THE VEIL OF ISIS

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THE VEIL OF ISIS

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AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE NOW:
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WORDS

Anna Johnson and Richard Black

From the bucolic Gippsland to the semi-arid terrains of the Mallee district, the Victorian landscape is as diverse and varied as Australia in its entirety. Across those landscapes is another landscape or more accurately – context, a contested layering of histories, origins and influences where questions of identity and ownership are all set against the reality of climate change. And so for our guest editorial for AV, themed on contemporary responses to landscape, we advocate a position that takes on these complexities and in doing so, asserts alternative directions that variously acknowledge Australia’s indigenous past and the political, cultural and environmental concerns that constitute what is 21st century Australia.

We bring together a collection of practitioners, writers and an artist who reflect a more robust engagement made with the landscape than has typically occurred. We support the emergence of a generation of architects therefore can advocate the value of European modernism, European avant-garde art and architectural precedents for Australian context as well as the inspiring role of the clients - here Greek Jewish immigrants.

Our contributors fall along a north south axis that cuts through a great diversity of landscape conditions. From the northern most tip, Stuart Vokes gives us a glossary of open spaces; a provocation to help us reflect critically on the backyard space in the suburban setting. Bailey and Baynes, from the most southern extremity of this axis, reveal their methods and strategies for engaging and recording the landscape. Their photographs and drawing capturing methods for seeing and the origins for the formal clarity of their work and the way it forms a type of datum, a register set against site. From Victoria, Kerstin Thompson writes of the ‘Burden of Landscape’ and reflects on this term and the landscape strategies underpinning the work of KTA in terms of broader cultural context, spatial and physical realities and finally ending on a discussion of landscape as ecology. Louise Wright and Mauro Baracco argue for a careful reading of ecological processes to inform action. Meanwhile, bringing a broader historical grounding to these issues, Conrad Hamann discusses landscape in terms of Australian Architectural Ideology.

As part of this issue, we wanted the artists’ perspective as well. And so we interviewed John Wolseley, one of Australia’s most renowned contemporary landscape painters – landscape observers! Wolseley’s completely immersive approach to landscape and his commitment to being in it, knowing it as well as possible, we admired. Importantly, his approach is one that actively seeks collaboration and engagement with the country itself and significantly, with its indigenous people. Wolseley’s collaborations with aboriginal artists are long standing and reciprocal. We hope that the future sees greater collaboration and work between architects and Australia’s indigenous people, artists and architects.

In our recent book, Living in the Landscape, we write, ‘In its discursive role, architectural form enables and conveys dialogue. Becoming a kind of cultural conduit, a buildings form operates as a container, a transmitter of ideas and knowledge.’ Last century international preconceptions of Australian architecture were characterised by colonial motifs drawn from the bush and rife with nostalgic imagery that perhaps signalled a kind of longing for a patriarchal farmer figure. Whilst more locally, to engage with the landscape was often associated with light weight approaches characterised by politely styled architecture. With an appearance loosely driven by simple modernist tendencies tempered by local vernaculars and the ‘natural’ palette, these examples were orientated and positioned for the most harmonious attitude. As a kind of custodian of the landscape, architects therefore can advocate new found relationships between architecture and landscape.
Regarding questions of identity and Australia, we will reveal a new tide, a new force representative of the growing urgency to acknowledge Australia’s indigenous people—past and future—in the shaping of landscape responses. Whilst this is occurring with more force and conviction across literary and artistic spheres, there is only a tentative engagement with these questions across the architectural profession. We advocate acknowledgement of these historical revisions of post-European settlement Australia and its indigenous people—a reality made increasingly public by Don Watson’s The Bush and Bruce Pascoe’s Dark Emu.

We argue for a resistance to the force of consumerism motivating the relentless push for marketability that threatens to take the form of visibly natural, environmental responsibility, all clothed in white and wood. We hope for responses to landscapes that cut across these benign, examples and alternatively make more direct engagement with context that might sustain poetic or cultural ideas and narratives as well as addressing climatic and environmental realities.

Additionally, we extend the question of what landscape is and contemporary responses to include the city and its surfaces that variously host trees and vegetation but might also be quite bare. Backyards, front yards, courtyards, vertical gardens and window sill plantations form another type the contemporary landscape condition.

The engagement with landscape we assert is one that aims for a more direct, immersive relationship with the Australian landscape in all its nuanced conditions. A response where polite yielding, subtle merging or blurring are challenged by ambitious architectural responses that also address the reality of Australia’s very difficult and at times inhospitable environment.
Invoked, but never really there: landscape in Australian architecture’s ideology, 1910–1980

WORDS

Conrad Hamann

Landscape is invoked constantly in Australian architectural ideology, and it gained this focal place especially from around 1890 through till c 1980. But while they made Landscape a constant referent, few Australian architects ever went into detail on what it involved, or how it might differ in varied regions and circumstances. This was arguably because Australia’s architectural culture was refocusing on a broad national obligation, rather than the nineteenth-century focus on rival colonies, cities, towns or suburbs. Despite constant use as a reproach or an obligation in Australian architectural ideology, landscape assumed no more detail in examined reality than did Australian suburbs, castigated and lamented for decades. In architects’ circles Australian suburbs have gained very little actual exploration beyond Boyd’s beguiling one-page vignette in Australia’s Home (1952). Landscape remained similarly vague and similarly generalized: a vague subject of projection, and a generalized contrast to urban conditions. It was ‘harsh’, ‘ancient’, ‘threatening’ (courtesy of DH Lawrence’s four-week stay in 1922). It doubtless had sweeping plains, droughts and flooding rains, but its particularities, its specifics of terrain, if talked about, generally elicited bewilderment from the very architects who commanded us to be accountable to Australian landscape. It was treated as a standardised backdrop in Boyd’s later Australian Ugliness renderings.

How did you address this generalised backdrop architecturally? The default position became pavilions: contained, reposeful, expressing little movement other than hovering, general enough in bearing to set off a similarly generalised Landscape. If a ‘landscape artist’ – an Edna Walling (1895–1973), a nativist such as Ellis Stones (1895–1975) or a John Stevens (1920–2007), wanted to explore Australian landscape’s nature further, all well and good. But it was left to them as consultants.

Earlier, Boyd had rejected Australian sheltering from Australian sun and the ‘harsh’ landscape as ‘escapist’. Answering pithy queries on this by about this by Franz Philipp and Frederick Romberg, who had extensive contact with Australian Landscape and sun as internes, Boyd maintained in the Ugliness that the more glass used, the better: air-conditioning and limitless modern energy would help us keep visual possession-and command.

There are exceptions to this generalised dealing. In the 1900s there was George Sydney Jones, who in the Federation period urged a graded formality in garden design, where rectangular garden beds, extending spaces in houses, would merge into eucalypt forest at the edges of suburban sites. Then came the Griffins, specifying flower and tree species and foliage in great detail, with Marion Mahony Griffin describing trees and scrub in the greatest detail and Walter signing himself Landscape Architect. Edward Billson and Eric Nicholls followed suit in detailed study of foliage types during the 1920s, writing long lists of planting into their plans. After that, consultants aside, you wait till Gregory Burgess and Edmond and Corrigan, both, in different ways, engaged with revised attitudes to Australian suburbs. They took up detailed tree shrub and flower prescriptions in their plans, mostly in the early to mid-1980s.

In 1888 the American critic Barr Ferree argued there could be no American style: the contiguous US was too large and diverse in its landscape forms to determine a consistently national architectural form. But that did not deter the Prairie and Chicago school architects from continuing to search- and to ultimately maintain they had found a national architecture, even if they saw ‘their’ prairie and the fast vanishing frontier as summarizing the entire American continent. Their referents were landscape aspects, primarily: the rise, fall or spread of the Midwest terrain in the levels of the open floor plans of the second Francis Little house (1913), Robie (1909) and Ward Willits (1902) houses, the expanding frontier beyond Lake Michigan as in the Husser (1899) and Robie houses and the opening corners of Unity Temple. Snow and cold found answer in the huge hearths of reforming architecture around 1900; the fundamental harshness of landscape and its social effect recorded in the stern midwestern exhortations to thrift, work and savings that lined the atrium in Wright’s Larkin Soap offices (1904).

But with Georgian and Regency Rule-of-Taste revivalism of the 1920s, Australia’s architectural consensus became far more reductivist in its enactment and invocation. By then Australians’ nationhood, focusing on the newly created Anzac story of Gods and youths, gradually set aside other national myths of freedom, opportunity and circumstantial courage. These remained Americans’ great strength in recitation, exhortation and dues paying, even if Americans often sensed the mythology was not really true. The surging streams and bountiful landscapes imaged in Louis Sullivan’s Auditorium and its foyers (1886–89) were seldom pursued that way here.

Australia’s architectural culture preferred sundry landscape inhabitants and products, visible from the metal stair vines and grapes in John Verge’s Aberglasslyn (1840) through to the native animals urged by Lucien Henry and carved with such affection by Robert Prenzel. Walter Withers’ murals at Purrumbete homestead (1902), for all their landscape setting,
depicted pastoral pioneers taming the landscape and establishing a dynasty. The murals enacted what John Hirst called the Pioneer Legend. Earlier, Paul Fox’s scientific gentlemen of central and western Victoria shaped their landscapes in reflection of their new Age of Steam, a God-sanctioned Science conquering adversity, and a society seeing the landscape as a sphere of specific bounties and extraction. Much of landscape in later nineteenth century Victoria was to be read in glass museum cases.

Australia had its Boundless Soil, but it was primarily valued in giving Wealth for Toil. Till the 1930s the nearest Australia generally came to landscape of either Britain’s New Jerusalem or in America’s often mystical terms was in continued parliamentary efforts to settle farming yeomen, as in the Closer and Soldier Settlement schemes and their vast and often calamitous expectations and expenditure. Even This effort again took the landscape as a generalised given rather than as something infinitely nuanced and particular: witness the disastrous settling of soldiers in the Victorian Mallee, inducing sand dunes, or the expanses of salination around the Murray.

In the 1920s Australia ‘landscape’ became fixed as a resource or a platform for building virtues in national character, rather than a celebratory realm in and of itself. A Stake in the Land was a platform for patriotic duty. It was how we would keep Red Revolution at bay. It even involved a reproach to Australian cities: their abyss of urban flats and lodgings, inhabited variously by ne’er do wells or people waiting to ‘settle down’ properly in houses, was relentlessly contrasted with the mortgaged house and of investing in property, based in the idea that lodger types did not do anything with land. The Home Building Spirit embraced landscape by making it property, an honourable realm of investment, enriched by putting a house on it and being cultivated as a suburban garden. This position was shared in Labor’s campaign against Stanley Bruce in 1929, when ‘the Australian worker’ was pictured as an (inner suburban) landscape pioneer, chuckling while timorous Stan painted him as a red, bomb-carrying troglodyte (Fig.X). This trope of the Real Australia in fence and veranda had a long afterlife, taking centre stage for the other side in John Howard’s 1987 Incentivization booklet, published during his first stint as opposition leader.

The 1980s, where Incentivization’s logo had its base, is a mixture. In Australia’s architectural ideology, Landscape for architects remained benevolent and inert as in the 1920s, but was now to be left alone and, if trodden on, at least trodden on lightly. A belief held that Australian settlement had desecrated an ancient Australian landscape, smearing it in some original sin. The idea marks Robin Boyd’s Australian Ugliness (1960), but had its real flowering in the 1980s realm of Glenn Murcutt’s critical ascendancy, of galvanized steel, fixed over steel spars like bark across a gunyah branch. This was when aboriginal building was still generally perceived as nomadic transient, and minimal, and when, in almost eighteenth-century terms, both aborigines and their pre-colonial landscape were seen as maintaining societal stasis and equilibrium.

1980s architectural ruralism peaked when the prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, and over half his cabinet were farmers, came from regional centres or held rural electorates. The critical revival of John Verge came then: he was the squatter’s and rural pioneers’ architect, a refined moderate vanquishing ‘public sector’ characters from a previous or distant order, as with Greenway and James Blackburn. Verge’s now vanished homestead Austral Eden, and its evident accord with local aborigines, reads now as a dress rehearsal for a modern but still generalized pastoral, the Arcadian pavilion that embodied Australia’s architectural ideology in the 1980s. Even the official birth-sanctioning of Post-Modernism, in the Institute of Architects’ Pleasures of Architecture conference of 1980, had as its design subject the restoration and completion of a John Verge house, Engehurst (1833–35).

Touring observers helped enormously. They mostly saw the best Australian architecture as fitting British and European Hi-Tech or mainstream Modernism, though rendered newly laconic and simplified for sheep farms and beach shacks. In many ways these perspectives still assigned Australia its agricultural place among those wool bales and fruit cans, sand and surf. But at the same time, Australian architecture could present in scholarly European terms: reverential shelter or exultant temple in sublime landscape. Landscape itself remained a generalized appliance. It was still a quarry reflected in products, but granted an added legitimacy by renewed enthusiasm for the European enlightenment and of 1650–1890 Picturesque.

In this ideology, existing Australian cities, and their everyday suburbs, became almost background noise. They could go hang, really: by 1990, we had equilibrium and acceptance, both here and with visitors from that distant metropolis overseas. And heavens! We had sought their approval, and that conspicuous maturity, for so long!
The burden of landscape

Regardless of where one sits on Australia’s architectural spectrum there is a shared compulsion to respond to a selected notion of landscape. Whether the preferred reference point is the romance of untouched bush, the suburban vernacular or Indigenous ‘country’ (to name but a few), many of us explain our work in terms of its resistance to, or embracing of, a select understanding of landscape. If European architects could be understood to operate under the burden of a built history, then I would argue that Australian architects are instead under the considerable weight of the burden of landscape.

Architects use (or mis-use) the term ‘landscape’ to many different ends. For some it pertains to anything that is not the building - exterior space, the garden, what you look out at. For others, it is the formless, nameless other, only useful as benign background to the main event being architecture: your ground to my figure. Still others use the term to stand in for context or situation. Situatedness is what is abbreviated and distilled through the concept of landscape: shorthand for the various forces – physical/intangible, permanent/ephemeral qualities, cultural/historical – that constitute place.

Ian Robinson challenged the simplistic understanding of landscape I held as a student when in explaining the work of his practice Robinson Chen he described the landscape of Richmond. This entailed rooftops, power-poles, street edges, yards, bitumen and so on. In other words, not just the soft bucolic stuff. Since then, landscape has come to be a major preoccupation in the practice of KTA. Our work engages explicitly with thinking around landscape and is almost always generated and then explained through concepts of landscape. A summary of the prevailing approaches taken by Kirstin Thompson Architects (KTA) follow, illustrated by projects.

Landscape as context

For us, architecture is a useful device for reinforcing and amplifying local conditions such as topography, patterns of built form, light, materials, and vegetation. Our suite of stations for Victoria Police demonstrates this approach. While Warrandyte, Hurstbridge and Marysville Police stations all share the same functional brief, they are distinguished from each other through material, formal and parti variations which respond to those in the context: client, site and community aspirations. Accordingly, they each have a distinct architectural character which comes from massaging the arrangement of the common program to achieve key functional relationships in a form responsive to the adjacent conditions.

Maryville’s plan extends along the length of the park edge to define the town’s heart. Its timber facade recalls the lost timber heritage erased by the bushfire and resonates with the striated verticality of the surrounding forest (Fig. 1). Warrandyte’s lustrous green glazed brick facade provides camouflage in its Yarra River environs and mirrors the ‘green’ identity of the community.
(Fig. 2). With its fat facia and brick veneer, Carrum Downs reflects the commercial and domestic built form of its drive-by highway location (Fig. 3).

These aspects, drawn from a project’s landscape as context, comprise a kit of site resources to distinguish here from there and from which we conjure architecture that is responsive to its situation.

Landscape as spatial continuum

Sometimes we use the term landscape to pertain to an interior and exterior continuum of space. This is to refute the spatial limitations and missed opportunities that come from quarantining the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture, outside from inside or relegating landscape to the role of background for the figure of architecture.

Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA) and the associated Ian Potter Sculpture Forecourt is an example of a spatial continuum. A geometry of radial and parallel lines organises both the museum and its forecourt and reinforces the relationship between them (Fig. 4). It sets up internal and external circulation and a series of major and minor areas for exhibition and gathering spaces. Vistas between inside and outside are formed within the radials to enable exchange between the typically internal program of the museum and the daily life of the campus and broader community. Thus art infiltrates and activates the surrounding landscape to enhance the campus grounds and provide it with a cultural and social focus.

When buildings and landscapes are considered as part of a continuum and are mutually defining then an enriched spatial outcome and experience of interiority and exteriority is enabled.

Landscape as territory

A building’s typology and its form influence the way in which interior and exterior space relate. For example, KTA’s Apartment House deploys the central courtyard and raises the primary level to first floor so that the landscape surrounds it and infiltrates its core (Fig. 5). A Country Villa, like many of KTA’s rural houses, has three tiers of exterior space. The first is the veranda deck; the second a more cultivated territory around the building, delimited by the hedge, that creates a threshold between the house interior and the third tier being the vast and less defined extended landscape (Fig. 6).

In many of our projects, particularly rural ones within expansive clearings such as House at Hanging Rock and House at Lake Connewarre, we arrange a building’s program in a linear configuration so that the resultant envelope is long in form, creating an effective wall of sorts. This attenuation of the building envelope is then used to prescribe a territory within what would otherwise be experienced as a predominantly horizontal expanse of undifferentiated space.

Both the Visitor’s Centre for the Australian Garden at Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne and Ivanhoe House take what is a linear arrangement of program (and form) and turn it back on itself to create a courtyard (Fig. 7).

In these ways, the built form is less valued for its quality as figure and more for territorial consequence and formation of interstitial space.

Landscape as ecology

The process of land subdivision and the promise of autonomy that land ownership entails foster the conception of site as a separate piece; disconnected, detached with no obligation beyond its own needs, not to its neighbours let alone the greater context.

But if we instead think of a site as part of an extended system, and its landscape less in terms of its picturesque value and more in terms of ecology, then whether urban, suburban or rural, it is part of a greater system of many interrelated and co-dependent parts. Water catchment and infrastructure is an obvious example of this.

In the case of House at Lake Connewarre, the development of a house became a catalyst for ecological repair and an opportunity to re-connect the site back into the broader ecology. Situated on a property damaged by years of agisting, the project commenced in collaboration with landscape architects Fiona Harrisson and Tim Nichols with the development of a plan to organise, repair and restore the lakeside ecology (Fig. 8). Following its successful implementation, the client has become the effective guardian of this piece in the larger puzzle of Lake Connewarre’s environment.

This expanded sphere of spatial consequence, and therefore responsibility, is inevitable if we question the extent of site and approach landscape from an ecological perspective.
A GLOSSARY FOR OPEN SPACE

WORDS
Stuart Vokes

In early 2009 I came across an article published in Architecture Australia magazine written by Greg Bamford entitled ‘Spooked by Sprawl’1.

In his essay Bamford presented a radical approach to density that espoused the virtues of open space, an embodiment of his thought experiment which he coined ‘Garden Oriented Development’ (GOD).

Bamford’s proposition did not champion suburbia but simply argued for proper accounting and re-valuing of open space in cities.

I remember being excited that someone was writing about gardens and the productive potential, public agenda, and value of private domestic open space.

At the time the article was published, my practice life was predominantly focussed on residential arts and adds projects in the backyards of Brisbane’s suburbia.

These were projects that many didn’t think were relevant to contemporary architectural discourse about cities and density.

We had come to the realisation that the architectural problem of these backyard projects had less to do with the buildings, and more to do with carefully managing the setting of the projects; a collective open space made up of interconnected backyards and borrowed scenery. We believed that by taking a position on open space, we were in fact, backyard by backyard, actively engaged in critical city making.

The more that we discussed themes of nature, gardens and landscape within our studio, the more apparent it became to us that architects appeared to rely upon a rather loose vocabulary when discussing the character of open space and the settings of buildings. This is evident when contemplating works such as the phenomenal plaza at Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute - neither a tree nor single blade of grass in sight. Without vegetation, is open space a garden? If enclosed by buildings, does open space represent a landscape?

I decided to assemble a personal glossary of terms that might clarify our critical thinking about the suburban setting of our backyard projects. It consists of only three terms; Nature, Gardens and Landscape.

Humans are biologically predisposed to liking natural settings or a proximity to nature. When I speak of Nature, I refer to various things: an uncultivated wilderness, the ground, vegetation, the sky, and emptiness. Nature is open space that is free of obvious human intervention, something we seldom find in the increasingly populous suburban settings of our architectural work. In the absence of true Nature, Gardens and Landscapes present opportunities to idealise the presence of nature or abstract the representation of these natural settings.

To define the second of these terms, Gardens, I reflected on the origins of the word. Etymologically, a garden is an enclosed space, or enclosed nature. Gardens are cultivated, frequently occupiable, potential places of refuge, evoking mindfulness and anchoring. The enclosure of space in this way has the capacity to connect one through the vertical axis to both the ground and the sky. In this sense, gardens can be strikingly profound. In my private lexicon, the Garden is therefore allied to the architectural element of the wall.

For me, Landscape is an image or composition of nature, involving editing and framing. The Landscape is open space ‘beyond’ the physical limits of a building experienced as a view, a prospect. Landscape is about dreaming and hope, and connects one to the horizon. For this reason, Landscape is allied to the architectural element of the window.

The obvious question that follows my attempts at categorisation is to ask what the utility of this thinking might be for an architect and how this relates to Bamford’s call to re-value open space. Our observation has been that dissecting architectural elements can help to clarify their essential qualities and thereby help us better understand what their potential might be, or how best to deploy them in our work.

As Greg Bamford’s writing on ‘Garden Oriented Development’ reminds us that the value of open space is immense. We can all intuitively understand the attraction of natural settings and many of us have experienced the profundity of great spaces such as Kahn’s plaza at the Salk Institute (it is a Garden plus Landscape plus Nature triffecta, btw). Open space is a resource to the architect (and the city) and an integral part of an architectural project. To conceive of a building without placing equal emphasis on open space is to fundamentally misunderstand the act of building. It follows that an architect should aim to understand the characteristics of open space with the same exactitude that they would apply to the placement of a brick in one of Kahn’s seminal arches. My advice: ask the open space what it wants to be.

Footnotes:
The Strand Melbourne
Hotbeam LED Linear VarioLED Flex RGB SV IP67 in feature cove.
Hotbeam LED Linear VarioLED Flex HD10 4000K in surrounding cove.
At the time of Peter Corrigan's very sad passing away on December 1st 2016, we were in discussion with him about the Athan House for a piece he was very keen – 'delighted' – to write for this issue. Although the piece was not finished, we very much wanted to include the Athan House to pay tribute to Peter and to the house. For us, this house is a great example of Australian architecture that is also an imaginative, theatrical and also gently provocative solution for making architecture in this difficult landscape. We have edited and compiled some of the notes Peter was making in preparation for his piece and then following those, we have also included some extended comments from an interview I made with Sophe Athan 2006. We also thank Matthew Corrigan for giving us Peter’s notes so promptly.

Anna Johnson.
Peter Corrigan November 2016:

Lately I've been thinking about a period in my life where I sat in a warm bar Elm St, New Haven and talked diffidently to Yankees and thought of the exotic warmth of Mexico City and confirmed in my mind the superiority of suburban Melbourne and how unique was Carlton. I realised that this thought would shape my architectural future...

The narrative for the Athan house was the Greek Jewish diaspora. The Jews in Greece were particularly harassed and the Athan's, with their persistence, their planning, their intelligence had a story to tell me and I was eager to hear it. I was swept along by an appreciation of my female client, a 'mother courage' figure and at the start, the landscape was a minor consideration, something to walkover and carefully walk around but still worth considering. The journey into site does begin a fairy tale quality - 'of going into the woods' - which was attractive and unusual. But the house was about devotion really, not landscape, Roger Kemp, not the contours.

Chekov dancers can be elegant, magical and resolved but you should smell the rehearsal room...I believe we have an uncomfortable relationship with nature in Australia...Architecture has always been narrative and political. We know that, it's simply a matter of teasing out the evidence,

My briefing technique was to request the client ask me home to dinner as a method to ascertain the clients taste, ambition and any other information. The elderly aunt in the family, obviously not a drinker, none of them where, along with the extended family became increasingly inebriated and excited. I followed suit and there was a long discussion about what the house should do...and I remember sitting entranced as I heard all these options about what each particular member of the family wanted and they had opinions. Eventually I sprang to my feet, slightly intoxicated and said I will build you a City of Hope...there was silence and then a round of applause...and I sat down and thought to myself in absolute shock I am going to have to do it. I was sort of trapped in this wild promise... this city of hopes....and in a way that's what I have been building ever since...cities of hope.

Sophe Athan March 2006:

We wanted to be environmentally friendly, take note of the sun angles...we wanted to make as little impact on the environment as possible, but we also didn't want to blend into the bush, because I don't think the Australian bush is a blending thing...so we looked at how do integrate, interface with it and bring about European culture into the Australian bush and do it in a way that makes a statement. Peter got really excited about this. I also didn't want a concrete slab...because I thought I don't want the energies of the earth to be totally suppressed!

And so the concept was like an old castle, or a monastery or labyrinth...like an old library. There are beautiful passages like galleries and different types of spaces all over. The concepts came about through our discussions and evolved...His imagination is wonderful.

But the prime influence is the interaction between the Europeans coming to settle and this environment; this landscape. He is more of a European architect who is not appreciated as much as he should be in Australia and I think he has the courage to come out and say, 'I understand the dynamics of how Australia has been influenced and has had to change because of the European influence. To deny that is to be deluded and it also has an impact on identity because the reality is we are Europeans in Australia not aborigines or Australian becoming aborigines, which doesn't quite work.” And often that's avoided because it's not politically correct.
We interviewed John Wolseley while he was in the middle of completing his current project – a major work that captures the floodplains of Garrangari and Garrangali, in Arnhem Land. As part of this project and inherent in his working methodology to ‘get into the landscape,’ Wolseley is collaborating with the local indigenous artists and in particular for this work, Mulkun Wirrpanda.

AJ: We are interested in the ways that you work in the landscape, how you see it, understand it…it does look like you use several strategies or ways of working brought together at different scales?

JW: Yes. I have sort of invented 5 or 6 systems or approaches by which I get into landscape. To give you some background artists like Caspar David Friedrich, or Turner or Streeton, in painting the landscape were engaging with the earth - the whole dynamic thing …even the universe. The tradition of landscape painting that I come from is about saying something about the earth as a great big self-organising system. For me, I’m trying to paint Gaia and say that there is this incredible system…and how can I image its energy? It’s very ambitious thing.

RB: Did moving from England to Australia (in 1976) change your work?

JW: In the last paintings I did in England, I just couldn't get into the landscape, I think because the landscape in England is already such a construct. England invented this thing called landscape painting which was done by chaps and the magisterial gaze: the landscape is out there and he stood and painted it as if he was something separate from it…and I wanted to get into the landscape

I thought to help describe my way into landscape, I’ll read you this passage from Heidegger. It helps me describe the different ways of dwelling within the landscape and being in it, not as something quite separate from it...

These are some brief remarks on the German words Bauen (building), Wohnen (dwelling) and Denken (thinking). Wohnen means to reside or stay to dwell at peace, to be content. It is related to words that mean to grow accustomed to or feel at home in a place. It is also tied to the German word for delight. For Heidegger, to dwell signifies the way human beings are on the earth, and man’s (sic) being rests in his capacity to cultivate and safeguard the earth, to protect it from thoughtless exploitation and to defend it from the
calumnies of the metaphysical tradition…'

And so my way of doing landscape is to dwell in it first, camp in it, and find my way into it. As I said, I have 6 approaches that I then sort of do, which very often results in a painting having waves, different waves being put onto the painting...

RB: Can you describe those approaches to us?

JW: All of the approaches are trying to subvert and avoid the tradition of landscape artists - those who are separate from it. I am trying to find different ways of stopping that distance. So, system one is not to stand apart from the plant and rather, to actually engage in a collaboration with the plant with its particular way of growing and living. I actually ink the plant up in a gentle sort of way. Then I lay, as it were, the physical manifestation of the landscape, the phusis, onto the paper... For me, this narrows the distance between me and the thing...

The next approach is to talk as much as possible to the custodians, the indigenous people of the land. I've been lucky enough to meet elders, and there are very few of them left, who can tell me the stories of the place.

Then a third way, is to look at the traditions of understanding landscape that comes from my own western tradition. I've collected a large number of books, one is this John Gerard's The herball, or generall Historie of Plantes from 1597, I'm very interested in the astonishing anatomical drawings of the plants.

My fourth approach, which is also as part of my own lineage and tradition and another way of getting into the landscape, is to use the tradition of scientific diagrams... For example, a series I did I worked with Darwin's diagrammatic methods of showing the dance and growth of plants. With this, what I'm doing is trying to paint - reveal - the different patterns of energy and the growth of things. The most wonderful book about all this is Pierre's Hadot, The Veil of Isis and he goes into the whole idea of painting nature and, what we are taking about is nature after all. Hadot describes how the word nature and the idea of nature comes from the early Greek word Phusis.

Following from that, is the fifth approach where I'm trying to find the underlying movements and dynamics of something. So here in this painting, I'm in the middle of the Simpson Desert. Firstly, I studied how the sand dunes move - the desert geomorphology. From that I did abstract painting and placed it underneath. Onto that I put the physically recognisable plants and the energy of phusis of all the different plants that live on the dune. And so I was also able to understand how this particular plant - the cane grass - works on that geomorphic pattern almost like a Buckminster Fuller structure. And the rest of it forms the bigger pattern. It is a Buddhist idea; the phenomenal world, the things you actually see are like a skein; a series of structures that come and go. So that when I saw a little wren, it was so extraordinary the way it moved because it was always following the cane's quite geometric structures. I painted a red line that follows the movement patterns of the bird in the landscape.

I'm always trying to think or remember that my way, my life system, is very much that of an 18th century gent from England unlike all the other creatures that live in this world whose life world is completely different. Jakob Baron von Uexküll is very important here, his book 'A Foray into the worlds of animals and humans' and his Unwelt is an idea I'm very interested in. He talks about us having a very objective view of nature that is separate... For example, we might see a mountain or the sand dune as a static thing because we are separate from it, whereas a swallow is part of it and follows the way the wind shapes the dunes, the crests and swirls down... and so the swallows are almost an extension of the landscape. So for me, the landscape painter, the things that make up the Umwelt - the total experience of the thing – are intimately tied up with the things which live in it.

AJ: I find it interesting that you bring very traditional drawings of things into the bigger painting...is it that intentional?

JW: The answer is part of the 6th system... and very aptly asked... in all these paintings I have my own personal traditions but then joined up with the other 'forces', other ways of being in the landscape - here is the actual
plant doing its thing and here is me doing my more 18th century thing.

AJ: There are a lot of things sustained on the same bit of paper, different ways of seeing things held simultaneously… that’s very interesting and visible...

JW: A lot of postmodern work is about the idea that life is about different systems and the interest is in the play between those differences. What I hope is that I am using a postmodern methodology but I am then weaving it into a bigger narrative that I think is missing from many postmodern artists.

RB: Your way of working requires a lot of being in place, but the other part of the work is about research and understanding – almost a more scholarly part of the work. There are two worlds brought together in the practice; the scholarly way of diagramming, the mythologies and stories and the botanical studies that find a way into the work along with your more immersive, very present way of working in the landscape to capture place. So it’s not just about going into the landscape - it’s a far more complex interrelations of worlds coming together.

JW: I like that you have made that observation. Yes there is that scholarly aspect of it and intentionally, I have invented two or three of these systems that are much more instinctive, chthonic, playful and deal with intuition. A lot of this stuff – my work – comes from an 18th century tradition of wild splashing and gestural marks. There’s a wonderful artists called Alexander Cuzens who did blotches and Turner did blotches. He would blot something in and do something on top….that was the energy, the phusis. So when in fact you might say the two things are together, I have felt a need to try and almost act in a dynamic way in the paintings because I’m so easily analytically retentive. And this gets back to Heidegger when he talked about how we are on this earth as custodians – part of dwelling is that we are looking after the earth – which is what Mulkun Wirrpanda is doing.

AJ: I’m interested in the gestural quality of those marks – do you see it exactly what it is: for example in the Pelican painting – is it a tracing of a pelican or do you also see it as a gesture, a compositional mark?

JW: Yes I do I think a very big element of performance ends up in very good peoples work, when you stand up against a big Turner it is unbelievable. You can see his fingerprints, he had a great mass of paint and the gestures went on directly.

RB: Those bush fire drawings seem like that… dragging the paper through the charred remnant landscapes after the bushfires … and making abstract marks?

JW: Yes…those paintings were made almost by those aleatorical accidental things. It was a landscape where I released the bits of paper which themselves documented the landscape and flew around and as it were, collaborated with the landscape which is perhaps my 7th approach which comes from the Japanese idea of Wabi Sabi – a belief in incompleteness…

AJ: Well…I think that’s the topic of our next interview! Incompleteness and the Australian Landscape…
Our practice is one that privileges green space and works with the idea that green spaces, outdoor areas and gardens are just as important as the building itself. For us, the architectural question extends beyond the building envelope. We began our practice thinking about how the suburban dream of the backyard can be rethought in the contemporary city, where space is minimal and population densities are increasing. Early on, this led to a series of projects and speculations about the vertical backyard where we took the green space areas and reconfigured them, changing their orientation and placement. For instance, we might stack the landscape, making walls instead of lawn, or roof gardens with vegetable patches. Simply put, in these projects, we were really answering the questions; ‘how do we not forget about the green space? And how does landscape not become that little bit at the end of a project that just gets added on?’

Our projects invert the traditional architecture landscape relationship and ask; ‘how can landscape and green space actually drive the project?’ From this, across the last decade, we have evolved a typology of outdoor spaces and strategies that work through propositions of relating to and engaging with the garden and outdoors. In many cases, this might even include co-opting and exchanging with the public neighbouring conditions and outdoor spaces that bump up against our work.

Most of our work is on small inner city sites where we are adding more building onto an already compact site. To privilege green space and to ensure it is an equal part of the design is challenging.
We have developed a series of design strategies for compressed sites but they all begin with one rule; there needs to be as much landscape as building. We see our role as giving hierarchy to those spaces. We think about the spaces you look out onto, as much as the space you are in. We delight in the efficient, small and careful use of space. In our architecture and the use of outdoor space, we always look for ways to be economical and work with careful, considered spaces and moves. More broadly, we have always advocated designing smaller and more efficient houses. Perhaps in the past, Australian’s have had too much space.

Courtyards have been useful typologies to explore these ideas. These are spaces that provide opportunities for an exchange between inside and outside. They offer more façade, which enables greater connection with landscape. With each project we try to make more façade, not for the architecture, but for landscape. Importantly for us, the design doesn’t stop at the end of the wall or the fence. The fence can be as important as the house - it might be that the backyard has equal weight to the front yard.

Architecture doesn’t stop at the building, it spills out into the public space and the street. We care about the curb edge and the drain. In a situation where space is compressed, you have to care about everything. Our practice is about designing the whole site; the relationship of the property to the street is something we talk about a lot. In this way, we treat the small house like a public project with each one able to make a contribution to the city and the suburb and play a role in activating the laneways and streets.

Some of the best projects we do are the ones that are almost like an overgrown cloister, a kind of a magical place that you might unexpectedly discover; like a semi-overgrown ruin. More recently we have been thinking about the whole house as a garden. In this instance, we have thought of the project as an arbour with the house being used as the structure of the arbour. To link the outdoor spaces and the domestic area, we have made a link that is a hedge - so it’s a hedge wall. We like playing with expectations - placing lemon trees on the roof or creating lawns that might resemble a little mound.
Tim Winton observes that ‘two centuries after [the Aboriginal people’s] way of living was disrupted forever, Australia is still a place where there is more landscape than culture. Our island resists the levels of containment and permanent physical presence that prevail on most other continents. It probably always will’.1

With this quote we begin an essay in our book on Robin Boyd.2 It is a book that discusses the spatial qualities of Boyd’s work, particularly for its relationship to the landscapes they occupy. It opens a door to a discussion of what we mean by landscape and we direct you there for an expanded resection. Architecturally, it carries on some interests of our office in simple forms, loose spatial qualities - particularly of veranda type spaces - and the role of vegetation in the overall design.

It isn’t really a house, but more a kind of semi-permanent tent. Architecturally, it carries on some interests of our office in simple forms, loose spatial qualities - particularly of veranda type spaces - and the role of vegetation in the overall design.

It is located in a coastal area on Westernport Bay. We think this approach, which we will summarise as starting with the ground, is particularly relevant to Australia and to Melbourne. Actual wilderness in the form of remnant or intact pre-settlement ecosystems is present in our cities, a condition that is rare. It’s there on the edges of our cities but also traverses our urban context to the core of our cities, often touching our everyday lives.

While the indigenous vegetation and natural systems of our site were altered – mainly through the presence of grazing pasture - they became evident to us through sheer time spent there and another technique called the ‘Bradley Method’. This was named after the Bradley sisters, who restored Bradley head in Sydney Harbour. This beautifully simple technique involved allowing the previously mown grass to grow along with the small remnants of indigenous vegetation, hunting for the remnants among the grass and then weeding around them so they could expand which was a laborious but rewarding process.

The diagrams show this evolution and the emergence of tea tree heath vegetation including seasonal orchids, lilies, small herbaceous plants and native grasses (Fig 3).

Whilst a natural choice for siting a building was the rear area, defined by a ring of trees, after time it became apparent that the only area were no plants emerged was the central area (where it turned out that fill had been dumped there). Maintaining the original soil is the first rule of regeneration, followed by the hydrology and ground profile. This is a dilemma for architects in siting buildings.

The design maintained the natural ground. A raised 6m x 5.5m deck, shower, toilet, and mezzanine allows the ground and seasonal floodwaters to move...
through (Fig 4), and as we have discovered, also the vegetation. As a stand of tea tree has started to spread inside, our plans to plant inside have been suspended to allow for the vegetation to make its own way through.

The shelter is an off the shelf kit shed, at 8m x 8m. The remaining area around the deck is an indoor garden in a veranda typology. Like a tent, it could be removed and the impact would be relatively minimal. There was only around one cubic metre of waste (mostly recyclable), no soil was removed and only a small amount was disturbed for the footings.

Unlike previous use of sheds and clear cladding that aim to create large cheap volume, here the clear cladding allows the plants to grow, and us to enjoy the stars, moon, fog, plants and sometimes be hot and cold.

These qualities revealed in this unusual process would not often be evident in urban contexts, but every now and then make themselves known, particularly through overland flow paths and flooding. If this approach was included in our reading of context and locale, very different and exciting architecture may evolve.

Developing meaningful responses to issues of our environment within the city - not just outside its edges - could lead to very interesting shifts for architecture that may see buildings that allow water to move through, the joining up of vegetated space across property boundaries and the need to create new site geographies that effect form and siting and who knows what else?

Many cities have been exploring responses to restoration of local ecologies, often toward mitigation of flooding and sea level rise, through redefinition of infrastructure and landscape. So far there hasn’t seemed to be much of a role for architecture but to us it seems an important progression in the reading and responses to urban contexts and something worth pursuing.

References:
1. Tim Winton, Island Home, A Landscape Memoir, Hamish Hamilton (Penguin Books), Australia, 2015, p. 56
The Fungi Pavilion

WORDS

Simon Whibley

After 22 years of running mushroom foraging tours on the Mornington Peninsula, where forested areas are increasingly diminished by residential development, our client for this project decided to make his own forest.

The first trees are currently being planted on an area of dilapidated farmland in Raglan, two hours west of Melbourne. Eventually, the plan is for a forest of chestnut, acacia, oak, beech, pine, and eucalypts, an assortment of the kinds of trees that different species of wild mushrooms like.

In considering this project, our client, Cameron Russell, realised that timescales grew much longer and the reasons behind it substantially changed. Rather than simply providing a new location for his tours, this was now a larger project – one of longevity - not only for the rehabilitation of a landscape that will only be complete long after the death of its instigator, but also a place that he hoped would continue to share knowledge...
about fungi and their ecologies. The project was now about much more than facilitating mushroom tours; it was about why fungi had held such fascination for him over the last two decades. It was from these realisations of the changed nature of the project that the fungi pavilion was conceived: as the architectural manifestation of this fascination and its value.

The conversations about the design concept, and the design itself, were about how you perceive landscape – what kind of space is it in the landscape that belongs to the forager and the ecology of mushrooms? How do you take people from a normative experience of landscape - of horizon and view and standing above the ground – down into this sub-space? How do you get them to look differently, to imaginatively transform their location within the landscape in both scale and position?

We discussed the idea of sacred secular spaces and their architecture – design elements of entry and procession that signal that this space is one apart; a ritualistic marker for something of enduring value and outside of the everyday, altogether a little mysterious. The idea became the “door in the forest”, the entry as a indent in a wall of local basalt, in front of the trees, where light beyond can be seen but not the space you will move into.

At our first meeting, looking for mushrooms at a nearby pine forest that will form part of the foraging tour, Cameron described with excitement that the space here is long. The primary structural beams of the project, running counter intuitively along the centre of the pavilion, appear over your left shoulder and disappear through a window at the far end of the room and embed that long forest space within the building. Placeholders for a future conversation in the pavilion following the visit to the pine forest, they remark upon a kind of space invented in the intersection of the fraying enclosure of a tree’s foliage and an ordered planting - there is no such line, or space, in the naturally occurring forest.

Above the primary beams, the roof structure of the pavilion is composed of a series of intersecting rafters, skylit through the pockets of space created at their intersections. What is communicated here is simple – here, above you, is an arrangement of material through which light falls. What it falls onto is equally important, a strip of raw earth between the floor of the pavilion and its external walls. Taken together, this is an invitation to imagine the space above the earth and beneath the pine needles - the sub-space of the landscape over which we walk but do not inhabit.

Planting for the mushrooms follows an entirely different order to the tree plantation. In many ways, the fascination for mushrooms held by Cameron is to do with the way their presence evidences particular ecologies: in looking at this small thing on the forest floor you can learn about the particular climate and composition of the micro-environment you are within. What the client is attempting, by mixing different species of trees in conjunction with the existing features of the landscape, is to curate a forest of micro-environments, to be a gardener of spores.

Cameron told me this when I was on the forest road and he was in the roadside ditch with a Slippery Jack. It was a fantastic, theatrical scene: me - the audience - looking down to him and the mushroom with the forest rising behind as a backdrop. With its earth perimeter, the raised interior timber platform of the pavilion is an attempt to recreate that moment, to lift the audience above the stage and again draw the gaze downwards. The perimeter strip of earth is also the threshold – an engawa1 board made of soil - stepping down from the pavilion into Cameron’s garden, where the tourists start to forage, and where the procession ends.

References:
1. A typical element of the traditional Japanese house, the engawa is a strip of timber flooring that surrounds the house, representing a filter between the inside and the outside.
We indulge in a range of processes for knowing; walking, air-travel, cycling and traditional forms of knowledge that would fall into the categories of geology and meteorology. However, it is our particular process-based photographic explorations from cars, buses and trains that we wish to discuss here.

We have long pursued various techniques that extend our knowledge of place. We believe that this process informs us in a corporal manner as to the ‘subject body’ for our work – being the landform itself. Like a surgeon inserting a new valve into the heart of a patient, a full understanding of the heart and vascular system is obligatory, but also a grounding and broad understanding of all knowledge of that body and its systems must be obtained if one is to act prudently. Simply put, we see these photographic adventures informing us of ‘the self’ that is our physical context. Taking the photographs is our way of asking questions about what Tasmania actually is.

As students, much of our recreation was in remote ‘wild’ locations. As such, we would often be caught, physically exhausted, travelling at speed over rolling hills of Tasmania when the light is low to the horizon and as day approached dawn or dusk. The low light, accentuating the curve of the landform, and the narrowing of the colour spectrum also re-igniting the known colours of the landscape, into an exuberant ephemeral newness.

The photographic process is one where, usually, the driver directs the passenger to photograph parts of the landscape, but more particularly, and interestingly, the driver predicts or recalls a spatial sequence that is to occur and by equipping the passenger with a camera, and a task, the passenger becomes participant in a game of visual and also corporeal pleasure. The resulting images serve as markers for memory, but often show unexpected delight. Within the blink of interest at 130km/h there may be lasting beauty and intrigue. The fever for this discovery – this new knowledge - drives us on.

The camera helps us to really see, it is an eye without preconceptions and when held up to a world you think you know, it cannot help but to highlight something you do not. For us, this process-based work gives us a visual key to unlock a truth of the places we experience, something honest and raw and importantly, far removed from the saccharin contrived postcard photographic record which paints the image of Tasmania around the world. This raw disruptive process has a liberty and glee which glistens starkly against the conformist mantra of landscape photography, but also resonates with our dissonant architectural voice in the context of architectural practice. It is honest, direct, uncomfortable, and hopefully has a beauty that resonates with the ‘Hard Core of Beauty’. It is created seemingly without emotion. Precisely because of this, the images are emotionally laden – they speak to the core of being in a place, at a time. They create the moment outside of the mundane, they perform the function of Art – they say ‘you are here… now’.

A key component of this journey is the sense that we are exploring a new territory, we are documenting something that has not been previously viewed as remarkable. Such a simple dislocation from the standard role of driver and passenger makes us feel like explorers of the unknown. This is still a place where the stark and brutal cut of modernity sits antagonistically beside an ancient ‘natural’ given. It is literally a cut; transmission lines marching straight and un-empathetically through the central highlands, the flood of dams generating a man-made datum in the Anne...
range, the dusting lights of the suburban sprawl at the foot of Mt Wellington, often these experiences are tragic but also alarmingly engaging.

A strange juxtaposition is rendered clearly between forgotten places. We are scientists exploring a new field. We are Blossfeldt exploring a new intellectual frontier, the forgotten places, the nowhere, we are people on a crusade to show nothing in particular, but hinting at the 'everything' that we operate in.

Implicit in this exploration there is a youthful angry search for genuine understanding of the contemporary condition. We feel that much of the Australian celebrated creative energy, particularly in Architecture, ignores an honest appraisal of contemporary Australia and sits smugly on its laurels. It exists hand in self-congratulatory hand in the mindless fecund armpit of a bygone era, 'let it be gone!' chants the engine, let us strip away the pompous void and freshen our lungs with truth.

Our travels have also revealed to us an appreciation of the glowing simplicity and impeccable siting that many vernacular farm buildings embody. This has spawned a belief that an acute architectural incision can quietly command an entire landscape, from horizon to hilltop. This also affirms our belief that great buildings stand, without rhetoric with a transcendent strength all of their own.

Of course these buildings are often characterised by a deliberate and extreme dedication to efficient use of labour and material. This approach sings a very different rendition of the modernists mantra of 'form following function', a more direct interpretation, one manifest in the actual fabric of the construction alone, one completely devoid of an aesthetic expectation – this is a liberty and freedom that the modernists who coined the phrase, were never allowed.

While all our buildings express much of this learning, it is at GASP! (Glenorchy Art and Sculpture Park, Glenorchy, Tasmania, 2011-13) that we most directly employ these concepts. In a manner entirely appropriate given our predilection for photography at speed, we conceptualised GASP from the highway. Rushing past the balusters, colours blurring, gone before you know it. You are moving.

At Wilkinson Point concrete screens and coloured glass obscure and frame. A red aperture is experienced perpendicular, and to the left, of the path of travel. The spatial foundations for the architecture have their origins in our photographic explorations.

The site is vacuously large. Our landscape architects, surprisingly to us, felt it required limits. Being city dwellers, perhaps their eyes were unused to being cradled in a distant horizon only. The site felt like an island stranded in an amphitheatre whose edges were the jagged and torn limits of hills and mountains. We, along with the client, felt this experience was exhilarating. Our architecture and landscape approach did not seek to bring this scale back and normalise the experience, but sought to augment the experience, to further isolate the extremities of the landmass, to remove foreground and only provide the limit of the landform for reference, to define place with a minor incision in a vast continuum.

Given the openness of the site and program it first appeared impossible to provide a revelation at the ultimate point of the Park. When you have looked towards your destination for 3km of infrastructure, it is a matter of building expectation, of generating a journey to a place, of seeing and then re-seeing the landscape from only a moderately different vantage point, of building a sequence and destination. The pavilion sits monolithic in the landscape, as though it could be a relic from an industrial past (it partly is), it has the strength of industry but is benign and playful, friendly and welcoming. It provokes a re-assessment of the meaning of similar man-made interventions in Tasmania. It asks us if we can re-appraise our relationship to this place.

References:
BY VIRGINIA MANNERING

PROJECT 1
SOFT LOUD HOUSE ARCHITECTS
DANDENONG RANGES
STEINER SCHOOL

Soft Loud Architects design via a process they describe as “values-based architecture”, with the aim of embodying ideals such as practicality, beauty, generosity, and quietness into their practice. They have an interest in educational architecture and to date have completed approximately 50 classroom projects, mainly for community and Steiner schools.

One of these, Dandenong Ranges Steiner School, is set on a rural site heavily impacted by green wedge, bushfire and planning restrictions. The architects are currently working on some additions to the school - the practice’s fourth for the same client - with the facilities now at construction stage.

A sustainable approach features heavily, using materials such as insulated cavity timbercrete recycled brick, hand-built solid timber joinery, while outside a large area of the site has been permanently reserved and preserved to increase and encourage local biodiversity.

Photographer_ Soft Loud Architects

PROJECT 2
CHIVERTON ARCHITECTS
IVANHOE HOUSE

Surrounded by native trees, veggie patches and landscaped gardens, Chiverton Architects Ivanhoe House features a largely windowed façade that captures views, light and blurs the boundaries between inside and out. Bifold screens provide a protective layer over the glazing, allowing occupants to control privacy and shading.

The house and its garden are accessed by multiple staircases that run up, around and through the property, emphasising the undulating terrain on which the building sits and elevating the house to sit amongst the tree tops. A charcoal facade provides a contrast to the surrounding grey-green vegetation, and is framed by pergolas and awnings.

The house’s interiors contrast the dark exterior, and are finished in white, textured painted brick and light timbers.

Photographer_ Tatjana Plitt

PROJECT 3
JANE CAMERON ARCHITECTS
PRINCES HILL HOUSE

Jane Cameron Architects recently completed a two-storey addition to a Victorian terrace in Princes Hill. Designed for a young family, the project aimed to create a strong connection between the indoors and out by extending the open plan living out to the back garden. The garden is characterised by large towering eucalyptus tree, a focal point for the new structure with a raked ceiling and end elevation that assist in framing views of the tree. At the rear of the property is a garage that reflects the extension’s design and forms part of the outlook from the house.

The extension features a material palette of polished concrete, steel framed windows, and bricks on the boundary walls. An angular, zinc-clad roof reflects the pitches of neighbouring terraces and articulates the project’s sectional qualities.

Photographer_ Peter Clarke
Located in Northcote, Garth was once a dilapidated Italianate Victorian dwelling that has since been restored and extended by OLA Studio to accommodate a young family of five and two dogs.

The original house is one solid form with all rooms contained within a single volume, and a decision was made to approach the design through architectural contrasts and similarities. New and old are similar in scale of footprint and mass, and both are reserved and devoid of unnecessary detail.

The new build adopts the rectilinear forms of the old, but varies their sequence and size. Externally the new addition reads as a reserved collection of rigid forms stacked on top of, or next to one another, while the internal circulation functions as an easy transition from one space to the next.

Photographer: Derek Swalwell
Aaron Roberts and Kim Bridgland are directors of Edition Office, a young practice that is articulate in narrative, experimentation and figurative architectural gestures. Their work runs the gamut from rural to urban, approaching sites with an exact measure of delicacy and constancy. I met with them late in 2016 to talk about their work, about site and context, and about their particular lens on the Australian landscape.

Straddling the line between romantic and deliberate banality, they constitute an exciting voice in the dialogue on what it means to build in Australia, within country and within city. Converging from backgrounds in architectural and contemporary art practice, both draw upon personal histories, memory, literature, typology and a wider understanding of time to elucidate very human perspectives on our relations with land.

To Aaron and Kim, every new building has an effect on our collective understanding of place, and that through built form, architecture can offer re-readings of what is, was and will be there. As an exposition, this reveals the gravity and vital humility required of such modifications of site.

Within the landscape, and of it, but not it. This description abbreviates a rather more complex set of relationships of site and built object that Edition Office explores in their work. One finds in their houses an intelligent mingling of space and time. These rural built forms speak their own new-ness within the wild, old landscapes, through a precise, rugged contrast and aloofness from that which surrounds them. The use of architectural devices such as veils, armatures and filters capture vistas within interior spaces explicitly through the creation of a boundary between them. Their buildings strictly do not drape over the landscape, rather they exert an inward muscularity to contain themselves.

Yet inherent in the architecture is also a timeless nature, an imminent relic. Drawing upon the scale of the monumental and materials that are familiar with aging gracefully, the built form’s relationship to the site traverses the fourth dimension. Both Fish Creek House and Mount Martha House are examples to consider.

The ability to elicit multiple readings is crucial to Kim and Aaron. Avoiding prescriptive and singular meaning, they seek to present narratives that can unfold through everyday life.

VD: Why are multiple readings important to your work?

KB: Every landscape holds within it a great diversity of historical and emotional significance to the person that is experiencing it. I may share certain historical events and stories of a place with other people however the understating and interpretation of their meaning will be mine alone. This is due to viewing the world through my own particular and idiosyncratic cultural lens, which is an idea more fully articulated by artist Daniel Boyd.

If each landscape or site has multiple and overlapping meanings and histories, with some in profound conflict, then we see it as vital that a dialogue with these narratives can be opened. A new built object in that landscape is a particularly interesting way to establish a relationship between place and other, site and modifier, which can stimulate further discourse.
AR: Certain places have a clearer underlying character and or a stronger umbrella of how the broader community read place, yet history and culture imbues place with alternative narratives. We are interested in creating frameworks, volumes, objects and experiences which can recalibrate or challenge readings of place, allowing these alternate experiences and narratives to unfold. The creation of dissonance, the selection of what we reveal and what we take away are linked to these ideas.

…

There is an intensity present in their studio, but not in a distracting and heavy way. Rather, there is a manifest desire to explore and engage with contemporary architectural discourse through their work, material research, maquettes and publication. In our meeting Aaron drew upon Richard Sennett’s explorations on interiority of the human mind in public spaces, and explained how such moments of repose are something to which their work aspires.

Edition Office saw considerable accolades in 2016 with both their Fish Creek House winning the ArchiTeam Medal and New Residential categories, and their Cambridge Street office collecting a commendation. In October, they presented an exhibition of drawings, models and photographs entitled ‘Site and Modifiers’, expounding through their oeuvre, a refreshing manifesto on space, affect, land and time.
Welcome to 2017 and an exciting year for the Chapter as we continue to develop and improve on the programs and events that we deliver to you across the year.

This year we are excited to be more closely involved in a number of key external design events that provide an opportunity to showcase skills, talent and expertise of the profession.

Commencing in March 2017, the annual Melbourne Design Week will enable and promote diverse design practices across cultural and commercial sectors. It provides a new platform for design communities to join together and present products, ideas and interests to public and business audiences.

Melbourne Design Week runs from 16 – 26 March 2017 and through the theme of Design Values will explore a range of topics and ideas spanning innovation; social impact; urbanism; ecology; technology; culture; health and more.

The profession is represented on the Advisory Panel for the Design Week program, and both the 2017 Presentation to Juries weekend and the 2016 Graduate Prize Exhibition will be included in this year’s program.

The second external opportunity is this year’s Open House Melbourne, the 10th anniversary of this amazing event. Held annually in July, for the last few years the Chapter has been involved by opening up 41X as one of the buildings on the program. In 2016 EmAGN also contributed a Young Guns walking map. In 2017 both the Chapter and EmAGN will be planning for a bigger and better profile for the profession at Open House. We encourage all members to contribute buildings to the program, and keep an eye out for what will be a myriad of ways you can get involved. This year’s event will be held on the weekend of 29/30 July.

The Victorian 2016 Emerging Architect Prize was awarded at the 2016 End of Year Party in December. Michael Roper is this year’s well deserved winner and is now in contention for the National Emerging Architect of the Year, which will be announced later in this quarter. The End of Year Party also saw Open House Melbourne receive the President’s Prize as recognition of the amazing job they have done over the last decade to spread the message about the value and role of design in shaping our communities.

The release late last year of the long awaited Apartment Design Standards – (Better Apartments for Victorians) was somewhat of an anti-climax. While we welcome some of the liveability initiatives contained within the document, like room size, storage, noise, accessibility and natural ventilation, we don't believe they go far enough to protect the public interest. We are disappointed that this document is the best the Government can deliver. Given the time and considerable expertise, advice and intelligence the industry has afforded government over two years in good faith we had hoped for a more substantive outcome.

We continue to support Apartment Design Standards in Victoria, as this will bring Melbourne in line with other global cities. We will continue to work with the Government to look at ways that these particular standards can be implemented to produce the change required to assist consumers and safeguard the long term quality of the built environment. For this we need them to directly address design excellence, mandate design review for site specific responses and ensure that our communities are being designed by those best qualified to do so – architects.

With the New Year comes the flurry of locking in photographers and finalising submissions that capture collectively many years of hard work, commitment and love.

With entries now closed, we are delighted by the submitted projects and the nominated award Juries who have been selected for 2017.

This year we are excited to announce that the Presentations to Juries weekend will be opened up to the public. As part of the National Gallery of Victoria’s inaugural Melbourne Design Week, the Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter are providing the opportunity for the public to engage with what has become a fundamental part of the assessment process for selecting the annual award winners. More details to be announced shortly.

We wish all submitting practices and practitioners the very best for the upcoming Presentation to Juries weekend which will be held on Friday 24 March at the 41X and Saturday 25 March 2017 at the Melbourne School of Design, Melbourne University.
REGIONAL PRACTICE FORUMS

Kim Irons
REGIONAL CHAIR

As some of you may know, Chapter Council is introducing Regional Practice Forums. The intention of the forums is to support regional members to network locally, offer common opportunities for continuing professional development, and, importantly, a conduit to Chapter council.

The format is similar to the Small and Medium Practice Forums with a meeting every second month (or as agreed by the region) with presentations by members or other invited guests from the local areas. This provides an opportunity for shared CPD events and networking.

Geelong Regional Practice Forum has met through 2016 on a regular basis with presentations from conferences, local council authorities and other design disciplines. We have met with the Ballarat group and hope to see more regular meetings in 2017.

If other regional members are interested in starting a forum in their area please contact either the Chapter staff or me (my details are on the Institute website - Chapter council details).

PRACTICE OF ARCHITECTURE COMMITTEE

Kim Irons
CHAIR

In closing last year the committee acknowledged the success of the “Practice Odd Spots” and the assistance and steerage provided by CPD Coordinator Jodie Mitchell.

Our actions moving in 2017 include preparing a standard shop drawing stamp, guidance in dealing with Practical Completion and defects for inclusion in Acumen. In addition we have identified support to the Acumen Content Review Panel and the need to review current notes on partial services and student and graduate commissions.

We are also anticipating some shuffling of members as we need to refresh the representatives of Small and Large Practice forums. The change is not anticipated until April, however I’d like to take this opportunity to thank Karen McWilliam and Jane Cameron Finlay for their insight, knowledge and contribution to dynamic discourse. I can honestly say that being a member of PoAC offers constant learning and exemplifies the benefits of participating in Institute committees.
THE OVGA AMBITION FOR INTEGRATED DESIGN OUTCOMES:
OBSERVATIONS ON ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE

2016 marked the tenth anniversary of the Office of the Victorian Government Architect. For a decade, the OVGA has worked tirelessly with government to embed an understanding of the long term community value inherent in achieving better design outcomes across a diverse range of projects. At times the OVGA has operated invisibly within the constraints of confidential processes, and at other times has been both visible and vocal as advocates for design aspiration, vision, and considered, intelligent change.

Government’s design interventions include buildings and places that signify diverse commitments – extending to culture, sport, health, education, housing and transport. The OVGA’s iterative voice continues to remind government that ‘design as legacy’, across all project types, helps define Victoria as a place that is vibrant, economically thriving, healthy, sustainable, loved by its citizens, great to live in and engaging to visit.

Over 2016, the growth in OVGA’s project involvements has strengthened our call for integrated design solutions, promoting the real benefit of integrated design processes that meld architecture, landscape, urban design and engineering into cohesive, effective and contextually appropriate place-based outcomes. This OVGA aspiration is now clearly stated in design principles underpinned at a national level by the urban design protocol for Australian Cities (Creating Places for People) and embedded in projects ranging in scale from major transport infrastructure (e.g. Level Crossing Removals and Melbourne Metro) through to small regional interventions (e.g. life saving clubs and regional galleries). It is our observation that industry acknowledges this shift in expectation of government as smart client, and there is emerging evidence of a more collaborative design environment emerging in significant projects.

However, as we watch our cities become more dense, higher, impermeable and unnatural, it seems essential that we develop a deeper understanding of the inherent value of integrating architecture (built environment) with landscape (natural environment). There is limited strategic discussion or understanding of the possibilities inherent in the concept of green infrastructure as a framework to restore the value of natural processes into the management of a denser human environment. The landscape-led Green Grid strategy, an award winning initiative developed by the NSW Government Architect’s Office that seeks to conserve, improve and expand Sydney’s strategic network of open spaces, is an important moment in advancing this thinking.

We have reached a critical point in the growth and development of our cities where the implications of our design decisions are critical to the ‘liveability balance’ that supports the triple aspiration of living, working and visiting. Accepting the inevitability of change in our built environment, OVGA advocacy and advice across diverse projects emphasizes the significant responsibility to ensure change is never dictated purely by economics, but is always overlaid by deep considerations about the quality and long term impact of the places we build and concern for the community for whom we build. The question of what constitutes a liveable city inspires much debate, but has become a ubiquitous aspiration in contemporary policy, planning and urban design. In Melbourne, nominated so often as the world’s most liveable city, it has become enshrined in the public imagination as the highest form of praise we can give to the place we call home.

The OVGA is not alone in regularly questioning the attitude that lets ‘the market decide’ what housing we get. There are many important and relevant international and local examples of alternatives to market-developed housing (such as Vauban in Germany), where higher density housing is complemented by the sustainable systems that an integrated architecture and landscape can provide. These innovative housing models can be viewed in many ways - as an exercise in: reducing ecological impact; affordability; liveability; provision of mutual social support; and a reduction in reliance on the car as a primary means of transport.

The OVGA’s design review processes reveal a significant move towards the ‘greening’ of architecture, ranging from vertical green walls to roof, balcony or sky gardens. Insights from expert landscape architects on our design review panel regularly alert designers and stakeholders to the technical requirements of greening buildings, to ensure genuine propositions that meld architecture with environmental benefits rather than ill-considered efforts to make density appear more palatable.

Victoria’s recently released Better Apartments Design Standards elevate consideration of landscape as part of an integrated design response. Objectives include protection of the landscape character of a place, the requirement to maintain and enhance ecological habitats, encouraging the retention of existing mature vegetation and the promotion of climate-responsive landscape and water solutions that address ecological issues such as the urban heat island effect. The requirement for deep soil planting (or performance-reviewed alternatives) is an important and long overdue obligation that should be embraced and promoted through exemplary integrated architecture and landscape design solutions for our changing cities.

As we look forward – extending our reach and collaborating with different sectors across government – OVGA takes its cue from Laura Lee’s seminal work ‘An Integrated Design Strategy for South Australia: Building the Future’ undertaken as Adelaide Thinker in Residence, a design-led strategy that puts people first:

“Integrated design is about collaboration, consultation and communication across broad stakeholders and, early in the design process, acknowledges challenges and perceived restrictions. It enables the integration of research into all aspects of industry and professional practice with an emphasis on processes for achieving outcomes as well as the outcomes themselves. Based on a human centred approach, integrated design fosters coordinated, long-term decision-making leading to improved quality of life outcomes.”

message
Thank you to Anna Johnson and Richard Black for provoking a timely and thoughtful reanalysis of our contemporary and ever-shifting relationship with landscape, both as editors of this issue and in their book Living in the Landscape. Our relationship with the landscape is under constant revision and reassessment. This relationship is both real and imaginary, as delivered to us via images and text, and is worthy of reflection.

I’m often asked what is happening at the Institute, and as the start of the year seems a good time for reflection I’ll outline some achievements of 2016 around the Institute’s 3 pillars of Members Services, Advocacy and Education.

Members Services

The Chapter office has moved to Level 1 making it more accessible to members (thanks to KFiveKinnarps for the handsome office furniture). This is the first step in a masterplan for level 1. The next step is the development of a members’ drop-in space, with occasional working, meeting space and exhibition space.

Our Small and Medium Practice Forums are extremely popular, with feedback from many practitioners on their enormous value, both in the information shared and the collegiate atmosphere. Architects have a long tradition of informal mentoring and it continues in these forums. We have started to replicate this model in regional centres assisted by our new Regional Chair Kim Irons. Kim has facilitated similar forums in Geelong and Ballarat and inviting key people from other regions to attend then replicate that model in their region.

For younger members – the students group, SONA and graduates group EmAGN - continue to be well supported by many events, forums and mentoring (or speed dating) sessions that encourage them to ‘build their tribe’ via the Institute. Peter Malatt has been instrumental in bringing through the next generation of members. The Graduate Prize has been restructured into one larger prize across all universities that includes cash, mentoring, registration fee and sitting-in and touring with an Awards jury.

The Honours Committee are pushing hard on a number of other Victorian Gold Medal nominations, Civil Honours nominations and have been working with me to encourage eligible women to nominate as Fellows, so we can bring through more women Life Fellows. The excellent writers and academics on that committee like Phillip Goad and Harriet Edquist, have significantly raised the quality of our submissions.

Advocacy

Most of the heavy lifting so far has been around Planning Reform – and in particular the Better Apartment Design Standards. We’ve had good access to government. The Institute supported the introduction of Standards, and believe they are required to protect the public interest. We have publicly supported the Minister while also advocating for more. More detail can be found in my two interviews with Linda Cheng for ArchitectureAU in August and December, and In the Chapter Council report in this issue.

Early in the year we presented to Planning Panels on the Zoning Reform Review and advocated to retain existing interim height controls in both the NR and GR zones.

The Awards Program remain our most public expression, and reinforces all 3 pillars. Our media messaging around the Awards was well picked up by the press, emphasising the value architects contribute to community by thinking beyond their site.

Victorian member engagement is the largest in the country with 197 entries. Nine projects went on to win 10 National Awards, meaning that about a quarter of awarded projects were from Victoria. Victoria is also Home to 4 AA AA winners - not least of which being the 2016 Gold Medal winners, ARM Architecture.

We also continue relationships with government and industry stakeholders. The following members represent the Institute on external bodies and forums - Megan Dwyer (Building Advisory Council), Ian Sutter (ARBV), Karen Alcock (Apartment Standards Industry Taskforce) and Regina Bron (Building Regulations Advisory Committee) which is Chaired by VBA Commissioner Yvonne von Hartel.

We are also introducing the opportunity to purchase CPD events in advance in bundles at a discount. The tickets can them be used throughout the year for topics you find interesting. Practices can make a saving at the same time as planning their CPD calendar for the year.

Last year a number CPD workshop events focussing on practice management were delivered as a series. The first series sold out very quickly, so we are looking to repeat this style of delivery in 2017.

This year we are introducing a CPD series specifically for EmAGN/graduates looking at each of the defined competencies (practice management / design / documentation / project delivery).

At the other end of the profession we are also offering a series that will look at succession planning / planning for retirement / to grow or not to grow. We are reframing our CPD program to meet the needs of members at every stage of their career.

We are also introducing the #033 practice and projects, including downloadable resources such as ABIC reference contracts and guide letters.

Wish you all a constructive 2017.

VANESSA BIRD
VICTORIAN CHAPTER PRESIDENT
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