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'Shack' Architecture: a produced landscape

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The exhibition *'Shack' Architecture: a produced landscape* held at the Western Australian Maritime Museum in February 2004 and this, the accompanying paper examine a conservation dilemma occurring along the Western Australian coastline. Wedge is a coastal squatter settlement of some 360 shacks, located about 150 kilometres north of Perth. The settlement has become a focus of attention from both local and regional political forces due to two factors: first, the fragile ecology of the sand dunes; and second, the issues of equality of access and sovereignty. As a consequence of the foregrounding of these factors, procedures are underway for the removal of the squatters and their shacks. However, while both the exhibition and this paper acknowledge the significance of those two factors, they raise a third - the cultural and aesthetic significance of the produced landscape at Wedge. Wedge's particular culture and aesthetic not only contests the systemic rules and values within which most of us make our way, but they also project differentiation. They project life on the edge of a vast, isolated, physically and psychologically challenging continent. The question (problem) added here to the vision of Wedge's future concerns the significant value of cultural and aesthetic factors inherent in the existing produced landscape.

THE CONTEXT AND ISSUES

Wedge's shifting sands, disappearing vegetation, poetic built form and community dynamics are presently accessible only by four-wheel drive vehicles. The geography is coastal sand dunes and bushland. While surrounded by parks and reserves of high conservation value, the ground at Wedge itself is criss-crossed with the tyre tracks of off-road-vehicles. In addition, the surrounding area is subjected to military training installations and activities, both land and sea based.

The history of European inhabitation of Wedge began in the 1840s when the pastoral industry was becoming established in Western Australia. Pastoralists from Toodyay were moving through the region and squatting in the northern outposts. When one such pastoralist, Bob Wedge, established a shack in the early 1930s, he 'initiated what was to become a ritual for thousands of people every year, [an escape to a shack on the beach] interrupted only by the Australian Military Forces coast watch presence during World War Two' (WIPA 2001, p. 3). After the war the Cray fishing

industry also discovered a place for itself at Wedge. In addition, 'the system's' Diaspora had found a place and a community to ritually return to. In 1968 this community formed a 'Progressive Association with the object of introducing local controls to better manage the site'(WIPA 2001, p. 3). However, Wedge has 'managed' to remain outside the scope of formal development; there is no public infrastructure (no power, water or sewerage systems). And so the patterns, moods and temperament of the built environment, are the consequence of the organic sprouting of tin shacks over the tumultuous wilderness of Wedge. The land was not gazetted until 24 February 1995. At this time both Wedge and Grey, a smaller squatter settlement approximately 20 kilometres north of Wedge, were gazetted for the purpose of Parkland, Recreation and the Letting of Cottages to enable the implementation of the State Government Squatter Policy (WIPA 2001, p. 16). Now, the questions of whether to develop Wedge, and the nature and extent of future development are prominent. In addressing these questions and the potential of this place, it is worthwhile to take account of the significance of what has already formed there.

However, before detailing the existing produced landscape, it is worth noting both CALM (The Department of Conservation and Land Management) and WIPA's (The Wedge Island Protection Association) accounts of Wedge. CALM's Master plan for this area is consistent with the State Government Squatter Policy (previously mentioned) to remove existing recreational squatter shacks after the expiry of the lease in 2006. CALM sees the shacks as occupying 'attractive coastal locations that would otherwise be available for public use and enjoyment' (CALM 2000, p. 1). Therefore, they see the removal of existing shacks as one of the means of resolving the environmental, equity and empowerment issues. The Master plan recommends that the area be incorporated into Nambung National Park and developed to provide a range of accommodation and day visitor facilities for recreation and tourism. However, concern for the two factors previously mentioned - the fragility of the dune environment and equality of access to a recreation area - are perhaps compromised when the 'natural' beauty of Wedge is projected as a potential site for tourism. Meanwhile, CALM's approach circumscribes both the particular 'identity' of the community and the beauty of the 'produced' landscape raising the question as to whether consideration should be afforded to these factors. Is CALM's vision of '[a] feature of Wedge [that] could be a creative display that interprets the squatter history'(WIPA 2001, p. 13) enough? Is a lived experience, embodying the lawless liberation, possible and preferable to a two dimensional didactic display?

WIPA envisages Wedge as being developed along similar lines to CALM, although with less emphasis on commercialism. WIPA also advocates for the inclusion of input and involvement from within the existing community (WIPA 2001). However, WIPA does propose replacement of many existing shacks with 'well-planned' modular cottages. Thus their argument with CALM is more about retaining the shack-owners than it is about the shacks. Once again, the issue of equity is highlighted.

This paper does not intend to provide solutions towards resolving the issues of environment and equity. Rather, both the exhibition and the paper present both a series of propositions and the research upon which they are based. The intention is to provoke further questioning of what the existing produced landscape at Wedge is; is this of value; and how is this projected into the future? The architecture of the shack is of particular concern.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SHACKS

The shacks at Wedge are artefacts in composition with the beach. They compose a repository of memories, traces left by individuals and community. This research begins to decipher these 'traces' by drawing from existing physical, social and political conditions. These conditions, analysed via text, readings, drawings and photographs, inform a series of propositions relating to the future of Wedge that take account of the produced landscape in relation to the pre-existing natural landscape.

The research was conducted in concurrence with the 2003 Second Year Architecture Studio at Curtin University where environmental issues, and economic and social sustainability constituted the framework for developing the propositions. The propositions that emerged from the research, act to confront widely accepted values of **consumption, aesthetics and territoriality**.

Consumption

'To all who come to this happy place: Welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past ...' (Gottdiener 1994, p. 99). The first proposition to be discussed envisages Wedge as 'Disneyfied'. A tourist facility, branded *The Big Thong*, is developed after erasing the existing artefacts; however, memories of the past are collected, stored and frozen in time (See Figure 1). *The Big Thong* is a response to souvenirs left behind by visitors to Wedge. Along several kilometres of the final approach to the entry of Wedge numerous timber fence posts lining the

roadside have been seemingly randomly selected for the ritual nailing of shoes and thongs, a subtle suggestion of the sense of humour and identity of the Wedge community. *The Big Thong* proposition is underpinned by economics, the development of Wedge as a 'commodity' for the consumption of tourists.

The Gaze is an architectural insertion into the landscape, at the highest point of Wedge (See Figure 2). From this subtle structure, a few simple walls, views are presented to the tourists, in a formal manner. *The Gaze* establishes a distance between the viewer and the viewed, lending power to the viewer, who may see more of Wedge through the categorization of viewpoint. In this proposition Wedge is presented as a spectacle with a price attached. Here, the architectural insertion at Wedge involves an experience that is different from those encountered in the everyday life. This spectacle reflects a power – the power of the capital.

Aesthetics

The second proposition, based on the notion of community and its artefacts, is one where Wedge is viewed as 'a product of its inaccessibility, natural environment and unique community dynamic'. The shacks are considered to embody this evolutionary process and as such are crucial for retaining the specific 'sense of place'. Their belonging to the site is as natural as the dunes running along the coast. For a few kilometres, the coastal landscape is dotted with kit sheds and impromptu shacks. Access difficulties have so far confined the building palette to light claddings and structural frames. Usually the material is recycled, and the construction is highly inventive. Harsh winds have lead to continuous weathering of the building, the natural process of decay have lead to replacement and reconstruction, and changing needs over time have lead to small additions. These interactions between nature and culture



Figure 1. The Big Thong: Wedge as a Commodity for Consumption (Power, Matala et al. 2003)

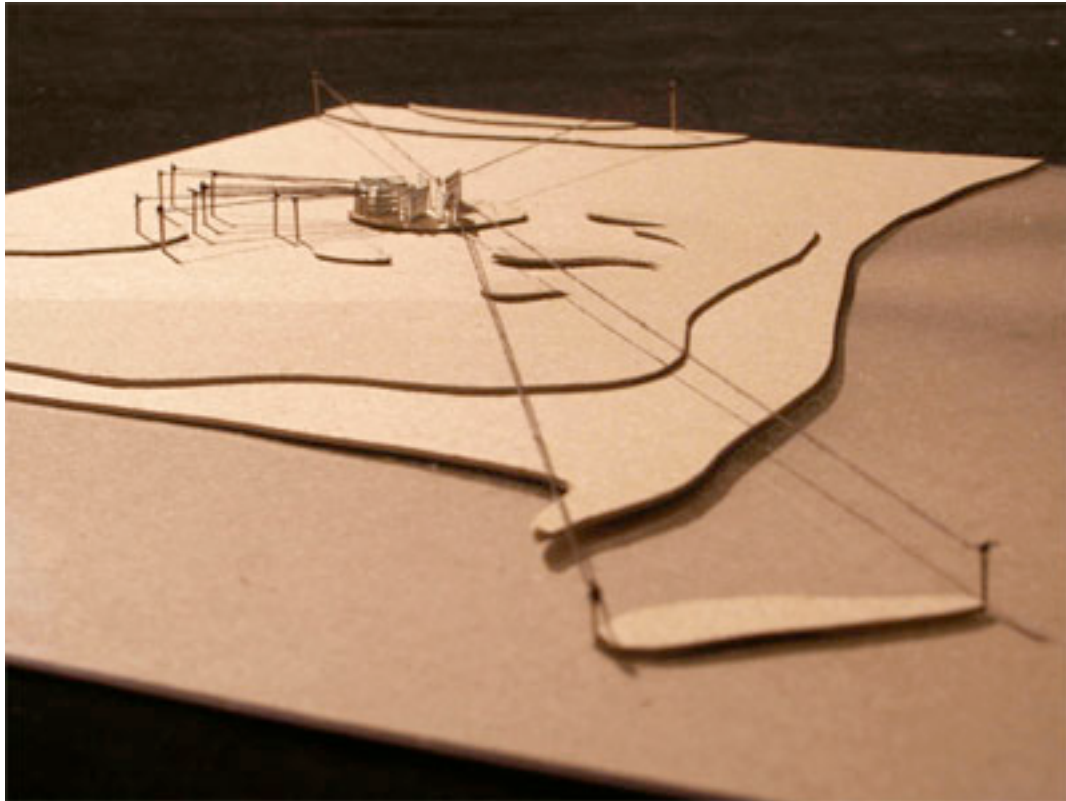


Figure 2. The Gaze: Views categorized and presented (Hestelow 2003)

have formed a layered skin. The shacks are seen as palimpsest – of time, and of the symbiotic relationship between human and nature. Thus this approach is about 'salvaging' the social, structural and formal patterns of the shacks, while simultaneously, looking into the environmental and economic sustainability. Patterns at Wedge are chaotic, organic and ambiguous and yet there are glimpses of a poetic order from within the decayed fragments, from within its vernacular built-form. The highly unregulated aesthetic at Wedge is revealed in the proposition *Twisted Fragments* (See Figure 3). *Twisted Fragments* speculates ways of dealing with water collection and heating systems, refrigeration and toilets. Here the particular architectural language of the settlement, the inventive and unconventional use of materials, methods of construction, the relationship between the interior of the building and the wilderness of its exterior world are observed and transformed into a new architecture specific to that site. Further, after engaging in 'excavation' and salvaging of fragments from the matter of Wedge, the functions of these fragments are reassigned. The subtle poetics of shacks, water and vegetation – the three key elements here – are suddenly twisted, exaggerated and ultimately revealed in this architectural proposition.

Territoriality

Domestic territory at Wedge is 'other' to the ideal projection of domestic territory in suburbia. 'Newness', for example, is completely absent, as are finishes or anything 'finished'. Here one finds a model for a vernacular building responding to both the immediate and also the more distant day to day political, physical and cultural climate. The response wears no-frills; the driving sensibility is for function and utility. It appears to mark male territory: the home is turned inside-out with the nitty-gritty of services exposed to the street. Barbecues, cricket pitch and glimpses of golf sets, further stamp this territory as male, the final marker being the 'gun club' which acts as a social hub of the community, with its 'les wylie pavilion' (See 4). Is this produced landscape between the human body and the unruly exterior world the masculinization of domestic territory? Is Wedge about male territoriality?

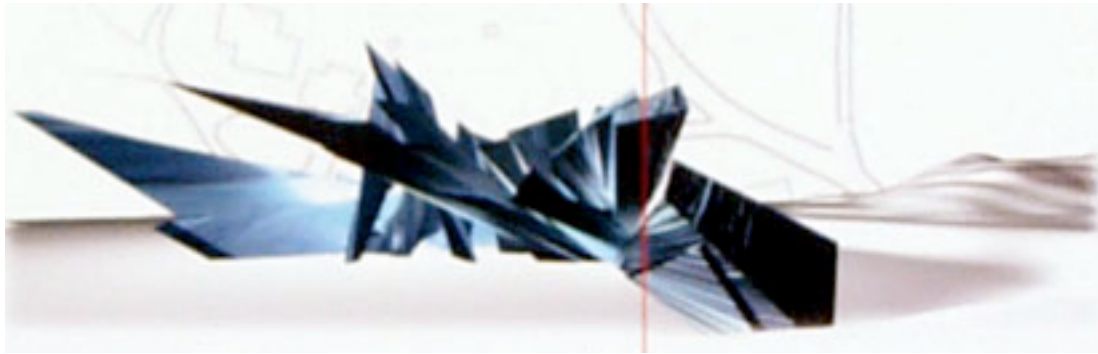


Figure 3. Twisted Fragments: Shack forms are twisted and exaggerated (Perry 2003)



Figure 4. The Les Wylie Pavilion

The proposition *The Venus* observes and responds to this masculinization of space
(See Figure 5).

*Rushed past the Island
Over the shore
Lifting the sand
Unveiling the Venus*

*Her ribs grew out of the land
As he shifted
Rolling over her body
The greatest topography
We too have seen the Venus,
Not in effect,
But in the maternity of the land
Reclining in the dunes
Gazing out to the horizon.*

*With her outstretched arm
The Venus persuades us off
The path
And onto her cage*

*I take off my thongs,
Feeling the fine,
White sand and the
Weathered timber
Ribs of the Venus
With my feet.*

*Her body gently
Curves down into
The womb where the
Fire begins to kindle.*

*Her sides spill up
From the pit,
An open air
Amphitheatre*

*We sit back
On the crest
And watch the
Sun close (Shields 2003)*

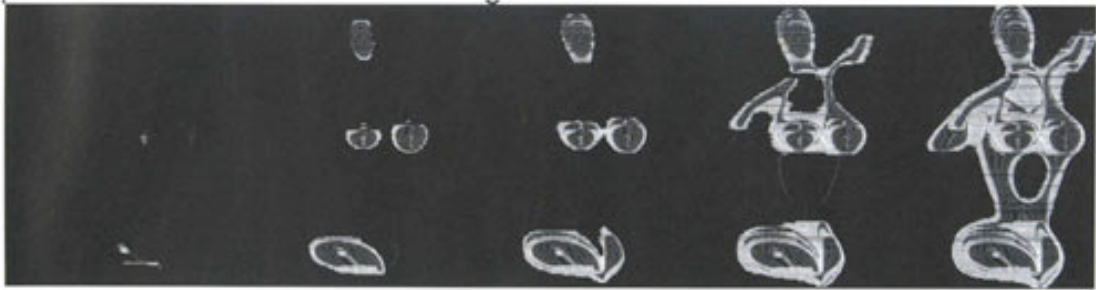


Figure 5. Feminine space within the masculine territory of Wedge is revealed by unveiling the Venus (Shields 2003)

CONCLUSION

Wedge is about the coincidence between particularly harsh and unruly conditions at the edge, and the formation of a particular community and the emergence of a particular architecture in response to these conditions. It is about wilderness, culture and production. Our exploration of the conditions at Wedge has revealed that this produced landscape (upon until recently un-gazetted land) confronts widely accepted values concerning: 'consumption', 'aesthetics' and 'territory'. The physical evidence – a community constructed from recycled rusted corrugated iron sheeting and timbers – may be seen as poetic. Poetic in its precision and economy, and in its imaginative expression of the particular conditions. And poetic in its antipathy towards the system within which most of us live. This produced landscape taps at aspects of the human condition – our vulnerability, the organisation of relations between humans, culture and the idea of civilisation. Both the exhibition and the paper demonstrate how small, carefully researched additions to the produced landscape may be able to mediate a relationship between the human experience and the natural environment. *The Gaze*, for example, constructs a series of carefully edited views, serving to both contrast and highlight the conditions within which it sits. *The Gaze* mediates an experience of discovery. Generally, the propositions demonstrate site specificity, the works respond specifically to what Wedge is. Such architecture would be meaningless in Kalbarri, Fremantle or Margaret River, as would the converse be similarly meaningless. The propositions demonstrate sensations of 'differentiation'. Whether it be *the masculine re-interpretation of domestic space*; or (the lampooning of) *The Big Thong*, '*SHACK*' *Architecture: a produced landscape* exhibits a series of thoughtful propositions that provoke questions concerning future expressions of conservation of the built environment.

What is Wedge in its past, present and future? What is it about this 'place' that we value now, or may value in the future?

Is it about nature? Is it about the people of that place?

Is it about a dialogue between the people + nature, a dialogue that is reflected in the shacks?

Is Wedge destined to be another undifferentiated 'resort'? If so, how do we then value it as a *locus* of memories, both collective and individual; memories, which are the 'consciousness' of a place, that unify the past, present and the future; memories which reside in both artefacts and nature?

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