Creating a Sense of Place:
*Edge of the Trees* at the Museum of Sydney

Anna MacDonald

On 26 January 1788 É [Captain Arthur Phillip] assembled his officers and the marines on a space freshly cleared by European hands on the shores of Sydney Cove. By such hands of European industry, the British intended to establish claims of effective and moral proprietorship over New South Wales. Phillip then ran up the flag to reassert the legal claim over [the colony] É

David Day¹

And on 26 January 1995, over 200 years later, the people of Sydney assembled at First Government House Place in front of the Museum of Sydney on the site of first Government House; a space newly cleared by archaeologists, built over by architects and memorialised by historians, artists and curators.² A space intended to establish a sense of place: not only of the effective, moral and legal proprietorship claimed by Phillip in 1788, but also of the lived experiences resulting from that claim.

The Museum of Sydney and Spatial History

First Government House was built under Governor Arthur Phillip in 1788 and demolished in 1845-6 by Governor George Gipps. Although it was, between those years, the home and office of Australia’s first nine Governors, its significance as an historical site is not solely governmental, for Government House was also an important site of and for contact – between cultures, genders and classes.³ In and through the

² The italics appear in the title of the Museum of Sydney (MoS), which was officially opened in May 1995, four months after the opening of its foregrounding First Government House Place.
³ First Government House was a place of colonial exchange. It was here that Governor Phillip shared his home with and later buried Arabanoo, here that Bennelong and Coleby ate at the Governor’s table. (Arabanoo, Bennelong and Coleby were all Aborigines who had been ‘removed’ from their clans under Phillip’s orders, with the idea of creating go-betweens who would move and communicate between Aboriginal and European communities. Arabanoo died during the smallpox epidemic in 1789 and Bennelong and Coleby escaped soon after their capture, although Bennelong’s relationship with Phillip continued after he had returned to his
Museum of Sydney (MoS) this historical contact and exchange continues. However first Government House has not always been considered worth memorialising. Indeed, since the House was demolished, the site has been variously used as ‘an engineer’s store, a carter’s yard, … shops, government offices, [and] dwellings’. Until the early 1980s, when the State government of New South Wales planned a large scale urban development for the site, it had been a car park for over ten years.

Prior to implementing the latest plan to commercially develop the site, the government initiated what it thought would be a limited archaeological dig, in order to establish to what extent the remains of the House still existed. When the footings and a variety of artefacts were discovered, the site became publicly important and a campaign by heritage-minded groups such as the Friends of Government House led to a more extensive archaeological exploration of the site; and eventually to its museological memorialisation by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. In 1988-9, the Trust called for architectural submissions for the Museum building, and the Melbourne based firm Denton Corker Marshall (DCM), whose formalist imagining of the site’s architecture provided an interpretive frame for the Museum’s historians, artists, multi-media technicians and curators, was successful in its bid.

Like the historical subject of the Museum, the process of the memorialisation of first Government House takes the form of contact, or more strictly, collaboration between archaeologists, architects, historians, artists and curators. The result of this interdisciplinary collaboration is a museum that looks and feels differently from many other museums, both at history and to the visitor. The MoS is a resting place. It is a place to stop, listen, look and respond to traces of the first sixty odd years of European settlement/invasion in Australia, the years between 1788 and 1850. But the MoS never lets you get too snug in your repose. Like the sudden and sometimes violent jerk just before sleep, this museum catches us and our comfortable historical assumptions unawares.

clan). It was at first Government House also that dinner guests, regardless of rank, had to bring their own bread during periods of food shortage, and here that Governor and Mrs King added a drawing room, a place ‘meant mainly for women’s conversation’. (See Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 269).


6 *ibid.*, p. 66.

7 The major excavations of the site went from 1983 to 1990. However smaller scale projects continued until 1995 (*ibid.*, p. 67).

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Although an interdisciplinary museum, the MoS is particularly significant for the way it represents Australia’s history from 1788 to 1850. At the MoS, settlement histories are not just about military ceremonies in unnatural clearings, they are about the personal and shared stories and effects of a settled (or even unsettled) place. The MoS seeks to create a sense of place on the site of first Government House. It tells a spatial history that is informed as much by its location and by Australia’s present condition as a postcolonial settler society looking forward to the possibility of reconciliation, as it is by the techniques and technologies of a ‘new museology’.10

Spatial history deviates from empirical histories that are told from the perspective of an imagined and independent observer, and often depend upon a singular, panoramic, and generally unreturned gaze. Greg Dening has noted that ‘[h]istorians … are outsiders. They always make a drama out of what the participants experienced as one damn thing after another’.11 It is this dramatising, this theatricality of imperial/empirical histories, this making of history a stage, with which historian Paul Carter is concerned. He has argued that

rather than focus on the intentional world of historical individuals, the world of active, spatial choices, empirical history … has as its focus facts which, in a sense, come after the event. The primary object is not to understand or interpret: it is to legitimate … hence, imperial history’s defensive appeal to the logic of cause and effect … Hence, too, its preference for fixed and detachable facts, for actual houses, visible clearings and boats at anchor. For these, unlike the intentions which brought them there, unlike the material certainties of lived time and

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9 As an historical representation, the Museum is not only significant because of the way it tells the history of the site of first Government House, Sydney and the region more generally. It is also important because of the controversy which that represented history has caused, from the early planning stages of the memorialisation of the site. Although outside the bounds of this discussion, such a controversy demonstrates the importance of the site of first Government House to Australian histories and identities.

10 This ‘new museology’ is a broad movement within the museum community towards self-reflexive techniques of display that are aware of the necessarily subjective processes of the acquisition and display of objects; the simplifying effects of labeling; the selective narratives constructed through the display of certain objects in relation to one another; and the ways in which particular displays are in turn shaped by and reflect the social context of which they are a product and a part. For a discussion of the ‘new museology’ and its relationship to the representation of history in museums, see Paul Vergo’s The New Museology, in which he argues that this revised practice of display recognises that every display ‘means placing a certain construction upon history’. As such the practice represents a shift from a concern in the methods used by museums to the purposes behind such methodologies. Paul Vergo (ed.), The New Museology, Reaktion Books, London, 1989, pp. 2, 3.

space, are durable objects which can be treated as typical, as further evidence of a universal historical process.\textsuperscript{12}

In the absence of the ‘actual house’, the ‘historical fact’, the ‘anchored’ point of legitimation, the MoS is better able to engage with the site of first Government House temporally and spatially, while making a drama out of the everyday, \textit{albeit} one that subtly and somewhat ironically subverts empiricism’s desire for ‘facts’. The Museum’s indoors collection is made up of mundane objects like broken plates, china dolls, garden tools, medicine bottles, cutlery, pieces of fabric, buttons and spectacles – now interesting because of their age, their source and their placement within a museum that interprets them as evidence of lived place. This interpretation humbles first Government House (it is one home among many – like yours, like mine) at the same time as it locates it at the centre of Sydney’s, and hence of Australia’s, colonial administration. Through the MoS’s insistence on the importance of the everyday, the Museum challenges the primacy of facts in historical representation; or rather it focuses on different facts, those that relate to a community in the first years of settlement in a new country. Although still concerned with a larger picture – the fact of colonisation, Phillip’s laying of the House’s foundation stone in 1788 and the reign of respective Governors – for the MoS facts are not only (or even, not always) dated. They are also located within the lived experience of a place – the use of a different dinner set on special occasions, the fond burial of a pet dog, the sowing of seeds to feed a community that is isolated from its imperial centre.

As a museum concerned with the representation of spatial history, the MoS not only explores past attachments to place – be they personal, cultural or governmental – it also embodies a process of territorialisation itself. Through a broad recognition of and reflection on the dynamics of postcolonialism in Australia, the MoS effects a complex reinscription of the site of first Government House which is aided by the conspicuous (and auspicious) absence of the House itself.\textsuperscript{13} This process is evidenced in particular by Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley’s collaborative sculpture \textit{Edge of the Trees} (hereafter \textit{Edge}). In this artwork, as well as in other elements of the Museum, it becomes evident that the reterritorialisation of the site is effected through a pervasive deconstruction of remnant colonial binary oppositions.

\textsuperscript{12} Paul Carter, \textit{The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History}, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, p. xvi, his emphasis.

\textsuperscript{13} Examples of the theoretical placement of the MoS are the contributions made to it by cultural theorist Ross Gibson (in the Bond Store, a darkened alcove with three television screens from which various characters narrate their story of life on the sea or of living in a port city - Sydney), and by postcolonial historian Paul Carter (in The Calling to Come, a soundscape at the entrance of the Museum that takes the form of talk between European William Dawes and Aborigine Patyegarang).
At the *Edge of the Trees*

Laurence and Foley’s sculptural installation is situated at the margins of the Museum site, by the entrance and between First Government House Place plaza and the Young Street terrace houses. It represents the first encounter between Aborigine and European, and is an allegory of contact between cultures, places, times and historical narratives. Like its historical subject, *Edge* is intended to be one of the first installations encountered by the museum visitor, and it introduces many ideas that are echoed throughout the rest of the Museum. As part of the Museum’s deconstructive project, *Edge* seeks to complicate distinctions such as those between Aboriginal and European, natural and cultural, and past and present by demonstrating various attachments to place that cross cultures and times, as well as by exploring the physical forms that such attachments have taken. The result is an historical representation that considers not only the contact between post-1788 Australian inhabitants, but also the exchanges between these people evidenced by the changing form of the physical landscape and emotional attachments to it. At the *Edge of the Trees*, a history of contact and exchange is told through a creative association of objects of material culture.

*Edge* was commissioned by the MoS. It was the first public artwork in Sydney to be collaboratively created by a non-Aboriginal and an Aboriginal artist. The Concept Brief specified that it ‘engage with the architecture [of the Museum and the surrounding cityscape] in dialogue, counterpoint, even tension’.14 As its accompanying storyboard indicates, the sculpture takes its name from prehistorian Rhys Jones’ eloquent description of the primary encounter between European and indigene, when

— the discoverers struggling through the surf were met on the beaches by other people looking at them from the edges of the trees. Thus the landscape perceived by the newcomers as alien, hostile or having no coherent form, was to the indigenous people their home, a familiar place, the inspiration of dreams.15

This quotation prefaces the installation. Alongside it runs an explanatory statement:

*Edge of the Trees* is about contact. It acknowledges the indigenous place and people of Sydney, home of the Eora and many layers of occupation since 1788. Materials – stone, wood, steel – represent human presence and passing. Names – of Eora men and women, First Fleeters, plants and koori callings of place – represent shared and

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14 Peter Emmett, *Edge of the Trees*, Concept Brief, p. 3.
separate custom, memory and knowledge. A place to enter, explore, contest anew; perhaps reconciliation?¹⁶

The sculpture consists of twenty-nine pillars, one for each Eora clan which lived in the region in 1788. The pillars vary in height. They are not displayed linearly, and do not represent or create a sharp edge. Rather, they are clustered, making a forest that is reminiscent of the pre-contact edge of trees from which the sculpture takes its name.

Like a forest, Edge can be walked through, touched and listened to. The visitor can hug the ‘trees’, scuff and wear paths into the red grainy earth in which they are planted, and listen to a soundscape not of birds and rustling leaves, but of Eora place names spoken slowly, intermittently, by different indigenous voices throughout the installation.¹⁷ The pillars are made from various materials including wood, corten steel and sandstone. They represent the trees that once stood on the site; the uses of wood in Eora culture (carving, burning); the architectural evidence of the scaping of the land since 1788; and the sandstone cliffs of the Sydney region.¹⁸ Some pillars have been ‘recycled’: brought to the Museum from sites around Sydney, such as those from the recently demolished McWilliams’ wine store in Pyrmont. In many of the pillars, boxes of glass have been inserted at varying heights – some at eye level, others close to the ground, and some so high up that they are almost impossible to see, or at least to see into. Within these glass cases, ash, hair, shells and bones, honey and oxides are displayed. Each represents a different aspect of Eora culture and its links to the Sydney environment, be it in the form of human presence, body paint, sources of food or of spiritual value.¹⁹ Some pillars have been written upon. One bears zinc plates engraved with the signatures of (literate) First Fleeters, including convicts and Governor Arthur Phillip. On another the botanical names of the flora in the area at the time of settlement/invasion (taken from a pollen sample in Phillip’s garden, collected during the archaeological dig) have been burned into the wood. Both European and Eora place names have been inscribed into some of the sandstone blocks, such as ‘the point called the docks/Pa-rein-ma’, ‘Sydney Cove/War-ran’. On another pillar all of the Eora clans living in the Sydney region at the time of first contact have been listed.

Looking up towards the tops of the ‘trees’, the visitor’s eye moves beyond the roofs of the Young Street terrace houses, and scales the mirrored skyscrapers that reflect their surroundings in different, although equally powerful ways as does Edge. Edge is part of every landscape that has preceded it and with which it coexists. Through its form, content and context the sculpture effectively complicates distinctions between

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¹⁶ Edge of the Trees Storyboard.
¹⁷ The soundscape was designed by the artists in collaboration with Margaret Mahon, who has worked on the languages and songs of Aborigines in New South Wales (MoS document, Edge of the Trees, p. 6).
¹⁸ ibid., p.5.
¹⁹ ibid., p.4.
the environmental and the mathematical, the organic and the human-made, the present and the absent, the Aboriginal and the European, the natural and the cultural, and this complication looks forward to a hybrid reterritorialisation of the site of first Government House.

A hybrid landscape

*Edge* is hybrid, but not in the sense of an offspring, a child of the union of two different elements. It is not an embodiment of mixed origins, but a process of mixing itself. As a crucial part of the MoS, *Edge* questions the very notion of origins, safe (if never secure) beginnings and deceptive authenticities. *Edge* insists upon the continuity of European and indigenous identity positions at the same time as it represents their mutual exchanges in Australia over the past 200 years. It complicates both essentialist and joyfully hybrid notions of postcolonial identity. Although it confronts a hybridised historical landscape, one that reminds the viewer of the layers of landscaping that have preceded the MoS on the site of first Government House, this is a hybridity that issues from violent dispossession and conspicuous imbalances of power.

The history that is mapped by Laurence and Foley is not simply a contemporary reinscription of the land; instead it engages with the site in such a way that its previous histories are revealed and problematised. The land is no longer understood in terms of a pre-existent and empty space waiting to be ‘discovered’, explored and objectively mapped. Rather, it is self-reflexively scaped – formed, represented, placed. *Edge* embodies not only the historical contestation over the site of first Government House and the year of settlement/invasion, 1788. It also creates a site that is hybridly inscribed in the sense that it writes both indigenous and non-indigenous, past and present attachments to the land onto the material of the Sydney environment. Early European maps are etched into rough sandstone blocks; ash, ochre and shells fill corten steel beams; and Eora clan names are burned into a recycled telegraph pole. *Edge* is an interstice in and through which the scaping of the land, the

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20 Key postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has been criticised by Benita Parry among others for heralding hybridity as positive and productive (of, among other things, agency for the colonised). Parry and others have argued that Bhabha’s embrace of the concept effectively denies the indigenous subject a coherent identity position from which to speak. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994 and Benita Parry, ‘Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse’, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 36-44.

21 European settlement/invasion in Australia was based on the assumption that the land was uninhabited, or rather that its indigenous population did not use the land productively, which amounted to the same thing (see Peter Hulme, ‘The Spontaneous Hand of Nature: Savagery, Colonialism and the Enlightenment’, in Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova (eds) *The Enlightenment and its Shadows*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp. 16-34). Thus Australia was declared *terra nullius*, a doctrine that had legitimised European settlement in Australia until 1992 when it was rejected by the High Court in the landmark Mabo decision (Tim Rouse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p. 21).
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making of Australia, the creation of a sense of place, can be understood – not simply in
terms of dispossession and/through imperial mappings, but also as a place of (often
asymmetrical) exchange.

As is evident in the sculpture, landscaping is not specific to a colonising
mentality. The colonisers simply formed the land in a different way to the colonised.
The land the colonisers mapped had already been placed by indigenous Australians;
pre-contact Australia was not the mythical terra nullius. Geoff King has noted the
various layers of the Australian landscape, hypothesising that,

[In being named and so called into being, the forms of the territory
became a text within which orientation could be gained…The
particular way the Australian landscape was written by Western
explorers was arbitrary but answered the specific requirements of
colonisation. We should note the importance of a similar kind of
narrative calling-into-being of the land in indigenous aboriginal
culture…A[nother] narrative…that renders the environment
meaningful, negotiable and habitable…In neither case is the meaning
either inherent or objectively given. The landscape may thus be read as
a palimpsest of different mappings.]

Edge celebrates this palimpsest. It evokes the myriad meanings of the site of first
Government House through its remapping of this place. That the land is shaped
physically as well as narratologically, a fact that falls outside King’s immediate concern
with cultural mappings, is shown by Edge, which represents the physical effects of
narratives of place. Instead of simply renaming the site of first Government House, or
telling its story differently, Edge is conscious of the way the land changes physically
according to the story being told and the person doing the telling. In the process of
making it ‘meaningful, negotiable and habitable’ indigenous Australians acculturated the
land through, for example, firestick farming and cave paintings, and the Europeans in

22 And indigenous mappings of the land were not invisible to the colonial, cartographic eye.
Indeed, in some instances they facilitated its exploration and European translation. Historian
David Day has noted this, arguing that ‘[a]lthough not acknowledging the Aboriginal impact on
the landscape, [British surveyors] followed Aboriginal pathways through the tall grasses and
underwood, turning some of them into European tracks and then roads’ (Day, Claiming a
Continent, p. 51).
23 Geoff King, Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies, MacMillan Press, London,
1996, p. 73.
24 For a discussion of the relationship between renaming, reterritorialisation and the problems of
recognising the different attachments to particular landscapes see Tony Birch, ‘ “A land so
inviting and still without inhabitants”: erasing Koori culture from (post-) colonial landscapes’, in
Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall (eds), Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and
History in South Africa and Australia, pp. 173-188.
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Australia tended plants from ‘Home’ and built buildings like that of first Government House. To both post-1788 inhabitants of the country the land was of great importance and each shaped it to create a homely sense of place.

The sense of place created by Edge is at once diachronic (concerned with the layered history of the site) and synchretic (locating the site within a broader, regional context). The meeting of diachronic and synchretic perspectives affords a depth and breadth to this historical representation. In Edge Laurence and Foley have created a productive space. It is not a membrane through which the visitor can look in order to observe contact, but an installation that fuddles linear notions of Australian history. Instead of colonial history being represented as though it were a progressive chain of events from violent dispossession to settlement and order, this historical representation makes non-linear links between past and present, between cultures, and between mappings of the land. Through both the jumbled congregation of trees and the sculpture’s use of materials (old and new; old made new) a coalescence is created that signifies the past’s presence in the present. Some of the trees have a history outside the Museum site. They have been collected and recycled from places that have disappeared from modern Sydney. In their museological and sculptural placement at the site of first Government House these trees – in common with all museum objects – afford their previous homes and functions an after-life of sorts, recontextualised in a museum. In the MoS, Edge draws threads between and across historical layers and locations, however its historical narrative is not without direction. Rather, it has a loose linearity, commencing with first contact at the edge of trees in 1788 and culminating with the hope of reconciliation in the not too distant future.

Laurence and Foley’s representation of the Australian landscape as hybrid facilitates a spatial perception of Australia’s history of contact. As a contact zone, what Mary Louise Pratt would call a ‘social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other’, Edge resists becoming a known, bounded and contained landscape. Unlike colonial maps, which Graeme Huggan has argued sought to authoritatively mark out a ‘recognizable totality’, the meaning of Edge moves like (and with) the museum visitor – through the trees, beyond the edges, in-between

25 Here I am referring to Janet Laurence’s description of that historical edge of trees to which Edge makes reference. ‘In the original government [sic] House there was a grove of trees which acted like a membrane between white so-called culture and black so-called nature and one would look through to the other’. Janet Laurence cited in Bronwyn Watson, ‘Building on bare harmony’, Sydney Morning Herald, Monday June 28, 1994, p. 30.
26 The space of the sculpture was initially meant to be more directed, as the trees were to be placed as a fishing map of Eora clans in the Sydney region in 1788 (MoS document, Edge of the Trees, p. 2) Through the design process however, this placement had to be changed due to restrictions of space. The Eora place names were then absorbed into the soundscape by way of compensation. (Janet Laurence, pers. comm.).
comfortable and comfortably contained identities. Like the ‘discoverers, explorers and settlers’ before them, Laurence and Foley are ‘making spatial history. They [are] choosing directions, applying names, imagining goals, inhabiting the country’. Unlike their predecessors, however, whose cartographic enterprise according to Jane Jacobs ‘depended upon a technique (and a hope) of representing a stable and knowable reality in what were unknown lands inhabited by unknown people’, Laurence and Foley are making a self-reflexive spatial history of the region.

**A New Territory**

As a space of and for contact, *Edge* is not simply an intermediary. Instead, the contact with which it is concerned is a communicative one, an exchange that has complicated Australia’s history from first contact in 1788 through to the current debates over the feasibility, or indeed the desirability of reconciliation. The sculpture focuses on the effects of cross-cultural exchange. It represents a moment in-between that is not distinguished from pre- and post-contact histories of Australia, but is at once in and between them – of both, yet specific to neither.

As a sculpture in-between the designations of racial identities, *Edge* is able to elide the positions of authentic Aboriginality that are required, for example, under Native Title legislation with its burden to prove ‘authentic’ Aboriginal identity and links with the land. Instead, its representation of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ties to the land resists collapsing indigeneity, spirituality and environment, permitting instead an indigenous reclamation of the symbolic site of first Government House without an accompanying burden of proof. This is a feature of the MoS more generally. Its representations of histories and identities are complicated by the formative exchanges between cultures, places and their histories.

Laurence and Foley’s hybrid reinscription of the site of first Government House, and their resistance to essentialist subject positions, can be productively compared to the J.C. Slaughter Falls art trail in Brisbane, which combines Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal orientations of place in a duel mapping/reading of the land. Like *Edge*, the trail has a ‘directed’, pedagogical hybridity that questions colonial authority over the land without denying its connection to it. Jane Jacobs has called the trail

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31 For a discussion of the ‘in-between’ see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

32 Although the reclamation is never complete. It persists on the condition that it is a *hybrid* reclamation of the site, reclaimed by both Aboriginal and European Australians as an historical narrative of their cross-cultural contact and exchange.

33 See Jacobs, *Edge of Empire*, especially pp. 142-156.
a remapping, which is intended to herald a new territory. Its hybrid form suggests the demise of the persistent and static binary oppositions that are so fundamental to the culture of colonialism. … [It] was not produced in order to liquidate the distinction between Self and Other, but to reorder this difference in a way that empowers and liberates Aborigines… in some forms the re-Aboriginalisation of the place, although not land rights itself, can be a meaningful reterritorialisation.  

Although Edge is not solely a re-Aboriginalisation of the site of first Government House and the Sydney region, like the trail it is a ‘new territory’ that is primarily conceived in terms of the hybrid effects of cross-cultural scappings of the land.

As with any form of deconstruction, the challenge posed by Edge is a complex one that is always susceptible to the ambivalences of that which it attempts to problematise. In his Concept Brief for the installation, Peter Emmett recognised the problem, in particular, of evoking and involving nature and culture without reducing them to a binary opposition, and without defining them racially (that is by ascribing ‘nature’ to Aborigines and ‘culture’ to Europeans):

> [t]he Nature/Culture debate/dilemma is inevitably entangled in the Edge of the Trees concept. So be it. A challenge to artist, curator and museum visitor. How to represent/locate the Eora as a culture, with an intimate relation to the land, but not made of it!  

One of the most innovative ways in which Edge deconstructs the nature/culture divide is as an urban forest – not only urban in its location in Sydney’s CBD and as part of First Government House Place (an urban meeting place), but also in its construction from materials collected from around the city. Although inspired by and named after an historical edge of trees, the sculpture deviates considerably from that initial, ‘natural’ forest. Unlike their leafy equivalents, these trees are unfailingly erect. They do not branch off in different directions, their trunks do not bend irregularly, indeed their trunks are indistinguishable from their tops. They have no leaves, and the shadows they cast are uniform and do not distinguish between the various widths, heights or shapes of the individual pillars. Although a forest, Edge is grounded in the red earth so often used to signify the arid and (more importantly), the ‘empty’, ‘unformed’ space of the Australian desert – which is, ironically, earth in which few trees could actually live.

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34 ibid, p. 154, her emphasis.
35 Emmett, Edge of the Trees, Concept Brief, p. 8.
The contact and exchange between nature and culture in the sculpture is not unidirectional – that is, it is not confined to the acculturation of the land. In particular, the architectural evidence of lived place is always subject to natural forces such as wind and rain. This exchange has been included in the very construction of Edge, which has been designed to change over time. As Andrew Nimmo has noted, all of the sculpture’s materials, including its steel pillars … are … in a process of transformation. The steel is coated in a red iron oxide and is subject to the effects of wind and rain. The outer skin of oxidation serves to protect the vulnerable metal underneath but, after rain, some of it is washed away and it bleeds into the granite on the ground. Further oxidation will occur to re-cover the surface and a constant natural cycle is thereby established.

At the Edge the urban mixes with the earth and the organic meets the human-made. Wooden pillars, recycled from their industrial use, contain glass boxes filled with ochre or shells. Others are inscribed with the Latin names of local flora, part of a narrative of lived place, a scaping of the land through scientific classification. Pillars of steel have been filled with ash, and sandstone blocks – cut from the coastal cliffs of New South Wales – have been scarred with both Aboriginal and European names of place. As an urban forest Edge effectively deconstructs the nature/culture divide. Through its motif of contact and exchange, the sculpture emphasises the mingling of nature and culture that is inevitable in any inhabited land, irrespective of who its inhabitants are.

In thus resisting a reductive representation of Eora culture, Laurence and Foley have emphasised the importance of the land to both indigenous and settler cultures. As Nimmo has indicated,

[t]he work does not aim to separate the experiences of the Eora from those of the white settlers, but tackles the much more difficult issue of their interdependence, through a shared, albeit different, dependence on the land. [Laurence and Foley] propose not a simple dichotomy but a complex merging of culture and nature which stands as a metaphor for all.

37 This emphasis is not specific to the MoS, but rather fits into a growing literature on attachments to the Australian landscape across cultures. See for example, Peter Read, Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996.
This refusal to confine any people or culture to a rigid system of signs is common to Laurence and Foley’s representation of both the Eora and the Europeans and importantly assists the MoS’s deconstructive project.

However museums have always had problems in ensuring the historical representations that they make are read in the ‘right’ way and this problem applies as much to the MoS as to more didactic displays.39 For example, Julie Marcus is highly critical of the co-presence of the Aboriginal and the European, and the cultural and the natural in the MoS. She claims that in the MoS ‘Aboriginal objects [are] illuminated and displayed in ways that leave Aboriginal people where they have always been, on the margins and outside history’.40 Using the placement of Laurence and Foley’s sculpture to elucidate this point, Marcus contends that

[ had the museum been serious about recognising Aboriginal culture – Aboriginal claims to be first in the history of Sydney, Aboriginal claims to own the land – then the forest of poles would have been placed across the front of the museum so that visitors had to pass through them to get to the doors. Instead, the poles stand marginalised, as ever, leaving the heavy paving of the empty forecourt as a Nuremberg style approach to a temple of doom.41

This criticism does not acknowledge the hybrid nature of Edge and its presencing of non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal cultures on the site of first Government House. It takes no account of the sculpture’s role in the MoS’s movement towards a postcolonial understanding of Australian history as necessarily including both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures and histories. Far from being marginal to an empty, ‘Nuremberg-like’ forecourt, Edge and ‘the forecourt’ – First Government House Place – are part of the MoS’s collaborative creation of a sense of place, that ‘does not centre on the

39 The museum has been forced to deal with a visiting public who wanted their response to the Museum’s displays to be more directed than the curators had initially allowed. For its first three years, installations at the MoS were accompanied only by a board of historical quotations (as well as a basic Museum Guide in pamphlet form and labels for many, although not all, individual objects), taken from texts contemporary to the first years of European settlement in Australia as well as more contemporary works, both critical and fictional. Apparently, and perhaps not surprisingly, these deliberately non-explanatory exhibition guides troubled many visitors, whose museological literacies did not often extend beyond more traditional, typological or chronological methods of order and display. In response to these concerns, the MoS has devised boards to be placed beside these citations, to act as a mediator between visitor, installation and the quoted historical texts.


41 ibid, pp.5-6.

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divisive elements of our shared history, but concentrates instead on the links that draw together the various cultural groups and the natural world they inhabit and exploit.\(^\text{42}\)

As a museum object and an historical representation, *Edge*’s frame of reference is necessarily a limited one. Laurence and Foley were compelled to choose their emphasis, one in keeping with the installation’s allegorical depiction of contact. As a consequence, their focus on the in-between moments and effects of contact and exchange between Aborigines and Europeans has somewhat simplified Australia’s race relations. In *Edge* the violence of dispossession is perhaps not given its due – although some critical responses to the sculpture have made a connection between Laurence and Foley’s ‘trees’ and Aboriginal burial poles (a connection denied by the Museum), and others have understood the ash and human hair in one of the glass boxes to be a reference to the Holocaust.\(^\text{43}\) Nevertheless, as Nimmo has noted, there is a certain ‘sadness’ about *Edge* – perhaps inspired by the knowledge that is brought to the installation by the visitor about past, present and (no doubt) future racial violence – a knowledge that haunts every Australian’s sense of her/his history, be it expressed in a defensive diatribe on ‘black armband history’, in the personal signing of a book for ‘National Sorry Day’, in quiet contemplation, or in public political activism.

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Through installations like *Edge of the Trees*, the MoS represents a shared Australian past that is important to both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. As a symbol of contact in and beyond 1788, it tells a story of cross-cultural exchange in the light of current concerns about republicanism, land rights and reconciliation. However as a museum that seeks to incorporate multiple historical voices, the MoS grapples with the responsibilities of museological display, which it meets through a cross-cultural collaboration with indigenous curators and artists, as well as by working self-reflexively in an attempt to subvert some of the techniques and technologies of more conventional museum displays.

Although the story the MoS tells is primarily an historical one, its historicisation is not confined to the material objects on display, but includes the processes of its collection (through archaeology), interpretation (through history) and display (through architecture and art). In keeping with new museological practices, and like Susan Pearce’s ‘meta-exhibitions’ – ‘exhibitions of collections which reveal the nature of themselves’ – the MoS places the museum in history as well as history in the

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museum.\textsuperscript{44} It is knowingly part of a history of representation, and is an attempt to represent the past in terms of present concerns in Australia. Through its deconstruction of reductive binary oppositions, the MoS hopes to extend historical understandings of Australian identity in the late twentieth century. No longer either (or only) Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, with or without formative links to the land, the MoS presents Australia and Australians as hybrid effects of colonisation. For coming to grips with living in what Jane Jacobs and Ken Gelder have called ‘uncanny Australia’ (where ‘in this moment of decolonisation, what is “ours” is also potentially, or even always already “theirs” – the one is becoming the other, the familiar is becoming strange’) requires symbolic as well as practical strategies.\textsuperscript{45} The MoS is such a symbolic strategy.
