

Nation, City, Place: Rethinking Nationalism

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IN THE PAST TWO DECADES academic interest in, and discussion of, identity and place mainly arose in the context of globalisation, its drive to homogenise culture and the role architecture may play in resisting the negative effects of excessive economic power. Nationalism, another potent political driver with a major influence on place, has not gained as much attention. *Nation, City, Place: Rethinking Nationalism*, a conference initiated by Anoma Pieris and Julie Willis from the University of Melbourne, provided an opportunity to realise that, while we are fascinated with the concept of shrinking time and space, 'old-fashioned' nationalism still plays a significant role in shaping our environments and, in return, our psyches. About 30 presenters from around the globe gathered at the Faculty of Architecture, Building & Planning on a July weekend to share their knowledge and case studies. The opening session focused on museums, one prevalent type of iconic architecture that encapsulates the way public education to nationhood continues to construct psyches, and perhaps is even further reinforced within globalisation.

Greig Crysler (University of California, Berkley) presented a thought-provoking account of the way in which a series of museums that focus on themes of national trauma and violence became a vehicle to offer 'emotional consumption of fear'. The idea of Nation is linked to violence and, in this instance, the 'selling' of empathy with the victims, bolsters citizenship and legitimises and perpetuates ongoing state violence. Crysler ironically suggested that 'national deads' may have more rights than the living.

A similar critic of the danger of promoting primitivistic emotional responses at the expense of collective self-awareness was Laura Hanks (University of Nottingham, United Kingdom). Hanks used the example of the Canadian Museum of Civilisation to illustrate how the narrative of a geological landscape was recruited to promote national cohesiveness. While Hanks recognised that the natural landscape had, in the past, acted as a foil to escape a problematic Canadian urban reality, she challenged the architect's positivistic relationship between landscape and identity and questioned the usefulness of this approach.

A challenge to the idea of whether national cohesion even exists was posed by Paul Walker (University of Melbourne). Triggered by his observation of contrasting architectural expressions of 'Australian Identity' between monuments such as the Opera House or Parliament, and an Aboriginal tent embassy set up at the Old Parliament house in Canberra, Walker criticised an attempt to claim a singular narrative in architecture in sites such as the national architectural narrative in the

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National Museum of Australia and the National War Memorial. The use of the metaphor of a mosaic to describe multiculturalism within a national identity is false, argued Walker, because mosaic suggests that there is an overall picture such as 'Australianess' while denying a reality of a 'conflict of interpretations'. Louis Noble, a Brisbane-based urban designer, echoed Walker's claim in her study of the fragmented and transparent representation of the indigenous people in the city of Brisbane.

Other case studies reinforced ideas that keynote speakers Lawrence Vale (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe (University of British Columbia) introduced.

Windsor-Liscombe, building on the post-colonial Canadian example, demonstrated the multi-faceted relationship between national and architectural discourse, noting the commonalities between architecture and nationhood: both were driven by real-estate and were opportunistic by nature.

Vale focused on the politics of space and power displayed, in particular, through modern capital cities. Similar to Windsor-Liscombe, who noted that nationalism is active in the transcendent arena as well as in the usual one, Vale argued that designers often, whether consciously or not, become agents who reinforce political agendas. Vale defined four of the temptations facing environmental designers in that context: sub-nationalism, invented history, display, and isolation, and called for design professionals to be aware and to avoid these temptations. In doing so, Vale touched on the ethical dimension of the architectural profession, which is perhaps a core motivation of the academics who engage in research that relates to nationalism.

Other examples of political agendas being delivered through architecture were ample. Deepika Mathur (University of Melbourne) presented an interesting analysis of the dialectical nature of Indian discourse on sustainable architecture and argued that it paralleled a nationalist discourse. Another fascinating example was provided by Maryam Gusheh (University of New South Wales) in her account of Louis Kahn's well-known parliament building in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Gusheh argued that Kahn's sophisticated articulation of spatial qualities, intrinsic to his fundamental approach to the project, corresponded with the nationalist aspirations of the Bengali educated elite.

As Windsor-Liscombe noted, one specific arena recruited to create 'national cohesion' is sport. To that end, government investment in spectacular sport facilities is common. Kai Smith (University of Melbourne) explored the symbolic function that sport plays in the national identity of Jamaica. Smith analysed the form, material and experiential qualities of two Jamaican public spaces, focusing, in particular, on sport and representations of race, class and gender.

Another stage where architecture should be inspected as a repository of nationalism is in the international arena. Edson Cabalfin (Cornell University) examined the articulation of post-colonial Filipino values in the architecture of the Philippine pavilions in international expositions between 1958–2000. For

Cabalfin, the pavilions were seen not only as expressions of national identity but also as the elements that construct citizenship.

It would be fair to say that the argument that the built environment is both an expression of national identity and a constructor of one was a consensual theme of the conference. So was the notion that the built landscape, like nationalism, does not represent a monolithic entity. Nationalism embodies many associations and tensions, such as violence, patriotism and tribalism. Through studying the built environment, there are opportunities to investigate topics such as the relationship between tourism and nationhood, post-colonialism and the nostalgia for empire.

The above examples are just a few from the array of quality papers that were presented. Unfortunately, as is the case with most conferences, parallel sessions meant that I had to make choices between attending presentations, and I was sorry to miss the closing session which, no doubt, would have been thought-provoking. I hope that this body of knowledge finds an avenue for collective publication.

To conclude, the small-scale conference was well organised and smoothly run, but, more importantly, the scholarship and academic rigour of the chosen papers indicated that, at a time when everyone is discussing corporate power in the context of globalisation, nationhood is still a pertinent topic. Perhaps the next conference should focus on that intersection between nationhood and globalisation and the ethical roles designers may play there.