



‘Dwelling’ as a political form

Architecture and memory
in the practice of Archie Moore

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Archie Moore, *A Home Away from Home (Benelong/Vera's Hut)*, 2016, installation view, 20th Biennale of Sydney, Royal Botanic Garden, 2016; mixed-media installation, 433.2 x 345 x 258.4cm; made with assistance from Neil Hobbs and Karina Harris, and Kevin O'Brien; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney; photo: Wendell Teodoro

To dwell on an idea means to linger with it, to consider it, to ponder on it for a prolonged duration. It can also mean to physically stay still in one place and reimagine the various potentialities it could offer. The practice of dwelling is conventionally seen as a moment of quietness, reprieve and thoughtfulness; however, in some cases it can also be staged as an avenue of protest, anger and resilience.

A Brisbane-based Indigenous artist aligned with the Kamilaroi language group, Archie Moore's artistic practice is one that takes the idea of dwelling as both a method of creative process and an act of politics. His practice is premised on Aboriginal politics in Australia, simultaneously foregrounding the issues of race, language and identity through different media, including painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, photography, sound and video. Having grown up in regional South East Queensland, Moore moved to Brisbane to study at the Queensland University of Technology, graduating in 1998. He stayed on in Brisbane, participating in the city's vibrant music/sound scene in addition to projects by artist-run initiatives (ARIs). Here Moore was able to find comradeship with other contemporary artists while also benefiting from the strong lineage of Aboriginal activism in the city evidenced by the Indigenous art collective proppaNOW.

Moore's interest in architecture was first explored, in relation to religion, through an ongoing series of small paper-based works made from bibles called 'On a Mission From God' (2008). A 2010 iteration from the series, *Humpy Goona*, highlights Moore's interest in the ongoing genocidal damage to Indigenous culture in Australia, primarily focusing on the repression brought about by colonial Christian missions and state-sanctioned government reserves and stations. These institutions began to multiply after the introduction of the 1883 Aboriginal Protection Board in New South Wales. Closely following this, many states in Australia adopted a version of the *Aboriginal Protection Act*, legislation that gave these states the authority to segregate Aboriginal people from European Australians, resulting in often extreme acts of Aboriginal cultural genocide at large.

Stately architecture was at the forefront of this brutish assimilation, with the church forming a key site for the enforcement of the many cruel disciplinary measures that were perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians. Furthermore, most of those institutionalised had not lived before in European-style buildings, meaning that here the architecture became the core apparatus for the church and state to actively embody cultural assimilation.

During his student days, Moore actively interrogated questions relating to identity and its specific associations with both language and memory. These engagements culminated in the 2010 exhibition 'Dwelling' at the Brisbane ARI Accidentally Annie Street Space. Exploring architecture through personal histories, Moore recreated elements from his childhood home in a site-specific installation spanning the entirety of a three-bedroom colonial 'Queenslander' and its unmown lawn. Permeated by the powerful scent of disinfectant, the exhibition featured a shower curtain in the bathroom inscribed with 'WILD BLACK', a graffitied couch and a 1980s-style television sprawled on the floor. These items form part of Moore's personal history as the child of an Indigenous mother and white father, highlighting the poverty and racial discrimination that he and his family have experienced growing up in regional Australia. Moore has also faced his own personal demons along the way, as he didn't always fit into the one-dimensional projection of what mainstream Australia has considered 'Indigenous' to be.

Continuing with architecture as form, Moore's installation *Clover* was produced for an exhibition at another Brisbane ARI, Boxcopy, in 2012. Resembling a scrawled protest banner draped or discarded over a makeshift dwelling, the work focused on ar-

chitecture as an apparatus in support of the state and furthered the artist's inquiry into communicating an Aboriginal experience of colonisation through a particular focus on Queensland policy. In mid-1981, then-Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen argued against a World Council of Churches investigation into Aboriginal living conditions, saying that Aboriginal Australians 'lived in clover' and 'paradise' compared to the plight of others within the delegation. Here Moore's use of architecture refers to a stereotype of vernacular Aboriginal dwellings, and thus Bjelke-Petersen's remarks.

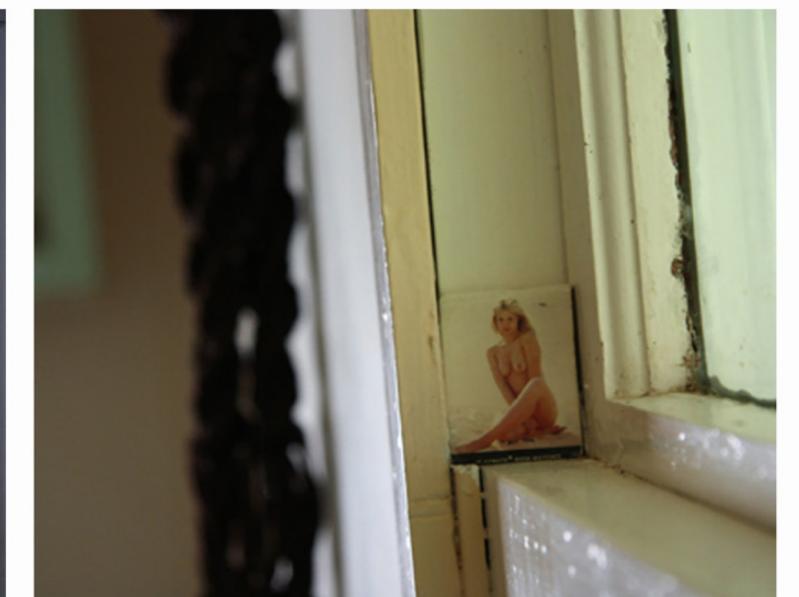
These three examples of the intertwining of personal histories culminated in Moore's most recent commission for the 20th Biennale of Sydney in 2016. Titled *A Home Away From Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)*, the work extended the artist's interest in redrafting personal memory through architecture by collaborating for the first time with Kevin O'Brien, a Brisbane architect renowned for working within the space of Indigenous knowledge. Since 2005 O'Brien has pursued – in practice as well as in his teaching – a project or method that he refers to as 'Finding Country', and which saw him exhibit at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2012:

Work from my studio is based on gaining an understanding of Country first. Not a token race card action, and not a symbolic reaction. We don't start with a blank sheet, or the terra nullius as I sometimes call it. More typically it's the making of space by taking things away, not by adding. The Venice Biennale project ['Finding Country'] explores that notion. Everyone was given a grid of land in Brisbane and asked to erase some of what has been built on it and to re-imagine it in terms of history, uses, conditions, past and present.¹

The recent Biennale of Sydney collaboration between Moore and O'Brien was installed at a site originally known as Tubowgulle (also referred to as Bennelong Lawn), an elevated section within Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden surrounded by spectacular harbour views and in close proximity to Government House. Considerably humble for its prestigious location, the temporary building that they collaborated on was small, simplistic and unadorned. The interior walls were covered in rusted corrugated iron, with an industrial tin drum sitting on the dirt floor. The structural reference was directly linked to Moore's own family history – like many Indigenous Australians, his grandmother Vera lived in a dirt-floor hut. The re-enactment of these living conditions by Moore in a biennale context highlighted the historical disparity of wealth and freedoms between Indigenous people and other Australians since colonisation. As he has elaborated:

I was thinking about the inequality of distribution of wealth – if there were any distribution at all – and which is why my grandparents were living in corrugated huts when the rest of the town had houses.²

The work also draws reference to a celebrated historical Aboriginal figure, the Wangal man named Woollarawarre Bennelong.³ He is recorded as the first Indigenous person to enter into a diplomatic relationship with European settlers. According to historical accounts, in 1789 the New South Wales Governor Arthur Phillip was ordered by King George III to use 'every possible means' to open dialogue with the Indigenous people of Sydney. One result of this order was the abduction of Bennelong by Phillip's men. After about six months Bennelong escaped but later willingly returned to the colony, gradually becoming friends with the Governor and other settlers. In 1790 Phillip built a small brick hut for Bennelong on the site of Tubowgulle, and in



Archie Moore, *Dwelling*, 2010, installation views, Accidentally Annie Street Space, Brisbane, 2010; site-specific installation; images courtesy The Commercial Gallery, Sydney; photos: Erika Scott



Archie Moore, *Sacred Sights (The First Intervention)*, 2008, folded book, 14 x 48 x 27cm, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, purchased 2008

1792 Bennelong and another Indigenous man Yemmerrawanne (or Imeerawanyee) travelled with the Governor to England to be received by the King. Over the course of Bennelong's life, he lived both a traditional Indigenous life while also adopting certain English traits from his work with the settlers. However, because there are no direct references from Bennelong himself citing his experiences, it is difficult to accurately represent or truly understand his otherwise highly mythologised life as a diplomat between two cultures.

In the background to these histories, *A Home Away From Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)* was also a response to the theme of embassies that ran through Stephanie Rosenthal's biennale, entitled 'The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed'. Moore's interpretation of the embassy theme emerged from his own historical interest, joined with O'Brien's expertise and knowledge of Indigenous vernacular architecture. Together they analysed the few extant archival images of Bennelong's hut from a handful of paintings and drawings and brought its surrounding history and Indigenous Australian culture more widely to the forefront of the biennale.

It is meaningful to bring these subtle statements by Moore into the wider context of activity by other Indigenous Australian artists – most notably Richard Bell. His now internationally exhibited ongoing project *Embassy* (2013–), which faced Moore's biennale work across Circular Quay in the forecourt of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, restages the original Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra that is among the world's longest running protests.

Apart from these two seminal projects in the biennale context, the wider urban ecology of Sydney has recently been engaged with by other Indigenous artist projects in public spaces. These include this year's Kaldor Public Art Project by Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones), and the City of Sydney's 2013 commissioning of Girramay artist Tony Albert to produce a memorial to Indigenous Australians who served in the nation's military, *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall* (2015). Albert's work forms part of Indigenous Curatorial Advisor Hetti Perkins's 'Eora Journey', an ongoing 10-year City of Sydney initiative which has been commissioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to create seven major public art projects around the city. Such initiatives are crucial in building

new solidarities for the representation of Indigenous communities. As Indigenous artist Fiona Foley has noted:

Civic spaces are a reflection of who you are; and where the bureaucratic arts community wishes to see itself echoed around the world ... If Australians could find the courage to be proud of Aboriginal people and their culture – then Australia could indeed be a space of meaningful significance.⁴

It could be argued that such artistic and political intensities produced by Archie Moore and the other contemporary examples documented in this essay point us towards hopeful futures of real and meaningful place-making by Indigenous Australian artists. However, there is no denying that there is still a way to go.

The author would like to thank Art Monthly Australasia and MPavilion for the opportunity, and: Archie Moore; Kevin O'Brien; The Commercial Gallery, Sydney; Hetti Perkins; Emma Caskey and Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi.

1. Margie Fraser, '20 Queensland designers: Kevin O'Brien', in *designonline.org.au*, 2012; see <http://designonline.org.au/content/20-queensland-designers-kevin-obrien/>, accessed 23 October 2016.

2. The author, 'A conversation with Archie Moore', in *ocula.com*, 1 March 2016; see <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/archie-moore/>, accessed 23 October 2016.

3. Could also be referred to as a Wanngal or Wahngal.

4. Fiona Foley, 'The elephant in the room: Public art in Brisbane', in *Artlink*, vol. 32, no. 2, June 2012, pp. 66–9; see www.artlink.com.au/articles/3779/the-elephant-in-the-room-public-art-in-brisbane/, accessed 23 October 2016.

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Top:
Archie Moore, *Clover*, 2012, installation view, Boxcopy, Brisbane; acrylic paint, sticks, dimensions variable; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney; photo: Chris Handran

Bottom:
Archie Moore, *A Home Away from Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)*, 2016, installation view, 20th Biennale of Sydney, Royal Botanic Garden, 2016; mixed-media installation, 433.2 x 345 x 258.4cm; made with assistance from Neil Hobbs and Karina Harris, and Kevin O'Brien; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney; photo: Wendell Teodoro