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NOVEMBER 2010

ARCHITECTURAL

STEEL INNOVATION

WITH BLUESCOPE STEEL

# STEEL PROFILE

HEFFERNAN BUTTON VOSS ARCHITECTS  
TRANSEND PRIMARY STORE

IN PROFILE:  
HAMISH LYON

ROOM11  
ALLENS RIVULET HOUSE

# CULTURAL CANOPY

An aerial photograph showing a city street intersection. A modern, angular canopy structure made of dark metal frames is installed at the corner. The street has white zebra crossings and several cars are visible. Buildings line the streets, and trees are scattered throughout the scene.

ABOVE: The junction of Hickson Road and George Street forms the triangulated site

LEFT: The patterned canopy structure creates complex rhythms of light and shade on the plaza and footpath below

**ARCHITECT** Terroir

**PROJECT** 88 George Street Canopy

**LOCATION** The Rocks (Bushell's Place),  
New South Wales

Bushell's Place in Sydney's Rocks area is a tiny but prominent corner site. For years its potential as a public space remained unfulfilled. Architect Terroir has now reinvented it with a steel and glass canopy of remarkable delicacy.

Words Paul McGillick Photography Brett Boardman; Paul Bradshaw

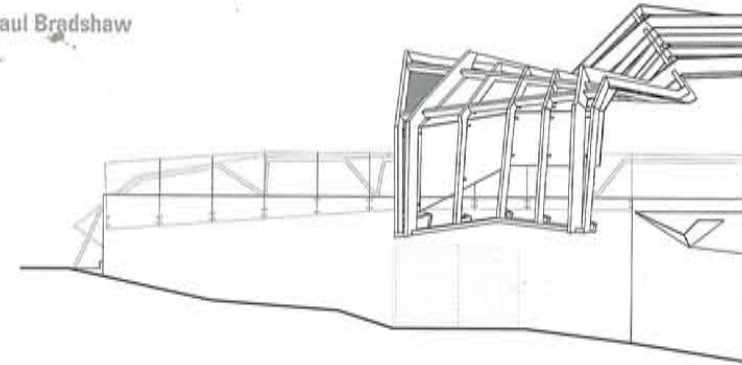
It is hard to imagine today that Sydney's Rocks precinct – originally carved from a narrow sandstone ridge, now in the shadow of the Sydney Harbour Bridge – was threatened with wholesale demolition in the early 1970s. It was famously saved by the Green Bans – bans on demolition imposed by the building workers' union – which not only preserved this microcosm of Sydney's early colonial heritage, but which also helped drive national and state-based heritage legislation passed in 1975-77.

Of course, one of the inconvenient ironies of this now long-established sensitivity to our built heritage is that it has imposed considerable constraints on all forms of new building, good or bad, and the vital and on-going program to reconcile our past with our present. In architectural terms, it strongly inhibits a local understanding of how contemporary forms and materials can complement our architectural history. Indeed, for some, any form of contemporary intervention into historical sites is seen as sacrilege.

But this conservationist bias can also be seen as an opportunity, so long as there is a predisposition to at least explore how new forays can be made into the existing historical fabric and conceivably enhance it. As Terroir design director Gerard Reinmuth comments regarding his firm's re-invention of Bushell's Place: "The Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority had a particular interest in sustainability and an innovative design approach – not a heritage pastiche type of thing, but actually trying to do something modern and fresh down there."

Modern European precedents show that the most fruitful resolution of this conflict between the old and the new starts with acknowledging the difference rather than denying it by resorting to facadism, and sentimental mimicry. The most generative solutions come from a bold contrast between the past and the present. In perceptual matters, understanding and insight spring from the process of reconciling two apparently contrasting things.

The Rocks is a concentrated urban precinct of early colonial buildings. But it is not just the building forms which are important. Just as important are the materials from which these buildings were made. Like all colonial architecture in Australia, the built environment was made from local materials,

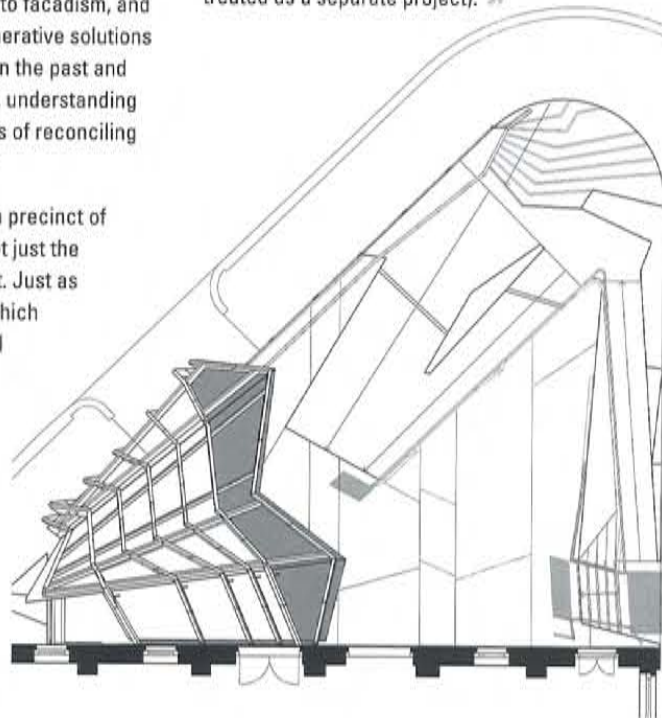


EAST ELEVATION

and it is this material character – and the way the precinct has been carved out of sandstone – which helps make The Rocks so distinctive.

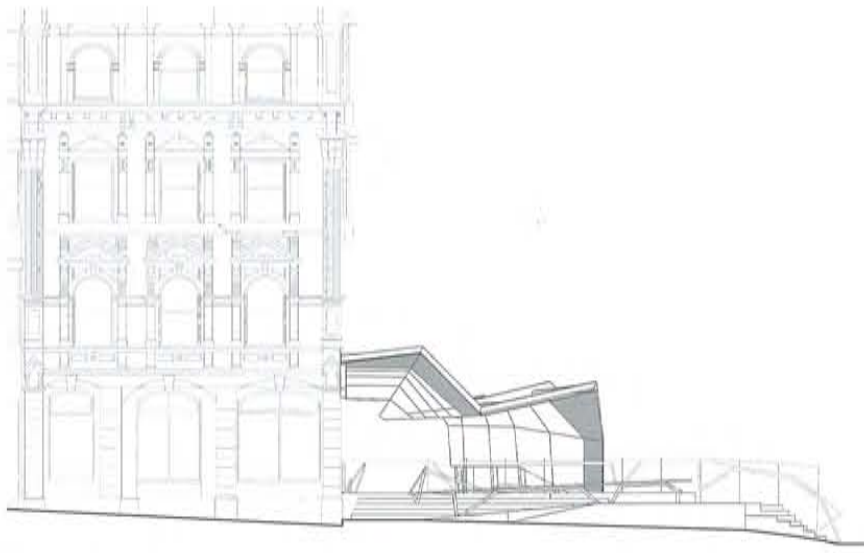
It follows that any new contribution, if it is to preserve this sense of place, needs to acknowledge the elements which have created it. This can't be done by imitating those features, because we live in a different age (hand-cutting sandstone blocks, for example, is clearly uneconomic today). Rather, that sense of place and complementarity is achieved by understanding the underlying process. As the late Harry Seidler said: "It is not a matter of style, but of attitude."

Sydney-based architectural practice Terroir had worked for Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (SHFA) previously on The Rocks Centre. In 2005, the SHFA invited Terroir to lodge an Expression of Interest for the make-over of Bushell's Place, which occupies a crucial site at the forked intersection of George Street and Hickson Road. Here the existing small plaza in front of a café had not resolved the sharp change in street level, resulting in an isolated and uninviting space which worked neither for the café nor as a genuine public domain. The brief was to create a sheltered public space, as well as refurbishing the adjacent heritage building (which Terroir effectively treated as a separate project).



SITE PLAN

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SOUTH ELEVATION SHOWING HERITAGE BUILDING

MIDDLE LEFT: The canopy connects seamlessly to the heritage building to provide protection for the café while framing the view out to the Harbour

MIDDLE RIGHT: The steel structure "clamps" on to the building and the concrete podium

BOTTOM LEFT: The classic industrial character of the Harbour Bridge is echoed by the extruded steel structure

BOTTOM RIGHT: The Hickson Road elevation forms a vertical sculptural element to complement the sculptural concrete podium





The angular patterned RHS canopy structure responds to the pitched roof lines typical of the Rocks area

Terroir saw the solution as a marriage of two elements: the “carved” sculptural concrete base which forms the public area, and a steel and glass canopy which, in the words of Reinmuth, is “clamped on” to provide shelter from wind and rain, to cover about half the space. At the same time, this solution is also a marriage of the functional and the aesthetic which, for Terroir, is about “making people ask questions and engaging with their environment”.

This particular engagement is with the character of The Rocks and with a variety of connections: immediate connectivity with the streetscape and a wider empathy offered by the stunning sightlines back down George Street to Circular Quay and the city on the south, and across the Harbour to Kirribilli on the north. But the character of The Rocks is not just about sandstone. It is equally about the Harbour Bridge, an industrial steel (and sandstone) sculpture which grows out of area, to link the city with the North Shore.

At the ground plane, Terroir has created a sculptural plaza whose forms echo the dynamics of the immediate streetscape. The sculpted forms – animated by a rhythmic composition of galvanised steel handrails, grabrails and bike stands – both draw people up to the café area and provide informal street-side seating.

But above this intimate plaza is a folded, lightweight steel and glass canopy. Using PFCs, RHSs and flat steel plate, the architects have designed an expressive, complex shelter from rain, wind and sun. Asked why the canopy should be made from steel

and not any other material, project architect Tamara Donnellan responded that: “to get the form we were looking at, there was no other material from which we could have created the base structure”.

“The canopy,” says Gerard Reinmuth, “was very much driven out of the idea of the pitched roof lines that are typical down in The Rocks. But it is also a reflection of the area’s industrial heritage.”

So, if the use of steel was essential for the functionality of the canopy, it was just as essential in achieving the aesthetic aims of the architects. The steel frame is not just a reference to the industrial past of The Rocks, but is a material and visual link to the nearby Sydney Harbour Bridge, even being adorned in the International Paints bridge paint system to give it the same patina.

Hence, in its formal devices and its aesthetic gestures, Terroir’s sheltered plaza at Bushell’s Place is integrated into the cultural and material fabric of The Rocks. Ultimately, however, its success derives from its perfect sense of scale. While its character is assertive and distinctive, it is not domineering. It is native to its place as much because of its scale, as anything else.

The delicacy of this contemporary insertion into a heritage precinct owes a lot to the way the structural steel elements are used to create a lightweight form which preserves the necessary transparency. Likewise, the restrained use of steel plate fulfils the functional need to provide shelter, while still contributing to a beautifully resolved and coherent aesthetic expression. *SP*

## PANEL SAYS

This is a brilliant example of urban acupuncture: where the sculptural possibilities of structural steel provide a magnificent contrast with the solidity of the surrounding buildings. The new canopy makes a bold contemporary statement in a largely historical context. We particularly like the way the structural steel connects with the facade without puncturing it, and the almost frivolous form it takes as it cascades away from the host structure. Although the brief – which called for a canopy to provide shelter for café patrons and to enliven the public space – had the potential to generate “heritage-pastiche”, this project exhibits enormous integrity, and the visible strength of the steel plays a key role in transmitting the architects’ intentions.

**PROJECT** 88 George Street Canopy **CLIENT** Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority **ARCHITECT** Terroir **PROJECT TEAM** Gerard Reinmuth, Richard Blythe, Scott Balmforth, Tamara Donnellan, Sarah Benton, Robert Beson, Nic Fabrizio, Justin Hanlon, Matthew Skirving, Moritz von Stuenzner, Emma Trask **CONSULTANT TEAM** Structural Engineer: Simpson Design Associates; Mechanical Engineer: Steensen Varming; Hydraulic Engineer: Warren Smith & Partners; Heritage: Design 5 **QUANTITY SURVEYOR** Chris Bylatt & Associates **ELECTRICAL ENGINEER** Steensen Varming **LIGHTING** Steensen Varming **ACOUSTIC** Acoustic Studio **ORIGINAL ARCHITECT** UP TO DA Architectural Projects **CONSTRUCTION TEAM** Builder: Hooker Cockram; Project Manager: Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority **PRINCIPAL STEEL COMPONENTS** PFC, RHS and flat steel plate, galvanised steel tubing **COMPLETION DATE** March 2009 **GROSS FLOOR AREA** 214m<sup>2</sup>