



Woolshed - exterior

Exclusive

Interview with Peter Stutchbury – architect, Sydney

In place of the monthly survey of architecture made in Luxembourg, we feature extracts of a conversation with pioneering Australian architect, Peter Stutchbury. The office Stutchbury and Pape near Sydney, Australia, run in partnership with his wife, landscape architect Phoebe Pape, has been at the forefront of innovative building design on the giant continent over the past 10 years. Recent public buildings are the Aboriginal Cultural Centre, the Life Sciences Building, the Design Faculty Building – University of Newcastle and the Sydney International Archery Park.

kulturrissimo: Australia lies at a considerable distance from Europe. In your lecture you pointed out the tenuous association between the two and the „splendid“ isolation of your continent, which relates most closely to its immediate Pacific neighbours. Is this reflected in contemporary Australian architecture?

Peter Stutchbury: The fundamental is that there's a spirit in the land that's been picked up by the indigenous people. I think the momentum of Australia is a spiritual one. There's language in the land. Thus an essence of difference between architecture in Europe and from countries like Australia and South Africa. The work of Peter Rich in the latter has for example also picked this up very beautifully.

k.: So indigenous culture and knowledge systems are important for your work?

P.S.: Yes, I lived with and studied the customs and buildings of indigenous tribes in Australia, Papua New Guinea

and backpacked through parts of Africa. When we look at Aboriginal art, we'll find a plan perspective, an image and a story - all based on a minimal structure. In the West drawings show an elevation and are visual. I also spent several months in Japan. My childhood was spent to a large degree on our spacious family farm in Australia, where I observed the basics of building in various ways; my father's engineering projects also had an impact upon my thinking.

k.: The genesis of your refreshingly unusual, carefully crafted architecture shows an opening up not only physically but also mentally and emotionally to the landscape and its spirit of place. What do you have in mind when you take on a brief?

P.S.: My work is about finding the psychology of people and place. A new building has no intended reference to previous ones: I custom make each one for my clients, so to speak. A house is a machine that should operate around their/our desires. It's not just a vacant convenience, but should challenge us. In the case of Bay House, which won the National House Award: the day the jury arrived there was the worst wind in history blowing, about 160 knots. I was terrified the roof would lift off and was suffering because I hadn't listened to the engineer, who had asked me to put 5 tie-downs on this roof. I had only put on 3 ... but what this experience did do, was to bring the people to an absolute understanding of the conditions that that house was in at the time, so it was a living building. I think – whilst it's not a preoccupation on a job-to-job basis - that producing buildings that have life is what I'm concerned about. Another fundamental aspect of my approach is the



Bangalay - indoor/outdoor kitchen

integration of sensible thinking into architecture – it's my way. It's easy to argue against theory, but it's impossible to argue against common sense. A building must really add something to your life.

k.: Can you give us some examples?

P.S.: The populated areas in Australia are determined by rainfall and mineral deposits. 90% of the people live on the coast. The Pacific Ocean affects the population, i.e. light reflects off the water and onto buildings. Since the continent only has between 15 mm - 1200 mm generally of topsoil, it's a light continent in terms of what it can support. Life there is about adaptation, survival. When I do a building, my wife Phoebe embeds its periphery in natural systems. For example we'll build a wooden tower block holding a communal space and raise it on a natural stone base to reach the level of the surrounding eucalypt trees - taking into consideration the danger of forest fires, we „water“ the roof. Or we'll construct two towers, as in our own house - one for winter and one for summer. We build an indoor-outdoor kitchen in one and the same flow.

We support the use of recyclable building materials and don't use air conditioning. Instead we profit from cross-ventilation and water-cooling, which is pumped across and cascades from the roof into an underground basin for re-use. We lose only about 20% with this method.

Or we'll design a roof like a parasol, the line of the roof following the line of the sun's movement (Israel House). And all our buildings are flexible size-wise, which means sections can be dismantled and re-assembled as family or office needs change.

We pursue the philosophy of „honesty in building“, and ask: how can we expand our buildings visually and practically as needs be?

k.: The centrally heated buildings of Europe (and Luxembourg) must seem problematic to you ...?

P.S.: They're energy tragedies! Obviously, in Australia we're more concerned with cooling than with heating.

k.: What would your solution look like?

P.S.: I'd heat only the communal rooms and the work spaces. Bedrooms need not be heated. I found it interesting that in a country as cold as Japan, buildings there are nonetheless conceived in a more open manner to nature. I think architecture fails when there's too much luxury.

k.: Although your stay in Luxembourg has been brief, what have you seen here that you find interesting architecturally?

P.S.: The power station in the new town (Kirchberg) by Paul Bretz is great, but the new boulevard itself has unfortunately been planned as a boulevard to the motor car and not to the people. Then there's a lovely little addition to that old castle behind the new (Pei)

museum, which is humble, doesn't compete and has a beautiful form.

k.: To return to your remark about the „psychology of people and place“: is this aspect taught in architectural faculties and is it something Europeans need to be developing?

P.S.: I tutor at a master class on the subject for 2 weeks every year together with Glenn Murcutt, the 2002 Pritzker Prize laureate, Richard Leplastrier and Lindsay Johnston in Riversdale. Regarding Europe, let's say we could give guidance - not teaching - and share this approach. Simply put: let's take a look! The personality of a building can emulate the site. My houses become less perimeter, so more part of the landscape. Europe's buildings reflect a certain rigidity of history. You could say I'm on this lecture tour to provoke new ideas.

k.: Your buildings often resemble aspects of a winged being, and sometimes look like Leonardo da Vinci's drawings for flying machines. Would you secretly like your houses to take off and fly?!

P.S.: I'd certainly like the people inside them to take off and fly!

k.: Another intriguing question: How do you use geometry, and is it fractal?

P.S.: I use an infinite, universal geometry, broken down to the point of relaxation - the mathematics of one's being. I guess fractals are everywhere. In our award-winning Bay House, we physically cast its geometry into the floor. This element was made by a jeweller friend. I make non-programmatic, intuitive, direct buildings which should enhance how we live socially, environmentally and honour the publicity of living.

k.: Apart from indigenous sources, immortalised for example in Bruce

Chatwin's book „The Songlines“, with whom do you feel an affinity in your building practise?

P.S.: I prefer not to nominate specific architects, it becomes too referential. Instead I note attitude. I appreciate a building approach that is obvious, that deals specifically with 5 facades, an attitude of connection; a building that connects to a place greater than itself provides the occupants with the opportunity for an open mind. A simple palette of materials and a sweep of the hand that merges one thought to another. A clear cross-section, considered edges.

k.: Your office has been innovative in many areas of building practise. One interesting feature is the labour-saving invention of the „bolt-on window system“ - please elaborate.

P.S.: We, like many architects, consider the relevance of the systems we inherit. We have in the past developed a window system that is applied externally onto the façade of the building, large operable skylight systems, heavy duty double hung door systems, a self-spanning ceiling system and a sun generated heating system. It is the architect's role to reconsider what is relevant that day.

k.: You have been quoted as saying: „architecture is an old person's art“ ...

P.S.: In the interview by Julie Olivier I said: It's something our culture is very bad at, understanding that knowledge and wisdom can come with age. Understanding materials is a long educational process. It's also about the rhythm inherent in a building. The ability to maintain a child's inquisitiveness alongside a currency of imbedded knowledge.

k.: Finally, please tell us a little about your clients - your houses are renowned for not changing hands once occupied.

P.S.: We do many houses, and it's been a real joy to work for discerning, architecture- and life-literate clients - as in the Bay House. Then, I had a Chinese client, a small man with a remarkable art collection who spoke so quietly that when he did speak, you couldn't hear him! I asked him: what can I do for you? He whispered back: „Give me your most contemporary building!“ And other clients so full of helpful enthusiasm it requires an equality of time to balance new ground.

The interview was conducted by Sally Arnold

▷ Peter Stutchbury is also conjoint lecturer at the School of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He was in Luxembourg by invitation of the Fondation de l'Architecture et de l'Ingénierie, speaking on „Architecture: Not A Foreign Art“ at the Banque de Luxembourg on January 8. His illuminating lecture tour continued to Strasbourg, Paris and Helsinki where he was bound to shake up prevailing notions on how to build. Info: www.ozetecture.org



Glade House - exterior