Prefabrication takes a variety of forms, from the construction of complete buildings designed to be moved in one piece, to the manufacture of quite small components capable of being assembled according to some pre-determined system. The critical factor is that as much of the labour component as possible should be expended off-site, at the point of origin. Conversely, one of the best criteria for assessing the degree of prefabrication is how little building waste is produced on site during the process of erection.

Prefabrication will almost never be at issue when the necessary building materials are available near the point of erection. When the building materials are to be imported, however, the critical question is whether labour is more cheaply had at the point of erection or at the point of origin: if the latter, then prefabrication will be an economic proposition. These conditions have applied commonly to various military, colonial and trading outposts, especially from the later part of the eighteenth century, and they applied generally for at least the first decade of settlement in each of the Australian colonies, the differences between the colonies being largely a question of whether buildings were imported from neighbouring colonies or from overseas.

Architectural historians have devoted serious attention to prefabrication only in relatively recent years. One of the first treatments of the topic was an article by the late Charles E. Peterson in the Gazette des Beaux Arts of 1947, and there have been incidental references since that time in general works like Hitchcock's Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, and in Australia in some of the works of E. Graeme Robertson. The first significant monograph devoted to the topic was Pioneers of Prefabrication, of 1978, and the author, Gilbert Herbert, is one of the contributors to this issue of Historic Environment. In Australia, Miles Lewis has also carried out major research on prefabrication.

The significance of this topic in the Australian context is that, apart from the prefabricated buildings of the first settlements, of which a few rather surprisingly survive, very large numbers were imported at the time of the gold rushes.
not only of timber but of iron, zinc and other materials. In fact Victoria in the 1850s was the biggest market for prefabrication the world had ever seen, and it may not have been exceeded since.

Prefabrication has remained important in Australia for various reasons. One of these was the way in which Queensland developed with a string of ports along the coast, each with its railway running inland, but with a less developed system of overland communication in the north-south direction. This gave rise to the extensive importation into North Queensland of iron components made by Francis Morton of Liverpool (though not often of complete buildings) and encouraged even the prefabrication of houses from locally sawn timber, as discussed by Donald Watson. Another special situation calling for prefabrication in Australia was the housing shortage after World War II, which gave rise to extensive importation of buildings as well as to a number of ingenious local manufacturing schemes - a topic which remains to be analysed by the scholars of the future.