Melissa Bright

Pragmatic poetry
Melissa Bright is the owner and founding director of MAKE architecture—an emerging practice that has already gathered a collection of built work that displays a striking conversation with Melbourne architectural heritage. With its work predominantly in residential building—alterations and addition—the careful understanding of occupational use is complemented by an intrinsic interest in material specificity.

MAKE thoughtfully approaches projects with the ambition that they do more, offer more; for the client, the neighbourhood and the broader site context. This reflects Mel’s belief that every project is a privilege and opportunity to contribute positively to the fabric of its place. Believers in quality not quantity, MAKE looks for delight and efficiencies in design and focuses on ways buildings can make our lives better. In this interview the quality of Mel’s deep design thinking certainly shines through.
I felt like there was more opportunity to make a difference in architecture. That it is less about fashion and style than other design professions. Architecture has an ability to make a contribution to our cities and the way people live. On one end of the scale you need to keep the rain out, at the other we want to create something that gives delight—light, space and poetry.
From the ground up

I loved art and design in high school and at the last minute I changed my university preferences from engineering to architecture. I realised that with architecture I could combine both the rational and the creative.

Even at university I still wasn’t sure and I was initially a pretty average student. I studied at RMIT, and at the time it felt like a very overwhelming place. I was straight out of high school and often felt out of my depth. Design studios during first year were run as vertical studios, so I was in classes with students that had already been there for three years. Many were mature age students, some who had been trying to get into the degree for many years, they were really focused and happy to be there. The quality of work they did was amazing. For a long time I stayed quiet—too unsure to say much at university. I took a long time to build confidence and find my voice. I learnt that good design is about perseverance and testing, more about hard work than anything else—1% inspiration 99% perspiration. Things started to click and architecture slowly got under my skin. By the end of the degree I was very committed and determined to do well. Now I can’t quite imagine doing anything else.

My family are all quite rational with an engineering background. I was brought up with a strong work ethic and a great sense that integrity is important in a person. This has shaped my approach to things and how I run the business. I still often talk with my dad for advice on how to deal with certain issues; his support has always been amazing to have in the background. I also love that practising as an architect requires pretty diverse and varied set of skills from so many disciplines. It is constantly challenging and I feel like I am learning all the time.

Starting in practice

I enjoyed working in larger practices prior to starting MAKE. However, the idea of exploring my own design ambitions and being the master of my own destiny was increasingly attractive.

Initially in many ways I thought of it as a way to have more flexibility and control in my life. I wanted to have children and liked that I could choose my own hours and work load. I also loved that in a small practice you switch from all aspects—design, practice management, site visits, talks, waterproofing details.

In the early years, I took on any job and tried to make the most out of it. The first projects were very small, bathroom and kitchen renovations for friends of friends. Each project has led to the next and they have slowly improved along the way. In a large practice on bigger projects it is easier to get pigeonholed.
The idea that there is a ‘light bulb’ moment of inspiration is not a true reflection of how we design. Good architecture has so many layers. You can’t solve that in an instant. Hard work and research might get you there though.

With each project taking two to three years we are really only in our third round of projects. I think we should talk about architecture years like dog years where three years equates to one year. Making it happen is a lot about perseverance.

— Has there been a moment when you felt as if the roof fell in? I don’t think there was an actual moment where I felt like the roof caved in, but there have been many obstacles and difficulties. In the earlier years of practice I found any difficult issue quite stressful, I would lay awake at night worrying. I think that has been something that I have learnt to get better at managing. Experience has taught me to take a deep breath and understand that issues are normal and that they just need to be calmly worked through with those involved. With most issues the best way forward is good clear communication and I would always tackle any problem head on rather than avoid the situation. I think that even in difficult situations you can maintain integrity. Empathy is also important remembering that everyone has their own concerns and worries.

Beautiful reward

I’d like to be able to say that running my own practice has given me great flexibility with family and kids. The reality in recent times is that I am working really hard and I don’t see the kids as much as I would like.

Practising as an architect though gives me great joy and satisfaction through making something. I love that my job most often doesn’t feel like work, I look forward to being there and I’m always excited to see our designs come to life.

Seeing something built is still the greatest reward for what we do. This is highly motivating. Those moments when you are sure you did the right thing and the built reality is right.

Progressing the profession

There is much conversation about architects becoming irrelevant. Conversely I think that as the pressure increases to densify our cities architects have an important role to play.

To allow for population growth and stop further sprawl our suburbs must increase in density. The current model of oversized houses located increasingly greater distances from employment has meant a huge reliance on cars that is unsustainable.

Current standards of buildings especially in the Melbourne apartment arena are not good enough. Apartments are built for selling, not for making the homes for residents of our cities in the future. The real estate agent is king and the conversation is so much about what is known to sell. There is no room for innovation or something that hasn’t been seen before because it hasn’t been tested in the market. If we are to live more closely to one another, good innovative design is essential to ensure the living quality is not reduced. Architecture, with the support from planning, can provide a socially sustainable built environment that encourages connections to communities.

Rising above commonplace

— Do you think the present education system really measures up? I am really impressed with some of the graduates coming out of university. They are so skilled, ambitious and organised. I don’t remember being like that.

Many people complain about graduates not being technically skilled enough. However, I think one of the most important things an architecture degree teaches is design thinking. If you can learn this then it can be applied to any problem. Balancing a degree with working part-time in practice is an essential thing. The realities of practicing as an architect can really only be learnt on the job.

— What advice would give a student when they hit a brick wall? Go around it. Brick walls in design can only be escaped by doing more work, tackle the problem from a different direction. The worst thing a student can do when they come to a design roadblock is to stare at a white sheet of paper. Test something, test anything, whatever you do don’t do nothing. The reality is design can be really hard and sometimes it feels like you won’t crack a project. One of the questions we ask in the studio during the design stage is, ‘are you excited about seeing it on site?’ If the answer isn’t ‘yes’ then the design isn’t good enough yet.

In terms of career and life, a good friend once said to me that he had, ‘decided to start walking through the open doors and that he was going to stop banging his head against the closed ones.’ This has stayed with me. I like the idea that one should just work hard and keep an eye out for opportunities. See the opportunities that are presented and grab them with both hands.

— What qualities do you look for when hiring for your practice? MAKE is like a little family so it is hugely important to find the right people. Durable designers that can handle robust design discussions are essential. We all like to stand around and debate design, so egos need to be left at the door.
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- Balancing a degree with working part-time in practice is essential
- Design isn’t a commodity, it belongs to the community
- Aim to delight through design efficiency and social sustainability
- Great architectural design has so many layers. It can’t simply be solved in a light bulb moment
- When you hit a brick wall test something, test anything. Whatever you do, don’t do nothing
- Taking a deep breath can get you a long way in life
- There are so many times a project can be pushed off the rails. Push it at every stage, don’t give up
- Great design is like a future gift to ourselves and our clients
The best people are just trying to work towards finding the right design solution and it gets done as a team in a collaborative manner. It doesn’t matter who did it but that we got to the right answer.

—is there a common DNA running through architects? Everyone is different and there are so many ways to practise architecture. However, I do think that to be a successful architect you have to be really persistent and determined. There are so many times that one thing or another can threaten a good outcome for a project. You just have to persevere, keep pushing and keep inventing new solutions. Being an agile problem solver is also handy, as so many factors have to be considered all at once. Constraints of budget, client, constraints of building, all make it hard to produce good design.

Thinking through breakthroughs

I don’t know if we have breakthroughs—more things that we test and obsess over that slowly come into focus. It is often an accumulation of ideas that sit in the background. After a while I see repeated things in our work that make sense to me.

The right outcome is such a layered solution. It must do many things, so this never really comes as a breakthrough, more as a series of things that finally come together. There is always compromise and I focus on the one bit that is not perfect. Always feeling slightly worried or dissatisfied—this certainly drives me.

The idea that there is a ‘light bulb’ moment of inspiration is not a true reflection of how we design. Good architecture has so many layers. You can’t solve that in an instant. Hard work and research might get you there though.

Architecture can transform our cities and suburbs and affect the way we live and interact with each other. We have the ability to create cities for people and communities. Embracing this positive ethos contributes to a socially sustainable community, knowing that this will ultimately help a suburb to be a happy place to live.
Ultimately I think good design is like a future gift to ourselves, and our clients. This is what really drives me—architecture is hard so it might as well be good.