



AUSTRAL

Does a notion of unfolding Modernism, enriched by cultural mix, stand up in contemporary Australia? to the quick and questions Modernism's relevance itinerant condition.



It is not evident to me that Modernism has ever been an available strategy to Australians, living – as they perceive themselves to live – on an extreme periphery of the world. Certainly the classical universalising certainty of modernity that peaked in the 1920s in what was even then not a singularity – as evidenced in the bruising contest between Le Corbusier’s grand vision of architecture as servant to the state, any state, and Meier’s *‘existenzminimum’* social architecture – was not available. There were direct and unruffled translations from Le Corbusier into the totalitarian regimes of Brazil and South Africa, but no such direct flow into the more democratic antipodes. Australian architecture was cushioned by its direct connections to London, through which flourished a vigorous subaltern arm of Arts and Crafts.

A few works directly derived from English Modernism (for example, the Tahara Road apartments in Cairo) did arrive. There was a fascination with Aalto’s Finnish Pavilion at the World’s Fair – an almost instinctive grasping at this work from another of the world’s peripheries. Modernism as mediated into a style by the Museum of Modern Art’s ‘this is modern architecture’ did eventually arrive,¹ post-Second World War, through Boyd’s reworkings of the 1930s us domestic Modernism documented by MoMA. A succeeding generation embraced the Case Study houses, and this is a recurring source of inspiration in those cities that have yet to establish their own architectural discourse.

But the Australian mindset seems to have always been in a second-order relationship to Modernism, warily observing itself trying on the style, taking liberties with the canon justified by an ironic embracing of the tyrannies of distance – as exemplified in Howard Raggatt’s (of Ashton Raggatt McDougall/ARM architects) recollection² that in the textbook available to him as a student the photograph of the Villa Savoye was printed back to front. All diasporas take on a mantle of multiple identities – something that critics, from what they themselves regard as the metropolitan cores of Modernism, find very difficult to comprehend. And Australia has been suspended between its mother country, its largely suppressed Aboriginal heritage, its halting embrace of the New World³ and waves of migration that have added Italian, Greek, Maltese, Dutch, Lebanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Chilean, Argentinean, Sudanese, Iraqi and others to a largely UK-derived settler population. The UK is still the source of most migrants.

So does the notion of an unfolding Modernism, enriched by a broadening of the mix, make any sense here? Or is this notion of a ‘new mix’ another attempt to assert the hegemony of the one right path of Modernism that Critical Regionalism heralded in the 1960s? On that occasion, regional climate was allowed to ‘enrich’. What emerges in the diasporic cultures is irredeemably plural and second order: architectures and self-aware irony. Every Australian architect is both here and somewhere else – as indeed in some essential way is everyone on earth, but in the antipodes this is a front-of-mind condition. There are mutually conflicting clusters of agreement about where that somewhere else should be. There are those who see this somewhere else as the indigenous past and either combine European mythology with an interpretation of

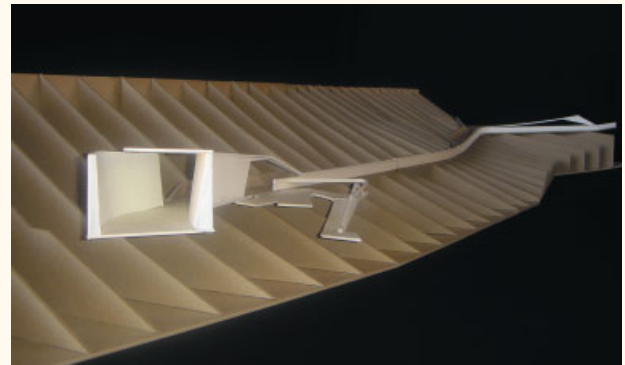
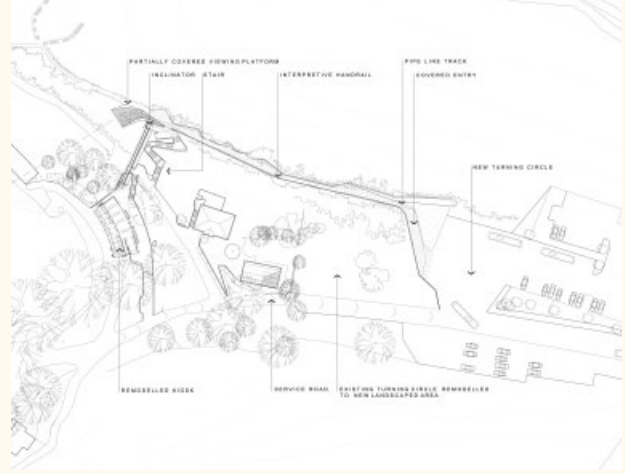
Sean Godsell, Carter Tucker House, Breamlea, Victoria, 2000

The Carter Tucker House sits in the lee of an ocean dune, facing north to the sun. It unfolds to the outside on three sides, with a circulation spine across its southern face.

indigenous lore, as does Greg Burgess, much of whose practice has concerned interpretive centres for sacred sites; or incorporate into their design the innate and tragic conflict between sacred knowledge that retains its value only if it is passed from initiate to initiate and the modern notion of transparency, as does the Terroir practice when working in similar terrain.

This is treacherous ground, with an ancient knowledge system seemingly devoid of any but a starkly instrumental architectural tradition luring architects, settler and Aboriginal alike, into embracing Postmodern formalism as an expression of what that tradition might be beyond the utilitarian. In this context, the sleight of hand that in the 1960s linked bark 'humpies' to the Barcelona Pavilion and begat Murcutt's *oeuvre* seems to be about appropriation pure and simple. The overtly political work of ARM's National Museum points to a new, perhaps less patronising way of addressing these issues, even if the result, in the short term, has been merely the arousing of neo-conservative ire. Time will tell. ARM's strategy on the Melbourne shrine, in which the firm works from the settler heartland towards an inclusion of others seems to offer a more enduring and 'hearts and minds' winning approach.

That settler heartland is itself conflicted with desire. Nicholas Murray, a young architect working mainly in multimedia installation with a profound concern for the impact of soundscapes on our sense of being, devises in 'Birds and Bees' what seems to be a cosy doll's house, but rumblings from low-resonance sound sources disconcert anyone entering. Murray works to simulate the actual discomfort that everyone subliminally feels about their tenuous reaching from the primal sexual and territorial urges from which we try to win relationships and the higher-order meaning systems of art, music and architecture. This is a mix that Modernism has suppressed in its Faustian compact with objective reason, a compact that has twice brought forth the monsters of world war, and in the continuing Proto-Modernist denial that our primitive being maintains our world in an unending recursion of violence. Murray and his collaborators seem refreshingly willing to confront experience in all of its layers, not only the rational. As I have previously



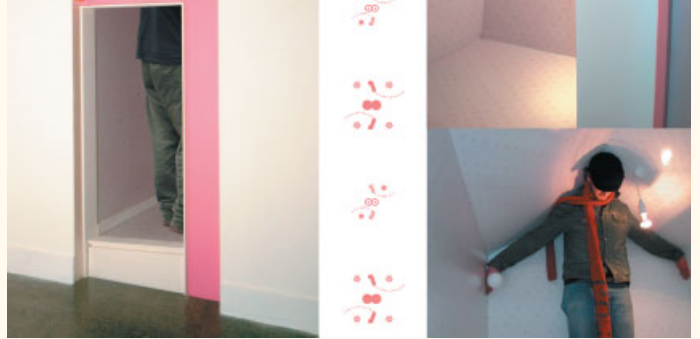
Terroir, Viewing Place, Cataract Gorge, Launceston, Tasmania, 2005–
The 1:500 concept plan shows how the architects are forming an arrival route that delivers the visitor to the central pool of the gorge in a scenographic simulacrum of the existing route from its mouth. The model shows how the architecture frames this up, referring only analogously to what can be shared about the traditional knowledge of the site.

Greg Burgess, Uluru-Kata Tjuta Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Yulara, Northern Territory, 1995
This design subtly evokes the tradition of care for the environment that is at the core of the 40,000 years of Aboriginal civilisation in Australia. The plan was evolved in a participative process with the local traditional owners of these sites, known to settlers as the 'Red centre'.



described,⁴ this includes using light with sound. In the *Birds and the Bees*, the scale of the doll's house confounds, but it also brings symbols into play. From a distance the surfaces seem covered in innocuous and now commonplace Laura Ashley wallpaper. However, up close, the wallpaper seems to be a field of bees, and one discovers that each motif is composed of sexual symbols – breasts, bums and penises. The savage and the civil ride in close tandem, and even though the work is – as is always the case with Murray – genial in feel, it flips us in and out of safety.

Sean Godsell, also from that settler heartland and now internationally recognised as a leading Modernist, follows in his father's avowedly Modernist quest. But he has found inspiration in the ascetic refinements of Kyoto temples, and reached through that to peers of regional architecture like Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, rather than to any of the current Modernist mainstream. There is something of a Zen sensibility in the very fit between Godsell's increasingly ethereal cages of space and their sites – a fit that is so perfected that these buildings do not look new. The Carter Tucker House is a box on a dune that unfolds to become inhabitable, the walls becoming screens that filter the sun. One can imagine the house in time-lapse photography, through a 24-hour cycle and through the seasons, almost as responsive to its situation as is the turning head of the sunflower to the sun. The Mornington Peninsula House, on the other hand, is a cage of laths around a glass box that seems to have been discovered embedded in a fold in the land. It has such a sense of rightness that it seems as ancient and as inevitable in its landscape as the temples of Kyoto are in theirs; temples that paradoxically may well be in construction terms – depending on the maintenance cycle – quite as new as Godsell's houses. It is just as difficult to label Godsell as a Modernist as it is to use the term to say something meaningful about Zumthor, whose St Benedict chapel at Somvix replaced a chapel destroyed in an



Nicholas Murray, Melissa Bright, Shelley Freeman, Jono Podborsek and Kirsten Grant, *The Birds and The Bees* installation, curated by Hannah Mathews in spare room@project space, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 2003
Left to right: the entrance to the doll's house, the 'birds and bees' wallpaper motif and the interior of the doll's house.



Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM), Melbourne Shrine Visitors Centre, 2004
ARM has undercut the shrine with fractally derived incisions, providing informal access under the ceremonial axis. In this way the settler/empire tradition is maintained, but the complex is opened to new readings by citizens from different backgrounds.

ARM, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003
While the skin of the building and its plan comment on the past, a Boolean stream penetrates the building, setting up a dialogue with the more multicultural present, and thus embracing the future optimistically.





Sean Godsell, Peninsula House, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, 2002
 Also in a dune system, the Peninsula House is barely visible until one drops down into it along its east face, arriving in the living area that opens out to a barbecue deck.



Daniël Cleemput, House Cerkez (above), Carlton, Melbourne, and Owen Studio (below), Collingwood, Melbourne, both 1999
 These buildings for artists introduce a new notion of *architectura povera* to Melbourne, one that exposes a rationalism that is in powerful contrast to the slick Neomodernist style that pervades much less considered design in Australia.



avalanche and, in responding to this, has – as do Godsell’s works – an engineered quality though lacking any of the ubiquity of engineering solutions. It lacks also the remorseless ubiquity of the style that we know as Neomodernism.

Migrant to Melbourne Daniël Cleemput has added his own Belgian minimalist sensibility to the mix with a series of *architectura povera* works of stunning technical simplicity. These houses for artists are possible because the clients are themselves intrigued by novel propositions, have limited budgets and have often found – as Nikos Papastergiadis has shown artists do⁵ – possibilities for inhabitable sites that no-one else has seen. These subtly altered warehouses (like that for the sculptor Robert Owen) and constructions on slices of seemingly too narrow land (like the house for artist Mutlu Cerkez), are serenely rational, but arise from interactions with clients who are engaged in challenging the orthodoxies of Modernism.

Asian influences are difficult to discern despite the growing presence of people of Vietnamese and Chinese origin. As in my observations about Nicholas Murray and the ways in which we win our civility from the teeth of our primitive selves, there does seem to be a hierarchy of concerns in settlement, which initially skew the professions in favour of surveying, engineering and law – so that land could be parcelled, accessed and traded⁶ – with design emerging only as a much later concern. This seems to play out for each wave of settlers, with the professions of preference for first-generation offspring being medicine and law. Asian influence is more evident in intercity relationships. For example, Australia has an architectural kinship with the diaspora state of Singapore, with which it shares a language, a flight path to Europe, and a common colonial history.

Kerry Hill, an Australian architect based in Singapore, has reinvented an Asian vernacular in a series of resorts that have reawakened the tropical sensibility of a region that had come to equate comfort with air-conditioned enclosure behind Modernist glass. From his office has emerged a school of ‘lush situation’ architecture trained to ensure that every head that hits a pillow in a resort has the same privileged view across lawns to a pool and the beach beyond. Leaders in this are woha designs, one of whose principals, Richard Hassell, is – like Hill – an Australian from Perth. Australian-educated architects work across the entire Southeast Asian region. Many, like Australian-educated Singaporean Look Boon Gee, make a distinctive contribution to the emergence of sustainable local cultures of architectural innovation.

Hong Kong had a period in which Australian architects made a major contribution, with the Hong Kong Club, a seminal design by Seidler, originating the city’s enduring preference for Modernist design. Recent Australian influence has been more baleful, with a strange obsession in Hong Kong for outdoing the Sydney Opera House, an obsession that has not produced one work of note. These two-way flows are worth watching. China is awash with schemes designed by Australians in one of the biggest carpetbagger booms in architectural history. Whether anything of enduring interest emerges seems unlikely to me, holding as I do that architecture at its best emerges

from, and contributes to, local cultures. There are those who settle in a city long enough to become part of its culture, as Lab Architecture did while designing Federation Square, but their major work is now in China. Perhaps here, too, as in Singapore, it is Australians, like James Brearly, who began to seek work in the booming city of Shanghai, then married into and migrated to the city, who will make a contribution that will resonate eventually back in the architectural culture of their country of origin.

Back in Australia, relative newcomers have made major contributions. Nonda Katsalidis, born to the Greek diaspora that has made Melbourne the third largest Greek city, has done much to transform citizens' ideas of what it is like to live in the city, leading a wave of well-designed inner-city apartment blocks, many named with a migrant sense of the politics of the future – Republic Towers (named during the failed referendum seeking to separate Australia from the British Crown) and Eureka Towers (named for an early uprising of miners fighting for their rights against the colonial state). Katsalidis brings a thoroughly Mediterranean sensuousness into his work, a quality sometimes referred to as 'boomstyle', and one that certainly distances his best work from Neomodern ascetics. Eli Gianini and Nicholas Goia are in conscious dialogue with their origins in Italy. Ivan Rijavec has worked from an almost 'cabinet of Doctor Caligari' mental space towards a much less chiaroscuro position, but one in which space is always worked energetically and unexpectedly. Another notable local innovator, with a fascination for the relationship between real and virtual space, is Slovenian-born Tom Kovac. He is one of the few Australians who play into the architectural forums of nonstandard architecture – a movement that Frederic Migayrou has identified as suppressed by Modernism's drive to conform to the standardising systems of the industrialisation of the 19th and 20th centuries.

And there is another wave of invisible migrants, English speakers from southern Africa, whose influence has been infrastructurally notable in Perth and Melbourne, seeking perhaps to redeem through subtler orderings the control societies they have left behind? Patrick de Villiers has been instrumental in saving Fremantle from destruction by traffic engineering and unmediated commercial expansion (only to have this undone by the dead hand of a university that is buying up the individual properties that are the glory of the city, and neutralising them by turning a major section of the city into a single-use entity).

Rob Adams, of Zimbabwean origin, educated at the University of Cape Town, has made a major contribution to the reinstatement and extension of the underlying principles of the urbanity of Melbourne, without which the city would have continued its headlong collapse into the nihilist Modernistic freefall that it embraced at the time of the 1956 Olympics. His work on maintaining and extending the lanes and boulevards of the city, and stopping developments that kill streets by turning their backs to them, has led the central city to reinvigorate itself. When he started this work as city urban designer, Melbourne was leaching activities to suburban centres at a rate that our research showed had reduced variety by 30 per cent in the decades since 1956.⁷

Where recently this infrastructural intelligence has been



Kerry Hill, Apartment Building, Bangkok, 2005
The reinvention of an Asian tropical architecture by Kerry Hill continues in this new apartment building in Bangkok.

Look Boon Gee, Bishan Community Library Project, Singapore, 2005–
This community library is designed to present as much of its workings to the outside world as is possible, a desire for readability that characterises the diaspora.

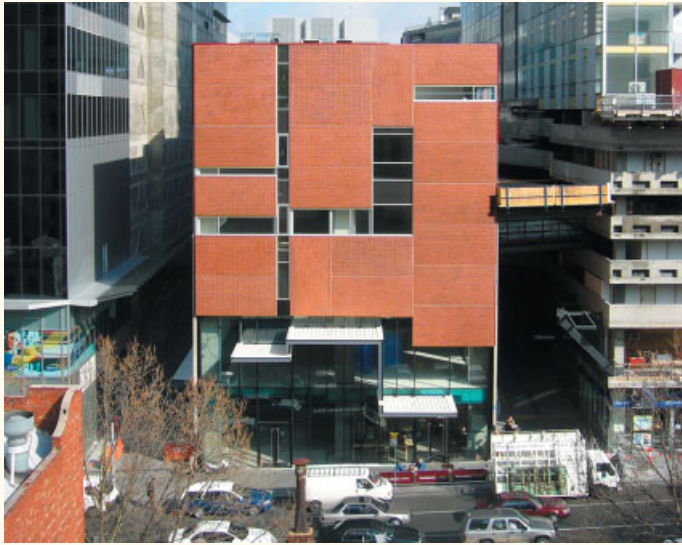


Ivan Rijavec, Alessio House (exterior) and Freeland House (interior), Melbourne, 1997 and 1994.

Like many people who have experienced more than one continent, Rijavec is fascinated by perception. These houses use cambered walls and ceilings to create environments that alert visitors to their spatial perception mechanisms.

Richard Hassell/wOHA, Alila Villas, Pecatur, Bali, approved for construction 2005
View of terrace. The 'lush situation' that wOHA engineers in all its projects stems from the firm's deep involvement in the design of tropical resorts, initially during the architects' time in Kerry Hill's office.





QV Site, Melbourne
 Top: Kerstin Thompson Architects, building housing crèche on top level, 2004.
 Middle: Lyons Architects, BHP Billiton HQ, 2004.
 Bottom: John Wardle Architects, QV Apartments, 2005.

combined with a design procurement process that I (also often reported as a South African migrant – though my architectural roots are more English than South African)⁸ introduced to Melbourne in the late 1980s, works of enormous significance have emerged. Chief among these is the QV site in central Melbourne, which layers parking, regional scale supermarkets, food courts, laneways of fashion shops and coffee bars and restaurants, the headquarters building for BHP Billiton, a crèche, a corporate front office for Sensis, a layer of white goods and furniture retail, and housing over a system of laneways that links three levels to the streets surrounding the block. While the architects are almost all graduates of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) invitational Masters programme, not migrants, this complex brings to Australia for the first time the layering that characterises the new Asian urbanism.⁹ This is a layering that Modernism abandoned except in Hong Kong, where the huge density of human occupation has always supported the many-layered city dreamed of in early modern thinking.

Something ‘new mix’ has certainly occurred in this complex, and in the nearby Melbourne Central, in which a Halperin-influenced retail maze and theme park superblock has been carved into by architects ARM, establishing lanes and connecting them to the surrounding lanes and streets, and opening up the perimeter walls to the streets with multiple tenancies on the scale of the old 19th-century fabric. The marriage of European urban principles laid down in the colonial period, and the inescapable experience of what our Asian neighbours are doing, has created a new urban form that combines the rationality of the grid city with the teeming population of space of the Asian city. It is no accident that this coming together of systems – understanding how to promote inner-urban activity, how to marshal patronage in support of local architectural culture, and a major presence of apartment dwellers, many of them students from Asian cities – has produced such a new urban form. The exuberance and diversity of the architectural expression reflects the maturity of one Australian city’s architectural culture, one in which *techné*, poetics and civic narrative provide three poles to a vital discourse. ▯

Notes

- 1 In 1932, HR Hitchcock brought European avant-garde architecture to the us ‘New World’ as a style rather than as an intellectual approach.
- 2 Leon van Schaik (ed), *Fin de Siecle and the Twenty-First Century: Architectures of Melbourne*, RMIT (Melbourne), p 120.
- 3 Paul Fox identifies a long struggle between those who sought to emulate the old country and those who embraced new ideas, agriculturally at least, from the New World of the us. Paul Fox, *Clearings: Six Colonial Gardens*, Melbourne University Press, 2004.
- 4 Leon Van Schaik, ‘Wayfinder, Cate Consandine and Nicholas Murray at Conical, April 2003’, *▯ Club Culture*, Vol 73, No 6, Nov/Dec 2003.
- 5 Nikos Papastergiadis, *Metaphor and Tension: On Collaboration and its Discontents*, Artspace (Sydney), 2004.
- 6 Brian J McLoughlin, *Shaping Melbourne’s Future*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, Melbourne, New York), 1992.
- 7 Unpublished thesis by Kathy Greening, RMIT.
- 8 *Belle* magazine, No 152, April/May 1999, pp 30–48.
- 9 William SW Lim, *Asian New Urbanism*, Select Books (Singapore), 1998.