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Reconciliation: the Search for an Authentic Architecture

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reconciliation - the search for an
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GLENN MURCUTT AND JUHANI PALLASMAA IN CONVERSATION

Reconciliation – The Search for an Authentic Architecture

by Noel J Brady

"Creation is a patient search"
(Le Corbusier, 1960)

As the holder of the inaugural CRH Chair of Architecture at DIT, Professor Glenn Murcutt conducted a masterclass with 12 final year architecture students, which reached its penultimate critique just before Christmas 2006. The renowned Finnish architect, author and Professor of Architecture, Juhani Pallasmaa, joined Glenn for the review. This provided me with an opportunity to discuss the nature of contemporary architecture and to explore the basis for the masterclass – the Centre for Reconciliation at Glencree, Co. Wicklow – with them.

(Murcutt) The last thing that the Glencree Reconciliation Centre Project would be is 'branding'. The whole notion of globalisation where an architect from New York will build a building in this or that country, doing the same things where energy is pumped into the building, bludgeoning it as it were, is the antithesis of what I think. It is an issue about being in part global, understanding the relationship of place to the planet, to the whole. This studio has been conducting that idea of reconciliation as a process of human interaction; reconciliation with the landscape, with human waste, reconciliation with materiality, with their cost, the use of materials and the waste of materials. What is appropriate about their [the students'] materiality is entirely different to the materiality appropriate to the tropics of Northern Australia. The studio has been run so that the participants understand where they are.

(Pallasmaa) I previously wrote that architecture is the art of mediation and reconciliation without any reference to Glenn's project here. Reconciliation is the extended way of understanding the relationship between the human being and his/her life situation (the world). This is what architecture primarily mediates. I have been somewhat critical of the notion of Critical Regionalism. If understood in a shallow manner, it leads to another type of thematisation. I have also spoken about regionalism of the mind, which is the attitude that aims at authenticity of any kind, authenticity of the historical, authenticity of human relations and experiences; a position of resistance to the phenomena we are witnessing in the economic world, where capital is global and does not pay any attention to local economic conditions it just aims at maximum profit.

(Murcutt) A dynamo, an uncontrollable dynamo.

(Pallasmaa) The current star architecture is a direct reflection of this.

(Murcutt) Authentic seems old fashioned, I use the word and using it, one is almost of another time.

(Brady) Within the post modern critique there was a move towards the authentic. Your own work and that of architects like Utzon and Ando have been aligned with Critical Regionalism, an architecture that doesn't preclude progression, while being resistant to the loss of culture. It shows that you can be forward looking about your culture and be continuously fresh and relevant.

(Murcutt) It is relevant if it embodies the authentic; when it is authentic you know it has roots.

(Pallasmaa) When it is emancipated, when it is not being manipulated in terms other than itself, this is one quality of architecture we both support, it emancipates the individual. It liberates and respects the individual and his/her perceptions and feelings. So much architecture today imposes certain readings, symbolisms and emotions.

(Brady) This is due in a large way to the predominant visual mediation rather than the body or the haptic senses.

(Pallasmaa) Mostly so, it is also branding. You can hardly brand any sense other than vision. This tells me that perhaps the other senses are more deeply rooted.

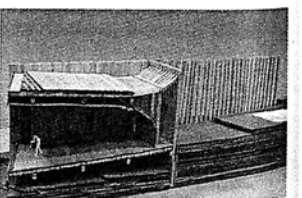
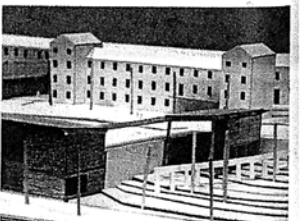
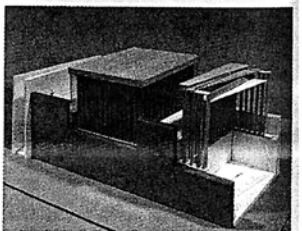
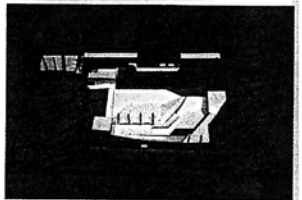
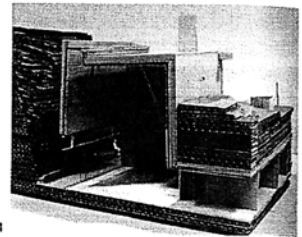
(Murcutt) We talk about globalisation as being a relatively modern phenomenon but the fact is that I live in Australia, and that Australia and the Americas are occupied by Europeans means that globalisation started a long time ago. It has taken 200 years for us in Australia to become part of the land. We were totally foreign in the land because we did not embed our roots in the land. We painted Eucalyptus trees like European trees. The beginning of roots is an understanding of the authentic.

"Surely a man needs a closed place wherein he may strike root and, like the seed, become." [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Wisdom of the Sands*, 1950]

(Brady) The use of drawing, the method by which the idea draws out the relationships, similar to how an artist works, appears fundamental to your search for the authentic. I am also struck by the exacting correlation of the drawing to the built work, especially in the work of Gunter Behnisch and more especially your work (Glenn).

(Murcutt) When Kenneth Frampton came to Australia to write the new book on my work (due for publication in Dec 2007) the thing that struck him more than anything was that the drawings looked exactly like my buildings

(Pallasmaa) Borges and many other writers and artists have said that over time all artists work on their self portrait. Borges says it more poetically of course. There is a unity to things which I think is absolute. So choosing the method of working we choose the means of our expression?

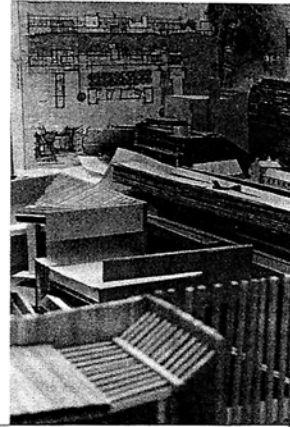




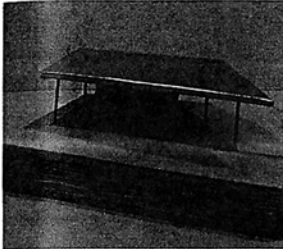
Glenn Murkutt



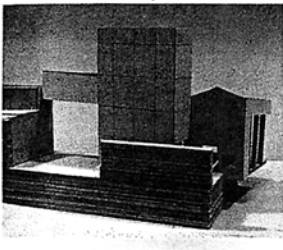
Juhani Pallasmaa



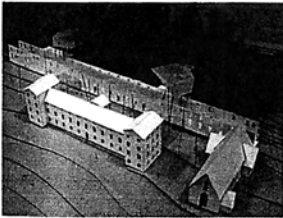
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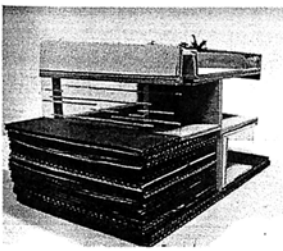
(Murcutt) The indigenous people of the Pacific, when moving from one area to another (moving into another person's land), must first of all enter the chief's domain to 'show your face', showing what is inside, your intent, your spirit, your being. When shown, it is understood and then permission is given to use 'my house as your house, my land as your land'.



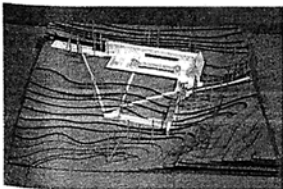
(Brady) We could contrast that with the current architectural propensity of image over content, a tendency towards camouflage. It reminds me of the development of camouflage in the early 20th century to produce 'dazzle ships' to obscure reality. Architecture has become a 5-mm rain screen obscuring the reality of the activity. Added to which we seem to live in a period in which time no longer matters, that the image has condensed the fabric of space and time to that of a single veneer. However, your work is overtly real, it says 'look at me, I am explicitly doing this work'. It also remains inherently fresh no matter how many times you return to it.



(Murcutt) Architecture requires time, like slow cooking. Slow architecture is slow to understand, to consider all the factors that go into making architecture takes a long time. I have found, the more experience I have, the more time it takes.



(Pallasmaa) I fully agree with that, and often when I am dealing with students I talk about the virtues of uncertainty, because education normally has the goal of absolute certainty. Creativity is uncertainty and also modesty, those attitudes go together. Uncertainty for instance means that you cannot use precedent even your own; it means you have to reinvent the window every time.



(Murcutt) Every time, and it becomes a discovery (a search). The creative aspect of our work is the way we approach discovery, the method by which we discover; that is entirely different to creating. The self becomes the discoverer, the search to find, that is the creative process, we are not creating anything we are discovering that which can exist or that which already exists, which has always had the potential to be discovered, to find the key to all those things is to make architecture whose basis is authentic. It has roots, it belongs. I don't mean to say that it is just local but it can be global in a sense, but it is of place. Some people have told me "you are producing some of the first expressions of Australian architecture". If one sets out to produce an Australian architecture, all one would achieve is pastiche. Architecture comes out of other factors that are not even conscious, it must come out of the blood, the mind and the spirit, and if it develops that way it is authentic.

(Murcutt) That's exactly what I think. For instance I do not let the students draw pictures of what the building looks like. Instead I want more sections, plan sections and understandings of what the processes are. There was not one elevation done for the Arthur & Yvonne Boyd Art Centre until we completed the sections and plans. Because we understood the systems and the thinking about how these things were connecting all of a sudden the building emerges. One could massage parts of the building a bit I guess but there was hardly any massaging done at all. It is like writing a composition, for music. The builder is the conductor the trades are all the people that put those things together, the building is drawing the elements of the landscape, allowing the receiver to experience all that the building addresses, the ventilation, the cool, the light, the warmth, and it can be made to work, to do these things. This is not fancy stuff. A building should perform; it has its tones, its ecotones, for example how it relates to place, how it manipulates light and ventilation at its edges. These are all parts of the skin, like we have on our bodies. The body has many of these systems of tones and ecotones (the forehead, eyebrows, eyelids and eyelashes are there to shade and protect the eyes). I think that a building should incorporate similar systems. Then when we put our buildings together in this way of thinking, they begin to sing; it is a matter of perception and observation and pulling all these elements around us is a tool.

(Pallasmaa) In the preface to Glenn's recent book, I have an introduction to tools. I don't think there was ever a tool maker that tried to make a beautiful tool.

Towards the end of the conversation, I suggested to Glenn that in the house at Kangaroo Valley there is a feeling of correspondence between building and use, like that of Hugo Häring's infamous Cowshed. While not explicitly similar to his houses, the works appear to function much as a tool to unlock the reality that surrounds us.

The objective of an authentic architecture may not be the search for beauty. Instead by making a tool that fits to our shape form and our lives, architecture may reveal as that which we inherently know; the beauty of the earth.

"The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building"
[Louis Kahn in *Between Silence and Light*, John Lobell 1979]

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(Pallasmaa) When you set about trying to make a beautiful house or beautiful anything it ends up being kitsch. Beauty derives from some discipline and some other concerns.

12 Glenn Murkutt masterclass