



Desk-crit with Murcutt

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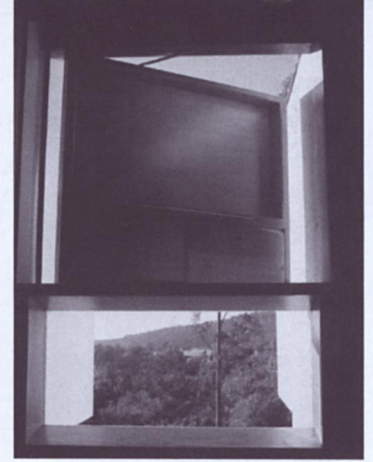
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Desk-crit with Murcutt

DANIEL RYAN



Day 10 in Sydney of the Murcutt Masterclass 2007, sketches everywhere; my group of six was slightly at sea. Our proposition to reorganise the approach to the Arthur Boyd Centre by flooding the nearby valley and bridging it with a gallery was causing a few headaches. Glenn Murcutt wandered by, recommending that we collect our thoughts and be ready to work through the issues when he came back.

The Masterclass is a two-week full-time course with 32 students from around the world. Organiser-in-chief is Dungannon man, Lindsay Johnstonⁱ who seemed pleased that five of the participants had Irish connections – Lorna Browne, Tom Finnegan, Woytek Przywecki, Daniel Ryan and Marcus Simpson. The course reflects an ideal of teaching based on experiential learning. Every evening there was a different lecture by Glenn Murcutt, Richard Lepplastrier, Brit Andresen or Peter Stutchbury. “You have to give it away to keep it” as Aboriginal elder Max Harrison eloquently put it.

Living next to the site for the first week, you experienced it by walking it, watching it and documenting it. Bush walks with Max - a highlight for many - showed the deep traditional understanding of place.

Staying in Riversdale at the Arthur Boyd Centre, woken by sunlight, showering while looking over the Shoalhaven River, weaving between the *in* and the *out* furthered an understanding of Murcutt’s approach to

architecture and the Australian landscape. Every few days there were pin-ups, which were less ‘critiques’ than ‘appraisals’ that emphasised the potential of each project. Visits to some key houses around coastal New South Wales showed the skill of those teaching in reading a site, creating prospect, refuge and an emotional response to place. Finally, living and working with others from various parts of the globe offered an insight into different cultural approaches to the environment. This diversity of people has created a masterclass network around the world, ensuring that this approach to architecture does not remain only in Australia.

A group with “a lot of firepower” according to Ric Lepplastrier, we comprised a mixture of practitioners and graduate students, from Aberdeen and Beijing, Copenhagen and Colorado, Dublin and Dhaka. There was no strong sense of hierarchy; design emerged through discussion whilst walking the valley, making investigative models and a series of drawings describing the interaction between the elements of climate and the land. Although deadlines forced decisions, debate also brought forth doubt.

We had left the site on Friday full of intentions. Our brief was to design a gallery for research and temporary exhibitions about the Australian landscape artist, Arthur Boyd. Riversdale was the location that had inspired him, and where he had been at ease. Wandering the whole valley, we

had decided against attempting a picturesque solution. The issue with the site was one of access. What was required was a transformation of the approach to Murcutt’s Arthur Boyd Centre. A gallery meant that all storage of art works had to be above the 15m, 100 year flood line. But this level also marked the tree line around the valley. The land had been cultivated close to the river but further back in the valley there still remained pristine turpentine forests. Any penetration with parking & service pipes would likely cause damage.

Our solution involved bridging the valley, in the most delicate manner possible, to connect the forest approach road with the Riversdale complex on the other side. This bridge could house the art works and its orientation was perfect to catch cooling breezes and pick up on southern light for gallery spaces yet offer northern light for café’s and for open circulation. It would be out of the fire zone too. We wanted to keep it as narrow as possible – 6m width was agreed, with 220m in length.

We started by considering the building as a dam, which would flood the valley, emphasise the presence of water in the area and allow the development of wetlands with their associated wildlife. What level to set the dam at was a source of much debate. Through a series of drawings, it soon became clear also that a 15m high dam would be too obtrusive. Try 10m – no, this would flood the creeks



running through the valley. 7.5m was settled on – enough to attenuate water, and only a 2m high causeway was necessary. This causeway would rarely be flooded and therefore could allow some cars to cross it.

Now we had two projects – two lines floating above each other. A width of only 4.5m could affect a whole valley. The building boundary was not the site boundary. This was an important lesson.

We were struggling to tie our intentions together. We felt that a strong simple line would work best, but as the project headed off in different directions, maintaining simplicity was a complex task. Car parking was causing headaches, so too was squeezing a gallery and circulation into a narrow section. How could we relieve the monotony of the corridor? Trouble with circulation, what side, should it shift, how open?

Glenn came back again, as doubt was setting in. He worked through our proposals for damming the valley – assuring us it could act as a wetland, explaining devices that could divert water from the

existing creeks to the plain. If we built up the banks of the streams, the trees would remain by the creeks. He felt it was feasible, liked the idea.

What about the bridge? He spoke about Japanese bridges and drew two rectangles that touched and overlapped at their ends, noting how this change space was a point of encounter with the elements; how this transition point launched you into your surroundings; how seats would be placed at these points to create a meeting point for passers-by. This could only occur at one place on our bridge – where the bridge ran over the creek. At this location it would be possible to comprehend the source of the stream and then turn to watch the water flow into the Shoalhaven river. The essence and emotion of crossing would be intensified.

Talking as he was drawing, he noted how at this change space we could descend and make contact with the river and be greeted by a fountain at the lower level as Barragan would do. Maybe the underside of the bridge should be a massive structure, with holes punched

out for views of the river. Further reference was made to the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. Could the gallery contain a series of different rooms that would allow views back to Boyd's hill at some points or the Shoalhaven at others? Next he spoke about Aalto and how he would introduce some irregularities but allow continuity by keeping the same material treatment. We could offer different types of light for these rooms. So many possibilities had now opened up. Even the roof was reconsidered. With a twinkle in his eye, he added, why not consider the roof as a bridge for animals, so that they could escape across the valley at times of flood.

"Was that a help?" said Glenn in his modest way as he left to prepare for a lecture that evening.

Daniel Ryan is a Master's candidate in Sustainable Design at the University of Sydney. He attended the 2007 Glenn Murcutt International Masterclass in New South Wales with the assistance of the Travel & Training Award Scheme of the Irish Arts Council.

For more information on the Glenn Murcutt International Masterclass see www.ozetecture.org

i See also Building Material 15 & 16