

ECHO WORKS

The manufacture of the Australian beach

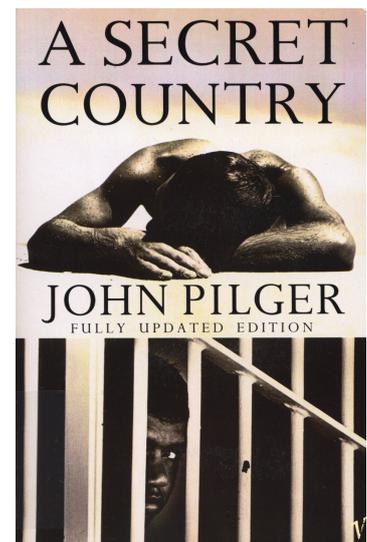
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This research was undertaken and presented by Agent of Change Oskar Johanson for It's About Time – the 10th Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, 2022.

The beach occupies what can seem an unimpeachable place in the Australian imaginary. In *A Secret Country* (1989), Australian political journalist John Pilger argued that the beach was a place given inimitable qualities by the 'smell and taste' of salt and sand and (occasional) raw sewerage, the 'diamond light' of December sun, and the multicultural and diverse characters that congregated there, and who, in descending upon the sand, were freed of the strictures and discrimination of urban life¹. On the beach, Pilger claimed, there were 'no proprietorial rights'; the beach was owned by the state, which is to say the people. Pilger used these heterotopic qualities to suggest that the beach was Australia's 'true democracy' and that a 'spirit of equality [began] at the promenade steps'.

These claims were made in contradistinction to Pilger's piercing critique of the society that began on at the top of those steps. In the many ways in which Pilger described the idyll of the Australian beach, he implied the inverse was true for wider Australian society: that it was corrupt, racist, monocultural, stuck-up, sexually repressed, insular, and addled by its obsession with private property. This conceit was visually represented on the front cover of the book; on the top of the cover, Max Dupain's *Sunbather*, an 'Australian icon', and a figure with which Pilger deeply personally

¹ Pilger, John, *A Secret Country* (1989), London: Vintage, 1992, pp.9-14



Front cover of *A Secret Country* by John Pilger.

² *The Guardian Australia*, 'The Killing Times'. Last updated 16 March 2022. Available [online](#).

³ Taylor, Africa, 'Australian Bodies, Australian Sands' in *Noble, Gregory, Lines in the sand: Multiculturalism and national belonging*, The Institute of Criminology Series 28, Institute of Criminology Press, 2009.

⁴ Stronach, Megan, Adair, Daryl, and Maxwell, Hazel, "Djabooly-djabooly: why don't they swim?": the ebb and flow of water in the lives of Australian Aboriginal women' in *Annals Of Leisure Research 2019*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Routledge, pp.286–304.

⁵ Stronach, Megan, Michelle O'Shea, and Maxwell, Hazel, 'The open Australian beach is a myth: not everyone can access these spaces equally', *The Conversation*, January 21, 2021. Available [online](#).

identified, and, on the bottom, an undated and non-located photograph of an unnamed Aboriginal Australian boy behind bars.

Yet, for many Australians, including those who do not look like the Sunbather, Pilger's identification of the radicality and freedom of the Australian beach will be baffling, or *eu-topian*, in the sense that, for them, it might never have existed, and could never exist.

After all, the Australian beach was where the invasion began. Cook's crew first stepped ashore at Kurnell beach on the north side of Botany Bay. The beach at Manly Cove was where Governor Philip received a spear through the shoulder searching for Bennelong. Throughout the nineteenth century, the topography of the beach was itself pressed into the service of murder, when at the beaches of Fraser Island and Indian Head, and countless others, people were driven into the surf and made to drown at the point of British guns². The beach was thus the site of the beginning of the theft of not only the continent but its people; the first iteration of a frontier of violence that was eventually pushed deep into the continent.

Conversely, as the colony developed, and out of that colony the nation of Australia emerged, sanitised, glorified visions of the colonised beach came to undergird Australia's mythos, moving effortlessly, as Affrica Taylor observes, from redcoats hoisting the Union Flag to the red costume of the lifesaver, from the salt-encrusted back of the Sunbather to the high camp of the thong float at the Sydney Olympics closing ceremony³. Taylor writes that it is in this sense the beach is a 'cultural construct', a means of shoring up certain, privileged Australian identities, a 'White native' male identity in particular, and which in its practice is categorically exclusionary. In stark contrast to Pilger's heady vision of the beach as ownerless, this identity demands the 'proprietary enclosure' of the beach. To the extent the beach is for the Australian, it must be secured against the Other — be they Indigenous, Muslim, non-heteronormative, or in any other way divergent.

In Australia, this enclosure is always operating to dispossess and degrade the people who have since time immemorial been its custodians. At the Australian beach, this violence was targeted at Aboriginal women in particular, who, as the colony developed, were denied the aquatic practices, such as swimming, playing, and collecting food, they had always practiced⁴. When, decades after the first wave of the invasion, Aboriginal men and women were admitted to the beach, it was in the form of segregated swimming races, an arrangement that underscored that the coloniser now dominated the territory⁵.



The figure of the male, white lifesaver, iconic enough by the 1930s to be the bearer of the flag on the occasion of the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Image: 'Sydney bridge celebrations poster' (1932), Douglas Annand and Arthur Whitmore/Australian National Maritime Museum.

The proprietorial enclosure of the beach by the coloniser has in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries expanded to target many other Othered communities. In 2005, racist slogans were carved into the sand of Cronulla beach following riots and conflict between Lebanese Australians and Anglo-Australians, egged on by the media. During these events, the beach was both territory and media, a sandbox in which to cosplay the re-conquest of White Australia and a text to be scrawled upon, to broadcast nativist screeds. More recently, ocean pools and baths have been a site of excluding transpeople as part of a contrived culture war⁶. This sorry and hateful scapegoating is set against a wider history of queer spaces developing in peripheries upon the periphery, such as at baths and pools beyond or on the edge of the beach, in response to the homophobic violence practiced there.

The beach in Australia has thus consistently functioned as a zone of conflict, not in spite of this history *but as a function of it* — and the mythology into which it has been folded. This condition of the beach is critical to foreground in any examination of spatial responses to climate change, which in Australia tend towards the remaking and re-instrumentalisation of the beach again. No ground in Australia is neutral ground, least of those parts upon which hinges the country's most dominant, fragile, and paranoid identity.

Australia's built environment clings to the rim of the continent, its land value magnified by proximity to the coast. The beach is therefore at the core of urban, often privileged Australian imaginaries (although many beaches remain wild places, beyond the city). This fact has brought the city and its wealthiest residents into direct interface and interference with the sea, a condition that serves, on the one hand, to situate those residents closer to the symbolic heartland of the Australian settler-colonial regime, and with it all the associated national mythology of the beach, but which, on the other hand, has also made these residents' properties the frontline of catastrophic climate change. As the Earth system continues to destabilise, greater energy storage in the atmosphere, combined with rising sea levels, increasingly makes this interface unviable. At the same time, the countermeasures taken by those who choose to fight these effects, to preserve their access to the beach and guarantee the supremacy of private property, are proving to be increasingly unreasonable and destructive, representative of the wider ideological and imaginative deficit of the settler-colonial project of Australia.

This tendency plays out in Tweed Heads, in the northernmost region of New South Wales. There, in the twentieth century, breakwaters were built to interrupt the ocean-borne transport of

⁶ Gallagher, Alex, 'The McIver's Ladies Baths Situation Proves (Again) How Fraught Beaches Are For Trans Bodies', *Pedestrian*, January 14, 2021. Available [online](#).



Max Dupain, *Sunbaker* [detail], 1937, gelatin silver photograph, 37.9 x 42.8 cm.



E. Phillips Fox, *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770* [detail], 1902, oil on canvas, 192.2 x 265.4 cm

⁷ Gordon, Angus, Britton, Greg, and Dickenson, Todd, 'Collaroy Beach, 2016. D Day Storm – Lessons learnt' in proceedings of the NSW Coastal Conference, Coffs Harbour, Australia, 9-11 November 2016.

sand across the mouth of the Tweed River. This was done to keep the river navigable, but had the effect of accelerating the erosion of the beaches of the South Gold Coast, further north along the coast, as these beaches became choked of what had hitherto been a regular supply of fresh sand. That access to the beach could be lost was deemed unacceptable by government, not least because of the importance of these beaches to the local tourist economy. The solution was a permanently operating sand pump, the so-called Tweed Sand Bypass, which since 2005 has sucked up sand from the Tweed harbour entrance, pumped it in pipes a kilometre north and across state boundaries, and dumped it on the South Gold Coast beaches. It is through this machine — an intervention that does not address a so-called natural process but the effects of an anthropogenic intervention elsewhere — we can understand that the beach of the Australian mythos, in addition to being a site of conflict, is also an *entirely manufactured* place. It must constantly be upkept, a fact that jars with the image of the beach as a natural Australian asset, a free gift of nature that takes care of itself.

Another beach that captures these conditions in vivid detail is Collaroy-Narrabeen Beach, the longest and most central in a cycloidal chain of beaches that runs from the mouth of Sydney Harbour to the mouth of Broken Bay, the northern limit of Sydney. The beach is lined with a series of suburbs built on the stolen land of the Gari people. These suburbs constitute the federal district of Mackellar, named in part after Dorethea Mackellar, the poet whose work *My Country* is a staple of Australian geo-myth. Its electors voted right-wing in every election until the election of a so-called 'teal' independent candidate (conservative but concerned with the climate) in 2020.

The changing political landscape of these suburbs can be in part understood in the context of the events of 2016. Between the 5th and 7th of June, an 'East Coast Low', a type of intense storm well known on the east coast of Australia, tracked southwards across the city, generating a strong, southward sweep along the beach and producing currents up to 2 metres a second⁷. The storm's effects were amplified by its spanning the peaks of two high tides. In one short section, the storm removed approximately 14,000 cubic metres of sand, dumping it beyond the surf zone. Where there were ad hoc seawalls and coastal defences, these collapsed, undermining the line of houses that had been built up to the very edge of the beach. Balconies, patios, gardens, and entire pools were ripped from their foundations and dragged across the beach. Sewerage mains, buried under the sand, were uncovered and broken apart, leaving raw sewerage to spill out onto the beach. In



Revetment boulders at Collaroy,
March 2021. Photo: Oskar Johanson.



Tetrahedral concrete blocks such as these were cast during the Second World War to be deployed along Australian coastlines and frustrate amphibious assaults. They were moved to Collaroy-Narrabeen beach only after the war for defence against a different enemy: coastal erosion. It is auspicious that the storm of 2016 landed on D-Day, the commemoration of another amphibious assault, and for which the storm is now known in certain literature.

Photo: Oskar Johanson.

the aftermath, residents were evacuated by the police, for fear that their properties would collapse entirely or a gas line explode.

Nobody died, but one can imagine how these residents would have been rocked by the experience of being escorted out of their home by police (and when properties that would have been valued in the many millions of dollars saw that value literally crumble into the sea). As various temporary measures for protecting the houses from further decay were put in place, work began on drawings for a coastal defence system to be built on behalf of the owners of 10 properties along one of the worst-affected stretches of the beach. The council had already stipulated that no coastal defences that diminished the beach would be accepted, so this solution was to be entirely built within private land.

By 2018, plans for the wall were lodged, with written submissions from the residents in support of the project. A common refrain in the submissions was that residents were 'entitled' to protect their land. Another was that, in fact, by constructing this wall residents were performing a service in defending the busy public road that ran behind their properties⁸. Although we can question this entitlement, the residents were in a sense sanctioned by the council, who, in eventually agreeing to the plans, as well financing the construction by 10% (with another 10% coming from the federal government), legitimated the claim that such a major private work for narrow, private gain would not damage the beach, its amenity, or public access⁹. In defending the council's approval, a spokesperson pointed out that 'Danish' engineers, as well as local experts, had approved the plans¹⁰. But this defence was late in coming. The process by which the council received and then approved the plans for the wall was, at no point, publicly exhibited, and available only through the council's planning website, a labyrinthine and technocratic place. Accordingly, the first many constituents knew about the plans was when construction began in 2021.

When the first stretch of the works was completed in 2022, the reaction from the community was outrage. Capped by a blue-green glass balustrade, a concrete wall descends four metres vertically from the ground floor at the seaward edge of the properties. Here, it is reinforced and supported by a concrete footing 1.2 metres deep and 0.6 metres wide, and which itself, on the seaward side, is reinforced by a substantial line of boulders. This footing sits on a continuous line of concrete piles that extend a further 5 metres into the sand. Attached at regular intervals along the footing and extending away from the sea downwards diagonally are permanent screw pile anchors 7.5 metres long. Cast into setback sections along the wall are private access steps for the residents.

⁸ See Development Application DA2018/1289, Northern Beaches Council planning portal.

⁹ 'Understanding the Collaroy seawall challenge', Northern Beaches Council website news page, 26 November 2021. Available [online](#).

¹⁰ Kurmelovs, Royce, 'A 7m wall has gone up on a Sydney beach: are we destroying public space to save private property?', *The Guardian Australia*, 24 October 2021. Available [online](#).

¹² During storm erosion, sand is moved from the beach to further back behind the surf zone, where it can accumulate in sand banks. In calmer weather, this sand slowly returns to the beach.

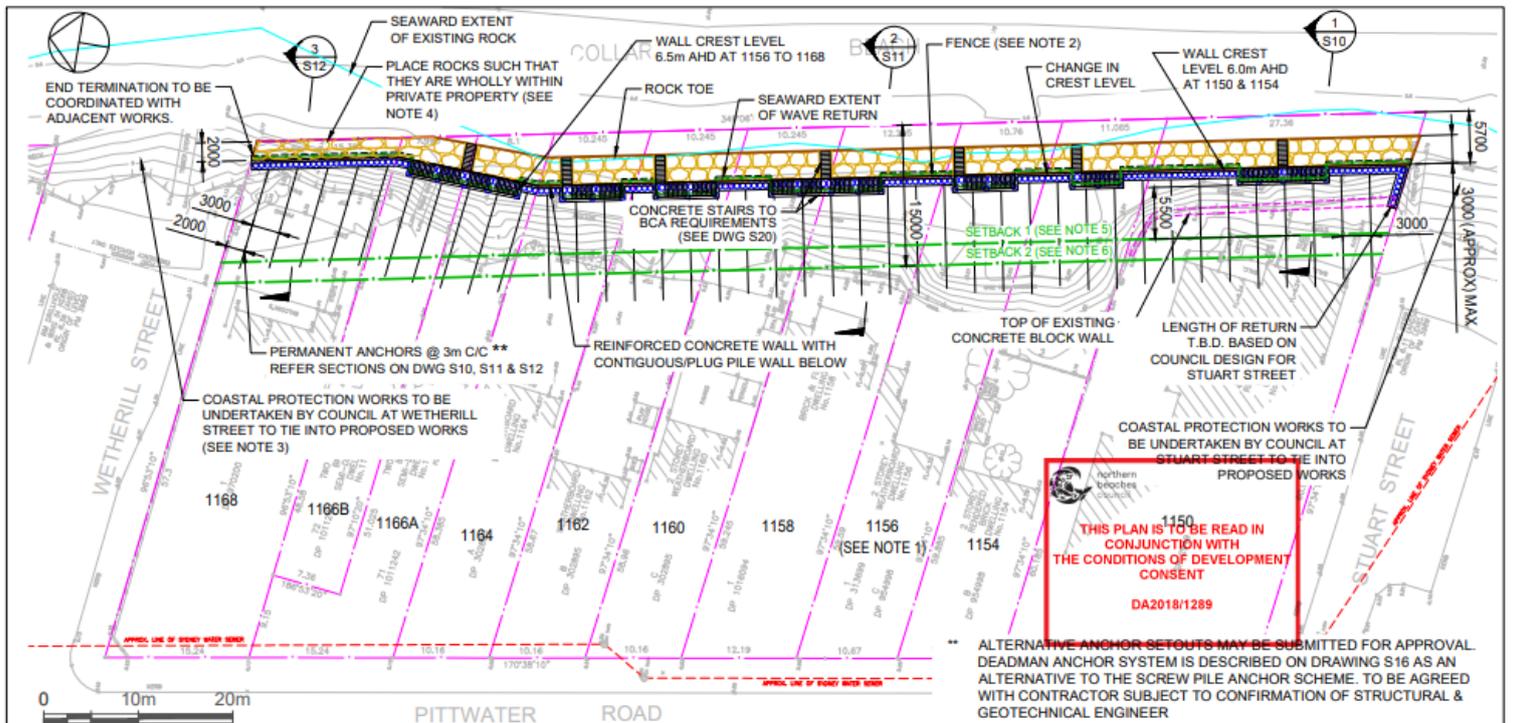
Although designed to be buried by sand above the boulders, during the winter storms of 2022 the beach's top layers of sand were dragged away, exposing the footing and the boulders along with broken pipe, builder's materials, and chunks of the boulder. After these events, one could observe that, at times, no beach remained between the wall and the surf. It had largely disappeared¹².

In a sense, the story is straightforward. The residents wanted protection, not only to secure themselves against the trauma of 2016 but presumably also to protect the value of the assets they inhabit. They felt entitled to secure this protection for themselves and felt entitled to compensation from the state to do so. On both of these senses of entitlement, the state was partially obliging, but in the interest of the public the state also stipulated that such protections were to be built within the property boundaries of those residents. Wishing to preserve as much of the value of their properties as possible, the residents then demanded a solution from their engineers that would occupy the smallest possible footprint: a vertical wall. But a vertical wall is the most damaging form of architecture for the beach. Whereas a form that gently slopes up and away from the sea, like a dune, allows waves to roll up and dissipate their energy, a vertical wall reflects waves back to the sea with almost all of their energy, allowing them to drag the sand of the beach with them. This architectural fact is the key to the failure of the council's decision-making. Private works they sanctioned will now continue to damage and narrow a public good, despite being limited within the bounds of private property.



Charles Meere, *Australian beach pattern* [detail], 1940, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122.0 cm.

Threading together the wall, the pump, and thousands of other coastal defence schemes across the country is the overriding conviction that the Australian coast, to the extent it remains within the domain of the urban, is a territory to be dominated and produced, even to the point of self-annihilation, at which point it must be re-produced. It is the privileging of one sense of time — the time of real estate, of the financial cycle and value appreciation — over the deep and slow time by which sand is transported along the length of the continent, and from the floor of the continental shelf to the coast, and back again. The entanglement of this architectural chauvinism with its identitarian counterpart, and the reservoir of colonial imagination from which it springs, must be understood if we are to engage in serious and just adaptation to catastrophic climate change. The beach, after all, is a model heterotopia; although it has not yet delivered it, the beach contains within it the promise of a counter society, and with it, counter architectural practices that more than likely will be more about the removal of buildings than the fortification of so-called 'proprietary rights'.



1. 1156 IS A DOUBLE LOT. COMMON LOT BOUNDARY IS NOT SHOWN
 2. ALL FENCING SHALL COMPLY WITH STATE ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING POLICY (EXEMPT AND COMPLYING DEVELOPMENT CODES) 2008 AND BUILDING CODE OF AUSTRALIA (BCA)
 3. COUNCIL PROTECTION WORKS AT WETHERILL STREET EXPECTED TO BE OF SAME DESIGN, SO NO RETURN IS NEEDED ON NORTHERN BOUNDARY OF 1168
 4. AT 1168, ROCK SHALL BE SELECTED AND POSITIONED AS DIRECTED BY COASTAL ENGINEER. LONGER ROCK DIMENSION MAY NEED TO BE ALONGSHORE TO FIT ROCKS WITHIN PROPERTY
 5. SETBACK 1 IS A MAINTENANCE SETBACK. NO FUTURE STRUCTURES, EXCEPT READILY RELOCATABLE OR REMOVABLE STRUCTURES THAT DO NOT INTERRUPT VIEWS, TO BE CONSTRUCTED SEAWARD OF THIS LINE, TO ENABLE CLEAR PASSAGE OF CONSTRUCTION PLANT AS REQUIRED FOR FUTURE PROTECTION WORKS MAINTENANCE
 6. SETBACK 2 IS THE RECOMMENDED MOST SEAWARD SETBACK FOR FUTURE DWELLINGS (SEE NOTE 7), CONSISTENT WITH THE MOST SEAWARD ALIGNMENT OF EXISTING DWELLINGS AT 1150 AND 1168. LOW LEVEL STRUCTURES THAT DO NOT INTERRUPT VIEWS, SUCH AS DECKS AND POOLS, ARE RECOMMENDED TO POTENTIALLY BE PERMISSIBLE IN THE AREA BETWEEN SETBACK 1 AND SETBACK 2 (SEE NOTE 7)
 7. SETBACKS AND DEVELOPMENT TYPES ADOPTED ARE SUBJECT TO MERIT ASSESSMENT AGAINST OTHER PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS (INCLUDING VIEWS AND OVERSHADOWING) AND SPECIFIC ENGINEERING (COASTAL, STRUCTURAL AND GEOTECHNICAL) ADVICE (INCLUDING POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE PROTECTION WORKS)

UPGRADED COASTAL PROTECTION WORKS AT 1150-1168 PITTWATER ROAD COLLAROY NSW

COASTAL ENGINEERING DESIGN:
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 18 Reynolds Cres. Beacon Hill NSW 2100
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 peter@hortoncoastal.com.au
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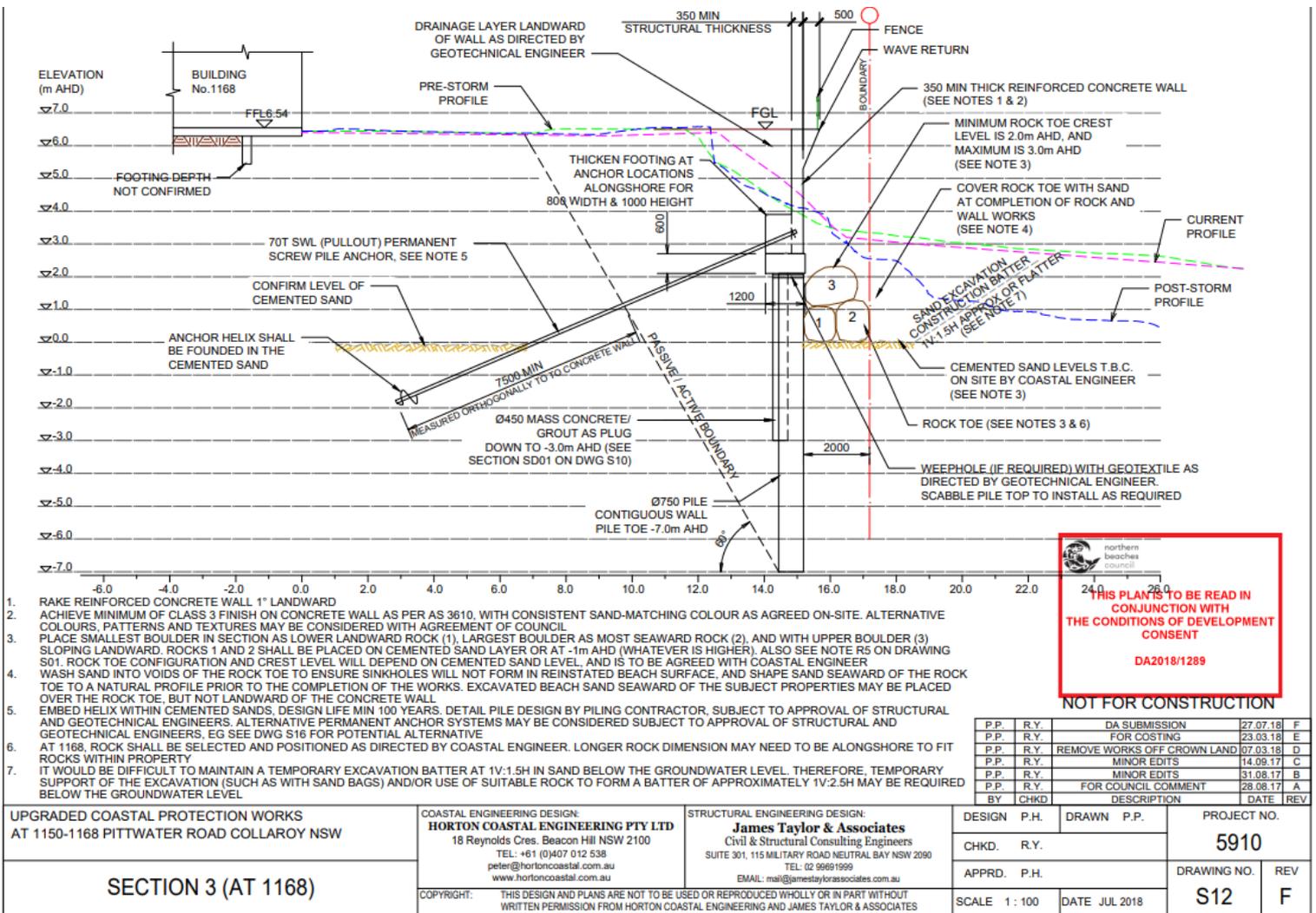
STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING DESIGN:
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DESIGN	P.H.	DRAWN	P.P.	PROJECT NO.
CHKD.	R.Y.			5910
APPRD.	P.H.			DRAWING NO. S02
SCALE 1:400	DATE JUL 2018			REV F

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

P.P.	R.Y.	DESCRIPTION	DATE	REV
		DA SUBMISSION	27.07.18	F
		FOR COSTING	23.03.18	E
		REMOVE WORKS OFF CROWN LAND	07.03.18	D
		MINOR EDITS	14.09.17	C
		MINOR EDITS	31.08.17	B
		FOR COUNCIL COMMENT	28.06.17	A





The sea wall at Collaroy, March 2021. Photo: Oskar Johanson.