

Concrete Activities:

Tropical Modern Buildings in the Pacific

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As an artist I come to architectural histories via my multipart photographic and film projects that investigate tropical modern architecture in Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands. This paper returns to a time when the British were establishing infrastructure in these Islands, and bringing together a diverse range of more than 70 languages and cultures for a unified nation. While Brutalism occurred as a part of Britain's post-war re-construction, tropical architecture emerged in the 1940s to late 1960s as the acclimatisation of modern architecture to tropical territories.¹ It is inherently entwined in modernisation and decolonisation politics. Re-encountering several public buildings that demonstrate activities of the British administration in Honiara, I attempt to situate this architecture in its Pacific location. I need to point out here that these are fragmentary and suggestive historical moments rather than a complete overview, given the short length of this paper.

My own work explores a private relationship to these buildings, in particular my 2012 silent looped film titled *In Conversation with the Architect (Dad and I)*.² My father, Charles Stevenson (known to most as Jock), was an architect in the Public Works Department during the 1950s in Lagos, Nigeria and in the 1960s in Honiara, then the British Solomon Islands. Following his colonial service he established his private practice in Honiara in 1969 and I was born and grew up there. In my film conversations with my father about his buildings with are enacted through our hands pointing to images, while an edited text of our dialogue runs parallel to the shifting footage. I refer to clips from this film, alongside both archival and my own images from a return visit to Honiara throughout this paper.

As I started to think about this presentation news of the recent floods in Honiara hit the headlines. Solomon Islanders have communal strength in their wontok system (literally one-talk) – meaning people of the same language, extended family or village area. This

extends to the Solomon Island pijin term *Iuminao* meaning “we all as a collectivity now”.³ Being resilient together as wontoks, enables a way forward, and this has always been the way for rebuilding villages and homes after cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis. However, in urban Honiara with concrete infrastructure now damaged, the collaborative spirit of *Iuminao* seems especially relevant in relation to these public buildings in Honiara today.



Fig 1. The Public Works Department Building, 1962. Photograph by Charles Stevenson.

In 1964, a Pacific Island Monthly celebrated the clean formal lines of tropical architecture in Honiara. The Public Works Department building, also known as the PWD is noted. Sited on the edge of town, this department was responsible for building infrastructure throughout the islands. “It’s breezeblock sunscreen is made of ordinary cement blocks turned hollow-side out, serves a useful purpose and adds to the distinction of the building.”⁴ Concrete was made locally, using imported cement and gravel from the Lunga Beach near Honiara. In the islands it was important for termite resistance and had a structural permanence in keeping with Western perspectives. As precast for structural walls, reinforced for foundations, block-work and breezeblock walls, it informed a structural grid that delineated formal European spaces. These concrete terms easily evoke not only architectural imposition in these islands, but also associated material, socio-cultural and environmental implications. However, the local

environment challenged the materiality of concrete, becoming damp with the high humidity to turn mouldy and black over time. It also needed strong steel reinforcing against the frequent earthquakes.



Fig 2. The King George VI Secondary School, Dormitory under construction in 1964. Photograph by Charles Stevenson.

In June 1963 my father arrived in Honiara as a senior architect in the PWD to design the King George VI secondary school (known locally as KGVI). During the 1960s cement itself was a political and economic discussion point in the Solomons. A 1963 letter clearly instructs the Solomon Islands administration at the time, that the Western Pacific High Commission are “to be consulted if ever there is a suggestion that we cease to purchase our cement from the United Kingdom since if a change in supply is made, there is very real danger that our direct shipping link with Europe would not be maintained”.⁵

John Tagg, in his 1988 book *Burden of Representation on Photography and Histories*, prompts starting with “Concrete material activities, and what it produces.”⁶ On one hand, this issue of cement demonstrates the colonial institutional apparatus holding in place its mode of operation in these islands, while on the other, revealing the destabilizing effects of an oceanic location resisting its implementation. Pacific distances inserted themselves into the very materiality of building tropical architecture in this location.

On its level site just outside of Honiara, KGVI was the first residential and co-educational secondary school in these islands. Another 1960s Pacific Island monthly notes that, “[i]n terms of much needed native education, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate dragged its heels more than any other territory.”⁷ The Solomon Islands was further away both spatially and temporally in terms of its modernisation, by which time decolonisation was well underway. The smaller scale of construction in these islands was very much a consequence of distance and tightened colonial purse strings. The KGVI Lecture Theatre (which today is used as a science classroom) recalls the much grander form of Trenchard Hall at the University of Ibadan, in Nigeria. Renowned architects Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, who were key protagonists in tropical architecture, designed this building in 1951. Beginning in West Africa in the 1940s, their work extended to co-partnership with Le Corbusier on Chandigarh.⁸

For Fry and Drew, the value of modern technology underpinned indigenous educational change, which was seen as an inevitable part of modern development. Rhodri Liscombe, writing on Fry and Drew’s educational buildings, interprets their use of concrete structural systems and modular organisation as symbolically referencing enlightened colonial policies. Nevertheless, she argues that Fry and Drew, “respected inherent cultural differences in the belief of the possibility of resolution through design”.⁹ In relation to the KGVI secondary school, with its gridded concrete spatiality alongside its European curriculum and colonial cultural “ethos”, this utopian perspective seems somewhat incongruous. However, despite this the school today in fact offers a space for the recovery of a struggling sense of national identity. The Solomon Islands became independent only thirty-six years ago, in 1978, and, in 2000, suffered a serious cultural trauma with a civil uprising resulting in violence and deaths.

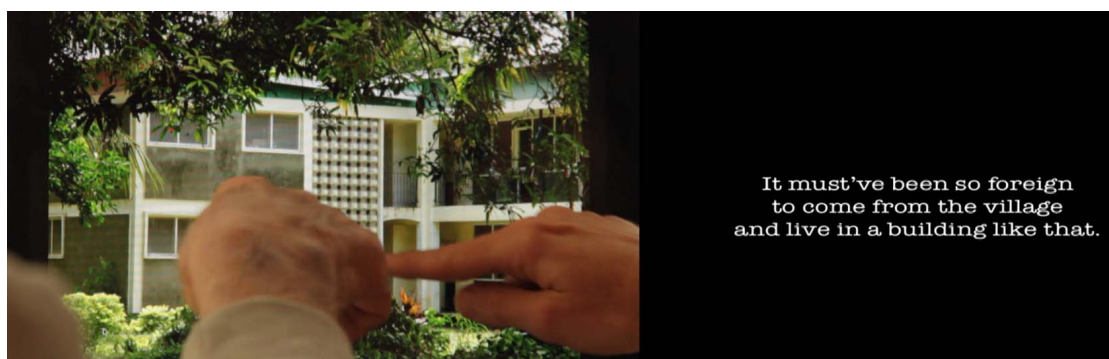


Fig 3. Still from *In Conversation with the Architect (Dad and I)*, 2012.

As the main government secondary school, KGVI today has over 6000 students from all over the Solomons, including external-schools on various islands. Uniquely, striking murals based on Solomon Islands designs have been painted on buildings throughout the school, refracting the multiple cultures of its student body. Cultural studies scholar Dr. David Gegeo, from the island of Malaita in the Solomons, discusses *space* from his perspective as, “ (...place situated in dwelling” ; that is, place not of ones existential being but rather of temporary or even long-term staying) referring to a space that is not of one’s identity or origin.”¹⁰ In relation to this, in terms of belonging to land, kin and genealogy, the idea of *place* is considered “portable”.¹¹ Meaning, it can be taken to *spaces* due to circumstances such as leaving for education or work on another island. These KGVI murals demonstrate a local claiming of these school spaces, embodying this idea of portability. I celebrated these murals in my three channel video work titled *Motifs Adrift* (2012). Still functioning, fifty years on, despite minimal resources and up-keep, KGVI today has a vibrant atmosphere that incorporates informal Island ways. Locals importantly see this school as offering valuable opportunities for the countries future.



Fig 4. General Post Office, Honiara, 1970s. Photograph by Ann Stevenson.

Located in Honiara’s town centre, is the Solomon Island’s General Post Office. Designed in 1969, it was my father’s first commission in private practice. Its west-facing

aluminium screen protected computer equipment from the hot afternoon sun. Hannah le Roux observes in her valuable paper “The Networks of Tropical Architecture” that modern communications was pivotal in the emergence of tropical architecture within colonial spatialities.¹² Along with facilitating the cohesion of diverse provinces for a new nation, modern communications kept civil servants in touch with those back home and connected peripheral colonial territories to metropolitan centres, such as London. At the end of the 1960s this Post Office building notably reiterates the formal structure of tropical modernism. This was when local contractors began to import their own cement and suggestively this building has a structural steel frame.

Was communications as a system linked to colonial modernisation more unreliable in the Islands? Pacific scholar Epeli Hau’Ofa defines in his well-known essay *Our Sea of Islands* that, “There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands’ ”.¹³ Perhaps, the western perspective of “islands in a far sea” acts to condemn the colonial understanding of communication in the Pacific to one of perpetual long distance. Compounded with an expatriate sense of double displacement, given that many had served in other colonies, an emphasis on colonial social and technical practices remained strong in the last years before Solomon Islands Independence. However, over time, tropical architecture in Honiara has increasingly displayed transgressions of this cohesive attitude.



Fig 5. General Post Office, Honiara, 2012. Photograph by author.

The bright re-colouring of this Post Office seems to enact a fundamental break with colonial legacies. The cooling, reflective properties of white promoted by early tropical architects dissipate and become invalid given the embracing of air conditioning. Many of these building now display such units. Has air conditioning gained such a status, that the sensibility of Western comfort is now ingrained in the local culture of tropical urban centres? Or, on the other hand, were these buildings still too uncomfortable despite their modern cooling designs?¹⁴ Especially given that concrete absorbs heat daily and slowly releases it throughout the night, causing what is now termed ‘Urban Heat Islands’.

In a 1959 conversation on Brutalism between Fry and Drew, and architects Alison and Peter Smithson, the idea of architectural communication is discussed: asking not only how well something is built, but whether it should be built there at all, and if so how it relates. Smithson explains, “one puts less value on the thing being symmetrical or cubic and more on the fact that its particular geometry, builds up into a relationship with other geometry”.¹⁵ In the context of these buildings this points to questions about the whole presence of colonialism in the Solomon Islands, and including how it relates to its fluid Pacific location and the people in shifting postcolonial times. How do Solomon Islanders experience and respond to these buildings? The previously mentioned Solomon Island scholar David Gegeo in his article “Cultural Rupture and Indigeneity” points out that for Solomon Islanders such issues will not stop being discussed until they are laid to rest for the benefit of the whole community.¹⁶



Fig 6. High Court, Honiara (1962). 2012. Photograph by author.



Fig 7. Ceiling of the High Court in Honiara (1962), 2012. Photograph by author.

Concrete buildings such as these, along with their legacies of colonial activities, continue to inform the physical and psychological fabric of Honiara. Long-time visitor to the Solomons, Professor of Architecture at Canberra University, Rodney Moss, comments that “Honiara (...) was sensibly planned and the architecture developed by the British, was colonial and formal.”¹⁷ He further points out that while after Independence the colonial infrastructure deteriorated, in comparison to later commercial developments, these buildings still maintain a quality regarding site, climate and materials. A sense of building for a future, as the British envisaged, was inherent to colonial tropical architecture. Still functioning for the same purposes for which they were built, these buildings remain a testament to success of the architecture of this era. However, along with their utopian ideologies, perhaps these buildings seem anachronistic in today’s Pacific region; and broader questions remain about the current status of this architecture and its preservation throughout the Pacific.



Fig 8. Solomon Island Mural on King George VI Secondary School classroom building, (1965) 2012. Photograph by author.

Filtered through a private archive and discussions with my father, my own work aims to create a space in which these buildings can be productively revisited. My father once remarked that as a young architect he was told never to look back at his buildings. This points to a pragmatic acceptance that the initial ideal and utopian vision of a building is always transformed through time and use in ways other than anticipated. In the utopian spirit of Le Corbusier's *Open Hand*, "as a sign of optimism in this world of catastrophe",¹⁸ alongside the Solomon Island collaborative outlook of *Iuminao*, perhaps it's in the complex transformations, or even abandonment, of these buildings to their place by the people that new futures can be offered, futures that may be of relevance for our broader Pacific region.

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- ¹ Jiatt Hwee Chang and Anthony D. King, "Towards a genealogy of tropical architecture: Historical fragments of power-knowledge, built environment and climate in the British colonial territories," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 32, no. 3 (2001): 287. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9493.2011.00434.x
- ² Louise Stevenson, *In Conversation with the Architect (Dad and I)* 2012, HD film, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyOciZYx2QQ&feature=em-upload_owner
- ³ David Welchman Gegeo, "Culture Rupture and Indigeneity: The Challenge of (Re)visioning "Place" in the Pacific," *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, No. 2 (2001): 498.
- ⁴ "Old and New in the Solomons", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, October (1964): 57.
- ⁵ Building Construction BSIP Design Programme, WPHC 222/11/12 Vol. 1-II. Great Britain: High Commission for Western Pacific Islands. Western Pacific archives. 1875-1978, MSS & Archives 2003/1. Special Collections, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services.
- ⁶ Tagg, John. *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 221.
- ⁷ "The British Solomon Islands Protectorate: Elysian Fields at the End of the Line", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, May (1963): 17.
- ⁸ Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, "Modernism in Late Imperial British West Africa: The Work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, 1946 -56," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 2 (2006): 188 – 215.
- ⁹ Liscombe, "Modernism in Late Imperial British West Africa," 195.
- ¹⁰ Gegeo, "Culture Rupture and Indigeneity," 494.
- ¹¹ Gegeo, "Culture Rupture and Indigeneity," 495.
- ¹² Hannah Le Roux, "The Networks of Tropical Architecture," *The Journal of Architecture* 8, no. 3 (2003): 337-354.
- ¹³ Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands", in *We are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 31.
- ¹⁴ Ola Uduku, "Educational Design and Modernism in West Africa," *Docomomo* no. 28 (March 2003): 82.
- ¹⁵ "Conversation on Brutalism: Alison Smithson, Peter Smithson, Jane B. Drew, E. Maxwell Fry", *October* 136 (2011): 41, from *Zodiac* 4, (1959): 73-81.
- ¹⁶ Gegeo, "Culture Rupture and Indigeneity," 491 – 507.
- ¹⁷ Rodney Moss, "Emerging Architecture in the Solomon Islands," *Architecture Bulletin* (December 2010): 20 -21.
- ¹⁸ Jacques Barsac, *Le Corbusier*, 35mm film, interview with Le Corbusier, 1987, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmcR9jU6SPw>.