

The Archipelago of Connection

Building and Colonial Shipping and Trade Networks in Asia Pacific

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Building and Colonial Shipping and Trade Networks in Asia Pacific

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Histories of the built environment in the Pacific and Southeast Asia are fragmented by narratives of postcolonial nation-building.¹ Research on the early 20th century built environment of this region, however, suggests a porosity of architectural influences shared across the region.² Nation-state borders are challenged by the networked operations of two inter-colonial companies, founded in the 1880s: the Sydney-based Burns Philp and the Batavia-based Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij (KPM). They were commercial rivals but sometimes shared networks and facilities. Their rapid expansion across Australia and the Asia Pacific region produced a geographic web spanning from Sydney to Singapore. This connected inland and island plantations to seaports, oceanic voyages, regional and metropolitan markets, and inter-colonial exhibition spaces. Their shipping routes not only facilitated rapid industrialisation of agriculture in Asia Pacific and distribution of its products, but also the rise of tourism and travel across the region. Their activities across Southeast Asia and the Pacific produced multiple intercolonial encounters and exchanges, with notable border-crossing of labour, commodities, technology, and building practices and knowledge.

This paper examines aspects of these encounters and exchanges by considering three kinds of buildings that KPM and Burns Philp commissioned and built: administrative buildings, hotels, and labour accommodation.

The most celebrated buildings that Burns Philp and KPM built were their administrative premises in key port cities of Australia and the Dutch East Indies. Architect FJL (Frans) Ghijsels built the headquarters building for KPM at Weltevreden in 1916. He followed with KPM offices in Semarang and Makassar (1917; 1925). Architecturally, these were akin to the ambitious projects that Sydney architect John Brogan built for Burns Philp in Suva, Fiji, and Apia, Samoa (1929–31). Like earlier buildings designed for Burns Philp by architects Arthur and Geoge McCredie in Townsville (1895) and Sydney (1899–1901), these projects by Brogan and Ghijsels had both practical and symbolic purposes. They accommodated the companies' "paper empires" (their administrative structures) and represented their (proto-) modernity in the colonial urbanscapes in which they were located.

1.

Philip Goad and Julie Willis, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Mohamad T.M. Rasdi, *Architecture and Nation Building* (Singapore: Partridge, 2015).

2.

Amanda Achimadi and Paul Walker, "Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania, 1780–1914," in *Sir Banister Fletcher's Global History of Architecture*, vol. 2, ed. M. Fraser (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

As well as shipping commodities, both Burns Philp and KPM developed tourism operations. Burns Philp offered its first tourist cruise in 1884 – a seven-week trip from Thursday Island to Port Moresby – and regularly ran tourist trips thereafter. As tourism was not a priority of the colonial government of the Dutch East Indies, KPM was somewhat slower to address leisure travel. However, in 1908 the Batavia authorities started a tourist bureau as an association of interested organisations in which KPM was represented. That year KPM started a regular service between the east coast cities of Australia (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane) and the north coast of Java and ultimately Singapore. For this, it commissioned ships that were fitted out to suit the demanding standards of Australian tourists. As part of Burns Philp's tourist operations, Brogan was to substantially remodel the Papua and Moresby Hotels they owned in New Guinea in 1928; the same year, Ghijsels designed KPM's ground-breaking Hotel Bali in Denpasar.

Explicit differences in the material practices of Burns Philp and KPM are apparent in a third type of building: worker housing. In KPM's case, the most pressing

need was for accommodation of workers at its principal port, Batavia, where poor housing conditions were thought to risk productivity. KPM responded by building a new kampong for dockworkers and their families, housing 400 people. Its success led to a collaboration between shipping companies to build a larger facility, "Uniekampong," with up to 4000 people. In Burns Philp's case, the need to house workers was related to their network of depots, trading posts, and port facilities at remote sites mostly outside Australia. Individually, these buildings were modest in scale, often of prefabricated (or at least precut) timber elements. From 1928 until WWII, most – perhaps all – were designed by Brogan.

The administrative buildings, the hotels, and the worker accommodation built by KPM and Burns Philp facilitated the commercial movement of goods and people across colonial boundaries and the borders of modern nation-states. Fashioning relationships between island sites, their commercial empires built a material and representational archipelago of connection.