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Architects on the Verge: Distance in Proximity at “The Pleasures of Architecture”

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Between May 23 and 26, 1980, the New South Wales chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects held a conference in Sydney, entitled “The Pleasures of Architecture.” International guests invited to speak at this conference were Michael Graves, George Baird and Rem Koolhaas. To feed the discussion, the conference organisers invited twenty prominent Australian architects to submit a design to fictionally complete Engehurst, an 1830s villa in Paddington (Sydney) originally designed by architect John Verge, which was never completed and of which only a fragment still existed. All schemes were presented in an exhibition that took place in parallel with the conference. The proposed projects were published in full in the April/May 1980 issue of Architecture Australia and were remarkably diverse in their conceptual approach to the completion of Verge’s villa. Recent scholarship pinpoints “The Pleasures of Architecture” conference as a watershed moment in Australian architectural history—although, sadly, not a very “pleasurable” one. The considerable conceptual distance that manifested itself between Australia’s modern masters and proponents of post-modernism resulted in an acrimonious atmosphere, which was felt both at the conference and in the discourse that erupted in its wake. Examining the entries that were submitted for the Engehurst exhibition, this paper argues that the all too black-and-white discourse that emerged in the aftermath of “The Pleasures of Architecture” failed to appreciate the alternative (non-modernist, non-postmodernist), critical approaches that appeared in response to the task of completing Verge’s design; approaches that sought to transcend the crisis of modernity.

Keywords
“The Pleasures of Architecture”; John Verge; Engehurst; anxious modernisms; Australian post-modernism
Verge’s Engehurst
Between 23 and 26 May 1980, the New South Wales chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) held a conference in Sydney, entitled “The Pleasures of Architecture.” To feed the discussion, conference chair Andrew Metcalf invited twenty prominent Australian architects and architecture firms to submit a proposal to fictionally complete Engehurst, an 1830s villa in Paddington (Sydney) originally designed by architect John Verge (1782-1861), which was never fully completed, and of which only a fragment still existed. All schemes were presented in an exhibition that took place in parallel with the conference, and the submitted design panels were published in full in the April/May 1980 issue of *Architecture Australia* (*AA*). In his foreword to this issue, Metcalf wrote: “this exhibition will show an architecture relieved of its missionary social role and looking more interesting for it.”

The theme of the conference, as well as the brief for the exhibition were ostensibly inspired by Bernard Tschumi’s “The Pleasure of Architecture” article, which was published in a 1977 (eponymously titled) issue of *Architectural Design* (*AD*). In his text, Tschumi lamented that “[d]iscourse within architecture has been limited to how architects may manage resources,” and that “this view of architecture … ignores its function as an instrument of socio-cultural change.” One of the architects whose work was discussed in this issue of the journal was Leon Krier. Three years later, he was (perhaps not coincidentally) invited to speak at “The Pleasures of Architecture” conference. Krier, however, declined and was replaced by Rem Koolhaas, who joined Michael Graves and George Baird in Sydney in May 1980, as one of the principal guests.

The design brief for the “Completion of Engehurst” was quite ambitious. Beyond specifying that the house was to be freestanding and responsive to place and climate, it also urged contributors to comment on urban and suburban typologies in relation to the genealogy of the Australian house; explore issues of public and private space in its functions; and comment on ways of living and human habitation, both in social and political terms.

The choice for Engehurst as a site for intervention was revealing on several fronts. It openly tapped into the renewed interest in historical precedents paramount in 1970s architectural culture on the one hand and appositely expressed Australia’s (then) social and political climate on the other. John Verge, who designed Engehurst, was born in Hampshire (England) in 1782, and migrated to Australia in 1828 to become a farmer. When this plan failed, he instead established himself as a builder and architect in Sydney. There, he had a brief but brilliant career, which covered little more than seven years, and which fortuitously coincided with the golden era of colonial settlement.
During this time, Verge produced an impressive complement of (mainly domestic) designs, which was reportedly “unequalled by any of his colonial contemporaries.” In 1978, after having been largely forgotten for 150 years, a book was published on his works. In it, historian Ian Evans noted that Verge’s efforts had “… contributed a great deal to the transformation of Sydney from the crudely-built convict town of the late 1820s to the smarter, more sophisticated and business-like centre of the late 1830s.” In the lead-up to Australia’s bicentenary, which was taking place in 1988, celebrating early colonial architects such as Verge, whose work was said to be “comparable to English work of the period,” emphatically highlighted the progress that the British settlers had made in 200 years on the continent, and thus recast architecture as “an instrument of socio-cultural change”—as Tschumi had plead for in his 1977 AD article. Introducing the designs in AA, Metcalfe and Alexander Tzannes (a member of the conference committee) accordingly noted: “The existence of the Verge fragment [of Engehurst] enforces an evaluation of the genealogy of the Australian house, at least since European settlement to the present.”

Engehurst was originally commissioned by Frederick Augustus Hely, the Principal Superintendent of Convicts. The original design is thought to date back to October 1833 and consisted of a grand two-storied house in Regency style faced by a service wing across a court, and connected to it by an underground passage. Hely took up residence in Engehurst in 1835, after the service wing was built, but soon expressed doubts about the magnitude of the scheme. Not much later, in September 1836, he died of a stroke before Engehurst was completed. What’s more, in the decades (century even) that followed, as Sydney progressively urbanised and Paddington—an area that was once described as a “paddock full of houses”—became part of the inner city, large parts of the service wing that was built were demolished, and Engehurst’s remnants became increasingly encapsulated in the city’s dense urban fabric.

Oppositions
In the conference booklet, Metcalf introduced “The Pleasures of Architecture” theme as follows:

Because a real crisis of modernity is upon us we have a decisive and important role to play at this conference. If it is some form of renewal we seek, and one is permitted momentarily to posit alternatives in black and white: do we find it in a re-enervated modernism seeking to preserve its abstract aesthetic and formal content in the face of intellectual, historical and social challenges to the contrary; or, is regeneration to be found in an allusionistically safe, but cliche-prone post modernism?
Many entrants to the Engehurst exhibition rapidly cast aside any reservations about architectural clichés and resolutely opted for post-modernist aesthetics, seeking inspiration in the latest designs from across the Pacific. Drawing on Frank Gehry’s interventions in his own house in Santa Monica (1978), Ken Woolley, for instance, left the Verge fragment in its encapsulated condition, merely adding bits of lattice screen, porch and verandah elements, and pergola structures here and there, as well as a new studio building at the rear (fig. 1).

![Perspective drawing by Ken Woolley, entry for the “Completion of Engehurst” exhibition, 1980.](image)

Philip Cox’s design visibly referenced Charles Moore’s *Piazza d’Italia* (1978). In an act of (what Metcalf called) “historical fetishism,”16 he excavated the servants’ wing from the built fabric that had come to surround it, fully restored the building, and placed it centre-stage on a raised platform, flanked on both sides by faux ruined fragments of the original Georgian front and rear facades of the main house (which was never built). Two minarets overlooking the site and a bust of Verge, prominently placed on the main (diagonal) axis of the complex, were designed to pay homage to the great colonial architect (fig. 2).
Daryl Jackson, in turn, conjured the postmodern aesthetics of Michael Graves, and used the Verge fragment as a base for a faux grand neo-classical mansion. Noticeably delighted by the recommendation to forsake architecture’s “missionary social role,” Jackson also worked several humorous references to the conference’s international guests into his design. On the first floor, he included a Georgian-fronted “George’s Bairdroom” antechamber, and on the ground level, he planned an irregularly shaped “Rem’s poolhaas” swimming pool and a “Graves’ end” terrace at the rear, adjoining the garden (fig. 3).
Set against these American-inspired post-modernist schemes were a few entries that attempted to salvage what could be salvaged of modernism by aligning themselves with the postulates of (what would soon be labelled) “critical regionalism.” Glen Murcutt, for instance, opted for clean lines and neutral facades in a classical layout, to (in his own words) “reveal and reinforce the apparent intent of Verge’s original scheme.” The proposal revealed Murcutt’s desire to formulate a new regional, place-sensitive style within the modernist idiom, and—perhaps even more so than Cox’s entry—proposed a shrine dedicated to Verge.

Murcutt’s abstract lines and honed back aesthetic made painfully plain the absence of Harry Seidler. Then Sydney’s preeminent architect and one of the fathers of modernism in Australia, Seidler was invited to participate in the Engehurst exhibition but declined, his name on the list of invitees tellingly accompanied by the words “not interested.” Seidler was, however, not entirely disinterested either. He attended the conference quietly from the peanut gallery, and shortly after gave a lecture squarely directed at his “Post-modernist friends.” Scolding “the young and uninitiated” conference organisers and goers for “ignoring [and] defying all constructional, let alone structural logic,” he labelled their appeals for a new architectural language as nothing more than “the tantrums of a rich spoilt child, delighting in being contrary—shocking us with rather corny stylistic idioms [and] ludicrous bad taste.”

The way in which “The Pleasures of Architecture” posited “alternatives in black and white” and the considerable conceptual distance that manifested itself between Australia’s modern masters and proponents of post-modernism resulted in an acrimonious atmosphere, which was felt both at the conference and in the discourse that erupted in its wake. In all their ideological self-righteous zeal, the opposing camps failed to appreciate the alternative (non-modernist, non-postmodernist), critical approaches that appeared in response to the task of completing Verge’s design.

Odd Ones Out
Not all exhibition entries were as black-and-white as suggested by the conference convenors. The approaches that were adopted to fictionally complete Verge’s Engehurst in fact varied widely, as exhibition participants selected which elements of the brief to respond to. This was already pointed
out in an interview that George Baird gave to Cathy Peake, Grant Marani, Ian McDougall and Richard Munday for the journal *Transition*, in which he stated: “I must confess that I didn't see any clear pattern amongst them. They seem to be very heterogenous in orientation.” Indeed, apart from the ones that allowed for “simple” (if there is such a thing) categorisation—modernist, post-modernist, critical regionalist—there were those who seized the design brief as an opportunity to test new concepts and tools to outline a new path; a way out of the acrimonious atmosphere created by the all-too-stark opposition between modernism and post-modernism. Two designs in particular stood out: the entry by Edmond and Corrigan, and OWA’s submission.

The entry by Maggie Edmond and Peter Corrigan, a husband-and-wife duo, sharply examined architecture’s agency as an instrument of socio-cultural change, and (more than any of the other submissions) responded to the charge to evaluate the genealogy of the Australian house since European settlement. Through a series of colourful semi-sketch, semi-collage pop-art inspired visuals, their first panel interrogated how Australian society had evolved since European settlement. Proposing to move the Verge fragment to Windsor, a town to the north-west of Sydney, and the third-oldest place of British settlement on the Australian continent, they rhetorically inserted (a model of) the Sydney Opera House on the (now) vacant plot. In the wake of the “culture war” that made Utzon’s project an “Antipodean Tower of Babel,” the centre of a debate on the essence of Australian culture, this move ostensibly questioned the ascendance of Australia’s capital cities—locales of “high culture”—and pointed to the profession’s disregard for the popular cricket, beer and “dingo” culture that was to be found in the vast salmon-brick suburban deserts that surrounded them (fig. 4).
This cultural polarity, which Edmond & Corrigan saw expressed in geographical terms, was poignantly captured in the opening sequence of the 1968 cult documentary *Autopsy on a Dream*, which dissected the controversy surrounding the Opera House:25

In a land where there is always a king tide running and a summer forever to spend on the beach, in a Pepsi-Cola culture, a gentler Texas of the South Seas; where the rough idealism of the Bush anthem of the fathers is a far cry from the virile materialism of the sons; where history is regarded as a European luxury, and culture a distraction from the serious business of pleasure; where noble headlands submerge under seas of red bungalows, it seems a bit odd that the people should perform a cultural act of faith and build an Opera House, when they had nothing to put in it.

Edmond & Corrigan’s second panel, an opulent “Home for Mr & Mrs Graeme Blundell—and all their friends,” derided the devolution apparent in the genealogy of the Australian house. Replete with a Federation entry hall, cricket rehearsal studio, swimming pool, protruding observation deck,
grand (rear) stairs with built-in barbeque, and an assortment of aerals on the roof, it parodied Australia’s contemporary culture of fatuous opulence and ridiculed the eagerness with which architects, such as Daryl Jackson, responded to it—heedlessly rejoicing in the “pleasures” (or excesses) that the new language of architecture afforded.

Beseeching a more inclusive representation of Australian society, Edmond & Corrigan’s entry demonstrated the potential of architecture as a polemical device. In the lead-up to the country’s bicentenary, their design cuttlingly questioned what Australian culture might be—urban or suburban, high or low, British or American, …—and impelled the profession to give greater thought to such questions; to pave a path out of the crisis of modernity. However, Edmond & Corrigan’s critical piece of “architectural ockerism”26 or, as Transition called it, “a mini-manifesto” based on a “national uneasiness with the prospect of larrikin energy”27 overreached the design brief and was largely ignored. Paul Jackson commented in the July 1980 RAIA Bulletin: “Blundell was star? But few heard.”28

Jackson’s comment could, apparently, be taken quite literally. The presentations of the Engehurst exhibits took place in three separate groups, with one of the international guests assigned to each of the groups. What’s more, all presentations took place concurrently, and within the same space, making it very difficult to hear any of the presentations properly. Transition commented: “It [the presentation of the Engehurst entries] could have been the focal point of the conference. Instead, it was like a peculiar supermarket where people and ideas jostled for expression, and the visitors’ comments were inaudible to all but their immediate neighbours.”29

Conference attendants were also tone-deaf to OWA’s exhibition entry which, like Edmond & Corrigan’s entry was equally out of left field, albeit of a completely different ilk. The result of a temporary alliance between Peter O’Gorman, Donald Watson and Brit Andresen, all academics at the University of Queensland’s School of Architecture, OWA’s design—while conceptually drawing on Engehurst’s palimpsestuous history—uncompromisingly relied on the new tools (or “commands”) afforded by computer-aided drafting (CAD). Its inclusion in AA represented one of the earliest published examples of the use of computer-aided-architectural design in the country.

In the late 1970s, Mike McLean, a lecturer in computer science at the University of Queensland (UQ), had developed “a computerized drafting system for use on low-cost computers in small drawing offices.”30 Around the same time, Peter Ritson, an undergraduate student at the UQ Department of Architecture became closely involved with software design. He authored his
bachelor thesis on “Foundations to Computercentrics in Architectural Draughting” and in 1977-78, working with McLean, devised a computer programme to generate perspectives of 3D computer-generated models. It was this system that OWA used to “complete” Engehurst.

Departing from the as-built footprint of the servant’s wing of Engehurst, OWA, in a first move folded every element surpassing the perimeter of the 1980-building-plot back onto the site. Using the site’s boundaries as mirror lines, and then extruding every fold into a new level, the trio created a villa of comparable volume to the building that had been. The geometry derived from the folding lines was subsequently intensified to “reconcile the relationship of the walls to the street” and relate the new design to “the Victorian tile patterns common in adjacent porches.” Finally, the array created by the party walls in the street was continued on site—an “echo of the Victorian subdivision”—and each “party wall” translated into a scaled up trellis screen, derived from Verge’s original design for Engehurst’s verandah trellises. These magnified screens were to “act as a layering device to set up contrived views from the villa.” Presented in a checkerboard pattern layout, consisting of both text and images, each of these actions were carefully detailed on panel one, and interspersed with a meticulously researched history of Verge’s design. The resulting design was presented on panel two through floorplans and a series of three computer-generated, wireframe elevations and perspective drawings.
OWA’s design departed from the binary opposition between modernism and post-modernism and relied on the new tools afforded by—or the logic inherent in—CAD to develop a place-related, historically-informed design, which surpassed the contemporary conundrum of style. However, like Edmond & Corrigan’s entry, the novelty of OWA’s scheme was ill understood, as were its graphics, leading Michael Graves to comment that it was simply “too much”\(^{35}\) and labelling it “a bit diagrammatic and academic” in his subsequent \textit{Transition} interview.\(^{36}\)

From Anxious Modernisms to Aberrant Architectures

One of the final chapters of \textit{Australian Architecture since 1960}, a book by renowned Australian architectural historian Jennifer Taylor, was—partially in reference to the conference—entitled “Pleasures of Architecture.” In it, Taylor described Australian architectural culture from the late 1970s as follows:

Towards the end of the 1970s there were several disparate directions in Australian architecture. Mainstream modernism was represented in the work of Seidler and [Robin] Gibson, and with a lesser degree of excellence, in that of the large firms essentially designing commercial buildings in the cities. Also there were the regional affinities of architects such as [John] Andrews and Murcutt. A third group consisted of those who came under the influence of contemporary overseas movements, particularly from America but also from Europe. The work of the last two groups in differing ways involved a critique of the content of orthodox modern architecture.\(^{37}\)

Featuring entries by both Murcutt and Jackson, and with the noted absence of Seidler, the Engehurst exhibition presented a perfect microcosm of contemporary Australian architecture, and revealed the considerable conceptual distance that existed between Australia’s modern masters and proponents of post-modernism. It resulted in an acrimonious atmosphere, which was felt both at the conference and in the discourse that erupted in its wake, that was played out by and large in the pages of \textit{AA} and \textit{Transition}.\(^{38}\) This all too black-and-white discourse, however, failed to appreciate the alternative (non-modernist, non-postmodernist), critical approaches that emerged in response to the task of completing Verge’s design.
Edmond & Corrigan proposed a regionalism that was distinct from the prevailing “nuts and berries” type pursued by many of their peers. Theirs was a cultural regionalism, which implored a more inclusive representation of Australian society. OWA’s submission then stubbornly referenced the history of the place but in a very dissimilar manner from many of their contemporary (post-modern) peers. Rather than relying on pastiche, they explored the possibilities offered by newly developed CAD technologies to express their deep-seated belief in the necessity to relate architecture to place. While these designs clearly departed from a time of anxious modernisms, they did not blindly commit to post-modernism either. Their entries speak of a search for something else after modernism and demonstrate a willingness to engage with novel concepts and tools to find it.


2 Hogben, “The Aftermath of ‘Pleasures’.”


8 In 1962 a book, entitled *John Verge, Early Australian Architect: His Ledger and his Clients* had been published on a limited print-run of 250, but it was not until 1978 that the first complete monograph on Verge was published on a larger print run of 1500.

9 Evans, “John Verge (1782-1861),” 11.


14 Kelly, *Paddock Full of Houses*.


The term “critical regionalism” was first coined by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in 1981, and was later adopted (and adjusted) by Kenneth Frampton in his 1983 essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism.”

Glenn Murcutt in *Architecture Australia* (April/May 1980), 69.


Andrew Metcalf, interviewed by Janina Gosseye and Don Watson in Sydney (BVN Offices), September 27, 2017.

Andrew Metcalf, “Graves, Koolhaas and Baird in Australia,” *International Architect* 1, no. 4 (1980): 4-5. For more detail regarding Seidler’s reaction to the conference, please see Hogben, “The Aftermath of ‘Pleasures’.”

Hogben, “The Aftermath of ‘Pleasures’.”


Directed by John Weiley, this film documents the controversy surrounding the creation of the Sydney Opera House, a controversy that also extended to the film itself. It was screened once by the BBC and then destroyed, only to be recovered 45 years later. See: John Weiley, dir., *Autopsy on a Dream* (BBC, 1968), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuHtP8OFOIA>.

Edmond & Corrigan’s entry was described as such by Peter Corrigan himself: “Finishing Touch—17 Times,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 7, 1980, 8.


Paul Hogben, “The Aftermath of ‘Pleasures’.”

This term was coined by Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Réjean Legault in their edited book *Anxious Modernism: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).