

A. S. Hook Address

Words by Peter Elliott

The 2017 Australian Institute of Architects' Gold Medallist Peter Elliott reflects on his past four decades in practice. From the period of fermenting change that spurred his socially conscious approach to architecture and city making, through to the love of building and the built identity of a culture that continue to underpin his work.

It has become something of a tradition for the A. S. Hook Address to reflect broadly on matters of architecture and the profession generally as well as the built work of the practice. I want to consider a number of themes here that give insight into the enormous generational change that has taken place over the last four decades as well as looking at a way of working as a sole practitioner in one city. I see architecture as a three-pronged endeavour: community and professional advocacy, design teaching and design practice.

Over the last few months I have been travelling around the country as part of the Gold Medal tour. I feel a bit like an architectural pinball, randomly bouncing around the nation, delivering Gold Medal dust. It is a humbling experience to meet students and architects of all generations coming together to celebrate something architectural and to get a sense of the mood of the nation from the varied perspectives of each capital city.

Early days

I am proudly a Melbourne architect and am, as Peter Corrigan said in his own A. S. Hook Address, "inclined to think architecture is a local matter." He also said, "It is a great honour to be a Melbourne architect." Both are sentiments I share. I live and work within a four-kilometre radius of central Melbourne and aside from two interstate commissions and a handful in regional Victoria, you can walk to most projects – it is that local. The irony of the local, of course, is that we live in a connected world, where ideas are instantly spread and consumed through the internet. I practise with an international awareness, but am firmly located in Melbourne.

From the beginning, my architectural interests have been embedded in the Australian city and the design of the public realm, combining architecture, urban design and landscape.

My attitude to practice has been founded on a lifelong interest in the relationship of architecture to the Australian landscape and in urbanity, the relationship between architecture and the city.

I am sure every architect has a personal story behind why they became an architect. I was drawn to architecture from an early age, for two reasons – a love of art and drawing and a desire to serve the community. I started my architecture course at the University of Melbourne fifty years ago, in 1968. This was at the time of the Vietnam War, moratoriums and student and social activism. I lived in a share house in Fitzroy where more people came and went over the back fence than in through the front door. The house was filled with politically active people connected to a wide circle of draft dodgers, journalists, academics, artists and generally interesting characters. This was a restless generation busting for change and it was exhilarating.

I became involved with a number of local organizations in Fitzroy and Collingwood, such as the Fitzroy Housing Repair Advisory Service, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Shelter and the Centre for Urban Research and Action. This was a period of inner suburban slum clearance programs and new freeways battering their way through established neighbourhoods. These organizations were focused on improving social housing as well as rethinking responsible urban renewal. They pioneered new types of tenant-run housing associations, promoted spot purchase and infill programs and lobbied to save boarding houses, which were fast disappearing.

The very people who had lobbied for a radical change in government policy were suddenly landed with the responsibility to implement it. With that came new opportunities for young and emerging architects. In 1985 Peter Elliott Architecture

↙ The 2017 Gold Medal recipient Peter Elliott, pictured in 1973, 1984, 1992 and 2017, which spans his past four decades of practice.

→ The Carlton Baths and Community Centre (1990/2013), Elliott's first major public commission, which he refurbished twenty-three years later.

Photography: John Gollings

and Urban Design was commissioned by the Ministry of Housing for a major new public housing development on an old industrial site in Port Melbourne. The model was a version of the terrace house arranged in a perimeter block, so everyone had a front door on the street and their own courtyard. The aim was to normalize public housing and redefine its place within each local neighbourhood. Sadly, this reformist period did not last more than a decade and public housing has lagged ever since.

Patrons, mentors and guardian angels

Those years of activism taught me about the importance of advocacy and that as architects we need to stand for something beyond our own professional interests. I am most thankful to a small number of exceptional people who took the trouble to foster me as a young architect. Some of these people were architects, but many were not. Their spirit of generosity has stayed with me and I have tried hard to return that spirit to others. I was fortunate to become involved with a number of very generous, politically active architects – Andrew McCutcheon, Evan Walker, Dimity Reed and Howard McCorkell, among others. They got me going, taught me about worldly things, commissioned and referred work, instilled confidence and provided support – just what every young architect needs.

I have huge admiration for those brave and rare individuals who fight for architecture, the patrons, the mentors, the public advocates and the guardian angels. These are the people who get onto boards and government agencies, and into positions of influence, who understand the value of design and are willing to support and defend it. One of my favourite guardian angels of recent times, and there have been a few, was the senior project director on one of our freeway projects. If anyone tried to undermine our role as urban designers, and this happened quite



regularly, he would be there defending the design. As a profession we all need guardians, for when they are not there life can get quite hard.

Design teaching

As with many architects, the early years of practice started with a mix of small renovations and the occasional new building. Income from teaching supported the practice in the first years. As many will testify, starting a practice while teaching design studio has enormous benefits. The design studio is a place of contemplation, experimentation and testing ideas, and the practice studio is a place of rude reality, where ideas are made manifest. I love to build; it's the best thing about being an architect.

Host architecture

Over the past four decades the practice has developed a particular way of working, in which architecture has been extended into the realm of landscape, urban design, public space and city infrastructure. Over this time, many lessons have been learned, ideas developed and strategies deployed.

One factor that has influenced my attitude to architecture is that I am largely self-taught, having not worked for other architects, except as a student. The practice started with very modest work, mostly minor renovations and additions. This taught me to focus on the essence of things and the intrinsic values within architecture as revealed through doing the work.

At the University of Melbourne's Parkville campus the practice undertook a

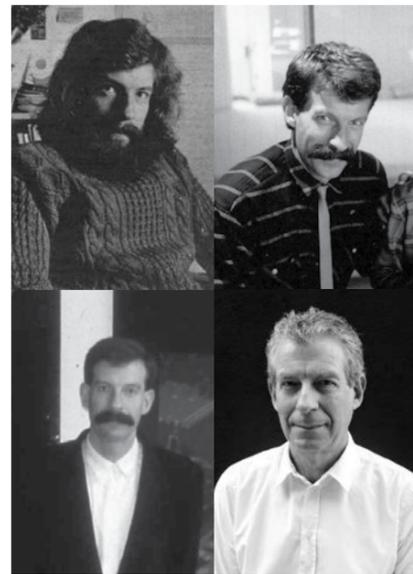
decade of small repeat commissions, three or four every year. There were lots of incidental projects that individually were of little impact, but that collectively began to interconnect buildings with public space and to create a pathway through the campus: a new front door, a staircase, a foyer or a small paved square. I learnt to work patiently and modestly with the existing built fabric and to treat the ordinary elements of architecture as fragments of larger buildings or spaces.

The experience also taught me to look beyond individual buildings and consider their place among their neighbours. In an urban architecture of the city, each building or space can be considered a host to which various surgical strategies could be applied. Here the architect acts as a kind of urban surgeon, stitching and knitting the city back together, grafting new onto old, removing and revealing, adding on, excavating or building anew. This is a design strategy that welcomes the contingent and accepts constraints as fundamentally enriching.

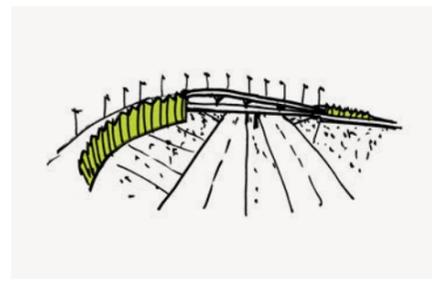
Topographic architecture

The idea that architecture could also be a form of topographic terrain has always interested me. This is where landscape, buildings and townscape overlap and it is perhaps best found in the Italian hill town. Here buildings become topography, where stone walls, terraces, staircases, ramparts, loggias, roofs and facades all merge into one continuous surface draped over the land.

One favourite "topographic" project from the early 1970s is the Catholic



Photography (clockwise from the top-left): John Gollings.



Diocesan Offices by Yuncken Freeman Architects, located in the grounds of St Patrick's Cathedral in East Melbourne. This is a tough but clever form of submerged urban architecture, organized around a series of sunken courtyards, water features and terraces you can walk over. The architecture is unapologetic and yet it sits comfortably as a foreground to the cathedral.

We are currently working on new extensions to Victoria's Parliament House and have adopted a similar topographic approach. The new parliament building is sunken and embedded into the landform and engulfed by a fine nineteenth-century garden. The building is organized around a large central courtyard facing St Patrick's Cathedral, with roof gardens and terraces that can be traversed, inhabited and sat on.

An earlier topographic project from 2005 is our Memorial Hall project at Melbourne Grammar School. Here a new underground music studio/rehearsal space has been added to a heritage-listed 1920s hall. The studio is fully excavated underground and yet the space does not feel submerged. The language of the extension is not architectural, but draws on the urban vocabulary of the hill town, with its rampart walls, stairways and terraces. The roof of the music studio is a series of paved and landscaped terraces that knit back into the campus.

Companion architecture

Another arena of interest has been the companion building. This is where a new piece of architecture has to negotiate a place with a pre-existing piece of architecture – an age-old proposition.

"Companion" implies some form of architectural equivalence by weight or presence. It perhaps implies that one element does not dominate the other but that somehow they manage to coexist.

The Victoria University Law School library extension of 2003 is a companion building, having an old rusticated base with a new concertina top. The folded jack-in-the-box form appears to emerge from the base building, or has it been squashed down and so appears crumpled? Here the strategy is more sculptural than architectural, as the form, function and scale of the addition are purposely rendered ambiguous. Somehow this modest little add-on has to contend with the full-on decorative power of the old Public Records Office.

The baroque

Travelling and studying the work of other architects is a well-trodden pathway to expanding horizons and discovering new worlds. I grew up in the postwar suburbs of Melbourne, which were lean and spread out, where houses and gardens were thinly applied to the land. And then there is the vast Australian landscape, with more thin horizons and endless space, for which I have a great fondness and empathy.

In early 1971 I travelled to Italy for the first time and discovered the baroque world. Pumped, inflated and exuberant, public space was intensely urban and theatrical. This was revolutionary to a suburban boy bred on early modernism. One aspect of the baroque that interested me was the way architects exaggerated and amplified scale. A window or door might span several storeys and mask the normal reading of levels within a building, and objects were regularly over-scaled for effect and gravitas.

A simple bollard was not just a bollard but a massive stone artefact, often shaped or sculptured to resemble an urn or other found object. In the baroque the elements of architecture were always embedded with more than their functional necessities.

Three architects of interest

For all architects, I think it is a complex matter to isolate all of the core influences that underpin their approach and attitude to architecture. For me there are many influences, but there are three architects of particular interest: Jože Plečnik, Carlo Scarpa and Luis Barragán. My interest is not so much in the work itself, but in the way they worked and the breadth of their interests. For them the practice of

architecture could not be separated from their local culture, landscape or urban setting.

Jože Plečnik was a Slovene architect, city planner, urbanist and academic who worked mostly in Prague and Ljubljana in the early to mid-twentieth century. He is regularly referred to as the master of the urban intervention, which is my particular interest in him. Prague Castle was built over ten centuries, generation upon generation. Within the castle grounds and buildings lie a thousand years of architectural history, woven into a vast tableau. Plečnik's interventions span decades and range from small, almost insignificant changes to completely new urban elements. Strewn throughout the castle grounds are his many interventions: flagpoles, manhole covers, fountains, canopies, grilles, gates, balustrades, ramparts, stairways, garden vases, pavilions, pergolas, obelisks and much more.

Plečnik located elements to reinforce their urban role. A giant flagpole in the first courtyard seems oddly located, until you see it aligned with a narrow passageway he has created, leading you into the next courtyard. The viewer is drawn almost subconsciously into a secret web of outdoor rooms, passages, stairways, terraces and promenades, as each episode in the journey unfolds. What surprised me most at Prague Castle was how difficult it was to see where he had been, where his work stopped and started. In this form of urbanist practice there are no boundaries separating design disciplines as we have today. What this approach demonstrates, though, is a rich understanding of city making, generation after generation.

Luis Barragán was one of Mexico's most influential architects. Of particular interest to me is the way Barragán worked with the elements of landscape and architecture as a singular sensibility. His gardens are confident, full of character and mystery. Barragán's landscapes are rooted in nature as he found it. He preferred uneven ground, with strange shapes and geological accidents.

Carlo Scarpa was an Italian architect and master of many disciplines and a great hero of his generation. He taught drawing and interior decoration at the University of Venice for over thirty years. He was a very fine draftsman, producing prodigious numbers of beautiful pencil drawings for every project he undertook. Scarpa used the drawing process to investigate ideas. His drawings are more like a visual diary, recording his

Photography: John Gollings

← For the past ten years, Peter Elliott Architecture and Urban Design has been the urban designer on Melbourne's M80 Ring Road upgrade.

← Sketch by Peter Elliott of the M80 Ring Road upgrade – a vast project to widen and extend thirty-eight kilometres of freeway in Melbourne's west.

↓ Ideogram by Elliott portraying the Victoria University Law School library extension's (2003) jack-in-the-box form.

↓ The library extension is an exemplar of Elliott's companion architecture; a new concertina top coexists with an older, rusticated base.



Photography: Trevor Mein

thoughts, than conventional architectural illustrations.

Of Scarpa's many fine renderings, a particular favourite of mine is a plan study of the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona. This project involved the rehabilitation of a fourteenth-century castle, which he conducted through a series of architectural interventions from the late 1950s. In the drawing, Scarpa has overlaid the faint outline of the old castle with layers of sketches, describing and testing new components to see how they might fit. You can see where he has rubbed out or tried another idea drawn over the previous one. Layers of line work are built up or erased as a kind of palimpsest deeply connected to the development of the building. Scarpa understood how to reveal the intrinsic values of the original architecture and give voice to its history.

Civic architecture

For me architecture is deeply rooted in the civic realm. Memorable public buildings and public spaces represent the built identity of a culture, a place and a time. It is one of the great privileges of architecture to be able to build civic fabric and to serve society. As a practice we have sought public commissions almost to the complete exclusion of all other types of work. One project led to the next and in the process we learnt about the civic in its various scales and settings.

The first major public commission was the Carlton Baths and Community Centre, designed in 1986 and completed in

1990. Then, twenty-three years later in 2013, refurbished again. It is a bit tragic to be old enough to renovate your own buildings. The founding proposition was based on the idea of a "village of forms" rather than a singular building. This strategy owes much to the observations set out in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's 1978 seminal book *Collage City* (following their 1975 article of the same name), in which architecture finds its place in the city through an assemblage of disparate elements.

The Carlton building is an assemblage of civic elements: the loggia, the pavilion, the frame and the big roof. It was purposely not domestic. Inevitably civic architecture has to contend with notions of monumentality. At the baths we played with scale to heighten the drama and test the building's place within the neighbourhood.

Freeway and infrastructure architecture

In recent years, architects have found a new role in the design of bridges, freeways and other large-scale infrastructure projects, once the exclusive domain of engineers. One reason for this is that as architects, we think differently from engineers. We see things visually and we take the trouble to understand a site's context and its connection to the local topography, landscape and community. This seems to matter. In recent years, all major freeway projects in Melbourne have included an architect urban designer on the design team and this has produced some amazing work, including the Eastern Freeway Extension by Wood Marsh Architecture, City Link and Melbourne Gateway by DCM and Craigieburn Bypass by Taylor Cullity Lethlean and Tonkin Zulaikha Greer, among many others.

For the last ten years we have been the urban designers on the upgrade of the M80 Ring Road (also known as Western and Metropolitan Ring Roads). This is a vast, \$2.25 billion-dollar project to widen and extend thirty-eight kilometres of freeway. We found ourselves asking, how does an architect work within the domain of the road engineer and get to influence anything worthwhile? We have learnt to be very tactical and to focus on a few simple but robust strategies underpinned by a strong design narrative.

Public space architecture

One of the biggest shifts in the practice of architecture over recent decades has been the expanding arena of urban design. Australian cities have been slow to

embrace density and with it the complexities of a more urban environment over the suburban. Greater Melbourne's ongoing transformation since the mid 1980s is a case in point, as it has struggled with how to plan sensibly for increased density. We are left with rampant low-density growth at the periphery, locked up middle suburbs and a free-for-all on the inner urban industrial sites. The frustration is palpable.

My particular interest in the remaking of Melbourne has been in the design of public space. The public spaces we have inherited from the founding of the city are essentially leftover space not occupied by buildings. Today we find these accidental public spaces scattered through the city.

The physical transformation of Melbourne's public spaces has been hard-fought. Changes to the City Square, Bourke Street Mall and Swanston Street have all had a number of false starts and cautious beginnings. The City Square, for instance, has been rebuilt three times in three decades and is currently being dug up again. Somehow Melbourne had to learn to shift from a suburban mentality and invent a new, local form of urbanism and a way of understanding how to remake public space in a city already built.

RMIT Urban Spaces

Over the past twenty years our practice has been slowly transforming RMIT's public spaces and connecting the campus back to the city. This has been a most unusual commission. Who would have thought it

possible that one practice, one design hand, could have survived over that timeframe to oversee a project of that complexity? Urban-scale projects like this are a war of attrition; we have seen out five vice-chancellors and three complete changes of property services over that period. It is a testament to RMIT and a few tenacious guardian angels who saw it through.

By the 1980s the campus was a tired and disconnected place that students complained did not look or feel like a university. The core of the campus bounded by Swanston, Latrobe, Franklin and Russell Streets had become a degraded piece of urban fabric, dominated by cars and with almost no space or amenity for people. The campus was truly awful and in need of drastic change. In 1996 we were appointed architects/urban designers and the Urban Spaces Project was born, which lasted twenty years.

We had learnt from past experience how to edit urban fabric, through many small architectural interventions. At RMIT, buildings and spaces were selectively modified, cut away or added to and, in the process, stitched back into the larger whole. To give structure to this process of transformation we divided the campus into convenient sectors or places, each with its own identity and urban role. A way of designing public space is to give clarity to the vocabulary of urban elements that make up the city – the streets, lanes, forecourts, plazas, yards, courtyards, walls, terraces and gardens.

I hope I have made the case for a



Photography Paul Hermes

broad form of urban design practice that engages with the city. Someone recently introduced me as a “public space architect.” That term seems to aptly describe the transformational shift in practice from just designing buildings to encompassing the whole of the public realm. I feel privileged and proud to be an architect, particularly one working in the public realm. It has been an exhilarating journey.

— Peter Elliott is the founding principal of Peter Elliott Architecture and Urban Design and recipient of the 2017 Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal.



↑ RMIT University Alumni Court (RMIT University Urban Spaces project, 2003). Peter Elliott Architecture and Urban Design has been slowly transforming the university campus and connecting it back to the city for the past twenty years.

← In its design for the Parliament House Office Accommodation building (current), Peter Elliott Architecture and Urban Design has adopted a topographic approach, incorporating roof gardens and terraces.

Image courtesy Peter Elliott Architecture and Urban Design