

Narratives of Disease, Discomfort, Development, and Disaster: Reconsidering (sub)Tropical Architecture and Urbanism

A stream on the historiography of tropical and subtropical architecture to be presented at **Urban Tropicality: the 7th International Network of Tropical Architecture Conference**

Stream convened by Dr Deborah van der Plaats (The University of Queensland), Dr Vandana Baweja (University of Florida) and Professor Tom Avermaete (ETH Zurich).

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Cyclone damaged Methodist Church at Mackay (Queensland, Australia) 1918. This image depicts the flattened Methodist Church on Gregory Street, Mackay and the damaged Parsonage next door. (Image: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland)

<https://www.architecture.uq.edu.au/urban-tropicality>





Destruction in Darwin (Northern Territory Australia) following Cyclone Tracy in 1974. (Image: AAP/AP)



Destruction of Chinese Mission Hall in Townsville caused by cyclone Leonta, 1903: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, D10-10-89

Hurricanes Irma and Maria (2017) have demonstrated the urgent need for architecture in the tropics to be resilient to tropical cyclones, storms, sea surges and floods. Yet, in architectural historiography, tropical architecture has been viewed as a colonial construct acting in response to disease and discomfort – factors that needed to be conquered, overcome, and tackled. For example: in *Triumph in the Tropics: An Historical Sketch of Queensland* (1959), the Australian medical practitioner Raphael Cilento (1893–1985) linked the advancement of tropical Australia to the conquest of disease and attainment of comfort by the European settler, both realized through domestic design and urban planning. Despite a long history and frequent occurrence of flood, tropical storms, and cyclones – causal attributes long identified in colonial discourses as limiting the development potential of tropical regions—floods and hurricanes have begun to dominate tropical architectural discourses only recently. The correlation between anthropogenic climate change and the increasing intensity of hurricanes and sea level rise has led to the dominance of the trope of disaster in contemporary tropical architectural discourses. In addition, as it became apparent that buildings, as one of the key consumers of fossil fuels contribute significantly to climate change; the relationship between architecture and climate has gone through a paradigmatic shift—from one in which climate was a determinant of architectural metrics, to one in which architecture is seen as an active agent in the transformation of global climatic systems. As a consequence, tropical architecture, which began as discourse founded on the relationship between architecture and climate to ensure the well-being of the human body in a localised context, is now seen as a discourse where the production and operation of architecture have global planetary impact.

The idea of tropical and subtropical architecture and urbanism initially developed through a particular connection between discourses on disease, spatial practices and optimum architectural typologies, which were believed to circumvent the spread of tropical diseases and to maintain the comfort of the white settler. After the Second World War, the focus shifted from the European settlement of the colonial tropics to the self-development and governance of the world's tropical regions; a phenomenon necessitated and propelled by post-war decolonization and global regimes of development aid. Accompanying this change was a shift away from the physiological comfort of the colonial settler to a new focus on indigenous cultures, vernacular building traditions, use of local materials, and increasing appreciation for the psychological value of cultural conventions, including superstition and taboo.



South Townsville floods, Queensland, 1946 (State Library of Queensland, D3-6-83)

Disease

In colonial hygiene and medical discourses a causal relationship was established between the tropical climate and disease. This was based on a pathologisation of the tropics based on the assumption that diseases were caused by putrefaction and fermentation, which in turn were caused by tropical climatic conditions¹. From its inception, tropical architecture was globalised as a set of spatial practices in the tropical world through treatises on tropical medicine and hygiene manuals. Spatial prescriptions for buildings, street layouts, and type designs in the colonies were transformed with developments in medicine and hygiene. In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theories of Helminthology, Bacteriology, and Parasitology clarified how diseases were transmitted through vectors.

The aim of this stream is to examine how “triumph” in the tropics was imagined across multiple geographies, by various subjects, through diverse discourses, and at different times and to critically investigate the roles architecture and urban planning played in this process. How are particular attributes of the (sub) tropics – climatic, environmental, social, ideological, spatial, and developmental – constructed through the discipline of architectural history? What role has architecture played in the imagination of tropicality through acclimatization, hygiene, comfort, development, and resilience; and how was this represented? How has architecture’s role in the imagination of the tropics shifted over time as political regimes transformed from colonization-settlement to decolonization-development debates? Is there a core set of ideas or values that constitute the imagination of the built environment in the tropics? How do these compare to indigenous understandings? What is the relation between the imaginaries of tropical architectures and cities by colonizers and colonized, or by transnational development experts and the receivers of this aid?

We particularly welcome papers that offer historical case studies of tropical and subtropical architecture and urbanism examined through one of four lenses: disease, discomfort, development or disaster. Case studies or papers may consider (but are not restricted to) the following topics.

How did the rapidly changing discourses of tropical medicine – from miasma to germ theory – change architecture? When, why and how did disease feature so strongly in the colonial discourses on the tropics and subtropics. What anxieties, ideologies and/or climatic theories informed this debate? What technical, spatial and urban strategies were developed to mitigate the transmission of tropical diseases? How did the colonized communities respond to the architectural and urban discourses that developed as a consequence of tropical medicine and hygiene? Who were the key writers, disciplines or organisations that shaped this debate and what consequences did this have for local and/or colonial communities?

¹H. Naraindas, ‘Poisons, Putrescence and the Weather: A Genealogy of the Advent of Tropical Medicine’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, pp. 1–35.

Discomfort

Diseases and discomfort were competing factors in the design of tropical architecture from its inception. As the transmission of tropical diseases was better understood, the discourse on the body in tropical architecture shifted from environmental health concerns around contagious diseases to physiological comfort and productivity. This stream will examine how comfort became a dominant category in the discourses on tropical and subtropical architecture and urbanism. How was tropical or subtropical discomfort (or fatigue) defined, for whom, and what spatial, material and technological strategies were developed in buildings and cities to address this? What anxieties did tropical

discomfort address? How did race and gender enter discourses and practices? What role did ornamentation and decoration play in the mediation of tropical discomfort? Was the move from imperial colonialism to settler colonialism significant and what impact did this have on the climatic anxieties of settler communities. What was the role of the physiological scientist and/or method on understandings of climate in the early to mid-twentieth century and did this effect perceptions of tropical and subtropical architecture? What governmental bodies controlled these debates? Who were the key writers and/or adherents of such ideas?



Townsville floods, Queensland, Australia, February 2019

Development

Post-war de-colonisations brought discourses of 'development aid', defined as the economic, social and technical advancement of the world's tropical regions. Concerns for white discomfort were replaced with a new focus on shelter, low-cost housing, self-help housing, vernacular building technologies and materials, and the acknowledgement of local customs and taboos. What consequences did decolonization and rapid modernization have on architecture and urban design in these regions? How did transnational organizations such as the United Nations in collaboration with private and governmental organizations shape, support, and

facilitate a new developmentalist agenda? Who were the key actors, theorists, writers and architects in this arena at the intersection of tropical architecture and postwar development? How did the postwar developmental paradigm break away from earlier paradigms of tropical architecture? What role was played by programmes in tropical architecture such as the Department of Tropical Architecture at the Architecture Association (London, 1955 –71) or the postgraduate studies in Tropical architecture offered by Balwant Saini and Steven Szokolay at the University of Queensland in the 1970s and 1980s.

Disaster

Despite a long association of the “torrid zone” with natural disaster, and particularly flood and tropical cyclone, the historiography on the tropics and subtropics rarely documents architectural and urban responses to such phenomena. While their influence and impact is hinted at by structures such as the elevated house and the use of lightweight building materials, it is only in recent years that extreme weather events and rising sea levels have identified resilience as a priority for these regions. We seek papers that document architectural and planning responses, past and present, to tropical storms and flood. Papers may examine specific events (Typhoon Wanda, Hong Kong, 1962; Cyclone Tracey,

Darwin 1974; or Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico, 2017) and their impact on the built environment and cultural heritage of their regions; the historical role of regulation, building codes and zoning and their material impact or consequences; historical discussions or debates on tropical resilience; and attempts, both past and present, to develop new and more resilient models of housing and infrastructure in the world's tropics and subtropics. The recent promotion of tropical and subtropical architects by governmental programs (i.e. the HEAT program sponsored by the Queensland State Government) to face global challenges such as climate change offers an alternate focus.

Narratives of Disease, Discomfort, Development and Disaster: Reconsidering (sub)Tropical Architecture and Urbanism, is a stream of the 2019 INTA Conference and will run over 2 days.

The stream will consist of panels of three to four papers of twenty minutes each, with four to five panels per day. Authors will be invited to publish their papers as an edited book to be published in 2020. Authors who submit papers and are accepted are expected to attend and present at the conference.

Submission Information & Instructions

Submit abstracts of no more than 300 words in length by email as Word documents to: <https://easychair.org/conferences/?conf=inta2019>. Please name the email subject ABSTRACT-SURNAME and use this name for your submission file as well. Please nominate which stream you would like your paper to be considered under.

April 26, 2019: Abstracts due

May 17, 2019: Notification of Acceptance & feedback on abstract

July 26, 2019: Paper Submission 1

October 18, 2019: Paper submission 2

Dec 6, 2019: INTA conference and presentation of papers (Brisbane): feedback from conveners.

Additional details on paper submissions will be provided with notification of acceptance.

For further information please contact:
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<http://atch.architecture.uq.edu.au/narratives-disease-discomfort-development-and-disaster-reconsidering-subtropical-architecture-and>

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