

GOLD

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND
VOL. 33

Edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad

Published in Melbourne, Australia, by SAHANZ, 2016

ISBN: 978-0-7340-5265-0

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

Renee Miller-Yeaman "Transitory Homes: Refugee Resettlement and Detainment in Sydney's Western Suburbs."
In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 33, Gold*, edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad, 502-508. Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2016.

TRANSITORY HOMES: REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND DETAINMENT IN SYDNEY'S WESTERN SUBURBS

The proposed redevelopment of the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, located in Western Sydney, includes an adjacent heritage precinct displaying the site's former use as one of Australia's longest running post-war, Commonwealth migrant hostels. The refurbished precinct will offer a tableau of multicultural memories in the form of remaining buildings and memorabilia. However, this gilded site neighbours the security fence of the currently operative immigration detention centre that signposts the recent history of abject onshore and offshore repositories for the economically and politically disenfranchised. This collision of competing and contested narratives highlights a fluctuating exchange between Australia's refugee resettlement and the production of political national identities. The paper approaches on-arrival refugee accommodation as an entry point into Australian citizenship with the aim to investigate how varying scales of domesticity and incarceration have been employed spatially. It will analyse the dwellings constructed to house transients across two key periods in the site's history that shadow significant changes in Australian Immigration Policy from 1945. The paper proposes that these accommodation types, defined by temporality and confinement, demonstrate the ingrained tension between home ideals and the racial anxiety surrounding the economic utility of migrants in Australia.

Introduction

The site of the operative Villawood Immigration Detention Centre was formerly occupied by one of Australia's largest Commonwealth migrant hostels that accommodated migrants arriving from 1949 to 1984. Located in Chester Hill in the Greater Western Sydney Region, the site has provided varying forms of on-arrival accommodation for immigrants and refugees as the surrounding suburbs developed to be simultaneously celebrated as exemplars of multicultural living and derided as ethnic and working-class enclaves in popular media.¹ This paper investigates two key periods in the Villawood site's built history that coincide with significant changes in Australian Immigration Policy from 1945, with the first period being the design and arrested development of new housing blocks during the late 1960s. During this time selected Commonwealth migrant hostels underwent substantial alterations, moving from portable structures inherited from the military to purpose-built communal apartments. The second period is the introduction and gradual growth of detention systems implemented on site from the mid-1980s onward to hold refugees and asylum seekers subject to detention and subsequent mandatory detention. These two periods belong to two separate trajectories in Australia's immigration and refugee policy and the procedural aims underwriting the physical facilities vary from nation building to securitisation. However, the shared facility use offers a platform to explore crossovers between the differing policies and to investigate how home ideals influence both refugee resettlement in Australia and the surrounding volatile and divisive public narratives. This paper examines the spatial and material character of dwellings during the two key periods in order to understand how the accommodation types provided to displaced people, that gain momentum from political agendas and anxieties, have shaped critical entry points into Australian citizenship.²

There is increased interest in former migrant hostel sites as exemplifiers for new practices of place making in connection to contested national memories. This is seen in the work of historians such as Sara Wills, Alexandra Dellios, and Glenda Sluga.³ However, as suggested by Seamus O'Hanlon, housing histories in Australia have often overlooked individuals and groups and generally focused on nuclear or traditional family structures as tied to individual home ownership.⁴ A slice of Villawood's architectural history is used to examine how scales of domesticity and incarceration have been employed spatially in transitory, on-arrival accommodation. There are two dimensions to the discourse surrounding this history of Villawood's accommodation with the first focusing on architecture and migrancy and the other on internment. This is due to the regulatory, and then, by extension, the carceral nature of the accommodation concerned, and the fact that both migrant hostels and immigration detention centres served specific government purposes by temporarily collecting migrants for labour or criminalising asylum seekers.

Firstly, there is the growing published research on the migrant house in Australia, including the work of Mirjana Lozanovska and Iris Levin Azriel, but the focus is often on homes owned by migrants rather than government subsidised facilities that endorse temporary tenures and conditions of physical transience such as migrant hostels or public housing estates in cities.⁵ The second area of scholarship is the work examining refugee displacement and imprisonment for example Michel Agier's work on refugee camps and Sean Anderson and Jennifer Feng's work on detention centres under Australia's jurisdiction.⁶ Villawood's historical trajectory from camp to communal house to prison provides a platform to connect historical processes of migrant settlement in Australia to the contemporary carceral detention centres. This initial research frames the site as an urban laboratory for the settlement strategies used historically for displaced people in Australia. It intends to offer an alternative housing history that focuses on temporary tenures with the aim to contribute to a broader understanding of idealised constructions of home. For this paper, the building analysis is compiled from a selection of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works and Economic Development reports from 1960 to 2009. These are used in addition with an archival record of the Villawood site prepared for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship in provision for the demolition of selected buildings in 2011. National and local newspapers are also used along with photographic material documenting migrant hostels in the 1960s commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. There is limited accessible information on the structure or internal mechanisms of detention centres and the incremental building additions and conversions are traced through inquiries conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission into living standards from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Villawood Migrant Hostel

When the Villawood Migrant Hostel officially opened in 1949, it was one of over forty migrant hostels operating in Australia from 1948, which accommodated migrants entering Australia through public assistance, namely displaced persons from the Second World War.⁷ Migrant hostels, also known as holding centres or reception and training centres were often located in rural areas notably Albury-Wodonga and Bathurst to satisfy needs for agricultural labour. However, city locations were also used, such as the temporary reception centre set up on the former oval north of Exhibition Building in the Carlton Gardens, Melbourne.⁸ Many migrant hostels across Australia were converted from ex-military facilities and this heritage provided a template for spatial hierarchies and regulation. The Villawood site was formerly the Leightonfield Munitions Factory that operated from 1941 to 1945. After the war ceased, the NSW Government's State Housing Commission obtained the decommissioned site.⁹ The Department of Immigration initially managed Villawood but in 1951 Commonwealth Hostels Limited, a company working directly with the department, took over management. The company, established in the same year, was responsible for setting accommodation costs that were deducted from unemployment benefits or from income once employed. These tariff rates were a substantial portion of incomes available and particularly affected larger families.¹⁰ On-site accommodation has been continually amended in tandem with Australian immigration and refugee policy with the first additional dwelling structures being prefabricated army huts; a mixture of timber-framed huts, Nissen huts and the larger Quonset huts arranged in rows. These army leftovers had been imported in excessive quantities from the United Kingdom through the British Ministry of Works and from the closed US Army base in Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, for temporary migrant housing.¹¹ The huts were partitioned down the middle and divided into rooms and were used to provide basic housing initially for displaced persons arriving mainly from Britain and Eastern Europe, and then later from Italy and Malta.

From the commencement of immigration programs, political anxieties surrounding arriving immigrants were directly linked to perceptions of housing. Ann-Mari Jordens argues in her paper *On Accommodating Migrants*, that due to a housing shortage stemming from the Great Depression after the war "the political acceptability of the immigration program depended upon the ability of the government to prevent migrant home-seekers from competing with Australian born for rented and privately owned accommodation."¹² Initial strategies for this included housing British migrants with their sponsors but eventually the government instigated subsidised hostels for all migrants. This contributed to a connection between immigration policy and policy emerging from the new Housing Department from 1945 onward.¹³ While the 1950s, military and industrial facilities were deployed without much modification to accommodate migrants, the 1960s saw a change of strategy; a nationwide programme orchestrated by Commonwealth Hostels to improve the basic standards in migrant housing. There was a gradual shift from accommodation associated with military cultures to more domestic dwellings equipped with modern household conveniences that aimed to help project images of increased government hospitality. During this time many of the remaining migrant hostels in Australia underwent significant alterations, moving from portable structures to permanent, purposely designed apartments. In a proposal for a new hostel in Randwick in 1966, the government brief stipulated that the "design was required to preserve privacy and recognise the emphasis on family living" and "there was also the requirement that the buildings should avoid having an institutional appearance."¹⁴ Jordens suggests that these building upgrades aimed to placate demonstrations and reverse the increasing non-compliance from inhabitants to tariffs. Due to tough living conditions in the ex-army huts and strict regulations around food consumption, many migrants had refused to pay accommodation rates. However, Jordens argues that the main motivation behind the building upgrades was to continue to attract migrants at the conclusion of the nation-building program. She states that the improvements "owed more to changed expectations of migrants from Europe and fears within the bureaucracy that Australia would not be able to attract and retain sufficient numbers of migrants it needed."¹⁵

The construction of new hostel buildings at Villawood during the late 1960s, in alignment with schemes for urban renewal, coincided with both the construction of large-scale apartment buildings in Western Sydney, namely the expansive Housing Commission Estate at Green Valley, and the use of medium-density townhouses on various estates.¹⁶ At Villawood, double-story blocks were constructed with face-brick walls and tiled skillion roofs, with each block connected to communal dining and laundry areas by covered walkways. There were twelve blocks divided into groups and planned to form rectangular grass courtyards with each block containing differing numbers of apartments from eight to sixteen. The apartments were arranged in modular units of four, consisting of two apartments on each floor divided by an external, concrete stairwell. The Villawood Hostel was rebranded as the Westbridge Hostel to cement this physical transformation. The Sydney architectural firm Bunning & Madden designed the new dwellings, practicing as a partnership between Walter Bunning and Charles Madden from 1946. The firm had previously undertaken substantial planning and architectural work for the NSW Housing Commission. According to the firm's

project statement for the Villawood Migrant Hostel, it was envisaged that the new blocks would generate a residential neighbourhood of communal living: “The aim has been to give a residential atmosphere throughout the site by a careful placement of blocks, landscape planning and the preservation of existing trees. Where major blocks run across the contours of the land they have been steeped to prevent any tendency towards monotony.”¹⁷ The new apartments increased domestic privacy with one main bed or sitting room and one or two additional bedrooms along with one bathroom. All rooms had windows and amenities such as heating, hot water in every bathroom, and an outlet from the main TV-antennae in the bed-sitting room. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural, and Indigenous Affairs commissioned extensive photographic documentation of the new facilities.¹⁸ Previous Commonwealth documentation of daily life experiences at the hostel had been negligible in comparison to the abundant publicity images for the new buildings, which emphasized children playing on outdoor equipment, families sitting on the grass back-lit by the brick-blocks, and classrooms for learning English, and showcased the new industrial-grade facilities in the laundry and kitchen areas. In addition, local newspapers covered the government’s unveiling of new additions in 1968 that positioned Villawood as the flagship for the nationwide program of improving living standards for migrants.¹⁹ New, clean facilities along with greater domestic comfort and cordial community areas provided better living conditions than the hostel’s previous incarnation but they also helped to promote improved Commonwealth hospitality towards migrants by providing a fresh modern image for migrant hostels.

Australian home ideals have traditionally centred around the idea of home ownership as a method of economic and cultural securitisation and this attitude towards housing, arguably more pronounced historically, impacts on migrant hostel forms. This is evident in the forms previously discussed, firstly in establishing camps as housing alternatives to allay public fears of non-whites competing for home ownership. Secondly it emerges through how the Australian Dream was packaged and promoted to new arrivals. This is seen in the construction of modern dwellings that aimed to reconstruct the idea of a suburban neighbourhood as both an incentive for migrants to come to Australia and as a stage for processes of assimilation. This transformation of on-arrival accommodation demonstrates how aesthetic choices and everyday practices as related to domesticity were influenced by the collusion of ingrained anxieties about racial heterogeneity and buying a house. The permission to control access and competition in the market for an increasingly illusive ideal home is again being pushed as one narrative behind the recent strategies to secure geographic borders from unauthorised people and degrade the prosecuted and displaced. Since the intersection of these two discourses on border protection and historic housing provision is seldom linked in architectural studies, one of the challenges of this research is establishing their relationship as critical to evaluating how shifting conceptions of home in Australia influence government strategies to resettle refugees and asylum seekers.

Villawood Immigration Detention Centre

The Villawood site was first used to detain people seeking protection in 1976 and from this point onwards there has been a succession of building adaptations and additions to generate more secure facilities. Although there had been various restrictions on migrants daily lives in the hostels, for example regulated meals and eating times, with the gradual emergence of increasing detention on site, inhabitants were categorised more systemically and movement rigorously controlled. In 1984 the Villawood and Westbridge Hostels were officially closed and the buildings were used to house Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees before transitioning into an immigration detention which evolved during the following decades into two main categories of detention facilities. The first is the much smaller Sydney Immigration Residential Housing (current operational capacity approximately 24 persons) and the second the larger Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, (current operational capacity approximately 450 persons).²⁰ Immigration Residential Housing is for lower-security risk persons and according to government definitions, “the benefit of this domestic style of accommodation is that detainees are able to cook their own food and control many aspects of their household.” Scaled levels of perceived domesticity are used to classify inhabitants; the lower the perceived threat the more autonomy granted in the house.²¹ Unlike the first transitional period that shows as clear transition in building types, the former Villawood Immigration Detention Centre was not purpose-built. The emergence of physical and spatial detention systems on site were piecemeal and disjointed, reflecting the constant policy changes in regard to the mandatory detention of unauthorised arrivals and the requirements for persons holding temporary visas. From the mid-1980s to the 2000s, the existing hostel buildings were adapted with the notable additions including increased fencing and partitions. Family orientated apartments were converted to gendered dormitories and individual separation areas, including observation rooms. The detention centre, serving as the highest security compound, evolved to have three major compounds with Blaxland or Stage 1, fortified by razor wire and surveillance cameras. According

to the Australia Humans Rights Commission in 2008, Blaxland was one of the most restrictive and prison-like areas in Australia's detention network and detainees in this compound had limited privacy and access to outdoor space.²²

Spatial practices used in prisons were adopted at Villawood but the detention centre is not exactly a prison replica as Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange argue, "Detainees in detention centres are non-criminal (despite rhetoric to the contrary) and non-citizens. Detention centres are prison-like in their administration, architecture and high security features, but they more closely resemble quarantine and enemy internment: the detention of groups, most often non-citizens who were incarcerated on grounds other than having committed criminal offences."²³ The Villawood Immigration Detention Centre's design does not exclusively shadow prison planning or form. Instead the constant layering and reordering of security measures along with the introduction of spatial segregation into the apartment blocks and individual houses produces a vigilant but improvised version of confinement that sits uncomfortably between the house and the prison as a spatial prototype. This design uncertainty and coalescence of programs, arguably reflects imprisoning unauthorised asylum seekers and persons with invalid temporary visas as a contentious and fraught practice due to the continual physical amendments. Due to its suburban location, Villawood is a key internal site where Australia's recent difficult and dark histories have been made partially visible to the public. Past protests by internees have used both violence and civil disobedience as methods to gain wider recognition for their predicament and the substandard living conditions, and their protests were frequently directed at the buildings. An example that made national headlines and exemplified divisive media representations, is the riot that occurred on the night of the April 20 2011, where several buildings were set alight during a protest by detained asylum seekers.²⁴ Consequently, these acts of protest directed at and damaging facilities become criminalized as Bashford and Strange argue that "in the act of resisting detention, or the conditions of detention, non-criminal detainees become criminal, escapees end up in goal, rioters are charged with damage to property."²⁵

In 2002, un-used buildings on site were demolished and the Commonwealth Government sold a significant portion of the site to a private developer, where a gated housing community is under development. This updated packaging of the suburban dream will border the new \$186.7 million redevelopment of Villawood Immigration Detention Centre that is forecast for completion by the end of 2016. The detention centre is being refurbished in order to upgrade detainee amenities, processing areas and visitor meeting spaces in part due to multiple investigations by the Australian Human Rights Commission into the alarming living conditions and facility depletion observed.²⁶ One requirement was future proofing the design, so accommodation options could respond to changes in policy with the government wanting to consolidate immigration detention facilities onshore, with Villawood functioning as the principle high security facility on the Australian mainland.²⁷ Included in this upgrade is another renaming of the facilities with internal sections such as Stage 1, Stage 2, and Stage 3 to be rebranded with non-institutional names. These naming adjustments combined with representative images on the government website, for example, basketball courts and outdoor cafeteria eating areas emphasise another shift in image for the facilities from spatial and material associations derived from the prison to projecting a more amenable institution. In the publicity stills, markedly devoid of people and experiences of the space, it appears like a suburban high school.

The scheme also includes a heritage precinct, nestled between the detention centre and the site's boundary, the precinct features two relocated heritage listed Nissen huts that will exhibit reconstructed interiors. Neighbouring these huts will be interpretative displays of remaining everyday artefacts such as laundry boilers along with informative panels and oral history listening posts. Although the heritage precinct is uncompleted and is publicised to present a nuanced story of Australia's complex migration histories, by emphasising the experiences associated with the first wave of migrants and the earliest physical incarnations on the site, the precinct distances itself from more recent, contentious resettlement practices that occurred adjacent. This strange merging of a public memorial generated through architectural remnants of camps and the current evolution of Australia's ongoing detention practices has the ability to suggest a reading that stresses the diverse forms of contact, including the positive, ambiguous and painful settlement experiences refugees have had historically and continue to have with Australia. However the proposed site dichotomy highlights a contentious cut in national narratives that tends to mythologise Post War Immigration as the golden era of Commonwealth generosity that set the foundation for state multiculturalism and governing versions of difference.²⁸ Sara Wills in her discussion of migrant hostel sites that were transformed into detention centres suggests that "the layering of these cultural landscapes of migrancy on and in these sites in Australia should only be explored in a way that does not return us to national pride."²⁹ The problematic division occurring at Villawood both simplifies the varying and unfixed experiences of living in migrant hostels but also implies the recurrent division of diasporic populations between assimilated Australians and marginal others, reinforcing the vilification of asylum seekers on racial and economic terms.

Conclusion

Villawood's generational changes from spartan army huts to community oriented hostels to detention facilities exposes how insular political traditions manifest through various modes of housing afforded to immigrants and refugees. The Villawood site is significant as it highlights that home, as a form that is visualised and spatialised as an Australian ideal, has frequently been transitory and discursively marked by cultures of both hospitality and spatial violence.

Two main contemporary issues prompt the larger historical investigation this paper has introduced: current national and international anxieties in relation to detention of unauthorised people and ongoing concerns surrounding transitory tenures vs home ownership in Australia.³⁰ Through the lens of architecture, the research aims to understand the historical context of these contemporary situations and tensions between them. In particular, how uncertainty surrounding national borders on different economic scales allows for the reassertion of predictable, xenophobic political traditions within the nation that have historically influenced the settlement options available to displaced people. The overview of temporary dwellings presented in this paper is the prelude to understanding how on-arrival accommodation warranted to displaced people helps visualize and materialise these broader issues of physical and economic instability. Through further it is anticipated that the Villawood site could be framed as a microcosm that foreshadows and ignites public anxieties about housing as connected to national identity and ethnicity in the Australian vernacular.

Endnotes

- 1 Helen Grace, et al, *Home/world: space, community and marginality in Sydney's west* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 1997).
- 2 This paper is a preliminary study that introduces a broader research project. The paper establishes Villawood as a key site to explore the connection between incarceration and housing in Australia and to provide a history for alternate experiences of dwelling.
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- 4 Seamus O'Hanlon outlines this argument has been put forth by Meredith Fletcher and Patrick Troy, who also suggest that a thorough understanding of housing histories outside home ownership is absent. Seamus O'Hanlon, "Full board and lodging: hostels for migrant workers in early postwar Melbourne," *History Australia* 2 no. 3 (2005).
- 5 Mirjana Lozanovska, Iris Levin, and Maria Victoria Gantala, "Is the Migrant House in Australia an Australian Vernacular Architecture?" *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 24, no. 2 (2013), 65-78.
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- 12 Ann-Mari Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants, Administration, Compliance and Governability Program, Working Paper No. 19*, (Canberra: Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences, 1994), 2.
- 13 Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants*, 3-4.

- 14 Parliament of Australia, Standing Committee on Public Works, *Report relating to the proposed erection of a Migrant Hostel at Randwick, New South Wales*, (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1966), 7.
- 15 Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants*, 20.
- 16 Diane Powell, *Out West: perceptions of Sydney's western suburbs*, (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 68-84.
- 17 Bunning and Madden, *The Work of Bunning & Madden*, (Sydney: Bunning and Madden, 1970), 68-69.
- 18 Example: Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, "Immigration-Hostels, holding centres and state reception centres-Modern, New Hostel units at Villawood." Photograph, 1969, National Archives of Australia, Image no.: A12111, 1/1969/22/19.
- 19 "New Flats at Migrant Hostel" *Bankstown-Canterbury Torch*. August 28, 1968; "Minister opens new-look migrant accommodation," *The Biz*, August 29, 1968, Trove Newspapers.
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- 21 Parliament of Australia, joint submission by the Department of Finance and Deregulation and Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Villawood Immigration Detention Facility Redevelopment Villawood, New South Wales, Statement of evidence to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works (Version 3)*, (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2009) and "Immigration Detention Facilities," Department of Immigration and Border Protection, last accessed February 21 2016, <http://www.border.gov.au/Busi/Comp/Immigration-detention/facilities>
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- 25 Bashford and Strange, "Asylum-Seekers" 516.
- 26 The main example these investigations mentioned as a reason behind the need for the redevelopment in the *Villawood Immigration Detention Facility Redevelopment Villawood, Statement of evidence to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works (Version 3)*, is Grame Innes and Australia Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Immigration Detention Report 2008*.
- 27 Parliament of Australia, Standing Committee on Public Works, *Redevelopment of the Villawood Immigration Detention Facility, Report 6/2009* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009): 7-8.
- 28 State multiculturalism is discussed in Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The colonial dimensions of multiculturalisms*, (London: Routledge, 2004):33-50; Ghassan Hage, *White nation: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998)
- 29 Wills, "Between the hostel and the detention centre," 273.
- 30 Refugee policies are discussed in: Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia's response to refugees and asylum seekers in the wake of the Tampa* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002); Don McMaster, *Asylum seekers: Australia's response to refugees* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 2001).