Surface and Deep Histories

Surface and Deep Histories:
Critiques and Practices in Art, Architecture and Design

Edited by

Anuradha Chatterjee

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INTRODUCTION

SURFACE POTENTIALITIES

ANURADHA CHATTERJEE

Theoretical Milieu

One of the key debates recently revived within the history and theory of architecture and design concerns *surface*—the formal definition of which is broadened to include skin, surface, threshold, liminal space, edge, boundary, photographic image, and interior space. The crisis of representation in Western architecture that marked nineteenth-century theory and stylistic revivals, and the nonrepresentational imperatives of twentieth-century architectural modernism, are now succeeded by the attention to issues of media and image, branding and fashion, and sustainability, thus contributing to the revivification of the debates on surface. Interest in the history, theory, and practice of surface has therefore informed many recent scholarly articles in the *Journal of Architecture*, *Grey Room*, *Perspecta*, and 'designerly' articles on projects and buildings in *Architectural Design*.

A key recent publication that challenges the denial of representation in twentieth-century architecture is David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi's *Surface Architecture* (2000). They argue that surface became an autonomous entity with the emergence of the free façade. The structural and nonstructural aspects of the cladding were distinguished, leading to unprecedented transformations in the tectonic and material qualities of the surface. Before the widespread use of frame construction, requirements for light, ventilation, and views outside the building were met with apertures, built as openings in the wall. The frame changed that. Windows ceased to be openings, and adopted the status of the external wall. As the skin of the building became independent of the structure, the nature and definition of the building's appearance became the subject of repeated consideration. While Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi define surface within rather narrow tectonic and material limits, Mark Taylor's edited issue of *Architectural*

Design titled ‘Surface Consciousness’ (2003) shifts the focus. Taylor notes that the aim is to discuss “surface in an effort to recognize a spatial condition that lies outside the traditional architectural models that polarize surface and substrate.”[1] Hence, the essays concentrate on “surface as the subject of study rather than the oppositional format of whether surface is depth or depth is surface.”[2] While Taylor proposes an ontology of autonomy for architectural surface, Amanda Reeser Lawrence and Ashley Schafer, editors of ‘Expanding Surface’ (2007), a special issue of *Praxis: Journal of Writing and Building,* note that:

> “Expanding Surface” insinuates itself into this discourse by focusing on the specific means by which surfaces—after years of being burdened with the task of representation (even if that which was ‘represented’ was their own dematerialization)—have become sites of performance and effect. Most obviously, Expanding Surface refers to the transformation of an inherently two-dimensional construct into a three-dimensional one. More pointedly, it refers to the physical and conceptual appropriation of the surface as a territory for architectural invention.[3]

The terrain of surface as architecture and architecture as surface forms the foundation of *Surface and Deep Histories: Critiques, and Practices in Art, Architecture, and Design*. It is also prompted by my doctoral dissertation on John Ruskin’s theory of the adorned “wall veil,” which presented a nineteenth-century theory of surface. Ruskin ‘proposed’ the theory of the adorned “wall veil,” which argued that good architecture evoked the image of a well-dressed body.[4] For Ruskin, the well-dressed body was a woman clothed in vivid colors and seamless folded forms, undisturbed by the contours of the bodily form. Ruskin hoped that architecture too would ideally consist of planar walls, where the masonry structure is wholly covered from base to coping with an uninterrupted veneer consisting of polychromatic and bas relief ornament (ideally in combination). The veneer would consist of repeatable decorative units fused together, and be physically and symbolically distinct from the spatial and structural system it masked.[5] As clothing made the body a meaningful cultural object, the addition of “venerable or beautiful” but “unnecessary” features to the edifice converted “building” (otherwise unmemorable and not properly the object of history) into “architecture.” Ruskin’s theory of the adorned wall veil advanced a disciplinary redefinition of architecture *as* surface—an entirely visual phenomenon.[6] This defined architecture as absolute surface-ness, denying its physicality, and celebrating its fleeting status as effect and image. The renewal of Ruskin’s writings is, no doubt, realized in the current discursive atmosphere of surface consciousness.

The Ruskinian attitude of surface as architecture and architecture as surface opens up possibilities of invention, allowing surface to be viewed as central and not ancillary to the disciplinary definition of architecture. A research project entitled *Scratching the Surface, Looking for Substance*, funded by a David Saunders grant, the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand (2008), examined the works of Australian architectural practitioners such as Lyons, John Wardle, McBride Charles Ryan, and H2o in Melbourne; Dales Jones Evans, Francis-Jones Morehen Thorp, and Johnson Pilton Walker in Sydney; and Donovan Hill in Brisbane. The investigation revealed five surface typologies. However, while the production of surface was palpable, the critical and discursive space surrounding it was not. This is the gap that the 2012 Association of Art Australia and New Zealand Conference panel on surface attempted to address. It invited contributions from scholars and practitioners from the broad interdisciplinary field of art, architecture, and design, to examine surface as the site of critical and instrumental figurations, scales, and typologies.

Surface Turn

The revitalization of surface debates has two distinctive orientations—critical and design-based approaches. In my own chapter, I discuss the architectural perspectives of Andrew Benjamin (surface as effect and an operative force) and Kurt W. Forster (surface as pervasive and fundamentally sensorial). Ecological psychologist James Gibson argues for the importance of surface to visual perception, noting: “The surface is where most of the action is. The surface is where light is reflected or absorbed, not the interior of the substance. The surface is what touches the animal, not the interior.”[7] Avrum Stroll’s *Surfaces* (1988) advances this by delineating surface typologies. Nevertheless, these views are contested by ecological anthropologist Tim Ingold, who maintains that Gibson’s views are characterized by a rigid and immutable environment, fully produced and final. He argues that what we need is

> not a casting about the hard surfaces of a world in which everything is already laid out, but an issuing along with things in the very processes of their generation; not the *trans-port* (carrying across) of completed being, but the *pro-duction* (bringing forth) of perpetual becoming.[8]

Utilizing Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s becoming, Ingold suggests that Gibson’s theory of surface is limited to material (not materiality) and occupation (not dwelling). As an alternative, he proposes a view of surface that highlights “the sentient body, at once both perceiver and producer.”[9]

The design-based approach to surface is a critical anthropology of designed objects that represents the corporeal desire to connect and collapse boundaries between bodies and things. Ellen Lupton’s *Skin: Surface, Substance and Design* (2002) explores the human and the industrial skin as envelopes and surfaces that are used to complete, complement, and enhance the body, and “supplement the inadequacies of the body’s natural envelope.”[10] Design practice is portrayed as fundamentally organic, since skin is regarded as “both substance and metaphor.”[11] Lupton’s definition of skin as lacking “definitive boundaries … [that flow] continuously from the exposed surfaces of the body to its internal cavities” undermines the association of skin with shallowness. Fashion has also informed the emergence of interest in surface, as it too extends the manufactured envelope of the body. This was evidenced in the exhibition *Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles (2006–2007), which showcased the “shared strategies and techniques of the two disciplines.”[12] Curator Brooke Hodge argues that in the “recent years, architects have adopted techniques such as printing, pleating, folding, draping, and weaving to develop more complex exterior surfaces, or skins, for their buildings,” informed by an acute awareness of fashion practice.[13] Hodge suggests that the expressive curved forms of Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall (1987–2003), Los Angeles, resonate with Rei Kawakubo’s *Body meets Dress, Dress meets Body* collection (1997), characterized by “exaggeratedly mutated forms achieved by padding garments in unexpected places.”[14]

The ubiquity of digital technology also augments the attention to surface. Alicia Imperiale suggests that “there has been a movement away from dialectical relationships, from the opposition between surface and depth, in favor of an awareness of the oscillating movement from one into the other,” favoring “smooth exchange, flow, continuous surface, skin, membranes, [and] bubbles.”[15] This is based on the metaphor of the “living body [which] may be imagined as a continuous surface from inside to out.”[16] Designers are working with complex curvatures in real time, with softwares that are “inherently [a] dynamic system: surfaces and objects are developed in a shifting relation to a surface,” thereby highlighting the surface condition of contemporary architecture.[17] Imperiale suggests that the topological orientation is manifested as folded spaces and smooth forms, enabled by 3D modeling software, scanners, and printers. In other words, the depthless surface forms the structural, formal, and organizational unit in digital design in architecture. Technological imperatives of projection technologies and the popularization of media façades is also an important determinant. Innovations in display and projection capacities, resolutions, costs, and accessibility have supported the concurrent emergence of global cities and commodity culture as citizenship.

Modernity and Visuality

In addition to responding to contemporary surface consciousness, *Surface and Deep Histories* is also positioned in relation to visuality, since surface and vision are paradoxically linked. Surface is a requisite for the operation of vision. Yet it is also the cause of vision's obscurity, uncertainty, and opacity. Martin Jay's canonical text *Scopic Regimes of Modernity* (1988) locates the modern era as one that is "dominated by sight in a way that sets it apart from its premodern predecessors."[18] The condition is exacerbated in the nineteenth century, marked by what Jonathan Crary terms the emergence of the observer, the seeing body, and subjective vision.[19] Crary explains that vision itself became the object of study, and the inquiry shifted from "physical optics (the study of light and the forms of its propagation) … such that physiological optics (the study of the eye and its sensory capacities) comes to dominate the study of vision."[20] Specifically, the interest in the "retinal afterimage" suggested the possibility of the existence of optical truth.[21] The quest for truth was also directed at the physical world. Kate Flint argues that "Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of the reliability—or otherwise—of the human eye, and with the problems of interpreting what they saw."[22] The desire to bring the invisible to the surface was not just to gain an understanding of it, but also to exercise control over the unknown.

It was not just empirical truth but also spiritual truth that was important to nineteenth-century thinkers. Ruskin's commentaries on surfaces aimed to construct the idealized reader and seer, who does not just gather knowledge but cultivates a way of seeing marked by "perception." Ruskin noted: "The whole function of the artist in the world is to be a seeing and feeling creature."[23] The emphasis was on discerning suggestions of inner life and moral well-being. Furthermore, his interpretation of Medieval and Renaissance architecture was not concerned with historical accuracy. It was a vehicle for articulating an imaginative mode of perception. David van Zanten notes that for nineteenth-century thinkers like Ruskin (and Semper and their contemporaries), ornament was a "truly hallucinatory experience," which involved the "sudden opening of mental vistas into the evolution of architectural forms, into the cultural significance of buildings and of institutions, into the events in the erection of a structure."[24] Ruskin's hallucinatory historiography involved looking at Gothic and Romanesque buildings as abstract compositions of color and form, to discern extra-architectural images. Hence, when he looked at the Ducal Palace in Venice, he saw the quatrefoil traceries as parts of lacelike fabric, and the polychromatic wall as similar to woven textiles. Seeing was a form of construction of reality, thereby rendering surface as fundamentally architectural.

Architectural surface as optical tool is explored by Mark Wigley in *White Walls and Designer Dresses*, as he brings the focus onto Le Corbusier's 1959 preface to his 1925 essay *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*. Wigley explains that the preface introduced the theory of the white wall, which was "a rethinking of the very identity of architecture."[25] Architecture did not merely have visual properties: it occupied the visual field. Wigley explains:

> Architecture is no longer simply a visual object with certain properties. It is actually involved in the construction of the visual before it is placed within the visual. Indeed, vision itself becomes an architectural phenomenon. The place of architecture becomes much more complicated. A building can no longer be separated from the gaze that appears to be directed at it. Before having a certain look, the building is a certain way of looking. The white wall is intended to radically transform the status of the building by transforming the condition of visuality itself.[26]

This visuality is spatial. Wigley explains that the white shirt "brackets the body out but at the same time, it forces the body into the imaginary by advertising an inaccessible domain."[27] It "raises the question of a physical domain beyond images and, in so doing, *defines a new kind of space*. Indeed, it starts to redefine the very condition of space."[28] Similarly, the white wall does not "simply clean a space, or even give the impression of clean space. Rather, it constructs a new kind of space."[29] This "new kind of space" is uncanny: purged of sensuality, yet invested with an acute awareness of the presence of the sensual.

The complexity of architectural surface as cultivation and practice of visuality is historically compromised by popular and reductive modernist histories of architecture, which recognize action *and* innovation as always and only spatial (defined as real and not virtual modes of occupation). Yet critical analyses of pictorial surfaces prevent the foreclosure of this debate. In "Transparency," Anthony Vidler examines the writings and paintings of Robert Slutzky, artist, theorist, and co-author of the influential 1955 essay "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," suggesting via Pierre Francastel's writings on Mondrian that "[A]ll the plastic arts are arts of space."[30] According to Vidler, Mondrian's paintings are capable of suggesting the "principle of laterality, of nonstability," and thereby they open up "many imaginary spaces distinct from the geometrical surface that carries the geometrical."[31] Vidler argues that in Slutzky's paintings it becomes apparent that the "description of time and space by means of perspective has been abandoned; *it is the flat surface itself that transmits spatial continuity*."[32] In other words, painting does not test architectural principles. It is already architectural. The pictorial surface is further considered by Queensland-based architect and scholar Ashley Paine, who recommends the "spatio-visual" practice of painting and installation as an alternative to object-oriented definitions of occupation in architecture. Paine challenges the definition of occupation predicated usually upon the separation of real (material, phenomenal, social, corporeal, and embodied experience) and virtual (disconnected and disengaged) experience of space, advancing the pictorial space *as* spatial, and its performative, mimetic, and iterative making *as* occupation. Specifically, Paine's experiments with spatio-visual organizational themes such as "mirroring, doubling, pairing, paralleling, or duplicating," aim to construct the conception and not just the experience of space.[33]

Deep Histories

Surface and Deep Histories occupies this 'expanded' terrain of architecture and is capable of recognizing its many forms, with the contributions covering such varied topics as montage, wallpaper, dress, architectural ornament, walls and media walls, and verandahs. In "Montage and Modernity: Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial Graphic Culture," Molly Duggins examines a variety of media manufactured in the late nineteenth-century by Sydney-based printers John Sands Ltd, ranging from advertisements and greeting cards to atlases, addresses, and albums, and proposes the use of montage as "constructive" and a "strategic visual vehicle." This was especially true in Australia "where the graphic arts not only dominated the cultural sector, but also represented one of the most developed areas of colonial artistic and commercial production." Duggins advances Walter Benjamin's definition of montage as a "*constructive* principle," by convincingly mapping the juxtapositions and organization of the visual culture around competing ideas of colonial modernity and transnational cosmopolitanism.

The exploration of nineteenth-century visuality is advanced by Anna Daly in "Between Mischief and Reason: Wallpaper, Femininity, and the

Production of Space in the Late-Nineteenth Century," which considers the phenomenon of women dressing to merge with or recede into the wallpapered interiors of nineteenth-century domestic spaces, while the male subject, wearing a dark suit, stands out from the background. Referring to scenes from Edouard Vuillard's paintings, Daly undertakes a careful journey through Henri Lefebvre's arguments about real and produced space, the history of wallpaper, nineteenth-century domestic interiors, and signification, to render the flattened space of modernity as fundamentally problematic to the identification of feminine subjectivity. Daly argues that the suppression of the body from the construction of modern space, and the capacity for represented space to stand in for real space, was materialized most legibly at the site of the wallpaper. This also meant that the inability to distinguish between objects and space was also extended to objects and subjects, thereby instituting the interchangeability between the decorative and the feminine. Importantly, the spatial appearance/disappearance of women, symbolizing also the lack of recognition of achievements in the social realm, contained subversive potentials.

Surface as spatialized and corporealized construct is explored in Stella North's "Sartorialized Space: The Surfacing of Expansive Bodies." The chapter discusses the inter-constituted nature of bodies, clothes, and space. It explores the "interconnectedness of the surface/s—material, experiential, and imagistic—by which cities and bodies are constituted, in order to demonstrate how they constitute one another." North is able to shift traditional arguments about the body which are generally analogical in nature. Instead, she suggests that bodies are spatialized as much as clothing is corporealized, and cities sartorialized. As North argues: "[W]hen we see bodies in space, we are seeing space in bodies. Dressed bodies, in this understanding, are spatialized by their surfaces, and space in turn sartorialized." Informed by the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, North traverses the theoretical terrain of architectural theory, fashion theory, fashion practice, urban imagery, and psychology of popular culture to uncover conceptual and material instances that suggest dynamic cooperation between becoming, inhabiting, and spatializing on one hand, and surfacing, dressing, and interfacing on the other. The chapter brings fashion theory and body studies into conversation with urbanism and the meaning of occupying the city.

The urban surface is considered by Hank Haeusler in "Hypersurface Architecture [Redux]," which revisits Stephen Perrella's aspirational theory of Hypersurface as the synthesis of Pixel or Media architecture and Topological architecture, seeking the "infusion of form with media and media with form to work between the two." Haeusler provides a brief history of computing and display technologies available in the 1990s, the challenges faced by designers, and current advancements, pointing out the disconnect between technical capacity and theoretical ambitions of designers and thinkers, and the specifications that are required in order to achieve a genuine synthesis of form and image. The theory of Hypersurface is revisited and tested through two installations designed and produced in Sydney in 2012 and 2013. The design-based testing of the theory of Hypersurface reveals some interesting lessons. The wall or the surface itself can be considered as consisting of three-dimensional pixels or ‘Digital Bricks’ (computationally derived form, animated with LEDs), which can be arrayed to form an image to achieve the Hypersurface. As the installation transformed human action into digital content and then light, which animated the form, it demonstrated the integration of information and topology.

The urban surface as a threshold, and much more, is examined in Chris Brisbin’s “What’s in a Name? The In-between-ness of the Verandah’s Public Faces and Threshold Spaces.” Through historical accounts and studio-based research/documentation works produced by Brisbin and his students in Adelaide and Brisbane, the chapter presents a shift from a typological understanding of the verandah, which may or may not recognize or consider authentic the appropriated verandah in the Australian colonial and post-colonial milieu. Instead, Brisbin argues that “the verandah’s true power lies in both its operative social capacity (its *physiology*) in combination with its elemental composition as an architectural typology (its *anatomy*).” The focus is on the performative aspect of the verandah, which adds value to its spatial and tectonic ambit, giving it agency beyond its typological identification. Using the method of drawing to “forensically draw out and make present the idea,” Brisbin demonstrates the various uses of the verandah as social and climatic buffer, experience, mediator of topography, provider of layers of screening and hence degrees of privacy, and a stage-set that conceals as well as projects the social and gendered identity of its occupants. In essence, Brisbin’s discussion of verandah constructs it as an architectural realm of its own, capable of exceeding its edge-ness, and structuring public and private life, having relevance beyond its perceived decorative or ancillary role.

The decorative is, however, not trivial. Nineteenth-century thinkers used ornament in an ethical manner in their pursuit of truth and rationality, and in addressing specific audiences. Peter Kohane explores this in “Rational Complexity: James Fergusson’s Theory of Ornament,” where he explains that Ferguson was interested in promoting a ‘true’ style of architecture and rejecting the ‘false’ styles or nineteenth-century buildings that copied the forms of historical buildings. The ‘true’ style would not alienate the public (Fergusson’s “modern community”) at large who may lack the capacity to interpret historical forms, and who instead would be engaged by ornament that revealed the logic of the structure of the building. Kohane explains this through a close reading of an image from Fergusson’s *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (1855), which depicts a series of (overlaid) façades in the same drawing. Registering the separate but cooperative domains of the builder, engineer, and architect, the drawing demonstrates the transformation of a simple building into a work of architecture through the addition of embellishments, such that a brute structure is transformed into one overlaid with profuse ornamentation. Fergusson argues that architects are responsible for providing the ‘fine art’, which accords with the principles of ‘ornamented construction’ and ‘constructive ornament’, captured in his reading of true styles—Greek (Doric temple) and Gothic (cathedral interior). No doubt, Fergusson’s theory of modern community addresses the predominance of the visual in the nineteenth century, especially since empirical visual knowledge enabled democratic participation in urban life. Furthermore, the emphasis on the visual (the concealed and the revealed) tethered tenuously to the constructed reveals the desire to seek legitimacy for architecture in/as the visual field.

The exploration of the irresolvable complexity of the visual, and the paradoxical and confounded nature of representational surface, is explored in Flavia Marcello and Ian Woodcock’s “Scratching the Surface: Representational and Symbolic Practices of Contemporary Green Architecture.” They challenge the “simplistic divide between the identification of architecture as aesthetic practice as opposed to the practice of building being a technical one, involving a myriad technical, legal, and economic practices, as this has historically contributed to compromising architecture’s engagement with sustainability.” Marcello and Woodcock ground their inquiry in the history of architecture and the green building debate, Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory of fields of cultural production, and the reception and public debate surrounding the key three contemporary Green buildings in Melbourne—CH2, Pixel, and the Hub. They argue that a green building cannot merely be sustainable: it must also be seen to be performing this role. This produces the surface (façade) as a site of anxiety around truth and deceit, accompanied by alienation and attraction. As sustainability is neither measurable nor entirely communicable, it confounds the very category of the surface. The anxiety is exacerbated due to the measurability of sustainability, even though this cannot be accessed instantly or visually.

The typological complexity of surface is introduced in my own chapter titled “Surface Typologies, Critical Function, and Glass Walls in Australian Architecture.” The chapter aims to provide a brief theoretical history of surface through a somewhat chronological framing of precursors, interruptions, failed interruptions, emergences, and reappearances, demonstrating the resilience of surface in architectural theory. The typologies of surface that emerge are representational; urban marker or threshold; integrated and performative; transient; and design tool—some of which have been discussed by the contributors to this collection. Writing on surface in Australia is tricky because while experimentation is evidenced, the critical terrain is marked by silence. In pursuing the aim of testing these typologies in contemporary curtain walls in Australia, hoping to discern a particular sociology of the architectural practice, the chapter reveals deliberate shifts in the universalized North American narrative of curtain wall as media. However, most importantly, the chapter aims to bring the focus onto the role of surface as the unconscious of architecture, invisible because of its overexposure, yet the “site of architecture’s locked potentiality, as it is neither one nor the other.”

The collection therefore aims to show that surface in architecture has had a deeper and a more pervasive presence in the practice and theory of the discipline than is commonly supposed. Surface is both superficial and pervasive, symbol and space; meaningful and functional; static and transitory, object and envelope. Furthermore, attitudes to surface emerge, collapse, and reappear, sustaining it as a legitimate theoretical and artefactual entity, despite the disciplinary definition of architecture as space, structure, and function. Despite being a key part of the discipline, it occupies the interstice or the space of the unconscious in architectural discourse, from where it defends its legitimacy as architecturally valuable, as opposed to merely visually pleasurable.

CHAPTER ONE

MONTAGE AND MODERNITY: LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY COLONIAL GRAPHIC CULTURE

MOLLY DUGGINS

Late nineteenth-century graphic montage reflects the multivalent culture of modernity in which it was produced through dynamic composite images, featuring vignettes, roundels, insets, borders, and frames.[1] In his study of arcades, Walter Benjamin has argued that montage developed as a "conscious principle of construction" in nineteenth-century design.[2] Born of the kaleidoscopic cityscape, with its exhibitionary forms of spectacle, this constructive medium reverberated in the graphic culture of the period, channeling commodity fetishism, industrial progress, and the eclecticism of the decorative arts inspired by the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts movements. Defined by a dense surface visuality, late nineteenth-century graphic montage embraced the materiality and self-reflexivity of popular media as developed and circulated through transnational economic and social networks that engaged with the spaces of modernity at both a global and local level.[3]

Drawing upon Robert Dixon's concept of colonial modernity, in which colonial culture industries of the Anglosphere "were at once internationalizing … *and* locally inflected" (emphasis original), this essay will examine the production and display of graphic montage in late nineteenth-century Australia as the product of a mobile cosmopolitanism grounded in "multi-centred innovations and exchanges."[4] Aesthetic exchange, in particular, occurred through the channels of vernacular media—illustration, photography, and commercial design—dispersed through books, albums, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and posters, which informed the visual culture of colonial modernity far more substantially than the traditional high art forms of painting and sculpture.[5] As Erika Esau has demonstrated, the portability and reproducibility of such media was enhanced by the itinerancy of artists and artisans who engaged in creative and technical dialogues that crisscrossed global networks, especially within the Pacific Rim, where a fluid exchange of information circulated between Australia and America.[6]

While geographically marginalized, late nineteenth-century Australian graphic culture was thus intimately associated with sophisticated Euro-American graphic trends and sought to showcase its aesthetic modernism through montage, which, as a visual medium, was ideally suited to display both technological innovation and stylistic sophistication, while catering to the demands of the cosmopolitan colonial consumer.[7] However, colonial montage was more than just a modernist vehicle. Its productive qualities, as outlined by Benjamin, have particular resonance in Australia in the years leading up to its Federation in 1901, when the colonies were actively involved in nation-making through visual discourse. While the ideological artwork of the Australian Impressionists, including Tom Roberts (1856–1931), Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917), and Arthur Streeton (1867–1943), has been largely credited with the enshrinement of a mythological, nationalist Australian landscape, graphic montage from the period reveals the constructive framework through which this imagery was established and disseminated.

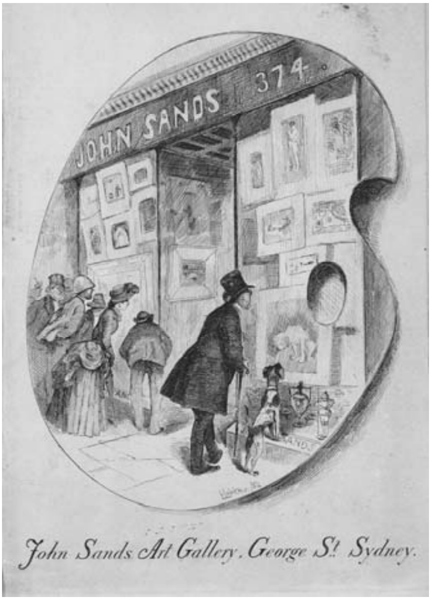
Despite its widespread application, little attention has been devoted to the role of montage as a strategic visual vehicle. Montage played a critical role in Australia, where the graphic arts not only dominated the cultural sector but also represented one of the most developed areas of colonial artistic and commercial production. Through the strategic framing and arrangement of landscapes, portraits, and native flora and fauna into composite visual narratives, Australian imagery was transformed from the everyday to the iconic through montage, which not only provided a robust vehicle for the consolidation and systematization of a nationalist iconography, but also served as a means through which to domesticate, sentimentalize, and historicize the colonial experience. Focusing on the graphic imagery produced by the Sydney-based printers John Sands Ltd., this essay will examine montage as a strategic illustrative style engaged in visually defining Australian identity in the years leading up to Federation. Printing graphic montages that appealed to a modern eye versed in exhibitionary culture, the Sands firm manufactured composite illustrations that merged decoration and design with production and progress in a variety of media from advertisements and greeting cards to atlases, addresses, and albums. While demonstrating the artistic and technological sophistication of the colonies, Sands's montage imagery also drew upon an intimate scrapbook aesthetic that sought to personally appeal to and implicate the viewer in the consolidation of a nationalist visual narrative.

Ads, Atlases, and the Exhibitionary Nature of Montage

In 1837, John Sands, a British engraver and map-colorer, whose father illustrated for *Punch* and worked alongside John Le Keux and George Cruikshank, founded an engraving and stationery company in George Street, Sydney.[8] Sands formed a number of partnerships in Sydney and Melbourne, and by the 1870s the firm was one of the largest of its kind in Australia. Beyond operating as printers, stationers, and booksellers, it had expanded to include the lucrative business of account book manufacturing and the production of directories. The Melbourne branch, Sands and McDougall, won several prizes for printing and book production at the Intercolonial Exhibition in 1870, while Johns Sands Ltd. in Sydney cemented its reputation as fine art printers through the sale of limited edition engravings from "the leading Art Publishers of England, America, and the Continent."[9]

John Sands Ltd. did much to reclaim Sydney as the cultural capital of the colonies in the wake of Melbourne's post-gold rush artistic flowering, fostering the appreciation of Australian imagery, in particular, through public art competitions, including the sponsorship of one of the first series of Australian Christmas and New Year cards in 1881. Featuring kangaroos and cockatoos, native flowers and berries, swagmen and Indigenous Australians, the submissions, which were sent in from all over the colonies, demonstrate a familiarity with emerging Australian emblems which were largely disseminated through the illustrated press.[10] Winning entries from Sands's competitions were frequently published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* as wood engravings and lithographic supplements, contributing to the inscription of Australian life and culture into a solidifying Australian iconography.[11]

Consciously artistic, Sands's graphic oeuvre was exhibited at the company's art gallery at 374 George Street, the windows of which feature in a catalogue cover by Livingston Hopkins ("Hop"), an established American comic illustrator recruited by the Sydney-based *Bulletin*, a leading nationalist magazine that sought to emulate American illustrative styles (Fig. 1-1).[12] Lightly lampooning the fashionable buzz of "the block," with pedestrians caught up in the voyeuristic pleasures of window-shopping, Hop's composition reveals a hodge-podge arrangement of artworks in the gallery windows, playfully framed within an artist's palette. A whirligig of visual pleasure, the optical appeal of this arrangement lies in the dynamic juxtaposition of its display, in which images of different subjects and sizes are crowded together, emphasizing both their variety and materiality. A tradition harking back to eighteenth-century printmakers' *quodlibets* and *trompe l'oeil* drawings, such works were intended to highlight the virtuosity of the painter, draftsman, or printer, while engaging the viewer in a process of narrative-building through the visual appropriation of an illusory surface-space, a picture plane rich in apparent depth, texture, and tangibility, packed with enticingly disparate material items.[13] From colonial *trompe l'oeil* drawings, which Roger Blackley has argued represent an alternative form of history painting celebrating the personal appropriation of the developing visual world of graphic culture in Australia, to increasingly complex pictorial essays on colonial culture and progress in the illustrated press, and the influx of advertisements and commercial displays in the public sphere, montage transformed the urban colonial landscape in the latter decades of the nineteenth century into a three-dimensional collage of composite imagery requiring constant visual negotiation.[14]


JOHN SANDS
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John Sands Art Gallery. George St. Sydney.

Fig. 1-1: Livingston Hopkins, "John Sands Art Gallery, George St. Sydney," engraving, 1884, 13.5 x 20.8cm. John Sands Ltd., *Catalogue of Art Gallery, George St.*, 1884. Courtesy of State Library of NSW.

Through its emphasis on surface appeal, montage was particularly suited to the commercial sector. Reminiscent of the gallery windows in Hop's cartoon, Sands's later shop front display, visible in a photograph from the souvenir booklet *Commemorating Manufacturers' Day* (1910), exudes an aesthetic of abundance in its pyramidal mélange of manufactured goods, exemplars of the firm's lithographic and letterpress printing, bookbinding, box making, and embossing.[15] Inspired by the overstuffed exhibits at the World Fairs, themed around industrial progress and imperial expansion, this form of display conditioned viewers to process such spectacle through a fragmented and multiple focus, bolstered by the selective and classificatory skills associated with the art of collecting.[16] Infiltrating department store design, this montage aesthetic emphasized the choice, variety, and bounty of the "commodity on display."[17] Moreover, it borrowed from the visual rhetoric of festivity to enhance the allure of products for sale, drawing upon the conscription of native flora and greenery as decoration for ceremonies and celebrations, from fern fronds for Christmastide to elaborate installations displaying Australian *naturalia* on triumphal arches created to commemorate royal visits and civic anniversaries. Garlands of flowers, draperies, and silks were enlisted to enliven commercial displays, similar to the festoons of native flora used to decorate Christmas cards and embellish Australian imagery in the illustrated press.[18]

In transposing goods into fantastical tableaux, such commercial installations drew from the emphasis on surface visuality, dynamism, and the creation of a reality effect that characterized the exhibitionary complex of late nineteenth-century visual culture.[19] This dramatization, which masked a simmering tension between authenticity and artifice, was further exploited in advertisements, which sought to maximize the dimensionality and desirability of products through montage as revealed in a lithograph printed by Sands for the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society (Fig. 1-2).[20] In its artful arrangement of colonial office façades, symbolizing the society's stability and growth, the advertisement recalls the decorative display of Sands's gallery window, reflecting the montage aesthetic of the dynamic cityscape. The *trompe l'oeil* effect of haphazardly overlapping leaves with turned-down corners adds a playful vitality to the composite image, encouraging a meandering visual acquisition of the picture plane transformed into an alluringly dimensional surface-space. Native floral embellishments, including ferns and flannel flowers, lend a festive air, while stressing the society's Australian character in an attempt to envelop the viewer in a sense of colonial community.[21]

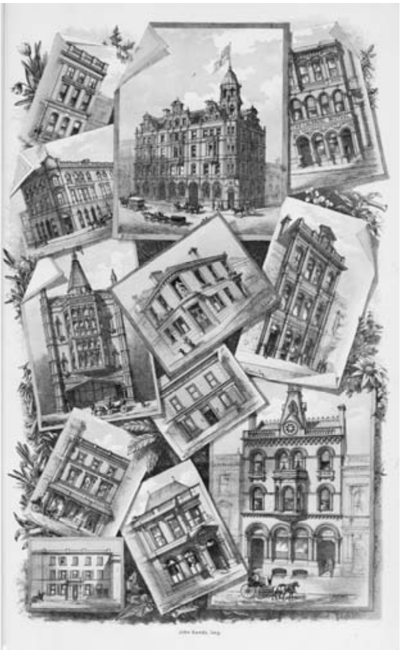
John Sands, Imp.

Fig. 1-2: “Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society,” lithograph, 1886, 31 x 50.1cm. John Sands Ltd., *New Atlas of Australia*, 1886. Courtesy of State Library of NSW.

Sands’s sophisticated design was targeted at the urbane Australian consumer who would have appreciated the modern, cosmopolitan vision embodied in the fashionable architectural façades of the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society, a number of which are situated on bustling urban streets filled with pedestrians and carriages. As Dixon has suggested, colonial markets, fed by mass communication, produced experienced consumers who were familiar with and desired up-to-date international commercial and entertainment formats.[22] The montage aesthetic of Sands’s advertisement is not only reflective of an Australian colonial culture catapulted into a global urbanized modernity, but also embodies the technological dynamism of a modernizing printmaking industry in which photographic technologies would ultimately replace engraving and lithography by the late 1880s and 90s.[23] Such vibrant and variegated composite imagery was employed both to lure the potential customer and highlight the technical complexity of the illustrators’ and engravers’ art as