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Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

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Written into Existence: Publications and the Perceived Narratives of Gregory Burgess's Architecture

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Abstract

This research contributes to the influential work of Melbourne-based Architect, Gregory Burgess. Awarded the RAI Gold Medal in 2004, Burgess is best known for celebrating human values through design and for his spiritual methodologies, organic aesthetic, and work with Indigenous landowners. While Burgess has initiated very little writing, his work has been the focus of numerous articles published within a variety of journals, newsletters, magazines, and books including those from the construction industry which are often overlooked in journalistic reviews. This paper investigates discussions of architecture in publications through lenses such as intended audiences and physical medium, which consequentially develop narratives and form perceived relationships between an architectural project, an architect, and reader.

Conducted as archival research within Gregory Burgess's anthology of saved publications, the examination and cataloguing of over 230 publications that mention him and his work date from 1979-2013. The breadth of the collection provides publications which range from local timber fabrication companies to Russian journals reviewing organic architecture, the majority in which the architect and the work was discussed without consultation from the design team. As a robust collection was maintained by the architect himself, general issues of discovering and accessing publications including those which fall within the digital dark age can be accessed and provide a fuller historical perception of the built work.

The discussions of and narratives formed within this literature portray Burgess and his work in conscientious manners through the written word targeted for specific audiences: the construction industry, the trained architect, and members of the general public. Often, rather than contributing to architectural journalism or critique in a meaningful way, prominent projects and their broader themes become a vehicle for the author to promote their own voice and ideas. The findings argue that the different relationships an author has experiencing an architectural space demonstrates a broader picture of the architectural industry and the ways that historical publications can generate a perception of a designer and their designs.

Introduction

1. Naomi Stead, *Semi-Detached: Writing, representation and criticism in architecture*, (Melbourne, Australia: Uro Media, 2012), 5.

The written word is linked to the communication and comprehension of architecture, ranging from technical detailing to flourishing descriptions of the human experience. These words have and will continue to provide distinctive points of reference within the wide body of knowledge that has documented the architecture industry. Within the profession, manifestos and literature record schools of thought and changes within modes of practice while newspapers and journals connect communities with their local urban fabric, creating a place for meaningful public engagement and providing a method of translating design semantics. Regardless to proximity to the architecture industry, every person experiencing a space has their own valid expertise in architecture and their own way of describing and critiquing it.¹ Whether in a book or on a single sheet of paper, the written word bypasses geographical and material boundaries, allowing information about static structures to be disseminated at a global scale, centuries before digital born content expedited the same process.

There has been a shift in the methods of consumption and dissemination of information. One prominent example of this is the way in which pictures are increasingly used to replace words completely as a narrative tool. Striking visual imagery has always been associated with the design profession, yet description or a contextualization is often required to make sense of it to an observer. While sublime experiences might be difficult to relay through diction, the factual information of what something is made of and the rational of it can easily be recorded in text. Beyond imagery, explanatory statements that accompany visual experiences pass along information to a consumer, highlighting digestible snippets of knowledge to enrich or influence the architectural experience.

2. Terry Kuny, "A Digital Dark Ages? Challenges in the Preservation of Electronic Information," *IFLA 63rd Annual Meeting*, (Copenhagen, 1997).

Shifts in media consumption and the advent of digital platforms have developed new methods that make content quicker and easier to generate and consume. However, a lack of editorial assessment, the classification of an audience, and a curatorial eye make current design-related content difficult to sort through. A major disruption in communication occurred within the digital dark age which makes a certain era of writing difficult if not impossible to locate.² The distribution of new content and the ability for reference and filtering lacks order, which is why this specific collection is unique. Rather than focusing on an era or theme, a filter containing "Greg Burgess" as a search topic was embedded in the archival materials. It is in the aspiration to disseminate knowledge that the findings of this research are based in. Through the lens of Gregory Burgess' architecture, an examination of the variety of publications and authors which choose to feature him, and his work demonstrate a wide array of the architectural industry.

The method employed here involved developing an index of all the publications included in the recently formed Greg Burgess Archive. This involved reviewing and categorizing pieces of literature in a systematic format, similar to what a standard library collection might gather for metadata. As the research was exploratory in nature, the catalogue developed simultaneous to the investigation and required unique identifiers to be included due to the architectural content matter. The

current metadata index includes 238 unique literary artifacts with 12 fields categorizing relevant information including information such as name and issue of a publication, title of the article, author, year, as well as relevant observed information such as projects mentioned and the medium in which the writing is situated. Additional research on publishers and observational analysis of the publication itself provided the information required to categorize each piece into who an intended audience may be.

Audience

3. Jessica Kelly, *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research*, (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2019), 81.

The determination of audience is crucial to the consumption process, it can shape the way published material is curated and key words are indicative of the target audience of an editor and author. By grounding the writing in this context, each publication becomes a method of orienting information and distributing a body of knowledge to create meaning of architecture solely dependent on their place within the discourse.³ For the purpose of developing a catalogue, the publications are categorized into four different intended audiences: the public, design experts, construction industry, and academic/historical. Each grouping serves a unique purpose, and all provide insight and information on what was being oriented to, and consumed by, the varied stakeholders that make significant impacts on our built environment.

The publications developed for and by design experts comprised the largest component of the collection with 109 artifacts, aligning with the intent of a collection documenting architectural projects. Journals and magazine aimed at those with architectural backgrounds or with interest in the specificities of architecture make up the largest portion of the documented work through Greg Burgess projects included in titles such as *The Architectural Review*, *UIA International Architect*, and *Space & Society: The international journal of architecture*. As an architect practicing within Australia, the publications produced by The Australian Institute of Architects at the national and local chapter often discussed Burgess's work as it was completed. Similarly, landscape architecture specific publications discuss several projects in which Greg Burgess Architects was involved, where Taylor Cullity Lethlean was the landscape designer.

4. John Devenish, "Filling in the Gaps," *Medium Density Housing in Australia*, (Canberra, RAlA Education Division, 1986), 50-60.

5. Office of Victoria, "Good Design Local Government," Issue 4, (2008).

Some might consider the content aimed at design professionals as the most critical content to review because of the industry respect associated with the exclusive curatorial nature of such magazines but the archival collection provided content associated to various other fields worth including in architectural discourse, resulting in the development of audience as a tool for categorization as a focus of this research. One subcategory that the research identified within the design profession were those tailored to, or developed by, government groups. Books such as *Medium Density Housing in Australia* discuss the Ministry of Housing infill project that Burgess and other architects in the 1980's were involved in⁴ or newsletters issued from the office of the Victorian Government Architect such as *Good Design Local Government* (Issue 4) which outline how well-designed structures contribute to the objectives of local council.⁵ These types of publications intend to inform and influence a specific audience, one which ultimately effects

capital spending by municipalities. The curatorial choices of projects in publications such as these are likely to make a significant impact on informing the design of future public buildings, where case studies act as a foundation to derive a design from rather than providing unbiased precedents for a new project.

6. "Brambuk Living Cultural Centre," *Wood World*. Australian Timber Organization, (1990).

7. "The Great Cover Up! What are Builders and Architects trying to hide?" *Roots*, (1994), 32-34.

One sector which is often overlooked within historical architectural research is the information embedded within the construction industry. With 11 publications dedicated to or generated by product manufacturers, building materials, or specific to construction and the industry, this category provides specific insight to the work of Burgess and the relationships established within a practice. Most often, these publications highlight the innovative uses of timber within projects such as Brambuk Living Cultural Centre and Box Hill Community Arts Centre. In 1990, *Wood World* highlighted Brambuk Living Cultural Centre as a magnificent architectural achievement that received a variety of recent awards, the audience is engineering and construction focused as the majority of the information is quoted from the engineer on the project, Peter Yttrup. He discusses specific methodologies such as the use of segmented ridge beam construction to create the organic shaped roof, grey box poles for roof support, and that all curved timber were steam bent on site.⁶ This unique approach to using timber was also used as a case study in *Roots*, in which the article aims to debunk timber as being perceived as a low-grade construction material that lacks aesthetic qualities mainly due to the commercialization of timber frame construction used in the boom of suburban homes from the decades prior. The author advocates that rather than covering up wood as a structural material, native Australian hardwood should be highlighted in projects. Noting timber being used as a visual element in the designs of Alistair Knox, Burgess receives accolades for the use of ironbark poles in Brambuk with the bark still on it. The critical tone of the article shines through in the discussion by stating the poles reveal "an inspired use for what might otherwise have been a fence post."⁷

A particularly personal letter from Bruce Bell of Laminated Timber Supplies Pty Ltd in 1993 includes an album of 24 photographs from the construction site during the timber installation and two magazine article clippings from the Box Hill Community Arts Centre project. The letter appears to be marketing for future work by asking Burgess to consider them again when a contractor requires 'the expertise and use of a quality engineered timber products,' but earnestly states "hopefully your work to date will stir the imagination of the construction industry creating a new surge of timber buildings in Australia." While a practicing designer might consider custom methods to be a costly nuisance for construction, the letter indicates respect for Burgess as a person and the design of the building in mentioning he wishes to recognize the "unique and imaginative design using timber structure as a practical, yet very much an art form building." In the personal correspondence between subcontractor and architect, sincerity for craftsmanship brings to light the way material industry professionals perceive a project.



Figures 1: Photos within a scrapbook depicting construction of the Box Hill Community Arts Centre.

8. Stephen Crafti "From Mars," *Steel Profile*, April, (2008).

Other construction industry publications such as *Steel Profile* and *Specifier* outline a project with brief information on the design practice where products are the main intent of the publication. While seemingly objective, visually impressive projects act as case studies to sell services and products. Publications like this inevitably act as glorified product guides for other designers to take inspiration from and use products in the future. In a specific feature issue titled as "100 architectural innovations" the Victorian Space Science Education Centre designed by Burgess in included. The intent for product marketing is obvious when stating the specific steel components used from BlueScope product lines, including a testimonial from Burgess noting that "COLORBOND® steel provides a sense of movement – it allows you to wrap and twist shapes."⁸ Images and text description of spaces highlight steel as structural and an aesthetic material, making the choice of this specific material inseparable to the award-winning design of the building.

Publications in which architecture is included but the content is situated within a larger historical context, or those developed within academic settings including those intended for students learning are categorized as "historical" or "academic". While this section only consists of 14 artifacts, it situates Burgess's architecture within a broader societal context rather than confined to a specific time and place generally outlined in journal articles. Examples of this includes books such as *Holiday Business: Tourism in Australia since 1870* which include Brambuk Living Cultural Centre and Uluru Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre or case studies within a PhD *The Architecture of Liturgy* that include the Church of St. Michael and St. John in Horsham. Although architecture or design is not always a central focus established in these literary settings, a broader historical scope can contextualize a building from a different perspective and provides a platform to discuss architecture outside of design-centric media.

The last category outlines media developed for the public, such as

those likely consuming the information as a form of entertainment or pop culture, or as part of another, broader topic. While some of the catalogued articles are situated in more design-focused magazines such as *Australian Kitchen Trends*, others like *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*, *The Monthly*, and *The Australian Magazine* are publications which document Burgess's architecture in the context of the Australia culture. In this type of public sharing, a reader does not necessarily have a discerning eye on the specifics of consumption and thus the content shifts to being eye catching, becoming easy and pleasant to consume, considering editors aim for increase popular interest to consistently drive sales. The mainstream quality of these publications does not warrant the content to be overlooked, but rather the opposite. By noting these articles as being a part of pop culture or daily news intended for consumption by the general populous, architects and their designs become embedded within a cultural zeitgeist.



Figures 2: Australian Financial Review Magazine with taped annotations

Mediums

It is worth considering how the methods in which information is disseminated have consequences on the way they are consumed and who they are consumed by. For example, newsletters and pamphlets are intentionally short, which make them more appealing as a quickly digestible form of media. Books and journals on the opposite spectrum are associated as being more time consuming due to their length, yet their content is typically richer and oriented to those who will be reading the specific marketed content.

Defined by their printed content distributed over a regular period, magazines and journals are the most common type of publication located within the catalogue. Associated with having a regular and consistent output and wide distribution, these likely accrue the most readers as well as acclaim for project inclusion. Burgess's collection includes 61 unique magazines from both local and international

9. Arian Mostaedi, "Burraworin Residence Flinders," *Sustainable Architecture: Lowtech Houses*, (Barcelona, 2004), 50-59.

10. Tamara Winikoff, *Places not Spaces: Placemaking in Australia*, (1995), 39, 42-46.

publications such as *A+U*, *Vogue Living*, and RMIT's *Transitions*. Numerous books were also saved for inclusion of Burgess's work, with many sporting glossy pages filled with striking architectural imagery in the form of a decorative coffee table book. While photography books such as *Beach Houses* or *Another 100 of the World's best houses* include very little actual written content, they provide a platform for visually impressive or unique work to be shared in an accessible manner. The addition of a lesser known architect within aesthetic-centric bindings places Burgess at an international table for his work to be visually consumed. Other books are more text-heavy and written for those within the design profession. *Sustainable Architecture: Lowtech Houses* outlines the construction of the Burraworin House noting the innovative use of radial cutting as a method to reduce the amount of wood needed for projects,⁹ while *Places not Spaces: Placemaking in Australia* discusses Box Hill Community Arts Centre and Brambuk Living Cultural Centre as public building case study projects that successfully integrated the community to the design process for a rewarding finished product.¹⁰

Among the books and magazines, other archival material included pamphlets from award ceremonies, printed information from speaking at conferences, gallery or exhibition guides that would have accompanied a physical installation or event, newsletters from smaller foundations, and a few letters; one in which an appliance company is writing in hopes to use the Earth House as a set for a commercial.

Evaluation

Quantification of a project demonstrates prominence simply through a repeated representation, showing that critically curated editorial content warranted Burgess's work for repeated discussion and display to readers. While approximately 49 distinct projects are mentioned throughout the collection of publications, the quantity of times a specific project was considered can cause it to stand out amongst others. Brambuk Living Cultural Centre and Uluru Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre were most frequently identified at 53 times each. The next most published projects were significantly less discussed, Eltham Library at 22 times and the Sidney Myer Music Bowl Renovation at 18 times.

The publications within the collection date back to 1979 and end in 2013, covering 34 years of architectural practice. Within that time frame, 1981 and 1982 were the only years where there is no record of publication on the practice. The year in which the largest quantity of publications exist is in 2004, which coincides with Greg Burgess receiving the RAIA Gold Medal award. In 2008 there are 19 artifacts, some of which discuss the recently completed Victorian Space Science Centre, while various other projects such as Uluru Kata Cultural Centre, Burraworin House, and the Mansfield Information Centre are discussed in different capacities. 1996 aligns with completion of Uluru and dominated the collection from this year. Over the nearly 50 years of Greg Burgess Architect in practice, despite a significant transition of journalism and architectural media shifting to a digital platform, the quantity and consistency of physical published pieces demonstrates an ongoing presence and relevance to all aspects of the architectural practice.

Authors

11. "Towards a community architecture of wholeness," *Architecture into Millennium* 3, (1993), 19-22.

Often authors did not personally know Burgess yet there are a handful of recurring authors, all of which who were Australian based. Familiar names in the dissemination of Australian architectural history such as Philip Goad and Rory Spence frequently provided content including the work of Greg Burgess Architects. Stephen Crafti, Melbourne based author of *A Pocketful of Beach Houses* and *Beach Houses*, shares contemporary design in a more visual manner and would likely reach a different audience with these than the other authors would have. Image-based publications provide an accessible route to consuming design, one which doesn't require words. When situated within a specific lens such as "beach houses", the reader is able to easily digest visual information, understanding that the images and projects they are viewing are selected intentionally to fit within this margin. Within the collection are some of Burgess's own writing and written word from speaking at conferences, these appear to act as a tool used to communicate his philosophy explaining the practice and approach to design. One which made several appearances in the early nineties was *Towards a community architecture of wholeness*. This call to action outlines architecture as a tool that can peel back cultural layers and through time can heal and introduce senses into the spirit and desires us to learn from and protect the nature-integrated wisdoms of the remaining indigenous cultures of the world.¹¹

Geography

12. Philip Goad, "Isolation and Introspection: Fortune and Folly of Australian Architecture," *Casabella: International Architectural Review* 550, (1989), 50-52, 58-59.

The collection of 238 artifacts can be pared down into 152 unique publications, as over the years several journal titles would discuss Greg Burgess Architects. Of these 152, 44 are based internationally and the remaining 108 are Australian. Inclusion in international publications demonstrate that although Burgess and his work was based solely within Australia, it had global influence and impact. These publications also provide information towards what other countries and design scenes were considering and how the work of an Australian fit into that. Several international architectural publications like German based *Mensch + Architektur* featured Greg Burgess' work in issues focused on the notion of organic architecture. Another based in Milan, *Casabella: International Architectural Review*, featured the Catholic Church in Horsham and the Johnson House alongside numerous other Australian designs, accompanied by text from Philip Goad titled "Isolation and Introspection: Fortune and Folly of Australian Architecture."¹² Articles that place the idea of contemporary Australian design within international architectural publications come across as seemingly self-aware and strategically situate the globally under-represented projects of down under to a wider audience.



Figures 3: Russian magazine Табулет displaying Peninsula House and Burraworin House

There were numerous Australian and Melbourne-based publication which included projects designed by Burgess, but over the years one with various similar sounding titles such as *Architectural Review Asia Pacific* and *The Architectural Review* existed under the conglomerate of Australian Design Review published 18 articles featuring his projects. Existing outside of the formal boundaries of the Australian Institute of Architects, these magazines proved to be more accessible to the public. The consumption of media is reinforced by the ways in which the projects are presented within them; visually-forward with an approachable amount of text provided by a knowledgeable source. Usually including several pages of photographs, architectural plans and sections and never a full page of text, *The Review* was a platform for imagery and descriptive text to outline an experiential and spatial understanding of the two-dimensional media set in front of a reader.

Findings

13. Alan Hill, "Continental Drift: Trust your instincts and follow a new path; Australia has a wealth of experiences to explore," *Vogue Living* Dec/Jan, (Australia, 1996), 190-193.

Beyond the formal categorization used to develop a catalogue of archived publications, certain key pieces discuss Burgess and his architectural works in ways that highlight topics that warrant additional review. For example, several articles portray Australian culture as tourism, in which Burgess is included in various capacities in which his architecture aided in the formation of this notion. *Vogue Living* includes Uluru Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre as a tourist destination as a worthy destination to explore, in which the Centre acts as a destination for those who arrive to leave with new knowledge of place.¹³ In February of 1994, Qantas Airline's in-flight magazine, *The Australian Way*, discuss the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre as a culinary destination worth arriving at in the Grampians. Nestled between an advertisement for the Old Melbourne Hotel and an article on cricket's eternal appeal, the article discusses Claude Forell tasting the culinary traditions of the Koori people. The journalistic intent of the piece is clearly for providing a food-based experience, with very little mention of the architecture beyond

some text describing the functional uses of the "Brambuk Centre" and describing it as a "curve, ground hugging building with an undulating red-brown roof," and a nonchalant mentioned as having won several architectural awards of national merit.¹⁴ The introduction to architecture however brief can provide impact and intrigue required for those not interested in design to want to learn more.

Innovative construction as being difficult to communicate is another reoccurring theme within articles. An author discussing the construction of the Uluru Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre within *The Owner Builder: The Australian Home Builders Magazine* appears to be both impressed and flummoxed with the design and shares that there is "a certain amount of frustration in trying to share" experience of the building with readers. This is both contradicted and reinforced when they state that "the casual observer may not take the time to fully appreciate the effort gone into making the design worthy of the cultural importance of the site" but rather the way the building fits "delightfully" into the surrounding geography. Articles such as this by an impartial observer of a construction site, writing within a publication oriented to individuals who are interested in learning about construction methods provides relevant commentary on the complex design.

Lastly, what bias is inherent to an architectural publication collection when saved by the architect themselves? As the research was limited to physical copies within an individual collection, there are bound to be missing publications whether intentional or not. Overall, the indexing process is not necessarily an evaluation on architectural discourse, but rather an exploration on the mediums, methods, and audiences which architectural publications could focus on through the lens of a specific architect. Although Burgess's architectural practice involved the written word it did not depend on it to be situated alongside it like similar locally known Melbourne practitioners such as Robin Boyd and Norman Day. Burgess, rather, represents the wider demographic of practitioners who design projects that gain commendation and followed by a desire to be shared.

Future explorations in this realm of research could delve into specific projects and qualitatively assess the ways in which various industries share the same content, or perhaps focus on locating what hasn't been collected which has the possibility to unearth the criticism and commentary that was deemed not worth maintaining as part of the permanent collection used for indexing. Specific to Burgess and his work, we can investigate how design projects are reconceived for local tourism, for international trends in organic architecture, and in the woes of the timber industry. An archival collection of historical publications demonstrate that a designer is not limited to being discussed in architecture practice-specific publications, but rather in a wide gamut of industries and situated in historical contexts as framed by the interests and experiences of an author.