

Papua New Guinea Housing Commission 1968-1983

Optimism Within Islands of Practice in the Provision of Housing

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When on September 16, 1975, Papua New Guinea gained independence and became the newest island-nation-state in the Pacific region, processes of decolonisation were already underway. Amongst the issues facing the new nation-state was an acute and persistent housing shortage, a crisis that had been described in detail by Balwant Singh Saini in a 1973 report commissioned by Michael Somare, the Chief Minister of Papua and New Guinea, titled “Urban Housing in Papua New Guinea.” In response to the report, the mandate of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea Housing Commission (TPNG HC), formed in 1968 to provide housing for public servants and their families, was broadened. At Independence the rebadged National Housing Commission (NHC) was tasked with strategies for housing all Papua New Guinean migrant workers. But because attention in the lead-up to Independence was focused on urgent governance issues (the drafting of a new constitution, the floating of a new currency), the NHC, unhitched from the Commonwealth and with limited interdepartmental exchange or oversight, sustained a culture that supported architectural experimentation: an island of innovative practice in a sea of bureaucratic uncertainty.

It was the 1968 House of Assembly, Papua and New Guinea’s second properly representative assembly, that gave its citizens limited responsibility for “matters of immediate electoral concern” through an “embryonic” Ministerial system.¹ The arrangement provided opportunities for “locals” to participate in political processes and institutions, thereby enabling Australia to meet its responsibilities under the terms of a UN Trusteeship agreement while maintaining control over matters of national interest. This was an unwieldy arrangement that resulted in the strategically significant portfolio of Lands remaining under Australian Administration, while the more pressing social issue of Housing found its place in Public Works under the ministerial guidance of an elected Papua New Guinean representative, with a Papua New Guinea “local” as Departmental Head.² Following the passing of the Housing Commission Act 1967, the TPNG Housing Commission came into existence on July 1, 1968. Modelled on the Commonwealth Department of Housing and Construction, it boasted a Technical Division and a Building Division, and had access to a Building Research Station within the TPNG Department of Works. It employed the first architecture graduates

1.

Stuart Doran, *Australia and Papua New Guinea 1966–1969: Documents on Australian Foreign Policy* (Canberra: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2006), xxxi.

2.

Doran, *Australia and Papua New Guinea 1966–1969*, 462, 501. Letter, Warwick Smith to Hay, April 3, 1968; Letter, Hay to Warwick Smith, May 11, 1968.

of the Papua New Guinea Institute of Technology (Unitech), then under the direction of Neville Quarry, alongside planners and architects from England, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Australia. Following the departure of Commonwealth Works in 1975, Russell Hall accepted a position in the Papua New Guinea NHC, where he was joined some years later by Graham Davis. In 1978 Hall and Davis designed a remarkable office building – in an evocation of the traditional Haus Tamboran – in Boroko, Port Moresby, as the administration hub for the Central Province NHC.

Holding fast to their idealism and encouraged by an enlightened supervisor (Irish architect Des Binney), freed from the oppressive oversight of the Australian Administration and with building regulations loosened, NHC architects explored solutions for appropriate housing to address the lifestyles and budgets of Papua New Guinean workers. The Commonwealth's generic tropical house for expatriate public servants was no longer the model as NHC architects downscaled and increasingly embraced forms familiar to Papua New Guineans, playing with material and structural systems in inventive ways.

Ultimately, with the NHC isolated in its departmental silo, it was unable to address the structural issues fuelling poverty and homelessness. Matters of finance, together with customary land tenure and *wantok* kinship systems, worked against the best efforts of the NHC and its houses remained beyond the financial reach of most Papua New Guinean migrant workers. These shortcomings, together with Papua New Guinea's straitened economic circumstances, triggered a series of restructures and mergers that shifted the focus of the NHC further away from architectural solutions. But as the NHC became increasingly mired in an "institutional 'merry-go-round,'"³ other islands of innovative practice emerged, motivated by different architectural and procurement strategies for addressing the ongoing housing shortage.⁴

3.

Brian J. Aldrich, "Providing Urban Housing," *INA Public Seminar: Urban Housing in Papua New Guinea 20th October 1983* (Port Moresby: Institute of National Affairs, 1983), 58.

4.

No AI technology was used in the writing of this paper.