

Reclamation and repair

Words by

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The symbolic content of the *Repair* exhibit at the 16th International Venice Architecture Biennale reflected a developing architectural practice of integrating built and natural systems to repair the environment and a contemporary re-valuing of heritage. The following narrative draws from early ethnographic descriptions of the temperate grasslands in what is now Victoria, South-eastern Australia, 1835 and moves to nineteenth-century contact history.

Dooti awoke at the pre-dawn to the sound of the song-man's boomerangs clapping. She emerged from her domed *wuurn* (house) to blow the fire coals and raise flames for warmth. The winter rains had departed a month before and the bone moon was hovering low in the sky to the west with the Morning Star. There was not a breath of wind, giving perfect conditions to make the great smoke signal to invite the surrounding tribespeople to gather at *Mirraywuyay* for the annual assembly of the grassland tribespeoples. More and more boomerang percussionists joined the distant singing as the local clansmen began their ceremony for the invitation smoke. As the sun

lipped above the horizon, all of the camp had to be at the side of the big swamp a kilometre away.

The local *Bunjil* (Eaglehawk) Dreaming clansmen emerged in full-body paint in a single line to commence their Kangaroo fertility dance. The *Waa* (Crow) Dreaming men from the neighbouring clan stood ready with their green boughs ready to manage the fire. When the dance reached its crescendo, the senior clan Elder, Jagajaga took the burning firestick to the swamp edge and lit the tall fringing grass. Flames leapt high as there was much dry dead grass interspersed with green on the swamp's edges. It was the role of the *Waa* men to control the fire so that it burnt in a narrow band from north to east (clockwise) around the periphery of the 500-metre circular swamp. As the song men raised their pitch, the great spiral white smoke began its ascent into the still morning sky. If it remained calm, the spiral would reach the height necessary to be seen for a radius of 250 kilometres covering the territories of the seven tribes of the Plains Nation.

Later in the middle of the day, *Dooti* was on the basalt-strewn

plains with her clanswomen's group, digging root foods (tubers, rhizomes, corms, bulbs). They were accompanied by some of the younger women from the neighbouring clan who were also *Bunjil*, having married in to the *Waa* clan. The women had spent most of the morning targeting *murnong* tubers (daisy roots) whose presence across the plain was conspicuous by their bright yellow flowers. But they supplemented these with other species of orchids that had shot up after the good winter rain. Their metre-long digging sticks, water coolamon and reed baskets were placed to one side together with tied bundles of grass for thatching the domed roofs in the camp. The women were taking a break in the shade of a small patch of shrubs on the otherwise open plain, and lightly roasting a small portion of their foodstuffs for a midday snack. The gossip was about the eligibility of particular young women from other tribal groups as wives to be promised for the young boys who would undergo the 'making-men' ceremony at the forthcoming assembly. Margurah, a visiting senior woman was praising the virtues as well as promoting the economic preference for the daughters of the Stone-Dreaming people to the west, who controlled rituals and rights over the greenstone axe and obsidian knife quarries.

Some weeks later, when the moon had grown full:

The great assembly was now well underway. All of those invited had arrived, according to the clan messengers who had travelled with the invitation ochre and feathers a moon before. The square-up rituals had been completed to equalise emotions – resolve grievances by

Right John Skinner Prout, *Melbourne from Collingwood*, 1847, with swamp ecology destroyed, Lithograph: 22.8 x 37.5 cm on sheet 33.6 x 42.8 cm State Library of Victoria Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Countries



duel fighting and perform mourning obligations for the deceased. The *Tanderrum* ceremonies had then followed over six days to ritually smoke all of the visitors, cleansing them of any malignant spirits that may have entered upon their well-being, and then to bestow them with rights to join in the local collection of food and material resources. And then the hundreds of visitors (perhaps almost 2000) had to be all carefully allocated their camping places between the foothills of the woody uplands and the fast-running stream on the edge of the plain, with an allocated defecation area at the rear. They all needed access to ample firewood and freshwater, but the camping pattern was according to locational positioning and had to be preserved: each party had to be camping in the direction of

their homeland. All those from one language group had to be together and broken down into clusters according to their constituent clans, which could be either *Waa* or *Bunjil* Dreaming. Public dancing corroborees had commenced in the evenings with each language group vying to be the most polished performers and at times, humorous dancers. This pattern would only be broken on the three nights of the man-making ceremony when everyone would camp around the ceremony ground in two large groups, either *Waa* or *Bunjil* group, to represent the two inter-marrying halves of the regional bloc of the plains tribespeople. These two categories of people would also be expressed during the ceremony in both sitting and dancing groups as well as styles of body paint-up →

and dress apparel. Husbands had to split from wives and adult children went with their father's clan. All young children were separated under a chaperone, well away from the ceremony ground. These were the socio-spatial customs of the grassland peoples.

The hunting drive begins:

Jemba, the husband of Dooti was in charge of the right flank of the great kangaroo and emu drive which would supply the camp with fresh meat for the duration of the ceremonies. Patchwork mosaic burning had been carried out before the wet season in the drive area, and now these patches contained succulent grass shoots from the ample winter rainfall. It was these shoots that drew in the feeding kangaroos. The drive was happening on day 4, after the visitor's offerings of smoked eels and fish as well as their vegetable baskets had been enjoyed by all. The weather was favourable with a prevailing wind from the north arising in the mid-morning. The strategy was to throw an arc of people, men, women and children, across a distance of 20 or so kilometres and gradually move south over a whole day towards a V-junction between two running streams, making as much noise as possible with the aid of barking hunting dogs, and by igniting selected patches of unburnt grass to make smoky fires. As they walked, the lead beaters from the local clan would sing the songs of the ancestral beings, the two Black Snake Cousins, the Long-tail one and the Short-tail one, who created the sacred stone weir sites in these streams. According to this sacred history, the two Cousins travelled to meet up and dance together at the junction site called *Bukadi*, before travelling seaward to create the site of *Limbilimbi*, the sacred rocks off-shore that stopped the sea from advancing landwards.

This great drive would concentrate large mobs of kangaroos, flocks of emus and other

animals into the stream junction at *Bukadi* where long net traps were slung between poles and spearsmen were waiting. The right flank was led by the *Bunjil* men and the left by the *Waa* men. Once the kangaroo and emu meat was all consumed, the camp would fall back to the reed-plaited eel and fish traps set in the rock weirs left by the Snake Cousins in the Dreamtime along the two streams. This system of stone-wall traps would yield the camp's sustenance during the final days of completing the ceremonies.

Colonial impacts

The narrative returns. The year is 1881 and the scene is a rural roadway leading into Melbourne:

Dooti is now a very old woman, but still strong and animated, riding on the tray of a horse-drawn wagon with some younger Aboriginal women and children, and led by their men-folk who are walking in front. She is 'calling the country'; calling out the Kulin Nation's names of each hill, creek, and waterhole that they pass as they travel, occasionally weeping, singing to the country, then reminiscing about her experiences and memories in each place during her younger years when people were under the old Law, and before the great disease-time which came with the white men and killed four-fifths of their plains-people.

Dooti is talking to her grandchildren and her great granddaughter *Bulthuku* (also called Jane), in particular, lamenting the loss of the food resource places and the destruction of sacred sites. She is encouraging *Bulthuku*, but with a chastising tone as if she will not take notice, to remember that her cultural identity is based on the Dreaming in their country. The wagon enters and moves through the growing suburbs of Melbourne with sprawling estates and industrial coal and steam-powered factories. The travelling group who are all extended family, lament on the impact and loss of the cultural landscape... *Dooti* is calling the names of sacred sites and of her

ancestors whose spirits she believes are still at those sites; all being subsumed by the fast-expanding urban development.

Once the steam engine-driven industrial era reached Australia in the late 1800s, the colonial conversion of the continent for economic purposes irreversibly damaged the ecology and habitats, either by urban expansion, pastoralism, mining, farming, logging, over-fishing, draining and damming waterways, and feral animal and plant introductions, all bringing the onset of the Anthropocene in the Southern Hemisphere. The differential spread of the frontier over 180 years had variable impacts in different ecological systems.

The party of *Dooti* and her relatives is travelling in protest, along the 65 kilometres journey south from their Aboriginal farm station of Coranderrk to Melbourne. They intend to petition the Colonial Parliament against the actions of the Aborigines Protection Board which has been trying to sell their Coranderrk farm station, and which through imposed management conditions has undermined the initiatives of the *Kulin* plainspeople to be economically self-sufficient. This is despite their earlier successes at self-governance, farming, house-building and commercial hop-processing, from when they voluntarily took up residence there in the 1860s with the help of Protector Thomas and Missionary John Green, after a time of starvation and land loss. Worse still, the Board wants to force tribespeople who have some white (Anglo-Celtic) blood to leave their old people at Coranderrk and live in cities and work for white people, and assimilate. The group of protesters is led by the last strong clan spokesmen who are grounded in the old Law, the *Ngurangaeta* leaders, William Barak of the *Woiwurrung* and Thomas Banfield of the *Taungurung*. *Dooti* is from the older generation again and a reference point of wisdom for the whole protest group. This is the tenth protest march which the group have made to the government in Melbourne since 1863,

when they had delivered gifts to be sent for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in return for their granted land rights. Unfortunately, the Queen did not hear. *Bulthuku* (Jane) was left angered and bitter.

In Aboriginal belief, the first travellers across the Australian continent were the ancestral heroes of the Dreamtime who created numerous sites as they travelled in which they deposited their sacred energies, perpetually left behind. In classical Aboriginal societies (before the colonial invasion), these creative acts were re-enacted and celebrated in ceremonies, as in the case of the Black Snake Cousins who travelled through the grassland country creating the weirs. Today the popular term 'Song-lines' is often used to describe these lines of travel and the creation sites at which songs, sacred histories and ceremonies and sometimes sacred objects were left behind. However, travel routes of cultural significance to Aboriginal people have also been generated during the colonial era, as was the case with the protest marches from Coranderrk to Melbourne.

There was a tendency in both colonial and post-colonial thought and writing to create and perpetuate a dichotomy between the city and the bush, the settled cities and farms of the east-coast versus the interior and northern wildernesses. However, the artificial colonial landscape versus the natural wild landscape myth has been gradually deconstructed in the late twentieth century with improved ethnographic models and understandings of ancient Aboriginal land management practices, as well as ecological understandings of how European land practices brought irreversible damage.

A different way of thinking then, is that all ecosystems both in urban, rural and remote areas have been undergoing successive transformations over centuries and millennia as a result of human interventions, starting with Aboriginal pre-colonial era, then followed in the colonial era by impacts such as pastoral grazing, farming, timber-

getting, land clearing, feral plant and animal introduction, soil erosion, atmospheric pollution culminating in the emerging Anthropocene with the likelihood of severe climate change. The proposition of restoring a landscape to some pristine imaginary model of an earlier non-human ecosystem becomes questionable if not impossible to model let alone achieve.

But is there something that we can call partial repair around which one can identify some sound ecological planning principles that mitigate against loss of species and support a healthy reproductive ecosystem? Ongoing interrogation is needed around this question. Situating projects within Aboriginal landscapes, a challenge then for contemporary architects is how to relate a project with some moral integrity, to a changed cultural landscape, often an irreversibly changed landscape.

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This is an excerpt from *Repair and Aboriginal Architecture* by Paul Memmott, published with kind permission.