



THE MINT PROJECT

EDITED BY ROBERT GRIFFIN

THE INDEPENDENT Gerard Reinmuth

This treatment of old versus new is not dialectical, in contrast with the modernist approach to dealing with old buildings. Our approach ... has a pinch of the martial arts. We compare this with the Aikido strategy of using the opponent's energy to gain the upper hand. These tactics lead to something new which is, ideally, twice as effective.¹

Richard Francis-Jones would probably consider himself an unlikely martial artist but then I never would have imagined him the author of a building that looked like a prawn. However, in the eyes of the City of Sydney's then Lord Mayor, Frank Sartor, Richard had created a prawn clambering on the back of our precious industrial heritage at the Mint.

The debate over the prawn – since tidied up by Richard and his team into a neat fillet – exemplifies everything that is wrong with architectural heritage theory and practice in Australia. We have a difficult relationship with our heritage buildings – a relationship tainted by decades of thoughtless destruction that produced a rearguard action in the 1980s and 1990s in favour of preservation at all costs. These simplistic and polemic positions concealed an intellectual vacuum in the professions that ultimately reduced our capacity as public intellectuals to guide the public (and city fathers) towards an understanding of sophisticated heritage practice. The result has been a yawning void in architectural and urban design practice, due to constraints imposed by a society that has no confidence in professions who have failed to display leadership on these issues.

The better work in this field in recent decades tended to a dialectical modernist approach. However, this juxtaposition of 'old' and 'new' results in an elegant Mexican stand-off at best – a stand-off contextualised and theorised via inane references to the need to be 'of our time' and to revel in the juxtaposition of a crystalline element against an older ruin. This strategy of non-engagement with heritage reveals the incapacity of the built environment professions to argue for or work with alternate approaches.

One client and their property portfolio has consistently demonstrated a 'middle way' over the past two decades. In doing so it has amassed a suite of refurbishment projects that equal the best work at an international level. The Historic Houses Trust has avoided the dialectic in favour of a far more nuanced approach involving a judicious mix of appropriation, invention and improvisation. These strategies have been a hallmark of the work produced under the auspices of the HHT since Tonkin Zulaikha Harford's refurbishment of Hyde Park Barracks in the early 1990s. This remains one of the best examples of its type in the country. The consistent deployment of these strategies suggests that the HHT with Peter Watts at its helm has been directly responsible for enabling this work and for building capacity in architects, consultants and builders to work at this level.

As this collection of essays has demonstrated, the guidance of Peter and his team has again prevailed at the Mint where a healthy collaboration between architect, heritage architect and client has produced what is, in my view, the best of Richard Francis-Jones's work to date. The earnest approach to form and detail that is a hallmark of most FJMT projects has given way here to a fine exposition of the architectural martial arts – underpinned by a rigorous intellectual platform which, to Richard's credit, was fully explored and embraced.

Thus the clear structure of the internal and external spaces at the Mint, established at a diagrammatic level by FJMT, has been embellished and elaborated via a series of glorious episodes – such as the new steel truss in the office mezzanine or the freestyle approach to the retention of the mud and grime and decaying wallpaper on other surfaces throughout.



These athletic moves demonstrate that Richard and his team at FJMT are capable of a formal suppleness and improvisation when the conditions exist to support such explorations.

How did such a project – so universally acclaimed for this deft negotiation of and interrelation with the existing buildings – come about? Work of this type requires thinking on the run, changes to documents, suspension of works to explore new findings and high levels of technical innovation. Yet working for government today often commences with a lowest-price tender process after which adversarial contracts are signed – contracts with brutal clauses that deny intellectual property rights and void professional indemnity insurance. These engagement methods and contract conditions are a form of abuse that result in an adversarial culture from the start and are geared to draconian forms of recourse should something go wrong. The result is a total suffocation of design process, of innovation and of research and development – for all of these require trust, generosity and openness.

This volume outlines what is an exemplar of the alternate approach. Essays by Peter Watts, Paul Berkemeier and Barry McGregor outline a procurement process based from the outset on establishing strong and respectful relationships, fostering intense collaboration and insisting on the best quality – characteristics which are rarely present when working for government in the current environment. The achievement of the HHT is remarkable not only in itself but in the context of the environment in which the organisation operates. We can only hope that the excellence of the work at the Mint acts as something of a circuit breaker in the world of government procurement in the future. Such a project should be considered as the benchmark, rather than the exception, for all government procurement in the built environment – for which we would all benefit in improved hospitals, schools and public facilities.

I am always suspicious of a building that is received so uniformly well among all quarters, worrying that perhaps the levels of innovation were not as great as they should be – as the most innovative work tends to draw love and hate in equal portions. Regardless, I think that what has been achieved at the Mint is critically important in a city lacking in exemplars when it comes to integrating new layers with heritage sites and where the quality of public work generally has deteriorated markedly over the past two decades.

Architects often say that a good building cannot exist without a good client. The Mint is the ultimate proof of this maxim, where the client brought both an intellectual expertise in regard to the problem and a civilised approach to the relationships between the parties and the contracts that underpinned them. I truly hope this building is not an exception but has a legacy which is a new age of fine public buildings procured by the government for the people of Sydney and New South Wales.

¹ Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, interview in *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History*, ed Philip Ursprung, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal; Lars Müller, Baden, Switzerland, 2002.

