

Shifting the Views of Architectural History: A Review Essay

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This essay focuses on *Shifting Views: Selected Essays on the Architectural History of Australia and New Zealand* edited by Andrew Leach, Antony Moulis and Nicole Sully (2008).¹ The book is a collection of sixteen papers presented at the annual conferences of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) between 1984 and 2004.² In its twenty-five years of existence, SAHANZ has become a central forum for the discussion of the history of architecture in this part of the world and an important organisation internationally. The media release which accompanied the book on its launch stated that it ‘captures some of the most illuminating architectural debates from this time’ and that it will appeal to a broad range of people involved with architectural history.³ This review will situate the relevance of this publication for SAHANZ, assess the quality of the papers and discuss the contribution the book makes towards popularising architectural history in New Zealand.

SAHANZ was established by Australian architectural historian Professor David Saunders in 1984. The society can be seen as a local variation on such models as the American Society of Architectural History (SAH) and the Society of the Architectural Historians of Great Britain (SAHGB). Writing on the history of the first twenty years of SAHANZ, architectural historian Julia Gatley noted that the society has played a role not only in generating knowledge, but also in raising the standards of scholarship in architectural history and theory in Australia and New Zealand.⁴

Over the past twenty-five years, the conferences have grown in size. Early conferences attracted about a dozen papers per year, while there have been 60–80 presenters every year for the last ten years. In the early days, it was unclear as to whether conference papers would be published in proceedings, while now, refereed published proceedings are the norm. In addition, since 1989 the society has published a journal, *Fabrications*, which is also rigorously refereed. The quality of scholarship has been high, although perhaps the public profile of the society itself could have been higher. *Shifting Views* was conceived of as one way to remedy this problem.⁵

Shifting Views takes its title from the opening paper presented at the first SAHANZ conference in 1984: ‘Charting Shifting Views of Port Arthur and

Associated Methodological Problems', by Judith Brine. The editors of the collection explain in the introduction that they are interested, firstly, in 'issues of historical perspective, and of a self-reflective, critical historiography'.⁶ For that reason, the collection presents papers that focus on changing views and engage with the reinvention of values. Secondly, the editors use the term 'aggressive egalitarianism', also proposed in Brine's paper, to describe the selection of papers. Brine explains 'aggressive egalitarianism' as being constituted 'not so much by a strong belief that all are equal but rather by the obverse belief that no group should be accepted as more authoritative than the rest'.⁷ Consequently, *Shifting Views* states clearly its interest in those architectural historians who have 'undermined the privileged figures' within architectural history.⁸ With these two general principles asserted as the basis of selection, the editors acknowledge the limits of their unavoidably narrow choice of sixteen out of over 1000 papers (less than 2%) presented at conferences over the years, and leave the reader to engage with the papers themselves.

The sixteen selected papers are generally of an admirable quality.⁹ Many of them are sharply critical and very analytical. Even reading them without the framework of the introduction, it is clear that most of them do indeed deal with changes in perception of the same historical events over time, and many engage with the process of production of architectural history.

Of the earlier papers, several stand out. Judy Brine's paper (1984) on Port Arthur compares changes in perception of this Tasmanian penal institution. Once representing an unwanted past, Port Arthur came to provide a starting point for local history. In his paper on the 'Sydney School', Stanislaus Fung (1985) critically examines the methods that have, over the previous twenty years, contributed to the establishment of the term the 'Sydney School' without clearly defining the people, views, methods or styles behind it. Helen Proudfoot's paper (1988) examines how even a very recent past can be forgotten and then misinterpreted. She uses the example of the Old Government House in Sydney, which only thirty years after demolition was confused with a different building.

The selection of the early papers is interesting in itself. Given that SAHANZ was originally set up as an organisation that addressed architectural history in a broad way, many of the original contributions engaged with conservation and provided fairly straightforward histories of buildings. In her history of the society, Gatley talks about the ongoing split between 'empiricist historians and those with a commitment to theory' apparent from the first SAHANZ conference.¹⁰ The editors of this volume reinforce this divide not only by leading with papers by Brine, Joan Kerr and Fung, but also by actively promoting in the introduction a 'more correct' division between descriptive and critical. The early papers aside, the editors

focus their selection almost exclusively on the theoretical/critical side of the spectrum.

The middle section of the collection is dominated by four papers on New Zealand architecture. Deidre Brown and Mike Austin (both 2000) strongly support a critical line of interpretation when discussing trends in Maori architecture and considering the relationship between European and Polynesian influences in New Zealand architectural history. Robin Skinner's 1999 discussion of overseas perceptions of modern New Zealand architecture puts forward some very exciting interpretations, while Sarah Treadwell's paper (1997) discusses architectural principles important to the nineteenth-century New Zealand missionaries. Collectively, these papers provide an excellent representation of some of the most influential scholarly work in New Zealand architectural history.

From the outset, SAHANZ aimed to include contributions from both Australia and New Zealand, and viewed from that perspective, it has played a significant role in furthering discussions on New Zealand architectural history and theory. New Zealand was represented at the very first conference of SAHANZ, although in the early years of the society, New Zealand scholars only sporadically contributed papers.¹¹ This dramatically changed when the conference was held for the first time in New Zealand – in Christchurch, 1991. Here, New Zealanders dominated the conference.¹² Since then, the New Zealand contribution has remained at a steady 10–20% of the presented papers at conferences held in Australia (more or less in proportion to population and the numbers of institutions where architecture is studied in the two countries), with a slightly higher contribution at New Zealand-hosted conferences. Although SAHANZ is no longer the only forum for discussion on the history of architecture in New Zealand¹³, *Shifting Views* adequately represents New Zealand scholarship.

The choice of the most recent papers appears more confusing. While Paul Hogben's paper (2003) on the development of the perception of post-modernism in Australian architecture is excellent, and so is Harry Margalit and Paola Favaro's discussion of Italian architectural immigrants into Australia (2004), papers by Stephen Long (2002) and David Bridgman (2004) are not as theoretical and critical as the earlier texts. Although his discussion of the transformation of the Aboriginal settlement of Dajarra does appear relevant in general, Long's focus changes too radically, and it is difficult to identify any engagement with shifts in views. Similarly, Bridgman's paper nicely traces the origin of Darwin bungalows, which owe their existence to an Australian interpretation of Singapore architecture, but it still offers a fairly limited theoretical and critical base. Long's and Bridgman's papers are good representations of much of the scholarly work within SAHANZ, but they fail to rise up to the theoretical and critical standard of the rest

of the collection, inviting us to wonder whether a better choice of papers might have been possible.

Although most of the individual papers in the collection are excellent, the quality of the collection as a whole is disputable. The historical focus of the papers and their geographical grounding are quite different, which makes the relationship between the papers very abstract. While changes in views are apparent throughout, the book's 'aggressive egalitarianism' is far less obvious. More than half of the authors at some point served SAHANZ as presidents, members of editorial boards and editors of *Fabrications*, and a significant number currently hold professorial or other senior academic positions.¹⁴ It might therefore be that *Shifting Views* can be seen as a collection of work by the central figures of SAHANZ itself, thus representing a cross section of the mainstream architectural history establishment in Australia and New Zealand. If so, then this collection would seem to contradict the concept of 'aggressive egalitarianism' set out in the introduction.

A related question concerns how representative the collection is of the papers presented to SAHANZ over the years. Unfortunately, given the strong focus *Shifting Views* places on very theoretical and critical papers, the answer is that the collection is not particularly representative of the society. Obvious exclusions are the many historical or descriptive papers and the numerous scholarly works that engage with histories outside of Australia and New Zealand. Non-British migration is the topic of only one paper in the collection (interestingly, the last), and even that deals only with European influences. Issues related to gender, the body, representation and so on, which have generated a sizeable number of papers at past SAHANZ conferences, are all curiously overlooked.

One could also question the fact that two thirds of the papers reprinted in the collection are readily available in most university libraries in Australia and New Zealand. Might it not have been better if the collection had consisted only of those papers that are more difficult to locate? Would the money and effort invested in this project have been better spent on publishing new research, or even on making some of the past conference papers available online?

Although perhaps not fully representative of SAHANZ, and failing to fulfil all the selection criteria set out in the introduction, there is still much to appreciate in *Shifting Views*. It provides a series of excellent papers, sums up the work of some of the key writers within SAHANZ, and can be seen as a useful shortcut to readers keen to get an idea of the society.

1 St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2008.

2 I have been an irregular member of SAHANZ since 2000 when Andrew Leach and I co-convened the society's conference for that year. Since 2005, I have not been involved

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in the society, hence this review is not based on personal experience of the talks about the creation of the book.

- 3 Media Release, University of Queensland Press, 1 May 2008.
- 4 Julia Gatley, 'SAHANZ: the First 20 Years, 1984–2004', *Fabrications*, 13, 2 (2004), p.63.
- 5 Minutes of the twenty-fourth SAHANZ AGM, Adelaide, 23 September 2007, p.2. From http://www.sahanz.net/society_business/society.html (accessed 30 October 2008).
- 6 Andrew Leach, Antony Moulis and Nicole Sully, 'Introduction', in Andrew Leach, Antony Moulis and Nicole Sully, eds, *Shifting Views: Selected Essays on the Architectural History of Australia and New Zealand*, St Lucia, 2008, p.ix.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.xii.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 For reasons that will become apparent in the text, this review will discuss most but not all papers. The four papers that are not discussed simply do not fit well within the analysis presented here.
- 10 Gatley, 'SAHANZ: the First 20 Years', pp.63, 66, 68–71.
- 11 For example, there are no New Zealand papers in the proceedings from the fourth and fifth SAHANZ conferences. See Paul-Alan Johnson, ed., *SAHANZ 87: Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand. Papers from Fourth Annual Conference 9-10 May 1987*, Adelaide, 1987; and Stanislaus Fung and Timothy Turner, eds, *Australian Studies in Architectural History: Papers from the Fifth Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney, 1988. However, a paper by Russell Walden on Wellington's Futuna Chapel was presented at the first conference. See Gatley, 'SAHANZ: the First 20 Years', pp.66–68.
- 12 *Regional Responses: Papers and Proceedings*, SHANZ Annual Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand, 6–8 July 1991.
- 13 Alternative forums for discussion include the annual one day symposiums on New Zealand architecture organised by Christine McCarthy through Victoria University's Centre for Building Performance Research since 2004. These symposiums gather about 10–15 papers each year and focus on one decade of New Zealand architectural history. For more information, see the conference website: <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/cbpr/conferences/index.aspx> (accessed 30 October 2008).
- 14 See the biographies of 'Editors and Contributors' in *Shifting Views*, pp.xix–xxiii; and also the list of past SAHANZ officials at the website: <http://www.sahanz.net/about/index.html> (accessed 10 October 2008).

