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Glenn Murcutt in interview with Noel Brady

"The end of all our exploring will be to arrive at where we started and know the place for the first time." T.S. Eliot

In January 2003, Glenn Murcutt ran a Design Master Class with the students in the School of Architecture, DIT. Architecture, when published, appears to have arrived fully developed. We often forget about the inspiration, the craft, the development of ideas, even the education of the architect that has led to the "concretisation" of the idea. Assessing architecture from drawings or photographs leads to an interpretative discourse not with the primary material but with its shadow. This conversation with Glenn allows us to see behind the shadow to glimpse the seed at the heart of his work, and to understand that his own search will find him returning home again and again.

Noel: What are your sources of creativity? In your work I sense a search for stillness, such as that followed by Mies van der Rohe; architecture reduced to its essentials.

Glenn: I was required to be so highly disciplined within the family at one level and so free at another level, the contrast was very important, the time to imagine and the time to dream. My father taught us to be able to appreciate architecture, art, flora, food, materials, music through analysis, and sport to know what is good and what we liked about it. Rather than creativity we talked often about discovery and investigation. The enquiring mind is what matters most.

On one level I am totally chaotic. I am doing a thousand things at the same time, and because of the chaos of my mind, having to do so many things, my absolute fanatical search is for quietness and stillness. I would often leave the household, and just go into the landscape, into the Bush. All one could hear were the birds, the lapping of water at the harbour's edge and then the silence, it was absolutely fantastic.

What interests me is the structure; materials, proportion and dimension of space and the quality of light to layer systems and screening that adjust light and therefore contribute to the stillness. Barragan used colour, panel shutters, walls to bounce light and water landscapes to adjust light. So the essence of simplicity is providing a sufficient number of complimentary elements in spaces and structure that are not overtly evident, it is like the essence of a very good stock, it contains all of the flavours, and yet still be so distilled. I look to that essence as being very important, that which is structure, that which is skin, skin that can operate. Barragan said: "Any work of architecture that is designed without serenity in mind is a mistake, and when serenity contains joy it is ultimate".

Noel: The point of this stillness is almost a meditative point



Glenn Murcutt at DIT



Ball Eastaway House NSW

Glenn: It is a meditative point. It is order; order is an integral part of serenity, you see, I love the idea of order, the idea that maybe a door comes down to the very detail where it almost describes the idea of the place.

Noel: During your education as a young architect at the University of New South Wales, you mentioned Mies as an influence, what others were there?

Glenn: My father taught me about the logic of the obvious. If a roof gets hot, ventilate it; if a room gets hot, ventilate it. If there is glare, close it down. We are the instruments, we perceive what is happening, as an instrument if we perceive what is happening and respond appropriately. When my father took me out onto the hillsides of the Sydney Sandstone Landscape and showed me the water table, soil types, nutrients, wind patterns, light and why particular plants grew where, he was instructing me on the sense of place, instructing me on the logic of nature.

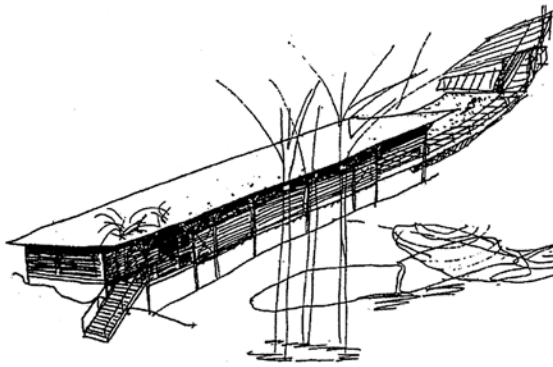
When I went to university I happened to get Noel Bazeley, the most fantastic extension of my father I have ever met. Under Bazeley, our first construction project was "continuity in nature – discuss". There could be no better construction knowledge than such a subject. Why does a blade of grass stand up? Why does bamboo stand up? How is bamboo constructed? We had to go the bamboo, examine its structure and then draw it, to properly understand the nature of structure.

The other influence was working with the other students, which was extremely important. I bought documents at university to extend my knowledge of Mies, Neutra, Craig Ellwood, Gordon Drake, and Frank Lloyd Wright who was incredibly important to us as students. Thoreau was extremely important, to me as a child, my father quoted Thoreau all the time: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, their resignation is confirmed desperation". So much of Thoreau's writing had such a strong basis although some would say it was slightly folksy. All those North Americans had so much to say at the time and what they had to say is as relevant today as it was then, if not more relevant today, because there is still a sense of desperation for most people.

Noel: Citing Wright, particularly Thoreau and now Emerson, places you very much in a particular context. They found themselves attempting to re-establish a sense of the wild in what was becoming a rapidly urbanised and civilised environment of America. Also the greatest influence on you has been the landscape and, your father being a joiner, the materials of that landscape.

Glenn: My father was also a very good boot maker; he started the Klinkii Pine Timber industry in New Guinea. He also discovered all sorts of systems, for alluvial gold mining and water filtration. Self-sufficiency was very important allowing for there to be enough left over for others. For my part, this way of working is good for me and I offer that; it may be or it may not be good for others; that's important. In education, I am always ready and eager to listen to another's position.

One can have knowledge and impart it or, through example present it. When I am teaching, I will sit down and draw with my students, I will always look at what they are doing and never impose what I am thinking. I am



Simpson Lee House NSW

interested in principles, the principles of light, the nature of materials, the idea of prospect, refuge, climate and movement.

When I was in the Greek islands I learned about the inevitability of movement and the unity of materials. In a sense you do not have to articulate every aspect of the solution to the client. There must be some surprises always for the architect and the client. I have always underestimated the result of my buildings, at the design stage. At times, my clients would like the design process to speed up. I will say it is in your interest that I will spend more time on it, it will not cost you any more. I rarely get a complaint after that.

The building is an instrument; there are all those forces, acting externally as well as internally that the building can connect to. I am very interested in making connections to all these forces, which tend to make architecture of response rather than imposition.

Noel: Some would say you are lucky to find wonderful clients, but it is because you allow the space in which they can become engaged in the project.

Glenn: You see the way I draw here, I draw this way also with my clients, and I communicate with my clients through drawings. In a sense you do not have to articulate every aspect of the solution to the client. There must be some surprises always for the architect and the client. I have always underestimated the result of my buildings, at the design stage. At times, my clients would like the design process to speed up. I will say it is in your interest that I will spend more time on it, it will not cost you any more. I rarely get a complaint after that.

Noel: You use the project as an exploration tool, a very strong iterative process, making something, revisiting it, examining it, replacing it rather than starting from *a priori* positions?

Glenn: In the most recent book by Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper they go through and show my process. In every project I start off trying to assume almost no knowledge of a past solution. I work with function diagrams and bubble diagrams and how spaces relate to one another; what are the logical relationships and proportions, and it will end up being incredibly regular. There is an ethic, which drives me, it will not allow me to do what I can't justify. Mies remains my conscience not necessarily my major influence.

One does not consciously design Norwegian Architecture or Australian Architecture. As it will most likely be naïve, a pastiche, a caricature. If an architecture is recognisably of a particular country then it comes out of other things, out of the body, through the body, through the blood, it just pours out, but not ever a conscious act.

Noel: While you don't seek promotion you place a lot of importance on documentation. What is the reason for that?

Glenn: Part of the teaching process is that one can explain through the work why one is doing it. A few people have written about my work. Maybe six or so people and each has visited the work and written about it. I do not hold a single original drawing of my work, all original drawings are held at the State Library of New South Wales pictures department. I have gifted every drawing since the beginning of my practice in 1969. I am a bowerbird. The drawings are totally unedited.

Noel: You are now being swept up into the Green Movement, and discussions about sustainability at the moment. How do you feel about been included in this new phase of thinking?

Glenn: When I received the "Green Pin" from Denmark, (for architecture and ecology), four years ago, I made the point that the ecological side of architecture

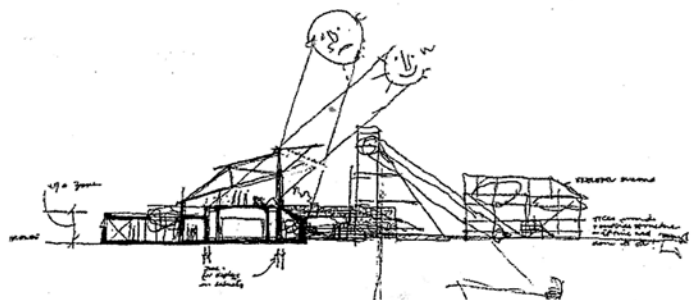
can only be a part of architecture. The environmental issues I have been working with as a matter of course are no more or less important than every other aspect of architecture.

Noel: You mentioned the importance earlier of having a place to dream, and how for instance dreamscape is very important to the aborigines, and even the painted landscape from which the aboriginal culture emerges, in the most fundamental way their ground.

Glenn: The aboriginal people have taught me so many things. We are so axial in our thinking; the symmetry in tradition is totally obvious. Aboriginal people never enter any space on axis they enter on edges and ends. It is a powerful experience for me to walk in aboriginal country. It was the main form of transport they had. I am interested in the change of scale, in the Australian landscape from the vastness of the landscape to the occupation of a cave, from entering a space along an edge, where it opens up into the landscape and withdraws back into the cave. If you look at the Simpson Lee house or the Kakadu National Park information centre, it is like an aboriginal cave and embodies similar principles of entry, edges and space.

What you will find in aboriginal painting, that is very interesting, is that there is no centre of interest. There is no beginning or end, but rather a continuum. In the Simpson Lee house there is no beginning or end, the path is part of the continuum. The access way is planned approximately on the path the aboriginal people once walked. What I have done is to bring the path inside and continue through the house to connect to the land beyond. The path changes its direction and changes the geometry back into the landscape. The aboriginal aspect has become a very important part for me. I feel close in relating to those aboriginal perceptions. *At the end of the path there is always the landscape, on leaving a space there is landscape.*

Glenn Murcutt's Master Class at DIT was made possible through the sponsorship of Henry J Lyons & Partners.



Minerals and Mining Museum, Broken Hill NSW

Noel Brady received a Diploma in Architecture from DIT (Bolton Street) before completing graduate studies at MIT (USA). He established NUBA Architects & Urban Designers in 1994 and has been the 4th year studio master at the School of Architecture DIT since 2000.