

The Improvised Dwelling - the Dwelling of Improvisations.

At a bar in Berlin, the improvising pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach waxed lyrical as he recalled his trip to Dangar Island while on tour in Australia in 1983. He described his adventures to a fellow musician: "We set out in a tiny boat across the water, landing on a beach, up and up we



climbed through the dense undergrowth and there - there in the middle of the jungle was this strange improvised house.”

Many have tried to describe improvised music with metaphors both prescient and tall - the list is long but a few pithy statements offer the following: it is like a conversation without subject matter, a game, a gamble in which everyone wins, abstract expressionism, the centrality of instrument, liquid architecture even. But no one, to my knowledge, ever described improvised music as the act of building a house - putting up a temporary tent maybe, but a house is an intended permanent structure of shelter if it is anything.

With my then wife Kristine, we bought a block of land on Dangar Island in 1978. It cost \$7,000. When I looked the other day, I saw a similar block going for \$750,000. This erstwhile sanctuary is not far enough from Sydney to be immune from the real estate pathology that dominates modern desires. Back then, ‘Dangar’ was an outlier for alternative lifestyle seekers, alcoholic fishermen, the poor, and the occasional professional who’d fallen in love with the intoxicating location of the massive Hawkesbury River estuary, idyllic hidden coves, and sandstone cliffs of grandeur and natural calligraphic inscription. I include myself in this category. However, being a musician meant, unlike other ‘professionals’, I had little to no money for building a house once the land had been purchased.

The block came with a fibro shack but no drainage except a stand pipe at the top of the land with a tap attached to it. Amazingly enough, the shack did have electricity. I’m not sure how, or when that happened, or whether it was legal, but it was a gift horse to be accepted, stroked, and put to work. The first necessity was getting a phone hooked up - an absolute requirement for a musician. “which tree you want it under, mate?” remarked a grinning man from the telephone company who happened to be visiting the island one day.

Around the other side of Dangar stood a caravan that gave the depressing appearance of many years of immobility. On enquiry at the post office (Dangar Island’s main source of news and innuendo), I ascertained that no one seemed to own it. The postmaster suggested that if I could move it, ownership being nine-tenths of the law. Only one vehicle was allowed on the island and that was the ageing LandRover belonging to the Danger Island Fire Brigade. On a particularly rainy winter’s day, having failed to inflate the tyres, the postmaster and I managed to drag the recalcitrant caravan to our block, narrowly avoiding losing the whole caboodle over the cliff. After much fumigation, the caravan became a temporary bedroom.

Need a house? I set to improvising one. It never crossed my mind to apply for planning permission, because it was a given that most of the dwellings on Dangar Island were DIY and illegally built. “You’d never get away with it in the UK” announced Evan Parker (saxophonist with the Schlippenbach Trio), and he was probably correct - or any other supposedly first world country I might have added. Other European improvising musicians who came to stay over the following years made much the same observation.

The first room I built was the bathroom. I dug a large hole, deposited one of the Island’s selection of broken discarded refrigerators in it, and named said hole ‘main drainage’. Attached to this hole were the PVC drainage pipes connected to the bathroom. But for a bathroom, we need water, and behold on the island lived an ex-plumber who now wished to be left alone as a latent hippy. “I only work for wages” he continually mumbled through his stoned persona. We connected many brass pipes to a water heater and other future-imagined facilities. Plumbing is a wonderful activity; pipes can go anywhere you want them to, particularly around unexpected corners. Under cover of darkness but lit by a full moon, we put on our swimmers and removed the tap on the stand pipe at the top of the block. A geyser of six to ten meters burst into the night sky - such was the pressure in the pipe caused by the giant mains water tank sitting on the top of the island. It took all of our combined strength to force our pipe onto the stand pipe. After much vernacular, we slowed the flow of water to drips and eventually stopped even the drip, drip. We had water connected and causal celebrations duly erupted.

Some years later, a guy from the water company was wandering around checking his customer list on the Island and, on discovering our illegal subterfuge, came and knocked on the door (we had a door but no connected wall at the time) with a look of puzzlement: “It says on my list that

there is no house here.” “Oh really?” I countered, “You can see there is a house, been here for years, probably a simple oversight, I suggest you upgrade your list.” And so he did, we becoming finally legal consumers of public water.

After hair-raising moments trying to install public electricity to new parts of the house, the post-master revealed yet another string to his bow: he had a licence to carry out domestic wiring. I never checked to read the truth on this piece of paper, but we wired and wired with positive results - even the electric toilet switched to functional.

If I had any idea of what I was doing at all, then it was the inclination towards *regional architecture* - something I had studied in art history - the idea that a building was built out of local materials and fitted into a local landscape and ecology. As the ice moved and scraped and the sea level rose, Dangar Island had determined to put up a brave defence to this geological bulldozer, so the island was littered with many rocks of useful shapes and sizes. A natural compact wall of fixed three-meter-high rocks became the back wall of my intended house. Many other large sand stones were levered into place to become the front and side walls of the construction. Ready mixed cement was transported to the Island in my two-and-a-half metre long tiny tin boat. Except for a couple of guilty occasions, I refrained from pinching building sand from the beach (as others clearly did). In fact everything had to come by the tiny ‘tinny’ - corrugated iron, cut glass, wood, a fridge, the proverbial kitchen sink, a pot-bellied stove, and even a donated ship’s piano (I ended up with two pianos, one kept outside on the block like a guard dog). Sometimes the boat’s gun-wales cleared only a few inches above the river; life jackets were for wimps. Even with numerous neighbour’s help, I became extremely fit, and with regard to homemade houses and creating fire-breaks on what was a giant hazard of a total island bonfire, the community worked as an exchange scheme - everyone chipped in. Occasionally, the free and easy character of Dangar Island came up short, like the day someone walked off with my prized AKG Microphones and ‘harvest ready’ dope plants.

This was also a time and place where the assembling of house building skills (or lack thereof) fed directly into the desires and applications associated with homemade musical instrument building (The Relative Violins). There was often very little difference in terms of tools, materials, and outcomes between the two activities, the environment also being a key integrated (indeed unavoidable) factor. For example, a piece of galvanised down pipe became the resonating chamber for my *Tromba Mariner*. This was my literal take on the medieval *trompette marine*, and spent its performing life attached to my boat much to the confused looks on the local fishermen’s faces who thought I had a scientific device for attracting the big ones that get away.

It was on one of those sublime sunny days of Sydney that I was admiring the completion of the new corrugated iron roof. Walking backward across the old roof of the fibro shack, I forgot that there was a strategically placed roof window which I managed to step on, falling through, although painfully not all the way through, thus severing my thigh with a shard of broken glass. It was a bloody mess. There was a doctor of sorts who lived on the island but spent most of his life as a part-time explorer with business entrepreneur Dick Smith in the Antarctic. He took one look, said he felt ill, and that I would have to go to the hospital. Only problem was that the accident took place on a day of a king low tide. The river was mostly a two-kilometre mud flat, and it was through that brown sludge that two women friends from the beach pushed me and my tourniqueted leg to the boat ramp on the other side. By the time I got to the hospital, it was about five hours after the accident, late on a Friday afternoon, and I was in agony. The surgeon was in no mood for a new patient, he would be late for his golf (he grumbled), and so two layers of stitches were rushed into my leg while a nurse kept demanding my number for the health insurance (of which I had none).

Hobbling around on crutches for the next few months, I had time to consider how the improvised abode was going. Apart from some dodgy issues when it rained (I had a little channel cut under the large rocks which could cope with an acceptable downpour but not a total deluge), there was no shortcut to the kitchen sink (one of the most used part of the house). To get from the back veranda to the kitchen (a few inches away) involved a walk around the entire dwelling. Under the raised bedroom was the ‘cave’ area, which was quickly becoming a zoo for a rich selection of creepy crawlers. The electric toilet had a certain aroma. Summer nights were spent around the insect zapper or under the mosquito net. Yes, it felt very *regional* in structure and lifestyle. My final

construction was a large deck that pushed out into the subtropical rainforest. All the free wood used in this impressive(!) addition came from a derelict house a few blocks away - entropy as resource.

Trying to integrate this DIY life with that of a professional musician had its tests. The weather at its worst was not interested in helping with the challenges of setting off for gigs with a boat load of gear whether the tide was low or high. On a couple of occasions, massive storms with several meter high waves required me to spend the night in my van on the mainland. The current of the river met the incoming tide from the sea with a raging passion, and Danger Island was right in the middle of this. Sheer fatigue overtook me once driving back from a gig halfway up the central coast. On one of the last bends heading into the marina where my boat was moored, I fell deeply asleep. Even after I had rolled the van, I didn't immediately wake up. My attention (upside down in my seat belt) was stirred by the smell of petrol escaping and an elderly lady yelling at me through her bedroom window "Hey, whatcha doing, it's 4 in the morning!" After only a few minutes, a team of sleepless locals were on hand, helping me right the vehicle. With an alarming wobble in the front forks, I drove the short trip to the river. Looking back, I see that I lived in a state of precariousness: shit happened, but in general, life on Danger Island was a fecund period imbued with that sense of immortality that defines the young, until one day the tight bond of permanence and location was shaken.

It was when one of the empty blocks next door got sold and we all found out where our properties actually began and ended. This new bloke had money. Not only did he have the nerve to get the whole place officially surveyed, but he flew his prefabricated house onto the island by helicopter - hiring yet another helicopter to film the aerial horror show. Oh dear! Half my house was built diagonally on someone else's land, although the owner did not know that, as he had closed off the back of his block with a wire fence to keep his chooks in check. I had wrongly assumed that fence to be the border of both his and my land. This guy was nice enough, an alcoholic fisherman short of a few teeth who was very happy to find out that he had an extra triangle of land he previously had not considered he owned. Negotiations took place. I offered money, we drank, with a toothy shake of the head he would indicate a no-deal, I would explain the logic of my mistake, he said the house would have to come down eventually but he wasn't in a hurry, we drank more. This headache-inducing ceremonial took place at regular intervals over the next years. To him, such a free gift from the hard and uncaring universe should not be declined.

The negotiations never succeeded, and life and my career moved on (to Berlin). The block with small *regional* house was sold, and the dwelling pulled down. Some years later, I was visiting the island and couldn't resist a peep at what had been home for nine years. Much of the stone work was left, and it had become green and overgrown with subtropical vegetation, giving the impression of one of those Victorian follies where a faked and artificially aged ruin was inserted into an unsuspecting landscape. So much for *regional* architecture. And as for improvisation as a method of house building? Possibly not one of my most successful ventures, but not one to forget either.

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