Darwin: urban meeting places in tropical Australia

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Living in a new country is not an eccentricity: it is the contemporary condition. We live as others allow us to live, creating meeting places as we go along. Such places may be monumental, they may be nothing more than encounters...yet they can form the basis of a social fabric, one that does not suppress the contingency of its community but makes its migratory haphazardness the material out of which it weaves its identity.

Located on one of north Australia's finest natural harbours, Darwin was the first successful European settlement in the Northern Territory and since its foundation in 1869 has been the headquarters of the Territory's administration. Despite, or perhaps because of, its remoteness from other major population centres in Australia, a harsh climate, natural disasters and bombing attacks, its historic environment today includes structures and places that relate to significant aspects of the record of human settlement in the Australian tropics.

Climate, as Alan Powell contends, 'is the main unifying feature' of the Northern Territory's Top End region where Darwin is located. Darwin, he maintains, 'owes much of its regional dominance to the lack of competition resulting from a natural environment that presents a severe challenge to European-based civilisation.' The region has the most sharply differentiated of Australia's tropical dry-climates. During the summer 'wet' there is high heat and humidity and nearly all the average annual rainfall of 1500 millimetres comes. The winter 'dry' has virtually no rainfall at all and is much less humid. Temperatures then, however, regularly reach 30 degrees Celsius and more.

Darwin has a chequered history. While the area's Aboriginal owners, the Larrakia people, found it abundant in animal, bird and marine life, for Europeans it was almost completely intractable and they failed to discover what they regarded as adequate economic resources. Crew members from HMS Beagle discovered the harbour in 1839 and named it Port Darwin after the scientist Charles Darwin, still a relatively unknown figure and an earlier passenger on the Beagle. The settlement of Palmerston, at the harbour-side location of present-day Darwin's port and central business district, began in 1869. The area around was largely flat, covered by eucalypt woodlands, a few patches of rainforest and abundant ant hills. Before 1869 four earlier attempts at white settlement in the Northern Territory were conspicuous failures at least in part because a difficult physical environment proved too much for those who tried to tame it. South Australia administered the Northern Territory until 1869. Palmerston remained a tiny outpost on the edge of a peninsula with only a few hundred white inhabitants, serving as an administrative centre, the northern base of the Overland Telegraph Line and the terminus for a railway to the small goldfield centre of Pine Creek. The nature of the site meant that there was easy access to the harbour. When suburban expansion eventually occurred, however, it would be to the north on an east-west axis with many suburbs away from the sea. By the 1880s Darwin’s Chinese residents, who provided essential supplies and services through their businesses and market gardens, outnumbered the Europeans by about seven to one. The Larrakia were forced from most of their land but maintained their identity as a distinct Indigenous group.

The Commonwealth government took responsibility for the Northern Territory in 1911. Palmerston was renamed Darwin. In spite of some temporary growth until the early 1920s, it was not until the late 1930s, with a defence build up, that the town and its European population grew significantly. During the Second World War it was the target for repeated Japanese air attacks. Darwin was rebuilt after the war and its population increased quite dramatically as the Commonwealth poured in funds and some wealth came from the Northern Territory's mining and pastoral industries. Cyclone Tracy in 1974, the third very serious cyclone to hit Darwin, damaged or destroyed some 90 per cent of the buildings. Since 1978 Darwin has been the capital of a self-governing Northern Territory. The 2001 Census recorded 109,419 people in the Darwin Statistical Division (which includes the satellite city of Palmerston), 8.9% of whom were Indigenous. The city has a wide range of the usual urban services and sprawling suburbs yet is still, both physically and metaphorically, for many Australians a remote and somewhat strange outpost on the far extremity of their continent.

Given the climate and the impact of war and cyclones, it is not surprising that the written records of Darwin’s past are often fragmentary. There are some gaps in archival holdings due to heat, termites, bombs, storms, neglect, administrative inconsistency and deliberate destruction. Significant collections of private papers were damaged or destroyed by similar means. In addition many Darwin residents, particularly but not only Aboriginal and Asian people, neither made nor kept written records. In a lot of instances the transitory nature of much of the population militated against the development of private records. Until the 1980s, oral history research in Darwin concentrated on the memories of the better-known white inhabitants. Vital elements of Darwin’s history can, as a consequence, only be understood when the evidence of historic places and structures is examined and explained. Key themes are the impact of government, transport and communications, commerce and enterprise, the provision of community services, housing and the impact of war. All are dealt with comprehensively in my book Looking at Darwin’s Past. Here I discuss them through attention to selected examples.

Imposing authority

As already noted, Darwin began as an administrative outpost and since 1869 it has been a regional headquarters for various government agencies. The city’s oldest buildings all initially had...
governmental functions. They are representations of a process that commenced in 1869 through which the Europeans in charge of Darwin legitimised their occupation and ensured that Anglo-Australian rules of conduct were enforced. As in other isolated frontier outposts, it was necessary to have structures that imposed colonial authority and from which administrative and legal tasks could be undertaken.

Outstanding among these is the complex that includes the former police station, courthouse, courthouse annexe and cellblock remains on The Esplanade overlooking the harbour. Described by the architectural historians Adrian Welke and Philip Harris as ‘perfectly early South Australian’, the buildings have simple verandahs, hipped roofs with minimal overhang and porcellanite stone walls. The buildings ‘were in stark contrast to the general, lightweight, temporary texture (typified by corrugated galvanised iron) of most of the rest of the town’. The wide verandahs ‘onto which open large windows together with high internal ceilings were early design responses to moderate the tropical climate’.

Construction of the courthouse and police station commenced in 1879 and proceeded in stages with the architect John Knight and the surveyor Gilbert McMinn being in charge of the work at different times. In June 1884 Knight decided that a verandah would be added to the rear of the courthouse. In August of the following year he ordered several alterations to rooms there permitted counsel to take off their wigs and gowns before doing so himself. In October 1942 the Royal Australian Navy took over the complex as its Darwin headquarters, retaining control until Cyclone Tracy. Very seriously damaged by the cyclone, the buildings remained derelict until the Northern Territory Department of Transport and Works rebuilt them in 1981. Under the supervision of conservation architect Alan Hammond, the work made every effort to ensure that the external fabric resembled its original state. Now used as offices for the Administrator of the Northern Territory and his staff, the buildings survive today as elements of what was once a larger government precinct and have considerable architectural and townscape values.

Defeating distance

Geoffrey Blainey once observed that the ‘idea of distance’ does much to explain Australia’s past. In particular, he argued that the coming of mechanical communications and transport – the telegraph, steamships, railways, motor vehicles and aviation – shaped the country’s economic and social development. Perhaps to an even greater extent than in other Australia capitals, the requirement to conquer distance and provide a more effective means of communication had a very considerable impact on Darwin.

Aviation more than any other factor broke what the aviation historian John Haslett described as Darwin’s ‘final barrier’. The growth of both Darwin and the entire Northern Territory was enormously assisted through the development of commercial aviation from the 1920s until the 1950s. Aircraft travelling between Australia and the rest of the world stopped in Darwin for refuelling and service, providing a boost to the local economy. In 1919 the well-known aviator Hudson Fysh supervised the clearing of an airstrip close to the harbour in the suburb of Fannie Bay. Today the strip remains as a wide tree-lined street, Ross Smith Avenue, Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Service Ltd (Qantas), which Fysh helped found, was established in 1920 and operated out of Darwin. However, the present Darwin airport was first commissioned as a Royal Australian Air Force base in 1940. Still a military airport, it also handles domestic and international flights and is a base for light aircraft operations.

The old ‘aerodrome’ at Fannie Bay can ‘be tied to almost every major event or major name in Australian aviation history’. A small monument at the seaward end of the former strip commemorates the achievement of Ross and Keith Smith in landing a small Vickers Vimy aircraft there on 10 December 1919 after the first flight from Britain to Australia. The journey took 28 days. In Darwin there were great festivities. The historian Manning Clark later wrote that ‘Hopes were running high for communications between Australia and the capital of the Empire. At the close of the Darwin banquet a lady kissed the aviators. Those present cheered.’

It was on the Fannie Bay strip that Bert Hinkler landed during his first solo flight. Another to arrive there was Amy Johnson, the first woman to fly solo from Britain. It was also here that Qantas started its regular overseas mail service in 1934. For those who grew up in Darwin during the 1920s and 1930s the arrival of famous aviators provided much excitement. A
most treasured memory of Christa Lichfield, who was born in 1916 and lived in a home near the aerodrome, was having morning tea in Charles Kingsford-Smith's Southern Cross.18

The only surviving building that was part of the former aerodrome is a 1934 hangar at MacDonald Street, Parap. A large curved structure, the hangar at its front has a tall wide entrance so that four De Havilland DH86 aircraft could be accommodated at any one time. It retains cannon holes and shrapnel scars from the Second World War. The hangar was erected primarily because of Qantas tendering successfully for the Australian Overseas Air Service between the United Kingdom and Australia, which saw the development of international air routes. Qantas provided the Brisbane-Darwin-Singapore link. Sidney Williams Company constructed the new hangar in September and October 1934. At the time it was the largest in Australia and featured a steel internal frame with corrugated galvanised iron cladding. From then until the Second World War both Qantas and Guine Airways flights used the hangar. It was a base for air force units during the Second World War and was badly damaged in Japanese raids. In 1946 the civil aerodrome ceased operations and the hangar was subsequently used for storage purposes. It remains, though, as the most obvious feature of the first international airport at Australia's 'front door'.19

**Commerce and enterprise**

Although established as an administrative and communications centre, Darwin has always had important commercial and economic functions. The first shops were set up very soon after the initial European settlement. Banks, hotels and small workshops followed. Today, there are the usual shopping centres, supermarkets and tall office and hotel structures that dominate most Australian urban centres. There is, however, comparatively little industry.

At one stage there was a distinct area of Chinese shops in Darwin running along Cavenagh Street. Most of this was destroyed during and immediately after the Second World War. But one relic, the Sue Wah Chin Building, remains largely intact. Built as a group of five shops in 1888, its stonework, wall openings and iron bars on the windows mostly appear original. The hipped roofs and guttering were removed after Cyclone Tracy.20 The same Australian Chinese family has owned the building since 1956 and it is still used as a retail outlet.21

Among the more prominent tenants was the Japanese-born businessman, community leader and pioneer of the cultured pearl industry in north Australia, Yasukichi Murakami, who had a photographic shop there during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Interned in 1942, he died two years later.22

**Servicing the community**

Like most other regional centres in Australia, various colonial, local, Commonwealth and 'state' government agencies, community organisations and cultural and religious groups in Darwin gradually provided an increased range of community services. While some were typical of those found in other towns and cities, others graphically reflected Darwin's remote tropical location.

The first government school in Darwin was established in 1879.23 With alterations and additions, it served until 1953, when a new school, the Darwin Primary School, commenced operation. Situated on Woods Street, the school buildings of the 1950s include classrooms and rooms used for other purposes and some imposing trees surround them. The structures are mostly of concrete brick, partly one-storey and partly two. Helen Wilson and Adrian Welke observed that the school buildings display 'a unique array of climatically determined detailing that became the model for all later inner city schools, for example, Parap, Larrakeyah and Stuart Park'. The classrooms are, for example, open to the outside by double glazed doors with glass louvres above and were not air-conditioned.24

The school served the needs of children in Darwin's central business district and nearby suburbs until it was closed in 1983 due to declining enrolments. The Northern Territory government's decision to shut the school down caused much protest, particularly from prominent members of the local Chinese community who had been educated there.25 Since then the school buildings have been used for various purposes, mainly as offices for government and community organisations.

**Darwin's home**

Over 50 years ago the controversial architect and author Robin Boyd published the first edition of his now classic work *Australia's Home*. The book documented the history of the Australian domestic house, its builders and occupiers. Australia, he argued, had more privately owned houses per head of population than most other countries and, while collectively they were an outstanding achievement, individually they left much to be desired. They were, simultaneously, a material triumph and an aesthetic calamity. In the 1968 edition of the book, Boyd noted the trend in which more Australians were living in flats and home units but contended that much of this type of accommodation could also be strongly criticised on aesthetic and practical grounds.26

Boyd made no mention of Darwin and what he identified as the 'major steps of stylism' in Australian domestic architecture never gained much currency there. Instead, as various architectural historians have pointed out, there was a rather different sequence that David Bridgman recently described as including 'adaptations influenced by the racially plural population, the regional climate and the peculiarities of place'. There were also, he continued, important vernacular and colonial influences from regions as geographically removed as India, Singapore and Malaysia.27 Philip Harris and Adrian Welke, from Darwin's prize-winning Troppo Architects, maintained that until the 1960s and 1970s there were many examples of housing in Darwin in which good basic principles
were established for coping with climatic and economic peculiarities. While these principles started to disappear by the 1970s, particularly after Cyclone Tracy resulted in strict new rules for housing, by the early 1980s Darwin housing design again in some instances started to reflect earlier styles.26

A positive sign for the future came in May 1982 when a village of entries in a Northern Territory government 'low cost' housing competition opened in Darwin. As a requirement of construction, houses were all to cost no more then $34,000 each. Government houses at the time then cost between $45,000 and $48,000 each to build. The most controversial of these structures yet the one with the greatest subsequent influence in Darwin, was Troppo Architects 'Green Can'. The architects claimed that it had no precedent in earlier local versions of tropical housing yet was 'also deliberately derivative of the local architectural vocabulary, a product of the selective employment of historically developed climatic design principles'. The mainly iron and timber 'Green Can', an example of which can be found in the Darwin suburb of Karama, is slightly elevated with three bedrooms occupying the entire width of the main part of the structure and lots of louvres. A steep pitch roof draws up the heat and there is a generous overhang of the eaves.29 The 'Green Can' gave rise to several individual house commissions. It was not, Philip Goad observed, 'meant to be understood as a fixed entity, but as the fluid basis for an entire range of house types'.30 Other Darwin architects and builders have also adopted the same principles.

**Australia's front line**

Since the late nineteenth century Darwin's location has always been considered of strategic value. While Australian fears of an Asian invasion have usually focussed on the continent's north, particularly from the 1930s when Japan loomed as a potential threat. Today the city's population includes many armed forces personnel and there are significant defence bases in the greater Darwin area.

On East Point, near the entrance to the harbour, there is an elaborate and extensive military fortification complex. Work there commenced in 1932 and continued in stages until the end of the Second World War. Now under government protection and open to the public, the complex contains a vast variety of structures intended for the defence of Australia against northern attack, including emplacements for nine-inch guns, observation bunkers, command posts, magazines, communication towers, entrenchments, stores and associated facilities.31

The East Point site is closely associated with important historical events. In 1932 the Commonwealth announced its intention to fortify Darwin and, in particular, protect its oil depot. During 1933, barrack buildings at Thursday Island in Queensland were dismantled and shipped to East Point and nearby Emery Point. A couple of six-inch guns were also installed at East Point, with associated magazines, observation towers and stores. Further improvements were made between 1938 and 1942, including the installation of more six-inch guns, four-inch guns, nine-point-two-inch guns, machine gun posts, barracks, various ancillary buildings and a labour camp. After the Japanese bombing of Darwin in February 1942 the work stopped and tools and materials were moved inland to Berrimah to prevent them from falling into Japanese hands in case of invasion. The nine-point-two-inch guns were finally completed in 1945. No shot was ever fired at an invading enemy. Ironically, the guns were sold as scrap metal in 1960 to a Japanese salvage company. At the end of the war many buildings were also sold.32

**Whose past?**

The examples discussed here show that elements of Darwin's historic environment are of considerable value. Although its built heritage has suffered greatly because of cyclones, war and, in recent years, some most unfortunate demolitions, enough is left to illustrate key themes. Darwin's historic structures and places reflect a continuing struggle to provide the basic amenities of life. They also provide a physical record of the responses of succeeding generations of people to remoteness and an often harsh climate.

As for what today exists as an environmental history that non-Aboriginal people can easily recognise, the Aboriginal impact is far too often regarded as insignificant, largely restricted to such elements as stone fish traps. This view is, of course, misleading in that it ignores Aboriginal influence on vegetation before 1869 and the current existence of places around the city such as the Bagot Aboriginal community and the site of the former Kahlin Compound, where part-Aboriginal children were institutionalised. The non-Aboriginal, mainly European, contribution that is the focus of this article was very deliberately the opposite to what was perceived, even if mistakenly, as Aboriginal. As in other isolated frontier locations in Australia, Darwin's non-Indigenous inhabitants created tangible remains, however modest and humble, in an attempt to legitimise their occupation.

One of Darwin's most prominent buildings, the 1982 casino at Mindil Beach, is on a site of great significance to Aboriginal people as a burial ground. The Aboriginal Sacred Sites Authority (now the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority) was able to prove in 1981 and 1982 that it was used as such until the mid-1930s. 'The fact that this was considered implausible by many public figures', David Ritchie of the Authority later maintained, was a 'reflection of the transient nature of Darwin's population and ethnocentric selectivity of our perception of history'.33 Protests were made against construction at Mindil Beach but with little impact. Val McGuiness, a senior member of the Kungarikany Group, commented that 'if the Europeans had any respect for the dead at all, it didn't matter who they were, they wouldn't have built the Casino where it is, or attempted to build it there - they would have built it somewhere else and left that as a memorial to the Aboriginal people'.34

The European zeal in Darwin for building and rebuilding has frequently been oblivious to the sorts of concerns that McGuiness expressed. This zeal marks, in many respects, the continued assertion of a desire to mark the land as belonging to the settlers rather than the earlier Indigenous inhabitants of the
Darwin area and their descendants. It also reflects insecurity brought about by the tropical climate and the proximity to Asia. In order to come to terms with this frequently complex process, surviving elements of Darwin's diverse historical environment need to be preserved, studied and understood.

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Endnotes

3 Ibid.
6 Welke and Harris nd [1981]. Also see Welke and Wilson 1993: 4-5.
7 Welke and Wilson 1993: 5.
8 Carment et al. 1993: 49.
9 Mason 1968: 485.
11 National Trust of Australia (Northern Territory), Darwin office (hereafter NTANT), site file 6/304.
12 Blainey 1966.
13 Haslett 1981.
14 Ibid.: 54.
15 Ibid.
16 Clark 1987:134.
17 Haslett 1981: 54.
19 NTANT, site file 6/335.
21 NTANT, correspondence file 5/648.
23 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 29 November 1879.
25 Based on my own memories of the events described, in which I was actively involved.
26 Boyd 1968, especially pp 296-305.
28 Harris and Welke 1982 5-17.
29 Ibid.:55-57.
30 Goad 1999: 23.
31 Demoudy and Cook nd.
32 Ibid.:1-16; CCNT nd.
34 Ibid.: 11.