

DAVINA JACKSON/
EMERGING TALENTS IN
AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE

WURKLE

Thames & Hudson

PHOTOGRAPHY/SHANNON MCGRATH/

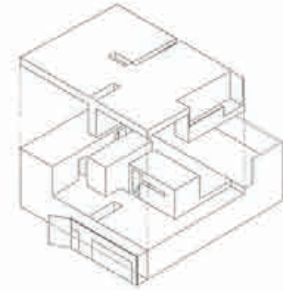
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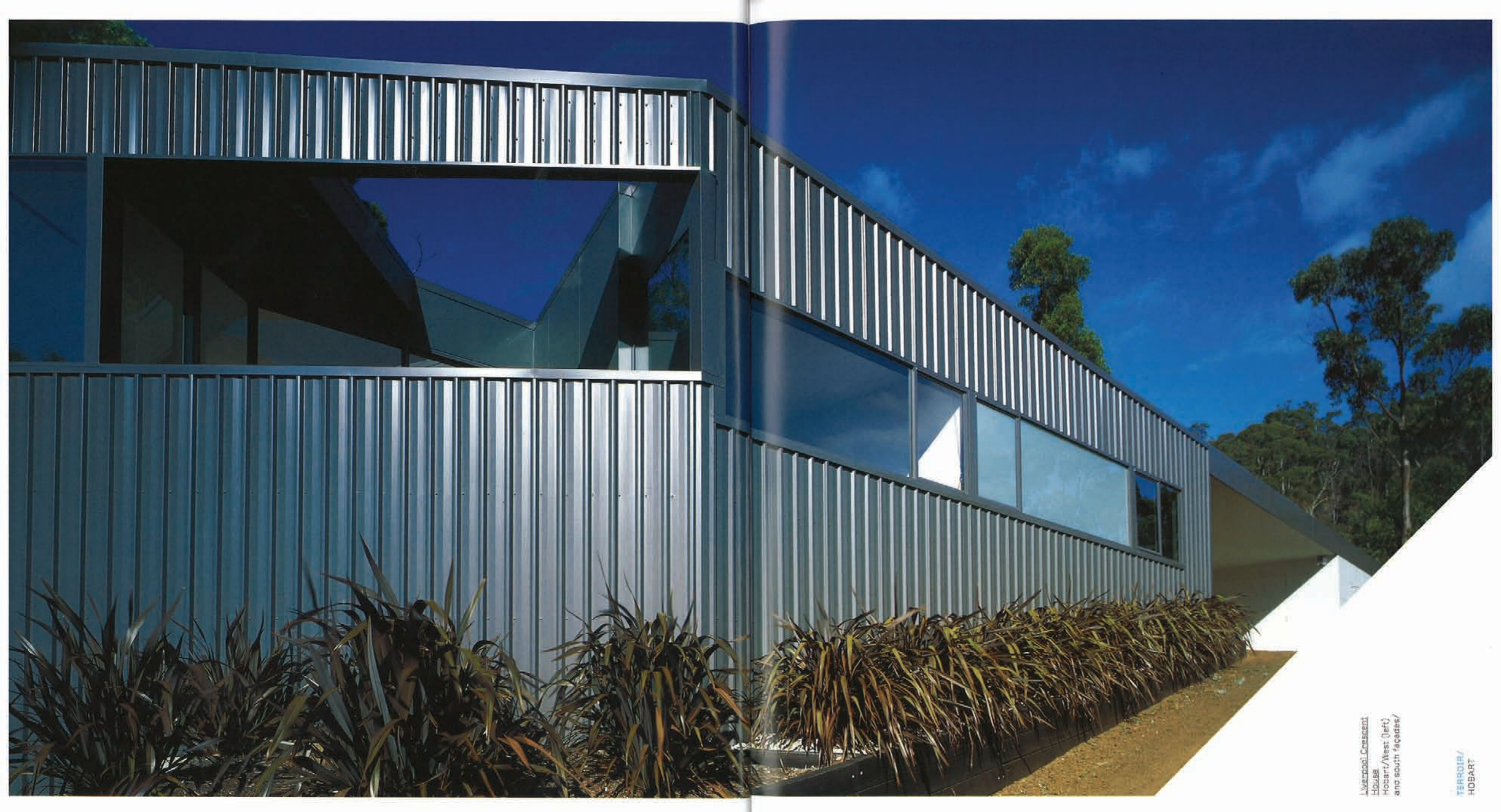


Peppermint Bay
Peppermint Bay,
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pages/Detail of timber
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Tolmans Hill House
Hobart/Opposite page/
North-east facade
(day)/Above/North-
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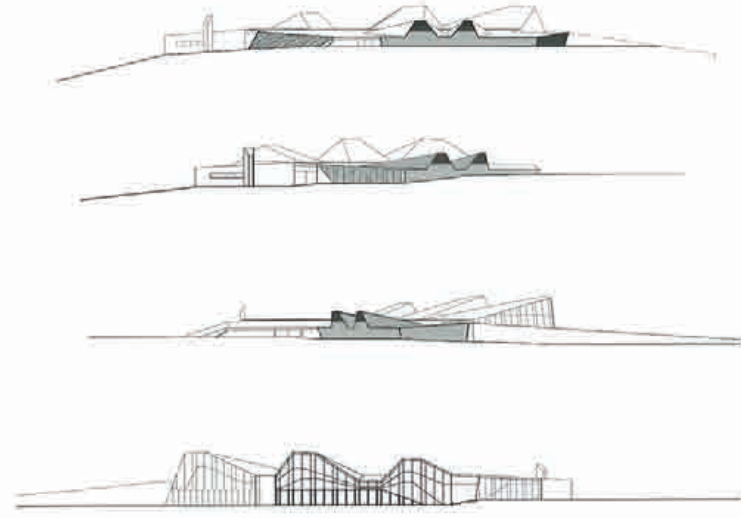
Tolmans Hill House
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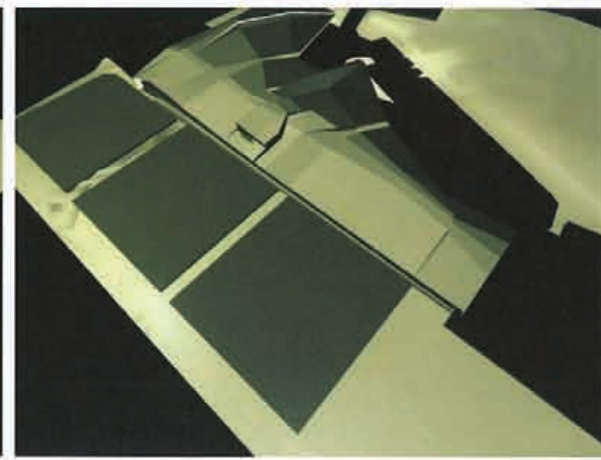
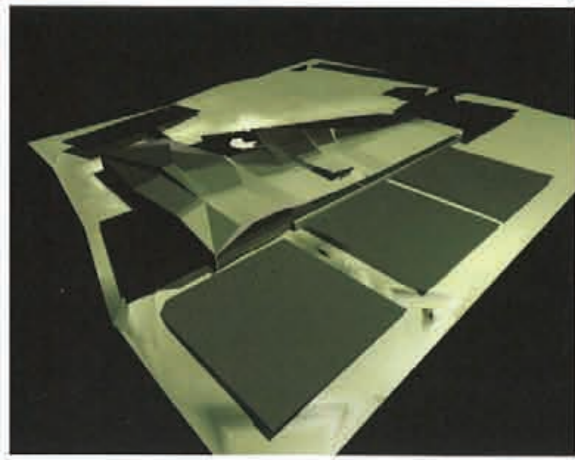
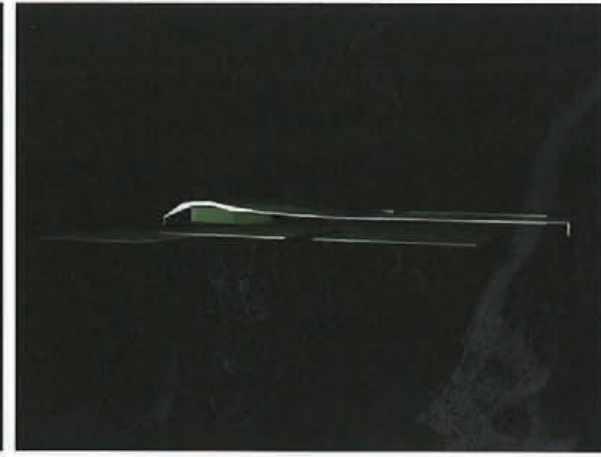
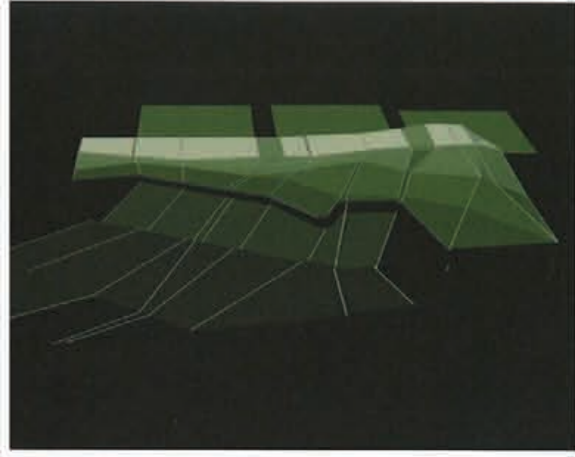


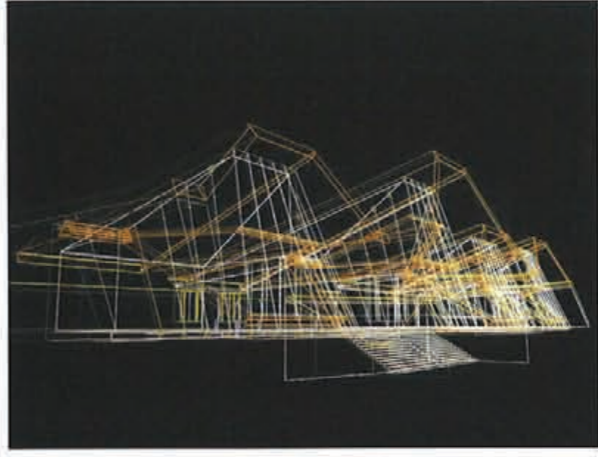
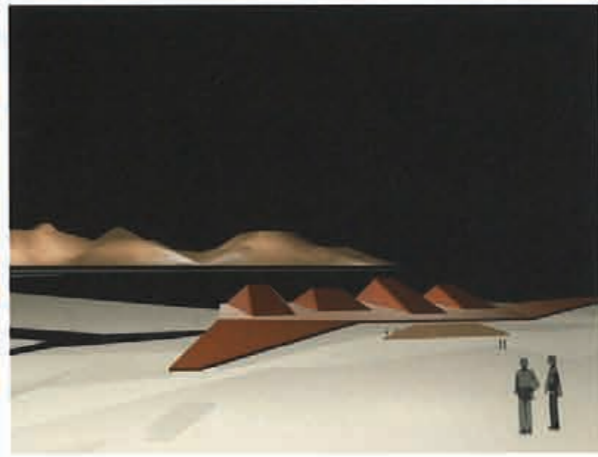
Liverpool Crescent
House
Hobart/West (left)
and south facades/





Peppermint Bay
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Opposite page/Restaurant interior/
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Three Tasmanian architects, Gerard Reinmuth, Richard Blythe and Scott Balmforth, direct a vigorous, multi-city practice whose architecture responds to geographical topographies with topological geometries. Their firm's name, Terroir, alludes to French viticultural interpretations of landscapes, considering not just visual qualities but also the subtleties of soil compositions, irrigation and fertilization, vegetation, climate, behaviour of fauna and the effects of light and shadow.

Realistically, the terroir analogy cannot be taken too far. Like all architects, Reinmuth, Blythe and Balmforth are destined to dramatically alter – in fact, significantly damage – earth's ecological systems by using building materials dug from the ground and manufactured through energy-wasting, air-polluting processes and transport logistics. It is not feasible for them to analyse terrains for building as intensively or as sensitively as winemakers must to cultivate grapes.

Symbolically, however, Terroir is contradicting 20th-century modernists indoctrinated by the international style, who wanted either to 'touch the earth lightly' or to separate their buildings from the ground to hover above sacrosanct nature. Instead, this firm aims towards 'appropriate designs for buildings that create a special bond with place'. For their early oeuvre in Tasmania, this often means designing roofs that emulate the profiles of mountains seen around their sites. Lushly vegetated hills, old forests and spectacular rivers define this small triangular island between mainland Australia and the Antarctic.

Terroir value landscape 'as a function of human interaction with it', addressing 'a constellation of human occupations and activities that occur on sites; it's more than a climatic/scientific approach'. University of Tasmania philosopher Professor Jeff Malpas, contributing to a forthcoming book on the firm, writes that: 'there are obvious ways, of course, in which the environment determines our activities and our thoughts ... but there are other, much less straightforward and perhaps more pervasive, ways in which our relation to landscape and environment is indeed one of our own affectivity as much as of our ability to affect.'

Terroir was founded in 1999 by Sydney-based design principal Reinmuth, then-Launceston academic Blythe and business-savvy Balmforth in Hobart (all being creatively astute). Like BKK in Melbourne, it exploits the media (by supplying interesting content and

editing/interviewing services) both as a networking tool and to expand recognition. Certainly it's firming an international reputation for thoughtful and adventurous architecture through articles (both by and about them), postgraduate scholarship (via the rigorously navel-gazing Masters by Project programme at RMIT University in Melbourne), travel (especially to Denmark, home of Reinmuth's architect wife Marie-Louise Holst, and with royal links to Tasmania), and regular entries in international competitions (the latest for a library in Prague).

By building locally and engaging internationally, they are beginning to exemplify both critical regionalism – the 1960s Marxist architectural response to global capitalism – and a newer phenomenon arising from online communications and affordable air travel – viral internationalism. The former hints at a notion that architects confined to provincial practices could engage with international artistic debates by critically analyzing foreign publications to decide (usually by tagging selected pages) and debate (with local colleagues) which strategies would – and would not – be emulated. Viral internationalism suggests a different concept – that information age architects are unable to 'critically' resist the media's relentless bombardment of images and messages and are constantly infected by unpredictable experiences with foreign people and places. The practice also is influenced by University of Technology Sydney Professor Andrew Benjamin's philosophical writings on contemporary architecture as a cosmopolitan phenomenon.

Even if they are not critical regionalists in any locality-restricted sense, they have developed a critical approach to their architecture. For most of the two-month entry preparation phase of their recent competition scheme for a national library and archives in Prague, the directors researched the Velvet Revolution, Czech cubism and planning of the New York Public Library and explored fanciful ideas ranging from imaginary topographies to a cluster of Franz Kafka's cockroach eggs (from *The Metamorphosis*) lying beneath a lifted carpet. The team's digital design expert, Sarah Benton, works closely with the trio in the Sydney office; this appears to be a female-friendly practice.

More collaborative online than many multi-city practices, Terroir's principals regularly exchange concept drawings and notes online – and have developed an email/PDF/tablet sketching system which includes staff in both offices in their chains

of discussion about design issues (six hundred emails are filed for the Prague competition). As noted by Professor Leon van Schaik, one supervisor of their Masters research, Terroir's strategy of recording their online design sketches and conversations is unusual and valuable for critics analyzing their work.

Although the Sydney office has not built major projects yet, it is piquing the interest of significant government clients and has international engineers Arup keen to collaborate (to engage its young engineers on the structural challenges of irregular, origami rooflines). In Tasmania, Terroir is the elite small practice – after precociously breaking through a surprising amount of early resistance from the island's established practitioners.

The significant built project of Terroir's early oeuvre is the Peppermint Bay gourmet restaurant and food emporium, a single-storey, sprawling structure, which appears to reconfigure the centre of its flat waterside site as a new topography of low hills and gullies in dark ribbed steel panelling. Internally, it has stone and ostentatiously thick plasterboard walls hinting at the weightiness of a European castle, but with the water-facing wall of the restaurant entirely glazed to exploit the panorama of lawn, trees and the Tasman Sea.

Still under construction is a 'cold weather' resort in the Freycinet National Park, which will exploit spectacular views along a beach and across a bay to one of Tasmania's outstanding landscape features, The Hazards, a chain of rocky hills defining a headland. Terroir is interpreting this context with a partly buried structure, accompanied by an array of external hot pools inspired by ancient Roman public baths. They explain the design as 'our understanding of the Tasmanian landscape as an essay in monumentality and intimacy' and have been influenced by the Seibachrome prints of a brilliant Tasmanian landscape photographer, the late Peter Dombrovskis.

There are two characteristics that set Terroir apart from other young practices in Sydney. One is that the directors bother little about the passive solar and ventilation strategies drummed into Sydney students, and the other is that they are considerably more adventurous in form-making than locally educated peers. In short, they are more creative and less responsive to instruction than many of their 'holier-than-thou' contemporaries of the Sydney modernist school.