

POSITION PAPER

Looking Back at *Distance Looks Back*: Reflections on the First Combined Meeting of EAHN and SAHANZ (Sydney, 10–13 July 2019)

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Distance is both conceptual and actual. It is overcome or exploited in all manner of ways that have consequences for the history of architecture. It is fostered in the critical attitude. And collapsed when history is invoked in the present. It shapes the relationship of Europe to its Antipodes, as well as of Europe to its neighbours. Its presence is necessary for claims upon disciplinarity; its absence, the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries. In what ways has distance figured in the history of architecture? What has it altered? What has it prevented? What has it allowed? What does it permit, even now? These lines opened the call for papers for *Distance Looks Back*, the first combined meeting of the EAHN and SAHANZ (Sydney, 10–13 July 2019, <http://distance2019.sydney>). This meeting served, first, to break down the distance that keeps the activities of these two highly compatible communities at a remove from one another. It also served to explore the very idea of distance as a practical consideration of the architectural historian's work and as a persistent theme in architectural history and its conceptualisation.

Introduction

In determining the theme for the first combined meeting of the European Architectural History Network (EAHN) and the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ), held 10–13 July 2019, we settled on a theme of distance as something that in one way or another affects not only all our work, but also our scholarly relationships around the world. What did it mean, we asked, to work at a remove, on topics proper to that remove? Or to look back on the 'centre' with eyes conditioned by (post-)colonial experience or modern mobility? It could never have occurred to us that distance might become *the* question of the moment to follow. As we write this, in June 2020, administrative borders around the world have become fixed and defended to prevent the spread of Covid-19; mobility and socialisation have been traded for their digital counterparts; and the prospect of a welcome if unplanned encounter with a dear colleague in the foyer of a conference hotel seems somewhat frivolous (**Figures 1 and 2**).

Distance in/and History

In his 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel argued that one consequence of the densification of Europe's cities over the last decades of the nineteenth century was the amplification of mental distance – a response to the inevitable and incessant proximity of bodies between apartments, in the street, on trams, and in the factory. This mental distance, he suggests, allows the metropolitan soul to survive, establishing unseen barriers

that define for everyone their own domain within the city. How odd to read this again in light of the discourse on social distancing and the necessity of physical separation. And how odd to witness the proliferation of measures to collapse the distances stipulated by health officials and governments by fostering social intimacy through collective experience. The traffic of essays and videos and games; and the establishment of platforms to visit galleries, go to the cinema, attend a concert, or dine together; the trade in music and song we witnessed (for a spell) emanating from the balconies of cities in northern Italy; and the sudden accommodation of working, governing and going to school online in lieu of those collective forums underpinned by *attendance* for which we would, just months earlier, have vociferously argued – all this responds both pragmatically and culturally to mandated distancing. The most loaded word of our collective Covid-19 experience was, arguably, 'normal', and whether the pandemic determines a new baseline for its significance in work and life or simply a check as we move back to something more relaxed, we have yet to see if that historical (pre-2020) definition will persist. As a result, we are now, arguably, both more distant and closer than we have ever been.

Our varied relationships with history become more acute in this new calculus of distance. The swift intensity of the recent changes in our daily lives has, like the drastic transformations provoked by the Industrial Revolution that spurred Simmel's essay, altered the sense of our place in history: the sense of this moment relating to others (crises in war, disease, economy, etc.), and the sense of this moment



Figure 1: A mobile coffee cart operating in the conference foyer was a very welcome addition to the programme. Photograph by Lee Stickells.



Figure 2: A small but treasured gift to the conference convenors from EAHN president (then vice-president) Jorge Correia. Photograph by Lee Stickells.

being historically distinct. While historians of architecture were figuring out how to proceed with their work, the materials of a future history (images, videos, commentary, reportage, facts and figures) proliferated with a remarkable focus. These months have obliged us to grapple with new structures of interaction and feeling, and in public discourse historical reference points have become regular props for thinking ourselves into an uncertain future. For architecture, the reimagining and redesigning of buildings and cities is already being widely discussed with operative reference to previous urban disease entanglements — the Black Death, cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid, SARS, MERS, and so on; pick your moment, choose your lessons. For architectural historians, the distance or proximity of our own concerns to the exigencies of the times in which we live is being pulled into sharp focus. In matters once as simple as our day-to-day work, access to libraries both personal and institutional has been disrupted. The closed doors of archives, museums and galleries have us teaching from and working with whatever material we took home in March, or had there already, as well as that which institutions have placed in easier digital reach. Projects like the Internet Archive and various university presses worked to make available books that would otherwise have remained inaccessible. The many ways in which thinking about history and the practices involved in producing and communicating it have had impacts that we can clearly sense, but which are yet to be fully evident.

Distance Today

Even as governments around the world are taking calculated risks in returning factories to full production and opening the doors of shops, galleries, theatres and schools, calculations of distance and capacity are bound together, and distance remains, or would seem to remain, the most obviously enforceable dimension of the social and institutional behaviours of the immediate future. Schools, yes, but four square metres per child. Lectures, yes, but not in lecture theatres. A workout? Of course, but a maximum of ten people in the complex, including staff. These measures (varied as they are from one jurisdiction to the next) are clearly pragmatic and a sign of everyone feeling their way forward in a situation for which no clear map exists. A story in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Power and Rabe 2020) reported on a study that the increased vehicular traffic into that city as a consequence of restrictions placed on the occupation limits of trains and buses would require an area of additional car parking greater than Sydney's CBD itself. Setting aside the temptation to test the assumptions of the study (will those towers really fill up again?), the effects of distancing (now primarily, in its usage, physical rather mental, emotional, ideological) are likely to shape architecture and cities in a very direct way: in public transport amenity; in the relationship of operations between cities and hinterlands, or between centres; in the relationship between vehicular traffic and bicycles and runners; in surveillance — there will be no consistency from city to city except the consistency of their being *something* of note. Writing as we are from our respective homes, one author in Sydney and the other on

the Gold Coast, and separated as we are by 850 kilometres (and a fixed state border, with mandatory quarantine for the northbound), we are reminded of the impermanence of cities themselves — let alone of the impermanence of our attachment to those specific cities that have long been 'in charge'. It has been time to look with fresh eyes on all those depictions of the Roman 'Campo Vaccino', the seat of republican power turned over to agriculture, and to imagine where else they might be pointing than to the eternal city.

One tension has already become clear while we have been writing, namely that which exists between a physical and social distancing — a practical response to the nature of Covid-19 and its transmission — and the role of the crowd (on which, consider Logan and Gosseye 2019). Of course, crowds formed early in the pandemic to protest against strictures that included preventing crowds from forming, insisting on the responsibility of individuals beyond collective motivations. 'You can't tell us not to go to the barber', and the like. Lurking beyond the sense that no freedoms should ever be traded for the common good is another sense, that freedoms are selectively granted, and those who face systematic oppression should bear it without response. The eruption of protests across the United States and gatherings across the globe that show solidarity with the plight of African Americans (echoed in the experience of other populations, like that of Aboriginal Australians) show the necessity of being visibly together in spite of the health risks; and this at the risk of a demographically skewed uptick (to use the language of the event) in new cases. Could this protest have been conveyed adequately online? At a remove from the street? Hardly. The moment demanded bodies in proximity — a risk on many fronts, even when addressed with care.

The terms by which distance is established, maintained (or sustained) and closed are not neutral, and extend to all aspects of our lives. As such, it both has a history, and shapes how we *do* history. Our periodic disciplinary meetings are the most obvious instances when we overcome distance (some with ease, others less so) to be in the same set of rooms to share work and sustain professional relationships. Already, the 2020 meetings of EAHN and SAHANZ have been postponed. SAH was staged online this year. The Renaissance Society of America was cancelled. And that just covers our own 2020 planning. Travel looks to return to its pre-Covid patterns with much hesitation, corridors between countries that have, to date, successfully contained its spread being touted to stimulate travel (and, hence, tourism). In Australia, Tourism New Zealand (it's farther away than you realise) has begun an advertising campaign themed around recovery and a return to the fundamental values of family and environment. But nobody, right now, is planning conference travel, and the precise circumstances under which we return to the check-in counter are almost impossible to predict. This uncertainty will affect how we plan out the coming year (well, years), and will determine what we work on. These are, in the scheme of things, fairly minor, individual decisions, but they will affect, somehow, the work published and pursued from this year on. How else might we pursue

those meetings most vital to our work? What makes them vital? What other forms might they take? The risk to those of us who need to clock up serious airmiles to meet many of our colleagues in person is that those meetings that do take place become more and more localised, and exclusive. And that we, once again, become more distant.

Together in Sydney

Looking back, then, at *Distance Looks Back*, a number of themes came to the fore across the conference that – already coherent in their own terms and in relation to the published conference theme – now also speak in a new way to those issues that have unfolded since the event in Sydney drew to a close. Foremost of these, unsurprisingly, was the experience and implications of travel (papers explored topics on this theme from the 18th century onwards) and the experience and effects of closing distance. Delegates surveyed individual experiences of travel in which sights are seen and returned to a point of origin and in which representations are gathered (models, drawings, written accounts) and thereafter inflect the work of an architect or an educator, including the techniques of communication and representation they employ. A number of papers considered the establishment and sustenance of professional and intellectual relationships – networks – across oceans and continents, and between situations both culturally close and distinctly foreign. They considered, too, the mechanisms and effects of influence (of experiences on architecture, of architecture on architects, of architects on one another, etc). Delegates shared new research on such practical considerations as the management of distant projects, and details of how pedagogical change was informed by direct experience. And the operation of initiatives in both trade and diplomacy (and the specific choreography of their entanglements with distance), each with their own architecture. A number of papers reflected on the experience of both travel and distance that also informed works and practices that evidenced the effects of distance on the histories of regional architectural cultures, education, technology and identity. Few geographies were untouched by the wide range of papers presented in Sydney; just as few of the implications of distance for the history of architecture were left unaddressed. This body of work, with all its variety, added up to a reflection on a world that has shrunk with the experience of modernity – from the age of colonialism to the era of globalisation – and in which architecture has at once been enlivened through exposure to the world beyond Europe and North America and flattened out as it expanded its remit around the earth. A number of speakers naturally worried at the edges of the discipline's own territory, taking in the experiences and material production of actors outside architecture's conventional disciplinary boundaries. The peripateticism of migrants, refugees, vernacular materials and others – elective or otherwise – was mapped and considered for its effects on architectural activity and culture, in ways that moved to recast what might be considered properly the concern of architectural history.

The flipside of a history (and hence an architectural history) of the world getting smaller are the processes of

subjugation that played out through the colonial experience – ideas not simply (simply?) found and taken back to architecture's centres, but imposed in ways that were both subtle and overt. Papers presented at the conference considered processes of (de)colonisation in terms of the spread of style and technology, pedagogy (and, in architectural history, its privileged lineages), exercises in power and authority manifest in drawings, decoration, urban planning, property acquisition, terminology and journalism. This is a theme with which SAHANZ has long been preoccupied, given the indigenous and colonial histories (and politics) of its constituent countries. From this starting point, the integration into this joint meeting of EAHN and SAHANZ of the discussions of the Society of Architectural and Urban Historians of Asia (which convened a dedicated panel within the conference program) proved especially productive – those scholars contributing to the SAUH session offered invaluable insights into discussions concerned with the Pacific, and amplified the discussion held, too, on vernacular architecture by testing it against scholarship in the historical disciplines. This element of the program was also reinforced by a panel discussion, held at the very end of the event, to extend the work by Amit Srivastava and Cole Roskam on the contribution of Australian architects to the construction of Southeast Asia's tourism infrastructure – and the traffic of ideas, people and methods that it fostered and the fissures it exposed (**Figure 3**). How has the methodology of 'the global' reinforced, or undermined, earlier globalising knowledge regimes? The answers are not simple, and require examination against the kind of preponderance of cases that this event allowed (**Figure 4**).

Intellectual distancing also figured prominently in the program. Papers considered the implication of historical distance in the development of conceptual formations such as postmodernism and the political valence of situated design responses. The latest twists in the historiographical turn were also in clear evidence, with the historiography of the global under scrutiny (in both papers and a special edition of the podcast *City Road*), the entanglements of modern architecture and its historiography extended to new treatments of architectural postmodernism, and a session exploring the twentieth-century historiography of Mannerism and the late Renaissance. Processes and tropes of estrangement were deployed to also reconsider architectural history's institutional arrangements and dispositions. What conceptual and methodological territories might or might not be obscured by architectural history's own community formations and guiding organisations? It was perhaps inevitable that a conference in which the longstanding protocols of a society (SAHANZ) were subject to experimentation witnessed robust reflection on the power dynamics of its geographical, institutional and methodological traditions. The 2020 SAHANZ conference, in its collective consideration of architectural history's future itself, will, its convenors declare, be 'slow and dispersed'. This is no surprise in our present, distanced, circumstances, but motivations for critical revision of the discipline and the way it conducts its business had already surfaced in the formal program and attendant

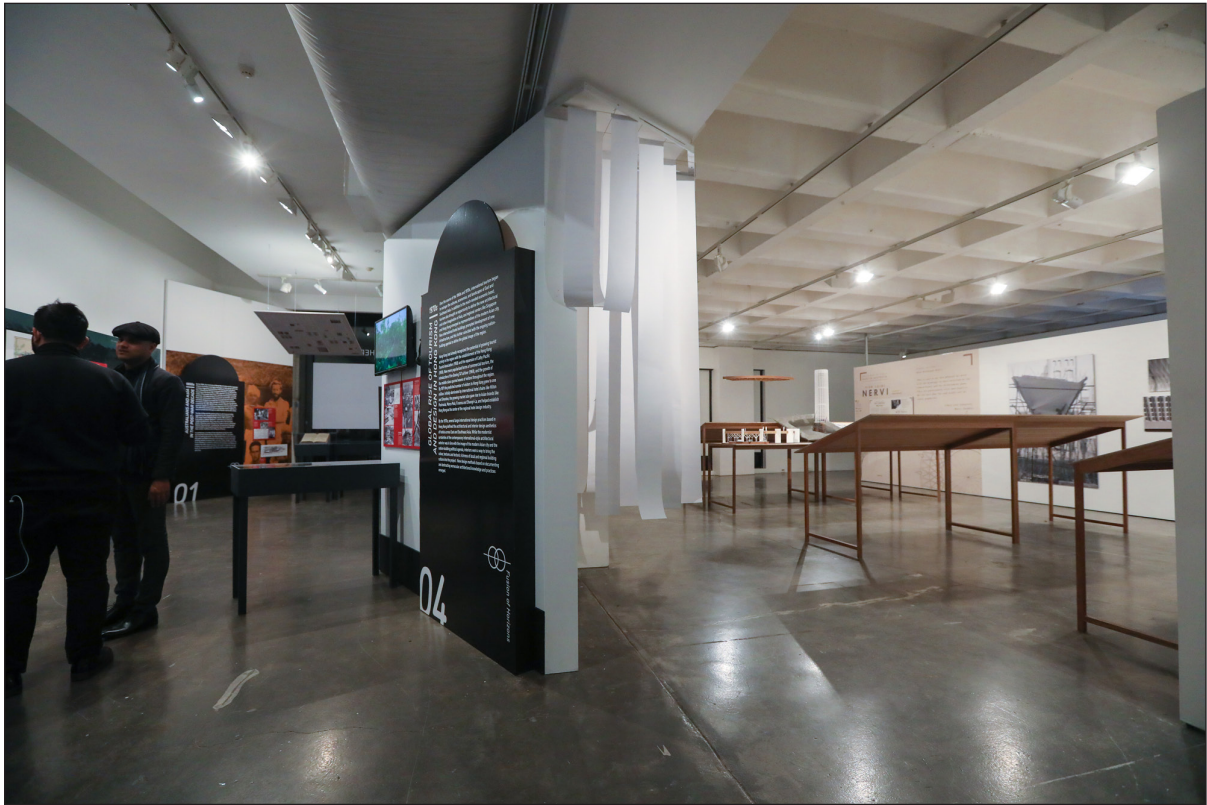


Figure 3: The Tin Sheds Gallery at the University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning. Installation view of two exhibitions that accompanied *Distance Looks Back*. On the left, *Fusion of Horizons: Australian Architects in Asia (1950s–80s)*, curated by Amit Srivastava and Cole Roskam, and, on the right, *Designed in Italy, Made in Australia: The Australian Work of Pier Luigi Nervi*, curated by Paolo Stracchi. Photographs by Maja Baska. Courtesy University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning.



Figure 4: Penelope Seidler AM and Paolo Stracchi, the curator of *Designed in Italy, Made in Australia*. Photograph by Maja Baska. Courtesy University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning.

discussions at *Distance Looks Back* (Figure 5). The powerful lenses of climate emergency and decolonisation – taken up in roundtable discussions and at many points on the floor of the conference – had already prompted us to think differently about the effects of globalisation and its predecessors and our relationship with the past and its effects. The efforts of our various communities have shifted from addressing these questions as a matter of determination to reconfiguring an event entirely out of necessity, as indicative of the present moment's accelerant force as anything.

Documentation and Dissemination

Pulling together, as *Distance Looks Back* did, scholars from the South Pacific, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, it is not surprising that the dissemination of the conference papers has not been overly centralised, but has instead been (or begun to be) dispersed into a number of discrete settings. The full range of topics addressed across the event can be reviewed on the conference website (distance2019.sydney/program), which is the best permanent account of the wide range of responses made by the hundred or so delegates who came together around idea of distance. While the conferences of SAHANZ regularly publish a full *Proceedings* that includes every paper presented, we had leave to take a more dispersed approach to the dissemination of papers – allowing authors working under various systems to publish in the most advantageous way they could. A selection of papers thus appeared in the *Proceedings* earlier this year, available as a full volume online (Jackson Wyatt, Leach, and Stickells 2020) and in the searchable SAHANZ *Proceedings* database. This volume is already

complemented by a special issue of the SAHANZ journal *Fabrications*, which documents the special program on vernacular architecture convened by Paul Memmott and John Ting (2020). An issue of *Architectural Theory Review* – a journal founded at the University of Sydney – will shortly publish a set of papers on the historiography of architectural Mannerism (exploring through this specific case how architectural history mediates historical distance). Other sets of papers are destined to appear in the context of projects and in the pages of *Fabrications*, *ATR* and other journals, including this one. Three episodes of the podcast *City Road* (published out of our school at the University of Sydney) were recorded during the event, exploring global architectural history teaching, environmental architectural history, and the question of national architectural histories (Feng and Barber 2019; Feng, Jarzombek and Troy 2019; Feng, Prakash, and Willis 2019). A report on the conference will shortly appear in *Fabrications* (Leach and Stickells 2020), offering a reflection on the event, its structure and the way it responded to the institutional situation in which it was constructed, between two organisations with shared values but different habits (Figure 6).

Afterthought

We have been conscious in working up this reflection on the event of our own distance conditions: working in different Australian states between which travel is not readily permitted, typing simultaneously (sometimes over the top of one another) in a shared Word file, mixing commentary and sidenotes with the business of locking down the language of the piece in a tone suited to the occasion, taking shared coffee breaks as needed, and doing our



Figure 5: Amit Srivastava and Cole Roskam, curators of *Fusion of Horizons*, address conference attendees at the exhibition opening. Photograph by Maja Baska. Courtesy University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning.



Figure 6: The online personas of the convenors of *Distance Looks Back*, Lee Stickells and Andrew Leach. Drawing by Lee Stickells.

best to manage suddenly home-schooled children as we go. We may no longer be in the thick of our various state and national responses to the pandemic, but we have had to change how we work – and how we engage with distance. The practical arrangements around our gatherings will need to be adapted for the foreseeable future, and we can brace ourselves for that turn of events. But the mental adjustments needed to manage distance – both maintaining it where necessary and working to collapse it where we can (and wish to) – has already made demands on us, and on the way we go about our work, that we will need to revisit, and revisit, into the coming months.

Competing Interests

The authors convened *Distance Looks Back* and co-chaired its academic committee.

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