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## **Veranda Urbanism: projecting the veranda edge onto the city**

### **Introduction**

‘Veranda Urbanism’ has become a ubiquitous term in the Queensland vernacular. Through its semantic appropriation of ‘veranda’ into its linguistic embrace, ‘veranda urbanism’ espouses the existence of a long historical tradition of vernacular residential building typologies that are specific to the sub-tropical regions of South-East Queensland. This historical and cultural legacy stretching back to the Western settlers of greater Brisbane some two hundred years ago, and across the Indian Ocean into the vernacular traditions and housing typologies of South-East Asia. Here in Queensland, the veranda is generally discussed in terms of its ‘threshold’ characteristics; the space held in tension between the interior and exterior. More recently, the veranda has become a rallying cry for astute developers, hungry to appropriate its cultural currency as a comodifiable, regionally identifiable icon, however little is actually known, or has been researched, about what, or how, the veranda typology has influenced the broader macro scale of urban, sub-tropical Brisbane. We have some sense of how the threshold that is created by the veranda works on an intuitive experiential level, relative specifically to the scale of a domestic building, but we have very little sense of how this same threshold condition might be understood, and applied, at the scale of the city and its own urban edges.

The Veranda Urbanism project is essentially a project that aims to document, critique, present and exhibit, and educate the academic community, and public at large, about the fundamental characteristics of the veranda typology and threshold condition. This project is a constituent part of an ongoing research project by Raxworthy and Brisbin. It also represents a component of a current Arts Queensland Grant to write an inter-disciplinary book on ‘Sweat’ by the Arts Modernity Design & Media Tier 4 Research group at the Queensland University of Technology. Whilst the emphasis of the ‘sweat’ project concerns the documentation of history, culture, and the visual arts through writing and critical discourse, this project emphasis is on the technical and experiential construction of the veranda. It is based on the scale of people, at moments of either transition from inside or out, or inhabitation of the in-between.

This project explores the veranda through a combination of precedent study, historical research, and through a drawing-based research method that documents a selection of verandas through the convention of sectional ‘measured’ drawing. The ‘measured drawing’ style is a type of drawing that is used to accurately record the existing condition of a building, or part of a building - in this case the veranda. It is an index of the current condition of the building in that it is not emotive, or representational, in any way. The sectional drawing on the other hand is a drawing that cuts through a building along a constant axis, revealing all of the structural elements used to construct the building in combination with a descriptive sense of the verticality of rooms and spaces along the section line. Together, the sectional drawing drawn with a ‘measured drawing’ convention, provides a widely accepted type of graphic representation that objectively records existing buildings, in this case, to be used for subsequent analysis and research.

### **Methodology (Limits to the study)**

The drawings that are presented here represent the primary research in the first stage of the Veranda Urbanism project. They were undertaken by undergraduate architectural research students in the Veranda Urbanism research elective of a pre-thesis research unit at QUT. The project was supervised by Chris Brisbin, Vicky Hamilton and Julian Raxworthy. The student authors of the drawings were Qing Ye, Ryan Furlonger, Lucy Jeffries, Rafael Upcroft, Mark Andrew, Tristan Shelly, and Jason Hardie. The intention of this paper is to present for the first time a selection of the twenty-eight A0 drawings external to the teaching environment, and consider them as a group in terms of a typology of concerns; as representations of particular preconceptions of the veranda, and as instruments through which to speculate upon the Veranda’s physiognomy. A second stage of this research, between this paper and the subsequent Veranda Urbanism book chapter/s in the Sweat publication, will be to then consider how the drawings critique, or redirect, those preconceptions on the basis of a specific empirical aspect revealed by the drawings as artefacts and as process. Considering the veranda’s considerable cultural and architectural importance the veranda has had, and will continue to have, a significant amount of scholarly enquiry associated with it in Queensland. Correspondingly, it is important to limit and contextualise the aims of this particular Veranda Urbanism study so as to explicitly outline as much what is within the scope of the research, as what exists outside of its gaze.

In graphic terms the drawings were compositionally informed by precedents of typological research previously conducted by RMIT researchers Nigel Bertram and Kim Hallik, as well as the work of Japanese architects Atelier Bow Wow. The anatomy of these drawings required the use of black and white line-work, applied with a sense of instructional graphics in order to convey empirical information in a cross comparable manner, that nonetheless had a wit and sensibility to them. This drawing method has become a recognisable, understood analytical methodology in Architecture, and therefore provided methodological precedent upon which to interrogate the Veranda as a vernacular element.

The drawing method used in this project was the measured Sectional Elevation drawing. Its analytical gaze commenced within the interior spaces behind the veranda, through the veranda edge itself, through any landscape elements, through gate and footpath, finally terminating at the street. Traditional drawings of the Veranda that can be found in historical and contemporary texts alike, deny the interior spaces that it veils, and suppresses its relationship to landscape or the street. It is therefore generally treated as an almost independent, stand-alone device that is added onto a dwelling. There was a range of reasons for this choice: In general our intention has been to treat certain readings of the veranda and Queensland Architecture as the 'site', as much as the verandas themselves. These readings include; **relationship between interior and exterior, experiential devices; a collection of period details; a vernacular architecture** and; **an architectural typology**. In settling on the Section Elevation we considered the propensities of the drawing method. At the most basic level the use of this analytical drawing method, the section, which catches minute three-dimensional relationships, attempts to place the reality of the architecture visibly adjacent to these readings. On the other hand, the use of the elevation, which we encouraged the students to populate, illustrated something of the use and 'occupation' (an important term to the experiential reading) of the space described through the section. While recognising that they will not be entirely empirically based, in proposing conclusions about the veranda we hope to reveal its '**mechanisms for action**'.

### **Defining via exceptions**

The single, most basic question that is repeated over and over again, both through the conventional historical research, and in particular through the voice of the drawings, was 'is it a veranda?' It is not necessarily any surprise that such questions of nomenclature would emerge through the rigorous unpicking of what it was that the veranda actually did. After all

there is a plethora of typologically cousins to the veranda that all bear similar genealogical traits; from the Stoop, Porch, Balcony, Awning, to the popular ‘addition of choice’ of renovation shows and DIYers alike in the naughties, the Deck. Part of this confusion in the veranda’s categorisation is a direct outcome of the nature of such typological research that focuses upon finding generalities from specific places, and therefore is always oscillating between the exceptional and the generic. In asking this question, the terms of defining what a veranda is, and does, changed. However, in further research that the students undertook, and in discussion with staff, what might be called physiological definitions became significant because of these very exceptions. Interestingly, it was significant because many of the projects selected for documentation by the students deliberately deviated from this anatomical definition, yet the students emphatically described them as verandas because they seemed to possess certain common qualities. These qualities were often fundamentally organisational, but they were also experiential. The students thus felt that they were more related to the ‘essence’ of the veranda. The following are examples that complexify (*to make complex*) the physiological definitions of a veranda:

#### *The Veranda is a Roof (Anatomy)*

The *Queensland House* by Rod Fisher and Brian Crozier defines the veranda in its Glossary as ‘an open-sided roofed structure, of Indian derivation, which is supported by the building on one side and posts or columns on the other, and often decorated.’ It further demarcates the veranda roof as a separate element to the veranda itself. This definition is one that categorises the veranda as an anatomical collection of elements. Historical examples of this type are numerous. The period Queenslander consistently represents this base type (see Illustration) as a study of anatomical variation within a singular typological family, or typology.

In attempting to extend the ‘sense of the veranda’ as a definition, particular aspects of the conventional veranda were seized, some of which contradicted each other; notably whether the veranda was a Roof or whether it was a partially enclosed space in-between the exterior and interior spaces of the building. Generally, anything defined as a veranda would be both in varying degrees: to provide the simplest forms of enclosure of the structure it would have to have a roof, and to be the veranda rather than the house interior it would have to be explicitly outside.

#### *Veranda as Buffer*

The drawing of the Regatta Hotel (1886) in Toowong illustrates an example where, despite a roof configuration different from the strict definition previously outlined, the building was identified by the students as still possessing the ‘essence’ of a veranda. Here, the structure attached to the building was still a veranda because it concluded to be **a form of covered ‘buffer’ between the inside and the outside**, despite having two balconies above it. The organisational relationship of the balconies above the threshold would effectively categorise the bottom space traditionally as an awning. However, because the veranda occurs within the site boundary and does not project onto the street, it is clearly a veranda. The drawing of the Ship Inn in South Bank (1866) also illustrates this relationship (Illustrations here).

Nick Ovens has proposed that the elements of the Queenslander that we directly associate with, and value, are based upon its detached Villa-like relationship to the landscape. Correspondingly, the task of densifying is therefore made more difficult as the typology is antithetical to attached density. Ovens contrasts this with the Japanese courtyard house where devices like the veranda are used around side courtyards and peristyles in attached housing, a relationship similar to the Queenslander. In the example of these public verandas, the verandas generally occur in a zero setback situation to adjacent buildings. This is the direct opposite of the scenario in which the Queenslander veranda type finds itself as an attached edge condition to a Villa-in-the-landscape typology. Although the veranda may find itself attached as a prosthetic to dramatically different typological bodies, in both the Courtyard and Villa type, the veranda still maintains a similar sense of typological acclimatisation. This supports a conclusive observation that a ‘Veranda Effect’ is at play, aiding in the qualitative success or failure of the overarching building type.

### *The Veranda Effect*

The idea that the conventions of the veranda are a type of experiential effect rather than a particular elemental configuration that can be quantified and measured it is important as it identifies the formal circumstances in which the effect occurs is as idealised as the central aim of the research, even while it is recognised that this is a subjective and speculative search in itself. A sense of enclosure, and the idea that the veranda is a space for rest and **acclimatisation** is core to the majority of readings the students identified of the veranda. But the relationship of **experiential envelope to public and private space** – an aspect of its in-between-ness – was also identified as being very important. An example by another student revealed similar spatial and organisational effects as the previously discussed Regatta

veranda. In the Spring Hill (1896) veranda drawing, the covered space between the interior and exterior that served as a place for rest and repose from the oppressive climate of Queensland, in this instance penetrated into the public realm. Here the veranda no longer acted to mediate between inside-ness and outside-ness, or between the private and public realms. Here what at first glance appeared to be a veranda was in fact categorically simply an **awning**.

### *Villa Veranda*

The appropriation of the anatomy of the veranda without understanding its actual physiognomy is brought to bear here as the Spring Hill example demonstrates a public-ness in the veranda's application that ultimately reprograms its use and undermines its conceptual framework entirely as a functioning a-typical veranda. The proposition that there is a Veranda Urbanism was proposed, initially, not based upon any particular observations drawn out of rigorous historical research concerning the veranda, but rather it developed from applications of the types that appear genealogically similar to the veranda such as the Spring Hill example. It is also born out of observations of contemporary urban examples such as specific public projects, notably by Cox Rayner Architects, where long linear awnings were used to resolve the public edges of commercial and hospitality projects in order to engage the street, and conform with the relatively recent concern with Tropical outdoor living. The veranda here was applied as a device that also provided a model for a particular relationship between the public and the private realms that would seem intuitively to be directly linked to historical examples of the verandas application. However, as the student's research survey progressed, it became clear that there was indeed a prevailing Veranda Urbanism that resulted from how a building was orientated upon its site, and how this orientation effected the veranda's interstitial configuration between the building and the site.

Evidenced by the research drawings, the veranda's setback from the site's front boundary is important in structuring how the veranda stages and mediates the public relationship between the house and the street. In effect, the veranda acts to negotiate between these two public and private territories. Specifically, the veranda becomes an important transformational device in that it assists in reconciling the ineffectual size of the lot relative to the house's yearning to be a true typological Villa. That is to say, in situations where the sites were thinner, the veranda became an important device in reconciling the Villa typologies need for greater site area upon which to perch. It could be possible to argue a direct relationship between the colonnade of

the Villa and the veranda to the dwelling on these thinner sites, however more research into the figure ground plans of the veranda and their parent dwelling would be required in order to conclude any definitive observations.

### *Slope of the Lot*

Topography was also revealed as an important component of the veranda's physiognomy. The topography was clearly a primary agent in defining how the veranda engaged with the street, controlling the view lines and spatial character of the resulting interstitial space. Notably, the fall of the lot in relation to the location of the house and the street was important because it created a variety of different scaled spaces, and therefore functional and recreational uses in relation to the veranda.

The resulting veranda elevation appears to be often due to the desire – whether through organisational intent or typological serendipity – to provide a utility space for storage below the house. In this instance the veranda effectively acts as a screening device, preventing the socially undesirable public display of the artefacts of the everyday that culminate on the dirt, under the veranda's floorboards. When the site slopes toward the street however, the building is thus elevated above the street. This topographical condition amplifies the condition of arrival and address to the street, providing more drama to the front steps that fold from the street to touch the veranda's edge akin to the pomp of the Villa typology. However, elevated blocks of land often also appear to cause the veranda to veil itself with lattice screening in order to provide visual privacy to the public street. In some veranda's the students studied, the result of this screening was to move the social activated spaces of the house from the front areas of the dwelling near the veranda, to the rear deck. This effectively reduced the veranda to a service zone that no longer served any social mediation or activation roles to the street.

Where the site sloped away from the street, the effect was quite different. This was particularly evident when observed relative to the landscape planting. Planting along the front boundary of the site consisted of trees and climbers on fences that conspire to make the space more enclosed and private. As a result the veranda appeared to become more social. Considering ideal orientations on sites, downward slopes to fronts are generally south facing and so have moister microclimates. This has a direct effect upon the resulting screening by reducing the amount and density of vegetation that will grow in this orientation of the site, and therefore there is correspondingly less screening to the street.



### *Layers of Screening*

In combination with issues such as the slope of the site and the resulting access to the site as discussed previously, the cumulative effect is a layered screening facade deep into the site. The majority of veranda conditions that were documented by the students revealed that the front fences were generally timber. The fences were generally opaque, sharing fenestration motifs between the building, veranda, and fence. The fence therefore can be understood to be providing the first level of screening to the street. Gardens and landscape also obscure views to and through the house from the public realm of the street. The seemingly mandatory Alexandra palm plantings close to the house do not provide sufficient shade to the building. Finally, the lattice screening was often used as a skin on the outer surface of the veranda itself in order to both mediate climate, in the form of solar penetration and glare, but also to prevent and/or control the unwanted wandering gaze of the public on the street from viewing the inner workings of the private sanctum veiled behind the veranda.

In concluding, one student, in completing a conceptual requirement of the project called the 'Experiential Device', created a light box that contained layered images that were applied onto overhead transparencies. Each transparency was conceptualised as a single layer in the overall veranda's physiognometric sequence. As each image was layered over the next in the student's experiential device the resulting viewable image became progressively more and more opaque. It thus acted as a highly effective and operable device in analysing the effectiveness of each of the constituent layers that defined the experiential sequence of movement and transition from outside to inside, through the mediatory veranda edge. This device has become pivotal in providing a conceptual lens through which to speculate upon how this project will develop. Although we now have a much clearer sense of the veranda's anatomy and nomenclature, we are still no clearer about how it really functions at an urban scale, and how this knowledge might underpin a new conscious Veranda Urbanism that is conceptually and environmentally appropriate to sub-tropical cities like Brisbane. A more in-depth study of urban morphology, conducted through an urban scale figure-ground studies that specifically document how buildings and verandas are choreographed together, will complete the picture as it were. It will provide the Veranda Urbanism research project with a more robust ground of knowledge upon which to speculate further about the appropriateness of the conceptual, cultural, and environment physiognomy of the veranda and its resulting urban condition.