

Resorting to Cockatoo Island Resort

Lapping Shorelines and Overlapping Land Use in "The Least Known Island Paradise in the World"

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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

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DOI: 10.55939/a5391py58j

Citation:

Adams, Loren. "Resorting to Cockatoo Island Resort: Lapping Shorelines and Overlapping Land Use in 'the Least Known Island Paradise in the World'." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 5-6. 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

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Paradise in the World”

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Between late 1988 and early 1989, a series of gilded birdcages containing meticulously feathered fake cockatoos were hand-delivered by courier to VIPs – Very Important Perth onalities – across the wealthy suburbs of metropolitan and regional Western Australia. In the beak of each cockatoo was an invitation to a party. On April 1, 1989, there would be an opening celebration for Cockatoo Island Resort: a luxury holiday destination in the Buccaneer Archipelago, 137 kilometres due north of Derby on Dambimangari Country, where tidal variations exceed ten metres, and where bubblegum pink bungalows and an oceanside infinity pool now perched alongside the deep ochre scar of an abandoned iron ore mine. This was, according to promotional brochures, “the least known island paradise in the world” (Figure 1).

These ostentatious animalic invitations had been sent on behalf of British-born Australian businessman Alan Bond (1938–2015) – “Bondy” – and his then-wife Eileen – “Big Red.” Formerly operated by Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd as an iron ore mine, Cockatoo Island had become the focus of a half-decade state government campaign to rebrand an exhausted island mining settlement as a

tourist destination. By 1986, the Bonds’ family company, Dallhold Investments, had acquired a tourism lease for the island through a corporate subsidiary, Segara Pty Ltd, after Perth-based developer Halcyon had been unable to secure finance for a similar venture. Under Big Red’s creative direction, AUD\$6 million was outlaid on renovation works: an infinity pool was installed to overlook the crocodile-infested turquoise ocean, and a cluster of prefabricated workers cottages on the island’s northwest hill slopes were painted pink.

At the time, Bondy was a boisterous and controversial public figure. In the three decades between 1959 and 1990, he built a multi-pronged, multi-billion-dollar business empire that held interests in beer, boats, homes, hotels, mining, and media, before declaring bankruptcy and being jailed for corporate fraud in the 1990s. In the tangled chronology of Bond Corporation, Bond’s other corporations, and other Bond-affiliated corporate holdings – corporations-owning-corporations-owning-property, ad infinitum – Cockatoo Island Resort is a mere blip before the big collapse. It was operational for less than six months, shuttering in September of 1989 amidst

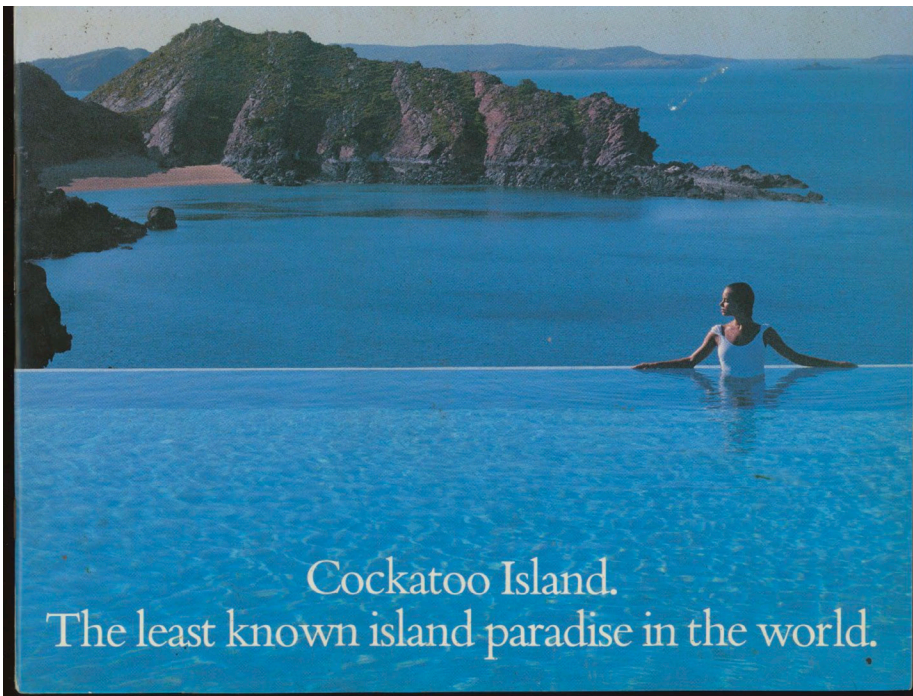


Figure 1:
FCB Shorter Perth (Producer) for Segara Pty Ltd.
(1988 est.). Cockatoo Island. The least
known island paradise in the world. Promotional
brochure, colour.
(Photography by Noel Holly, private collection)

escalating access challenges and a pilots' strike. This remote island paradise was, paradoxically, too remote.

Why, then, does it matter to architectural history that the red-headed soon-to-be-ex-wife of a "True Blue" soon-to-be-bankrupt businessman painted old mining bungalows bubblegum pink on an island off the remote northwest coast?

As an historical case, the Bonds' short-lived Cockatoo Island Resort offers a glimpse into a long and ongoing history of land tenure tussles between tourism operators, mining interests, the military, and Dambimangari people. In particular, it demonstrates how the uses and usefulness of (island) land is branded and rebranded through state regulation and corporate intervention – with architectural consequences. On Cockatoo Island, the resort is a fraught consequence of half a decade of state government campaigning to rebrand an exhausted island iron ore mine as a tourist destination, alongside a (dormant) defence training area on (then-unrecognised but still unceded) Aboriginal land.

In this research, I offer land use as a useful legal fiction that creates and

animates power, politics, products, and understandings of place. I do so as an outsider-researcher skirting the outside of this place from the inside depths of the archives, testing the outer limits of closeness and completeness, of partisanship and partiality. Using the state government-led rebranding of Cockatoo Island in the 1980s as a case, I will make three key points: first, that land use regulation is a (colonial) fiction; second, that legal fictions can (and do) have architectural consequences; and third, that language – whether performed in speech or written in documents – is the material of these legal fictions. Specifically, I will read "official" documents from the Western Australian Department of Tourism archives [SRO Files 141/83 and 193/83], alongside loosely held local histories and contemporary in-the-field observations, to make sense of the overlapping stories of land use in this "least known island paradise in the world."

Historically, the architecture of Cockatoo Island has relied on two contradictory modes of engagement: left untouched (as a resort) or dug right up (as a mine). Today, however, Cockatoo Island is off-limits to visitors and embroiled in active litigation. In the colonial imagination, it

is an always-becoming site of logistics and luxury, excavation and exclusivity – sometimes simultaneously.