

**KAREN BURNS**

**Between the Walls: Remembering colonial frontier space at *Purrumbete*, 1901–2**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the relations between art and architecture through the topos of site. It examines a 1901–2 rebuilding and mural cycle undertaken at *Purrumbete*, a nineteenth-century western district homestead near Camperdown. The new *Purrumbete* was a memory site created by the complementary partners of art and architecture. Building and painting constructed a home and its history, including the site's earlier frontier origins. Architecture played a central role in the reconstruction of colonial history at *Purrumbete*. The 1901–2 art and architectural program transformed the Victorian classical style homestead into a more conscious meditation on origins and identities. Oral histories of the family's 1840s experiences were transformed into public history in a mural cycle commissioned from the artist Walter Withers. These images surmounted two walls of the first public room, the large entry hall. The paintings depicted scenes memorialised in family oral history, including an apparent attack on the first Manifold homestead, and the building of a second homestead on a different, more defensible site.

Architect Guyon Purchas's extensive remodelling and interior design drew on the British Arts and Crafts rural vernacular idiom to evoke the associations of a long settled site and the aura of a manorial estate. In this way, architecture erased the struggle over site and produced a simulation. However, site is also radicalised — not merely legitimised — by art and architecture's intersection in a mural/building program. This alliance produces a renewed focus on site, on the conditions of viewing and inhabiting, fostering different interpretations of the subject matter depicted in the paintings and building works. This paper reads between the walls, looking to earlier textual accounts of the Manifold pastoral frontier as a fluid, unpredictable contact zone, seeing the art and architecture as components within a three-dimensional space. A viewer inhabits a site, moving from exterior to interior, moving between rooms and over thresholds. Multiple meanings can be acquired in this journey. Purchas's design also draws attention to questions of the frame and the view. On site, one views the murals through a frame and as a wall between spaces. Through the relations of site, each medium — of art and architecture — is able to reflect on the disciplinary boundaries and demands of the other, by situating both within a larger whole. The intersection facilitates a reappraisal.

**Between the Walls: Remembering colonial frontier space at *Purrumbete*, 1901–2**

This essay explores the joint between art and architecture by taking a metaphorical and material joint: the wall plane. My case study is a 1902 mural cycle and building works at *Purrumbete*, a western district homestead, near present day Camperdown.<sup>1</sup> This site forms part of a large study I am undertaking to examine the emergence of fortified European homes on the nineteenth-century frontier. *Purrumbete* is of interest for its later

---

1. Due to copyright delays, this paper does not include images of the homestead or murals. Images of the house can be found in Edquist, 2008, and Withers's murals are documented in Mackenzie, 1987.

public, historical commemoration of the site as a frontier contact zone. All of the projects in this study are focussed on the status of the wall: one of architecture's oldest building and cultural technologies.

Walls are always multiple in meaning: they are indeed joints between differing conditions. In a conference addressed to the intersection of art and architecture, this paper attends to the wall mural and its architectural setting. Walls function as enclosure and partition. Walls formalise and enact boundaries in differing ways. Walls perform boundaries, as these boundaries can change and become porous, as people and goods flow across borders. As thresholds, walls regulate the conjunction between one state or system and another. Architectural walls contain their own interior world of the wall cavity. Often what lies beneath and between the walls is not externalised, but hidden.

At *Purrumbete*, the art and architecture works enacted a public commemoration of a hitherto oral family history, one that literarily resided beneath and between the walls of the existing house. Boundary making and walls as boundaries formed the subject matter and medium of the mural cycle. Both art and architecture used the interior boundaries of walls and frames to explore the tensions of public and private history, the slippery borders between past and present, and the ambivalent viewpoint afforded the spectator called upon to witness the depiction of the homestead site's early colonial occupation.

### **Site biography**

*Purrumbete*'s 1901–2 artwork and architecture were events that punctuated a much longer construction of the site's biography. They were active interventions in a biographical construction. Arguably, all extant buildings, no matter their age, are part of our present: in use and inhabited. The making of a boundary between present and past depends on many small devices, including public modes of narrating history. An oral memory of a family might recount a building or site's history informally, but the interventions discussed below were public and formal: through organisation and design, they selectively reordered and represented the relationship between the past and present of a site, on site. The passage from private family history into public space presented the opportunity for a site's history to be opened to differing interpretations. This relationship and its physical setting in the wall plane are the subjects of this paper.

In 1901, William Manifold commissioned the extensive renovation and re-building of the family homestead *Purrumbete*.<sup>2</sup> As was common on rural properties, the site was criss-crossed with buildings, relocations, renovations and memories of two earlier homesteads. This process began with the building of the first 1839 homestead located on the northern shoreline of the great lake, although subsequent homesteads would be built on the southern shore. The early twentieth-century design would extensively rework the 1842 homestead, already twice rebuilt and extended during the nineteenth century.

---

2. Useful accounts of the property, family and mural cycle are provided by Rowe, 2001; Edquist, 2008, pp. 82–84; Manifold, 1984; and Mackenzie, 1987.

After rejecting an initial design from the architectural firm of Walter Butler, William Thompson Manifold settled on the design of another Melbourne-based architect Guyon Purchas, also commissioning a mural cycle from the Eltham-based artist Walter Withers who had been associated with the Heidelberg School, a nationalist group of *plein-air* painters, coming to prominence in the late-1880s. In the one surviving piece of correspondence between architect and artist, it is noted that the mural cycle emerged as a project in which the position of the artwork, its lighting and content, were the concern of both producers.<sup>3</sup> Little documentation survives beyond these brief hand-written lines, although a later publication documented the content brief for the murals provided by the clients. This paper is not concerned with the intentions of the three actors (architect, artist, patron), but with the complex effects engendered by the interrelationship of artwork and enclosing house.

The particular moment at which a site is memorialised raises the question of the relationship between micro-history and larger events. *Purrumbete* was rebuilt and its site origins depicted in a commission originating in 1901, the year of Australia's Federation — when nationhood and history making became explicitly entwined. The impetus for a private family (the Manifolds) to publicly stake its claim on both its personal and national histories is surely charged by this event of Federation, and amplified by the preceding years of a visual and literary culture devoted to depictions and narrations of Australia's pioneer past.<sup>4</sup> Understanding *Purrumbete* as one particular site, as a micro-history that allows us to study the complexities of memorialisation — including the material form of art and architecture, reveals the active construction of remembrance and commemoration.

### **Vernacular Architecture**

When William Manifold commissioned Purchas to alter the house in 1901, the depiction of 'pioneer' life was well established alongside the apotheosis of the rural idiom by urban culture makers in Melbourne and Sydney, having begun in the late-1880s. *Purrumbete* participated in this longer tradition, one that would extend to the interwar years. Whilst scholarly attention has been devoted to periodicals like *The Bulletin* and the later works of the Heidelberg School, architecture also played its part in consolidating bush icons and pioneer history. The architectural historian Conrad Hamann has argued that a homestead archetype emerged in the architecture of the 1890s (often termed 'Federation'), in part stimulated by trans-national interest in 'vernacular' architecture in Britain and North America.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the homestead circulated as an image far beyond rural properties to be cited in the small governmental buildings of country towns and the middle suburbs of cities.

Externally, the new *Purrumbete* homestead was closest to the domestic architectural vernacular of late-nineteenth-century North American shingle-style architecture, an idiom skilfully composed out of the local American reading of English Elizabethan vernacular

---

3. SLV MS7976, Box 1508/1 (d).

4. Astbury, 1985.

5. Hamann, 1988, pp. 32–35.

history and the tradition of simple, rural buildings.<sup>6</sup> From the *Purrumbete* drive, the homestead image was consolidated by the viewer's glimpse of key elements: a complex roof structure that swept down to incorporate the verandah as part of the building rather than an addition;<sup>7</sup> the front façade of the house; all gable ends; and steep, pitched roofs abutting onto the verandah. These components — all the signifiers of the rural homestead — predominated in lieu of the more pervasive decorative signs of Federation style (such as half-timbering, wooden fretwork, tiles or roof finials). When Walter Withers's wife wrote her account of the mural cycle and the building, she observed that *Purrumbete* was 'a house which bids fair to stand unrivalled, at this present time, as an Australian Homestead'.<sup>8</sup>

Internally, the house expanded the emotional and atmospheric promise of the hospitable and sheltering country home. One historian has recently observed that 'William Manifold gave the commission to Purchas to alter the house once more to reflect the more leisured life that the pastoralists of the Western District now enjoyed'.<sup>9</sup> In the tradition of country houses, hospitality and visitors were part of the public life of a private home. Purchas's design re-ordered the existing Victorian accommodation, adding new bedrooms and bathrooms to increase comfort and hospitality and notably added a new suite of four public reception rooms. Whilst the exterior spoke a North American inflected homestead vernacular, the interior reception suite was modelled in an arts and craft vernacular with Art Nouveau references in fret wood panelling and the style of the mural cycle. Both 'styles' were fashionable and both, despite the complexity of sources, produced a coherent image of the country home.

The enlarged great hall dominated the new addition. Its size and layout (including a minstrel gallery) referenced the older medieval style of the manorial estate, a source central to the Arts and Crafts idiom popular in Britain and influential beyond Britain's borders. *Purrumbete*'s American homestead vernacular also reinforced aspirations to a pioneering ethos. And the mural cycle on the walls of the great hall set out the arrival of the three Manifold brothers: on the shores of Western Victoria; on their journey to the site; and their encounters with the Djargurd Wurrung people, the owners of the land. When Walter Withers's widow later wrote of her husband's work at *Purrumbete*, the interior was lauded as being of the latest taste: an approbation of civility as well as cosmopolitan facility.<sup>10</sup>

Both the Purchas building and Withers's murals fashioned a genealogy and claim for the Manifold family's tenure on the land. The homestead had been extensively and fashionably rebuilt in 1881, but this design did not claim the land and history in the same fashion.<sup>11</sup> The 1901 murals and rebuilding occurred within a larger context of 'pioneer'

---

6. Purchas's design seems closer to the work of the expatriate Canadian John Horbury Hunt who had practised in New South Wales and invented local versions of the North American 'Shingle Style' vernacular. See Peter Reynolds, 2008.

7. Tibbits, 1989, p. 82.

8. Withers, 1987, p. 62.

9. Edquist, 2008, p. 82.

10. Withers, 1987, p. 62.

11. Rowe, 2001 extensively details the late-nineteenth-century extensions.

remembrance and the forging of national identity, an aspiration formally politicised in the 1901 federation of the Australian colonies into a nation.

## Public History

The mural cycle and exterior and interior works organised the transformation of family stories and land ownership into public history. The architectural idiom erased the earlier Italianate villa and remembered a simpler vernacular homestead, albeit a more newly minted type whose ascendancy had been recently endorsed. It was a “recovery” of a building, buried well beneath successive additions and alterations. Crossing the verandah and entering into the great reception hall, the largest public room in the new building, visitors and family members had to pass beneath Withers’s frieze to move into the adjoining east drawing room or west dining room, or they could relax in front of the ‘Great Hall’s’ fireplace with the mural cycle surrounding them. Withers’s panels depicted an earlier history, now embedded in the walls of the first room encountered by twentieth-century visitors. From within the wall plane, the site’s less visible history arose.

The murals counterbalanced the visitor’s experience of opulent hospitality and suggested that contemporary prosperity was hard won and heroic. Although the style of Withers’s murals was elegantly symbolist with references to Art Nouveau, its content displayed the trials of ‘pioneers’. It belonged to a larger genre of colonial romance focussed on dangerous obstacles encountered and subdued.<sup>12</sup> Unusually for a work of high culture, it portrayed settler friction with the first Australians. Images of frontier violence between Europeans and Aboriginals had appeared in popular late-nineteenth-century newspaper, book and magazine illustrations — but rarely, to my knowledge, in painting. Withers’s painting cycle depicted anecdotal Manifold family history of the contact zone and the violent potential of these cross-cultural encounters (although never a violent denouement).<sup>13</sup>

The first panel on the East wall illustrated the arrival by ship of the three Manifold brothers. Although Manifold sheep crowded the shoreline, Wauthorong peoples dominated the hinterland. The European settlers were in a liminal condition, situated in a small boat midway between ship and shore. The second panel depicted the journey inland with the Manifold brothers riding ahead to find fresh water, discovering Lake Purrumbete as a source of water for the stock. The third panel commemorated ‘tasting the water’, the moment when the Manifolds learnt that Lake Purrumbete was a fresh water lake and not salty. On the opposite West wall, the narrative continued: of the journey of the Bullock wagon across the stony rises, and then the next two panels dealt with two homestead building moments including the claim to land and the encounters of the contact zone, illustrated in the fifth panel titled *First Homestead Attacked by Blacks Whilst Sinking Well* and the final sixth panel, *Building of Second Homestead, 1842*. With the Europeans hard at work erecting a timber frame, unbeknownst to them they were watched by Djargurd Wurrung people who occupied the foreground of the mural. Although eight

---

12. Astbury, 1985, p. 131.

13. Edquist, 2010b, has observed that the panels fail to depict a ‘reprisal expedition’ which was the usual frontier response to a violent encounter.

panels were originally planned, only six were completed. The planned eighth panel depicted another cross-cultural friction, illustrating sheep being “stolen” off the Stony Rises by “Blacks”.<sup>14</sup> But the finished cycle ended with the second homestead building being depicted as a work in progress. The room in which the murals were placed was the end point to this narrative of homestead building.

In claiming that the mural was part of a larger colonial romance genre, I refer to the archetypal structuring of colonial hardship as a dramatised story. Of the many other difficulties facing squatters, we could also list: insecure land tenure (illegal squatting in advance of government claims); stock disease; labour shortage; drought; credit difficulties; unstable or fluctuating international markets; and the banking/credit collapse. These murals focus on the brave uncertainty of the enterprise (questioning whether the journey will be worthwhile), hard physical work (well- and house-building), and, most importantly, the “threat” posed by the land’s owners.

Withers’s cycle presented a site history, in part not only of “discovery” but of contestation over land. In a sequence from the first to the sixth panel, we read in part a narrative of who would occupy the land. The first panel depicted the landing of the *Manifolds* from Tasmania, watched by Wauthorong peoples from the shore, named anew as Point Henry (on the Bellarine Peninsula), while the fifth and sixth panels depicted the two bands of Djargurd Wurrung people who occupied the North and South shores of Lake Purrumbete.<sup>15</sup> In the first panel, the Wauthorong were in possession of the land, sitting mostly on the ground, and while it is the Djargurd Wurrung occupied the foreground of the last panel, it was the *Manifold* brothers who ultimately claimed the shoreline. The fifth and sixth panels dealt explicitly with the homestead building moment. Clearly these buildings were a point of reference for the newly built *Purchas/Withers* work and provided a historical origin and narrative of continuity of the enlarged estate home rebuilt or remodelled by each generation.

The squatter’s first form of dwelling in the first week or weeks of occupation was usually a tent or canvas tarpaulin slung over spars. It was temporary, fragile, lightweight and permeable to the weather. The canvas shifted and flapped — staking a very temporary claim on the ground surface. The mural cycle registered the symbolic importance and material effects of buildings. Bark slabs would expand and contract with heat and cold, and the bark tore when nailed or pegged — refusing to lie flat in stable sheets. A system of sledge poles tied over the bark roofing sheets stopped the bark from blowing away or curling up or splitting. These less durable and permeable buildings were also metonyms of an insecure claim to possession.

Although the fifth panel was inscribed ‘First Homestead. Attacked by Blacks Whilst Sinking Well’, the actual encounter between men and weapons was not depicted — instead, it was the preceding moment. The bark slab hut and the well were signs of European intervention in the landscape. A pick and shovel were splayed on the ground as

---

14. Withers, 1987, p. 58.

15. Clark, 1998, pp. 86–89 identifies two Djargurd Wurrung clans: the Barumbidji gundidj at Lake Purrumbete and the Mullungkil gundidj south of Lake Purrumbete including Mt Porndon.

the settlers dug into the ground and dug out the landscape so that the earth beneath and not merely the surface would be claimed. The sheep too would alter the ecology. From the perspective of European settlers, these material constructions were signs of pastoral development and the necessary infrastructure for colonisation. Although a simple shelter, the slab hut was a symbol of home-making and ground-claiming. In Withers's depiction, the door and window shutter were ajar. The interior was permeable and thus vulnerable and undefended.

The viewer's identification with a "vulnerable" house and of Europeans "under threat" is constructed by the symbolism of the building's permeable walls (its open windows and doors) and by the positioning of the Manifold brothers close to the edge of the picture and therefore proximate to the viewer. Two Manifold brothers work away in the foreground at some distance from the interior, while another Manifold brother emerges with gun in hand.

What actually occurred is difficult to ascertain because of gaps in the historical record, the silences and evasions that are particular to frontier history, and the different accounts given in the European Manifold family oral record. The three brothers had arrived at the site in early November 1838, but by August 1839, relationships with Aboriginal people were clearly difficult. On 22 August 1839, John Manifold attended a public meeting at a neighbouring squatter's house at Lake Colac and signed a public petition to record the Europeans' fear and to request government assistance. On 12 September 1840, Peter Manifold and a neighbour Arthur Lloyd signed a deposition at the Geelong Police Office recounting a raid on their sheep flocks and their efforts to track and recover the lost animals. By their account, Manifold and Lloyd discovered that a number of sheep had been killed (the Manifolds claimed they lost eighty-four sheep but recovered fifty-four) and found a large mob of about forty people (the Jancourt clan of Djargurd Wurrung people). The settlers claimed that spears were raised and then they fired their guns. They did not recount deaths or injuries to the indigenous people, but some, in no doubt, were injured. Lloyd had previously been accused of shooting (and killing) an Aboriginal man at Lake Colac when he was stationed there in 1837–39.

By one Manifold account, the Djargurd Wurrung came to spear sheep, and in the mural, the sheep spill down the hill, pearly white, perhaps still carrying resonance as Christian symbols. If there was a violent encounter or a later reprisal raid in which European settlers rode out to intimidate, drive out, punish, capture or kill local Aboriginal people in response to this incident, it did not appear in the murals and nor was it coherently represented in the Manifold family anecdotes later transcribed. What actually happened is very difficult to reconstruct because of both differing accounts in the Manifold oral history tradition and possible elisions in the recounting of events.<sup>16</sup> To what extent Lloyd

---

16. The scene list given to Withers as the basis for the paintings records an eighth scene, 'Blacks stealing sheep edge of Stony Rises', but the Manifold history does not record this as the second crucial and potentially violent encounter with Aboriginal people. Instead, Henry Matson (William Manifold's nephew), describes John Manifold tracing lost sheep to the edge of the Stony Rises, being offered help by a local man Gowin Gowin but on being reluctant to venture in further into Stony Rises country, Gowin Gowin was then on the verge of spearing Manifold and was in turn shot. Sheep raiding is not recorded in these transcribed

and Manifold's journey was a reprisal raid, as well as a stock recovery raid, is unknowable. Frontier historians note, however, that stock killing was a motivation for retaliatory, reprisal raids by settlers.<sup>17</sup>

Though a direct and violent encounter is not specifically depicted in the murals, several separate incidents may have been conflated. For instance, family tradition reported an early violent encounter in 1838:

The blacks had crept up to the hut and were about to attack the man in the well when Peter came out of the hut to attend to the windlass & on seeing the blacks he went and got the gun and fired it over their heads, the blacks not being used to firearms fled at the report. No doubt Mr Thomas Manifold would have been speared if his brother had not come to the rescue.<sup>18</sup>

Like all frontier accounts, this anecdote contains puzzles and is open to interpretation. Was it really a violent attack on a person, or was it an occasion for exchange or curiosity or seizing property and food? In another version of this incident offered to Withers, it was not Thomas Manifold but John Manifold who was "attacked" whilst shepherding sheep through thick timber not far from the house.<sup>19</sup> In the family retellings, danger is emphasised. The second key event described an episode in which John Manifold traced some lost cattle to the edge of the Stony Rise, met a local man Gowin Gowin who offered to help him track the cattle, and then tried to lure him into an "ambush". As the later WG Manifold noted: 'There had been only two other incidents worth recording, though each could have led to the death of one of the brothers.'<sup>20</sup> The recounting of the homestead incident, like many stories of the frontier, raises questions about the assumptions and silences embedded in the recounted tale. George Augustus Robinson, Protector of Aborigines recorded in his diary entry of 28 March 1841 that the Manifolds had excluded Aboriginal people from their run because potatoes had been stolen. But did something happen in late-1841 or early-1842 that has not been recorded? The Manifolds decided to relocate their homestead to a naturally fortified peninsula on the southern shore of the lake. The final panel records the new homestead being built in 1842 and the sequence suggests that an "attack" prompted this retreat. But family history only records a Homestead "raid" episode some years earlier. In 1842, Europeans recorded their highest death rate from frontier incidents. Perhaps the relocation of the homestead was a response to heightened uncertainty about the outcome of the frontier war?

---

histories, which focus on the homestead "attack" and the Stony Rises "ambush", and mention an early incident of an "attack" on men working in the sheepyards. See: Manifold, 1984, p. 66.

17. Ryan, 2010, p. 260.

18. Manifold, 1984, p. 66.

19. Mackenzie, 1987, p. 58 reproduces the list given by William Manifold's nephew and manager Henry Matson to Withers in which scene no. 5 is described as 'Manifolds attacked by the Blacks at first homestead small Hut. John Manifold shepherd Thomas & Peter Manifold sinking a Well at the time close to the Hut where the Blacks attacked John Manifold with the sheep'.

20. Manifold, 1984, p. 66.



Withers's commission can be interpreted as yet another clue to constructions of the Manifold frontier history. When the original scene list given to Withers is compared to the finished mural cycle, elisions and consolidations in the story-telling emerge.<sup>21</sup> Henry Matson, William Manifold's manager and nephew who oversaw the production in William's absence, compiled a list of eight scenes as the basis for the mural cycle: 1) Landing the first sheep at Point Henty from the brig Henry; 2) Travelling sheep from Point Henry [*sic*] to the Moorabool run; 3) Discovery of Lake Purrumbete; 4) Tasting the waters of Purrumbete; 5) Taking the first stroll through the Stony Rises with bullock drays and riding horses January 1839; 6) Manifolds attacked by the Blacks at the first homestead; 7) The brothers building a new homestead 1842; and 8) Blacks stealing sheep along the edge of the Western Rises.<sup>22</sup>

One historian, Harriet Edquist, has argued that this list emphasises the adversarial nature of Aboriginal people. She contends that Withers reduced this narrative emphasis by omitting the eighth sheep-stealing scene and depicting the Aboriginal warriors in the 'homestead attack' scene as small, distant figures. It would be interesting to know how this change was negotiated or argued for. Reducing the panels from eight to six could have been presented as a practical issue about the sizing of images in relation to the scale of the wall plane. Withers could also have argued that the revised program was more coherent since it closed with the foundations of the second homestead, thus setting the precedent for homestead building cycles including those of 1901–2. But perhaps tensions over different interpretations remained.

The use of inscriptions on each panel raises the question: how could different aspirations of client and commissioned artist be incorporated? The mural cycle depicts ancestors, the origin story of the estate and the founding moment of the house told in an anecdotal narrative form. Descriptive captions appeared as tableaux affixed close to the bottom of the image. The caption text was a prominent, legible feature aided by the individual electric light shining on each panel. As noted at the beginning of the paper, both artist and architect were concerned that the murals could be read and presumably thus interpreted rather than remaining as background decoration. The caption text was a site for the passage of family oral history into public history telling. The text explained the incidents depicted in the images and also framed its meaning by offering an interpretation. The texts were integrated both the clients' voice in the images and third-person history narration. The inclusion of the inscriptions may have been one mode devised by Withers to negotiate the differences between the client brief and his own reading. Thus, whilst the Aboriginal warriors were depicted as two distant figures crowning a hill with spear raised, the title of the mural directs us to the client's reading of the event, 'First Homestead Attacked by Blacks Whilst Sinking Well'. But in becoming public history, private narratives also passed into the public realm where they could be more readily available to difference. The question remains: to what degree did the architectural setting

---

21. Edquist, 2010a, p. 75.

22. It should be noted that the sequence is differently numbered in Matson's list. Matson describes scene one as '1<sup>st</sup>' and scene two as '2<sup>nd</sup>', then reverts to a different system describing scene three as 'No 2', and scene 4 as 'No 3', etcetera.

support, contest, ignore or differ from the competing readings embedded in the mural cycle?

## **Frames**

Mural paintings establish a relationship between their interior spaces — the spaces depicted — and the exterior space from which they are viewed. Thomas Puttfarcken borrowed the term ‘bounded image’ from Meyer Schapiro to describe the interior and exterior conjunction presented in large-scale wall murals.<sup>23</sup> He argued that the term more aptly presented the viewer’s sense of a double presence, being aware of an ‘imaginary relationship with the visual world’ and an awareness of the ‘real surroundings’. Whilst the setting of the Withers’s mural cycle was a reception room with a number of uses (drinks, introductions, warmth, or an extended entertainment space linked to adjoining rooms), the mural cycle was incorporated through various architectural devices into the room itself. It was set above the dado into the wainscot timber panelling and each mural panel was incorporated so as not to interfere with the sprung arches of the roof vault. Closer inspection of the architectural composition offers some ways of considering the double viewing position of bounded image and surroundings.

The mural cycle abutted the ceiling arch and the decorative screen of the first floor minstrel gallery, and the gallery was incorporated as a mezzanine feature, both part of and overlooking the room. In a surviving 1931 photograph of the reception room, we see how the architectural interior created residual spaces within the overall volume. The room was articulated by a number of planes: solid walls signified by opaque timber wainscotting, thin arches signifying a structural division, a light timber porous frame, and the solid fireplace, which operated as one boundary to the room and a three-dimensional element within the room. In comparison to mid-nineteenth-century interiors, this early twentieth-century space offered a much more complex interpretation of the wall’s function. It trafficked between opaque boundaries and a sub-division of the room by more porous thin timber framing devices. The room’s interior and its occupation became an architectural focus. Although furniture placement traditionally directed the different zones of occupation or use, here we find architectural devices more minutely describing a room’s sub-divisions. In using frames to sub-divide the room, the architectural devices suggested that a frame could also function like a traditional wall: bounding and demarcating space. Here, the frame signified difference, a new boundary.

The framing of the minstrel gallery drew attention to the mezzanine-viewing platform. From here, Withers’s panels could be viewed at a higher level — on the stairs or on the mezzanine — viewing platform. At either viewing point, the spectator’s view was framed by an arch, which constructed the edges of their field of vision. The screen’s symbolic referents drew on a generalised orientalism. An interest in Moorish architecture had circulated in British architectural circles since the early-1840s.<sup>24</sup> Moorish references were generally only cited in British entertainment, leisure buildings and interior spaces such as

---

23. The term ‘bounded image’ is drawn from Thomas Puttfarcken who in turn borrows it from Meyer Schapiro. See: Puttfarcken, 2000, p. 20.

24. Sweetman, 1988.

smoke rooms. They designated fantasy spaces and stood for a past architecture and world. The presence of the screen, in juxtaposition against the murals, raised questions about the status of the murals: the frame as a view into the past, the presence of the exotic, and the relationship between an exotic past and cosmopolitan present. Whilst at a simple level the alignment of exoticised architectural references and murals suggests the fantastic nature of the past, the physical and psychological boundaries remained more insecure.

Purchas's architectural schema used an arcade and perforated screen as remnant elements of a wall plane, to suggest the implied but invisible wall that bounds space. Withers's murals deployed a particular spatial, compositional tactic to offer the viewer a position within the image and to overflow the frame that might separate 'bounded image' and exterior space. The foreground of each image tilted downward, running towards the external world. The edge of the frame was combined with a rotating, strong diagonal entry into each picture plane, leaving a path inwards for the viewer.

Only the very last image in the sequence disturbed this convention. Here, the viewer was blocked from easy entry into the picture space. The Manifold brothers were located at a considerable distance in the background, and the foreground was filled by a number of standing and seated Djargurd Wurrung people. Whilst the overall narrative seemed to laud the capacities of European building technologies (and perhaps the domestic civility of home), it also ambiguously positioned the Manifolds in potential danger — or, as Edquist argues, reduced the Aboriginal presence to a passive more general sign of the exotic (in the use of Pacific clothing on the figures) and non-threatening otherness. A contrary reading is also possible. After Federation, legislation restricted the conditions of entry for non-white labour in Australia and the thousands of Pacific Islanders who worked in Australia were expelled. The last image may mark the passage from insider event to history, as the Manifolds' homestead building is conflated with nation-building and they are slightly encircled by Aboriginal or Pacific Islander others. The European invasion and the Federation of a white Australia become intertwined events.

A conventional architectural-historical interpretation of the new spatial configurations of the interior emerging at the turn of the twentieth century might be that new architectural compositional devices signalled an increasing convergence between the interior and interiority. Architecture's new interest in space, it has been argued, ran parallel to the discipline's interest in the interior as a privileged place and psychic space: a trope for subjectivity and as an active mechanism for inscribing subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud's work raised the spectre of the degree to which present subjectivity was founded in a subject's past. I am not in any way suggesting that Purchas was aware of this work, but this interior dealt with the problem of how the past could physically be viewed and the frames or boundaries that might separate or conjoin past and present.

The *Purrumbete* interior could be easily placed with other contemporary projects engaged in the production of a nationalist subject, grounded in the collective memory of the colonial past. Withers's murals confirm this project but also potentially provide a counter-reading. Here, the subjects of history and contemporary viewers were drawn into

---

25. See: Forty, 2000, pp. 256–266; Vidler, 2000; and Silverman, 1989.

a space of inter-subjectivity, of mutual relations between European settlers and Aboriginal owners. Withers's murals narrated, without direct depiction, the violence of the colonial frontier. The images suggested new subjectivities wrought from contact and exchange, hinting at the terror of the frontier, its anxieties and fears. Whilst the two subject groups were kept spatially separate, and Aboriginal subjectivity was represented in historical space, not the present day, a mutual interrelation or co-presence nevertheless appeared in three of the panels.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the creation of a contemporary subjectivity at the turn of the twentieth century was founded on both the pioneers and the Djargurd Wurrung and Wauthorong peoples.

This paper has investigated an alliance of art and architecture. The two media sometimes shared devices in the construction of a site, using narrative sequence and historical references to understand the past as a foundation for present day inhabitation of this site. Both works can be contextualised within a larger project forming a nationalist Australian subjectivity, one founded in the "achievements" of the colonial past. However, the local narrative depicted in the mural cycle attended to the contestation over ground and acknowledged the presence of the original owners. But in depicting places outside the homestead walls, such as the site of the first homestead, the murals also remade the spaces that inhabitants could view from the exterior.

The location of the Withers paintings within the first reception space transformed the interpretation of the paintings. They produced an origin story for the place in which the visitors and family find themselves. They entered into a spatial sequence, begun at the borders of the estate, continued in the journey up the drive, the vista of the vernacular homestead and in the interior encountering an explanatory story of the founding of the site, a biography of discovery and building in dangerous, heroic circumstances. The repeated cycle of homestead-building was given a genealogy and one in which the viewer was called forth and deliberately positioned. Invisible history, the remnants that lie beneath and between the walls, were here rendered visible. The murals catalysed a narrative of changed fortune, of increased prosperity, contrasting the comfort of present-day surrounds with the bark hut and pise homesteads of the first years. But did the immersive capacity of the murals, their size and location, ask the viewer to participate in and assent to this version of events (to bear witness), or to more distantly view the paintings, perhaps noticing the presence of Aboriginal people in half of the panels?

The physical conjunction of mural and interior posed the question of relationships: between the historical space imaged in the paintings and the witness or viewer in the interior. To my knowledge, the *Purrumbete* mural cycle was a rare high culture representation of traces of frontier violence, a subject normally confined to popular book, newspaper and magazine illustration. At *Purrumbete*, paintings and architecture formed an integrated site-work, presenting a public history of a particular location's events, thus in part escaping archetypal conventions and, from the perspective of a hundred years later, calling forth questions about the viewer's position.

---

26. Pratt, 1992, p. 7.

Over the last thirty years, Australian historians have actively produced histories of frontier violence and contact. This has more recently involved a reassessment of the ways in which this history was forgotten in the twentieth century, and a notable instance of this engagement was the 1901–2 rebuilding of *Purrumbete*. The *Purrumbete* reception room and mural cycle offered a physically and formally coherent resolution of space and paintings. The conceptual and political tensions of mural subject matter and the architectural understanding of the boundary between past and present, either at the scale of public history, or individual viewing subject were not resolved but ambiguously presented. These frictions and elisions were subdued by the skilled architectural composition, one that integrated mural within the volume of the room.

On closer inspection the architectural devices of frames and boundaries amplified the tension of the mural cycle: between framing narrative caption and interior content. It is impossible to argue that this conflict was the studied intent of a deliberate agency, but perhaps instead the outcome of the problem of multiple viewing positions, a multiplicity aided by the interior's location of differing viewing positions and ways of viewing, and by the ambiguity of the wall plane as finite or permeable boundary. In this example, art presented a more explicit rendering of site history, but both mural cycle and architectural frame worked to foreground the ambiguous boundaries underpinning the certain borders marking the line between public and private, subjective and objective, public history, fantasy and personal remembrance. The rebuilding works at *Purrumbete* do not present a stable reading but suggest that the collusion of art and architecture offered a complex, ambiguous and uncertain ground.

*Dr Karen Burns researches nineteenth-century architecture in an Australian and trans-national context. Her work has been published in international journals and essay collections (Assemblage, AD, Intimus, Postcolonial Spaces, Desiring Practices) and her 2009 SAHANZ conference paper was awarded “Best Paper Prize” at “Cultural Crossroads”, the 26<sup>th</sup> international conference of SAHANZ in Auckland, July 2009. She is a Senior Lecturer in the Architecture program at the University of Melbourne.*

## Bibliography

**Astbury, 1985:** Leigh Astbury, *City Bushmen: The Heidelberg School and the Rural Mythology*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985.

**Clark, 1998:** Ian D Clark, *'That's my country belonging to me': Aboriginal land tenure and dispossession in nineteenth century Western Victoria*, Melbourne: Heritage Matters, 1998.

**Edquist, 2008:** Harriet Edquist, *Pioneers of Modernism*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008.

**Edquist, 2010a:** Harriet Edquist, 'Stony Rises: The Formation of a Cultural Landscape', in Lisa Byrne, Harriet Edquist and Laurene Vaughan (eds), *Designing Place: Archaeology of the Western District*, Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2010.

**Edquist, 2010b:** Harriet Edquist, conversation with the author, March 2010.

**Forty, 2000:** Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

**GAG, 1975:** Geelong Art Gallery, *Walter Withers: A Survey*, exh. cat., Geelong: Geelong Art Gallery, 1975.

**Hamann, 1988:** Conrad Hamann, 'Paths of Beauty: The Afterlife of Australian Colonial Architecture, Part 1', in *Transition*, No. 26 (Spring 1988), pp. 27–44.

**Mackenzie, 1987:** Andrew Mackenzie, *Walter Withers: The Forgotten Manuscripts*, Lilydale, Victoria: Mannagum Press, 1987.

**Manifold, 1984:** WG Manifold, *The Wished-For-Land*, Newtown, Victoria: Neptune Press, 1984.

**Pratt, 1992:** Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: travel writing and transculturation*, London; New York: Routledge, 1992.

**Puttfarcken, 2000:** Thomas Puttfarcken, *The discovery of pictorial composition: theories of visual order in painting 1400–1800*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

**Reynolds, 2008:** Peter Reynolds, Lesley Muir and Joy Hughes (eds), *John Horbury Hunt: radical architect, 1838–1904*, Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2008.

**Rowe, 2001:** Dr David Rowe and Lorraine Huddle in association with Wendy Jacobs and Pamela Jellie, *Purrumbete Homestead. Conservation Management Plan*, November 2001, Heritage Victoria, Box No. 8697.

**Ryan, 2010:** Lyndall Ryan, ‘Settler Massacres on the Port Phillip Frontier, 1836–1851’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 34 (2010), pp. 257–273.

**Silverman, 1989:** Debora Silverman, *Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology and style*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

**SLV:** State Library of Victoria, Walter Withers 1854–1914 manuscripts. MS7976, Box 1508/1 (d).

**Sweetman, 1988:** John Sweetman, *The oriental obsession: Islamic inspiration in British and American art and architecture 1500–1920*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

**Tibbits, 1989:** George Tibbits, ‘An Emanation of lunacy: Victoria’, in Trevor Howells and Michael Nicholson (eds), *Towards the Dawn: Federation Architecture in Australia 1890–1915*, Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, 1989.

**Vidler, 2000:** Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: art, architecture and anxiety in modern culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2000.

**Withers, 1987:** Fanny Withers, ‘The Historic Manifold Estate Panels’, in Andrew MacKenzie (ed.), *Walter Withers: The Forgotten Manuscripts*, Lilydale, Victoria: Mannagum Press, 1987.