ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN & CONTEMPORARY CULTURE | SEPTEMBER 2001 | Nº187 | £3.75

BLUEPRINT

Youth culture.

Whatever.

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9 770268 492008 09

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EDITORIAL

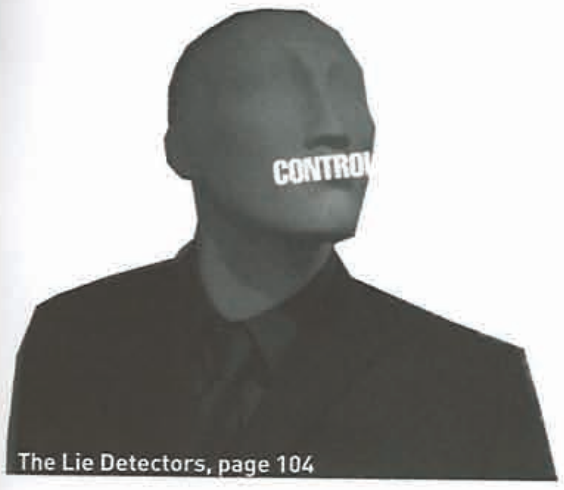
Youthful spirits

"Frankly, things are just too damn tame at the moment," writes Hugh Pearman in his preview of the Memphis exhibition to be held at the Design Museum this month (page 110). Sadly, trudging around various design graduation shows this summer, it is difficult not to agree. With a few exceptions – most notably the RCA, which had a very good year – reasonably well executed but often-derivative design appears to have replaced genuinely original thinking.

However, this seems to merely reflect the general malaise that's currently affecting culture. We live in a society that refuses to get old but which, at the same time, seems determined to keep its youth on a tight leash. The result is that many of the trappings of youth culture have been appropriated both by global brands and a new social group referred to as "adultescents".

There is no better example than MTV which celebrated its 20th birthday last month. The channel has made sure that our music comes pre-packaged and easily digestible, with the result being that the audience is presented either with "rebel" rock stars who are approaching their 30s or teen bands that are puppets for their all-conquering record labels. A new, vital, young movement surely doesn't stand a chance.

There are signs though that the world's youth is attempting to break free – the emergence in this country of the "straight-edgers", who refuse to line corporate pockets by smoking and drinking, perhaps proves that a new rebellion is taking seed. As Ekow Eshun points out on page 58: "There will never be an identikit scene to match punk. But the discontentments of young people are finding their own form." It would be good to believe that was true.



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Making the earth move

RBB terroir is one of Australia's leading young architecture practices, with ideals and psyche inextricably interwoven with the landscape of Tasmania. **Helen Kaiser**, herself a leading figure in Australian architectural journalism, examines the forces that drive the partners

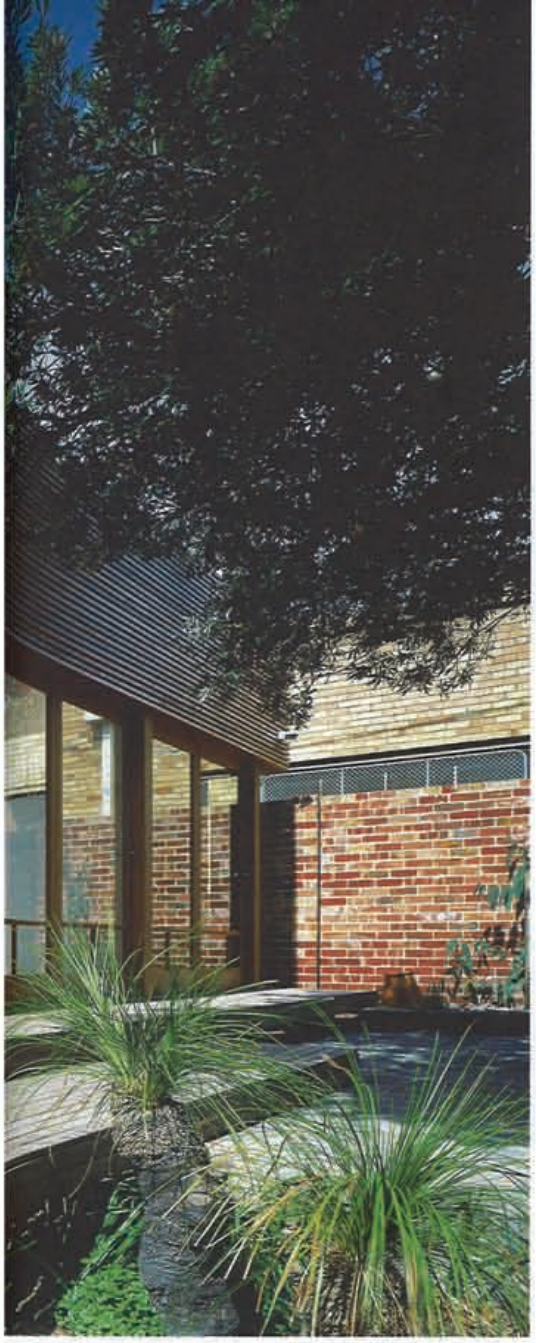
"Architecture is essentially a consumptive profession. While we would not really say we operate with a strong environmental emphasis, we are from the state where green politics was born in Australia, and we find it traumatic that to build a granite-clad office tower in Sydney a whole hillside in Italy has to be blasted away. So we do operate from the basic view that, if you are going to build something, you may as well do it 'properly' – with a long term view" – RBB terroir

In their two years together as RBB terroir, Gerard Reinmuth, Richard Blythe and Scott Balmforth have spread their practice interstate, expanded to a team of eight, and won back-to-back awards from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects for their first two completed projects. More importantly, this young Australian practice is rapidly becoming a successful commercial entity and projects in the pipeline will project them from "emerging" to "established" within the year. Little wonder that in their home town of Hobart, capital of the small island state of Tasmania, where most practices struggle to sustain a constant workflow, they're considered Young Turks.

While this says more about the Tasmanian architectural climate than their characters per se, their indifference to local criticism suggests that they have outgrown their beginnings. But this belies their respect for their origins, the importance of which is signified by their name. By adopting the French viticulture term for soil, terroir, the trio sought to embed a "conceptual sensibility" in their practice's DNA that is identified with the unique qualities of place and origin, and more specifically the effect of human intervention on that place. Despite a small population, Tasmania bears a relatively rich architectural history and well-preserved stock of buildings from its colonial and convict past.

This place and its context of "isolation and importation", an Australian condition amplified on the island state, has left an indelible mark on the practice's psyche. In an honours thesis chapter entitled The Isolation Paradox, Reinmuth explains that "Hobart's architectural history is one of the meeting between the universal and particular", describing the importation and appropriation of international architectural developments to this isolated island over generations. More specifically, it is Hobart's topography, and what Balmforth describes as "the brooding figure of Mount Wellington that (they) have all grown up with", and which "cradles" the city, that has become a pervasive notion in its work.

What is inherent in this practice, its projects and the ensuing dialogue, is a constant return to the fundamental, the primary, even the primitive. Ideologically, terroir's foundation is the primary function of architecture and the belief that, as



the "mother of the arts" it is vital to cultural and social function. Philosophically, it is about slowing time, favouring a long-term approach that considers the remains of our culture (and its actions) on the landscape. This stance is derived largely from the power and memory of the ancient landscape that lies beyond Hobart – a "quality" rather than a geological reality that manifests itself in the trio's ideology and their own sense of place. They aspire to the permanence and monumentality of Michael Heizer's land art or to the cultural engagement of Chillida's sculpture.

Though RBB terroir is in its formative stage, at a point where it would be easy to lurch rapidly and blindly forward, there is a conscious deceleration made by checking foundations. These foundations are acknowledged as the threshold from which terroir is evolving and the cradle within which new beginnings may be nurtured. Thus the "moving manifesto" of this emerging practice can be monitored and adjusted within clearly defined parameters. When set against the work, this theoretical underpinning becomes a kind of pre-rationalisation, not a premature justification for all to follow – it's considerably more strategic and fluid than that. One wonders whether geography has necessitated the establishment of this theoretical platform, or whether the fact that the partners are scattered across two states has simply accelerated its resolution on paper? With Balmforth in Hobart, Blythe in Launceston and Reinmuth in Sydney, what it has necessitated is a finely tuned, if quirky, communication.

"The discourse between partners is extremely important, in fact it is the point of the practice itself in many ways – the opportunity to exchange ideas between three people who share a strong affinity at both a personal and professional level," they explain. For expediency, and as an unavoidable by-product of their distinct characters, they have developed their own lingo, which is as crucial to their development of ideas as it is comical to the observer. It is a language derived from the vocabulary of the profession, whereby structural elements – contraptions, cradles, filters – become the means of describing bigger ideas.

This typically Australian trait of disguising intellectual exchange with flippant wit and wordplay is only possible between people who have an innate understanding. Though the team convenes at most four times a year, they are remarkably tight-knit. Reinmuth and Balmforth studied architecture together and were tutored over the years by Blythe, whose family has played a fundamental role in Tasmania's architectural development for more than 80 years. They have formed their own "family" ties, so secure now that they argue and engage as only family can. It's tempting to mull over their identities but they have fought hard to ensure that the individual's input isn't measured in the running of the practice. Twenty years on another review might assess their roles, but it that would be overlooking the ensemble's essence.

The key benefit of being in different cities is that one partner enjoys the familiarity of working within the context of a project, while another, removed from that context, can contribute with a degree of objectivity. Nevertheless, the process remains collaborative from the conception of the generating idea, through design development and documentation. On a practical level this entails frenzied faxing of sketches and diagrams, model making, e-mailing and phoning until each is satisfied.

If we were to measure success by sheer volume of built work, then this is essentially a pre-emptive profile: despite the number of projects currently underway there is, at time of writing, only four built works. These are split into two "suites" of buildings, each of which explores the notion of threshold. Terroir's first commission, the Masonic Club Hotel refurbishment, sits with a private house at Longley as the more complex of the works, while another private house at Tranmere and the latest project, a cafe/restaurant at Blackmans Bay on the Derwent River, are the more brutal siblings.

Each of the buildings emerges from a diagram with a dual narrative. Despite Longley's axial

Facing page, RBB terroir are, left to right, Gerard Reinmuth, Scott Balmforth and Richard Blythe; the Masonic Club Hotel, main picture facing page and this page, top centre and top right, was RBB terroir's first commission and sits in the practice's more complex "suite" of work; the Blackman's Bay restaurant, above, is terroir's latest project

The precision and delicacy of inserted elements is a common thread, weaving small in to big, balancing secondary with the primary

condition or Tranmere's linear spatial condition, the strategy is essentially the same. A line is set as the primary or "archaeological" mark in the landscape whose dual purpose is to anchor the building to its site and upon which the secondary elements or "ephemera" – inserted contraptions, joinery, and so on – are hung.

Reinmuth explains: "The secondary elements tend to be joinery items that solve the programmatic issues, as the primary mark is never about something as base as programme, but is about a response to larger issues, like landscape and form. In the search for a sculptural response, we try to merge the traditional building elements in to larger sculptural discussions."

The duality of these elements presents the two aspects of timing at play – the long, slow "time" of the walls, and the temporary, flippant gestures of the joinery. There is the implication that, should these secondary elements be stripped away in years to come, if the building is modified, one fundamental element will remain as the mark in the landscape. This paradoxical notion of creating a ruin is a romantic ideal at odds with our throwaway society that should, nevertheless, be an ideal to strive for architecturally.

In the Tranmere house, the primary gesture is the craggy wall or "brace", which simultaneously embraces the site and acts as the support from which the secondary elements are built out towards the view and along the linear contours of the site. At Longley, the equivalent "mark" is two parallel walls that are more complex in their direction/expression, warping to embrace the three dominant axes of the site. The partners talk of this as an armature on to which elements are "grafted". The complex roof form plays its part as an anchor too, from which these secondary elements are built down the site, due to the fall of the land. Both projects then employ a "filter" through which the landscape is experienced and it is this device that captures the occupant, pulling their orientation towards the view. In Tranmere this is a lens-like framing of place – in one direction, toward the river and the mountain opposite in a clear, abrupt gesture. In Longley, it is a more complex, more eloquent and more subtle modulation of the views – primarily through the Maison Jaoul timber insertion, so-called for Corbusian work that inspired it. The precision and delicacy of the inserted elements is a common thread through each of the projects, weaving small in to big, balancing the secondary with the primary.

Herein lies the poetry in their work. Though these houses are small in scale, their presence rivals the largesse of the Tasmanian landscape. The strength and weight of the primary gesture, the anchoring walls bracing and embracing the landscape, secures the structure, rooting it to its site. By treating the rest as an extraneous, temporary matter, a balance is struck within the resulting object – a balance between the archaic and transient, the brutal and delicate, the primal and ephemeral. Regarding these residential works as "bigger" buildings with an "implied monumentality", or as preparation for public works, doesn't belittle their significance but signals again thinking on a larger scale. Each idea, response, and strategy is preparation for what this firm sees as the "most noble act" of architecture – to create public buildings.

"We are interested in the public function of architecture, which reflects in part in our process, which is more about a dialogue or discourse than the genius of a sole creator," the partners state. "Even private buildings inevitably have a public role or face... If one returns to the root of architecture, one sees a profession that is about the interpretation of our culture and circumstance, rather than playing a more 'tertiary' role in the production of 'designed' objects... We are not really interested in design culture in that sense, but more in places like Stonehenge." It won't be long before they are challenged at this level: new commissions are for larger scale non-residential projects, including the design of a major gallery proposal for the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales; a sound wall to a Hobart freeway; and in Sydney the management of fit-outs at heritage shopping arcades, and a restaurant/nightclub/gym fit-out in a train tunnel.

While the partners predict that their strategy will remain the same, the challenge of the transition from a natural to a built urban landscape will test their resolve. Ideas about threshold, the clear marking of primary and secondary gestures, the dialogue between the old and the new and the process of communication can be logically imported, but in this contextual transfer, it will be Botta's idea of "building the site" that will be the key to implementing their fundamental ideology. "In this search for a more essential, sculptural dialogue with the landscape, we would like to get to the point when finally one of our built works is described as 'land art'. We could happily retire then," they quip. It would be a privilege to return in 100 years to review what mark was left on the landscape B

Above, top left and top centre, the Tranmere House, a private residence where the primary gesture is the craggy wall; left and far left, Longley House. Here the equivalent "mark" is its two parallel walls