

The Huge Watery Waste

The Architecture of Australian Imperialism

Jasper Ludewig

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

Confence 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

Copyright of this volume belongs to SAHANZ;
authors retain the copyright of the content of their
individual papers. All efforts have been undertaken
to ensure authors have secured appropriate
permissions to reproduce the images illustrating
individual contributions. Interested parties may
contact the editors.

DOI: 10.55939/a5417pica6

Citation:

Ludewig, Jasper. "The Huge Watery Waste: The Architectures
of Australian Imperialism ". In *Proceedings of the Society of
Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*,
edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 55-56. Brisbane,
Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural
Historians Australia
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

The Huge Watery Waste

The Architectures of Australian Imperialism

Jasper Ludewig, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

DOI: 10.55939/a5417pica6

In his study of imperialist attitudes in Australia, Roger C. Thompson argued that Australian companies and politicians were instrumental in shaping the final limits of British imperialism in the Pacific, demonstrating the “primacy of peripheral forces for political expansion in the growth of the British Empire.”¹ Already in the 1820s, the *Sydney Gazette* imagined that the Pacific’s “unnumbered islands, teeming with population” would one day become “the West Indies of Australia.”²

By 1877, the Premier of Victoria, Graham Berry, was calling for “a kind of Monroe Doctrine” under which “all the islands in this part of the world should be held by the Anglo-Saxon race.”³ Following federation in 1901, the *Adelaide Advertiser* declared that Australians should again turn their attention “towards the numberless islands that dot the huge watery waste around us,” regarded as “preordained, at however remote a date, to be our heritage.”⁴

If the social and political history of Australia is shot through with such imperialist visions of possession in the Pacific, the notion that Australia was an imperial power in its own right – and not simply a settler colonial product of British empire – remains marginal at best in the architectural scholarship of

this region by comparison.⁵ One reason is that Australia’s empire was primarily an informal one, advanced gradually via a loose and unplanned network of organisations and individuals who worked to entrench Australian influence on islands of value to its strategic objectives and economic development. The vast copra reserves amassed by Levers Pacific Plantations throughout the British Solomon Islands; the sugar infrastructure constructed in Fiji by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company; Burns, Philp & Co.’s settlement schemes for cotton plantations in the New Hebrides; the web of mission stations developed there by the Presbyterian Church of Victoria; and the banking infrastructure erected in Fiji by the Bank of New South Wales – these were the collective physical evidence that accompanied calls for imperial protection and visions for white possession of the “huge watery waste” encircling the Australian continent.

This paper charts the historical geography of Australia’s informal Pacific empire from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. It focuses on four sectors of Australian imperial activity: resources, logistics, services and aid. The paper argues that an architectural history of these sectors

1.

Roger C. Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific: The Expansionist Era, 1820–1920* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 220–24.

2.

Ralph Mansfield, “Atkinson on Distilling,” *Sydney Gazette*, September 24, 1829.

3.

Quoted in Marilyn Lake, “Colonial Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, vol. 3, Indigenous and Colonial Australia, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 555.

4.

Quoted in Roger C. Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific*, 158.

5.

A notable recent exception is Amanda Achmadi, Paul Walker and Soon-Tzu Speechley, eds., *Architectural Encounters in Asia Pacific: Built Traces of Intercolonial Trade, Industry and Labour, 1800s–1950s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

clarifies the legal, technical, and spatial conditions of Australian imperialism across the diverse geopolitical contexts it comprised. Moreover, it demonstrates that Australian architects and engineers played a central role in tethering Australian expansionism in the Pacific to economic development at home, a role that remains undertheorised and largely overlooked in the historical literature of Australian architecture.