

MONUMENT

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SULMAN AWARD WINNER

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**MONUMENT CELEBRATES 50 ISSUES WITH HASSELL
DURBACH BLOCK • ZAHA HADID • GLENN MURCUTT
CARUSO ST JOHN • DROST + VAN VEEN • SEAN GODSELL**



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AN AUDIENCE IN ROME

SYDNEY ARCHITECT GLENN MURCUTT HAS ALWAYS PRACTICED BY HIS OWN RULES. NOW, BEATING A FIELD OF 600 INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTS TO CLAIM THE PRESTIGIOUS 2002 PRITZKER PRIZE, HIS PROFILE IS FINALLY, JUSTLY, ELEVATED TO THE ELITE.

Text **Gerard Reinmuth** Photography **Nick Scott (Portrait), Anthony Browell (Rome)**





WITH THE RECEIPT of the 2002 *Pritzker Prize*, Glenn Murcutt completed an ascent into the 'super league' of international architects that started in 1992 with his receipt of the *Alvar Aalto Medal*. If not yet in the same stratosphere as Le Corbusier, Kahn or Mies van der Rohe, Murcutt has certainly now earned a place in the second-level orbit of 20th-century masters – a list including Sir Norman Foster, Renzo Piano, Tadao Ando, Frank Gehry and so on.

I make this point at the outset, not because it is a discussion in which Murcutt would be at all interested, nor for the sake of hyperbole, but to simply make the enormity of his achievement and his celebrity status within the profession. For, while Murcutt will wince at my use of the word 'celebrity', his world has certainly changed as a result of the past decade of international recognition.

In the wake of the post-*Pritzker* media frenzy, I was fortunate to be granted an interview soon after the award ceremony in Rome and while he was in the midst of the design of a major new project. These two issues – the experience of the *Pritzker* ceremony and Murcutt's involvement in a new larger scale project – suggested the directions a discussion

might take. What is the effect of the *Pritzker*, at both a personal and at a practice level – if in Murcutt's case, the two can even be separated?

On the day of the interview, Murcutt was still talking about the *Pritzker* ceremony with the freshness of a kid who just landed in the ultimate sandpit.

"You have to say, they certainly do these things properly," he mused. The size and stature of the ceremony is enormous; an attempt, according to Murcutt, by the *Pritzker Foundation* to secure the importance of these awards in the context of other major gongs such as the *Nobels*.

Murcutt received his award standing in the centre of the *Campodoglio*, Rome, and attended by a veritable who's who of world architecture: Norman Foster, Renzo Piano, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Francesco dal Co, Sverre Fehn, Juhani Pallasmaa – the list goes on and on.

At a more fundamental level, the receipt of the *Pritzker Prize* has provided a level of validation for someone who has been fighting a lonely battle for a long time. "The issue is that, because I have had, over my career, a fair number of difficulties in getting my work realised, to receive these awards and >>

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>> international recognition confirms the basis of why I wanted to do it," he explains. "It's reassuring that I'm not just some crackpot that has gone out just with ego and said that I will not be stopped at any price. The fact that I have received these awards is an enormous level of confirmation."

This confirmation is also important at a personal level, given that Murcutt often talks as if he exists solely for the practice of architecture. "My greatest aim is not for the self but the work," he says. "I had a plan that if I hadn't achieved a decent quality of architecture by the time I was 40, I was going to return to Europe and practice for somebody who I respected greatly. I'd rather work with somebody else who was doing good work than practice poorly myself."

As is well documented, this phenomenal drive came from the "very powerful influence of statements by my father, such as, 'You must start off as you would like to finish.' That was very powerful. So that is a policy I have had throughout my career."

So, this *Pritzker* is a confirmation at a fundamental level of a person and his life decisions— and of his commitment to architecture above all else — as much as

it is for an architect and their *oeuvre*. However, with the award comes a new pressure on Murcutt and his wife, Wendy Lewin, as they commence new projects at larger scales.

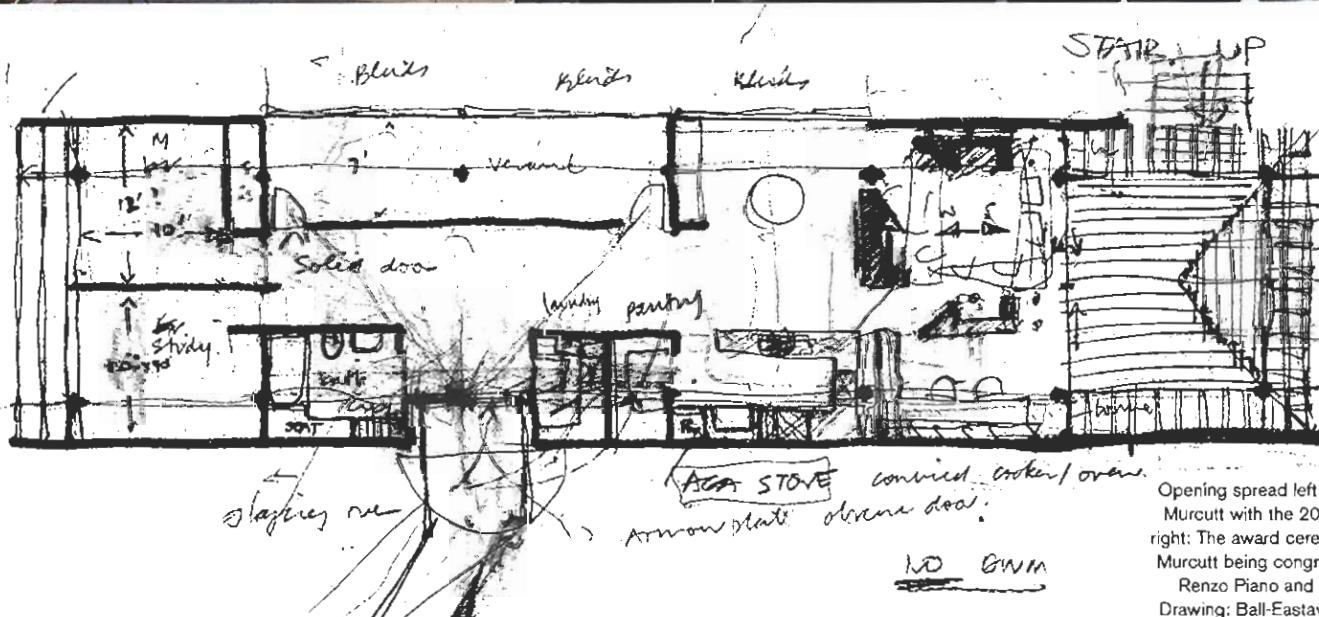
"I am actually quite an anxious person — anxious in the sense that I know how easy it is to be a bad architect," he notes. "Now, all these awards mean that every new work is vulnerable. There lies the pressure: I am aware that there are a lot of eyes that are watching to see what is coming up. But at the same time it does give me the confidence to go on, to keep going."

While Murcutt has completed an enormous range of projects over the past 30 years and contributes to the profession at an international level via teaching and his presence on competition juries, those seminal houses from the 1980's feature largely in the publicity surrounding the award. However, that the award came after the completion of 'Riverdale' (the Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Centre at Cambewarra) must have come as a validation of both Murcutt and Lewin's collaboration and of their move into larger projects.

"I don't know of anybody else I'd be able to [work] collaboratively with, like I

collaborate with Wendy," he notes. "I think that as dissimilar as we may seem to outsiders, we work actually very closely, and the work is very close in its basis."

Murcutt's collaboration with Lewin is of interest given both the change of scale in work and a shift in the emphasis of his design process that has accompanied this collaboration. In perusing the folios of Murcutt's drawings archived in the *State Library of NSW*, one can detect a clear shift from the diagrammatic plan-based investigations of the early houses to a more complex process where the relationship between landscape form and the building is far more direct. The linework and geometries suggest Aalto's ghost has suddenly appeared in its most potent form since Murcutt's 1960's *Staff House* at the *University of Newcastle*, completed while still at *Ancher Mortlock Murray and Woolley*. While this suggests a conceptual development in Murcutt's approach, the environmental rationalist within him prefers to explain this as the result of the typography, soil quality, access, building codes and of his collaboration with others. Nevertheless, he does concede that some progression



Opening spread left: Glenn Murcutt in Australia; right: Murcutt with the 2002 *Pritzker Prize* in Rome. Left to right: The award ceremony in the Campodoglio, Rome; Murcutt being congratulated by son Nicholas Murcutt; Renzo Piano and Frank Gehry watch the ceremony. Drawing: Ball-Eastaway house at Glenorie (schematic plan), assistants: Graham Jahn and Rad Milatic; Alex Tzannes, site visits (PXD 728, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW).

is inevitable with a change in scale. "It's a bit like casting in theatre, if you are cast in the same role all the time, you are going to get the same sort of work in architecture."

Murcutt certainly seems to be enjoying the opportunity offered by larger projects, with a new 75-room hotel in Victoria currently on the drawing board. Furthermore, he is still refusing to rule out any type of project. "Look, the criteria is, 'Is it a good client?' That's the criteria and it doesn't matter whether it is small or large, as long as there is room to move, as long as the brief is able to provide the basis that as an architect we can give the best of ourselves."

However, despite the possibilities offered by this statement, one cannot ignore the basis of Murcutt's highly refined way of working. "Wendy pointed out recently when I was preparing my speech for the acceptance, that I am a restless soul, I have a restless spirit, I am not able to stay in one place for any length of time. I need a huge turnover in clients because I can get very bored with one job for too long," he reveals. "The idea of working on a multistorey building for four or five years – that would be purgatory to me. I don't say

this for everybody, that's purely for me."

Nevertheless, when discussing his friends at an international level who have large offices, he speaks with considerable respect at their achievement.

"Renzo's scale and development of practice and how he has done it is quite remarkable," he enthuses. "He was very clear about how to train people in the office, about how to keep them there and interested. I mean, you don't hold people for 33 years and 25 years without looking after them and giving them a fair run. When you join Renzo's you join on the basis that you are going to learn and stay there and be trained. He has a practice that in many ways has a relationship to a very small practice; it's not just production. He is still working with things that young architects do, models and experimenting with various things, so the fact that he has multiplications of 100 allows him to do projects that are multiplications of 100."

Even if Murcutt does not suddenly launch into a range of larger-scale work, one sincerely hopes that he will be able to use the award and his elevated status in the role of "architectural statesman" to effect positive change at a political and urban design level as he has been able

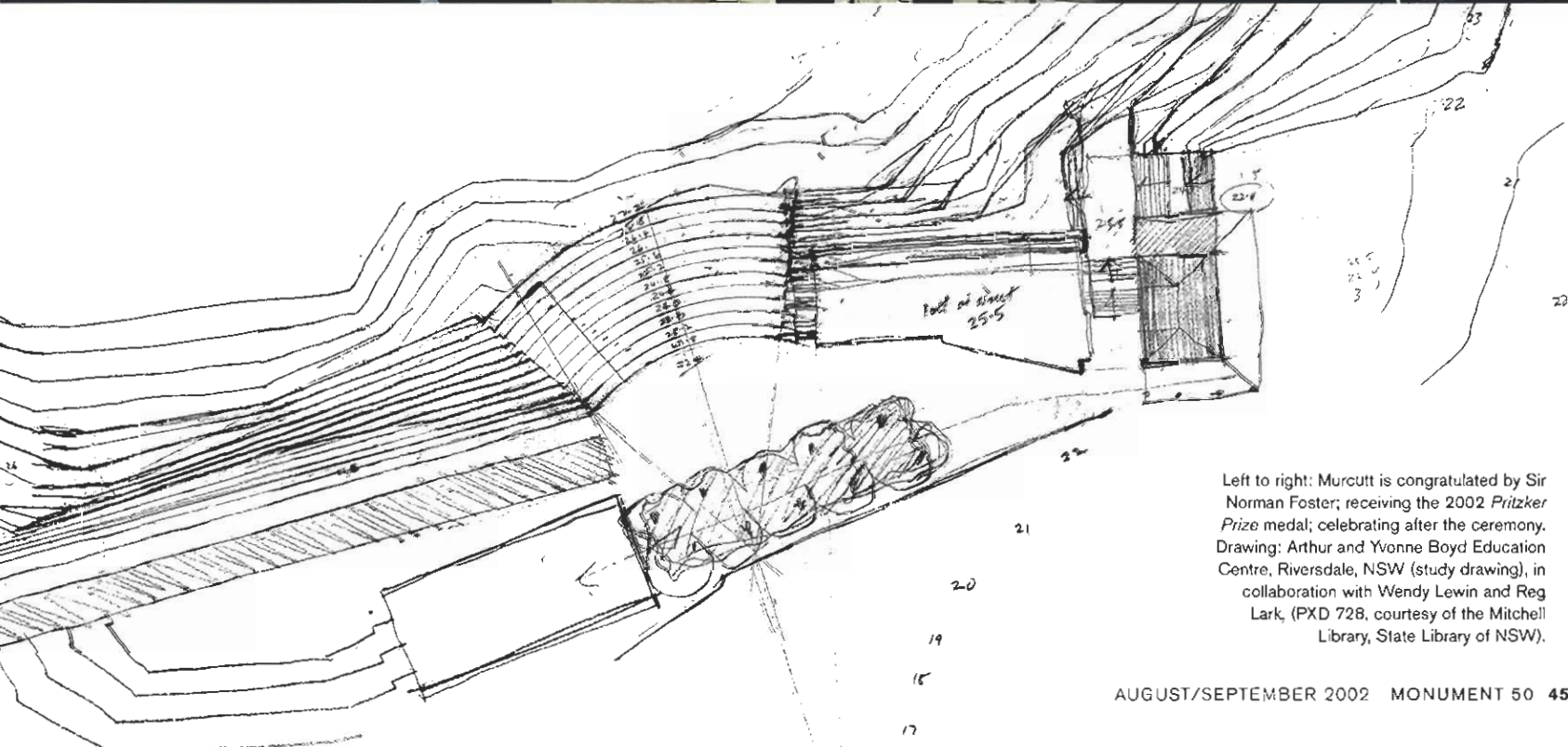
to do this through his role advising the UNSW as they transform their Sydney campus. One of the tragedies Murcutt laments in Australian culture and politics is that way in which those who excel in their fields often struggle to get the recognition and mandate they deserve at home. "I don't think that one is at all regarded decently in Australia," he says. "That's been my experience."

This tragedy is most felt in the omission of Murcutt from any serious role in Australian schools of architecture. His teaching is now almost solely confined to the United States (with the exception of a *University of Newcastle Master Class* every July) where he is given opportunities commensurate with someone of his status, where "the students are respectful" and where he is remunerated well. While it is difficult to envisage a change to the situation within Sydney's universities, he may start to be heard more clearly at a political level.

"I have written a letter to the [NSW] Premier, and am hoping to get a meeting with both the Premier and the Minister of Planning [Dr Andrew Refshauge]," he explains. "I want to discuss how at the moment we are in very dire straight in regard to planning

requirements. The problem with the DCPs [Development Control Plans] and the LEPs [Local Environment Plans] now is that they are supposedly designed to stop the worst, but they don't stop the worst; they actually help the worst, but they prevent the best. So we have planners causing for our profession tremendous problems. The frustration level of it is just terrible to have planners telling me how to design, giving 'helpful hints' is an affront. And I think the submission requirement on architects at development-consent stage has now gone beyond the pale. I think this situation is dramatically stupid, and unreasonable." Murcutt's anger goes beyond planning and into the requirements of NatHERS [National Home Energy Rating Scheme]. "These requirements work for triple-fronted bungalows but not for most well-designed buildings. I have a building down the South Coast, at Foxground, that did not pass the certifier without upper level windows all opening to get the ventilation. As if my buildings don't bloody ventilate properly!"

An increased public role for Murcutt would fill a sorely needed place for a critical voice that operates >>



Left to right: Murcutt is congratulated by Sir Norman Foster; receiving the 2002 Pritzker Prize medal; celebrating after the ceremony. Drawing: Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Education Centre, Riversdale, NSW (study drawing), in collaboration with Wendy Lewin and Reg Lark, (FXD 728, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW).

>> without vested interests, unlike most of the profession where commercial considerations limit the extent to which some issues are debated, Murcutt certainly calls it as he sees it. "Our architecture is a reflection of the value systems of our culture at any particular time," he says, "and if we don't like the architecture that's coming, then it's really time to look at ourselves as clients, as planners, as a total population – at our value system. Our value system is put into [all levels of] government. So, if the culture is that of materialism, then that's what we are going to get from our architecture."

Murcutt sees this materialism manifest in architecture in a range of ways, from the nature of developments generally but also in prevailing stylistic trends. "I think that a lot of this minimal architecture that is going on imposes itself as object and I don't think – and I am speaking for me – that has relevance. Simplification is not to do with the commodification of austerity; this is another issue altogether. I think life is more complex than just a sheer white wall."

46 However, Murcutt is extremely generous to architects whom he feels

are fighting the good fight alongside him. "There are a few of us – maybe two dozen or three dozen of us in this country – who are fighting a rearguard action against that process." In addition to the usual suspects such as Richard Le Plastrier, Peter Stutchbury and Paul Pholeros, he also nominates practitioners such as Donovan Hill, Brit Andresen and Peter O'Gorman, Durbach Block, and the Denton Corker Marshall Group as architects whom he respects greatly.

In regard to international practitioners, it can be noted that Murcutt was a phenomenal student of contemporary architecture up to the point where he found his own voice in private practice 20 years ago. The critical edge with which he researched architecture as a student – "all these things become one's conscience, this is an important issue, how the work of others becomes one conscience" – is notably absent when considering the work of his contemporaries. This is perhaps inevitable given that many of these are now counted among his friends.

The obvious names from his early investigations – Fehn, Luis Barragan, Mies – are now augmented by Piano,

Pallasmaa and others whom he has met as part of the international architectural firmament, all united with Murcutt by their absolute commitment to and pursuit of architectural excellence. He also cites Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, Frank Gehry and others whose work interests him.

"Greg Lynn I know, he is teaching at Yale at the same time I have been, and I get along very well with Greg," he says. "I see what he is up to with his seeds and pods and blobs and everything else, and I think it's an interesting project."

Murcutt's relationship with Gehry (in addition to Piano and Pallasmaa) has provided both validation for his hand-drawn explorations and an insight into the use of computers in contemporary practice. "I think it is a fairly important area," he offers. "My design is always by hand, and while Frank Gehry will talk about the fact that he couldn't do any of his works without the aid of computers now, he still does all his initial drawings and models by hand. Then computers come in, read the form and structure the whole thing. I think the hand-eye connection produces the options; if we lose that eye-hand connection we are losing a way of thinking that is extremely

vital, and I think we are going to see more discussion about this in the future."

Despite these diversions, Murcutt returns to his core value system when talking about his own work. "I think buildings should make people feel good, and feel comfortable. Something that Richard [Le Plastrier] and I have talked about for a long time is the 'ings' of 'things': sitting, resting, reclining, talking, enjoying, communicating, eating, preparing, sleeping, bathing. These are really wonderful things."

With this as a key element in his work, and with the validation bought by the 2002 Pritzker Prize, Murcutt has perhaps confirmed his most oft-repeated maxim. "Barragan made a statement, which I really uphold," he begins, "which is that any work of architecture that is designed without serenity in mind is, in my view, a mistake – and he added to that – when serenity possesses joy, it is ultimate." MSO



Left to right: Renzo Piano congratulates Glenn Murcutt; the audience of the 2002 Pritzker Prize ceremony; Murcutt gives his acceptance speech.

Drawing: Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Education Centre, Riversdale, NSW (study drawing), in collaboration with Wendy Lewin and Reg Lark, (PXD 728, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW).

