



Figure 7. Supreme Court, Vanuatu. Photo by William Rodman, with permission.

shaped by local versions of imperial cultures.⁶ For colonial officials in the New Hebrides, the illusion of empty space was so complete that to the earliest administrators there seemed to be no place at all to live. The symbolic dimensions of housing as a metaphor for social status, and even as a metaphor of the self, are clear in the situation that faced Hugh Hastings Romilly. He was appointed Her British Majesty's first consul for the New Hebrides in June 1888, but he didn't receive his commission until five months later. Then, at the end of December 1889, when the seals and stamps finally arrived that would allow him to collect fees and otherwise do his work, his position was suddenly abolished. Romilly found all of this frustrating, but especially his housing, or lack thereof: "[i]n the New Hebrides themselves there was no house available in which he could have lived in accordance with the traditions of civilized life."⁷

Romilly's dilemma—how to find suitable housing—was remarkably hard to solve. Three dimensions of the problem need further discussion here. First, administratively speaking, there was only empty space. Second, for Romilly's purposes, the New Hebrides, while empty of suitable housing, was filled with inappropriate lodgings. Bamboo houses and other native accommodation were everywhere, but they simply would not do. Third, he tried to avoid staying in the houses of settlers because he suspected them of engaging in precisely the illegal activities he was supposed to police.

The first part of Romilly's problem was that there was no designated administrative space in the New Hebrides. While there were numerous settlers and mis-