LIVING THE MODERN
AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE
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Modernism in Tasmania: Identity, Ground, and the Cosmopolitan

Richard Blythe

This essay explores themes of nature, economy, and humanism in a discussion of Tasmanian architecture of the second half of the twentieth century as they relate to the work and philosophy of my own practice, Terroir. This is a selective history of modernism in Tasmanian domestic architecture since 1950, presented through a discussion of influential houses and critical positions.

The only book documenting the history of Tasmanian architecture in the twentieth century is Barry McNeill and Leigh Woolley's *Architecture from the Edge*. It is, according to the authors, a coffee-table book, but one that nonetheless offers an insight into the philosophical position of the authors, who figure among Tasmania's more prominent contemporary architects. The name of the book encapsulates a modernist problematic of center and periphery. The text offers praise for those architects who have "applied international ideas in a regional setting," who demonstrate what is described as "creative thinking from the edge of the world," as if this location of Tasmanian architecture at the periphery qualified the possibility of direct engagement with the center (other than by the application of ideas received from it)—a center whose location remains undisclosed. The location of this territory (Tasmania) as peripheral is coupled with an interest in style to the extent that projects are credited with possessing an Australian style. In addition to this book, both Woolley and McNeill have produced fine buildings, but their work and views have provided a counterpoint for my own practice, Terroir. We have sought other ways to engage in an international architectural dialogue and other ways of understanding the ground of our territory. The romantic desire to establish a territorial identity for Tasmanian architecture is fundamentally informed by the rhetoric that developed around the politically inspired naming of the Tasmanian wilderness as captured in key photographic images by Peter Dombrovskis. This was a politically motivated enterprise that began during the debate following the damming of Lake Pedder and the successful campaign to prevent a subsequent hydro-electric dam from being constructed across the Gordon River below its junction with the Franklin. During this debate which raged throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a debate that inspired street rallies as far away as Piccadilly in London, concern for a Tasmanian identity rooted in the landscape reached fever-pitch. The three founding directors of Terroir grew up in this cultural-political climate, in which it was mandatory to have an opinion on landscape. The approach we have taken is to understand these kinds of nature images as constructions. We have sought to unravel or draw out such constructions in order to understand the multiple qualities of contexts. The impossibility of the essentialist thinking at work in the wilderness image—that is, the idea that the place itself contained within it some distinguishing essence holding the seed of territorial identity—poses an interesting question about the nature of ground in a cosmopolitan world. Terroir has looked to Tasmanian architects who offered models aligned with this approach.
The most notable Tasmanian domestic buildings of the 1950s and 1960s were the expressive steel and glass houses of Esmond Dorney, a World War II veteran who began his architectural career working with Walter Burley and Marion Mahoney Griffin in Melbourne. Dorney’s own Park Beach House (1957) was, like most houses designed by him, an expressive light-weight steel structure, assembled in a manner akin to the modular systems of Bailey bridge construction, an approach to construction he experienced firsthand during the war. The mimetic roof forms of Dorney’s houses echo the patterns of the scalloped bays of Derwent River and the folded silhouette of mountains and hills that contain it, seen, for example, in his Churchill Avenue Butterfly House. An affinity with Griffin’s architectural thinking, and in particular the fascination with the Australian landscape, is evident in this mimesis. It is the mimetic quality of these dramatic steel and glass houses that separates his work from the structural expressiveness of the Melbourne school as typified by the Peter McIntyre house built on the banks of the Yarra River, which was concerned more with the aesthetic properties of suspension and cantilever than with its landscape context. Although essentially simple, Dorney’s mimetic approach, in which the greater landscape affects to some extent the object, is germane to Terroir’s understanding of site as an extended field of affective possibility.

Despite Terroir’s concerns with its primary thesis, McNeill and Woolley’s book is a recent example of a long-standing architectural interest that the local profession has held outside the narrow pursuit of making buildings. This critical interest was previously evident in the journal *Tasmanian Architect*, established in the late 1950s and published regularly until 1968. In its most innovative moment, the journal published articles that included both an architect’s explanation and a critical response from a colleague as well as drawings and images. Later manifestations of the journal also included a right of reply for the architect, resulting in some direct exchanges. For example, in response to a critical piece by Barry McNeill, Brian Walch accuses McNeill of falling into an “extreme category of the practical attitude,” stating that he “has failed to prove his claim” that the architecture was formalist and that formalism was “dangerous” and led to “mutilation and perversion” in the sense that the order of the house did not appear to coincide with a solution to the functional problems of a house that were clear, apparently, to the critic. If this wasn’t going far enough, the journal also allowed the client a right of reply, and in this case the client was equally unimpressed with the pragmatic assessment offered. Putting aside the relative merits of these arguments, the fact that these critics and architects supported the publication of critical comment, even when it was directed at them, is a testament to their willingness to engage in architecture as a critical activity.

The less impressive of these articles, however, amount to little more than description and a listing of the pragmatic considerations of the brief, the inference being that from these practical forces somehow the architectural outcome was inevitable—a pragmatic fallacy, at play in the work of Tasmanian modernism at this time. Despite the commendable intentions, this was architectural criticism in a vacuum, disconnected from precedent or exemplar, as if Tasmanian architecture were isolated and independent without reference point, or influence, as if the pragmatic problems of economy as it relates to budget, and economy as it relates to function, site, and brief, had been the sole focus of the designer’s deliberations in the
production of a pure original: a peripheral condition in which the center remains concealed. This vacuum at the center of an otherwise critical endeavor is idiosyncratic of the way in which many modernist Australian architects practiced—by the adaptation of architectural innovation that took place elsewhere. Good design was presented in terms of technical and practical cleverness and remained isolated from critical discourse. There were attempts to ground criticism in a wider discourse, however. For example, an article by Dutch immigrant Dirk Bolt written in response to final-year student work at the local school of architecture clarifies the functionalist intent in modernism by extensively quoting the Dutch architect Johannes Duiker in his 1932 critique of Hendrick Petrus Berlage's 1903 Exchange Building in Amsterdam. Bolt defines functionalism as a search for economy achieved through a minimizing of means and in the sense that economy can be understood as a cosmic law and leads to higher levels of “spiritualization.” Leaving aside the problematic of such an argument, this was nonetheless an attempt to place what was happening locally in a wider disciplinary context. These comments by Bolt, who produced some of Tasmania’s best architecture during the 1960s, are indicative of an economy apparent in Tasmanian architecture, which has both historical precedent and contemporary exponents and was perhaps the underlying basis to McNeill’s theory of a regionalist synthetic pragmatics. The employment of restraint and minimal means is to be found in the island state’s Colonial and Victorian architecture, and is evident also in the elegant structural economy of Twenty First Century pavilion houses designed by Craig Rosevear the first of which appeared in the 1990s.

The practice Heffernan Nation, Rees and Viney founded in 1973 have been an important influence for Terroir. They provided alternate models of productive rather than essentialist relations of people and nature couched in cosmopolitan rather than regionalist terms. In 1981 its founders sponsored the international architectural journal U.I.A International Architect. Next to their names in the list of sponsors are James Stirling, Philip Johnson, Kenneth Frampton, Rem Koolhas, Norman Foster, Michael Graves, and Richard Meier. HNRY looked to a range of international precedents including the east coast of the United States and produced a series of houses and small buildings in the 1970s that took Tasmanian architecture in new directions.

The most straightforward importation was evident in a pair of houses on Sandy Bay Road by Bob Nation inspired largely by the work of Richard Meier, an imported approach applied with some skill. Viney went further than a literal translation however, in a series of houses constructed during the 1970s and 1980s as for example in his own house (designed 1975, completed 1977) perched on the slopes of a Hobart hillside. Viney explored the power of the small architectural object in a vast landscape, drawing on Nigel Pennick’s thesis of geometric relations. He used the Corbusian notion of promenade in conjunction with a particular orientation of floor slabs and walls, and the careful placement of openings to achieve architecturally what he described as “soaring.” Viney’s “soaring” was inspired by the way
Greek temples are placed on hill sides and by contemporary Japanese interests in podium based structures. Viney observed that even in a ruinous state, a temple platform in the landscape created a palpable spatial experience of projection out into the space beyond and simultaneous contraction of the vast space of the valley into a tiny architectural one.\(^{(3)}\) Viney arrived at this approach having worked through an interest in the vernacular.

Viney’s work stands out because of his ability to take on a cosmopolitan view, to be concerned with the particularity of place, of the relation between a subject and the landscape beyond the immediate site, while resisting the sentimentality of a regionalist approach. Viney’s own house demonstrated the potential of an idea as the ordering principle for an architectural project. This primacy of the idea and the bringing into relation of body, architecture, and world has been influential in the work of Terroir; we seek to produce a place-specific architecture that avoids the sentimentality of regionalism and that begins to address the question of ground in a cosmopolitan condition. This question of the way in which place takes shape through the productive engagement of human action and site seems to us more compelling than the question of regional identity.

1 Other promising young architects currently practicing in Tasmania that are not covered in this essay include: Room 11, 1+2 Architects and Poppy Taylor.
5 This concept is the subject of the forthcoming book Terroir: Cosmopolitan Ground to be released in 2007 by DAR Documents Sydney. It includes chapters by Richard Blythe, Gerard Reinmuth and Scott Balnforth, and philosophers Jeff Malpas and Marcelo Stamm.
10 Dirk Bolt, “Re-Discovery—a comment on student work”, Tasmanian Architect, April 1962, p. 27.
11 For example, the domestic architectures of John Lee Archer and Henry Hunter respectively.
12 The practice was founded by Ray Hefferman, Robert Nation, Bevan Rees and Michael Viney.
14 There have been conflicting dates published for this house. The dates given here have been confirmed with Mike Viney.