

The Australian National University  
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*Clay Objects and the Articulation of Place*

DISSERTATION

Presented In part fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### CLAY OBJECTS AND THE ARTICULATION OF PLACE

The Thesis, *Clay Objects and the Articulation of Place*, is comprised of two parts: a Studio Practice component and accompanying Studio Report (66%), and a Dissertation (33%). Using two different sites as models, both examine the ability of objects to provide information about specific places.

With Canberra as its site the Studio Practice explores, through processes of making, ways in which ceramic objects can convey information about the place where they are made and viewed. The research is presented in the form of an exhibition of ceramics held at the ANU School of Art Gallery from 15 – 23 March 2007.

The Dissertation takes as its focus a site in Sydney Harbour; Dubbagullee/Bennelong Point, one of the places where European Australians first turned country into object. In this document I show how examination of two of the objects/structures that have occupied the site - Bennelong's small clay brick house and later the Sydney Opera House - can provide information about Bennelong Point and the processes by which it has been shaped

### DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Paula Kelly 19/6/08, hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I've benefited enormously from discussion with colleagues and fellow students within the School of Art, and from the broader ANU community. Exposure to the research of visiting scholars via the Centre for Cross Cultural Research and from other programs within the University has been greatly enriching. Thank you to Wayne Johnson from the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, Annie Campbell from the Museum of Sydney, Mary Casey and Judy Birmingham for discussion and assistance.

Very many thanks as well to David George, Georgina Buckley, Helen Stephens, Margaret Park and Susan Ostling.

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## INTRODUCTION

This Dissertation together with a body of Studio Research and its accompanying Studio Report combine to form the PhD thesis 'Clay Objects and the Articulation of Place'. In my Studio Report 'Clay Objects and the Articulation of Place' I charted my enquiry into the ways in which ceramic objects might reflect something about the specificities of place. This study takes a somewhat oblique path in exploring the topic because it focuses on a different type of clay object, a brick house, and, moving between the past and the present, attempts to tease out what the house and the place it occupied can reveal about each other.

In the following Introduction the area of study is outlined first and a map of this document set out. Then I discuss the background to the investigation and provide a rationale for it, outline the methodology and give an explanation for the names and terms I utilize throughout.

### PART I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Edging Sydney Harbour on Bennelong Point, the Sydney Opera House stands suckered, mollusc-like, by its massive piers and footings onto the thin rocky tidal shelf below. Two centuries ago, between 1790 and 1795, a small, three metre square clay-brick house with one opening for a window and one for a door sat on the same narrow rocky platform. It was built by the newly arrived British Governor, Arthur Phillip, for the local man 'Bennelong'; an event that was documented variously, but without a lot of detail, in the early eyewitness accounts of the colony. Bare facts about the small house have been repeated in historical texts over the last two centuries, but with little further information or interpretation added.

Bennelong Point is one of the best-known places in Australia and although it has been home to four major buildings, it is the first and last of these, Bennelong's house and the Sydney Opera House, that have contributed most to its renown. But how has this happened? What are the mechanisms by which this place has come to be defined by these two utterly dissimilar buildings? In particular how does the first one, the small clay-brick house owned by the man the Point is named after, contribute to the political and cultural charge the site now has? The Dissertation presented here seeks to answer this question by tracing the history of Bennelong's house and the ways in which it has been drawn into the mythologising of the Opera House and the site.

How is it that a small insignificant building has contributed to the shaping of one of the most famous stretches of land in Australia when it is rarely accorded more than a few sketchy sentences in any book and when the key question, 'what sort of gift or exchange did it constitute?' has rarely been broached? Gifting is part of the exchange system of most cultures yet in the fraught cross-cultural exchanges taking place around Sydney Cove at that time the gift of a house must have been particularly charged, given that neither culture could have comprehended its implications. From the sparse information available, it is known that Bennelong asked that the house be built for him but why did he want it, and why did he choose that place?



Figure 1: Bennelong's house, Dubbagullee/Bennelong Point Not signed, not dated, 1793–4. (detail) *West View of Sydney-Cove taken from the Rocks, at the rear of the General Hospital.* pen and ink and wash on wove paper, 26 x 42cm.



Figure 2: Dubbagullee/Bennelong Point. Don McMurdo, between 1976 and 1998, *Sydney Opera House With Ferries*, slide:col., 5.3 x 5.3cm in mount 7x7cm.

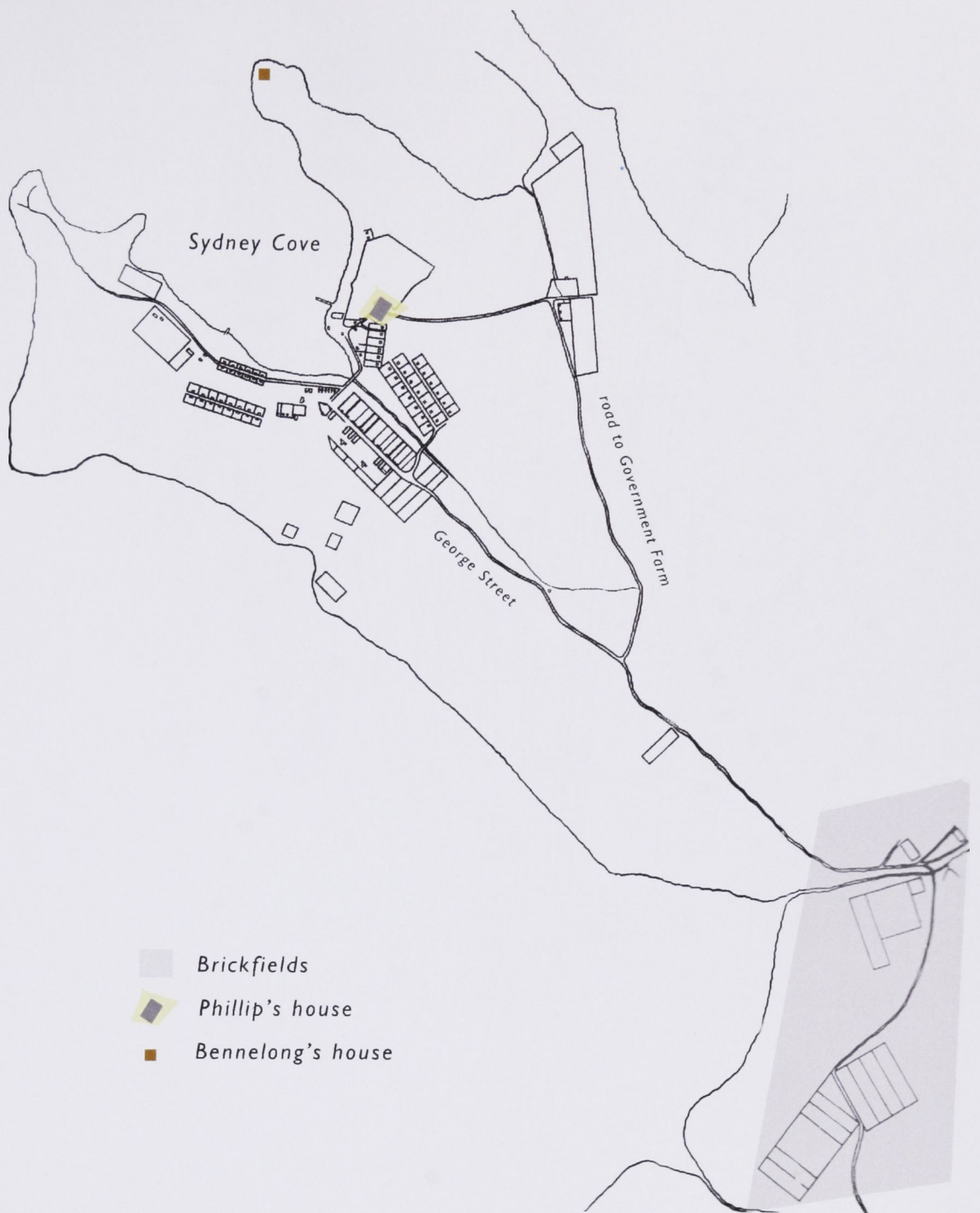


Figure 3: Sydney Cove, 1792. Map redrawn from *A Survey of the Settlement in New South Wales, New Holland, 1792*. Engraved by A. Dulon and L. Poates.



Figure 4: Meanders, Sydney, 2006. Map redrawn from various contemporary sources.

In 1790 only the highest ranking British officials had even the most basic of houses to live in and living conditions, by all accounts, were quite dire, so why did the British Governor provide it, and at what cost? The physical effort to build, with little equipment or mechanised means at hand must have been daunting and so the building of even a small house was a not insignificant act. Around the same time, a shield covered with tin

<sup>1</sup> David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, ed. B.H.Fletcher, vol. 1 (Sydney: A. H. & A.W. Reed, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1979).



Figure 5: Thomas Watling, 1793–95, *Sun-Rising, Going out of Port-Jackson-Harbour*, Pencil on wove paper, 14 x 20cm.

was also promised and delivered to Bennelong. Both shield and house *could be* seen as being functionally superior to equivalent objects used by he and the other locals. Did the British hope the skill at improvement embodied in these objects would help convert the Aborigines to their ways?



Figure 6: Thomas Watling, 1793–5, *North-West View, taken from the Rocks above Sydney, in New-South-Wales, for John White, Esq.*, pen and ink and wash on wove paper, 20.5 x 41 cm.



Figure 8: Fernando Brambila, 1793, *Vista de la Colonia Inglesa de Sydney en la Nueva Gales Meridional*, pen and ink and wash on laid paper, 30 x 60cm.

Although no trace of it remains, descriptions of the house and the surrounding topographical landscape exist. In particular, two of the chief eyewitnesses, the Judge-Advocate David Collins<sup>1</sup> and Captain-Lieutenant of Marines Watkin Tench,<sup>2</sup> have left written indications of its size and physical character while drawings showing the house, made by the convict painter Thomas Watling, (figures 5 and 6) and an artist with a 1792 visiting Spanish expedition, Fernando Brambila, (figure 7) remain. While the written descriptions accord, and the images all show a similar structure, the exact site of the house on the Point varies. The vagaries of colonial image production also cause questions about the way in which the house's relationship to the rest of the colony is shown.

Past dialogues and transactions between the British and the original inhabitants in the colonial period have been the subject of much scholarship and public discussion, and I question here what effect this discourse has had in marking Bennelong Point as a politically and historically charged site. In the present, Opera House ceremonies and publicity connect the building to the history of the site but how does this impact on the way Bennelong Point is seen today? The architect, Jørn Utzon named design influences as diverse as Mayan and Japanese temples and Kronborg Castle at Helsingor in Denmark; how might the significations of the Opera House's form and materials be interpreted in relation to the place the building is located?

#### THIS DOCUMENT: A MAP

The Dissertation is presented in sections titled *Bennelong's House* and *the Sydney Opera House*. In a short third section, *Meanders: Phillip's House, the Brickworks* I reflect upon two places connected with Bennelong's house that I developed a project of walking around during the study.

Visitors to a place often make the most trenchant observations. My investigation begins, in the first section, ***Bennelong's House***, with observations made by an international artist on the forecourt of the Opera House at the Sydney Biennale in 2004. Here, in his work

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Richards, *Eighteenth-Century Ceramics: Products for a Civilised Society, Studies in Design and Material Culture*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

'*Still Life with Car and Stone*,' Jimmie Durham makes some cogent points about objects and place in relation to the Opera House and the history of its site. Having encountered this work unexpectedly, while 'looking' for Bennelong's house, I begin by discussing the artist's use of material and process to bring the events begun at Sydney Cove in 1788 out into the light.

There are no existing Aboriginal versions of the conditions out of which the house arose, but the British versions of events leading up to the building of the house are first summarised, then information about the house, gleaned from documents and images made at the time, is analysed. To put the building of the house in context I attempt to estimate what the house would have cost in materials and effort, and then speculate on the way that both cultures might have perceived it. I examine what type of exchange the house might have constituted and hypothesize here that historical framing of the house as a gift has implications for the way Bennelong Point is perceived.

In the second section, *The Sydney Opera House*, that building becomes the focus. I firstly discuss the Opera House in relation to its site and question whether, through material or form, it relates to the place it occupies. I examine its connection to the rest of the harbour and the city and discuss the role I suggest it plays, and the role of the public historical sphere in constructing meaning, is examined as well. I conclude the section with a discussion of the importance of naming in the construction of place and consider how the Point, first claimed as a European entity with the name Bennelong's Point, has been objectified 200 years later as Bennelong Point.

Before setting out my conclusions I present a short final section titled *Meanders: Phillip's House, the Brickfields*. Here I reflect on the project I set myself of trying to understand the geographic area relevant to the study not just theoretically, but through physical experience as well (Figure 4). Phillip's house, built in 1788, was the first Government House and it played a large role in the relations between Bennelong and his compatriots and the British. The Brickfields, an area on the very edge of Sydney Cove was the place clay for the small house was dug and turned into bricks; in a sense a chunk of that place was scooped out and redeposited an hour's walk away as Bennelong's house, on the edge of the Harbour.

#### BACKGROUND: FROM THINGS USED IN A HOUSE TO THE HOUSE ITSELF

This body of research had its genesis in a quite different study, my attention being captured by Bennelong's house while I was in the process of looking for something else. I outline below the way a curiosity about the house took hold in order to provide a context for the form the study finally took.

Fuelled by an interest in 18<sup>th</sup> century European ceramic tableware, my initial aim was to investigate the role domestic objects such as those might have played in colonising processes and the construction of attitudes to place, and by extension to nature, in Australia. Much 18<sup>th</sup> century ceramic work celebrates, largely through ornament, the wonders of the natural world on the one hand, and the ability of man to control it on the other. The clays used were pristine and pale without blemish or impurity, the shapes precise and seamlessly replicated, increasingly by industrial means, and the patterns and imagery showed that nature could be improved upon by amplifying its colours and finessing its forms.

By 1788 objects such as these were increasingly filtering down from the upper to the lower classes and they would, in all likelihood, have been familiar to all of those who

arrived on the First Fleet. In Britain, ceramic objects contributed to an increased level of comfort, ease, and pleasure in everyday life that would have been enjoyed, though not equally, by all.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, daily life at Sydney Cove in late 1788 must have been dire. The existing accounts of the first years suggest it as a place with minimal domestic comfort and even for those most privileged, life must have been difficult.

At Sydney Cove, with no built environment or infrastructure, no factories producing necessities, no enclaves of skilled artisans or food producers, a precisely-formed white cup bordered with neat pink flowers, a mechanically formed pewter plate, or even a roughly turned wooden bowl must have reinforced the idea of England as a place of great superiority. These objects surely suggested that the land the British had come to was, basically, unmade. If, say, attitudes can be inculcated by repetition, what effect would frequent use and perception of such artefacts have had on attitudes to the place they were made, and the place where they were being used?<sup>4</sup>

Early research sought to uncover the type of material cultural objects brought out on the First Fleet. My interest lay in finding examples of eating and drinking implements used by differing classes during the first five years at Sydney Cove, and then in speculating on what these might have signified, during use, about place. I was interested here especially in the role domestic objects might play in the construction of attitudes to nature in a foreign place. In seeking to locate information about such objects, I began visiting two key archives.

The first of these was the Mitchell Library, where I looked for lists, descriptions – mentions even – of what type of domestic objects the First Fleet carried. The second was the Museum of Sydney *on the site of the first Government House* built, as its full name suggests, on the site once occupied by Phillip's house, the first Government House. There, I hoped to find ceramics dated to the time of the First Fleet amongst the thousands of fragments archived in the Museum's Resource Centre. These fragments (for there are very few unbroken things) were unearthed during a large archaeological excavation begun on the site in 1983 to ascertain whether any remains of the 1788 building existed; the Government house footings were located and now lie entombed under the forecourt of the Museum.

At the Mitchell Library I found many lists, but little description or mention of everyday things for eating and drinking. At the Museum of Sydney, thinking I might find remnants of objects used at the Governor's table or in the kitchens in the early years, I encountered little in the way of ceramic objects used prior to 1800. Searching further, I located, in the small archive at the centre of the building, the thousands – around 200,000 – of fragmentary remains of domestic objects, each one cleaned, labelled, grouped by type, boxed and painstakingly entered into a database. I found so much, so many not dissimilar ceramic pieces in fact, that the longer I looked, the more incoherent the small broken pieces became and the collection as a whole grew more incomprehensible with every visit.

### Where to look for things

An economic historian specializing in English material culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Lorna Weatherill, has noted that *material culture is documented in obscure ways* and I took as a starting point for my early explorations her diagram mapping the variety of sources which might offer up information.<sup>5</sup> Weatherill describes these as: *data* (inventories, purchase accounts), *descriptions* (diaries/letters, miscellaneous), *artifacts* themselves, and *pictures*.<sup>6</sup> I commenced by tracking 'data', for instance the inventories and lists in the volumes of the Historic Records of NSW, jumped then to 'pictures' and 'artefacts themselves', while simultaneously looking for 'descriptions'.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Tiffen, 'Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid,' *Callaloo* 16, no. 3 (1993). I am influenced here by Tiffen's discussion of the way in which the rote learning of English verse (with requisite elocution and posture) by school children in Jamaica and other colonial countries bound them to English cultural mores.

<sup>5</sup> Lorna Weatherill, *Was the North East Different from Other Areas? Everyday Consumption and Material Culture, 1670–1730* [website] (cited 30 April 2006); available from <http://www.campus.ncl.ac.uk/databases/history/invs/paper1.html>.



Ceramic domestic objects in use in Australia prior to 1800 seem not to have been depicted either as subjects or as secondary to other subject matter in pictures of the time. While the domestic interior was a not uncommon subject of painting and drawing in England then, in Australia the subject matter is concentrated on the external world. Topographic views, images of flora and fauna, documentation of the inexorable process of taking possession including its cartographic inscription, these are the topoi of early colonial image making.

Absent also are 'artefacts themselves'. I found no trace of any ceramic domestic object thought to date from the First Fleet except for some small, broken, clay pipes at the Museum of Sydney. These had been recovered from the footings of the first Government House and may possibly have been brought out as personal possessions, though they have not been firmly dated as yet.

### Things that reverberate: a small clay brick house

While I was studying accounts of the early years of the colony looking for references to bowls or cups, I found my attention kept being pulled to references to Bennelong's small clay-brick house. The house could be located in all of Weatherill's 'find' categories except that of 'artefacts themselves' for it no longer existed. It seemed such a significant object to me, and it was mentioned in almost every text I consulted yet the detail given was infuriatingly brief, usually just a few sentences (see Appendix 1 for examples) signalling the house's 'marker' status in the fraught business of relations between the two cultures who saw Sydney Cove as home.

I likened the pull the house exerted on me to a 'reverberation' because the few statements about it seemed to be echoed in every text. As it increasingly reverberated out of the texts it grew to be like the wail of a siren close by, a phone in a closed bag; I felt compelled to attend to it. Also though, I came to think of it as an object with a reverberating presence because it seemed to embody so much of what there was to regret about the colonisation of this country. Given my interest – in the Studio Research – of developing a body of objects that might speak about place, exploring what might be embodied in the house, and how, seemed important.

And so my interest shifted, from things used primarily *in* houses, to *a* house itself. Bennelong's house was one of the first houses built by the British and it wholly represented the turning of country into object – of turning place – into thing. Digging up land and converting it into houses gives physical manifestation to broader, less apparent transformations of place, and so the house presented an apt and intriguing subject. Most pressingly I wanted to understand what role the house played in the construction of Bennelong Point as the politically and culturally charged site it is today.

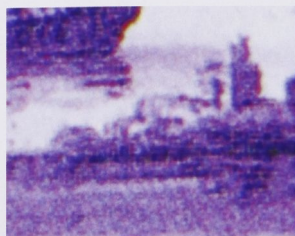


Figure 8: the house, Brambila

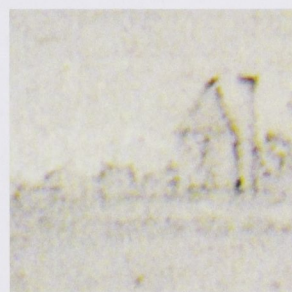


Figure 9: the house, Watling



Figure 10: the house, Watling

## METHODOLOGY

In this body of research I have used both a theoretical and a physical process. The theoretical component was centred around scholarship on aspects of colonisation, social geography, Australian history and cross-cultural exchange. To gain an experiential perspective of the area in which the study took place, I developed a project of walking around the site, Bennelong Point, and radiating out from there to other places germane to it, the site of the first Government House on the corner of Bridge and Phillip Streets and the area just north of Central Railway once known as 'the brickfields'. These are outlined below sequentially.

### Reading

In the study presented here assertions by two theorists have been particularly germane. The first of these, made by the archaeologist Jaques Maquet suggests that objects can be both instruments and signs; instruments in that they can be used to anatomise history and culture, and signs in that they refract back to the viewer something about that history and culture.<sup>7</sup> This led me to believe that by using the house as a focal point, built as it was at a time when attitudes to this country were being embedded into the European-Australian consciousness, something about the way relationships between objects and place are formed and maintained might take on greater clarity.

The second, made by the sociologist Henry Lefebvre suggested that, '*like all languages, the language of things is as useful for lying as it is for telling the truth.*'<sup>8</sup> Here, the idea is raised that the significance attaching to the house if it was construed as a gift, would differ from that which might attach to it if it was seen more directly as an exchange and that one of them would be, in effect – though this is somewhat rhetorical – be lying.

My investigation of the house and its connection to place has involved a study of colonial records and accounts in combination with examination of existing scholarship on the period. Also, it has drawn upon and been developed by research into theoretical areas of the conversion of space to place, in particular the work of Henri Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan and Michel de Certeau. 'Space' and 'Place' are well-used terms utilized differently, and sometimes ambiguously, in differing contexts and discourses. In 'The Production of Space' Lefebvre sees 'space' not just as a geographical entity but as produced through geographical, historical, economic, social and cultural activities and imaginings, and 'place' as a space made distinct through 'acts of naming as well as the distinctive activities and imaginings associated with particular social spaces'.<sup>9</sup>

Tuan and DeCerteau, although they swap the terms, emphasize the role that *experience* plays in the production process and thus stress the idea of subjectivity. Space is converted to place (Tuan) or place is converted to space (DeCerteau) as you get to know it via direct experience. Tuan in particular proposes also that it is through both conceptual *and* direct experience that space becomes reformulated as 'place'.<sup>10</sup> Material from the area of cross-cultural exchange has also underpinned my research. The works of Arjun Appadurai, Isabel McBryde and Annette Weiner in particular have informed my understanding of the area of gifting and exchange in cross-cultural situations. Writings by Michael Taussig, Paul Carter and Denis Byrne have provided illumination in relation to ways of interpreting the Australian past, as has the work of a number of historians, notably Keith Smith and Inga Clendinnen for their work on Bennelong and Phillip.

My growing appreciation that objects/artefacts can be used to interpret and tell many versions of the past – draws on writings from the area of museum studies. Tony Bennett

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (cited).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Maquet, 'Objects as Instruments, Objects as Signs' in Steven D. Lubar and W. D. Kingery, *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 88.

<sup>9</sup> Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine, *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004), 5. Also see Lefebvre, *The Production of Space.*, Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1977; reprint, Fourth Printing, 2005), 6.

and Michael Edwards, in *'The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics'*, in particular have discussed the processes by which an understanding of history is knitted into the fabric of public life by both individuals and institutions. Edwards borrows a term 'the public historical sphere', coined by the English authors Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright, to describe this, referring to:

. . . those institutions – from museums through national heritage sites to television historical dramas and documentaries – involved in producing and circulating meanings about the past.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 132.

<sup>12</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 6.

## Experiencing

During the early stages of my research when I was tentatively looking at the way in which ceramic objects used during the first five years of the British occupation might have represented the place where they were used, I fell into a pattern of walking back and forth between the Mitchell Library in Macquarie Street and the Museum of Sydney in Phillip Street, as I have mentioned, to look for descriptions and artefacts. As the present study came more sharply into focus and I sought to understand more about Bennelong's house, my circuit extended the length of Macquarie Street down to Bennelong Point, but I kept coming back to the Museum of Sydney.

I realised after some time that in walking back and forwards between the two places I was covering the distance often travelled by the Governor, Arthur Phillip and Bennelong, as they moved (as the sources say they often did) between each other's houses. In walking this path I felt able to orient myself to the relationship between the place where Bennelong's house had been, and the small settlement forming at Sydney Cove. Walking between those two resonant markers of British occupation, the sites of Bennelong's house and Phillip's house, the first Government House, I felt enabled to move, metaphorically, between the past and the present.

This process of walking I likened to one of the most common of all traditional ceramic decorative motifs, the meander.



Starting its life in ancient Greece, the meander is thought to have originally represented a river snaking its way through the landscape, but the term is also sometimes used to describe the schematic dispersal of small bunches of flowers around a ceramic vessel form or vase. Here the meander forms an analogue with a walk around the garden; the vessel/garden is walked around with a pause at each bunch/garden bed – the vessel being an imagined three-dimensional world. In Tuan's conception of space and place he suggests that:

. . . if we think about space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.<sup>12</sup>

As the research developed I became more intent on walking between the sites of the two houses then later, so I could get an idea of how far it was to cart the bricks for Bennelong's house, down to the area where the Brickfields had been located, the area north of Central Railway.

In a review of Inga Clendinnen's book about relations between colonists and locals, *Dancing with Strangers*, Alan Atkinson gently rebukes the author for using one of the earliest British forms of Bennelong's name: 'Baneelon'.<sup>13</sup> Clendinnen is careful throughout her text to acknowledge the complexities inherent in naming and spelling, and to set out her reasons for the names and terms she uses. 'Aborigine' is 'anachronistic' and she instead calls the inhabitants 'Australians'.<sup>14</sup> The name 'Bennelong', she renders as 'Baneelon' – the name used by Watkin Tench, author of one of the handful of eyewitness accounts of the time. She explains this as being a tactic to circumvent the 'freight of banalities', with which the name has become weighed down.<sup>15</sup>

Atkinson takes issue with the rationale she gives for using 'Baneelon', suggesting it singles out the history profession as responsible for casting him in a banal light. In my understanding, it is the broader public historical sphere, of which historians form a section only, that has constructed the identity the name forms part of. Given that this Dissertation, in looking at the small brick house, also examines the ways in which this sphere operates in relation to it, I have elected to employ the names and terms in common usage: Aborigine, Bennelong, British, etc., though I acknowledge they are imprecise. Repeating out aloud the name 'Bennelong' as spelt by three of the main recorders of the period, David Collins: 'Bennillong', Arthur Phillip: 'Bennillon' and Watkin Tench, 'Baneelon', I realise how each suggests a different pronunciation. From 1790–1792 at least, he must have been a frequent topic of conversation between them though and it would be unusual if they each pronounced his name differently amongst themselves. So perhaps it is the exigencies of spelling that are at work and this can be seen in the recording of the other names that Bennelong, as part of local culture, took or was known by.<sup>16</sup>

I began this paper by introducing Bennelong as 'the local man' because in 1788 it was quite clear who was local and who wasn't. Bennelong was indisputably born in the country, and although there is no *absolute* proof, he was almost certainly born and had lived his life within the local Sydney region. I then refer to him as being '*known as*' Bennelong to make clear that contingencies of naming are at work. Throughout the rest of the text though I refer to him by the name that has become most familiar: Bennelong. In his text on Bennelong, Keith Smith lists twenty-seven spellings of the name recorded between 1790 and 1883.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the one that has stuck, Bennelong, is the spelling used not by the eyewitnesses but the one adopted by the Sydney Gazette, the first British newspaper:

The name of the Point bearing this name also has many different versions; it was referred to in the first years of British occupation as Bennelong's Point. The name the local inhabitants used for it was also recorded variously by the British and Val Attenbrow from the Australian Museum identifies a number of these in a paper given on the recent dual naming of features around Sydney at a UNESCO conference in 2006. She records the names 'Tu-bow-gule', (William Dawes vocabulary 1790–2), 'Tubow-gule' (Phillip in Hunter, 1793), 'Too-bow-gu-liè' (Collins, 1798), 'Tobegully' (Meehan, 1807, 1811 maps), 'Jubughalee' (Larmer 1832) and 'Jubùghallee' (Mitchell 1830). But the name ascribed as most closely resembling what might have been its local language name by the Geographical Names Board of New South Wales Working Party, which included Attenbrow, members of the Aboriginal community and language experts was Dubbagullee.<sup>18</sup> This dual name was officially gazetted in 2005.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Alan Atkinson, *The Charmed Circle* (Issue No. 256) [website] (cited 5 September 2005); available from <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/Nov03/Atkinson.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Pub., 2003), 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming in of the Eora: Sydney Cove 1788–1792* (East Roseville, N.S.W.: Kangaroo Press, 2001), 159.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Val Attenbrow, *Aboriginal Placenames in Sydney Harbour, New South Wales, Australia – a Dual Naming Project* [website] (cited 5 August 2006); available from <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/unescolandscapes/files/ATTENBROWVal.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> *Official Notices* (Number 3, Friday 7 January) [website] (cited 10 September 2006); available from <http://www.advertising.nsw.commerce.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/eis77bxfi7okbfrjba6ipu1jtxjbg2axl5kjwg5cdtr2adkgu5wa57zbu5r5h2qo4v27eqjove473b.pdf>.

Throughout this text I have chosen to call the Point, Bennelong Point when I am discussing it after the British arrived. Where I refer to it prior to the arrival of the British, I have chosen to use this name, Dubbagullee. Throughout the paper I refer to the early eyewitness accounts, mostly from the hands of key officials of the day, Arthur Phillip, David Collins, Watkin Tench et al., as 'the accounts' and where letters, manuscripts or official documents are concerned, as 'the records'.

But I begin by walking from the Mitchell Library to Bennelong Point where, turning the corner from Farm Cove to the forecourt of the Opera House I come upon Jimmie Durham's work for the first time. I pause there to consider the questions it begs about Bennelong's house and the Point and the events happening around that place over 200 years ago. And to wonder how it is that a long gone clay-brick house still has a haunting presence.

## BENNELONG POINT, 2004

### February 2003

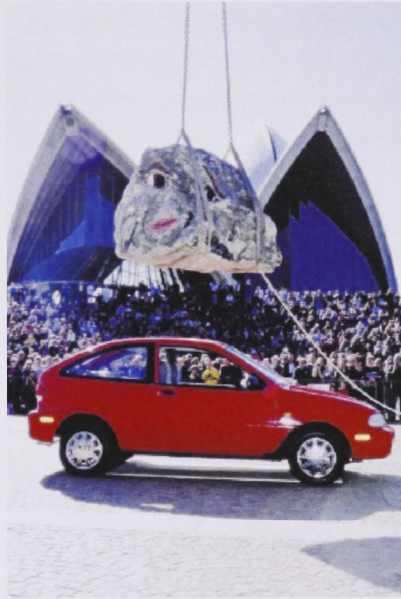
*Early on a Sunday morning I walk down to Bennelong Point and pause at the end of the Botanic Gardens to look out onto the Opera House. I'm not the only person there; a middle-aged man of Aboriginal descent sits on the bench overlooking the Point, a bottle in a brown paper bag on his lap. I'm shocked. It isn't the bottle – though it is only 8am – but I'm here to think about place and of course with place the idea of ownership is never far away – I'm an intruder. I self-consciously look around, take a few photos, pretend I'm a tourist (am I?) but feel embarrassed, so leave.*

### December 2003

*Standing looking across at the Opera House from the Botanic Gardens I see visitors swarming across its stairs and platform. From this vantage point you look straight into the large glass windows that enclose the cathedral-like spaces created by the roof. Turning toward the sandstone stairs to go down amongst the throng I become aware of a small group of young men of Middle-Eastern appearance standing not far from me and studying the Opera House as well. I'm horrified to find myself turning from thinking about one type of erasure, to thinking about another, though they are most likely Egyptian architecture students.*

### September 2004

*Walking from the Mitchell Library through the Botanic Gardens and towards the Sydney Opera House I turn the corner separating Farm Cove from Bennelong Point and I'm stopped by the sight of a small, red, brand new sportscar – crushed by a rock.*



Figures 11, 12, 13: Jimmie Durham, performance, *Still Life with Car and Stone*, Sydney Opera House forecourt, 2004

Jimmie Durham's work, *Still Life with Car and Stone*, a small bright red sports car crushed by a large rock with a wry face painted on it, sat quietly on the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House for the duration of the Sydney Biennale in 2004. It was a sculpture formed through a public performance, orchestrated by Durham and a crane driver, and I found it quite puzzling. Why the car? Why the rock? Why the face? In a free-ranging discussion with Nikos Papastergiadis at Artspace during the 2004 Biennale, Durham talks, obliquely at times it must be noted, about the work and his art practice in general. He mentions how he wanted the face on the rock to have a '*kind of placidity*', and speaks about an earlier visit to the site with his friend and guide, Aboriginal woman Cheryl Buchanan; an attention to place and history is a thread that runs the discussion.

**Nikos Papastergiadis:** I'm also struck by the fact the Sydney Opera House was built on a part of Sydney that's known as Bennelong Point. I'm sure you know the history of that place and the person who it's named after, and I'm positive of the fact that the rock wasn't dropped, was partly to do with the name of Bennelong. Am I right or wrong in that?

**Jimmie Durham:** You're not wrong. I don't like to make tight structure, but I like to make as many complexities as possible. As many layers of meanings of things of histories, that's always lovely to me.

**Nikos Papastergiadis:** How was the history of that woven into the piece do you think?

**Jimmy Durham:** Not in any direct way except here is a stone and if you know about Sydney and if you know about Bennelong Point, you can hear echoes. The stone will speak of echoes to you...<sup>20</sup>

Born in Arkansas, USA, Durham is based in Europe but as a First Nation Cherokee artist he stands in a position where ideas about space and place could be expected to have a particular resonance. As well, he belongs to that rarified breed of sought-after international artists whose work sees them one week in Yokohama, the next in Berlin – so an attention to what 'place' might be, and how it is constituted, could be seen as a given, to someone who is rarely at home.

As the images that opened the Section show, the performance that produced *Still Life with Car and Stone* involved the lowering of a large rock onto a small bright red sports car (the sort of car that a wealthy young man or woman might get as a 21st birthday gift) until the rock slowly crushed it, coming finally to rest on the car's now-crumpled chassis. Durham has often used stone in his work; in a work carried out in 1997/8 he orchestrated the towing into the middle of the Baltic Sea a barge containing a group of large elaborately carved granite stones. These had been hand-carved at a stonemason's yard in Sweden during the 2nd World War at the behest of the architect responsible for Hitler's building program, Albert Speer. Once in the middle of the sea, the barge, complete with stones was sunk:

They're beautifully hand-carved and they're immense. They're giant beyond belief. They were designed by Albert Speer, and they were intended to be a great, giant arch in Berlin. So they're beautiful stones, the work is beautiful, the history is beautiful in an ugly sort of way, and it seems a shame to just have them sitting there, doing nothing. I already have an ongoing project of working with stone. I want to do different

<sup>20</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, 'A Thousand Beautiful Things: Nikos Papastergiadis, Jimmie Durham and Maria-Theresa Alves,' in *Criticism+Engagement+Thought: 2004 Biennale of Sydney*, ed. Adam Geczy & Nicholas Tsoutas Blair French (Sydney: Artspace, 2004), 49.



things with stone to make stone light, to make it free of its metaphorical weight, its architectural weight, to make it light. So I've been thinking of different ways to make stone work and to make stone move instead of making stone into an architectural element.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jimmie Durham, *Facts and Fiction: Jimmie Durham* [website] (cited 17 April 2006); available from [http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Pinto/gene4/durham\\_eng.htm](http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Pinto/gene4/durham_eng.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Vincent Smith, *The Sydney Opera House* (Sydney: Paul Hamlyn Pty. Ltd., 1974), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Taussig, 'Jimmie Durham,' in *On Reason and Emotion: Biennale of Sydney 2004*, ed. Isabel and Art Gallery of New South Wales Carlos (Woolloomooloo, N.S.W.: Biennale of Sydney, 2004), 82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

And he goes on to state his main aim in the moving and re-placement of Speer's stones:

they never have to attempt to be a monument. They're free of monumentality.

There is something touchingly heroic about Durham's purpose here; its as though preventing a thing from becoming a monument is a monumental act in itself.

The 4 acres comprising the podium of the Opera House are faced with concrete slabs with a veneer of pulverised then reconstituted granite,<sup>22</sup> and it was perhaps to echo this that Durham went searching for a suitable granite rock at a Gosford quarry. He chose instead a piece of marble because he perceived already on its surface the face-like markings he intended to paint it with. Granite and marble are both types of stone often associated with monuments though I suggest they signify differently. Had Durham used granite it may have associated the work with the icing of granite covering Bennelong Point, and with its use as a material by such architects of the monumental as Speer. But the use of marble suggests the classic eras of Greece and Rome and the ideals of pure thought and reason, enlightened ways of thinking so intrinsically connected to western civilization, and by extension, to the colonial project. Like the often-figurative marble works of the ancient world, Durham's piece of marble, too, had a face on it.

In his catalogue essay on Durham's work for the 2004 Biennale, Michael Taussig makes a number of sweetly imagined observations about the work in the Forecourt and its ability to move us between the past and the present. He firstly makes a connection between performances at the Opera House and performances, or 'operas' – actually initiation ceremonies – produced at Farm Cove during the early years of British occupation and which a number of the newly arrived officers attended:

For there was plenty of grand opera in the vicinity of Bennelong Point before the Opera House was built. Indeed the judge and secretary of the colony records how in 1795, in the first years of the colony, he was invited by the Australians to their opera house, a cleared stretch of land in what is now known as Farm Cove . . . <sup>23</sup>

Taussig then connects Durham's stone to the stone – referred to by Collins as 'Kebah' – used to drive the wooden chisel with which the older men knocked out the front middle tooth of young men during the initiation, and he paraphrases Collins description:

. . . the young men were hoisted on the shoulders of the men to have a tooth knocked out . . . To complete the extraction, a wooden chisel hammered by a large stone was used, the man making a 'most hideous noise' as blood was allowed to freely run down over the head and shoulders of the man carrying the young man who would henceforth bear as part of his name, the name of the man carrying him.<sup>24</sup>

Taussig goes on to wonder why, in the all of the metaphor-making that accompanies the Opera House, its shells/sails are never likened to 'monster-like' teeth (the Opera House/shark has 'eaten' the Point?) and then suggests that the stone, with its sad/happy clown's face:

compresses with its wit too much history and too much pain to bear, the beautiful little car bravely bearing the burden, the burden of history.<sup>25</sup>

In his discussion with Papastergiadis about the performance that brought the work into being, Durham stressed the importance of the process of the stone being lowered onto the car, and how careful he was that it should not appear to have been dropped or otherwise have been allowed to accidentally smash onto the car. There is a parallel here, I contend, with the likewise slow and deliberate re-inscription of Bennelong's Point. The turning of space into place through the gradual accretion of successive layers of development, has been no accident – no stone fell. It has been a careful measured performance, a slow and exact process of erasure.

## BENNELONG'S HOUSE



follow the things themselves, for their meaning are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things.<sup>26</sup>

Like the young men in Michael Taussig's paraphrase of David Collins, it could be said that the Opera House 'sits on the shoulders' of Bennelong's house, on the Point that bears his name. On the spot where the Sydney Opera House now stands, in 1790 a small brick house sat, built on the orders of Governor Arthur Phillip – at the behest of the local man known as Bennelong. In the casual way that the naming of places once occurred, Bennelong Point has its name, it would seem, because it was a place that Bennelong frequented and he frequented that place because his house was there; there is a causal link. The house, sometimes described as a hut, fell into disrepair after a short period of use and was pulled down in 1795 yet despite its physical absence it continues, I maintain, to reverberate.

As part of the city's, and hence the country's, foundation story the house's history is frequently retold, but like many well-known and repeated stories, it is often adumbrated, or told too quickly. The reverberation that this repetition sets up takes on the form of a chorus, not a main story but something that nevertheless suggests or underscores the mood of the tale being told and in this way the reverberation takes on a more haunting form. As will be detailed in the following passages, the house was an object in which culture was concretised, a culture whose moral right to claim and occupy the country, let alone build houses on it, continues to be discussed. The imprint of history at Bennelong's Point is difficult to ignore.

The evidence that the house existed is indisputable; it figures in too many texts and images to have been fictive. Despite it having existed for only between four and five years, allusion to it is woven like a mantra through almost all of the texts documenting the early years of British settlement, and is repeated in many contemporary texts dealing with the foundation of European Australia.

### Background

The circumstances leading up to the building of the house are well-known<sup>27</sup> so I will just summarise them here. Anxious for contact with the local inhabitants, who after initial contact had been giving the British and the area they occupied a wide berth, in November 1789 Governor Arthur Phillip had effected the capture of two local men, known later by the names Bennelong and Colbee. Phillip wanted to continue the communication begun with the earlier kidnapping of another local, Arabanoo, who had been forcibly captured in December 1788 but had died of smallpox in May 1789. Colbee escaped within a matter of days, but Bennelong remained at Government House until May 1790. He appeared at first to show that he was not unhappy there, and Watkin Tench in his eyewitness account of the colony comments:

But Baneelon, though haughty, knew how to temporize. He quickly threw

<sup>26</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

<sup>27</sup> They are documented in the early accounts and interpretations can be found in many texts on the founding of the British colony. Recent examination and interpretation in Smith (2001) and Clendinnen (2003) below are examples.

off all reserve; and pretended, nay, at particular moments, perhaps felt satisfaction in his new state.<sup>28</sup>

and he and Phillip, Tench noted, had appeared to get along well,

Again, as a mark of affection and respect to the governor, he conferred on him the name of Wolarawaree, and sometimes called him 'Beenna' (father), adopting to himself the name of governor. This interchange we found is a constant symbol of friendship among them. In a word, his temper seemed pliant, and his relish of our society so great, that hardly any one judged he would attempt to quit us, were the means of escape put within his reach.<sup>29</sup>

But they were and he did. Then in September 1790, while visiting Manly Cove and attempting to make contact with a large group of Aboriginals, Phillip was speared. Keith Smith and Inga Clendinnen, both of whom have examined the period of first contact and written thoughtfully-argued interpretations, construe this incident as a ritual spearing, organised by Bennelong. Both consider him to have been a keen strategist and suggest the incident was aimed at spilling British blood in a payback for wrongs the British had committed, and thus consolidating his position amongst his own people.<sup>30</sup>

### Entanglements

There was little contact between the two cultures at Sydney Cove after Phillip's spearing, until after a period of seemingly ritualised approaches by both sides, Bennelong was persuaded to visit the Governor, with the promise of a hatchet as an encouragement. The meeting was by all accounts warm on both sides and marked the beginning of the period referred to frequently as the 'coming in', after which an Aboriginal presence around Sydney Cove was common. It was now that Bennelong asked that a house be built for him. Given the political manoeuvring that had been going on, this is most likely to have been a politically strategic act on Bennelong's part and what Phillip hoped for in exchange is open to conjecture; but the request and Phillip's agreement to it doubtless was part of a complex web of cross-cultural exchange carried on by both sides. Records of exchanges, at both Botany Bay and Port Jackson, pepper the written accounts of first contact between the English and the Aborigines and both curiosities and useful objects were given and taken by both sides, and sometimes just taken.

In her essay "'To establish a commerce of this sort. . .'" – Cross-Cultural exchange at the Port Jackson Settlement' Isobel McBryde points out that exchange for both parties was a familiar practice, in the English case through their experience in other colonial situations or in instances during travels where they were required to barter for goods or services. She argues that for the Aborigines too, exchange was well-established:

Exchange of goods marked the greeting of strangers, cemented marriage arrangements, political or judicial adjustments, and accompanied ritual and ceremony. Traditions of reciprocity in the conduct of relationships of all kinds were strong, and the re-distribution of valued goods played a significant role in social, political and ceremonial life. At both the individual and group level it was important for the acquisition and maintenance of status, hence power.<sup>31</sup>

Contemporaneous accounts of the details of Bennelong's request and Phillip's willingness to comply with it record the details in an infuriatingly sketchy way. Of the earliest accounts,

<sup>28</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, 159.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 160–61.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming in of the Eora: Sydney Cove 1788–1792*. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*.

<sup>31</sup> Isabel McBryde, "'to Establish a Commerce of This Sort. . .'" – Cross-Cultural Exchange at the Port Jackson Settlement', in *Studies from Terra Australis to Australia*, ed. J. P. Hardy, Alan Frost, and Australian Academy of the Humanities. (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1989), 173.

those of Collins and Tench have been most often cited and reiterated as the source of the narrative, and so I repeat them here. Collins gives most space to his account and the scant details he records are:

<sup>32</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, 200.

September 1790. Bennillong, after appointing several days to visit the governor, came at last on the 8<sup>th</sup>, attended by three of his companions. The welcome reception they met with from every one who saw them inspired the strangers with such a confidence in us, that the visit was soon repeated; and at length Bennillong solicited the governor to build him a hut at the extremity of the eastern point of the cove. This the governor, who was very desirous of preserving the friendly intercourse which seemed to have taken place, readily promised, and gave the necessary directions for its being built.<sup>32</sup>

Watkin Tench, is equally brief:

Baneelon, from being accustomed to our manners, and understanding a little English, was the person through whom we wished to prosecute inquiry; but he had lately become a man of so much dignity and consequence, that it was not always easy to obtain his company. Clothes had been given to him at various times; but he did not always condescend to wear them; one day he would appear in them; and the next day he was to be seen carrying them in a net, slung around his neck. Farther to please him, a brick house, of 12 feet square, was built for his use, and for that of such of his countrymen as might chuse to reside in it, on a point of land fixed upon by himself. A shield, double cased with tin, to ward off the spears of his enemies, was also presented to him, by the governor.<sup>33</sup>

Both make it clear that an exchange was taking place. Collins suggests that what the Government wanted in return was '*friendly intercourse*' and Tench '*that their inquiry could be prosecuted*'. At a glance it might seem to have represented a fair deal; a house in return for local knowledge, or an elevation of one's position in the minds of compatriots in return for friendly chat. But the reality of what the house symbolised, bound up as it was in a whole network of exchange, was quite different: a house/hut for culture. The house built was a small one and existing images of it show it to be a very modest structure indeed. As such its location, physically, probably played no role in shaping it, but the forces at work in Sydney Cove certainly did.

Bennelong (as far as we know) made no request for the *land*, the *place* - his request was just for a house - he surely presumed the land was not Phillip's to give, and Phillip (as far as we know) signed nothing over. The place Bennelong had '*fixed upon*' was the finger of land that formed the eastern point of Sydney Cove. Phillip, in the first years, authorised adjacent to it a salt works and a place for the boiling down of tallow on the side fronting Sydney Cove, and later a limeburning kiln on the western side. Most likely the house had the same status vis a vis land ownership as those amenities, that is they were sitting on what the administration of the day saw as Crown Land. Although the Governor's Domain, of which Bennelong Point formed a part, was not formally marked out until late 1792, Phillip set out no public buildings on it and existing images show none of the small houses or built structures that are pictured in other parts of Sydney Cove. Presumably then, Phillip had it in mind to set it aside for some sort of Government use from the beginning.

Although Phillip's *Instructions* dated 25 April 1787<sup>34</sup> authorised him to give land grants to emancipists – and this was amended later to include other settlers – land was not formally being parcelled out in the first years. Collins records in July 1790 that Phillip received 'for the first time' instructions from the Secretary of State 'respecting the granting of lands and the allotting of grounds in townships'.<sup>35</sup> It seems clear that the British used the land as if it was theirs, following the steps they had formulated to assert sovereignty over it. In 1962, the writer Marjorie Barnard stated it dispassionately – and concisely:

The history of land tenure in Australia began very simply with one assumption: all land was the property of the Crown. The aborigines alone might have been supposed to have some claim upon it and they, probably, at that time no more thought of a right to the earth they trod than to the air they breathed.<sup>36</sup>

The first land grant was not made until 1791 when 30 acres, called Experiment Farm, was granted to James Ruse,<sup>37</sup> who had previously been given land to work, and before 1800 there are no records of land allotted to an Aboriginal.

But in 1790 the land that comprised the eastern point of Sydney Cove, Phillip most likely saw as belonging to the King, not Bennelong or his fellow Aborigines, whereas Bennelong in all likelihood saw it as being his, or if not his personally, then at least 'his' in terms of ownership by his people. The facts of land ownership amongst the original inhabitants are unclear as is whether Bennelong had any claim to Dubagullee, or (or Tobegully, the name recorded on James Meehan's 1807 map<sup>38</sup>, or Jubgalee which the Geographic Names Board of N.S.W. formerly suggested<sup>39</sup>) or any of the names given to the eastern point of the cove. There is nothing written down to say that he did and no known oral history is extant. Collins records that both before he went to England and after he returned, Bennelong claimed that a place, Me-Mel (Goat Island), where he was observed to frequently spend time, belonged to him and that when he died he would pass it on to a person who he named.<sup>40</sup> The language was not a written one, but there are Sydney language words recorded by various First Fleet diarists that clearly ascribe personal (if not group) ownership to belongings:

His:	<i>Dar-ing-al</i>
Mine, that's mine:	<i>Dan-nai</i>
Yours:	<i>Gnee-ne-de</i>
Stealing:	<i>Car-rah-ma</i> <sup>41</sup>

Ownership was clearly a concept in use within Aboriginal culture.

### Exchange? Barter? Gift? Trade? Commodity?

The structures Bennelong's house shared the point with were civic instrumentalities; they produced goods and materials. What was produced – or performed – at Bennelong's house was a service, and though the house was similarly a civic instrument, it was an altogether more abstract one. Brick houses at Sydney Cove in 1790 were hard won so it is clear the house was a thing of value. Less clear are the frameworks covering the transaction and the relative value of what might be expected or given in exchange. As previously noted, Collins suggests 'preserving the friendly intercourse which seemed to have taken place' was what the British hoped for in exchange for the house, and Tench's 'with whom we wished to prosecute inquiry' suggests that insight into local knowledge was part of the trade.

<sup>34</sup> *Historical records of New South Wales* 1, Part 11 (1892): 90.

<sup>35</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 104.

<sup>36</sup> Marjorie Barnard, *A History of Australia* (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 268.

<sup>37</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 130.

<sup>38</sup> Paul and Waterson Ashton, Duncan, *Sydney Takes Shape: A History in Maps*, 3rd ed. (Brisbane: Hema Maps Pty. Ltd., 2000), 16.

<sup>39</sup> Geographic Names Board of NSW, *Geographical Names Register Extract* [website] (cited 21 April 2006); available from <http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/name/extract?id=ujKqFxWA>.

<sup>40</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 497.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 510–11.

In discussion of broader exchanges, of which we can take the house to be a part, Isabel McBryde quotes Phillip in a letter to Lord Sydney suggesting that British goods and services will be reciprocated with civilized behaviour on the one hand, and esteem for the source of it on the other:

In the [same] letter he states his intention of persuading some Aboriginal people to 'settle near us' 'who I mean to furnish with everything that can tend to civilize them, and to give them a high opinion of the new guests'.<sup>42</sup>

Then McBryde suggests that '*In return Aborigines offer fish, artefacts, services and a toleration of strangers within local territory.*' And, in relation to the value that these might represent, reminds us: '*We should not underestimate the value of any of these.*'<sup>43</sup> I'd suggest that, in relation to the gifting of the house, it was behaviour deemed 'civilised', and toleration of strangers the British most sought in 1790. The British had proved themselves able – by using nets – to supply themselves with fish in quantities greater than the more sustainable local methods they primarily documented – that of spearing individual fish – produced. Though they underwent periods when food was scarce, they couldn't have conceived that the locals could offer enough food to sustain the British 1000-strong population. The push to get hold of Aboriginal artefacts, which the British – convicts, officers, settlers and marines – had eagerly sought to acquire for their own collections or to sell to visiting ships, had most probably settled down by then. But acquiescence born of respect and shared civic and cultural values were of course harder to come by.

As an Aborigine to make overtures toward, Bennelong was perhaps the most obvious choice. He was familiar to the British, reputedly easy to get along with and entertaining, he had learnt some English during his period of incarceration and so probably seemed, to a degree, adaptable to foreign ways. It could be that the British also perceived in Bennelong a desire to boost his own standing amongst his fellow countrymen and women by gaining direct access to British consumables and technologies. Thinking Bennelong to be a central figure amongst the Aborigines, the British perhaps used him to show what might be offered to all, though there is no evidence that houses were provided for anyone else. Given that Aboriginal culture is characterised by a sharing of possessions, as opposed to the emulative behaviour that marks much of western culture – where one person wants what the other has – perhaps no one else asked for their own house.

The new brick house built for Bennelong formed just one of the commodities in a complex web of transactions and exchanges; but it was the most evident symbol, the most physically imposing object, if not the most desired or useful, put on the table by the British at the time. I use the term 'commodity' here to describe the house so as to underscore the idea that it was one of, in Arjun Appadurai's terms, the '*medium[s] of gifting*',<sup>44</sup> and not to describe it as fitting a category only exchangeable with money which the term can imply.

A house gifted without money changing hands is a complex thing, and this one more than most because its relationship to place is unclear: Who owned the land? Who owned the house? Questions such as these of course are from a Western perspective but they are questions that Bennelong most probably realised the answers to quite quickly. If events at Sydney Cove shaped the house, the small clay brick house could be said, at this early stage, to be shaping the Point – as British.

<sup>42</sup> McBryde, "to Establish a Commerce of This Sort..." – Cross-Cultural Exchange at the Port Jackson Settlement', 172.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>44</sup> Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, 5.

Western thinking in the areas of inter and intra-cultural exchange has been greatly influenced by the work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss and his ideas on gifting and reciprocity. Traditionally in the literature the focus was on defining *types* of exchanges, and this saw gift and barter always in contrast with commodity. Here, 'gift' and 'barter' were elided with, put baldly, primitive economy (clan-based society) and 'commodity' with western economy (class-based society). In 1984 the American sociologist Arjun Appadurai, famously, sought to transgress the emphasis this model gave to alterity by '*focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or function of exchange.*'<sup>45</sup>

Appadurai defined the term 'commodity', used in its traditional sense, as associated with monetary exchange, barter with pragmatic exchanges not involving sociality and the term gift as describing exchanges embedded in social and cultural norms and traditions. His adjustments argued that these terms were being considered as mutually exclusive when in fact in exchange situations all, or at least more than one, could be in play. He proposed instead an approach where:

the commodity situation in the social life of any 'thing' be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.<sup>46</sup>

All things then, he maintains, have '*commodity potential*', and they can move in and out of this phase over time. Further, commodities exist within '*regimes of value*' which may or may not be based in common understandings between parties of what value constitutes, but which determine their '*candicacy*' for '*commodity-hood*', and finally he posits that there are '*commodity contexts*' in which the candicacy of the thing and its commodity phase collide.

Now where Bennelong's house fits in this conception of exchange is difficult, from such a distance, to say with any conviction. I refer to Bennelong's house here alternately as 'gift' and as 'exchange' so as to keep uppermost the idea that both involve reciprocation of some sort. No money was exchanged and, though it might have been bartered, the conditions of the exchange in that case would have been more clearly delineated. What makes it problematic as a gift/exchange, though, are the differing British and Aboriginal cultural understandings which stood on either side of it.

In terming it at times a 'gift' it is not my intention to suggest it was a passively received thing. Bennelong after all asked for it and as the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas, another influential voice in the area, has argued:

... local relations and representations are never totally encompassed or determined by the violence of colonialism, and [that] the distinctive forms of indigenous sociality and politics contribute in a crucial way to the dynamics of accommodation and resistance constitutive of colonial history.<sup>47</sup>

And the contemporary accounts record that the house was used as the Aborigines saw fit. Bennelong's house may have formed a locus at which Aborigines gathered, but Collins and Tench et al record that Phillip's house was also much visited. Mention is made too of Aborigines staying at various places around the new settlement and so although ostensibly the house was to perform the role of 'gathering place', the local Aboriginal population also appears to have gathered where they pleased. Although the chimney shown in images tells us there was a fireplace inside the house, most of the records are

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 36.



of gatherings at the hut, or at fires outside it; there are few references to anyone being inside. It was pulled down five years after it went up, discarded and in disrepair so as a useful thing it was clearly of limited use to the Aborigines.<sup>48</sup> What might be seen as a lack of regard for it though, might also be construed as a form of resistance.

It is possible to discuss Bennelong's brick house as an exchange in isolation from the parcel of gifted and bartered objects in circulation during the early years of the British at Sydney Cove because, unlike the smaller items such as fish hooks, hatchets, food etc., Phillip, Collins and Tench et al all specified (though broadly) what was hoped for in return. Like the other objects though, the house was problematic as an exchange because differing sets of social and cultural norms and traditions were in operation; in short, neither side knew what entanglements exchange entailed in terms of the other's culture. Difference was everywhere remarked upon in the early encounters, and the British response to it was conditioned by the prevailing ideologies of their day. In the late 18th Century they saw the Pacific, it has been suggested, as a '*large British lake*'<sup>49</sup> and they perhaps saw its inhabitants as being at an earlier stage of a timeline of which *their* kind were at the apex.

So although difference was apprehended it was not allowed to stem the coercion of which their gifting was a part and there was little recognition that the relative values of the exchange were incommensurate. Little sense is gained from the records of an understanding of the responsibilities and behaviours it might have entailed for the Aborigines or of the entanglement of land, place, people and experience that Aboriginal culture comprised. '*Preserving friendly intercourse*', '*Farther to please*' and '*to civilize them, and to give them a high opinion of the new guests*' are phrases both innocent yet treacherous, but they give a hint of the processual enterprise the house was part of.

By 1790, the British had structures in place and control of technology sufficient for the building of brick houses. A few houses for the upper echelon – Phillip, Collins, Alt, Johnson – were already built and Bennelong must quickly have estimated the value accorded to those who had them, and so Appadurai's '*commodity context*' can be seen to have arisen from this collision of situations. Many, including officers, were still housed in tents or wattle and daub huts or other makeshift shelters that fared badly when it rained. Convicts were making their own shelters from discarded canvas or from bush materials and all of the official government-supported effort was toward public buildings; storehouses were a priority, and, gradually, housing for officers and marines.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the differing comparisons of value that characterised the exchange enterprise as a whole, I suggest that both parties saw the house at that moment as being valuable within their own '*regimes of value*'. The building of a brick house to Phillip represented a significant effort in terms of time and labour at a period when the small enclave was struggling to provide its own basic needs – it represented a thing of value.

By first kidnapping and then singling him out, the British had placed Bennelong in the position of their '*interlocutor*'<sup>51</sup> and as such he could well have seen their compliance with his request for a house as according *him*, and his role, significant value. Regardless of its commodity-status though, I contend that it remained, and remains to this day, in Elizabeth Weiner's construction, '*an inalienable object*'.<sup>52</sup> That is, it was an object that was given, yet kept, in a sense, at the same time. Like an heirloom brooch, or a country estate, its provenance remained, and remains, an integral part of its value. It is unusual perhaps to consider that '*inalienability*' could be preserved in an object no longer in existence, but Bennelong's house, I maintain, has been kept '*alive*' with his name and by the continued circulation of the story of the house, especially as I discussed in Section 2, in relation

<sup>48</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, Vol 1, 362.

<sup>49</sup> James Auchmuty in Arthur Phillip, William Eden Auckland, and James Johnston Auchmuty, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay: With Contributions by Other Officers of the First Fleet and Observations on Affairs of the Time* by Lord Auckland (Sydney: Angus & Robertson in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, 1970), xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Bridges, *Foundations of Identity: Building Early Sydney 1788–1822* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995). This is just one of a number of texts which discuss the chronology and techniques of building at Sydney Cove.

<sup>51</sup> Jakelin Troy, 'By Slow Degrees We Began ... To Understand Each Other ... Even in This the Natives Have the Advantage!', in *Exchanges: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Australia and the Pacific*, ed. Ross Gibson (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1996), 52.

<sup>52</sup> Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

to the history of the Opera House. This gives it power to enact the primary value of inalienability which is:

expressed through the power these objects have to define who one is in a historical sense. The object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into the present, so that the histories of ancestors, titles, or mythological events become an intimate part of a person's present identity.<sup>53</sup>

There is no 'person' here whose identity is being constructed though, it is rather the Sydney Opera House in whose name the house's inalienable status is exploited. Almost all historical and publicity-related material on the Sydney Opera House mentions Phillip, Bennelong and his house and this frequent allusion, reaching back in time, acts to define the Opera House in a historical sense.

What comes through in most of the stories that look back is the favour that Phillip did Bennelong in building him a house. Does 'Bennelong's house' denote anything other than what 'the Surgeon's house', or the 'Lieutenant Governor's house' do? Phillip also caused every house in the settlement to be built, and exchange of a different, though more quantifiable nature was involved here as well – work, loyalty, adherence to a set of rules and conventions etc. were, implicitly, expected in return. But the narration of the story of Bennelong's house is so frequently, almost exclusively, accompanied by 'built by the Governor', or 'which Phillip ordered to be built' that the idea of grace and favour, with all of the dependencies and inequalities that term conveys, is never far away. Where the places those other first colonial houses occupied are ringed by a 'foundation' aura, Bennelong's house is halo-ed as a place where a good deed was done. The truth was, however, that it was a place shaped by terms of exchange that were not only never clear, but untenable anyway.

### Exchange and Value

Although, as I stated earlier, the house as a gift was enmeshed in a broader project of exchange, it is nonetheless useful to evaluate it in terms of the value it might have attracted in 1790 so the forces that shaped it can be better understood. At that time, how hard won was a 12' by 12' house made of bricks with a tile roof; what would have been its significance in terms of resources, both material and human, and who else had a house at that early stage? Ten thousand bricks were brought out on the First Fleet and some of these were used to begin the Governor's house – but they wouldn't have gone far for a six-roomed two-storey building. The making of bricks had obviously been anticipated because 12 brick-moulds are listed among the '*Articles sent on the First Fleet to Botany Bay*,'<sup>54</sup> Collins tells us that as early as March 1788 clay had been found, bricks were being made, and that a kiln was in operation at the brick-fields, situated about a mile from the town at the head of what was known as Long Cove, where the currently named Cockle Bay extended up to the area just north of Central Railway – and now totally reclaimed. We know that a kiln to fire them had been built, because, again Collins lets us know that during fierce rains in August 1788 the '*brick kiln fell in more than once* ...'<sup>55</sup>

The words used by Collins here, 'fell in' suggests that the kiln being used at this time was reasonably sophisticated. The most rudimentary way of firing bricks is to mass them in large, rectangular stacks with channels left running underneath and through the stack. Fuel, usually wood but cow dung or other combustible material was sometimes used, is placed at intervals throughout and fires lit at places on the periphery. The heat produced was sucked through the stack by careful placement of the channels, and helped by the

<sup>53</sup> Annette Weiner, cited in Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, 22–23.

<sup>54</sup>: 388.

<sup>55</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> Worgan, cited in Helen Proudfoot and New South Wales. Dept. of Planning, *Australia's First Government House* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin in conjunction with the New South Wales Dept. of Planning, 1991), 40.

<sup>57</sup> R. J. Ryan, *The Second Fleet Convicts: A Comprehensive Listing of Convicts Who Sailed in Hms Guardian, Lady Juliana, Neptune, Scarborough and Surprise* (Sydney: Australian Documents Library, 1982), 378, 207, 460.

<sup>58</sup> Morton Herman and Morton Earle Herman, *The Early Australian Architects and Their Work* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954); J. M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia: A History*, Pelican Book. (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Books Australia, 1972).

<sup>59</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, 192–93.

<sup>60</sup> John Hunter et al., *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island with the Discoveries Which Have Been Made in New South Wales and in the Southern Ocean since the Publication of Phillip's Voyage, Compiled from the Official Papers, Including the Journals of Governors Phillip and King and of Lieut. Ball; and the Voyages from the First Sailing of the Sirius in 1787 to the Return of That Ship's Company in 1792*, *Australiana Facsimile Editions*; No. 148, 457.

<sup>61</sup> a 'moulding stool' is a table on which bricks are made.

<sup>62</sup> Warwick Gemmell, *And So We Graft from Six to Six: The Brickmakers of New South Wales* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 18.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Nicholas, *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past, Studies in Australian History*. (Cambridge, England: Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 187.

<sup>64</sup> I am indebted to the ACT

additional fuel. In this way a large number of bricks could be fired without the need for a kiln; they made their own. These kilns, known as 'clamps' (figure 14), tend not to 'fall in', but more to collapse.

'Falling in', suggests that a roof was in place and Warwick Gemmel, in his history of brick production in Australia, suggests that by the time Collins records this, an updraught 'Scotch' kiln (figure 15) was in use. George Worgan, in May 1788, records that 'between 20,000 and 30,000 bricks had been made by then'<sup>56</sup> and, given the small number of bricks bought from England it would not be unusual for a clamp kiln to have been built first and bricks from this used to build the ultimately more efficient and consistent Scotch kiln in service by August.

Building of such kilns is specialist knowledge but presumably one of the brickmakers listed amongst the convicts had that expertise. This is not unexpected as in Britain at the time many small or non-urban brickworks would have had workers performing a number of tasks, division of labour having not yet permeated to a full extent. There were a number of brickmakers amongst the convicts, the chief amongst whom appear to have been Samuel Wheeler, John King and James Bloodworth.<sup>57</sup> Bloodworth was later made Superintendent of Works, and is cited as being responsible for the design of many early Sydney buildings, including the first Government House.<sup>58</sup> He appears to have been the most able and so it is probable that he was far too busy on official business to contribute to the practical aspects of brickmaking, though he possibly supervised or undertook the building of the brick kiln.

Watkin Tench describes in some detail the work of Wheeler and King in November 1790 and this allows an estimation of some of the costs involved in building a small house:

Wheeler (one of the master brick-makers) with two tile stools and one brick stool, was tasked to make and burn ready for use 30000 tiles and bricks per month. He had twenty-one hands to assist him, who performed every thing; cut wood, dug clay, etc. . . . . From June, with one brick and two tile stools he has been tasked to make 40000 bricks and tiles monthly (as many of each sort as may be), having twenty-two men and two boys to assist him, on the same terms of procuring materials as before. They fetch the clay of which tiles are made, two hundred yards; that for bricks is close at hand.<sup>59</sup>

Tench goes on to detail the output of the other chief brickmaker John King and this is similar to that of Wheeler. The 'general Return of Male Convicts' of July 1790 shows that of the 908 convicts:

40 were employed making bricks and tiles.  
50 bringing in bricks, &c. for the new store-house  
19 Bricklayers and labourers employed in building a store-house and huts at Rose-Hill.<sup>60</sup>

Around 1000 bricks per day per stool<sup>61</sup> over a working day of 13 hours would have been standard production in late 18th Century England.<sup>62</sup> Convicts worked approximately 10 hours a day at Sydney Cove<sup>63</sup> and so would have made slightly less – around 800, and from Tench's description above this represented the output of approximately 21 men working in a team. A house 3.5 x 3.5 m square would require between 26,500–30,000 bricks.<sup>64</sup> so this amount would have taken 21 men 35 days to produce and with two teams working, that is, the '40 men employed making bricks and tiles', 17.5 days.

potter Ian Jones for this calculation.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 278.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Norman Selfe, 'Sydney Past, Present and Possible,' *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 1, Part 12 (1905/6): 239.

In an unusually detailed account, Collins gives a good description of the processes used to cart bricks from the brick-fields to the town,<sup>65</sup> and we can do further calculations from this. Wooden carts pulled by convicts were used, each cart could carry 350 bricks and was pulled by 12 men who on a standard day would make 5 return trips. Therefore Bennelong's house would have required 75 cartloads of 350 bricks. Pulled by 12 men making 5 trips a day it would take 15 days to carry the 26,500 bricks needed from Brickfield Hill to Bennelong Point. Then to that should be added the digging of clay and its preparation, a process which entailed it being trampled underfoot while it was in a wet, plastic state and sticks, stones etc being removed by hand, before it was left to dry to a workable consistency. The making and carting of roof tiles – that I have not calculated – the cutting, carting and preparing of wood for the framework, the digging and mixing of mortar, and the time taken for building, would also need to be taken into consideration.

The calculations above are of course estimates only, but they suggest that approximately 52 convicts were required for a total in all of 20 days, and this, once allowance is made for framing, building etc., would total in all under one month. According to Collins, the house was promised on 8 September, and he records it as being finished in November, and occupied in the middle of that month, a time frame that shows Phillip must have given it some priority in a busy building schedule.

### Exchange: what for what

This demonstrates that the building of the house represents, I believe, in late 1790 a not insignificant cost in labour and resources to Phillip. His own house had been completed in 1789, the Reverend Johnson and the Surveyor Alt were housed, and Collins' house was finished in January 1790. But the surgeon John White did not have a brick house until 1791 and John and Elizabeth McArthur were living in a wattle and daub house after their arrival in 1790 as were many of the marines and officers; so a brick house/hut for Bennelong would perhaps have caused some jealousies.

In July 1790 a road had been built between the town and the brick-kilns '*for the greater ease and expedition in bringing in bricks to the different buildings*'.<sup>66</sup> There are only two roads leading to the brick-fields on Phillip's 1791–2 map, (Figure 16) one goes via the Government Farm then on to Government House, and the other is High St, now George Street, and this is the route that most probably would have been taken, though either would have entailed negotiating the hill separating the brick-fields from the town. Slope tends to be masked in the modern city, but it can still easily be recognised that the brick fields were in a valley and in 1790 the hill between them and the top of Brickfield's Hill, around the current Sydney Town Hall, was steep. In what must have been a fairly massive undertaking, levelling out of the hill was carried out in mid 1837 and 15 feet of rock and soil were removed from the hill's highest point and used to fill in the swampy lower parts of the valley.<sup>67</sup> So in 1790 the route to the town entailed climbing the steep hill and then making the long slow descent towards the harbour. Walking it today, well shod and with no cart of bricks to pull or push can only give a small idea of the effort it would have entailed. Five return trips a day of approximately two kilometres, wearing the standard issue shoes where the one shape was worn on both left and right feet, and along what was probably a rough track from the end of the new road to the Point puts the cost of the small house to the convict worker high.

To the Governor, even if providing the house caused some disquiet amongst the men and women under his charge, and even if it was short-lived – it was little used after Bennelong accompanied Phillip on his return to England in 1792 – it probably came out

<sup>68</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 100.

<sup>69</sup> Graham Connah and Douglas Hobbs, *The Archaeology of Australia's History* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ashton, *Sydney Takes Shape: A History in Maps*, 12.

<sup>71</sup> Smith relates many of the occasions when particular people are named, as an example see Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming in of the Eora: Sydney Cove 1788–1792*, 75–77.

<sup>72</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, 200.

of his cost/benefit analysis well. Many of the early accounts record that Aboriginals, in late 1790 were increasingly visiting the town, and in particular McBryde and Clendinnen have shown that the Governor's house was a place they frequented, that some ate and slept there intermittently, or used as a refuge. The house built for Bennelong then was not the only place in town to stay, but it provided at a crucial time, I contend, a *concentrated* place, a place that gave Phillip access to, in Yi-fu Tuan's conception, the lucidity that architectural space confers.<sup>68</sup> It positioned a group of Aboriginals in a space the British understood, a house, and in a place that could now take form – as the place they gathered, and from there, even if they did not all make use of it, their fellow countrymen and women would get to see and hear of its advantage.

In Tench's description of the gifting he suggests the house was given not just to Bennelong but also '*... for that of such of his countrymen as might chuse (sic) to reside in it*'. We know that the houses being built for officers, for Collins, Surgeon White, Engineer Alt etc. were single dwellings for a sole occupant and that the marines shared barracks. The convicts were at first housed in tents or other rough shelters but from 1790 huts were being built for them at Parramatta in which ten men were housed in two rooms measuring 7.3 by 3.7 metres.<sup>69</sup> In Sydney by the end of 1792, brick houses had been built for convicts that housed 10 in a single room sized 26 feet by 16 feet (8.6 x 5.3m).<sup>70</sup>

Given those ratios, a 3 metre by 3 metre brick house/hut in 1790 might be expected to hold, if the Aboriginals were designated similarly to 'convict', possibly 5 people at most and this suggests it was a gift meant for Bennelong and his closer family group. This adds weight to the idea that one of the aims of the gifting was to show by example the benefits to be gained by acquiescing to the British way of life. In this respect the house could be seen as a very early example of the 'model home' – a device used to this day by estate agents to convince people of the benefits of living in newly developed or opened up areas, both of which were rapidly taking place at Sydney Cove.

The immediate benefits of the house to those who used it at the time, though, are difficult to assess. Smith mentions various of Bennelong's friends and relatives being at the house: his wives Barangaroo and Kurubarabulu and her father Mety, and Colbee are all recorded as being there at some time.<sup>71</sup> Even though many of the early accounts mention activity at the house at one time or another, they usually only mention it at times of particular strife, such as when Tench mentions in late November 1790, that '*the natives were observed to assemble in more than an ordinary number, at their house at the point ... and to be full of bustle and agitation ...*'<sup>72</sup> We don't have a very clear idea of who these 'usual numbers' were, if they represented a particular group, or what percentage of the population they comprised.

What was happening at the Brickfields, the extraction of clay and the attendant degradation of the landscape, the changes it made to topography, the clutter and mess of mixing and forming bricks must have made a huge visual impact. As stated previously, it is quite possible that the British were led to the source of clay used for the bricks by the locals. In other contexts Arthur Phillip speaks of putting to use 'the clay the natives mark themselves with' and so observing this practice perhaps led the British to the area around the Brickfields. How the local people must have felt to see the rapid escalation of mining taking place, the opening up of huge holes and crevices, the piles of broken bricks, the whole rapidly expanding industrial conglomeration, is hard to imagine. But for a culture with a strong spiritual attachment to country this wholesale plunder of the earth must have caused grief.

<sup>73</sup> Val Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past: Investigating the Archaeological and Historical Records* (Sydney, N.S.W.: UNSW Press, 2002), 23.

<sup>74</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 493.

As an individual, Bennelong's status may have benefited by his acquisition of a house but this would most likely have been from the act of having his request met, or his being singled out as intermediary, rather than a house as such being a thing of desire, or even very useful, amongst his group. It offered shelter from the wind, rain and sun, but so did the time-honoured means they already had at their disposal. To those who desired to avail themselves of the things the British had to offer, such as easily gotten fishhooks, lines, food and drink etc, it provided a place to sleep or to gather amongst their own which was also close to their regular food source, the sea and the rocks.

But the cost to Bennelong and his fellow Aboriginals, when measured in terms of what was expected from them in return: their '*living peaceably amongst us*', with all that implied, is inestimable. When put so baldly it seems an absurdity and far too simplistic to even discuss a small house in these terms yet, as I have argued, the house was one of the most visible symbols of the forces at work at that time. I believe that despite its absence it continues to carry a symbolic load today and therefore a degree of emphasis or exaggeration in relation to the price to be paid is warranted.

### THE POINT: THE PLACE WHERE THE HOUSE WAS

Almost without fail, wherever in the early accounts the building of the house is specified, it is recorded that Bennelong specified its location – he chose the place. In a table summarising early specifications of place names around Sydney, Attenbrow lists the name 'Cadigal' as covering the Bennelong Point area.<sup>73</sup> though there is no record of that specific place being the property of any particular family group. Given that Bennelong specified Me-Mel (Goat Island) as 'his', it is possible that Dubbagullee was 'someone's' as well, though whether the personal pronouns here denote land ownership or a form of custodianship, or other relationship is not clear. So it is unlikely that he 'owned' Dubbagullee. Similarly it is difficult to gain an appreciation of how the Point was used, how often, or by whom. Collins does describe one incident he was privy to that demonstrates most probably one of the uses to which it was put. Curious to see how a family party might act when out of British view, and coming one day, by accident, upon a family group at the Point, he obviously observes them for some time, then later describes:

Having strolled down to the Point named Too-bow-gu-liè, I saw the sister and the young wife of Bennillong coming round the Point in the new canoe which the husband had cut in his last excursion to Parramatta. They had been out to procure fish, and were keeping time with their paddles, responsive to the words of a song, in which they joined with much good humour and harmony. They were almost immediately joined by Bennillong, who had his sister's child on his shoulders. The canoe was hauled on shore, and what fish they had caught the women brought up. I observed that the women seated themselves at some little distance from Bennillong, and then the group was thus disposed of – the husband was seated on a rock, preparing to dress and eat the fish he had just received. On the same rock lay his pretty sister War-re-weer asleep in the sun, with a new born infant in her arms; and at some little distance were seated, rather below him, his other sister and his wife, the wife opening and eating some rock-oysters, and the sister sucking her child, Kah-dier-rang, whom she had taken from Bennillong.<sup>74</sup>

There is an air of wistfulness in the above description; he has given an 18<sup>th</sup> Century 'noble

savage' inflection to the scene, but he could genuinely have wished, and who could blame him, to swap his presumably heavy clothing and the responsibilities of his position for lunch on the rocks by the sea in the company of family.

Either way, this single description shows Dubbagullee as a place where, previously, actions of daily life occurred – unremarkably – whereas in the now-occupied and irretrievably changed place, two sets of everydayness were being played out side-by-side, though not in synch. Keith Smith, who begins his text *Bennelong*<sup>75</sup> with a refigured telling of this story, dates the event to 1791 but it is clear, from the references to the extensive shell middens that existed at Dubbagullee and in the vicinity,<sup>76</sup> collected and burnt for lime, that similar shared meals must have been taken there for millennia. From Collin's description we also get to know that it was a place that provided easy access between sea and land and this is demonstrated clearly in some of the early drawings and paintings discussed below.

'Tubowgule', the name used for the Point by Maria Nugent in a recent text on the history of Botany Bay, is attributed by her as meaning '*meeting of the waters*',<sup>77</sup> and that makes sense, it does separate the waters of the inner and outer harbour though whether the name refers to the land mass, or to the harbour waters is unclear.

Walking around Bennelong Point today it is interesting to speculate exactly where the house would have been. The *exact* place it stood is not known; in the early images it is shown as being in slightly different positions. Tim McCormick's *First Views of Australia: 1788–1825*<sup>78</sup> gathers together a number of images made around the time which show the Point, and all of these depict it as a rocky tidal promontory and the accounts state that it was separated from the main body of land at some high-tides. While it is difficult to know how accurate the existing views are, most show a flat rocky shelf rising then in a series of slopes with some trees, rock and grassy areas nearer the water, and denser forest at the rear. The Italian artist Fernando Brambilla, in 1793 shows the rear part of the Point to be a dense forest with cabbage tree palms rising high above it (Figure 7).

Two unsigned images, one thought to date from 1790 (figure 17) and one, McCormick suggests was possibly made by John Eyre, from 1804 (figure 18) give a further idea of the general shape of the Point. The later image looks to have been made at high tide with just the top of the submerged rocky shelf clearly pictured. Despite presenting a stylised view it shows the fairly seamless transition between sea and land and suggests access between the two would have been easy.

## Why that Place?

I've suggested above that it is improbable that Bennelong had specific ownership of Dubbagullee and it is not recorded *why* he chose that specific place for his house. Mary Casey<sup>79</sup> suggests he chose it because it was: easily accessible by land or sea, close to food resources, and close enough to the Governor's house for visiting. Or, I suggest, it could have been that strategically Bennelong saw that it was ideally situated as a meeting place for both northern and southern groups, or it could have been that it was the only one of the three most obviously well placed sites still vacant. The observatory occupied Dawes Point on the western arm of the cove, and Phillip's Government House commanded the elevated mid-point of the cove. Or, it could have been he recognised in the Point that, in an early echo of Lucy Grace Ellem's words regarding the choice of site for the Opera House:

. . . the site chosen, Bennelong Point, conforms to the essential characteristic of a status symbol: maximum display.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming in of the Eora: Sydney Cove 1788–1792*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, 2nd ed. (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1988; reprint, 1988), 11. Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past: Investigating the Archaeological and Historical Records*.

<sup>77</sup> Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet* (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 194.

<sup>78</sup> Tim McCormick, *First Views of Australia 1788–1825: A History of Early Sydney* (Chippendale, N.S.W.: David Ell Press with Longueville Publications, 1987).

<sup>79</sup> Mary Casey, 'Remaking the Government Domain, 1788–1821: Landscape, Archaeology and Meaning' (2002), 106.

<sup>80</sup> Anthony Bradley, Terry Smith, and Bernard Smith, *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 193.

Looking at the layout of the town in Figures 6, 7, 16 and 19, the site looks to have been quite isolated but a good vantage point, given the clearing that had taken place, for observing all that occurred on both land and on water:

Bennelong may also have noted that as a place reserved for the Governor, informally at this stage, it was marked as special, as symbolic, and this may have influenced his choice. There is also a chance, though, that it belonged to one of his enemies and that Phillip's protection there accorded him special status. And of course, like many after him, he may have just been attracted to it as a beautiful spot. At least in claiming the most advantageous spot, and one that could most likely have been seen from anywhere within the settlement, Bennelong was asserting his right to not be overlooked.

It could also have been that the accounts of Collins et al compress or neglect detail and that the siting of the house was in fact a negotiated position. If that was the case and Phillip chose the place, then he situated it, and by extension the people it was meant to house, within the area he had earmarked as Crown Land. Keith Smith has slyly suggested that Bennelong's house could be thought of as the first Aboriginal embassy;<sup>81</sup> but perhaps Bennelong Point could also have been the first place designated 'Aboriginal Reserve'? Certainly none of the British lived in the vicinity, and maybe Dubbagullee fulfilled Phillip's aim, stated earlier, of having the Aboriginals 'settle near us'<sup>82</sup>, but not 'among us'.

Looking again at the 1791–2 map Phillip had drawn up prior to leaving the colony (Figure 16) we see Phillip occupying the middle ground of the Cove and the rest of the British settlement arc-ing from his residence over the Tank Stream, down the arm forming The Rocks and then on toward Observatory Hill and Dawes Point. On the arm of land which formed the third side of the cove Bennelong's house is not marked but because we know it is there, we can sense he and his fellow Aboriginals coming and going, sometimes gathering at Dubbagullee, the place that was still, when his house was built, not yet Bennelong's Point. Maria Nugent uses this phrase 'not yet...' to describe the status of the country in 1788 as Cook and his men sat in their boat near Gooriwaal, the north head of Botany Bay. At that stage, she remarks, the land was still '*unambiguously indigenous. It is Gooriwaal, not yet Botany Bay.*'<sup>83</sup> Two years later in 1790, a few miles further up the coast we know that the Point had an informally used name, Cattle Point – it was the place the fleet's livestock were offloaded – and a phonetically spelled Aboriginal name; no ambiguity there either.

### What can be seen in the early images?

Was it a house or a hut? Collins calls it a 'hut', Tench calls it a 'house', Hunter calls it a 'hut'. An architectural historian, Robert Irving calls it a 'hut', and from his description so would I, though here I follow the majority of descriptions which render it 'house'. Irving gives one of the most complete descriptions of it:

It had a tiled roof, . . . It also had a fireplace and a chimney, a doorway and one window. Early views of the town show the little building with a pyramid-shaped roof, the door facing west, the window overlooking the north shore, and the chimney on the south side. and As far as is known the hut had no furniture, no door, and no window sash or shutter.<sup>84</sup>

In McCormick's 'First Views', the one overriding impression of the house that the images give is a sense of isolation. There are a number of contributing reasons for this: overall, the house is shown to be much smaller than the other houses/huts depicted and this lends an air of the abject to it; it looks so *meagre*. Most of the views are taken from the west side

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming in of the Eora: Sydney Cove 1788–1792*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> McBryde, "'to Establish a Commerce of This Sort....'" – Cross-Cultural Exchange at the Port Jackson Settlement', 179.

<sup>83</sup> Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Irving and Richard Apperly, *The History & Design of the Australian House* (Melbourne; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 36.



<sup>85</sup> Baiba Beata Berzins and State Library of New South Wales., *The Coming of the Strangers: Life in Australia 1788–1822* (Sydney: Collins Australia/ State Library of New South Wales, 1988), 44.

<sup>86</sup> Ian McLean, 'Landscape and Ideology: Picturing Sydney Cove 200 Years Ago,' in *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies*, ed. David S. Trigger and Gareth Griffiths (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 119.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Barber, 'Malaspina and George III Brambila and Watling: Three Discovered Drawings of Sydney and Parramatta by Fernando Brambila,' *Australian Journal of Art XV* (1993): 38.

of the cove, from the area today known as The Rocks, and so this relative smallness could have been the result of a perspectival schema. The area surrounding the house is shown as being predominately quite bare – the flat rocky platform of the tip of the Point on one side, trees or scrub, in varying thicknesses on the other; and so it stands out in contrast to these. There are no other built structures nearby whereas in the middle of the cove and on its west side, development is clearly taking place and roads, streets and tracks, gardens, the evidence of place being re-inscribed, can all be seen.

In Figures 6, 7, and 16, where a large section of the settlement can be seen, this has the effect of representing the eastern side of town as 'nature, natural, before-us' in relation to the 'culture, order, after-us' of the nascent settlement. The sense of isolation invoked, does, in terms of Phillip's hope that they might 'settle near us', cause the idea to arise of Bennelong Point being shaped as a segregated place, an early forerunner perhaps of the placement of Aboriginal camps on the edge of town. But if we believe the records and Bennelong chose the place, then perhaps his strategy was to put a certain distance between themselves and the newcomers, and maybe that was just the way he and his compatriots wanted it.

The three images (shown in figures 10, 14, and 15) are interesting to compare; each looks over to Bennelong's Point from the opposite arm of the Cove and each shows the house/hut looking by and large the same, and as Irving described it. Although each is different stylistically, and in the amount of detail shown, they are taken from almost the same spot though at differing angles; indeed the tree in the right of each image could be the same one. The practice, at that time, of copying images is well documented as is the use of picturesque compositional devices. For instance Baiba Berzins comments that Thomas Watling (Figures 14, 15) showed a willingness to 'select and combine' aspects of the landscape in the service of compositional interest.<sup>85</sup> And, Ian McLean writes of the tension expressed in the topographic views Watling made under direction during his term as a convict:

His letters reveal that he was an artist with an overwhelming picturesque sensibility. Despite the topographical imperatives of the imperial archive, he drew as a picturesque artist, that is, one who, in his art, had point of view, and through it hoped to express his freedom and redemption.<sup>86</sup>

Fernando Brambila's drawing (Figure 8), in which Bennelong's house is clearly visible, shows it sitting on the rise closest to the rock platform directly in front of a large rocky outcrop. Today, this now-hewn outcrop looks to form the edge of the Botanic Gardens, and this situates the house on the forecourt of the Opera House. Another similar image by the artist (not shown), is held in the British Library's King George III Topographical Collection. Brambila was an Italian artist attached to the Spanish Malaspina expedition that spent a short period at Sydney Cove in 1793. Peter Barber, in his article, '*Malaspina and George III Brambila and Watling: Three discovered drawings of Sydney and Parramatta by Fernando Brambila*' suggests the expedition was there to report back to Spain on the new British colony, and comparing the two Brambila images he notes that they:

seem to be intended to confirm the new 'civilised' image that the British government wanted to foster, while concealing Malaspina's own views.<sup>87</sup>

So, like most of the colonial images, caution is needed in reading them as completely accurate. Both Malaspina's and Watling's images suggest the house as being in a similar place though this is at odds with more contemporary locations suggested for it. For

instance, the Sydney Cove Map, a large circular concrete and terrazzo disc in 'First Fleet Park' at Circular Quay, commissioned as a bicentenary project in 1986–7 suggests the house as sitting on the rise now overlooking the forecourt (figure 20).

Putting aside the vicissitudes of both reading and interpreting colonial images<sup>88</sup> – and finding the *exact* location of a building not marked on any maps of the time – the drawings show remarkably similar structures; a small building, almost taller than it is deep or wide, with a pitched roof and a chimney on one side. The shape of the Point the images show, as well, is more or less consistent with what can be seen of Bennelong Point, if its tip can be imagined running under the Opera House, and the adjoining Botanical Gardens site today.

### The house falls into disrepair

Bennelong returned to Australia in 1795 but his house was by this time falling down and in a state of disrepair and Collins' records for late in that year note:

'The bricklayer and his gang were employed in repairing the column at the South Head; to do which, for want of bricks at the kiln, the little hut built formerly for Bennillong, being altogether forsaken by the natives, and tumbling down, the bricks of it were removed to the South Head.'<sup>89</sup>

I argue though, in *Section 2: The Sydney Opera House*, that its presence resonates still. Tuan has commented that '*Architectural space – a house, a temple, or a city – is a microcosm possessing a lucidity that natural features lack*'.<sup>90</sup> While Tuan is speaking from a particularly Western viewpoint, he suggests that planned and built spaces create, for those who build and use them, a particular 'awareness':

It is true that even without architectural form, people are able to sense the difference between interior and exterior, closed and open, darkness and light, private and public. But this kind of knowing is inchoate. Architectural space – even a simple hut surrounded by cleared ground – can define such sensations and render them vivid. Another influence is this: the built environment clarifies social roles and relations. People know better who they are and how they ought to behave when the arena is humanly designed rather than nature's raw stage . . . architecture is a key to comprehending reality.<sup>91</sup>

Tuan is speaking here without regard for the nuances of differing cultures attempting to negotiate space and the inevitable clashes in conceptions of roles and relations. I've suggested elsewhere that Phillip may well have hoped the house would show the Aboriginals how they ought to behave and given his cultural background and the system that he was a product of, this must have seemed, to him at that time, a worthwhile exercise. From this distance though, as I have argued here, the events surrounding the building of the house and the involvement of such key figures in the British occupation of this country, have conferred on it a particular lucidity. And it is this lucidity that has enabled it to be used, prism-like, to better understand the ways in which relationships between objects and place form.

<sup>88</sup> see Jane Lennon, 'Second Thoughts on First Views: The Port Jackson Circle, 1788–1800,' *Australian Journal of Art* XIV, no. 1 (1998). and McCormick, *First Views of Australia 1788–1825: A History of Early Sydney*.

<sup>89</sup> David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, &c. Of the Native Inhabitants of That Country: To Which Are Added, Some Particulars of New Zealand*, *Australiana Facsimile Editions*; No. 76., 433.

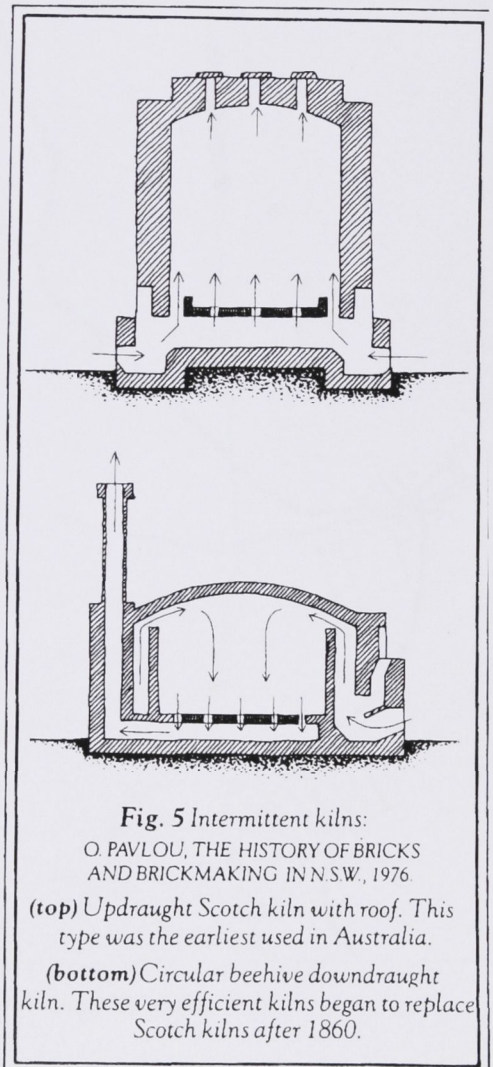
<sup>90</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 100–01.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.



Figure 14: 'Clamp Kiln', Rwanda.

Figure 15: 'Scotch Kiln', Warwick Gemmell.

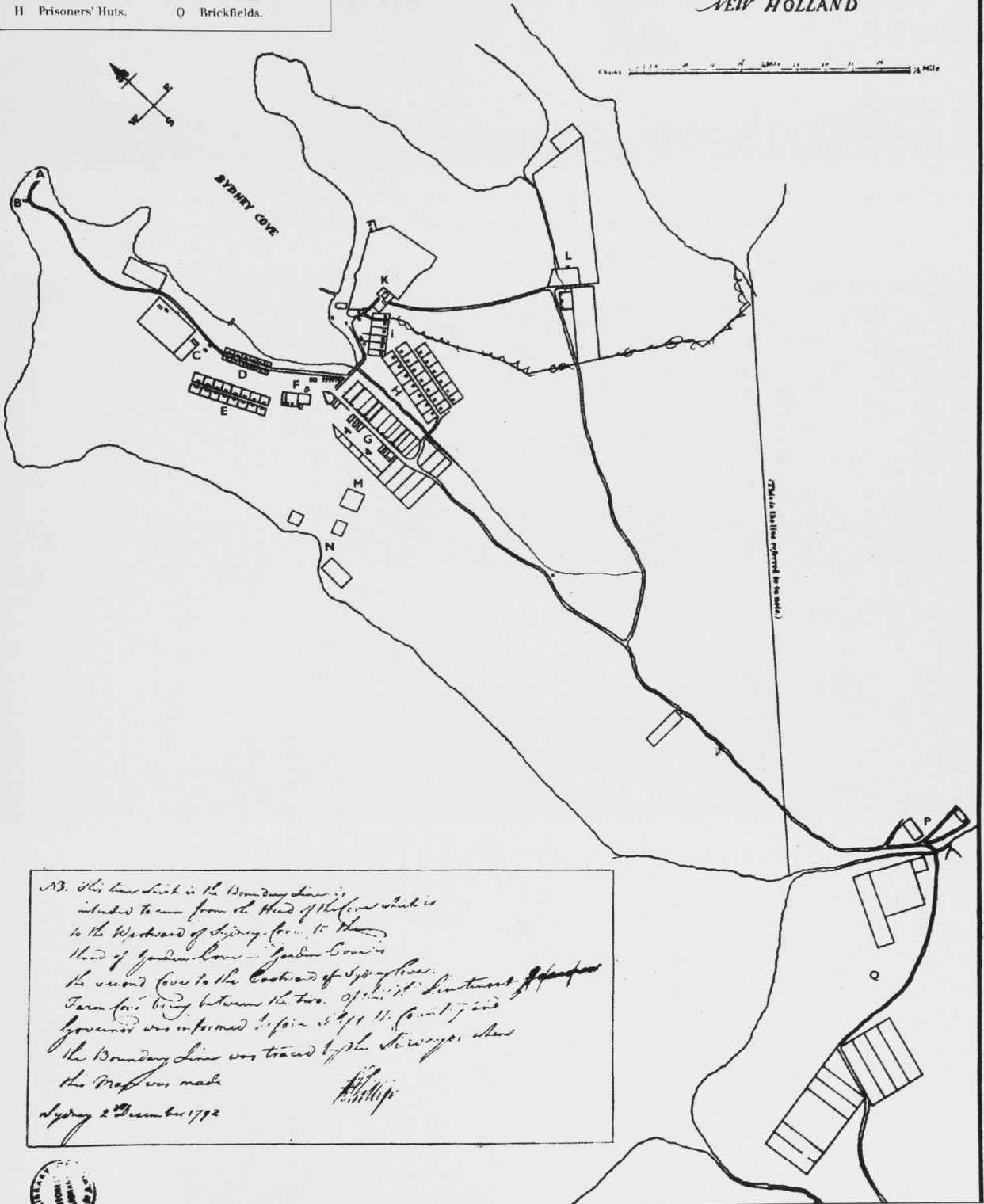


REFERENCES

- |                    |                       |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| A Signal Battery.  | I Workshops.          |
| B Observatory.     | K Government House.   |
| C Hospital.        | L Palmer's Farm.      |
| D Prison.          | M Officers' Quarters. |
| E Barracks.        | N Magazine.           |
| F Store House.     | O Gallow.             |
| G Marine Barracks. | P Brickkilns.         |
| H Prisoners' Huts. | Q Brickfields.        |

A SURVEY  
of  
THE SETTLEMENT in NEW SOUTH WALES  
NEW HOLLAND

Scale 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 Yards



N.B. This line which in the Boundary line is intended to run from the Head of the Cove that is to the Westward of Sydney, from the Head of Garden Cove to the Head of Garden Cove the second Cove to the Eastward of Sydney Cove. From this being between the two of which the Government was informed to join the Point and the Boundary line was traced by the Surveyor when this Map was made  
Phillips  
Sydney 2<sup>d</sup> December 1792

Figure 16: 'A Survey of the Settlement in New South Wales, New Holland, 1792'. Engraved by A. Dulon and L. Poates.

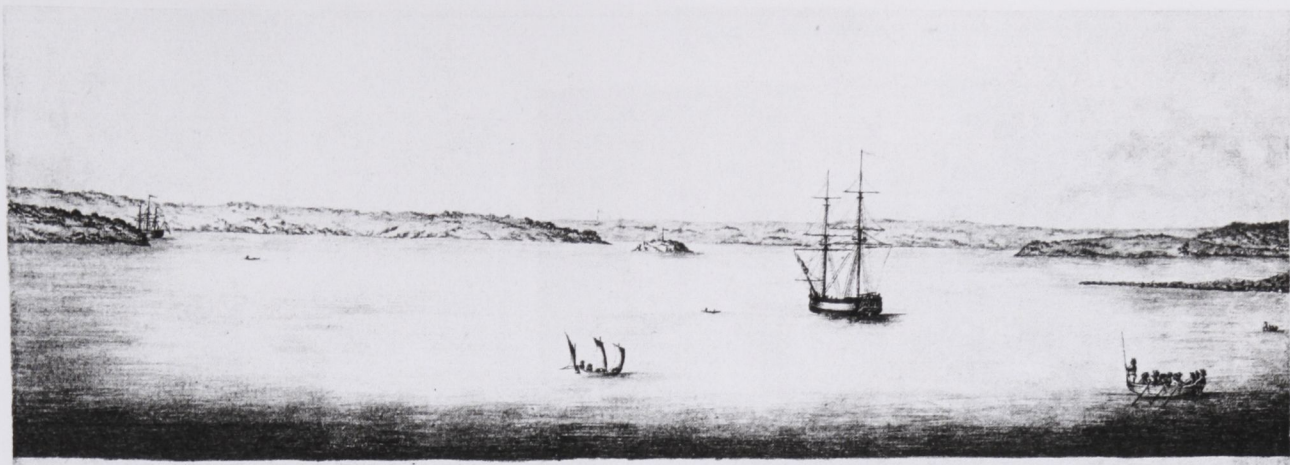


Figure 17: 'Entrance of Port Jackson as viewed from the west point of the Cove; viewed to seaward', not signed or dated, ca. 1790. Pen and Ink wash on wove paper; 20 x 45cm.



Figure 18: 'Bennelong Point from Dawes Point', not signed or dated, ca. 1804. watercolour on wove paper; 27 x 50cm.



Figure 19: 'West View of Sydney Cove taken from the Rocks, at the rear of the General Hospital', not signed or dated, ca. 1793–4. Pen and ink wash on wove paper, 26 x 42cm.

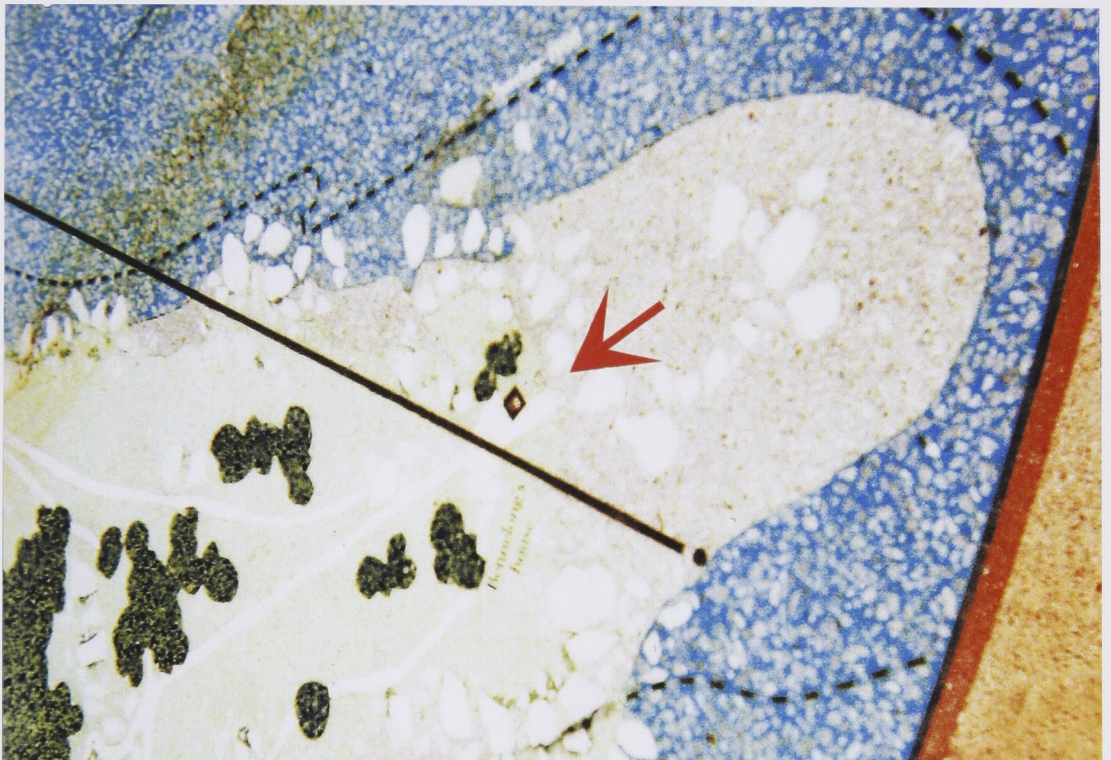


Figure 20: Sydney Cove Map, First Fleet Park, Circular Quay. Image: the author, 2006.

Little mention is made of Bennelong's house after he went to England in 1792. In March 1793 the previously-mentioned Spanish Malaspina expedition used Bennelong Point to take latitude and longitude measurements and were lent the house to store their instruments. They also erected other structures close by for their own use, one of which can be seen sitting next to Bennelong's house in figure 7. Not in exactly the same spot, but on the sand flats leading around to the Cove, members of Baudin's French expedition were housed in tents for 5 months in 1802. Bennelong, his family and friends, and the members of those two European expeditions are the only recorded residents up until that time.

Bennelong went to England with Arthur Phillip, sailing in December 1792 and returning again in September 1795. His companion Yemmurrawannie died in England of a respiratory infection in 1794 and Bennelong spent his final six months overseas living on the ship *Reliance*, docked in the Thames. The then-Governor, John Hunter, suggested in a letter that this extended wait, cold and homesick, had '*much broken his spirit*'<sup>92</sup> as well it might.

For a few years after his return he came and went from the Governor's house but almost all of the mentions of Bennelong in the eighteen years that follow are of him either drinking or fighting although this record may give a totally skewed account of his remaining life. He seems to have spent quite a lot of time on land at Kissing Point belonging to a publican, James Squire – the land around Sydney by that time all firmly in the hands of the government or private individuals. Bennelong died, most probably before he attained 50 years of age, and was buried at Kissing Point in 1813.

<sup>92</sup>: 240.

<sup>93</sup> Although this drawing by William Westall is not named, Keith Smith argues that it is Bennelong. Keith Smith, 'Port Jackson People,' *National Library of Australia News*, no. July (2005).



Figure 21. Samuel John Neele, 179?. *Benelong, a native of New Holland*, engraving; 18.8 x 15.2 cm



Figure 22. 'Port Jackson Painter', ca. 1790. *Native Named Bennelong. As Painted When Angry after Botany Bay Colebee Was Wounded*



Figure 23. William Westall, 1802. *Port Jackson, a native*, pencil drawing, 31.8 x 26.4 cm.<sup>93</sup>

## THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE



### INTRODUCTION

In this second Section, in response to another of Henri Lefebvre's assertions, that '*newly formed spaces don't eradicate previous ones*'<sup>94</sup> I investigate the relationship between the Sydney Opera House and Bennelong Point, and the connections between the first and last 'houses'. I begin here in 1957 as the building of the Opera House podium is getting underway, though the saga of the protracted construction and the political machinations surrounding it are only dealt with summarily because these are covered extensively in other texts. Instead, my concentration is on the way the building's myriad design references signify in relation to the historic nature of the site, and the ways symbolism attending its opening ceremonies and rituals might be interpreted. The Section ends with a discussion of the ways in which the Sydney Opera House is made to exploit its relationship to Bennelong's small brick house and the implications of this, in relation to objects and place, is questioned.

All is fairly quiet at the Point until the next structure that played a role in defining Bennelong Point, Fort Macquarie, was built in 1817. Designed by Francis Greenaway for Governor Lachlan Macquarie, it was a square squat turreted fortification that has the appearance, in images, of being about to sink into the ocean. The building of it ushered in the first major levelling of the rocky point to hold a building. It had:

sides 130 feet long, three of the sides washed by the sea at high tide and the fourth separated from the land by a narrow channel with access to the fort from the Point via a drawbridge.<sup>95</sup>

The Fort had an unremarkable life and was demolished in 1900 to make way for a tram depot. This humble building, incongruously, featured turrets also, and was in use until 1958 when it was razed to make way for the Sydney Opera House. The large tapestry of chisel marks on the vertical rock face which forms the boundary between the Botanic Gardens and the Opera House concourse bears witness to the major reshaping of the topographical contours of the area the two structures entailed. The preparatory work for the podium of the Opera House, though, was in another league altogether:

They must move 37,000 cubic yards of excavation, including 11,000 cubic yards of rock; sink two miles of three feet diameter steel-encased piers

<sup>94</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 86.

<sup>95</sup> David Messent, *Opera House Act One* (Balgowlah, N.S.W.: David Messent Photography, 1997), 52.



(500 separate piers in all); and pour 120,000 cubic yards of concrete foundations (about ten times as much concrete as contained in the average city building of 12 storeys).<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Gavin Souter, Daily Telegraph 12.4.60, cited in *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>97</sup> A number of texts on the Opera House are cited in this section and listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>98</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 42.

<sup>99</sup> cited in Messent, *Opera House Act One*, 71.

The picture that arises from this description is of Bennelong's Point being not so much erased, as encased, fixed, embalmed – and if a new term were to be devised to describe this modern phenomenon, it might be that the point has been enpodiumed. The design for the Opera House was put out to international competition and the winning entry, by Danish architect Jørn Utzon, was chosen by a government appointed panel. Its construction began in 1958 and the Queen declared it open in 1973. The story, or saga – as it is often termed – of the conception, design, and construction of the Opera House has, like Bennelong's House, had many tellings. It is not my intention in the following section to recount the story because the main facts are well known and it has been exhaustively documented elsewhere.<sup>97</sup> My aim rather is to examine firstly how its relationship to place has been forged and secondly to look at the ways through which it has come to fashion Bennelong Point.



Figure 24: The Sydney Opera House. Image, the author, 2006

#### THE OPERA HOUSE A GATEWAY?

If the history of European Australia is embodied in any place on the continent, that place is Sydney. In a discussion on spatial organization in relation to countries or cities, and whether either could be said to have 'fronts' or 'backs', Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that most Americans would see New York as being the country's 'ceremonial gate':

Most people in the United States probably regard the northeastern seaboard as the nation's front. The nation's history is perceived to begin there. New York, in particular, has come to mean the front portal. . . . [But] more important than size and business power, New York owes its gateway image to the fact that through it so many immigrants entered the land of promise.<sup>98</sup>

Since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 Sydney has, arguably, been thought of as the principal entrance to Australia; as the country's 'front'. Given that, and given its place at the entrance to the Harbour, the Sydney Opera House could be seen to have front gate status. As in New York, few arrive in Australia by sea now, but historically they had. At the time the idea for the building was being floated, a key proposer, Eugene Goossens, was noting that arriving by sea 'First you will see the Opera House, then you will see the Bridge.'<sup>99</sup>

Front gates, Tuan suggests, function in a number of ways:

The monumentality of the portal symbolized the power of the ruler. It also functioned as an ideogram for the entire city, presenting a front that was meant to impress visitors and foreign potentates.<sup>100</sup>

The Sydney Opera House is a monumental building and just as Phillip saw Bennelong's house as a step in the direction of civilizing the Aboriginals, so the Opera House presents to the world the extent to which Australia has taken on the mantle of European culture. Symbolised within it is the power of will to shape place, and the massive reworking of Bennelong Point could be seen as being analogous to the way the whole country has been reshaped and re-inscribed. And, just as the British brought their own customs and culture with them to this place, so the Opera House's architect brought his. Despite the site's history there is little in the Opera House that references historic aspects of the site, or that suggests any emotional resonances those may have left. But the Opera House competition brief made no requirement that the site's history should be acknowledged in any way, an oversight probably not uncommon in the 1950s. If the brief suggested a monumental edifice was appropriate, it was because the setting was monumental, as were the nation's aspirations.

The building is a wondrous response to its *physical* site – to the harbour, the harbour bridge and to the city but its physical presence has been shaped by an assorted collection of international architectural references. It is only the 'shell' likeness of the roof design that might point, unintentionally, to the shell middens the British noted in the area. Shells, common to both the original place and the current structure, could stand as either reminder of the original occupants, or, given they were burnt by the British to cement the first houses, monument to the Imperial project. But while the idea of shells or sails might visually link the building to its setting, almost all the shape, and material references are from somewhere else. The journalist Gavin Souter, reporting Utzon's first visit to the site noted:

'It's right,' said Utzon in his lilting Danish accent, looking up the Harbour towards Pinchgut. 'It's OK. This is the way they placed the temples in the old days'.<sup>101</sup>

The podium owes much to Mayan and Asian temple architecture, and these inspired Utzon to conceptualise an elevated platform as a place where the concert-goer was separated from the ordinariness of everyday life. It was to mark the place apart from its earthy surrounds and prepare the user for immersion in the imaginative realm that theatre, concert, opera promises. The podium is encased in aggregated granite slabs whereas if memory of place inheres in any material in Sydney, that material is sandstone. Working from photos, the architect found the Harbour to be dark, and the white of the roof would catch the sun as it did in '*the Mediterranean or South America or other sunlit countries*'.<sup>102</sup>

Utzon is quoted as saying that he hoped the '*true stoneware*' roof tiles would give Danish visitors, (even though the tiles were in fact made in Sweden), a feeling of being part of the building.<sup>103</sup> Particular clays can define an entire idiom and can come to represent traits or aesthetics valued by specific cultures. Porcelain clay is typically linked to the East, but 'stoneware', a common product of Germany and the Scandinavian countries, has long been associated with those countries. As a material it is marked by its toughness, its 'rock-like' qualities, its rightness for specific functional tasks.

<sup>100</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 42.

<sup>101</sup> Gavin Souter, 'Where Palms Once Waved,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1973, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Jørn Utzon, cited in Messent, *Opera House Act One*, 104.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Weston and Jørn Utzon, *Utzon: Inspiration, Vision, Architecture* (Hellerup, Denmark: Edition Bl'ndal, 2002), 120.

So the tiles, through their 'true stoneware'-like qualities establish a relationship to Danishness that is added to the myriad cultural references. So too is Kronberg castle near Utzon's home at Helsingor (Hamlet's Elsinor) cited as being an 'analogue for the site in Sydney.'<sup>104</sup> To the design references above can be added Utzon's interest in systems of growth and the more concrete mathematical studies he made of the surroundings. Phillip Drew notes that prior to making the design Utzon:

began by studying sea charts of Sydney Harbour, from these he measured distances to assess the height of the surroundings to develop a feel for the landscape.<sup>105</sup>

Coupled with this focus on spatial concerns, the construction techniques also have influenced the way the building looks. Utzon's attention to detail regarding the roof, the major focus of the building, is informative here. Worried that tiling a huge planar surface while at a great height might cause the roof-tilers to err in placement of the tiles, causing unequal gaps in the grid, he devised a method that would ensure a more precise geometric field unmarred by irregular spacings. He designed modular 'lids' so the tiles could be laid in place on the ground, and then the completely 'paved' panel hoisted into place on the roof. This required also the prefabricating of ribs to form the roof shells the tile panels then fitted onto. Together these, the ribs and the lids, gave Utzon and the builders much greater control and precision. Highly controlled modern industrial techniques such as these produced a building that, paradoxically, was almost handmade in its attention to detail.<sup>106</sup>

In the catalogue essay accompanying the 2005 exhibition '*The Studio of Jørn Utzon*' John Murphy concisely charts many of the symbolic references of the Opera House and summarises Utzon's inspirations as coming from:

diverse sources throughout the development of the Opera House. They ranged from the architecture of ancient civilisations to contemporary ephemera, and included works of art and nature which he experienced personally and through contact with influential books such as D'arcy Wentworth Thompson's '*On growth and form* (1917), a study of organic structure. Utzon also used analogies and allusions to describe the essence of his architecture rather than to identify an idea's source.<sup>107</sup>

A conclusion to be drawn from this then is that where place *did* fashion the Sydney Opera House it was primarily a physical and compositional shaping. Place shaped it as well in as much as local political, ideological, and economic structures and pressures play a part in shaping any building. A relationship between the building and place, if not expressed directly through its form or materials does though, I suggest, begin to form as one experiences the building.

## THE WHITE PERSON'S ULURU

ECQ's [East Circular Quay] public significance is profound and extraordinary. The symbolism is threefold (as good symbols must be): as birthplace-of-a-nation (or close to it); as mediator between parkland and water, themselves near-sacred elements; as Sydney's symbolic gateway. On all these fronts, Bennelong Point had, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, become modern Australia's closest approach to a genuinely sacred piece of dirt.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Philip Drew and Jørn Utzon, *Sydney Opera House: Jørn Utzon, Architecture in Detail (London, England)* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>106</sup> The bricks for Bennelong's house were cast in wooden molds and reading the descriptions of the way the rib and other sections of the Opera House were cast in wooden molds its hard not to wonder at the same methods (though different materials) being used to form the two buildings, 200 years apart.

<sup>107</sup> John Murphy, *The Studio of Jørn Utzon: Creating the Sydney Opera House* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2004), 3.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Farrelly, 'Architecture, Democracy, Chaos: The Strange, Strange Story of East Circular Quay,' *Architectural theory review: journal of the Department of Architecture, The University of Sydney* Vol. 7, no. No. 2 (2002): 131.

In an essay in *'Australian Art and Architecture: essays presented to Bernard Smith'*, Lucy Grace Ellem expresses her disappointment at the changes Utzon made to his plan between design and inception. She cites a change in construction technique as significant in dislocating the building design's symbolic genesis, from homage to nature, to homage to man's ability to shape nature:

the Opera House, a building begun in an organic tradition, and inspired by a romantic, emotional response to the elements of the natural world, was completed by the imposition of an abstract order which has its origin in the controlling logic of the rational mind.<sup>109</sup>

Walking through the Opera House a short while ago I was struck by the way in which, as you move around the outside walks, climb the podium, and travel through the interior; vistas open up, views are framed, the Harbour in all its glory is presented up to you. The internal spaces in particular demand that you map them on foot so you can establish the relationship of one to another, and of them to the external contours, spaces and outlooks of the building. As the building leads you through it and to its views it occurs to you that your progress is being orchestrated, in a Capability Brown sort of way, through a series of picturesque events. It is architectural contrivance that suggests you should stop here, look at this; turn here, look at that.

As previously stated, Utzon intended that mounting the staircase and entering the building would remove the visitor from everyday life, separate them from the mundane in preparation for the enriching cultural experience to come. Marooned on its podium it does seem separated from the hum of the city, just as the tip of the Point was separated at high tide before the rock platform was levelled and built over. Utzon visited Mayan Temple sites after winning the competition and many authors cite these, with their elevated platforms, as one of his major design sources. It's impossible not to think about the idea of bloodletting and sacrifice commonly associated with these temples, and to wonder if Utzon himself viewed the connection, in relation to what became his fate vis a vis the project, with any irony. Or to run through a list of things where the word, 'sacrifice', in some manner is conjured up by the place: teeth, culture, the rock platform, career, a small red car . . .

Standing there then, on Utzon's Mayan temple-inspired platform, you realise that in your ambulatory mapping of the building you have enacted, in a personal sense, the turning of space into place; understanding of its spatial particulars and organizations has, in a sense, made it part of you, made it yours. And it is then, I think, that a realisation comes that if the building represents anything about the place it occupies, it is through its embodiment of the process of re-inscription; the process whereby one thing is substituted for another. The building's substitution of itself for the Point is total, no trace remains, there is nothing that can be seen that might be called 'the site'; there is only the building. And in this there are echoes of an observation made recently by a visiting Afro-American entertainer; Saul Williams. After being shown around the city Williams voiced his concern at what he perceived to be the lack of an Aboriginal presence. Posed for a publicity photo on the steps of the Opera House, he expressed despair that a tour of the place, Sydney, could consist of being shown from monument to monument when:

I have not seen indigenous people,' he said, 'so in my opinion I haven't seen shit.'<sup>110</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Lucy Grace Ellem, 'Utzon's Sydney Opera House,' in *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*, ed. Anthony Bradley, Terry Smith, and Bernard Smith (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 192.

<sup>110</sup> Harriet Alexander, 'Thanks for the Postcard, but I'd Rather See the Real Picture,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 11 2006, 6.

## BENNELONG POINT: SECURING AND CEMENTING RELATIONSHIPS

Looking just at a building itself though is not the only way in which relationships between objects/artefacts and place can be teased apart. Meaning can also be drawn from the symbolic acts public buildings, especially major ones, are attended by, and from the processes by which an understanding of history is knitted into the fabric of public life by the individuals and institutions involved in that project. In looking for a way to describe these, Michael Edwards, in *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*, adopts a term suggested by other authors:

. . . in the British context, Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright have proposed the useful term 'public historical sphere' to refer to those institutions – from museums through national heritage sites to television historical dramas and documentaries – involved in producing and circulating meanings about the past.<sup>111</sup>

I suggest that included in these are also newspapers and academic scholarship and in this case, the Sydney Opera House itself together with those institutions with an interest in it such as the NSW State Government and the Sydney City Council.<sup>112</sup>

When looking at symbolic occasions related to major public buildings then, such as the turning of a sod, the laying of a first brick, the inscription of a copper plate etc, one is drawn to examine the ritual gestures of which they are comprised. At the ceremony held in 1958 to mark the beginning of the massive construction of the Opera House, the wife of the Danish Consul-General to Australia presented the building's architect, Jørn Utzon, with a didgeridoo.<sup>113</sup> In this gesture, a small one by a very minor player, it is as if the didgeridoo, baton-like, was being used to pass the Point on to Utzon. The place associated for so long with Bennelong given over to someone else, as if in a relay. And on this occasion, the Danish Consul-General's wife could be seen to have as much authority to offer an Aboriginal artefact at a symbolic ceremony as Phillip had to gift residence of a place that he had no claim to.

The didgeridoo given on that day, I suggest, set the scene for the way in which an aura of Aboriginal presence would in future be invoked countless times to secure and cement a relationship between the Opera House and the place it occupied. The official souvenir of the opening on 20 October 1973 notes that Bennelong Point was the site:

of the first building constructed for aborigines by Europeans in Australia. It is named after Bennelong, a notable figure in Australia's early history with whom the founders of the country first made contact in 1790. Bennelong maintained a long and intimate association with the early settlers and the brick hut built by Governor Phillip became a recognised gathering place for aborigines at Sydney Cove. There the colonists saw a corroboree for the first time and Bennelong was one of the masters of ceremonies.<sup>114</sup>

A picture arises from this somewhat paternalistic passage, of place ordered and shaped by the Europeans and one of the ordering devices is the building of a house. We get a sense of Bennelong somehow being found rather than kidnapped, of the cultivating and sustaining of relationships – without any hint of complexity, pressure or exchange – being

<sup>111</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, 132.

<sup>112</sup> The Sydney Opera House features prominently on both websites: <http://www.nsw.gov.au/index.asp>; <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au>

<sup>113</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3.3.59 cited in Messent, *Opera House Act One*, 168.

<sup>114</sup> Sydney Opera House Trust, 'Opening Ceremony Souvenir', (Sydney: 1973).

<sup>115</sup> 'Profitable Return for Bennelong,' *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 October 1973, 4.

<sup>116</sup> Tony Sarno, 'Face to Face,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1986, 6.

<sup>117</sup> "Bennelong' Recalls Opera House Act,' *Canberra Times*, 22 October 1978, 3.

<sup>118</sup> The Sydney Opera House is operated and maintained for the Government of New South Wales by the Sydney Opera House Trust.

<sup>119</sup> Sydney Opera House, [website] (cited 26 May 2006); available from [http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/sections/about\\_the\\_house/house\\_history/?sm=4&ss=18](http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/sections/about_the_house/house_history/?sm=4&ss=18).

instigated by him. And the house – built by Phillip – in this telling, is neither model home nor embassy, but has, if anything, the flavour of a community centre, a service provided by the government for what are now, through no agency of their own, its subjects. The passage above also establishes the Point as a place where, historically, performances are conducted and that the Sydney Opera House is just seamlessly continuing a past tradition. Terming Bennelong's role 'one of the masters of ceremonies' here turns 'corroboree' into entertainment and a certain idea of naturalness between past and present is facilitated. Bennelong Point emerges too as a place where European know-how and generosity of spirit had a consequence; in this case the production of harmonious relations.

At the opening ceremony on 20 October, 1973 which saw the Queen declaring the building open, one of the events in the official program was an appearance of the 'ghost of Bennelong'. The Aboriginal actor Ben Blakeney – playing Bennelong – stood on the highest sail for two minute seven seconds during which, dressed in a lap-lap<sup>115</sup> and with 5 feathers in his hair, he mimed a piece which started with:

I AM (sic) Bennelong. Two-hundred years ago, fire burned on this point . . . Here, my people chanted their stories of the Dreamtime, of Spirit Heroes and of Earth Creation and our painted bodies flowed in ceremony.<sup>116</sup>

And ended:

I am Bennelong – and my spirit and the spirit of my people lives, and their dance and their music, their drama and their laughter also remains.<sup>117</sup>

Outside the Opera House there was an extensive calendar of activities not just on the opening day, but lasting for a week. Pottery displays, embroidery and plant exhibitions, paintings at David Jones were augmented by performances by many local and visiting groups. Apart from Blakeney's Bennelong performance, the only Aboriginal presence of the week was an 'Aboriginal Dance Group' performing on the 'Pacific Islanders' program that toured venues such as the Rockdale and Ashfield Town Halls.

Now the appearance of Bennelong's ghost *may* have seemed a good idea at the time but today it seems a terrible act; a small act perhaps, in the scheme of things, but like 'the house built for Bennelong', the gap between appearance and signification is a highly charged one. In the intervening years Sydney Opera House publicity has made adjustments towards cultural sensitivity, but it continues to milk Bennelong for its own purposes. Although the language has changed since the time of the opening, the Sydney Opera House Trust<sup>118</sup>, through the Opera House website, links the two histories. In the section on the 'History of the House', under the heading 'To 1817' the following is recorded about Bennelong, starting with his return to Sydney Cove after the spearing of Phillip:

He later cautiously re- established contact with Phillip testing the Governor's intentions with numerous requests for favours, including a house to be built on the end of Bennelong Point.

In 1790 Bennelong took possession of the hut ordered for him by the Governor. The hut was used as a social centre by those Aborigines that frequented the settlement.

The first known concert on Bennelong Point was in March 1791. Bennelong provided an evening of entertainment at his house for the Governor and his party. '24 men, women and children danced to the accompaniment of beating sticks and hands'.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>120</sup> John Hunter et al., *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island, with the Discoveries Which Have Been Made in New South Wales and the Southern Ocean, since the Publication of Phillip's Voyage, Compiled from the Official Papers; Including the Journals of Governors Phillip and King, and of Lieut. Ball; and the Voyages from the First Sailing of the Sirius in 1787, to the Return of That Ship's Company to England in 1792, Australiana Facsimile Editions; No. 148., 210–11.*

<sup>121</sup> Julia Clark, 'Hamlet's Castle: Ectoplasm and Interpretation' (paper presented at the sites: nailing the debate, Museum of Sydney on the site of the first Government House, 1996), 173.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>123</sup> Denis Byrne, 'The Archaeology of Disaster', *Public History Review* 5/6 (1996/7): 28. I have borrowed Byrne's term here.

<sup>124</sup> He is referring particularly to archaeology but I believe his argument relates as well to the broader public historical sphere.

<sup>125</sup> Byrne, 'The Archaeology of Disaster', 21. and see note 12, 29.

Again the Point is constructed as a place where performance, traditionally, took place. John Hunter documented that the Aborigines '*often had a dance amongst themselves*' at the hut on the Point; but the 'first known concert' in 1791 referred to on the website was perhaps just the first the British, who asked to be invited, attended.<sup>120</sup> At least in framing it as an '*entertainment*' rather than the earlier '*corroboree*', no claim for spiritual continuity is made. The '*house*' he requested, in the next paragraph, turns into a *hut ordered for him by the Governor* and by casting this in the light of a '*favour*', and only one such sought by Bennelong, much is lost about what happened in that place at that time.

In canvassing ways that historic houses can be made to come alive for visitors, Julia Clarke, in a paper given to the seminar 'Sites: nailing the debate' quotes the American geographer, Yi-fu Tuan whose work on relationships between people and place is discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. She cites Tuan's belief that:

the appreciation of landscape [for which we can read historic place] is more personal and longer lasting when it is mixed with memory of human incidents.<sup>121</sup>

One of the examples used by Clarke to illustrate this is the way that for some visitors:

. . . it was the imagined presence of Hamlet at Kronberg Castle which turned their visit into a unique experience.<sup>122</sup>

Perhaps this explains the use to which Bennelong's house is put in service of the Sydney Opera House. But in the Opera House's version of its history, and the frequent iterations from other sectors of the public historical sphere something about place is lost. Bennelong Point as fashioned by the Sydney Opera House emerges as a place of conviviality and generosity, of 'harmonious relations', a cultured place where, as in Europe, culture is a longstanding tradition.

But, implicit in the oft-used term, 'Bennelong's house' is 'the house built by Phillip for Bennelong'. Today, the Opera House traces its heritage back to the house not as the house owned by Bennelong, but as the house built for Bennelong. This accords a certain degree of status and by extension, ownership, to the builder, and thus the idea that the house was enmeshed in a web of inducements and coercions, both economic and moral, drifts away.

## THE CONTEST BETWEEN MONUMENTS AND MEMORIES<sup>123</sup>

In his 1996/7 essay 'The Archaeology of Disaster', Denis Byrne takes heritage industries<sup>124</sup> to task for identifying only two of Australia's historical stratigraphic layers, the '*classic*' Aboriginal past, and the '*heroic settler heritage*'. By ignoring the traces that might exist of post-1788 interactions between Europeans and Aborigines, he argues, the processes by which one group '*substitutes*' itself for another are overlooked or forgotten:

In quite a real sense the failure to acknowledge the imprint on the landscape of the post-1788 Aboriginal experience has created a vacuum which has been filled by a heroic settler heritage. And increasingly the pre-contact sites are appropriated as 'sacred sites' for a white culture which seeks to indigenise itself by discovering a spiritual affinity for the land, a form of white Dreaming.<sup>125</sup>

Byrne argues that there are a number of ways in which forgetting takes place. He cites the picturesque 'old country town police lockup', preserved as a pioneer site but its history as

a place of deaths in custody glossed over. He notes the dispersal of Aboriginal populations to the fringes of towns having 'its counterpart in the exclusion of these communities from the pages of so many of the local history books', and the lack of memorials at known massacre sites. But he also suggests that within individual local knowledge there may be myriad, everyday, innocuous-seeming places that are personally remembered as disaster sites, for instance a local gate, road, bus or railway station where a child was removed, a relative last seen, humiliation or exclusion experienced. These myriad unmarked places, spread around the country like holes in a sieve may be memorialised in the minds of those for whom they are immediately meaningful, but in the national consciousness constitute sites of collective forgetting.

Much of what happened so long ago at Dubbagullee/Bennelong Point, I suggest, has been forgotten, or, to cast it another way, has been selectively remembered. During the years 1790 to 1792 it was a prime site of interaction between Europeans and Aboriginals though not connected with disaster in the way it is frequently cast, in the form of massacre. But unfolding there, around that small house the enunciations of usurpation, conflict in another form, which gradually blanketed the whole country, took place. By selectively using the post-1788 history as one of its monumentalising devices the Opera House frames itself as one of Byrne's 'heroic settler heritage sites'. It's a story of man overcoming the elements (building on water), of a vision hard won (Utzon vs the government of the day), of adventure and daring (beginning to build before the plans had been made and working out construction techniques on the hop), of shaping the land to your needs (whittling away the rocky point). And as Saul William's observation made on the steps of the Opera House suggests, if not entirely vanquishing the enemy/other (for it can't be blamed for that), then through its publicity, obscuring the processes by which *their* place became another's.

#### NAMING THE POINT?

But Bennelong's name has endured and has been associated with the Point for much of the last 200 years. The name, Bennelong's (in its various spellings) Point must have been in common usage when an unattributed image, 'A View of the west side of Sydney Cove taken from Too-bay-ulee, or Bannellongs Point' was painted, between 1792 – 1794.<sup>126</sup> John Eyre in 1809<sup>127</sup> specifies the Point as 'Bennalong's' (sic), in 1814 the Sydney Gazette records a ship, the '3 Bees', sinking at Bennelong's Point,<sup>128</sup> and a case in the Supreme Court of NSW notes a stolen boat 'passing Bennelong's Point' in 1835<sup>129</sup> – nearly 20 years into the period during which the Point was occupied by Fort Macquarie.

But it is now, and has been for some time, objectified as *Bennelong Point* – his no more – though across a similar time span Mrs Macquarie has kept her Point on the southern arm of Farm Cove, just opposite across the bay.<sup>130</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, the Government Gazette that under the Geographical Names Act of 1966 it (and forty other places around Sydney) had been assigned a dual 'indigenous' name and that 'neither name shall have precedence'.<sup>131</sup> The Board's charter, set out in its *Dual Naming – Supporting Cultural Recognition* booklet<sup>132</sup> states that support of local Aboriginal Land Councils is required, so the spelling has that authority. The Sydney Opera House has not yet adopted the dual naming system in any of its publications but when it does it will be interesting to see how it constructs the Dubbagullee story; names, like objects having such a strong ability to shape place.

<sup>126</sup> McCormick, *First Views of Australia 1788–1825: A History of Early Sydney*, 57.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>128</sup> The Sydney Gazette, Saturday 21 May 1814.

<sup>129</sup> Division of Law Macquarie University, *Decisions of the Superior Courts of New South Wales, 1788–1899*, King V. Mitchell. [website] (cited 12 December 2006); available from [http://www.law.mq.edu.au/scnsw/html/r\\_v\\_mitchell\\_\\_no\\_1\\_\\_1825.htm](http://www.law.mq.edu.au/scnsw/html/r_v_mitchell__no_1__1825.htm).

<sup>130</sup> Melway Publishing Pty Ltd, *Greater Sydney and Blue Mountains Street Directory* (Coogee: Sydway Publishing Pty Ltd, 2002), 56.

<sup>131</sup> *Official Notices* (cited).

<sup>132</sup> Geographical Names Board of New South Wales, *Dual Naming – Supporting Cultural Recognition* (cited 29 May 2006); available from <http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/infol>.



Perhaps the dual naming, Dubbagullee/Bennelong Point is conciliatory. 'Dubbagullee' might suggest a pre-contact, 'classic' indigenous period and 'Bennelong Point', a 'heroic pioneer settler site' (in Byrne's terms), but their juxtaposition could encourage the gap between to be explored, and the ways in which one converted to another; questioned.

# MEANDERINGS

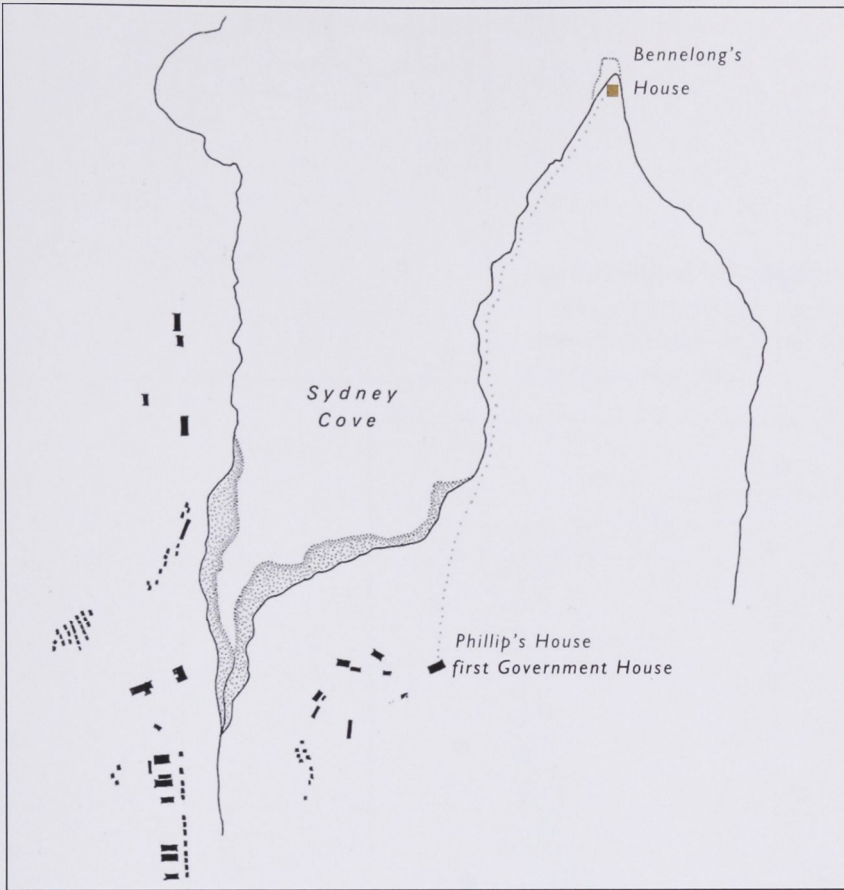


Figure 25: Reproduction from Helen Proudfoot, Anne Bickford, Brian Egloff, Robyn Stocks, *Australia's First Government House*, Figure 1.1, 'Location of Government House'. Possible route taken by Bennelong and Phillip, 1790–1792 inserted into reproduction

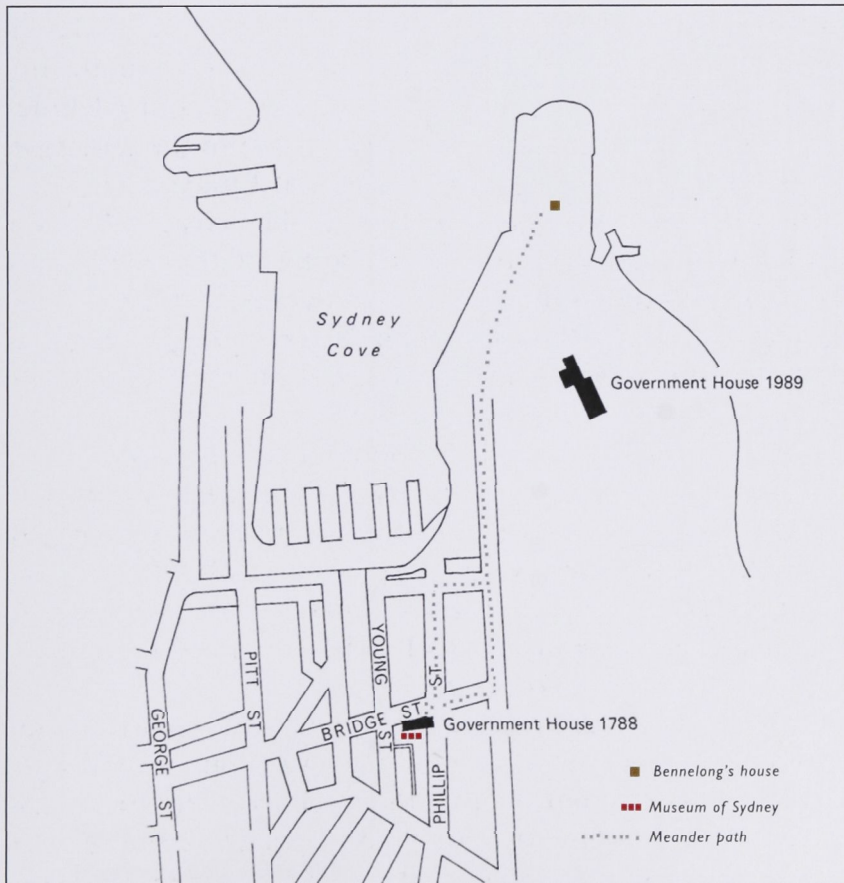


Figure 26: Reproduction from Helen Proudfoot, Anne Bickford, Brian Egloff, Robyn Stocks, *Australia's First Government House*, Figure 1.1, 'Location of Government House'. Walking route, Bennelong Point to the Museum of Sydney 2003–2006 inserted into reproduction

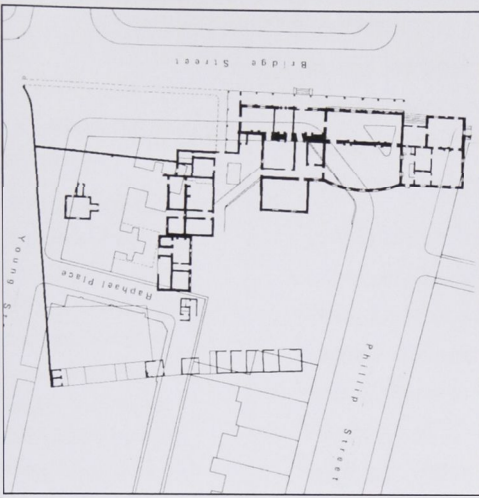


Figure 27: 'Plan of First Government House drawn just before demolition in 1845, superimposed on the present street plan'. Reproduced from Helen Proudfoot, Anne Bickford, Brian Egloff, Robyn Stocks, *Australia's First Government House*



Figure 28:  
Meanders, 2002–2006: map

<sup>133</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 84.

<sup>134</sup> Paul Carter; 'Ground Designs and the New Ichology,' in *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies*, ed. David S. Trigger and Gareth Griffiths (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 289.

In the Introduction I outlined the process of physical exploration I embarked upon to complement my theoretical understanding of the geographic area comprising Sydney Cove. I stated further that I likened this process of walking and observing to the ornamental form, the meander:

In this short final section I document reflections arising from this ambulatory project, especially in relation to two routes I walked often. Firstly, I walked between Bennelong Point and the source of the clay and bricks used to build Bennelong's house, the Brickfields, loosely defined as the area described by the present day George, Elizabeth, Goulburn and Campbell Streets (figure 28). Secondly, I walked between Bennelong Point and the Museum of Sydney, site of Governor Phillip's house, the first Government House though the main route of that 'meander' was around the Museum site itself (Figure 26).

Walking around the area early colonial maps described as Sydney Cove was in a sense a personal mapping of the place though if I seemed to be turning space into place, it was with the aim of observing and understanding. The making of maps has often been associated in the past with activities of claiming territory, and I was aware of that. In fact my mapping had the opposite effect, the more I concentrated on the topographic relationship of one part to another, and the more I tried to envisage the city in its previously wooded state, the less I felt any right to it. Having always thought of the area as home, it became more foreign – more someone else's – with each trip I made; I felt I understood the place better, but that it belonged to me less.

In walking around the city I was also mindful to resist making for myself what Lefebvre suggests regional maps sometimes offer the tourist, that is, 'a veritable feast of authenticity':

Some, such as maps that show 'beauty spots' and historical sites and monuments to the accompaniment of an appropriate rhetoric, aim to mystify in fairly obvious ways. This kind of map designates places where a ravenous consumption picks over the last remnants of nature and of the past in search of whatever nourishment may be obtained from the signs of anything historical or original.<sup>133</sup>

The picture Lefebvre paints is of space institutionally mapped/produced for a *specific and ideological purpose*; it pulls 'spots' out of the matrix and uses them to describe the whole. My purpose was not to identify the authentic but to investigate the mechanisms by which *historical sites* (places) might be constructed and to explore the complex intersections between texts, objects and experience from which they emerge.

My conception of the term 'meander' differs from some definitions that suggest a purposeless activity. I had a purpose, I didn't want to rely just on someone else's maps, I wanted to experience the area at first hand. Paul Carter has suggested that 'maps plane away to nothing' the '*array of meanders, grooves, ridges, pits and extrusions*'<sup>134</sup> that might be encountered directly from traversing or moving through a place. Even though it was clear that the colonial process itself had '*planed away*' the area's original contours, I wanted to get a sense of how, for instance, during the building of Bennelong's house it might have felt to be in a team pulling a cart laden with clay in both directions. How steep was the climb? What angle the downward slope? How would a full cart be controlled while going downhill?

<sup>135</sup> Neil Leach, 'Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space,' in *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, ed. Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 284.

<sup>136</sup> The suggestion of the bush as a 'wild' place outside of European experience runs through early Australian fiction and non-fiction. An Aboriginal perspective on settled areas as 'wild', albeit from a much more contemporary source, is given in Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia, Studies in Australian History*. (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 267. Griffiths quotes an aboriginal man, Daly Pulkara from Northern Australia, who 'speaks of land that has been cared for as 'quiet', and land that has been degraded by pastoralism as 'wild' country'. (267).

Of course I had no cart, no tonnes of wet clay – yet in walking I felt enabled to move between past and present. For me, it helped bridge the gap between the physical and the theoretical. At Bennelong Point I sat and watched; how far could I see, what could I see, could I imagine tall trees to my back, could I have seen Government House, how long did it take to go between each place? I walked it to find out. And I covered the same route many times so I would get to know it well, a practice the architectural theorist Neil Leach likens to the 'spatial tactics' posited by Michel De Certeau. Here, 'territorialisation' is developed as 'through habitual processes of movement, by covering and recovering the same paths and routes, we come to familiarise ourselves with a territory, and thereby find meaning in that territory'.<sup>135</sup>

Places I've walked around all my life, *Macquarie Street, Phillip Street, Bennelong Point*, began to resonate differently as I wandered them. Where once they had seemed innate, those names began to figure differently as I felt the weight of them, perhaps not for the first time, but with greater clarity, and with unease. Sydney's history is solidly compressed in its street names, especially those within the arc, the mythic foundational space, backing Circular Quay. To dwell on the names, even the ones that don't memorialise a historical figure, such as Bridge Street, can bring the period back quite sharply.

### The Brickfields

Moving between the area backing the Quay and walking towards the Brickfields you become aware of changes in the type of older buildings still in existence. Few original buildings remain, but there seems something in the change in character as you move from the Harbour's edge inland that mirrors the original layout of the settlement. Significant sandstone buildings line the streets closer to the Harbour, like those along Macquarie Street for instance, and these make way for more humble brick ones closer to the area comprised by the Brickfields. As you move further from the Quay, the streets carry less evocative names and fewer grand buildings mark it as historically significant. Today, the Brickfields area still seems to have the status of 'backyard'; it shares little of the gloss of other areas of the city. The abject air that the business of brickmaking must have once lent the area seems to hang over it still. The mess and environmental disorder produced by digging clay, with its gaping holes and piled up overburden, and the generation of dust and waste the forming and firing of huge numbers of bricks entails seem still to cast a pall, although no trace of the making of bricks remains.

Between 1788 and 1795 it represented the edge of the settlement and the two different cultures, Aboriginal and British, who ran up against each other there possibly saw it as equally abject, equally *wild*, though for different reasons.<sup>136</sup> For the British it was surely a place of hard labour, for the Aboriginals a place where the unaccountable was unfolding before their eyes. While the name 'Brickfield Hill', which once referred to the hill between Haymarket (around Central Railway) and the Town Hall traversed by George Street, remains in colloquial use, it no longer appears on maps, nor does the name 'Brickfields'.

### Phillip's house

Through my reading of the early eyewitness accounts I know that Bennelong and Phillip spent time together; they visited each other's houses and ate together often in the period between 1790 and 1792. Bennelong, the accounts note, was a very frequent visitor to Phillip's house and, just as much of what happened culturally and politically at that time is open to supposition, the strength of bonds between individuals are equally difficult to gauge; but I suspect there was one. A letter held by the State Library of New South Wales

from Henry Waterhouse to Phillip, dated 24 October 1795 – not long after Bennelong had returned from England, gives this indication:

I shall have the sum you mention, as shall Benalong whenever I can see any opportunity of its rendering him any service. . . . He however the (sic) never shall want any friendship I can shew him as well on his own account as yours . . . Mr Benalong desires me to send his best wishes to yourself and Mrs Phillips . . .<sup>137</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Henry Waterhouse, *Letter Received by Arthur Phillip. Cy 3005/ 132 and 135*. [website] (cited 4 September 2006); available from [http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/banks/series\\_37/37\\_28.cfm](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/banks/series_37/37_28.cfm).

I've walked, many times, a route the two may have taken between their two houses, from Bennelong Point to the intersection of Bridge and Phillip streets where the Museum of Sydney now marks the spot Phillip's house occupied.

Between 1983–85, Prior to the Museum's development, a team of specialist archaeologists and an army of volunteers inspected and combed the accessible sections of Phillip's first Government House, then the site was embalmed under a layer of fungicide, washed river sand and concrete. The adjacent areas of the site were developed and a large office tower, begun in 1990, built on its western edge. The Museum of Sydney *on the site of the First Government House* was built into the towerblock development and is managed by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW. In the open court that fronts the Museum, the foundations of Phillip's house are picked out, and a window over an open trench keeps a section of the footings visible.

Like the Opera House, the place where this house once stood is now a two-tiered site with the contemporary building, the Museum of Sydney *on the site of first Government House* sitting astride the earlier one, Phillip's house. The Museum of Sydney has been a constant in my efforts to bridge both ends of a temporal trajectory; I began visiting it to look for artefacts at the beginning of this study and became enthralled by its huge collection of broken ceramic shards dug up during the archaeological excavation. As I became more interested in the way the Museum interpreted the early period at Sydney Cove, I kept being drawn back there and my admiration for the Museum's Curator and other staff involved in the fraught deliberations of the ways in which the colonial period might be negotiated, at the time the building was being developed, grew.

By all reports, groups with differing interests sought ascendancy for their agendas; should the site celebrate settlement by the British, or acknowledge past wrongs? Should it celebrate pioneering spirit or recognize its impact? These questions seemed to also haunt my deliberations in relation to Bennelong Point. Both sites, ironically, now lie covered by a layer of concrete; Bennelong Point whittled away, now 'enpodiumed', the remnant foundations of Phillip's house fixed beneath a protective shell. One overlaid because nothing of value was recognized, the other because its value was so great. There is a certain irony too in the fact that although both houses are, in effect, absent, they seem to loom ever larger as the past recedes.

## The Yard

Walking over the protective shield covering Phillip's house I wonder if it lies on top of 'the yard', a place so often mentioned by Collins, Phillip, Tench et al as the place Bennelong and/or his compatriots gathered. The term 'yard' usually denotes an area close by the house and looking at William Bradley's 1791 watercolour of Government House (Figure 29), a number of places that could satisfy this designation can be seen. There is a narrow area at the front of the house (seen more clearly in a later unattributed painting (Figure 30) and an enclosure that is behind, and one to the north containing the kitchen. Bradley's

<sup>138</sup> The exception is Fernando Brambila's images.

images show two small groups of Aboriginals close to the house, one group appearing to be leaving, the other entering, both from the north, but they could be heading towards either of the spaces, or for the house itself.

A number of parallels come to me as I wander around the court, imagining myself in perhaps 'the yard'. Firstly I think about that other place where Aborigines sought to make use of a yard – the Tent Embassy in the front yard of what was then, when it was first erected, Parliament House in Canberra. How bold – and sure of your *place* – to physically locate yourself at the epicentre or to avail yourself of it.

Many of the early accounts suggest that the Aborigines gathered at the first Government House to be fed or to put themselves under Phillip's protection for one reason or another. Phillip has been portrayed as sympathetic and with a sense of responsibility towards them so perhaps his house provided a sense of security where they were safe from internecine dispute and from the disapprobation of less sympathetic new arrivals. But perhaps, like the later occupants of the Tent Embassy, they also saw the yard as *theirs*, and – just as the British did – by using it, symbolically claimed their sovereignty over that fragment and, by extension, the whole of their country.

### Overburden

The other parallel that occurs to me as I meander, self-consciously, around the Museum forecourt is with the idea of 'overburden', a term that kept recurring as I tried to imagine the depth of the layer separating me from the foundations, and while trying to reconcile the court's smooth flatness with the sharp slope of Bridge Street I saw before me. In ceramic and archaeological lexicons, 'overburden' refers to the layer of soil that must be removed to uncover geologic material such as clay, or other features, for instance archaeological finds, below. The archaeologist on the first Government House site catalogued the layers that had to be sliced down through to get to Phillip's footings – bitumen, then gravel, then a layer of dark brown soil, and finally old building rubble had to be removed.

The topography of much of Sydney today is different from what it was in 1788; soil has been moved, hills levelled, gullies filled – the natural world, which slowly and inexorably reshapes itself, reshaped in quadruple (or more) time to accommodate us. And the overburden removed in the process of extracting clay to turn country into object, space into place, created artificial hollows and depressions that was put to use, in turn, in the reclamation of other indentations. Hills were made, slopes levelled.

To use the term in a different way, both Phillip and Bennelong were overburdened; Phillip by the conflicts his duty represented, to give and take at the same time, Bennelong by the requirement to live in two worlds he must have been under. And, moreover, lined up in separate lines behind the two men, both those of British lineage and those of Aboriginal extraction are overburdened by the past, and by the legacies of colonialism, a legacy that often seems, I suspect on both sides, difficult to move aside.

### Slopes

The early paintings of Phillip's house show the site it occupied as very level (figure 29 shows an example) and there is little suggestion in most of them<sup>138</sup> of the hill that is Bridge Street today. Has the slope changed or was it unconscious, this imaginative levelling of a steep slope? Did George Raper, Thomas Watling and other unknown artists act in accord to image First Government House as existing on a level place? Was their aim to mirror the equilibrium, the command of space, the confident assertion of authority so suggested

<sup>139</sup> Museum staff relate that selected objects are used to relate historical narrative to children on School visits and that an occasional tertiary student uses the collection. There is no current project of which the assemblage is a part.

in the 18th century images of British country seats, images with which their depictions of Phillip's house had much in common? These images of early Sydney could never be taken as totally documentary, yet the depiction of the site as predominately level does seem odd and difficult to reconcile with today's streetscape.

### Small broken things

Walking across the flat smoothness of the forecourt and into the Museum I walk up the stairs to the first level, turn left past the large vitrine that holds, amongst other things, the Spode dinner service the wife of Governor King had sent out from England when they were the house's occupants, and into the double story-ed Resource Centre. In this handsome, beautifully fitted out room are stored the over 240,000 mostly broken relics, a large number of them ceramic, found and retrieved by archaeologists sifting through each of the site's stratigraphic levels, from Phillip's foundations to the day the archaeological project began. They are stored on this top level of the Centre, accessed by a narrow set of steps. The room is dimly lit as befits an archive, and all of the material – the broken china, bits of metal, bone etc – along with video and photographic documentation of the excavations, is here.

I've visited the Centre a number of times, searching for clay objects that might articulate something about the place during Bennelong and Phillip's time. But I come away defeated each time for there is something opaque about these small broken things, they are somehow too resolutely themselves – broken things that once were of use – to lead anywhere. There are beautiful small fragments of oriental porcelain, delicately decorated, that although not dated could have come out with Philip, or they could have just been thrown into the foundations during subsequent development. There is a fragment of earthenware possibly produced here, most likely near the Brickfields prior to 1797, and by examining it I found out much. For instance, it shows a combination of quite skilled making with fairly sloppy working practice and that could confirm the shortages of skilled labour at the time. But the small piece seemed to open few other avenues and I was at a loss to know what further questions I could ask of it. (notes made on this shard are included in Appendix 2)

So, neatly and precisely, *and thoroughly* catalogued in their pristine stiff cardboard boxes these small broken pieces seem, to me, also to be a burden in their own way. They have sat there since the mid-80's largely undisturbed and for the most part, uninterpreted<sup>139</sup> – fetishes perhaps now because of their connection with the place. There are other similar collections dotted, midden-like, around greater Sydney, each assemblage a symptom perhaps of an anxiety – a fraught type of caring – about throwing anything out that might help to make sense of this place in the past.

The Museum of Sydney, like the Sydney Opera House, has an artwork on its forecourt, though Janet Lawrence and Fiona Foley's work, 'Edge of the Trees' installation (Figure 31), unlike Durham's, is permanent. Walking outside I wander through its collection of tall wooden and sandstone poles, some carved with text, others with vitrines containing residues of Aboriginal life in the area. Just as Jimmie Durham's 'Car with Stone' does, I'm struck immediately by the capacity of this work to bring the past into sharper focus. Both are rich in meaning, both interpret the past using objects, both slice, forensically – anatomising – through the stratigraphic layers, the overburden, of the public historical sphere.

After a number of visits to the Resource Centre I continued to find myself mystified by the fragments held there. Small broken things such as these have been used for centuries



to provide information about the past so why do these seem so opaque? I admit I don't really know what questions I should ask of them and given the dearth of research they have been subjected to, perhaps nobody else does either? Is their past too close, and so their shapes and ornaments too familiar? Is the assemblage as a whole too similar to those uncovered in The Rocks and other parts of Sydney? Has the historic significance of the site been so disregarded in the past that its excavated contents are too much an unwieldy conflation of old and new?

Finally, would this inside archive tell more than the shells 'archived' outside in Lawrence and Foley's tall wooden poles? Both, on a superficial level, seem somewhat opaque, just records of what was in use at particular times. Theoretically, the ceramic fragments should be more transparent to those of European background because an understanding of the multiple contexts of which they form a part is inherent in those of that extraction. But if an oyster shell was similarly understood – not just its name but the taste of its contents at different times of the year, the way it felt in the hand, its multiple uses, the role it might play in social relations, the considerations covering its harvesting and disposal, then a shell might not seem so simple, so opaque, so *just itself* either.

Later, after walking back to where I'm staying I flick through the catalogue produced to accompany the 'Edge of the Trees' installation and see photographs there of the official opening ceremony of the Museum of Sydney *on the site of the first Government House*. These show crowds milling around the poles, craning to see into the vitrines embedded in the wood at the materials – ash, shell, bone, . . . clay – they contain, so integral to aboriginal life when Phillip's house was made to grow out of the landscape. Heads are lifted, the photographs show, listening to the unfamiliar sound of an Aboriginal language spoken aloud in this place.

Looking at these photographs the official opening of the Sydney Opera House comes to mind again, and I realise how unimaginable – how unthinkable – it would be now to have at the opening of a building, someone sit astride it and act out the part of an early captured/stolen Aboriginal; Arabanoo, for instance, buried in 1789 in the garden of Phillip's house – or Bennelong again. Or, for a European dignitary's wife to present a didgeridoo to an architect at such an event.



Figure 29: William Bradley, 'Governor's House at Sydney, Port Jackson, 1791', 1791. Watercolour on laid paper; 13 x 19cm.

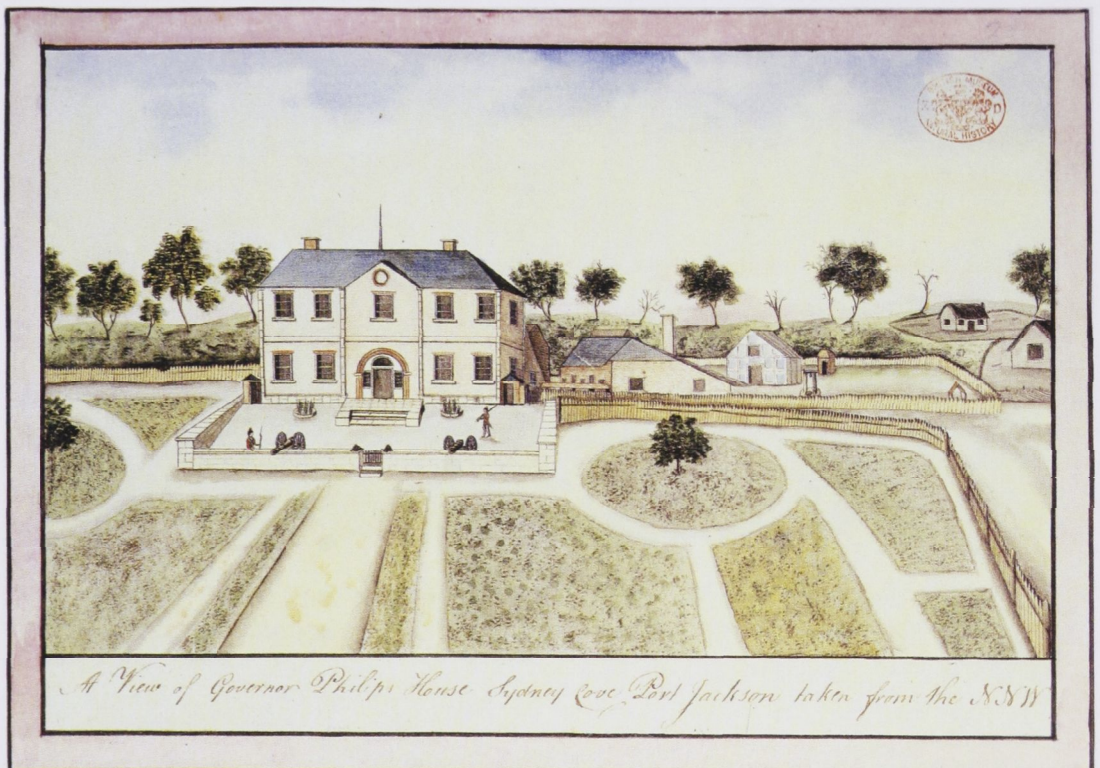


Figure 30: 'A View of Governor Philip's House Sydney Cove Port Jackson taken from the NNW', not signed or dated, ca. 1792. Pen ink and watercolour on laid paper; 16 x 27cm.



Figure 31, a & b: Fiona Foley, Janet Lawrence, 'The Edge of the Trees', 1994. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Forecourt, Museum of Sydney on the Site of First Government House.

## CONCLUSION

<sup>140</sup> An original strategy was to compare how place might be differently constructed by three types of material objects, the Sydney Cove Medallion, Bennelong's House, and a collection of colonial ceramic tableware sherds. The other two areas were set aside when it became clear that only one could be adequately examined in the space available.

<sup>141</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, 200.

In the discussion above I have sought to demonstrate how a small clay-brick house with only a five-year life span was fashioned by transactions and relationships at Sydney Cove during the first years of British occupation. Further, ways in which it, in turn, now fashions the place, Bennelong Point on Sydney Harbour, have been scrutinized and evaluated. In pursuing this, I have left the original focus of the Dissertation, ceramic domestic objects and the embodiment of attitudes to nature and place, behind. The understandings developed through the present study have though provided me with a firmer grounding, and a better understanding of context, from which to pursue research in that area in future.

Initial research, including much investigation not identified in this document,<sup>140</sup> was instrumental not only in developing the framework for this study, but in reinforcing my conviction that material objects can, in a sense, be articulate. While the material presented here does not *directly* reflect my investigation in the Studio Research, there are echoes back and forth. The dual methodology is mirrored in that both components utilize the metaphor of the meander and many of the texts on space and place are shared. My process of walking around the areas of investigation and stopping at points to reflect, characterizes both investigations. Importantly, questions about the nuances and tensions surrounding the area of 'place', who owns what, what does 'owning' constitute, who belongs where? – all of consequence in the contemporary world yet often determined through history – have resonance in both.

Throughout my investigation of Bennelong's house I have attempted to tease apart the short statements made about it because they continue to echo, for the most part unchanged and unchecked, as events surrounding the building of the small house are retold.

Farther to please him, a brick house, of 12 feet square, was built for his use, and for that of such of his countrymen as might chuse to reside in it, on a point of land fixed upon by himself.<sup>141</sup>

It wasn't just any house, but one of the first with which the British began incrementally to stake out their territory. As such, it marked the turning of what they appear to have thought of as an empty space, into a manifestation of British place. While most of the texts where the story is told are not necessarily attempting to deny the sleight of hand inherent in giving with one hand while taking with the other, frequent repetition of an adumbrated history I suggest conceals the underlying ideological agenda.

It has been fitting to examine the house in terms of 'favour' because that is the way it has often been cast. The message we attach to favours, sometimes subliminally, assigns particular credit to the giver and so my identification of it as belonging in Annette Weiner's exchange category of 'inalienable objects', things whose provenance stays with them, is apt.

I stated in the first section, *Bennelong's House* that the house was unlike other objects more usually in that category, old watches, early cedar chairs etc., but it does share some characteristics with other objects that could be termed 'inalienable'. These might include such things as Captain Cook's cup and saucer, recently donated to the National Museum, or Matthew Flinder's eyeglass, all of that class of objects which in themselves might be unremarkable but which carry with them the aura of their owner.

But Bennelong's house is weighted in a way objects such as those rarely are, because his ownership of it, really, was so enmeshed in contingency. The casual lines so often used to explain it, on reflection, make this clear because they so often link the building of the house straight back to the giver, Arthur Phillip, and through him to the British government of the day and the attendant suggestion of largesse and generosity obscures what Bennelong and his compatriots were being made, covertly, to accede.

The cost to the British at the time, I have argued, was most probably reasonably significant. Phillip had a gargantuan task to reshape the place and it is hard to imagine that his workers were particularly willing. It is not difficult to conceive how taxing the hard labour of splitting timber; digging clay, carting bricks must have been for those who were in all probability living in abject conditions themselves. But it must have barely caused a blip on the radar of the Government in Britain. The building itself was characterless except in its lack of architectural nicety; the images show it having *about* as much charm as a bricked bus shelter.

Styling the small house as a 'model home', as I have in the second section, has resonances with the Sydney Opera House in two respects. Firstly, the Opera House is the most celebrated of modern opera houses, and it is arguably thought of, despite what some might see as its functional shortcomings, as a model – for who could ask for more in any house devoted to performance, or to symbolise a nation? Secondly there is a parallel in the term 'model' in that the *house*, a space the British took as denoting a civilised way of life, could, once gifted to Bennelong, cause that desirable state to be modelled by the Aboriginals there. Similarly, the Sydney Opera House in offering to the relatively new Australian nation a model of European culture, might similarly encourage cultured behaviour here. Just as Bennelong's house could be said to mark the place where he and his relatives might emerge out of a remote, uncivilized past, so the Sydney Opera House might mark the emergence of a contemporary Australia from a remote, uncultured past and the 'place' fashioned by the Sydney Opera House in this case, is one firmly attached to a European past.

As I have argued, none of the design or material references of the Sydney Opera House tie it particularly to the place it so thoroughly occupies. Jørn Utzon's initial design was made before he visited Sydney and, working from photographs, it seems it was the physical setting his design sought to balance. In this, he appears to have worked more in the manner of a painter or sculptor bent on finding just the right solution to improve upon the composition the natural topography offered. Ironically, it is the motif of a shell unintentionally suggested by the shape of the roof, and familiarised through the use of that word to describe its vaults, that anchors it to the middens which once edged the Point, and thus link the building to the history of the place.

In seeking to convey the appropriateness of Bennelong Point as its legitimate home, publicity generated by the Sydney Opera House imparts an idea of it as a place where performance has a historical precedent. That may be true but the terms 'performance' and 'entertainment' can't be transposed with the word 'culture'. Denis Byrne's point that romanticising of the Aboriginal past can be accompanied by a disregard for their fate over the last 200 years resonates here. By focusing just on the entertainments that took place there, the undeniable fact that a particular way of life on the Point has disappeared is cloaked.

<sup>142</sup> Taussig, 'Jimmie Durham,' 82.

<sup>143</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 81.

<sup>144</sup> Papastergiadis, 'A Thousand Beautiful Things: Nikos Papastergiadis, Jimmie Durham and Maria-Theresa Alves,' 49.

<sup>145</sup> Keith Willey, *When the Sky Fell Down: The Destruction of the Tribes of the Sydney Region, 1788–1850's* (Sydney: Collins, 1979).

James Maquet's assertion that objects can be both 'instruments and signs' has held true with one proviso, which is that the information they refract can be differently received. The small clay-brick house, has proved for me a useful instrument in examining relationships between objects and place at Bennelong Point. But the mechanisms through which the house, in the public historical sphere, can be used to suggest multiple versions of events, have become clearer:

At the end of his catalogue essay on Jimmie Durham discussed at the beginning of the first section, *Bennelong's House*, Michael Taussig carries the initiation story of the younger man being carried on the shoulders of the older into the present as he summarises the impact of Durham's work in the Opera House forecourt as:

– looking for the absurdly telling connection that makes sense of everything and nothing, blood dripping onto the heads and shoulders of those who carry us and whose name we shall now add to our own.<sup>142</sup>

Extending Taussig's analogy further, I suggest that the shoulders carrying the Sydney Opera House are those of Bennelong's house. The Opera House has added his name to its own – the Sydney Opera House at Bennelong Point, his story to its own saga, and physically substituted itself for the place named after him. Just as ownership of the Point was in 1788 appropriated by the British, the massive house that now sits on the small house's shoulders has commandeered *it* to fashion the Point. Lefebvre's contention then, that objects can lie,<sup>143</sup> confronts us; objects might fashion places, but the 'public historical sphere' also fashions objects. And objects whose bricks, tiles and concrete we might think set – fused – turn out to be malleable still – able to fashion place at will. Jimmie Durham understands the complex interactions between objects and words well:

I had [Jose Saramago's] book about the death of Ricardo Reis and for a month I walked around Lisbon, my first time in Lisbon and I gathered objects and quotations from his beautiful book on to these things. So there's a construction made of some metal and some abalone shell and some wood, and it says, 'Do you accuse me of lying? No, we never lie to each other we are friends. When we need to lie we use words, they lie for us.' And this little construction of things I found began to do that in such a nice way. They're not lying, but they're calling it to attention that something is lying.<sup>144</sup>

Its impossible to imagine how life must have been for Bennelong and his countrymen and women at Sydney Cove after January 1788 but it *could* be imagined that the first section of the title Keith Willey gave to his influential book about the clash between the two cultures, *When the Sky Fell Down* might describe it.<sup>145</sup> For the British, except perhaps for the very most swashbuckling amongst them, life must have been abject; far from home and family, an uncertain future, slave labour for many, taxing responsibility for others.

People don't always behave well in fraught times, Bennelong possibly had no claim over the Point and shouldn't have asked for a house to be built there; whether he had the right or not will never be known. Phillip, though he may have thought he was doing a generous act, shouldn't have claimed the right to build. He may have thought he asked permission, he may have thought it was given, again, its impossible to know. What we do know we know from one side and primarily from reports and diaries made for the consumption of those who, on the whole, had a vested interest in the sovereignty of the British.

In the larger scheme of things, the circumstance of Bennelong's house might seem minor;

<sup>146</sup> Ben Blakeney, *Interview* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1994), Oral History Recording.

it possibly is. Nevertheless, a type of complaisant disregard accumulates each time the standard narrative about it is aired. It was one of the many small acts that presaged, to use now the second section of Willey's title, *the destruction of the tribes of the Sydney region, 1788–1850's*.

In an interview given in 1994 as part of the National Library's *Oral History Project of Australia*, Ben Blakeney, the actor who played the part of Bennelong at the 1973 opening of the Opera House, was asked to recall the words he had repeated from its roof 21 years before. He couldn't of course remember them word for word but he paraphrased his speech:

... but what it boiled down to was Bennelong, and he came from the past to tell the people down below that no matter what they built on that point, the spirits of his people still live on that point, that's all it was.<sup>146</sup>

The most monumental building now covers the Point – and it has its own compelling narrative. But seeping out from under, the small clay-brick house speaks of something undeniable, and in this way it continues to haunt Bennelong Point and, insistently, to shape it as a place.

## APPENDIX I

### TEXT REFERENCES TO THE HOUSE

<sup>147</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, 200.

<sup>148</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, Etc, of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 113.

<sup>149</sup> Eleanor Dark, *Bennelong (1764?–1813)* [website] (cited 2 December 2006); available from <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A010083b.htm>.

<sup>150</sup> Melinda Hinkson and Alana Harris, *Aboriginal Sydney: A Guide to Important Places of the Past and Present*

<sup>151</sup> Willey, *When the Sky Fell Down: The Destruction of the Tribes of the Sydney Region, 1788–1850's*, 121.

<sup>152</sup> J. P. McGuanne, 'Bennilong Point and Fort Macquarie,' *Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Historical Society: Part II* (1901): 9.

<sup>153</sup> Bridges, *Foundations of Identity: Building Early Sydney 1788–1822*, 16.

<sup>154</sup> John E. B. Currey, *David Collins: A Colonial Life* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>155</sup> Derek John Mulvaney and Australian Heritage Commission., *A Good Foundation: Reflections on the Heritage of the First Government House, Sydney, Special Australian Heritage Publication Series, No. 5.* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), 14.

Arranged below are examples of references to Bennelong's house:

Farther to please him, a brick house, of 12 feet square, was built for his use, and for that of such of his countrymen as might chuse to reside in it, on a point of land fixed upon by himself.<sup>147</sup>

. . . and at length Bennillong solicited the governor to build him a hut at the extremity of the eastern point of the cove. This the governor, who was very desirous of preserving the friendly intercourse which seemed to have taken place, readily promised, and gave the necessary directions for its being built.<sup>148</sup>

In 1791 a brick hut, 12 feet sq. (1.1 m<sup>2</sup>), was built for him on the eastern point of Sydney Cove, now called Bennelong Point.<sup>149</sup>

In 1790 Governor Phillip had a small hut built for his friend Bennelong on the site where the Opera House now stands. Thereafter the place became known as Bennelong Point.<sup>150</sup>

Bennelong's reputation among his people as the special friend of the white men is likely to have been further advanced when, at his request, Phillip had a brick hut, 3.6 metres square, built for him on the eastern point of Sydney Cove – later called Bennelong Point and now the site of the Sydney Opera House.<sup>151</sup>

For Bennilong, and three more blacks, huts were built on the point of land now bearing his name.<sup>152</sup>

. . . Phillip, in a well-intentioned move to gain the good-will and friendship of the Aboriginal people, ordered a small brick building twelve feet (3.7m) square to be put up for his friend Bennelong on the eastern point adjoining the Cove.<sup>153</sup>

At Bennillong's request a hut was built for him on the eastern point of the cove, and thereafter he and his companions came and went as they please, sometimes living in the village with the British officers, at others camping in the bush.<sup>154</sup>

Bennelong was given a brick hut specially built for his family on the point which bears his name. It was twelve feet square and must have been more substantial than most houses in 1790 (Tench 1961, p. 200). George Thompson (NRNSW 2, p. 797) noted that 'the Governor has built a very neat brick hut for one of the chiefs, but neither he nor his family will live in it; they will sometimes stay in the place for a day, then make a fire on the outside of it. In short, they prefer living in the woods . . .'<sup>155</sup>



<sup>156</sup> Blackburn to his sister Margaret, 17 March 1791 [Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, UK] cited in Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming in of the Eora: Sydney Cove 1788–1792*, 68.

<sup>157</sup> Irving and Apperly, *The History & Design of the Australian House*, 36.

<sup>158</sup> Willey, *When the Sky Fell Down: The Destruction of the Tribes of the Sydney Region, 1788–1850's*, 120–21.

<sup>159</sup> freestanding Panel, Cadigal Gallery, Museum of Sydney.

A House of Bricks was Run up for a Chief calld Bennelong ... where his Wife Children and Relations often Come & stay a Day or two – Since When, Many More Men Women & Children are Come Among Us, & are Sometimes quite familiar wrote Midshipman David Blackburn.<sup>156</sup>

At length he solicited the Governor to build him a hut at the extremity of the western point of Sydney Cove.<sup>157</sup>

Bennelong's reputation among his people as the special friend of the white men is likely to have been further advanced when, at this request, Phillip had a brick hut, 3.6 metres square, built for him on the eastern point of Sydney Cove – later called Bennelong Point and now the site of the Sydney Opera House.<sup>158</sup>

He later lived in a small brick house built for him on Tubowgule (Bennelong Point), on high ground above what is now the site of the Opera House.<sup>159</sup>

## APPENDIX 2

### NOTES ON A SHERD IN THE MUSEUM OF SYDNEY ON THE SITE OF FIRST GOVERNMENT HOUSE RESOURCE CENTRE



Figure 32: D. Markovic, Lead glazed earthenware sherd with spotted green decoration. Reproduced in Helen Proudfoot, Anne Bickford, Brian Egloff, Robyn Stocks, *Australia's First Government House*

Helen Proudfoot's photo caption reads:

Lead glazed earthenware sherd with spotted green decoration. It has a shallow flat shape with a flaring rim and is probably a fragment of a milk pan used in the diary. Milk was placed in such dishes so that the cream could separate and rise. This was found in the pit filling the trench for the 1797 box drain and must have been made before that time. The coarse composition of the body suggests that it was made here. If so, it must be one of the earliest pottery vessels known to have been made in Australia.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>160</sup> Proudfoot and New South Wales. Dept. of Planning., *Australia's First Government House*, no page number: colour insert.

#### FOLLOWING ARE NOTES FROM MY DIARY

*Earthenware sherd/shard, sandy buff clay – still porous (sticks to tongue) – base turned with metal or sharp wooden tool, turning marks show scraping, most likely from tool catching on larger particulate matter in clay. Very thin clear glaze on front with copper decoration, back not glazed except for series small spots which look like they are splashes from something nearby being dipped into glaze – or glaze being poured nearby (more likely), similar splashes over base as well (must have been stored upside down after glazing), concentric throwing marks on inside base, rim smoothed and skilfully defined with indented line, copper decoration not so finely controlled – small pinpoints copper all over and some bigger splatters, maybe used as powder rather than liquid mix. Clay on base is patchily coloured, hard to tell if poorly mixed or stained by long immersion in soil. The Museum of Sydney database entry for the sherd:*

Category No.	Context	Class & Material	Activity, Function, Sub-Function	
FGH10123	40R14:17	ceramic: fine	food preparation: bowl	
Portion	Colour	Type Series	Qty	Integrity
rim	–	lead glaze I (t)	1	single sherd

What do I know from the above: The clay doesn't tell me much: could have been either fine grained clay with coarse sand and grog of varying mesh size added or else clay from deposit that was contaminated with sand and gravel materials. Colour gives few clues: buff colour clay widespread over whole planet. The person who made them was skilled (well-controlled shape, finely potted walls of even shape and finely worked rims) but possibly not fussy aesthetically (careless spots glaze fired on). Perhaps they had bad vision? – the copper glaze spots would be hard to pick out from the darker clay. Perhaps they were in a hurry and didn't have time to clean off the wayward glaze spots? Perhaps because milk pan only for use by servants or lower classes, not important to take too much care?

So: this was a place where people with good skills, but who were a bit sloppy, lived. It was not a technologically advanced place, even for the 1790's – clay quality. The skilled workforce was either not supervised or supervised by people with lesser trade skills – sloppy workmanship, no quality control. Of course, the sherd could have been a sherd from day one, that is, it could have been broken up after being taken from the kiln because it was of low quality.

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