Nomadic Resistance: Tent Embassies and Collapsible Architecture: Illegal architecture and protest

Greg Cowan

Tents, through their association with the 'primitive' and 'unselfconscious' architectural traditions, have an established position in architecture outside the West. The tent has often been used as a means of besieging, invading, colonising and celebrating new and experimental space. In central Europe, there is a tradition of elaborate and princely tents, such as those deployed by the Ottoman Empire during their sieges on the frontier of the Western countries, and also the use of tents in the sieges of 1529 and 1683 at Vienna, for example. These could clearly be regarded as Tent Embassies of the Ottoman type, but will not be addressed in this chapter, which is concerned primarily with the Australian Aboriginal Tent Embassy as an established phenomenon. Grand Tents appear also in the widely-used, princely tent apparatus used by travelling nobility in European history, inspired and arguably emulating the tents of Kublai Khan and other Oriental models.

In the Western world of the late twentieth century, tents and collapsible architectures have also become familiar features in the context of protests and demonstrations, increasing with the global activism of the 1960s. European avant-garde architects contributed to peace and protest movements in Europe with collapsible and mobile architecture. The Austrian group Haus Rucker Co., the French Utopie group and others promoted temporal and portable architecture through inflatable designs. In Australia, the architectural revolution appeared in a politically important but apparently architecturally unpedigreed domain, the protest camp. This chapter suggests that the connection between these ways of employing tents in the Western world, and the vernacular uses of tents by nomads, is not a coincidence, but rather that each relates to architecturally significant features of the tent.

There is an important parallel between the temporal, mobile, and social 'architecture' of structures for activism and the social deployment of these structures in temporal and mobile ways. The world wide web of communications in the internet has provided a tool for activism since the 1990s. This activism has also provided a demand for indeterminate, mobile, temporary and rapidly deployable architecture, which has been found in the form of tents. The tent is a choice of architectural strategy which is not merely pragmatic. Ideological reasons also underpin the uses of these kinds of structure, contributing to their significance as architecture. In the exhibition catalogue for the Architectural League of New York's The Inflatable Moment, which is about the architecture of activism in the turbulent period of the late nineteen sixties, Marc Dessauce describes the resonances between ideology and activist architecture. At this time, monumental modern architecture appeared to have come to its logical conclusion, and modernity was captured in Karl Marx's statement "All that is solid melts into air". Dessauce makes light of the ephemeral work of activists as "a lot of hot air", describing the inflatables which formed a prominent part of the revolutions of the 1960s. The unsettled social conditions surrounding the global
student protests of 1968 were reflected in the architectures of protest; temporary, mobile and collaboratively deployed.

**Tents and Strategies of Occupying Contested Space**

This thesis identifies the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (named as such by the protestors who constructed it) as a prime example of collapsible architecture. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy is symbolically juxtaposed with the White Invasion/Settlement of Australia, and to form its case, uses tents as part of expressing the process of ownership. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy in particular is discussed in terms of ephemerality, portability, and social engenderment of activism it employs. The now prominent Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Australia draws attention to similarities between these two quite separate instances of the use of tents. It is further argued here that an uncanny similarity exists between two historical moments of illegal opportunistic camping in Australia.

The encampment of the first Europeans in Australia was eventually made redundant, with the establishment of permanent settlement. On the other hand, though the encampment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy began somewhat spontaneously on 26 January 1972, it continues to the present day, in the grounds of Provisional Parliament House in Canberra. It has stood in protest intermittently since 1972 and permanently since 1992. It recently appeared at Victoria Park, Sydney during the 2000 Olympic Games, as part of a delegation to the World Court at the Hague, and most recently in Wollongong.

**Invasion of Canberra**

On the 26th of January 1972, four young men from Sydney erected a beach umbrella in front of Provisional Parliament House, in the Australian capital.(see fig. 5.1) Their protest occurred on the annual national holiday known alternatively as Invasion Day or Australia Day, and which marks the original claim on the Australian continent by the British Crown. Later the same day, the land rights protest evolved into the form of a tent encampment. The camp comprised a group of shelters made of a bricolage of materials, including canvas tarpaulins and plastic sheets, which could be regarded as festive.
While the protesters called it the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the authorities clearly regarded the form and the name of the Embassy as disturbing. The protesters maintained their non-violent intentions, although inspired by contemporary international politics. International debate in the media focussed on the idea of an Aboriginal Tent Embassy and its political context of Land Rights. Part of the context of both the encampment and the case study conducted here is the striking misinterpretation of the pre-European state of occupation and inhabitation of Australia, as reflected in the legal status of Terra Nullius. For European legal purposes, it had been considered that Australia before European settlement was "practically unoccupied, without settled occupants or settled law". The principle of Terra Nullius was legally overturned only as recently as 1992, as a result of the Mabo land claim case in the High Court, which found that native title was recognised at common law.

Since that decision, Australian law concedes that Australia was previously inhabited — indeed, ‘practically’ occupied. The Mabo decision, in principle, is profoundly significant for Australia’s cultural identity and for the ongoing process of reconciling present day Australia with the ‘ghosts’ of its past. Although ‘practical’ occupation before European settlement is now legally part of the history of dwelling in Australia, equally, the ‘impractical’ or ‘extra-practical’ — the theory of architecture — requires to be reconciled. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy provides a rich case study of activism in the Australia, playing an important role in advancing the cause of Aboriginal land rights activism since its inception in 1972. Its erection in the centre of Canberra has been described as "brilliant, audacious, imaginative, and strategic." It was always more than simply a demonstration, and was newsworthy on both Australian and international scales.
The idea of an Aboriginal Tent Embassy was conceived spontaneously by the activists in response to statements about land rights planned for then Prime Minister McMahon's 'state of the nation' Australia Day speech, as details became known on the previous day, the 25th of January. According to Chicka Dixon, one of the original ‘architects’ of the Tent Embassy, the protest was intended to "put our plight into the eyes of the world". Indeed, the Embassy came about with the loan of a car and a $70 grant from the Communist Party, enabling four activists to make the trip from Sydney to Canberra. Initially, a beach umbrella was erected, soon to be followed by a "sprinkling" of tents. Regularity was not introduced and confusion did not give place to system, as it had in 1788 when Western settlers’/invaders’ tents gave way to permanent, ordered structures as discussed below.

The inauguration of the Tent Embassy is a potent symbol of Australia's Post Colonial identity, and the image reflected symbolically in its architecture. Pre-colonial Aboriginal architectural traditions were diverse. They varied by region in terms of building technology and socio-spatial behaviour. Tombs, hides, traps and landscape elements had greater significance as well as shelters. Toward the end of the twentieth century, there was increasing interest internationally in the tectonics and spatial rituals of primitive Aboriginal architecture in Australia. Enrico Guidoni’s Primitive Architecture in 1978 included a section on Aboriginal architecture. There is a reverence for the basic elements of space and simply constituted structures from local materials which are portrayed as elegant in their ecology and economy.

In 1990 Peter Blundell Jones wrote in the British Journal Architectural Review about "Aboriginal attitude to landscape" and "the meaning it has in myth and ceremony". In 1987, Bruce Chatwin’s internationally successful novel The Songlines, while it was controversial in Australia for its unauthoritative interpretations of Aboriginality, also attracted international attention to ideas of Australian nomadic reading of the ‘country’, as an alternative spatial definition of ‘architecture’. Australian architecture and landscape is a cultural interest which warrants close scholarly attention in regard to the processes of reconciliation of indigenous culture and race in Australia.

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy is remarkable for the ways in which it embodies a nomadological approach to architecture. The 'grounds' or philosophical foundations for this ‘camp’ include firstly, its inherent ephemerality, secondly, the movement rituals of its erection, re-erection, transformation and maintenance, and thirdly, the activism which it effectively embodies for the cause of Aboriginal land rights and other rights for indigenous peoples.

The Tent Embassy took shape in 1972, at a point in Australian history when the National Parliament House, a symbolically 'White' British-style formal 'House', was losing public acceptability as the symbol of the central seat of government in Australia. The building was massive and labyrinthine, symbolically impenetrable, and its public functions were not readily legible. In contrast, the first tent embassy was a spontaneous and yet revolutionary construction, and as a result of this contrast was
not only highly photogenic for the contemporary media of 1972 but was and is also a highly effective symbol.

With the capacity to appear and disappear suddenly, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy is ephemeral. Its constituent parts are also collapsible, organically facilitating compromise and resurrection. This Embassy is also portable, its parts, importantly, are transportable in the boot of a car. The Tent Embassy became an international focus during violent clashes surrounding its removal by police in 1972. Similarly, its resurrection was the dramatic centre of the battle between the 'state' interests in 'government property' and the protesters' interests, in challenging the legitimacy of ownership of this land per se. The Canberra Times referred to an incident in which a passing driver called out to the Tent Embassy staff "Go home niggers, you've had your fun" whereupon someone replied "We're home baby — you go home." Its collapsible and ephemeral qualities made possible its dramatic removal by the Police, and also its subsequent re-erection.

Ephemerality is a quality generally associated with the 'minutiae' of existence rather than the 'big picture'. In the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the reverse is true — the ephemerality of the architecture is of 'fundamental' importance. The Tent Embassy’s appearance of ephemerality allowed its 28 year tradition to be initiated by stealth. Whereas a permanent building might have been illegal under Building By-Laws, camping on the site in ACT in 1972 was not technically illegal. The camp allowed the Embassy six months of publicity before an ordinance could be gazetted and invoked. Only then did Police demolish the Embassy in the "most violent demonstrations Canberra had ever seen".

Importantly, despite being dismantled this ephemeral architecture did not fade away, but subsequently came back into life. Indeed, precisely because of its ephemerality, the camp needs periodic renewal by activists who 'inhabit' the Embassy structure. Ephemeral architecture can be considered environmentally responsible development, erected 'just in time', lasting only as long as needed, and often designed to be salvaged for re-use or to biologically degrade into the bush once abandoned.

The ironic practicality of the Tent Embassy, evident from its earliest stage as a lone beach umbrella to its development into a complex collection of tents, tarpaulins and domestic effects, means it may be regarded philosophically as a pragmatic structure. The visibility of the domestic 'reality' made the Tent Embassy more powerful. The "cooking in the open and bed linen spread out to dry" was reported as "bringing the reality of Aboriginal Australia right to Australia's front door." The unintentional similarity of the tent embassy with settler camps draws attention to the double standard of indigenous and exotic modes of inhabitation.

Importantly, the 'weaving' of the Tent Embassy also has a collaborative aspect. As a moveable and ephemeral architectural statement it is erected and maintained collaboratively. The grouping of elements is organic, and does not follow a Western
geometric pattern like a military camp. The Tent Embassy functions as an expression of its heterogeneous contributors and of the mixing of spaces and materials. As such it symbolises a great deal about place-making and ways of thinking about the built environment in Australia.

Architecture, as a Western concept, has roots in material craft traditions developed in ancient European society. There is an enormous chasm between craft and dwelling practices of the ancient Western world on one hand, which are at the core of modern Western architecture, and the nomadic dwelling traditions of ancient Australia, on the other. This cultural divide is manifested graphically in the architecture of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. The ‘informal’ dwellings of the Embassy are culturally significant for architectural thinking: they are expressions of human inhabitation, of social significance to be reckoned with on the level of sanctioned institutions. As suggested above, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy is a practical and potent ‘occupation’ of Australian space: physical, social and political.

Western notions of architectural planning and construction cannot be readily applied to this incidental form of architecture. Nevertheless, the colonial ‘settler’ culture, over the last two centuries, has applied Western theory with limited success to pragmatic traditions of ‘settling’ the Australian continent. Western theories of architectural hierarchies are not helpful in understanding the Aboriginal Tent Embassy because the theoretical roots of the Embassy are rhizomatic, rather than arboreal, as Western theories are structured. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy sprang from an impromptu idea, it "start(ed) as a joke" conceived in collaboration between seven men discussing the content of the planned Australia Day speech of Prime Minister McMahon.

**White Invasion of Australia**

Western societies are often preoccupied with imposing hierarchical order and permanence through buildings and settlements, while nomadic societies do not generally share these concerns. Opportunism, ephemerality and collapsibility are qualities which, it can be argued, have fundamentally affected cultures of dwelling in Australia. These may be considered to be critical to forming architectural theories which address the future of Australian culture. Dwelling on a moment of arrival in a new place is captured symbolically by the sudden erection of a collapsible architecture. The tent in this instance represents an opportunistic occupation of space.

The moment of the beginning of transformation from nomadic society, arguably of both the indigenous culture and that of the invading seafarer's culture, towards a settled (and oppressed) culture is highly significant. Such a transformation is still proceeding painstakingly in Australia and in other parts of the world, with important implications for understanding the nomadic and sedentary tendencies of the contemporary Australian society.

'Whitening' Australia, (or the first attempt in earnest to whiten) began in summer in
January 1788 with the arrival of Captain James Cook's Fleet at Port Jackson. The initial camps erected there consisted primarily of tents. After months living in tents during the mild summer, and as the weather grew colder into winter, the desire for permanent buildings grew, like a longing for a familiar 'home'. The makeshift tents of the settlement were clearly considered inadequate by the settlers, if not disdained by the traditional landowners in their huts. Surgeon to the First Fleet, John White wrote of his reservations about the tents in June 1788:

“We have been here nearly six months and four officers only as yet got huts: when the rest will be provided with them seems uncertain, but this I well know, that living in tents, as the rainy season has commenced, is truly uncomfortable, and likely to give a severe trial to the strongest and most robust constitution...”

After each of the settlements in Australia had grown into 'permanent' and European forms of settlement over the following century, a further stage in galvanising the European outposts was the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901. In the context of a growing desire for a sense of an Australian national identity, a national capital city was established at Canberra. Following a 1912 international design competition, "Provisional Parliament House," as it was called, was eventually built in Canberra in 1927, and was occupied by federal Parliament until 1988.

Provisional Parliament can be regarded as a piece of symbolic colonial architecture, aimed at establishing an imported European cultural tradition. The building is of a generic and derivative British colonial architectural style, significantly massive and white in form, and is set in an orderly, lawned and manicured landscaped setting. It has been described by architectural historian Jennifer Taylor as a "visually demanding white building of symmetrical design with an orderly, rhythmic distribution of its parts."

By 1965, Australia’s provisional Parliament House was becoming too crowded. As the perceived need for a "permanent" Parliament House grew, plans for a new Parliament began to emerge from within the sedentary hierarchy. This was also a period of increasing media awareness in Australia of the Civil Rights movements internationally and the Vietnam War at the end of the decade. Increasingly, it became more evident and publicly acknowledged that racism was a significant factor in Australian politics. At about this same time, the growing sense of a Pan-Aboriginal nation began to emerge from the amalgamation of state acts and the referendum of 1967 on the status of Aborigines. The referendum showed the Australian public’s overwhelming desire to "include Aboriginal people in Australian Society and civil life", beginning by including their numbers in the Census of the Australian population.

Provisional Parliament House stood in 1972 as an ambiguous expression of occupation. Was it a provisional parliament or a provisional ‘house’? Australia appeared not yet ready to occupy a permanent Parliament House. The early seventies were to be highly significant years for the besieged architectural expression of Australian national government. As the new 'permanent' Australian Parliament House
began to be a focus of bureaucratic governmental interest, indigenous inhabitants of Australia began to work towards forming a nation, which in the beginning of the 1970s was to be symbolised by their own flag and Embassy.

**The embassy and its meanings**

Despite its ostensibly uncertain future, the Tent Embassy embodies and accommodates aboriginal activism by example, thus engendering and accommodating activism for rights of indigenous people. It is closely connected to the modern history of engendering pan-aboriginal identity in Australia, a history which led to the formation of an Aboriginal flag, and to the formation of an Aboriginal Nation from several hundred smaller territories or countries in Australia. Yet, like the fringe dweller camps of rural Australian towns with which its appearance has been compared, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy is a makeshift camp. It is comprised of materially indeterminate architecture, which challenges the idea of architecture as an agency of civilisation and peaceful settlement in Australia. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy buildings nevertheless represent a subversive architecture of protest which has a deep-rooted significance for architecture in Australia. Importantly, the camp is more than shelter: it embodies not only needs, but culturally significant desires. More than rudimentary primitive shelter, the Embassy is a collapsible symbolic monument.

International attention was drawn to the Australian government when it brutally mistreated the peaceful protesters at the Tent Embassy in July 1972. The police ‘manhandled’ and assaulted the structure of the camp and molested the protesters. The protesters had peacefully demonstrated at Australia's democratically appointed forum. One MP called this one of the oldest principles of British law: to respect as the democratic right of all Australians to peaceably assemble to demonstrate political points of view, in a manner of their own choice, and without limit of duration. The principle of unlimited ephemeral occupation has become a critical feature of the encampment. The Grounds of Parliament, in the nation's Capital Territory, constituted a symbolically laden space on manicured lawn.

Since 1992, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy has been continuously occupied, although its exact location has varied. In 1995 the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was registered by the Australian Heritage Commission on the National Estate, as the first Australian Aboriginal Heritage Site. The Embassy was recorded as a 'heritage place' which is nationally recognised for the political struggle of the Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy pitched camp in a gesture intended undoubtedly to confront provisional Parliament House in a media-savvy and graphic demonstration. At the same time, the ‘Tent Embassy’ affronted many people in the way that it appropriated the language of camping and the great Australian Outdoors. It was a radical use of 'ready-mades' such as the beach umbrella and after-market contemporary tents combined with improvised shelters of tarpaulins. Rather than a presenting a romanticised impression of nomadic life ‘out bush’, the Embassy was actually an embarrassing reflection of the realistic contemporary dwelling conditions found in many fringe dweller camps in rural towns around the nation.
The Tent Embassy is particularly powerful because its architectural expression confronted the basic cultural assumptions of the imposed European culture and its expectations of proper architectural expression of that time. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy is a threatening nomadic ‘institution’ — which is architecturally challenging in four main ways:

Firstly, the Embassy is an impermanent structure juxtaposed against its context.

Secondly, the Tent Embassy implies, for some, the threat of militant invasion of the parliamentary circle (evidenced by the bringing of a newly gazetted 1932 trespass ordinance in 1972 to enable the police to remove the protesters legally)

Thirdly, the Tent Embassy's continual resurrection is a strategy for the maintenance of a culture — the Tent Embassy’s (physical) architecture is short-lived, requiring movement.

Fourthly, the Tent Embassy is strategically placed. The careful urban planning order which distances each international embassy from the Federal Parliament is violated with the placement of the Tent on the ‘front lawn’. The lawn at Provisional Parliament House is the equivalent to the ‘front lawn’ of the colonial suburban house type, a type which is at the heart of Australian suburbia.

As an ingenious architectural device of stealth, the Embassy, it seems, evades the oppression often acted by the establishment through parking violations, building by-Laws, town planning applications, or signage by-laws.

Reconciling Architecture

Symbolically or theoretically interpreting the twenty-eight-year tradition of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and its historical resonances make possible an opportunity for working on the architectural reconciliation of nomadic and settled elements of society present in Australia today. The Tent Embassy’s spontaneous and patchy physical architecture of lightweight, colourful, and impermanent materials and its mock-threatening location in front of ‘Old Parliament’ make the Embassy an ironically fitting pilgrimage destination. The architectural manifestation of land rights activism of the early 1970s is continuing in the twenty first century. Besides its role as a media focus for Land Rights and reconciliation processes, the site is legitimately part of Australia's national heritage, providing the setting for memorial services for activists in 1993, and for a wedding in 1997.

The unapologetic and assertively British-colonial architecture of the federal governments' Provisional Parliament House is effectively foiled by the strategically
placed ‘fringe-dwellers camp’. Although critics have called attention to its outward appearance as "ramshackle" and an "eyesore", the Tent Embassy offers more than a superficial aesthetic. The ephemeral and complex folds and spaces of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy provide a useful and critical aesthetic contrast with the massive and monolithic white architecture of a colonial society. A need has evolved in Australia for an engagement of indigenous race relations with cross-cultural thinking about architecture. The confusion of settlement with occupation is one which lies at the core of built environment 'ownership', and affects the limitations of what rôle architecture might perform in the future of Australia. The incidental construction of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy represents the positive nomadic qualities of a collapsible Australian architecture.

This challenge of occupying borrowed or stolen land is posed as a strategic issue for approaching issues of reconciliation of Australian people and of reconciliation of Australian people and their environment. The informal and nomadic, it is suggested, are critical to the process of discovering what architecture means for Australia today. Increasingly architects and designers of dwellings might become conscious of the ephemerality of occupation and respond in a conciliatory – rather than defensive – way to designing in this context.