

# Branding Territory with Traffic Islands

## Big Things as Road Features in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East

**Amy Clarke**

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/a5394pq158

Citation:

Clarke, Amy. "Branding Territory with Traffic Islands: Big  
Things as Road Features in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the  
Middle East." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural  
Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by  
Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 11-12. Brisbane, Australia:  
SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2024



**SAHANZ** Society of Architectural  
Historians Australia  
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

# Branding Territory with Traffic Islands

## Big Things as Road Features in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East

**Amy Clarke.** University of the Sunshine Coast, Petrie, Queensland, Australia

DOI: 10.55939/a5394pq158

Big Things – larger than life roadside colossi – are typically thought of as an Australian and North American phenomenon. The global notoriety of the Australian, American and Canadian collections has dominated the discourse on the history and function of oversized roadside monuments and has shaped the way we distinguish Big Things from other, similar types of landmarks and structures. But as this paper will highlight, there are substantial numbers of Big Things in many other parts of the world, including at least 1,000 in Southeast Asia, over 400 in the Middle East, more than 1,500 in Western Europe, and around 600 in Eastern Europe. There are, in fact, landmarks identifiable as Big Things in every global region except for Antarctica.

This research is the first to establish the truly international nature of Big Things, and to identify the characteristics of some of the regional clusters. Crucially, this research will focus on the specific phenomenon of situating Big Things on traffic islands and roundabouts: a practice that is uncommon in Australia and North America, but prominent in parts of Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The majority of Big Things in the state of Sabah (Malaysia) are on

roundabouts on the entrance roads to regional urban centres, for instance, as is also the case with smaller cities in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. While not always as “big” as the more renowned Big Things of Australia and North America, these landmarks are undeniably oversized, and share all the other features common to Big Things (three-dimensional representations of “real world” objects that are permanent, human-made fixtures located on the roadside). Intriguingly, while large parts of Europe locate Big Things away from traffic islands, the trend is reversed in France and Spain. Over 130 of France’s 200-plus Big Things can be found on traffic islands and roundabouts, as can forty-three of Spain’s roughly 120 such landmarks.

This paper will examine the trend of situating Big Things on traffic islands and roundabouts in the aforementioned regions, as well as their commonalities in subject matter and stylistic/design choices. Far from being a random or coincidental element of their existence, the traffic island location emphasises the three-dimensional nature of these structures and quite specifically “centres” the objects being represented, thus emphasising their

symbolic significance to their region or town. Rather than sitting alongside the road, these are structures which seemingly direct or punctuate the flow of traffic, forcing drivers and pedestrians to engage with them in ways even more active and intentional than the highway-adjacent Big Things more common in Australia and North America. Equally important, and as this paper will also highlight, is the communal nature of these Southeast Asian, African and Middle Eastern Big Things. Rather than being erected by and representing individual businesses, they are instead constructed by local authorities and feature subject matter that represents the brand or identity of the surrounding region. Finally, the possibility of colonial-era urban and transport planning influences will be considered, given the high proportion of French and Spanish Big Things that are situated on traffic islands, and the historic connections these two nations have with many of the focal countries in Africa and the Middle East. There are, as this paper will demonstrate, a range of factors that explain the abundance of Big Things being erected as intentional road design features in urban and semi-rural landscapes across several parts of the globe. Moreover, this phenomenon stands apart from the more

established historical and contemporary practice of Big Things in Australia, New Zealand, and North America.