

Islands Apart

Balwant Saini and the Tropical Architectures of Australia and its 'Colony', Papua New Guinea

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Volume 40

Conference hosted by the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5400p3s6a

Citation:

Goad, Philip. "Islands Apart: Balwant Saini and the Tropical Architectures of Australia and Its 'Colony,' Papua New Guinea." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 21-22. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New Zealand



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Brisbane, Australia

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In 1967, Indian-born Melbourne-trained architect and academic Balwant Singh Saini (1930–) completed his PhD at The University of Melbourne. Titled “An Investigation into Building and Planning Problems of the Tropical Regions of Australia and The Territory of Papua New Guinea,” his PhD was, significantly, one of the first sophisticated architectural studies of how to design for Australia’s tropical north, and also one of the first systematic investigations of the state of architecture, both vernacular and contemporary, in Australia’s “colony,” Papua New Guinea.

Australia had assumed complete control of the eastern half of the island of New Guinea after World II when the two protectorates were combined into The Territory of Papua New Guinea. (The two protectorates were The Territory of New Guinea, which constituted the northern half of the island’s eastern half and its offshore islands and had been captured from the Germans in 1914 by Australia, which was then given mandated administrative control by the League of Nations; and the British protectorate of The Territory of Papua, which constituted the southern half of the island’s eastern half). In 1975, Papua New

Guinea (PNG) gained independence as a newly formed country but sitting within the British Commonwealth, ending what had been effectively nearly sixty years of colonial rule by Australia.

Saini’s research on Papua New Guinea formed part of his larger career interests that focussed on the research and teaching of tropical architecture. After graduating from The University of Melbourne in 1954, he worked for the Shell Oil Corporation (1954–56), followed by a brief period of working in Chandigarh for Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew and teaching at the Delhi School of Architecture and Planning (1956–58). Saini returned to The University of Melbourne in 1958 to a full-time teaching position. In February 1960, at the behest of the Dean of the School of Architecture and Building, Professor Brian Lewis, Saini ran a pilot four-week extension course on tropical architecture. Its success led Saini to formally establish in 1962 a year-long postgraduate course on tropical architecture at the university, the first of its kind in Australia and one that attracted both local and international students, especially Colombo Plan students from Southeast Asia and the Indian sub-continent. In 1963, Saini was awarded a Tropical Building Research

Fellowship by the Commonwealth Department of Works to undertake a study of local building materials, building technologies and costs in PNG. Eight months of field work in PNG was followed by field trips totalling seven months in central and northern Australia, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and The University of Melbourne and taken between 1965 and 1966.

This paper examines Saini's PhD thesis, undertaken within the context of the increasing development of tropical northern Australia in the 1960s. This was in the face of economies of extraction and Australia's mounting concerns as to soaring expenditure in its colonial territory, Papua New Guinea, as well as Cold War fears of invasion from the north and the formation of groups such as People The North Committee (PTNC) in 1962. Saini's PhD research was ground-breaking, with the topics little studied or analysed within architectural history – if at all. It highlighted stark differences between the two “islands” and importantly, for Saini, the need for a complete reappraisal of the under-rated significance of the Indigenous architectures of Papua New Guinea. It also included balanced discussion and

critical analysis of Aboriginal housing issues. Saini's conclusions in 1967 were deliberately cautious, advocating multiple strands of response, especially as to the problematic role of the architect in the tropical regions, where he stated that, “It seems Papua New Guinea does not represent an isolated example of this. Experience in other developing regions in the tropical belt around the world suggests a similar situation where the architects, when faced with such problems, have shown either complete apathy or sheer ignorance of the local facts of economic, social and cultural existence.”¹

Saini's PhD research had influence that extended beyond his own career at The University of Melbourne and, after 1972, at The University of Queensland. It also had influence on the formation of a locally based building research station in Port Moresby, on work with Louis Matheson and Ian Langlands in formulating the establishment of a school of architecture in Lae, in authoring a public housing policy for PNG, and as the basis for the expansion of his long-held personal, professional and academic interests in tropical architecture.

1.

Balwant Saini, “An Investigation into Building and Planning Problems of the Tropical Regions of Australia and The Territory of Papua New Guinea” (PhD thesis, The University of Melbourne, 1967), 357.