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RMIT Masters by Invitation Program

Story telling.....



Durable Visual Record
October 2006

Architecture in Tasmanian literature:

The Great Mah-Jong Hall on Sarah Island, South West Tasmania

Gould's Book of Fish – a novel in twelve fish

Then he called for Capois Death.

The publican was ordered to design a building combining the wonder of Versailles with the cruder pleasures afforded by the Five Courts bear-baiting pit. Inspired though by only what he had seen - seashells & silk sails & the parabolic etching of the night sky glimpsed while lying with the Siamese girls beneath the palm fronds – Capois Death was in terror of the normal sort of parasites he found around the Commandant. Ever ready to do their master a favour & their rivals a disservice, all of them professed a love of the Commandant's stated ambition to outdo Europe by rebuilding it. They praised the plaster busts of Cicero that began to arrive even before the plans were complete, wrote sonnets in imitation of styles long dead & succeeded in creating Art that was a death mask of fashions buried everywhere else.

Accordingly Capois Death went to great pains to describe his first set of plans as being in the Egyptian Revival style with some Rococco elements. To the Commandant they looked suspiciously like six iron-ribbed, glass paned domes above which sat a giant gilded scallop shell held up by ornate columns from which flew silk sails tied down to a great bowsprit.

Whatever doubts the Commandant may have had were, however, suppressed by his acolytes' polite applause for the plans and his own delight in seeing the way even a building as ambitious & large as this would in turn be dwarfed by a statue of himself, so high his head would always be in the clouds, so massive that just his single finger was to be ten yards long. He heard no derisory comments about the big scallop, recognised the admiration & necessary backing & loans of the Javanese traders & the Chinese merchants, as long as various sureties were made & signed for.

The Commandant's predilection for strict symmetry followed by adornment, both of which suffered in consequence of his desire to have the building the embodiment of his desire. No plan could proceed without his signature, & when Capois Death later submitted three alternative drawings for the design of the six domes, the Commandant in a moment of inattentive weariness appended his signature to all three, and in consequence eighteen domes, all of varying shapes & materials, were built by his fearful underlings.

The scale of such a building was staggering, its construction a nightmare of suffering for all who worked upon it, the hundreds who died in its construction, the thousands who were maimed and crippled in the forging of the iron, the cutting & carrying of the timber, the quarrying of the stone, the masonry, the carpentry. Yet it was a nightmare of such stupendous proportions that it was impossible not to feel a perverse sense of astonishment at what was being raised in the middle of the wilderness.¹

¹ 'Gould's Book of Fish', Richard Flanagan, Picador ISBN 0 330 363 03 4. Published 2001

Building stories: my journey

The extract above describes surely the most surreal folly imagined for the island of Tasmania. It was created by my friend and collaborator Richard Flanagan, distinguished writer and historian who is the literary voice of this place, at this time.² I am told that in earlier drafts of the novel, the folly's designer was a convict architect called Morris Nunn. And the mah-jong folly of Capois Death draws inspiration from the glass roofed structures that I have designed in actuality.

Writing and building are quite different intellectual pursuits. Yet together, for me they represent the two most significant ways that we define who we are. Both our writing and our building make us different as one culture from the next. And they add to the legacy of memories that give us pride in our present, and renew our purpose in the future.

So to my own story ...

I believe it is possible to tell stories through architecture. Indeed, it is my practice to create buildings that tell stories. It is important to build and elaborate connections between past and present, to tease out memories and discover meanings. These define and strengthen a sense of community – in this instance the very community of which I am a part.

My oeuvre springs from cultural - even anecdotal - reference points, more than from the work of my architectural forebears and compatriots. Other architects design through a creative interaction with their unconscious: they develop doodles and lines, and resolve them into ordered spatial environments. Instead, when I claim to design buildings that tell stories, I mean that I create a spatial identity that resonates with memories and unconscious associations. This entails the very deliberate ordering of spaces - external and internal - where cultural considerations and their associated meanings are developed from the outset, informing the whole design process. My materials are the traditional fabric of contemporary architecture. I use them to modify buildings and shape spaces to visual symbols, objects by association.

My early work evolved in such a way that projects could be read as a illustrated story. I have more recently begun to engage in a more psychological 'place making' to conceive a building's form. The functional aspect of layout is always overlaid with visual imagery designed to evoke memories among the ordinary, mostly architecturally-illiterate people who use the buildings.

I am continually challenged to create architectural forms that more effectively engage with the culture and traditions of people and place. But neither my architectural practice nor my designs can be termed 'traditional'. Here I seek to describe story-telling as an architectural form. Stories are my contextual framework for thinking. And story-telling is my way to connect buildings with people.

² Richard Flanagan's previous novels which have received acclaim in international literary circles include 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping' and 'Death of a River Guide'. All are about aspects of life in Tasmania.

Blurring reality: 'stage sets' as architectural devices

One of my early ways to create buildings that connect with people was by using the 'stage set', a device borrowed from theatre³. In a staged drama, the actor performs within a setting, and that setting establishes context and helps bring the drama to life. Similarly I create three-dimensional staged settings in which people's lives may be made more interesting.

This device was used to profound effect in creating several aged care facilities. Corridors outside people's private rooms were transformed to become 'theatrical' streetscapes, rich with meaning for the residents themselves, many of whom suffer from dementia and live in a world of memories from long ago.

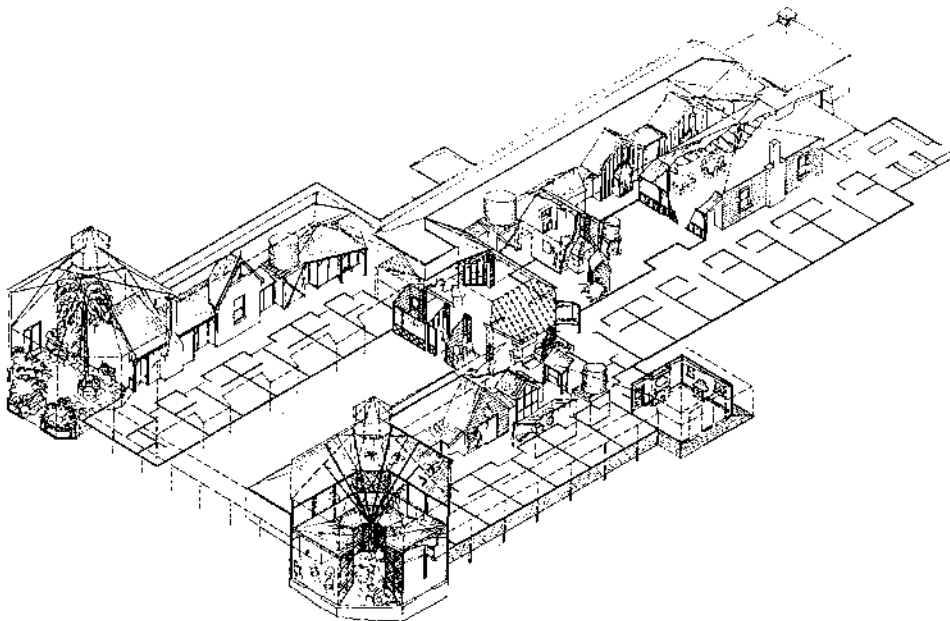


Figure 1: Corumbene: my own cutaway isometric drawing of the internal streets.

Corumbene (1998) – a forty-bed nursing home - is the third and most adventurous of these homes. The setting is an imaginary environment inspired by the collective memories of a rural community in Tasmania's Derwent Valley. Seventy years ago the major activity in the valley was hop growing, and everyone living there knew an oast house when they saw one. The external shape of Corumbene resembles the form of these structures with their tall lantern-topped kilns.

Inside, traditional hospital corridors are co-opted to conjure a sense of the Derwent Valley in the 1930s. Medical facilities are camouflaged by facades of miniature shops and sheds. The nurses station becomes a chemist, the treatment room a barber's, and the pan room is hidden behind barn doors. Elements of traditional hop farms are incorporated. The main house serves as a central dining area. Clustered around are small hop-pickers' huts, one of which is authentic. It was

³ The permanent street stage set of Palladio's Olympic theatre has been of ongoing interest.

transported intact from a farm, complete with chimney, outdoor water tank, and original loo replete with a fretwork barge boarded gable. The transposition of a real hop-picker's hut is like adding a 'direct quote' to a story. It blurs the distinction between that which is real, and that which is imaginary but still very 'real'.



Figure 2 /3: Corumbene: interior of Entry Conservatory and Internal Courtyard with Dunny and watertanks.

By representing the features of a 1930s rural community, the internal environment helps to uphold the culture and traditions of that community. The residents – now largely confined to the institution – live within a staged setting that encourages them to recall and enables them to act out important parts of their earlier lives. Even in their demented states, residents are soothed by familiar elements in the environment. They identify symbols from earlier in their lives, and maintain threads of connection to that which appears 'real'.



Figure 4: Corumbene: the act of removal of the hop pickers hut from its original site.

Corumbene received standing ovations at two international aged care conferences⁴, and the high praise of experts from related aged care health and design fields. The architecture had traced a similar journey to the displaced memories of the residents.

⁴ 1997 I.A.H.A.S.A. Convention in Barcelona and the 1998 A.A.H.A.S.A. Convention in Los Angeles

Bungawitta Child Care Centre (1987) is a fifty-place child-care centre for pre-schoolers aged between six months and five years. Its 'Alice through the Looking Glass' approach and Lilliputian interior generated enormous interest. Preschool children responded intuitively and very positively to the change in scale. Although still very small, they knew it was their very own world, because it was the 'right size' for them. They owned it.



Figure 5/6/7: Bungawitta: the 'child's drawing as Entry and views of the internal streets.

People enter through the front door in an oversized child's drawing of a house, something recognisable for both parents and children. Inside, the adults look 'wrong', out of place, and the preschoolers know it, and love it. The story of Bungawitta was published internationally and was used as a Case Study for the first published international review of Child Care Centre design.⁵

Both Corumbene and Bungawitta contain key visual elements that users relate to: scaled down buildings in the child care centre and transposed objects full of memories in the aged care environment.

Essentially these stage sets establish environments that are full of fantasy and yet are real.. To try and stylistically define these experiments, commentators have linked some of these projects to 'post modern' architecture. The writings of Robert Venturi have informed my developing knowledge base, especially 'Learning from Las Vegas'. But it was the work of groups like SITE that set my precedents for using visual devices to engage and motivate 'ordinary' people. They also helped me to develop more socially responsible architectural solutions that engaged with unconscious popularist values, if not 'popular taste'.

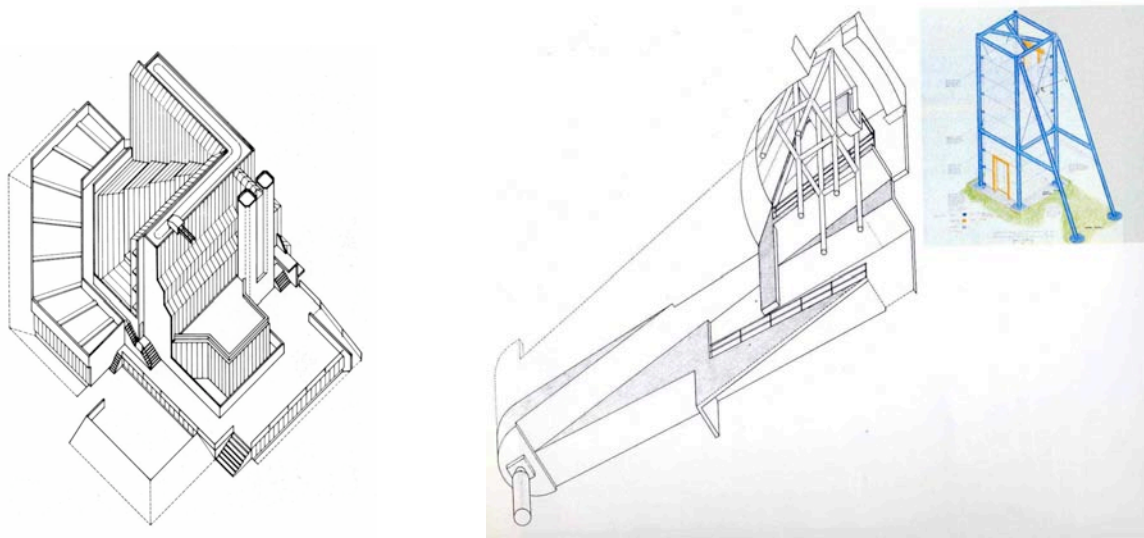
... In our view, most edifices built in the modernist tradition had lost all cultural and contextual meaning because of their dependency on the tired, academic principles of formalist design. We concluded that architecture itself should serve as the subject matter or raw material for art. Since many people tended to see Bauhaus-derived structures as no more than anonymous backdrops in their environment, our position seemed fortified by popular opinion as well as by the ever-growing opposition of a younger generation of architects to the lingering tyranny of formalism.....

⁵ *Kindergarten Architecture* by Mark Dudek. publ. Chapman and Hall (U.K.) 1996

One possibility, we concluded, could be found in Jung's concept of a collective unconscious, where the symbols generated were mutable and evolutionary, where the imagery evolved from personal or psychological sources, rather than cultural or religious sources. Thus, in creating work for today's public environment, new meanings had to be derived from our perceptions of people's responses to certain social and psychological signals. These elusive sources of symbolism, what Jung called "trigger mechanisms" for the unconscious mind, are difficult enough to identify, much less to convert to an architectural statement. They exist in the realm of pure instinct and are generally more suitable for translation into literature or drama, since language is the most appropriate way to convey psychological information. A playwright, for example, can readily deal with such current issues as human reaction to a nuclear destiny or people's alienation in a society of deteriorating values. But the intractable materials of architecture — masonry, glass, steel, concrete — seem inherently too physical and non-associative to serve as monitors of the collective unconscious.⁶

I have studied architects like the late James Stirling, the hero of my early years, and a generation later Daniel Liebeskind. Their buildings engage with ordinary people in ways that I relate to. And I discovered that the reality of their built work matches the rhetoric that surrounds it.

Stirling's drawing methods inspired my own. He was the first master of the cutaway drawing, and the wonderful axonometric projections looking from below. The precise, clean yet measurable quality of these images had a powerful effect on me.



Figures 8/9: James Stirling's drawings: History Library and worms-eye of a ramp and pit-shaft lift within the Staatsgalerie

I believe he was also the first contemporary architect to engage with the glass conservatory as a major design element. His History Faculty Library at Cambridge is a brave controversial attempt at using this building type, integrated with more traditional modern architectural elements. I like it.

I am also impressed by the way different building volumes link as a sequence of indoor/outdoor spaces along a journey, as if one building can take on the attributes of a series of urban spaces.

⁶ SITE: Rizzoli New York 1989, Foreword by James Wines

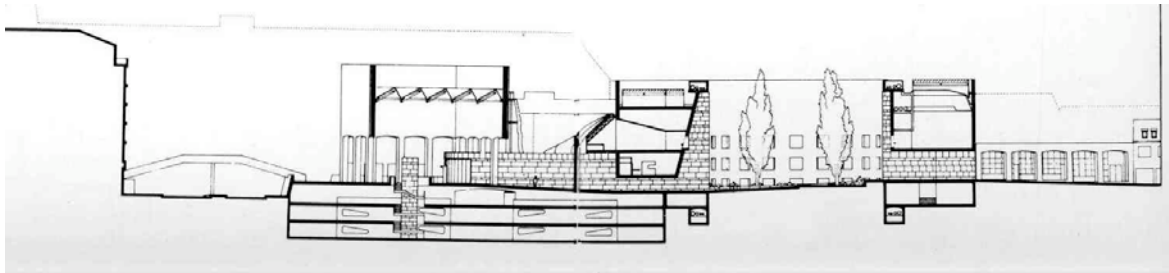


Figure 10: James Stirling: Museum of Nothrhine Westphalia 1975: Cross section

Stirling's later buildings are still 'modern' solutions with cultural connotations. I find them quite different to buildings generally tagged with a postmodern label. I learned much about internal/external spaces - and modelling them to include other qualities – from the three German art galley competitions that Stirling won (two of which remained unbuilt). Stirling claimed to consider the 19th century more relevant than the 20th when it came to designing art galleries. His Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart is an effective, powerful work: a building with real Wagnerian heroism that engages 'stürm und drang'. For a long time it attracted more visitors than any other art gallery in Germany, which suggests that it touched a great many other people too.

I also appreciate Stirling's sense of humour. I think of him as the first 20th century architect to include whimsy in his buildings. The wit of knocking a random hole in the external wall to the carpark, and the blocks littering the ground outside the Staatsgalerie are wonderful. Of course, even these apparently ad hoc arrangements would have been precisely documented and approved, as every German knows. But the joke is even more subtle ... The random blocks on the ground are the only real stones: the rest which look 'real' on the building are actually a thin veneer on a concrete substrate.

Seeing this gave me the assurance I need to make my spaces 'speak out' with a clear personal voice.

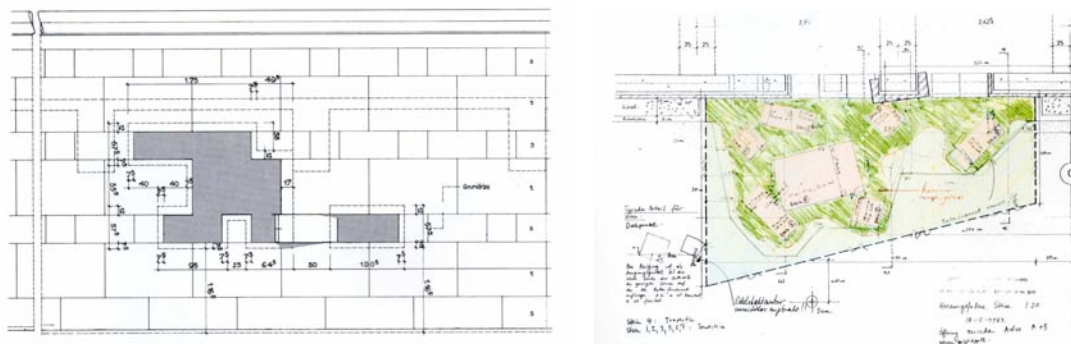
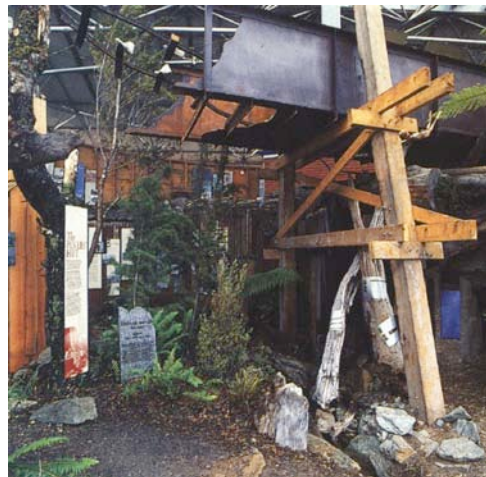
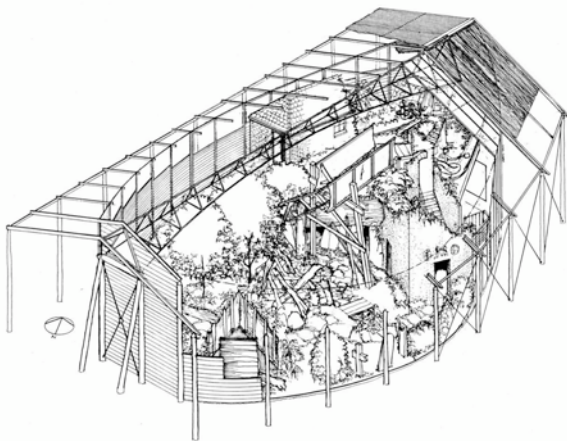


Figure 11: James Stirling: The hole in Staatsgalerie carpark wall , elevation and plan

The conservatory: experiments in building form

In conjunction with the 'stage set', the device that has been most useful in my endeavour to create socially meaningful architectural forms - Capois Death's effort included - is the historically intriguing architectural entity of the 'glass house' or conservatory.

Strahan Visitors Centre (1992) is a purpose built stage set inside a glass house. It is half rough hewn timber, half glass and steel. It houses a living rainforest, and one of the most bizarre and engaging exhibitions in Australia. Amidst the straggling Huon pines, manferns and creek may be found an aboriginal cave with kitchen bench, a brick and tile suburban living room (circa 1970) full of Greenie artefacts, and a flooded out timber and iron railway bridge.



Figures 12/13: Strahan Visitor Centre: My own drawing of the interior and photo as completed

Described as an ark with a novel inside, the Visitor Centre's boat like shape and glass roofed interior interpretation area were conceived as one entity, not as a traditional shell with an exhibition space to be designed and fitted out by others. The collaborating team - Richard Flanagan, Kevin Perkins and myself - wanted the Centre to challenge visitors, to rethink all they might take for granted.

The fixtures were designed to tell stories, so that visitors might discover meanings without necessarily reading one of Richard's 45,000 words. Why do we see some landscapes as beautiful and others as ugly? Is Tasmania's south-west anything more than a series of vistas and scenic backdrops? We worked to ensure that the interpretation imbued every aspect of the built fabric. It layers text upon contra images upon art works upon plant life upon physical forms ... and it represents the complex interplay between a rich ecology and the destructive desires and fears of human society.

Does it work? Read the visitor's book. People are moved in ways I could not have foreseen. It is humbling. Our creative collaboration has produced something unique. The project has been almost destroyed by negative bureaucratic action, but remarkably it survives, though it is badly scarred in places. In many ways this has been my most exhausting, challenging, formidable work

to date. But it is also work that fills me with pride. It is the story of three people who, with the backing of a community, created something that reaches out and touches people from all walks of life.

Forestry Tasmania Headquarters, Hobart (1998) is hidden in an urban side street in central Hobart. The project recycled two rather dark drab heritage listed 1930s brick buildings, and extended them with a series of structures to create a new office development with a floor area of 6,000 square metres.



Figure 14: Forestry Headquarters: concept model

The centrepiece of the building is a timber, steel and glass conservatory, which covers a living forest landscape. Inserted in an existing gap between the facades of the old buildings, the crack is now roofed with the fragment of a sphere that soars ... to become a complete shallow arched dome twelve metres above the ground. A portion of a 30 metre radius sphere, the circular top is a 22 metre diameter shallow dome with a 'tail' that continues the curved surface a further 15 metres out, and down towards the front entrance.



Figures 15/16: Forestry Headquarters: glazed timber dome interior and exterior street view

My concept was to create a celestial orb, reminiscent of early medieval illustrations of the world: a lattice sky floating above, a living forest below. Do the filigree beauty of the dome and the forest

read more dramatically for knowing this? The general public appreciate the space as an urban oasis. One couple - with no connection to the organisation or forest industry - even chose to marry there. The 'green' aesthetic always evokes a strong positive response, and Forestry Tasmania has gained immeasurably from it.

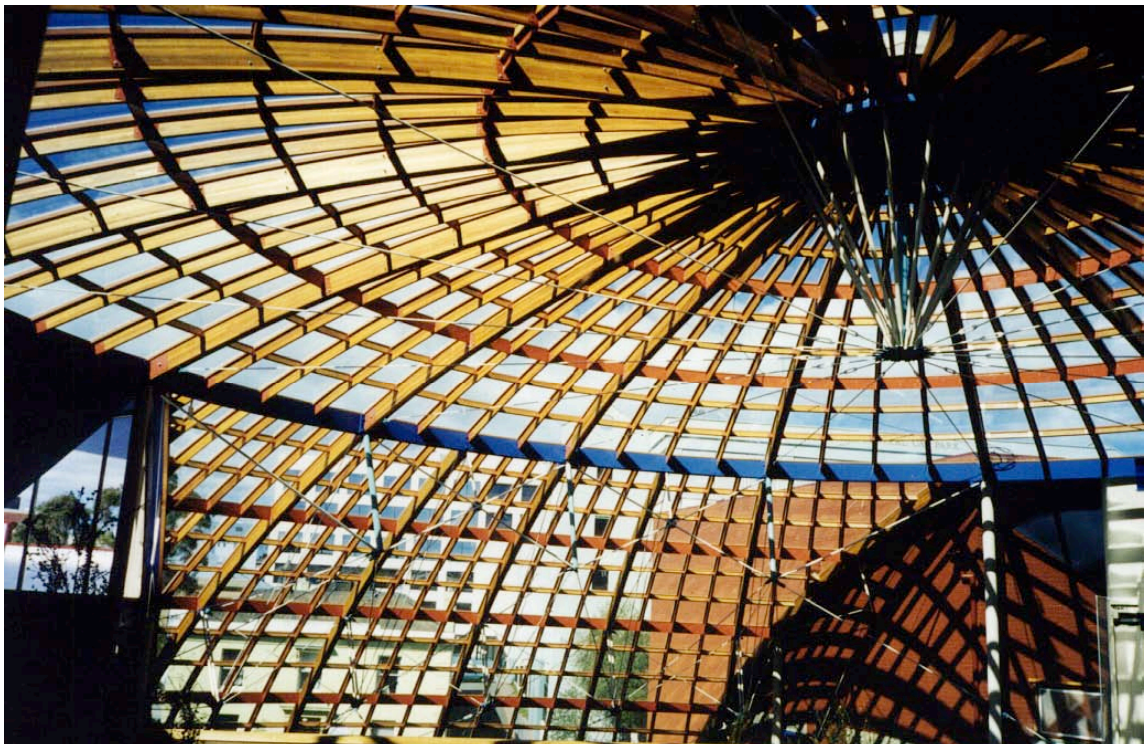
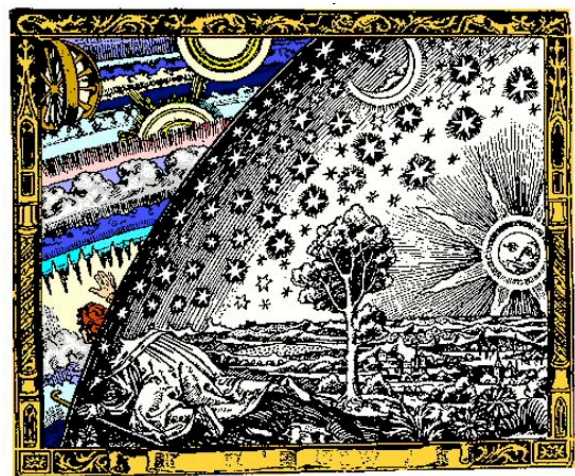
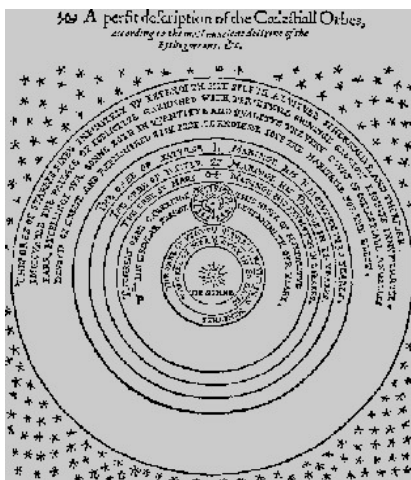


Figure 17: Forestry Headquarters: its interior domed vault as a metaphor for a heavenly sphere arching overhead



Figures 18/19: Copernicus' Map of the Celestial Orb and a 19th century illustration of the medieval universe

These two projects were transitional. Both include glass roofs and natural vegetation as part of the architectural 'place making', but neither exploits the environmental benefits implicit in their construction systems. Strahan 'works environmentally' by default. It has no heating in the main space and stays the same temperature as outside, which is perfect for the plant filled space and display. At Forestry Tasmania I proposed to use trapped heat generated by the Greenhouse Effect to warm the adjacent offices. Greenhouses change the wavelength of thermal energy, so heat may be collected inside a sealed volume sheeted with transparent material. But this approach was dismissed here as being too radical, and project managers appointed by the client installed a traditional A/C system. I remain convinced that it is entirely feasible for controlled passive solar gain to make buildings far more environmentally sustainable.



Figure 20: Forestry Headquarters: interior with its landscape

Architectural essentials: Environmentally Sustainable Design

I was becoming more aware of the need to tackle a range of issues as part of my work. Being a responsible architect, I could not create buildings that failed to address the growing environmental crisis. As part of my inclusive symbolic place making, my designs needed to find solutions to environmental problems. I hoped the different ideas could inform and enhance the other. ESD does not have to look like a kit of bits stuck to a traditional building shell. Moreover it can be what the building is about, at least in part.

The Forest EcoCentre (2002) is two buildings, one inside the other: a three-storey office building inside a truncated conical translucent outer covering. It was designed to conserve energy, and it has achieved usage rates well below normal consumption figures for comparable office buildings.



Figures 21/22: Forestry EcoCentre: external facade and view of exterior from western entry into the township.

The Centre uses as little as half the energy normally required to run a modern office building, even though it has cost no more than a traditional office building to construct (\$1,420 per sq.m against an average traditional office in Tasmania of \$1,700 per sq.m [2001]).⁷ About half the total energy used by a developed country like Australia is associated with its buildings, and seven per cent of this figure is the total energy used by office buildings.⁸ Given that 70 per cent of the total energy consumed by an office building is the energy used in day-to-day operations, a saving of half the total ongoing energy costs, for no additional initial cost, represents a 'landmark' environmental innovation.

The inner building is completely enclosed by a faceted translucent twinwall polycarbonate outer casing with a stretched Teflon woven fabric roof. The external shape was determined by a desire to create the largest enclosed internal volume in relation to its external surface area. The theoretical best shape is a sphere, but the truncated conical form is a practical alternative because it maximises the available area at the ground floor level. The building is tilted towards north to maximise winter sun penetration, and the rear is angled to avoid a cold southern side in winter.

⁷ Environment Design Guide :Cas 29 Forest EcoCentre, by Rory Spence

⁸ Ken Yeang; The Green Skyscraper



Figures 22/23: Forestry EcoCentre: cross-section and view of interior looking up the cone at the horizontal fan.

The most significant internal form is the conical void, created to drive warm air down inside the building in winter, and help it rise naturally in summer. Recirculated air is pushed down through the slowly rotating down draught fan into a chute. The chute is adjustable up and down so that heat can be directed out to the offices at different levels.

The Forest EcoCentre is made from radiata pine, thus it is a 'pine cone', but most people see a tree stump, a symbol of forest logging. Either way, the building makes a powerful visual statement that won't be ignored. The project won the RAI A 2002 National Sustainable Architecture Award, the most prestigious award for ESD buildings in Australia, as well as the 2002 Australian Timber Design Award. But surely the quirkiest outcome is that the building has become a cultural icon, a little like the Sydney Opera House. Tourists buy \$5 key rings and fridge magnets, and apparently the trinkets sell in large numbers. This indicates the value of the building as an icon. Perhaps the greatest impact and long term benefit will be due to its iconic status.

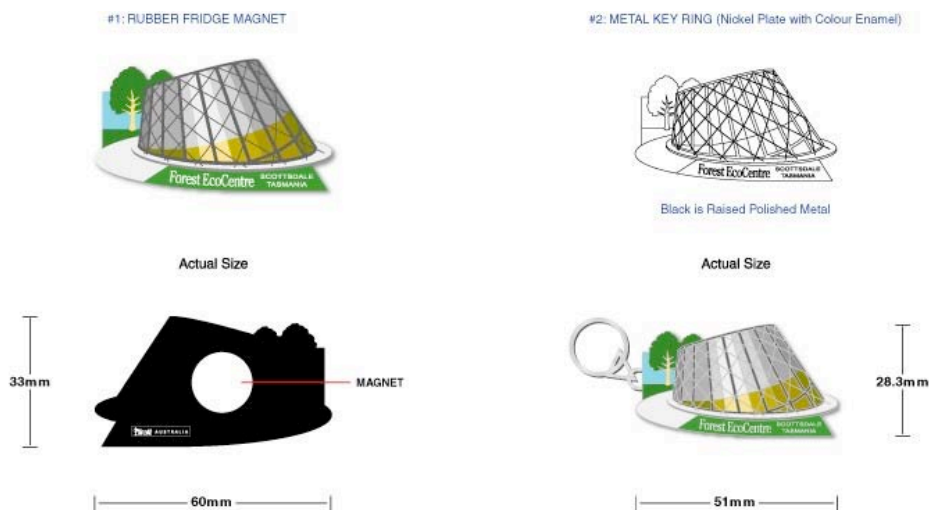


Figure 24: Forestry EcoCentre: Fridge magnets and key rings.

Recycling the extant: new narratives for old

Visible history in Tasmania goes back 35,000 years and all the epochs are readily accessible. In this State, preservation has happened largely because of economic neglect. Tasmania remains a treasure house of rich cultural traditions and artefacts, objects and landscaped environments, which add to the present. Much of the history is truly shocking, some of the worst cases of mankind's collective inhumanity ... from convicts to aboriginal genocide to the rape of nature. They are all here, all these stories, and they all inform my work.

I liken my work as adding a thin, almost transparent veneer onto what has gone before. As a design idea, recycling has a long tradition here ... call it making do with what you've already got. A large part of my body of work has involved doing just that, though I hope by including the past in a historically aware, socially inclusive way.

The IXL Development (2005) is the latest, largest and most inclusive of these projects.



Figures 25/26: IXL Redevelopment: historic view of restored exterior of the warehouses

Recycling six historic Georgian and Victorian warehouses into a new cultural precinct on Hobart's waterfront, this project brings together my main interests: finding architectural forms that engage with people and support social goals, developing environmentally sustainable outcomes, and working in the context of historically important buildings that date back to the earliest days of European settlement on this island. The warehouses have enjoyed various uses, and for almost a hundred years they housed Tasmania's largest industrial development, the Henry Jones IXL complex. Now, with minimum disturbance to the historic fabric, they have been converted to a fifty room 'five star' hotel with associated retail tenancies.



Figures 27/28: IXL Redevelopment: views of finished and unrestored interiors of the warehouses

By running all services through voids created by new false floors, all the original timber columns, beams, and exposed floors and corrugated iron roof could remain completely intact. Old finishes were washed down but otherwise unaltered, a clear matt lacquer layer protecting the crumbling masonry where mud was the original bonding agent. The fire engineering by Arup Fire involved a quantum leap in innovation.



Figures 29/30/31: IXL Redevelopment: views of exterior overall form and the interiors of the 'crate' bathrooms

New functional elements like bathrooms have been inserted as contrasting forms. Conceived as translucent glowing crates, the bathrooms' interiors are colour-back or translucent glass, or large mirrors. The scale inside appears huge. Wardrobes are veneer-faced crates that double as bed-heads with open storage elements behind.

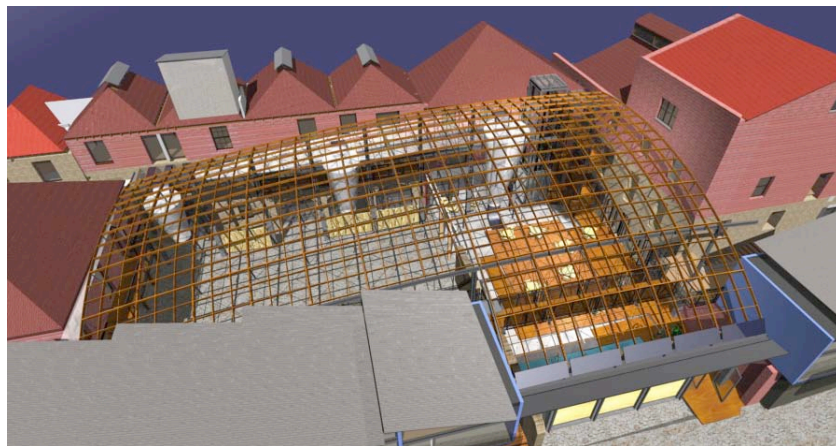


Figure 32: IXL Redevelopment: computer render as an aerial view of the glass atrium

The major new insertion occurs in the large space on the northern side of the warehouses, the side that gets the sun, where a 40m by 14m space has been roofed with a delicate new toroidal glass/steel/timber roof, to create a covered public space for arts and corporate events.

Warm air, trapped by the glass after entering the space, is collected by three fabric chutes and recirculated through the high thermal mass warehouses, keeping them naturally at an even temperature throughout the year. This forceful linking of 'heritage' and ESD creates a dialogue that enhances both, restoring vitality to the old, and lending visual and cultural texture to the new.



Figure 32: IXL Redevelopment: interior of the glass atrium at night with air chutes doubling as lanterns

This is an open plaza, left vacant and flexible, to cater for musical and other performances, and visual arts events, plus corporate launches and displays. Hobart has a new kind of public venue, achieved without major financial investment by government.

This project consolidated my design aspirations. I conceived the different functions for the derelict site, then won the tender for redevelopment from a host of competing ideas. But most significant, I was able to realise the project as a whole, within a design framework that I established from the outset. Uncompromising yet inclusive, the design approach has been widely recognised. Indeed this project has now won a national architectural award, a national tourism award for the best new tourism venture that year, and the hotel was voted the best new hotel in Australia. The project has won acceptance from locals and tourists, people who value its authenticity and innovation. Henry Jones' descendants feel their family's heritage is back. And the precinct is evolving as a new home for the arts.

One of the architectural award jurors commented; *"it works at a whole host of different levels..."* Indeed it does.

Layered History: discovering the seeds of ideas

Recently we won a nationwide competition⁹ having to create a prestigious tourist development adjacent to the Port Arthur historic site. This project brings together my principal interests, and facets of all the stories I have been developing over years: buildings as symbols, an environmental awareness, and active engagement with real history through 'real' stories.

The Port Arthur Resort Development (2006)

The project brief observes the inherent contradiction between a five-star hotel and a former place of incarceration, especially one termed the 'hell hole' of the British Empire. Rather than downplay this tension, it invigorates the development : the frisson challenges people to better understand the basics, the fundamental values that underpin our existence as human beings ... how we have treated each other and continue to mistreat each other.

We set about creating ideas with many different associations, recasting them in as many ways as is possible. Different visitors will discover many things to pique highly personal interests and tastes, intellectually and emotionally. The project engages positively with the historic cultural values of the site, not negatively. Dialogue keeps the project real and appropriate to the setting, and makes it unique.

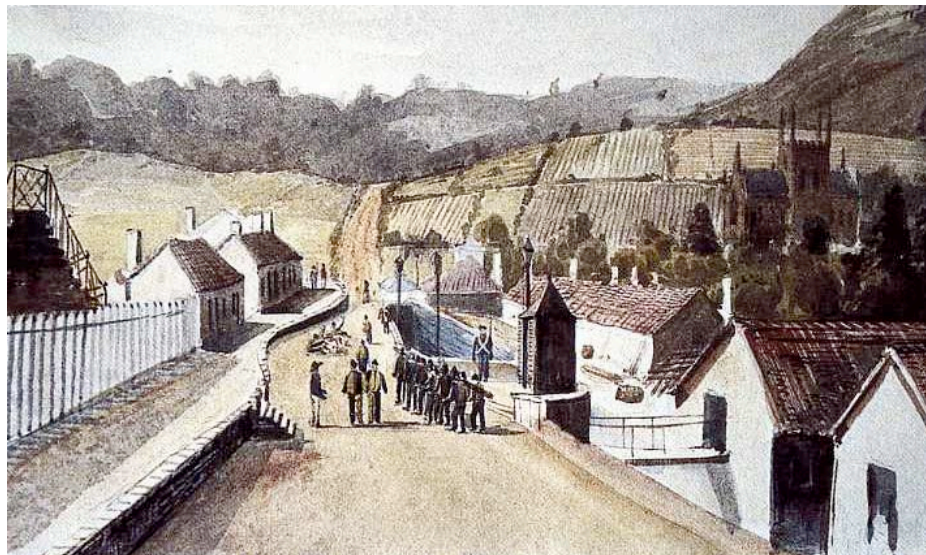


Figure 33: An 1847 view of Port Arthur by Owen Stanley, with the site itself on the far left of the illustration. Note the simple gabled roofed forms of the buildings.

New buildings will reflect the problematics of Port Arthur, the sense of 'something' having been there in the past but now being gone, a mere memory. The project will be an architecture of both allusion and illusion, alluding to the past by creating illusions. The ruins and recorded histories still

⁹ Federal Hotels organised a three stage selection process, first a registration and assessment based on credentials for completing exemplary work in sensitive Heritage sites, leading to a design competition for the selected 7 finalists. Entries were received from all round Australia.

give life to stories, and intangible memories of Times Past can change the perceptions of Times Present.

American convict, Linus Miller described Port Arthur in the 1840s ... *'Nature has done her part in rendering it one of the most pleasant and romantic places in that quarter of the globe; but man has converted it into a home of woe, sin and shame.'*

That punishment labour was undertaken in such a beautiful setting remains one of the site's real conundrums. Owing to the peculiarities of the penal station, this dichotomy of purpose was fostered through the development of ornamental gardens and grottos, which merged with surrounding vegetable patches to enhance the Arcadian sense of place. These contradictions merge and multiply, to become the real spirit of the place, its 'genius loci'.

Traditionally the site was agricultural land, cleared of its original trees early in the life of the settlement. During the entire period of the penal colony, land was used either as pasture or vegetable garden, so 'the garden' becomes a key part of any design idea for the new development.



Figure 34: The new development as a village, with historic Port Arthur, located directly in front of it

Our design creates new architectural forms that interpret the former simple Georgian buildings: gable shaped silhouettes that reference the past, but are insubstantial in themselves, even ghostly. Guest suites are sophisticated conservatories, with ESD thermal modelling and the latest energy and water conservation devices. This complex of buildings forms a 'ghost village', an architectural approach made possible by interacting with the actual history of the Port Arthur.



Figure 35: View from main lower part of Port Arthur with the new 'village' in the background

The accommodation will be in separate pavilions, each comprising three parts. An indoor / outdoor sitting area is entered via the recessed entry porch from outside the enclosing wall. As a separate internal volume, an inner sanctum or 'cell' (much larger than any convict cell) contains a generous bed, and may be light-sealed. Hotel paraphernalia (TV, fridge and wardrobe) are screened by a sliding panel with a unique introduction to the site: the story of an actual convict who lived and worked at Port Arthur, with words and illustrations (love tokens and tattoos) where possible created by his own hand. We intend to give a 'voice' to these people, long hidden by bureaucracy.



Figure 36: View towards the dry stone rubble enclosing walls, which surround each pavilion with a cutaway cross section showing (right to left), and 'outdoor' sitting area, a central sleeping cell, and at rear the private bathroom,

The global nature of convict transportation is reflected in the allocation of different convict identities to guest suites. Apart from the US Patriots who tried to invade Canada last century, individual convicts born outside of Britain and Ireland include a surgeon born in Pennsylvania, a soldier from Malta, a black African from the Cape who was partially crippled by a lion attack, a stonemason born in Bermuda, a sailor born in Bombay, a former slave from Mozambique, a drummer boy from the

Cape of Good Hope, a surgeon born in Paris and a soldier, born in Berlin but court martialled and sentenced to transportation in Montreal, Canada.

These 'characters' will be grouped so that prisoners born in different parts of the British Isles and the wider world may be assigned to different groups of suites. By this means the hotel will resemble a global map of 'native places'. This will underscore the process of transportation that separated convicts from kith and kin.

New gardens will be planted around each pavilion to link the whole of the accommodation together, and shield it from the historic site.



Figure 37: Reception area as a low space beginning to open out to the wider views. It is located under a garden roof, at the end of a journey down an old convict made cutting



Figure 38 : A restaurant as a glazed indoor/ outdoor element defined by random rubble walls reminiscent of those on the historic site.

Growing food for people living at the site has been a major activity at Port Arthur from its inception. The penal colony had to be as self sufficient in food as possible. The job of clearing and cultivating

both the public and officers' gardens was charged to convicts. Many were invalids, classed unfit for more intensive labour. The 1836 Catalogue by Daniel Bunce, Tasmania's first nurseryman, is essential documentation. Most likely Port Arthur's gardeners ordered seeds from Bunce's book and planted them at Port Arthur.

In 1838, Commissariat Officer T J Lemprière noted in his journal the productivity of the Officers' Gardens (which is just below our site):

'Almost every vegetable which forms the comfort or nursery of a European table is to be found in these gardens. Currants, gooseberries and strawberries are plentiful; peaches, apples cherries, plums, pears and figs are to be met with, also cucumbers and melons.'

The hotel site will become a living cottage garden, a veritable '*potager*'. And resort restaurants will specialise in a new cuisine created from old food plants, especially the vegetables and herbs that graced the colonial kitchen table. Several organisations are dedicated to preserving old agricultural and horticultural plants and vegetables, and we propose to work with them to commence a program of seed renewal for these old plant varieties.



Figure 39 : Interior of a Guest pavilion looking out at Port Arthur

Apart from the symbolism in the act of renewal for the hotel project, this is potentially important ecological work. Many of these plant varieties are in danger of being lost to us, but they may contain characteristics crucial to our modern crops, to combat crop failure due to disease or some other ecological catastrophe. Many of these species also have appearances, flavours and textures that set them apart from our modern varieties, which have been developed more in response to transport and storage parameters than for taste or flavour.

Using historic plants and horticulture, reviving memories of the Port Arthur village, and incorporating the stories of actual convicts will capture what is unique and special about this place.

The 'genius loci'.



Figure 40: The first manifestation of the EcoCentre was this model

The actual forms of my buildings are a response to two factors: first, the physical place itself, the particulars of microclimate, orientation, and all the other attributes of that unique location, and second, the cultural issues inherent in any project brief or context, implied or explicit.

Over the years, various people have tried to put a stylistic label on the way I design things. Professor Joan Kerr (Sydney University) called me 'a postmodernist with a social conscience', and Richard Flanagan described my work as 'magical realism'. To quote him from a public lecture he wrote with me:¹⁰

'The term 'magical realism' was first used to describe a school of South American writing that presented what was magic and special about a reality often wrongly dismissed as prosaic and ordinary..... it has been used to describe the Strahan Visitor Centre as 'the world's first magical realist building'. With the Strahan Visitor Centre I and the artists and crafts people with whom I collaborated were seeking to do was to recreate seemingly ordinary aspects of the past of south west Tasmanian wilderness in a new context, and in this way seek to shock people into recognition of what is magic and special about south west Tasmania.'

I don't much focus on these labels, and mention them now more for illuminating the essence and outcomes of my creative method, as assessed by others.

My way of working is quite intuitive. I read widely and inform myself about all facets of the project, especially the social and cultural values of the community who will use my building. Then I leave this to accumulate unordered in my subconscious. Once I know all the hidden facets of the project as well as the functional requirements, I conceive a coherent spatial whole that brings together the diverse elements. This thinking often occurs in the early hours of the morning, and I have trained myself to think in precise spatial terms from the outset. If I can mentally conceive an answer, I am content to carry it around in my mind, which allows for further distillation of the embryonic solution.

¹⁰ A paper presented at the RAlA National Conference, Hobart 1994

At this stage, there is nothing tangible to show, no evidence of resolution. For more complex problems, often the solution is the development of a staged series of design decisions, an ordering to grapple the most important ideas first, the solving of which informs those that follow. In my case, form does precede function. The spatial elements with all their cultural connotations are there at the outset. Practical functional relationships weave around and through these spatial constructs. Since all this happens at a subconscious level, it is not clear to me precisely how it comes together ... it just does.



Figure 41: As the first expression of an unrealised project, this 1:100 model was conceived from scratch to this state in a weekend

Generally the first visual manifestation of a design occurs over a weekend, the only time when the phone stops and I have uninterrupted periods in which to think. I begin by drawing a large-scale isometric or axonometric projection, which evolves naturally as I resolve the most important spaces first. Detailed functional relationships sort themselves out through the process of drawing. Or else, more recently I am building balsa and cardboard models as the first full-blown expression of the idea. There is no freehand sketching in the accepted sense. 'Big ideas' evolve as fully-resolved entities and they rarely change in any dramatic way, unless the functions which underpin the project are revised.

Story telling is my way of giving a voice to these ideas ... and like any good story, the more it becomes embellished with subtle nuances and lively descriptions, the richer it becomes. If a work can touch people like a good story, then I am happy. If it goes beyond, to capture how a community thinks about itself, then I am even more pleased. It makes the considerable difficulties in any project's creation worthwhile. Although the emotional investment is always huge, somehow the effort gets forgotten and I go looking for another project in which to immerse myself.

The future.

This Masters by Invitation process has allowed me to look inside myself, to understand what has been happening in my unconscious as I proceed with evolving a design. Now this understanding grows, encouraging me to build even more cultural ideas into the work that I choose.

I am committed to buildings that give visual expression to sound environmental principles. Recent projects have structures that proceed in one of two directions: either to diaphanous skins, the lightest most delicate forms that I can conceive, or to a heavyweight roof form that embodies environmental attributes. In the later category several sod-roofed buildings are emerging.

Conceived over six years ago, the Springs Ecotourism project on the upper slopes of Mt Wellington, high above Hobart, is approaching the resolution of complex issues surrounding it. Finally the first stage is to be built. The mountain is Hobart's own wilderness, and it holds great psychological power over the city of people below.



Figure 42: Springs Stage 1: a Day Centre covered with native vegetation, which hopefully will be grazed by the local marsupials

The cultural impacts of both the Mt Wellington and Port Arthur projects will be immense. To put new structures in these places is akin to designing within holy sites. This process of review through my Masters at RMIT has made me feel both aware of the implications and confident to proceed.

After word ...

The last words return us to one of my one of my built storytelling projects, transmuted to literature by a master storyteller. Richard's brother Martin Flanagan is both an esteemed journalist for *The Age* newspaper and also the author of several works that inquire into the human condition. In Martin's very personal memoir 'In Sunshine or in Shadow' there is a chapter about the formal opening of the Strahan Visitor Centre.

'... I'd been in the back bar of the Strahan pub with Richard and the architect, Robert Morris Nunn. Nunnie, as he is otherwise known, looks like the nineteenth century artist Charles Condor and has a laugh that sounds like a mad xylophonist. He is one of those artists working against the momentum of our age, which is flinging everyone towards the centre. Nunnie is one of those clinging to the edges, creating art that is both grand and distinctly local. In the pub, I told Nunnie the story of when Richard was at Oxford and came home and did an interview with the *Sunday Tasmanian* which ran under the heading 'State Scholar Slams Oxford Class Jerks'. In the text my brother made two memorable assertions – the first, and the one that beat him back to England, was that the bursar of his college was a recruiting agent for M15. The second, which had more impact locally, was that the only way to get on at Oxford was to sodomise with your don.

The first I knew of the article was when I was fronted at a party by an angry magistrate. His upper lip was quivering: he looked like a feral poodle. 'What's that arrogant young bastard of a brother of yours said now?' Not knowing what my brother had said, I was unable to assist him. The following week, the newspaper devoted a page to letters from people with MA (Oxon) after their names under the general heading 'How Dare You, Sir'. It looked like a Cairo traffic jam with every driver having one hand on the horn and his head out of the window shouting "Mr Flanagan may have got on at Oxford by sodomising his don but I didn't." I felt for the poor bastards, particularly the ones with Reverend in front of their name.

I was telling Nunnie this story when we were joined by a fourth man. Stout and red faced, he has a darkness to his colour and lustrous black eyes. Like us, he'd been drinking. He told us he was of Aboriginal descent, as was his wife, and originally he had not wanted to go into the Visitor Centre. But that day he had. A big man, he looked into the distance and nodded, then put Richard under his arm and began squeezing him like an accordion. 'You'll always be an Irishman to me' he said, putting on a bad brogue 'but I love what you do'. And then he kissed my brother wetly on the cheek.

The Age declined to run my story on the opening of the Strahan Visitor Centre. Too unusual in form, I was told, too Tasmanian. One year later, a German magazine doing a special edition on Australia rang me, seeking an article on Tasmania. Did I have one? Well as it happened I did. In the published version – translated into German of course – the word chosen by the translator for 'wog' was 'ossi' a derogatory term used by West Germans to describe East Germans in the aftermath of reunification. All great dramas, I believe, are enacted locally.¹¹

What can I add to that?

¹¹ In Sunshine or in Shadow', by Martin Flanagan, Picador ISBN 0 330 36370 0. Published 2002



Figure 43: Strahan Visitor Centre: the 1970s greenie suburban bungalow with its back smashed out, as another myth is destroyed

Robert Morris-Nunn (Nunnie)



Acknowledgements:

The projects described are all the result of collaborative endeavours, and a large part of their success is because a large number of people from all the different design professions, as well as artists and builders have contributed far more than the norm in order to bring them into being. The sum total is indeed infinitely greater than the different parts.

To mention but one individual out of many, Jim Gandy is the structural engineer for all the projects illustrated. His genius in developing my initial ideas in ways that I could never have conceived, has become a very important ongoing creative partnership for both of us.

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