

SALON CONVERSATIONS: COMMUNICATING ARCHITECTURE

To kick-off the recent Advertisements for Architecture exhibition at Fed Square, OpenHaus and the City of Melbourne staged a public debate on the challenges, and opportunities that communicating architecture to a broader public presents. The following is an abridged transcript of the discussion.



speakers

Martyn Hook
Tania Davidge
Christine Phillips
Alex Selenitsch
Hamish Lyon
Karen Burns
Stuart Harrison

images

Courtesy OpenHaus

MARTYN HOOK: I think that this proposition about communicating architectural ideas is interesting in a forum where you're talking mainly to architects. My argument would be that we don't communicate particularly well. Even when an architect's work is published in a magazine, the article is often written by another architect, who simply perpetuates an ongoing vocabulary and an increasingly elite language that really struggles to emerge beyond a series of quite select discussions that occur among architects. Essentially, architects and architecture need a decent PR campaign in order to communicate not only to the politicians who are making decisions, but also to the community and the general public who are actually absorbing the general consequence of what architects do.

So this evening I think is a timely engagement with the idea of how we communicate the importance of architecture. Before I go on for much longer, I'll introduce the two women who are the reason why we are here, Tania and Christine.

TANIA DAVIDGE: Thanks Martyn. Our practice is primarily about communicating architectural ideas to the wider public. Before modernism, the inhabitants of a city could understand its architecture, as architecture played by rules relating to symmetry, ornamentation and proportion. Inhabitants understood how architecture, through the formal language of classicism, communicated ideas about society and order. They understood that the architectural language of a church differed from the architectural language of a town hall or that of a house. With the demise of classical architecture in the 20th century, it has become increasingly difficult for the public to understand the thinking and conceptualisation behind the architectural object and how this relates to contemporary interpretations of society.

CHRISTINE PHILLIPS: I think we all know as architects, we're very good at discussing ideas among ourselves,

we're very good at speculating about what the profession means. So I think our personal view is that architecture moves beyond the built work and it also includes a range of things such as writing about buildings, drawings, other representations, architectural projects which are both real and unrealised, and the many conversations that surround architecture and the building. We believe that architecture is a wonderful tool for thinking and a medium for communication. It is a form of knowledge and we can use it to understand our contemporary world. With these thoughts in mind, Tania and I are particularly interested in how we might be better at communicating some of these ideas to the general public.

MH: Thank you. I'd next like to invite Hamish Lyon. Hamish is the Design Director of NH Architecture.

HAMISH LYON: Thank you. Martyn did talk in his introduction about how we're going to communicate, and I think our last speakers have talked about a method for communicating. I'm going to go back to an even more basic proposition, which is I think architects have lost the ability not just to have a voice, but they're actually unsure about what they should be saying. Before we even have a conversation with anybody, we need to go back to some fundamentals about what it is we think we should say. In terms of the perception of the way architects communicate, we are still living under the shadow of the grand masters of the 20th century – Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright. I suspect if you did a *Herald Sun* poll of what the community think about the way architects communicate, they would revert back to that fairly caricatured and clichéd view of the architect as the sole creative genius, the redemptive modernist who's going to save your soul through grand design. There were moments I think in the late 20th century where people started to investigate the broader social issues of architecture rather than the grand modernist view. Even locally when I was a student, we had Peter Corrigan, Greg Burgess, the early community projects of Ashton Raggatt McDougall and others, which were genuinely trying to address a public understanding of community and of architecture, and really also build up an Australian dimension to that conversation. But I think for most people in the room who have lived through the last 30 years, we've been predominantly returning to that view of the great era architect, to the point where most architecture is known through the communication of the architect as style guru. I think if you did an

international survey of Australian architecture, you would have found either the beach house or the vineyard retreat were the two buildings that people thought of as Australian architecture, and they thought of an Australian architect as a wanker. And then that really took hold in mass media. We found ourselves on prime time television watching these shows where we've become absorbed by the idea that the architect is some kind of rock star. I think that's really meant that the architect has lost the focus on having a voice, because it's become a one-dimensional conversation.

Now if we come forward to the present, a couple of things have brought us to a halt. Obviously the global financial crisis suddenly pulled the rug out from under all those Macquarie bankers and their beach houses. The architect suddenly found themselves with the prime minister who was saying, "Here's millions of dollars to build schools and community facilities", and the architectural profession was caught with its pants down. We weren't able to engage in a public community conversation; we've been too busy doing really beautiful buildings. I think at the moment, architects have to come to terms with that. I think the other dilemma is it's difficult even for the public to understand what conversation to have, because we don't really have public buildings anymore; it's all private-public, or public-private, or public private partnerships.

More recently in our local community, we had the great tragedy of the bushfires. It meant a fairly primal, raw conversation had to reoccur between architects, urban planners, master planners, local council and the community. Probably for the first time in my lifetime we were finding ourselves back in community conversations – "We've got a problem here we have to solve. What are we going to do?" And architects I don't think have found themselves in a very good space for that conversation.

MH: Thank you Hamish. Next I'd like to introduce Karen Burns, who has had a distinguished architectural career teaching at RMIT, University of Melbourne and Monash.

KAREN BURNS: Today, architecture, I believe, has a higher public relations profile than ever previously imagined. Some buildings have been magnetic attractors of our collective gaze, a dazzling shimmer of surfaces potentially remembered. They are advertisements

in themselves for architecture because their visual form refuses to be wilfully forgotten. Architecture and advertising have already collided. I suspect that our chemical mix, which some call branding, has driven the wily interest of a world famous Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas. His epigrammatic explanation for using the language of advertising quoted in Christine's catalogue, is that architecture is too slow. My brief discussion today is not about how to communicate the complex ideas underpinning architecture, but the need to communicate the diversity of architectures, the complex social sites that architecture occupies. New terms such as branding in part describe what we have always already known about architecture. Buildings have long been statements of the raw drive of self and power by those who commission them. Forts were palaces, churches funded by local warlords, beautiful country houses; these were once the stock in trade of European buildings. In the late 20th century, architecture renewed its status as a useful capital investment. The means were provided for a unique form that then circulates far and wide as a recognisable sign of the climate and product.

Personally, I don't have a problem with this phenomenon. The long shadow of the historic relationship between architecture and image and power needs to be remembered, not expunged. The universities, the sector in which I work, are branding themselves as well. The delivery of high quality environments paid for by universities or private corporations can propel us towards the difficult territory of ambiguity, compromise and deal brokering. We need to carefully calculate what can be gained and lost. As communities, we need to bargain hard with the ledger sheet to ask for a certain quantity of public space or art projects as the trade off for building. Architecture is always in down there at the deep end among society's immeasurable complexities; we need to communicate this.

Social complexity is mirrored in the diversity of the profession's activities. Architecture is multiple, it plays multiple roles in our societies. I don't think we need any more descriptions about what architecture should be, but more exposure to the many differences it currently is. What architecture is might be only partly driven by the architectural profession's aspirations. As the curators note in their introduction to their catalogue, buildings are alloyed to the economy and I would argue to the social. Gehry's building at Bilbao denotes the new central place occupied by architecture and



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Advertisements for Architecture
entry by Iredale Pedersen Hook.

/02

Entry by MAKE Architecture.

/03

Entry by Norman Day Associates.

the culture industries. This formation is part of a larger historical shift in which certain first world economies are more dependent on leisure, travel, retail and cultural sectors. Architecture is now placed in the culture industry.

Buildings of course are not only the outcome of one determining factor; the complexity of demands driving the commission of a building escapes the gridlock of simple sentence explanations. The emergence, for example, of the new museum is a barometer of the renewed attention to history and public memory, and not just the rise of the culture industry. Museums increasingly are civic sites where societies examine their histories – an image that threads, that both binds and potentially unravels communities. The delivery of culturally skilled readings of our society is one of the most important functions, I believe, served by architecture. Architecture's culture industry and public sector work is among its most honourable record. I know that several of the entries in the exhibition lamented architecture's three percent participation in the building market. I'm going to put this somewhat incendiary observation to one side for a moment in order to make another point. Much of Australia's capital cities and country towns were designed in the 19th and early 20th centuries by Government Works architects. Let us advertise how much of this public infrastructure was designed by architects and add this historical record to the recent success of public buildings and spaces in Melbourne. From the Museum to Fed Square to Southern Cross Station. We have high quality public

environments because of the labours of government architects and others so commissioned. The renewal of the Victorian Government Architect's Office is a really important turning point in the ebb and flow of relations between architecture and a larger social project, and I'm not just tugging my forelock here at the sponsors of this event. Through partnerships with the government and other entities like Vic Urban, designers will be able to explore new housing solutions and build prototypes in response to the environmental crises that currently beset us.

I take it as a given that architects can communicate the concepts that underpin their projects, whether complex or simple ideas, remembering too that complexity is no automatic badge of honour. Architects speak to others in non-expert language every day; they do this in the day-to-day business of communicating with their clients. We need to begin to deal with the myth of the mute architect – how on Earth do you keep your clients if you can't communicate? Perhaps we can have that discussion later. I think a more diverse profile and skilled explanations are the issues, rather than a failure of communication or the apparent invisibility of architecture. Communicating a multiple sense of the profession's diversity and quieter achievements is important to demonstrate our differing skills, tension and the multiplicity of architecture. The differences within architecture rescue it from stereotypes and from distraction. But I think it needs really to risk having a discussion about the more difficult social, political and economic effects of architecture, knowing that

such a discussion does not undermine architecture, but conveys the social complexity of how and why buildings come about, and why they're necessary.

MH: Thank you very much Karen. Now, I'd like to introduce Alex Selenitsch, academic at the University of Melbourne, but also the very rare beast of being an architect and a poet, a very fine draftsman and a creator of quite beautiful drawings, which I think go a long way towards providing a very thoughtful notion about what architecture could be or what it might be.

ALEX SELENITSCH: Thank you for your introduction. My ears are burning as I stand here.

Mozart is my hero tonight. He was the first modern creative worker to sidestep the patron. A contributing factor was the insulting way that the Archbishop of Salzburg treated him as a servant. His subsequent musical life was closer to his audience, which became a number of audiences; the ones in popular theatres, the ones out in the street, and he also wrote for private functions in palaces in Vienna as well. Over the enlightenment, this eviction of the patrons spread through to other creative workers; writers, musicians, painters and sculptors and playwrights began to generate their works independently of a patron's commission. Patrons didn't disappear, but became enlightened or rather disinterested.

Now there are probably lots of grey areas and a couple of versions of this disappearance of the patron in the arts over the 19th century, but what I'm interested in particularly is the provocative nature of this tendency

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for architects; or rather, its non-provocative nature. How many of us in this room are in a post Amadeus position? About the only kind of work we might do where we generate the architecture in all of its aspects is when we build our own house. For most of us, the patron is now called a client. A client commissions, which means a client directs the subject of the project, its site, its size, its finance, and we are the client’s servant, for better or for worse.

Now, the big thing about architecture is that it is a big thing. A building costs a lot of money. Poetry has a miniscule operating budget. About 15 years ago, I did a renovation job. The fee was \$3000. All of that was swallowed by expenses and operating costs. The same year I got a poem published. The fee was \$35, so I totalled up postage, paper, ink, pen, subtracted five dollars off the 35, I was \$30 ahead. A better rate of return. Anyway, writing novels is less funding intensive at the start to initiate. Painting, the operating budgets for that would probably be in the hundreds of dollars, maybe low thousands, sculpture might be in the low thousands as well. So it might be seen to be easy to be creative in these kind of endeavours where there isn’t a huge initial capital outlay. To just say, ‘Patron, get thee hence’ and go out and make an office building or an opera house would appear to be an impossibility. Yet, there is an allied creative activity where this does happen – film. The Governor of California does not ring up a filmmaker and commission a drama about LA in the future. This comes from a novel by Bradbury through a director called Ridley, through an entire machination and scheming system whereby a film is put together and then financed, funded, then made and distributed and so on.

As I sat making some notes for this talk last Saturday morning, I heard Paul Dean talking on the radio. He had just written some music to memorialise the sinking of one of the refugee boats off the north coast of Australia. It turns out that Sandy Evans, a saxophonist, has done the same. Where I wondered were or are the architectural responses to events like this? I don’t mean monuments to a sinking boat. This is an issue of territory, of boundaries, of profound spatial issues for us. Some of us should be spatialising it.

What about two issues that face us at the moment and which have been mentioned already – certainly these issues have been facing us for as long as us whites have been here in this country, fire and water. There are fundamental aspects of our recent catastrophe that need enculturation and need expression. We had a very monstrous, major objective event; that is an event outside of our experience. We have to somehow bring it in to our subjective realms. Architects should be there working their way through that as well.

The same thing applies to the smaller scale, non-catastrophic experiences of water. We have

an issue with water. Are water tanks all that we can imagine? Or grey water systems? Or the dual flush toilet? There has to be more to it than that. Water has a kind of substance; it interacts with humans in our institutions. These are cultural issues that architects don’t seem to want to deal with, or have no idea how to. Writers, musicians, painters and sculptors do. Think of the gum nuts and leaves, koalas and kangaroos that ornament art nouveau and art deco buildings. I wonder whether we have to have a building first before we can do anything for our audience as architecture. I have to say that I view buildings as yet another way of representing architecture, sometimes as good as drawing, modelling or animation, and sometimes worse – actually mostly worse. I would be happy with giving buildings the boot, along with the patron. What if we just had the gum nuts and the leaves and the koalas? And of course I don’t mean flora and fauna. What I mean is a spatial ratification of identity.

Now the post Amadeus condition means a direct or perhaps closer engagement with an audience. It means not being able to say the client made me do it. It also means finding out what the audience wants and needs, and after a decade of patronless work, I can sense that the audience could easily become another tyranny, and I could also test the difficulty of finding a subject, of finding something to say.

I’ll finish in two ways: quickly about the kind of political situation that I’m really talking about now, which is really to do with our identity as citizens, as creative workers. The first is from Morton Feldman. Morton Feldman used to meet in a cafe with a more conservative composer friend for a cup of coffee once a week. This particular day, Feldman’s friend chided him for writing such modern music. He asked him, “Why don’t you write music that can be understood by the man in the street?” So Feldman looked out on the street and watched as Jackson Pollock crossed the road.

My second story is fictitious and goes back to Mozart. At the start, remember how he was kicked out by the Archbishop of Salzburg, literally kicked out actually, it’s a musical legend – he was booted in the bum as he was thrown out of the palace. At the start of the *Magic Flute*, when the rustic bird handler, Papageno, child of nature, appears before the aristocratic hero, the aristocrat asks, “What are you?” And Mozart, has Papageno answer, “A man, like you”.

MH: Thank you Alex. Our final speaker is Stuart Harrison. Stuart is an academic at RMIT, a practising architect, and also a media personality who contributes significantly to architectural discourse in Melbourne.

STUART HARRISON: What I’m going to try and talk a bit about today taps into that agenda of ‘putting out’.

I think it’s an important idea for us as architects because what we do is often relatively internal. What I’m going to talk about is 10 years of attempting to try and get a picture out there into the wider public realm.

So I like Twitter and twittering is one of the new things that some architects are using to communicate ideas and what they’re doing. What’s interesting about Twitter is you get to talk to architects and non-architects alike; it’s an equal forum, it’s a kind of level playing field. So you can have a conversation with Stephen Fry or you can have one with Bjarke Ingels. The internet is a very contemporary phenomenon, and what’s interesting is there is an increasing amount of architects out of Sydney that are right on to Twitter and blogs and other forums. Interestingly, the critical discourse in Australian architecture has very firmly re-rooted itself via Sydney and via electronic media; people like Archininja, Marcus Trimble and Supercolossal, Dan Hill and cityofsound.

So of all these things that I’ve been involved with – the radio show on RRR that Karen mentioned that I do with Christine and Simon Knott, and writing in *Architectural Review* and other publications, those three are the only ones that matter; the others are very internal; the internal world of architectural projects.

Another form of architectural production or dissemination is postgraduate research. I did a Masters for four years at RMIT, with a very good chance that this research will never be accessed by anybody. A radio show will within one week have more reach than four years of postgraduate research.

One of the more recent phenomenas that I’ve been involved with is publication, and I get more excited about it the less architectural they are. *The Melbourne Design Guide* is a really interesting phenomenon; it catches the emerging design market in Melbourne and covers everything. I had a role in selecting certain things that went in it; there was a big hand drawn map emphasis. You go into a bookshop or other kind of shops, a jewellery shop, and *The Melbourne Design Guide* will be there. It was really an opportunity for me to foreground some new emerging practices in Melbourne.

The other thing that can be mentioned is the radio show. Now we stream and podcast, and that has increased the reach of the radio show quite massively, which is really fantastic. We broadcast out of Brunswick, and RRR is a community based radio station, so no government funding, it’s fiercely independent, and they were very generous in asking Simon and I five years ago to start a show on architecture. They had no idea

whether it would work or not, and we certainly didn’t – or we actually suspected it wouldn’t, but it did.

It’s a very abstract environment, the radio studio, it’s another architecture studio in a way. What you’re saying is being transmitted in metropolitan Melbourne at least, and now on the web, but you still feel like you’re within a closed room, even though you know it’s getting out there. It’s always really satisfying to meet people who are not architects who listen to the show and say, “I really enjoyed what you were saying”.

What we find almost universally is architectural ideas aren’t that complicated; it’s not that hard to explain, it’s not that hard to describe what architecture is about. This is very important to understand, to break down some of the stereotypes about architects being elitist and working very internally.

The point I wanted to make is that the traditional forms of media and the traditional forms of getting architecture out there are essentially insufficient; we need to engage more aggressively with media, preferably media aimed at a broader audience. I was asking myself the question: what is the problem in terms of communicating architecture? Our experience is the general public love architecture. It’s actually not that hard if you talk about it. Thank you. **ar**



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