatic interplay highlights the transitory form of accommodation and the hostel was packaged by the federal government as a short stay in a migrant’s journey to home ownership. Contemporary, collective images of the motel picked up from film history and historians evoke a domesticity that is marginal, frequently seedy and physical shells that are often rundown and decrepit. However, as Philip Goad suggests in his article “A Short Stay: The Motel and Australian Architecture,” the motel in the 1950s and early 60s was a new type of building that offered domestic privacy in relation to its counterpart the hotel and its often-shared corridors and bathrooms.25 The motel’s connection to car travel, offered it the allure of modern forms of privacy as argued by Graeme Davison “the motel carried the privacy of travel established by the motor car into an essentially self-contained cellular form accommodation.”26

One of the guiding aims behind the Endeavour’s design was to increase privacy for families. In the initial planning for the Endeavour it stipulates the design cater only for family units of four or more. This highlights the shift in the demographics the department wanted to recruit – shifting away from an emphasis on single male workers to families. In evidence to a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, the supporting documentation asserts: “The living accommodation is so planned as to provide the greatest flexibility in the use of the available space, and simultaneously to enable families to live in as normal a family setting as is practicable within a hostel system.”27 This quote is pertinent as it encapsulates the two pivotal agendas, one to maximise space for increased capacity and two to provide standards of accommodation akin to independent apartments to foster an environment conducive to homemaking practices. The Endeavour consisted of four accommodation blocks and one large administration block which included the communal kitchen and dining room,
child minding facilities along with areas for staff. The four accommodation blocks were replicas with minor adjustments and were striking in scale and form for a hostel development due to their radial planning of six accommodation wings. In each core, connecting the six wings was the shared male and female bathrooms along with a shared telephone booth and laundry drying rooms. The arrangements of units in each extruding wing from the core was planned with flexibility by using inter-communicating doors to cater for shifts in the number and the ages of children in each family. In the initial planning stages each unit consisted of at least two bedrooms, some more - one master bedroom which could be occupied by the parents but also used as a family living room. It was equipped with a divan bed which could be converted into a compact settee for seating when the program of the room shifted to a living room and the secondary bedrooms were joined to the master. These family units also contained toilets and hand basins.

The car is largely absent from this design, unlike roadside motels which pivot on the transition from car to room. However, the entrance to each family’s accommodation often comes directly off the internal covered walkways and at times roads, encapsulating that sense of privacy seen in the motel. Unlike the motel, the corridor of the hotel still lingers in its needs to be navigated to get to the shower. In this division and arrangement of rooms, there are traces of three domestic types, the motel, the hotel and the third is a more abstract attempt to render the home within these two transitory forms. One of the key aims of the new hostel designs, that was consistently reiterated in the departmental records and published reports, was that the architecture was to be less institutional in appearance. However, outside this repeated ambition and the furnishing of rooms with modern amenities and styles, the architecture in plan suggests a different reading. These clusters of radial wings make an imposing impression and from the aerial photography shots produced it evokes an institutional design for some type of incarceration or confinement such as a prison.

It is not in the scope of this short paper to trace the heritage of colonial prison architecture, particularly Parramatta Goal, that clearly informed this arrangement. However, it is important to note though that the Enterprise in Melbourne which adopted a simile of this radial wing arrangement, was used temporarily as a detention centre in 1988 when three women and their children were transferred from the Maribyrnong Detention Centre. These new detainees shared facilities with other residents but were restricted from leaving the hostel grounds. This quiet shift from accommodation to detention possibly suggests that the radial plan arrangement inherently lends itself to
spatial control. Considering this was the selected planning arrangement for purpose-built designs for the resettlement of migrants, it suggests departmental tensions that point to public anxieties around the type of accommodation and it inscribed agendas that should be offered to incoming people in need of accommodation. Apart from the planning similarities to the prison in the use of radial wings and cores, the internal layout of the rooms and their furnishings along with the disjuncture between sleeping quarters and communal everyday living such as eating or laundry suggest spatial configurations seen in the motel. The motel proliferated in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s and was viewed as a wholesome family destination, particularly on a long regional drive away from the city. It represented the benefits of an economically prosperous, modern Australia awash with American convenience that resulted in the ability to undertake independent, family travel. The Endeavour’s reference of the motel was to use the utilitarian domestic model to maximise space but the wider cultural suggestions were ideal for use in publications to entice migrants to Australia.

![Image: The Endeavour Hostel, Randwick, Sydney: Street view, 1984]

**Figure 4.** The Endeavour Hostel, Randwick, Sydney: Street view, 1984 Photograph Credit: Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs which at the time the photograph was commissioned was titled the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. Source: NAA: A12111, 2/1984/22A/562.

**Conclusion: Advertising Opportunity through Housing**
Outside the publications that were produced in house by various departments for a professional audience such as *Works Review* and *Company Tidings*, there was considerable promotional material published to recruit migrants to Australia. Up until the 1970s, the Department of Immigration produced versions of a booklet titled,
Migrant Hostels in Australia, that was sent overseas to prospective countries in Europe. The booklet was divided into two categories: a British edition and a European edition and in 1969 was printed in 17 languages - the corresponding editions had minor differences but were structured the same. In the period between 1966 and 1970, revisions happened approximately bi-monthly marking minor changes to the text and predominantly updating the list of running hostels and tariff charges. There was significant debate between the different stakeholders involved with migrant hostels about how to represent hostel architecture and facilities, namely how to display an accurate image of the diverse standards across Australia while emphasising the modern and opportune facilities that the Endeavour was considered to represent. The Endeavour and its Melbourne replicate, the Enterprise were used to define current migrant hostel facilities and presented as the height of decades of housing experimentation for new arrivals:

“What are migrant hostels? They could be described as large boarding establishments, varying in capacity from 250 to 1500. Some are former armed service establishments which were vacated after the war and converted for migrant accommodation. Others were built in the early 1950s especially for the purpose of receiving migrants. Experienced gained over the years has resulted in great improvements in the planning and design of hostels. Two new hostels have been built, Endeavour at Randwick, Sydney and Enterprise at Springvale, Melbourne. These new hostels incorporate features designed to provide for all reasonable requirements of migrants.”

The new dwellings with privacy for individual families along with updates of everyday technologies such as the inclusion of film projection equipment and telephones was pitched to prospective migrants and displaced people as a springboard for modern life in Australia. However, as this passage vaguely foreshadows, there were impressed notions about how the new facilities should be used and received by incoming people.

The Endeavour’s completion contributed to a network of hostels across Sydney that during mid to late 1970s began to decrease in operative scale. Select hostels such as the Endeavour remained opened and were used to house large numbers of refugees displaced from the Vietnam War. The Endeavour’s completion accentuates a significant juncture and convergence of immigration policies in relation to refugees with
on one hand materialising the necessity for better, more liveable accommodation for economically disenfranchised populations. However, at the same time within government departments existing hostel sites were beginning to be considered as locations for future purpose built Immigration Detention Centres. The radial planning seen in the Endeavour and its counterpart the Enterprise do suggest prison spatial formations and when considering Australia’s subsequent immigration histories, these designs foreshadow the emergence of networks of immigration detention. However, simultaneously these housing complexes borrowed from commercial domestic templates such as the motel to both maximise the programmatic efficiency demanded in government subsidised housing but also to render the possibility of a home in an institution. This packaging of future opportunity through domestic tropes associated with a prosperous and modern Australia was emphasised in how the Endeavour was visually and textually represented in different divisions of government publications for varying demographics. By positioning the architecture at the forefront, this paper initiates a discussion on how the range of spatial strategies informing hostel design along with the tentativeness to declare an approach, indicates the anxieties around federal government hospitality towards migrants and refugees entering Australia.

4 Bunning and Madden, The work of Bunning & Madden, (Sydney: Bunning and Madden, 1970), 68-69
6 Australia. Commonwealth Experimental Building Station, Office Record/Dept. of Works and Housing, Commonwealth Experimental Housing Station, (Sydney: The Station, no. 76-100, 1949): Office record no. 95/File no. GE/827.
13 Australia. Dept. of Works, Works review,18-19.
19 Geoff Bock, The end was to build well, 11.
20 Building Station, Office Record, No. 95.
21 Building Station, Office Record, No. 95.
22 Building Station, Office Record, No. 95.
27 Endeavour Migrant Hostel, Randwick, NSW, Part 2, (NAA: MP1760/1, M1966/46354).
30 Goad, A Short Stay: The Motel and Australian Architecture, 9-18.
32 See discussion of migrants with Turkish heritage in Dept. of Immigration pamphlets, (NAA: B146, 1966/1000).