

Gunyah, Goodie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia by Paul Memmott. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007, pp. 440, AUD \$90.00, Hardback ISBN: 9780702232459.



Gunyah, Goodie + Wurley is a study of Australian Indigenous ‘ethno-architecture’. Ethno-architecture examines how the knowledge system of a given community associates with the use and construction of physical environmental structures. Paul Memmott first trained as an architect in the late 1960s before he became a social anthropologist working on the spatial behaviour of Aboriginal people. He went on to establish the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre at the University of Queensland. He and his research team collected hundreds of images of shelters, huts, house structures and camps and settlements, some transitory, others semi-permanent. This study incorporates that research into what Memmott describes as a non-definitive guide to Australian Aboriginal

ethno-architecture. It was generally assumed by the invading Europeans, and later reiterated by immigrant settlers, that the Australian Aborigines did not have houses or towns, but rather occupied ephemeral camps, moving relentlessly and sheltering in flimsy makeshift huts, or lean-tos of grass and bark, known variously as ‘gunyahs’, ‘goodies’ or ‘wurlies’. Memmott’s admirable work informs us that traditional Aboriginal housing was (1) considerably more diverse in planning, design and construction, (2) less damaging to the natural environment and (3) more ecologically suited to the climate and geography, than anything white Australians ever knew or were able to build.

Beginning with an overview of Australia’s geography, climate, vegetation, rainfall and wind systems, Memmott shows that each minor variation in climate and geography produced remarkably different Indigenous architecture and architectonics. Shelter architecture can be quite modest, but the camps are highly structured in spatial layout. The spatial logistics are generated and regulated by cultural belief systems, behavioural customs and moral codes. Camp populations can vary from a single family, to one of several hundred people and camp sizes differ accordingly. In a typical larger settlement, there are separate shelters for diurnal and nocturnal activities. Ceremonial festival gatherings (corroborees) indicate how the socio-spatial structure of status identity manifested itself, usually in a clustering arrangement of sub-camp nocturnal windbreaks. Conversely, for many Aboriginal groups, symbolism was seldom attached to shelters, neither was there any applied decoration. It is interesting to note, however, that some Lower Murray people had architectural semantic associations based on cosmological belief systems and star constellations, such as the Milky Way.

Shelter forms and materials were geographically diverse: bark and leaf huts in Tasmania; mud-clad mallee and mulga domes in Cooper Creek; palm leaf and post on Cape York; cane and banana leaf in coastal Queensland; mud-clad domes east of Lake Eyre; conical shade screens of pandanus leaves on Torres Strait islands; and solid stone huts found at the cooler heights of alpine New South Wales. Campsites shifted location according to the weather pattern, season and availability of food and water. More

recently, Aborigines, displaced physically and spiritually, lived on the fringes of white towns and settlements, mainly in white planned and built encampments or reservations, where imported white architectural ideas and non-biodegradable materials predominate.

The knowledge base of these traditional campsites, villages and settlements has been gathered from many sources, some going back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Much of that knowledge has been lost to contemporary Aborigines, many of whom have been educated in mission schools on sedentary reservations, exposed exclusively to Western architectural forms and materials. Even the new town camps, like that of the Tiwi people on Bathurst Island, are still designed by white architects, though some have tried to incorporate traditional methods and design motifs. Fortunately, some contemporary Aborigines, educated in white schools and universities, having acquired or retained some sense of Indigenous heritage, have begun to build materially, ecologically and spiritually more harmonious dwellings for their peoples.

Particularly fascinating for me as an architect is the range and complexity of construction and engineering. The range encompasses hip roof with double pitch, post and beam lean-to, parabolic interwoven domes (not just single domes, but multiple interlocking domes), the balloon frame, the parasol and much more. Each form and construction exhibits a profound understanding of basic structural engineering principles, together with a common sense use of materials. Remembering that shelters had to provide protection from such diverse natural elements as cold, rain, sun, wind, sand, insects, snakes and animals, it is remarkable that each form and construction performed that task more than satisfactorily. The history of Aboriginal architecture deserves a larger forum, perhaps a television documentary series based on this book

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