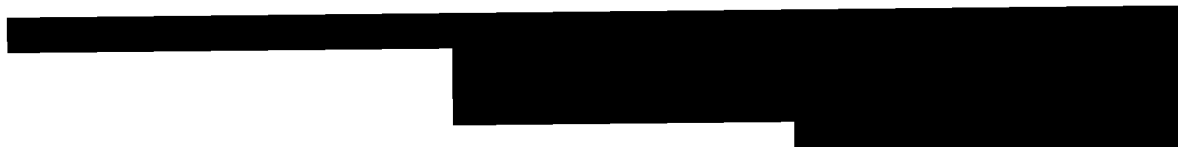


# VERS UNE IDENTITÉ



**ERIC TRILLO-FOX**



After Australian federation in 1901, it was deemed necessary to found a new city to house the new national government, a Capital which would become a symbol of identity to all Australians, and therefore, it was up to them to choose the site and name:

Those who have lived through the battle of the sites must have given a wry smile at the suggestion of Sydmebane, and there were a number of similar confections, the most euphonious of which was probably Sydmeperadbrisho. Wheatwoolgold, Kangaremu and Eucalypta headed a list of Australian animals, vegetables and minerals. [...] Anglophiles and classical scholars had put up Cromwell, Gladstone, Disraeli, Maxurba and Victoria Deferenda Defender.<sup>1</sup>

This is just one example of the struggle that Australians have had to define their identity. After all, which is «*more Australian*», Kangaremu or Sydmebane?

Architecture, as a reflection of society's demands and anxieties, has not been impervious to this struggle. In the world arena of modern architecture, Australia occupies a

<sup>1</sup> Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, p. 170-72

Glenn Murcutt, Marie Short House, Kempsey, 1975

fringe position, closely attuned to and affected by developments elsewhere yet sufficiently remote to retain an identifiable regional attitude.

In 1987, Ian Mc Dougall described the architectural trends in Australia as follows:

In August this year a group of architects and one student was brought to Canberra to judge the BHP sponsored RAA Student Biennale. [...] The general impression given was that while state differences were clear, three distinct theoretical, and therefore aesthetic, positions could be detected in the students' work which transcended state borders.

First, there remains a group of students, imbued with the «rural» mythology of this country. Masquerading as the one true «genius loci» of our nation, this myth of buildings in the bush, of the shed as a temple, continues to serve as placebo to the seduced.

As could be expected, the contemporary international architectural scene has provided a second group of students with prototypes to plunder. While not particularly experimental in their borrowings, projects which illustrated a knowledge of either the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank or Leon Krier's city were evidence of attempts to at least see our experience of urban life as part of international urban experience.

But more pertinent here was the emergence of a third national group of students who were apparently sharing an approach which some Biennale judges labelled as the 'dogs breakfast'. This petit dejeuner is immediately recognisable by its new Expressionist forms, and also by its broad use of collage. Characteristically no project is based on one simple (read profound) idea. They are textured, multifarious, opaque, murky.<sup>2</sup>

As Australian society and the political panorama have evolved—from a conservative loyalty to the monarchy to an increasingly Republican sentiment—architects have adopted different attitudes in the search for a distinctive Australian architecture which, not

surprisingly, reflect the three theoretical and aesthetic positions which Ian Mc Dougall found in the students' work. More interesting still is the fact that these theoretical positions seem to be a constant in Australian society; they may even be seen to be present in the search for a name for the new capital city:

- The *Cromwell* type. Described by Mc Dougall as «not particularly experimental in their borrowings».
- The *Kangaremu* type. Vernacular: «imbued with the rural mythology of this country», as described previously.
- The *Sydmeperadbrisho* type. We can clearly see Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Hobart melted into a new name. Described by Ian Mc Dougall as «immediately recognisable by its broad use of collage».

This article is an extract of «Vers une identite»<sup>3</sup>. It analyses the two most interesting of the aforementioned theoretical positions in relation to the search for an Australian character in architecture: *Kangaremu* and *Sydmeperadbrisho*.

<sup>2</sup> McDougall, I., *Form, fact, function*, Transition, Sept 1987, p. 60

<sup>3</sup> Trillo Fox, Eric. Oxford Brookes University, 1998

## KANGAREMU

[...] there remains a group of students, imbued with the «rural» mythology of this country. Masquerading as the one true «genius loci» of our nation, this myth of buildings in the bush, of the shed as a temple, continues to serve as placebo to the seduced.

Ian Mc Dougall. (RAIA Student Biennale)

## GLENN MURCUTT

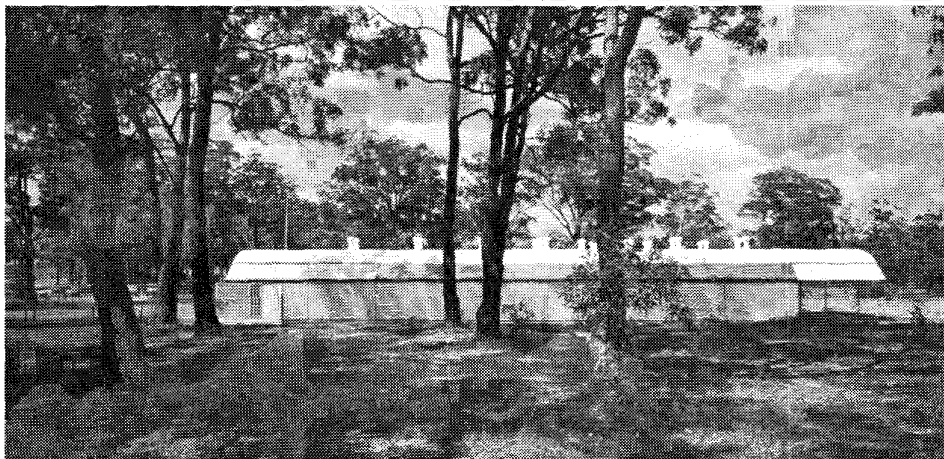
«Australians will have to make friends with Australian nature, not in their terms and in accordance with European rules but out of a deep and abiding reverence for what they find, and in conformity with the genius of the locality. No outside culture can supply Australians with the forms that are demanded ready for use. Australians alone, and drawing on their wealth of their common pool of experience will need to interpret the land and create their own forms [...]. This is the lesson of Glenn Murcutt's architecture. Such an architecture must be invented out of local causes. It cannot be acquired by a process of mimesis from somewhere else. To fail to recognise this fact is to condemn Australian architecture to remain a derivative phenomenon forever dependent on outside stimuli and themes».<sup>4</sup>

This is Phillip Drew's appeal to Australian architects to look to the land for inspiration in order to find an Australian character in their architecture. He sets Glenn Murcutt as an example for them all to follow, for Drew<sup>5</sup> claims Murcutt is the first architect who has been successful in achieving this aim, as his words about the Local History Museum at Kempsey show:

«The museum is the first truly Australian building. Time must be the judge of that. What is undeniable is that the building owes little or nothing to overseas fashion and represents the culmination of a line of development that began back in 1974 or 1975, and which moved forward gradually, with very little deviation from its goal, towards the achievement of a new form of a consciously endemic Australian architecture».

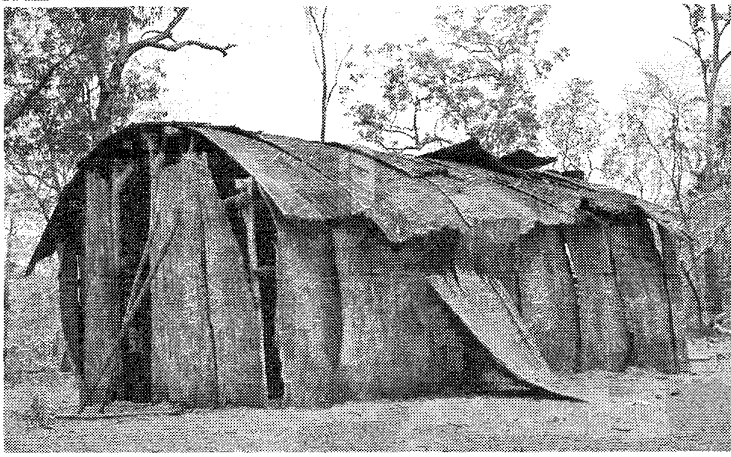
In the previous chapter entitled *Cromwell* we have seen how the work of many architects like Cox, Jackson and Seidler fails to have a distinct Australian character because of their faith in overseas precedents and design philosophies. One would assume that a so-called *truly Australian building* is so because it owes nothing to overseas tradition —that is what Phillip Drew's words suggest. Is this true? What is Murcutt's position in relation to the acceptance of overseas precedents?

Glenn Murcutt, Local History Museum and Tourist Information Centre, South Kempsey, 1987



<sup>4</sup> Drew, P., *Leaves of Iron*. Law book Co., 1985, p. 49

<sup>5</sup> Drew, P., *Ibid.*, p. 115



Aboriginal shelter in the Outstation of Maningrida, Northern Territory

E. M. Farrelly<sup>6</sup> has the answer: «Like those he admires, Murcutt is a Modernist —devout, disciplined, moralistic».

So, if he believes and follows the lessons taught by Modernism, what makes his work different from that of Seidler, for example?

The answer is to be found in the ideas of Sigfried Giedeon and Kenneth Frampton's regionalism<sup>7</sup>. Both preached that recognition of place and regional tuning are the inevitable criteria of the modern ideal. In Murcutt's visit to Spain in 1973, Josep Coderch<sup>8</sup> showed him how it was possible to be original while simultaneously contributing to the development of a regional character in architecture. Of Coderch's works, he wrote they «...were beautiful, of excellence, and very Spanish».<sup>9</sup>

Glenn Murcutt's architecture can also be described as very *Australian*. Phillip Drew<sup>10</sup> explains the reason for this Australianess: «Glenn Murcutt, far from rejecting Modernism gave it a vernacular accent which he took care to harmonise with the quality of Australian places».

At this point, I think it is very important to explain the characteristics of Australian vernacular architecture, because it is the affinity with these forms what leads Phillip Drew to talk about a *vernacular accent* in Murcutt's works.

Firstly, it is very important to differentiate between Aboriginal vernacular and that of the first settlers:

Being mostly hunters and gatherers, the aborigines did not want permanent architecture; their shelters were few and elemental, and almost none survive.<sup>11</sup> In 1688 William Dampier, the buccaneer-author, described what he saw: «The inhabitants of this country [...] have no houses, but lie in the open air without any covering, the earth being their bed, and the heaven their canopy».<sup>12</sup>

Glenn Murcutt has not been influenced by aboriginality,<sup>13</sup> neither in form nor in «touching the land lightly» —Phillip Drew claims Murcutt's buildings' respect for the landscape has its origins in an Aboriginal saying that claims: «One must touch-this-earth-lightly».<sup>14</sup> He could have not be influenced by such tradition because he admits that until 1987 he «thought there was no Aboriginal architecture».<sup>15</sup> The affinity between his forms and those of Aboriginal architecture is explained by F. Fromont:<sup>16</sup>

«Murcutt believes that any resemblance between the form of their bark huts and his own buildings is explained by a similar sensitivity to the same territory, not by deliberate imitation on his part».

It is clear, then, that the *vernacular accent* in Murcutt's architecture can only be referred to that of the first settlers. These forms, as described previously,<sup>17</sup> are characterised by lightweight portable structures, widespread use of corrugated iron, verandahs, water tanks, windmills, etc.

It is undeniable that all of these forms and characteristics are present in Murcutt's architecture, but to say he uses them to give a *vernacular accent* to his work is an unfair understatement. As F. Fromont<sup>18</sup> explains, all of these forms have a very rational reason to be there, and he doesn't use them only for aesthetic purposes:

«Murcutt strongly rejects, however, any suggestions that he is nostalgically reviving old rural images. [...] His identification with Australian traditions is perhaps best described as 'analogous inspiration': applying the same logic that produced the farm buildings, he introduced a similar pragmatism into domestic architecture, inevitably affecting the reappearance of particular forms».

<sup>6</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *Three Houses. Glenn Murcutt*, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996

<sup>7</sup> Jahn, G., «An Australian accent», *Perspectives on Architecture*, Nov 1994

<sup>8-9</sup> Drew, P., *Leaves of Iron*, Law book Co., 1985, p. 42

<sup>10</sup> Drew, P., *Ibid.*, p. 44

<sup>11-12</sup> Irving, R., *The History & design of the Australian house*. Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 33

<sup>13</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *op. cit.*, 1996

<sup>14</sup> Drew, P., «Touch-this-earth-lightly», *Architectural Review*, October 1988

<sup>15</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *op. cit.* 1996

<sup>16</sup> Fromont, F., *Glenn Murcutt. Works and projects*, Thames and Hudson, 1995, p. 25

<sup>17</sup> See Introduction, 2

<sup>18</sup> Fromont, F., *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 27

Having understood this point, we can proceed to analyse Glenn Murcutt's architecture and see that indeed, his forms are not pure nostalgia, but a direct response to the land and environmental forces such as climate and availability of materials.<sup>19</sup> F. Fromont<sup>20</sup> describes Murcutt's farmhouses:

«Modifiable and extendable, his pavilions on stilts can be demounted and removed without leaving a trace or causing any irremediable destruction to the environment».

This can be understood as an affinity with the so called portable houses of the first settlers, where demountability, portability and ease of reerection were described as «highly prized qualities» by G. Herbert.<sup>21</sup>

The reason for this is that, due to the remoteness of the sites where Murcutt's farmhouses are built,<sup>22</sup> they *really* are designed to meet these requirements: the construction process becomes part of the design so that all components can be designed and produced elsewhere, and just assembled in the site.

F. Fromont<sup>23</sup> describes how the design of the Marie Short House is determined in a great measure by the restrictions caused by the remoteness of the site:

«Because of its distance from Sydney, Murcutt was only able to make site visits every three weeks. He was thus restricted to use simple details and techniques familiar to local firms that were accustomed to building farms and cottages. Materials needed to be locally available [...]»

The use of corrugated iron for his buildings is a very clear example to explain Murcutt's affinity with the vernacular: corrugated iron is one of the most characteristic features of rural vernacular architecture, and it is so because it was one of the little available materials. It was used extensively in Australia because of its light weight, strength, and ease of transport.<sup>24</sup> By using rough materials such as corrugated iron, he is not consciously reviving an old image, but just making the most of the few materials available. This is what F. Fromont describes as «analogous inspiration»,<sup>25</sup> i. e. he responds to the same problem in a similar way, thus reaching a similar solution.

This «analogous inspiration» also explains some of the affinities of Glenn Murcutt's houses with the rural vernacular architecture which Phillip Drew highlights:<sup>26</sup>

«The corrugated iron roof and the water tank at the back of the house are the most conspicuous features of Australian vernacular building. [...]

The idea for a contraction tower was first proposed for the Reid house in 1975. It is a very Australian concept related to the Southern Cross windmills which were used extensively on farms to pump water to stock. [...]»<sup>27</sup>

Glen Murcutt, Nicholas Farmhouse, Mt Irvine, 1980



<sup>19</sup> Irving, R., *op.cit.*, 1985, p. 33

<sup>20</sup> Fromont, F., *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 50

<sup>21</sup> See Introduction, 2

<sup>22</sup> Fromont, F., *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 62

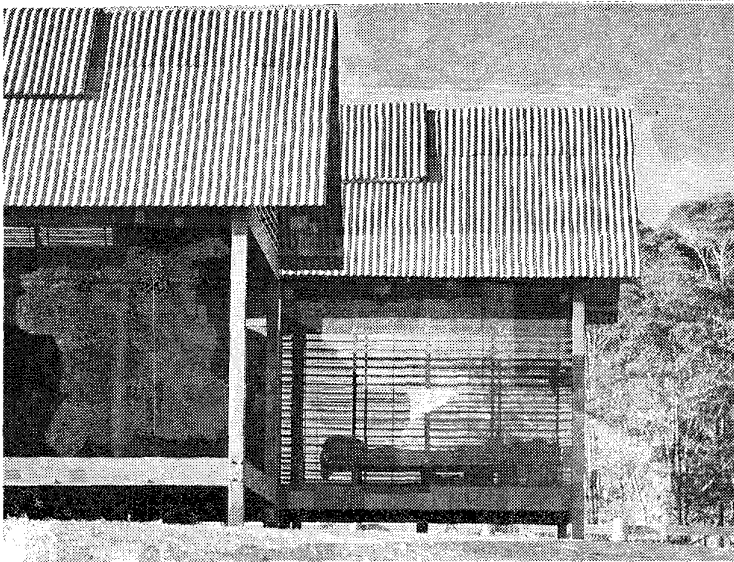
<sup>23</sup> Fromont, F., *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 62

<sup>24</sup> Drew, P., *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 13

<sup>25</sup> Fromont, F., *op. cit.*, 1995, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Drew, P., *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 75

<sup>27</sup> Drew, P., *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 78



Glen Murcutt, Marie Short House, Kempsey, 1975

Again, I do not believe Glenn Murcutt's idea of locating water tanks at the back of the houses was a strategy to relate his buildings to the vernacular. It is a response to a necessity: it seems only logical to make the best use of the little rain water available in such a dry climate; especially when, due to the remoteness of the site, water supply can be difficult. The same applies to energy: some of these houses have to be self-sufficient, and therefore it seems logical to try and make the best of available technology to solve this problem:

«The contraption tower for the Reid house, which was never built, was intended to support the solar panels fixed on the diagonal steel braces, along with a hot water unit on the top, lighting conductor and arc light for the swimming pool. This is a beautiful example of vernacular architecture, where something as characteristic from farmhouses as a wind-mill is transformed to adapt to modern technology but still related to the original purpose: energy self sufficiency».<sup>28</sup>

The point is clear: it is this «analogous inspiration», I shall call it «analogous response», what leads Glenn Murcutt to use these forms so characteristic of the Australian vernacular.

Sometimes, though, Murcutt has deliberately incorporated features of the vernacular buildings to his architecture. For example, the ventilation flaps between windows and walls in the Magney house, are derived from the little pivoting wooden shutters used

to expel hot air from greenhouses.<sup>29</sup> This analogy is due to the fact that Murcutt sees the vernacular buildings as a source of knowledge: because the woolshed was geared to production, its architecture is calculated to operate efficiently.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Murcutt can learn from it.

It is important to emphasise, once more, on the fact that he does not use these forms for aesthetic reasons, but because they offer him the solution to solve a practical problem. It is for this reason that Farrelly, describes Murcutt's architecture as «functionalist».<sup>31</sup> I believe it can best be described as «responsive», for every detail is the response to a design intention which not always follows a function —although it does in most of the times.

The clearest example to illustrate my point is the appearance of the helical seam around the downpipe of the Museum at Kempsey. Glenn Murcutt explains the reason for this detail:

«The water does not drop straight down the pipe, it swirls around the walls of the pipe on its way down so the joint on the outside suggests the movement of the water. The motions of the water has (sic) a sound all of its own, you do not get a crashing noise as the water falls, what you get instead is a trickling sound as the water circles around the inside wall of the pipe. I put in the downpipe guards as a way of saying, "look, that is something precious, and I wish to attach a certain importance to it"».<sup>32</sup>

This romantic gesture can be compared to Gaudi's chimneys for the Casa Mila in Barcelona, where the gentle twist at the top evokes the swirling motion of smoke when rising. Neither of these gestures can be described as functionalist —they are not shaped by their function. But they can be described as «responsive», for they both fulfil the architects intentions of communicating their feelings towards the poetics of the movement of water and smoke.

The French engineer and mathematician Gaspard Gustave de Coriolis,<sup>33</sup> in 1835, described the laws of mechanics in a rotating reference frame. He established that, given a series of conditions of equilibrium, water would go down the pipe in a different direction in the Northern hemisphere (clockwise) from that of the Southern hemisphere (Counter-clock wise).

<sup>28</sup> Drew, P., *op cit.*, 1985, p. 78

<sup>29</sup> Fromont, F., *op cit.*, 1995, p. 26

<sup>30</sup> Fromont, F., *op cit.*, 1995, p. 28

<sup>31</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *op cit.*, 1996

<sup>32</sup> Drew, P., *op cit.*, 1985, p. 71

<sup>33</sup> file:///D:/Download/coriolis\_force\_tyson\_debunking.html

Misled by Phillip Drew<sup>34</sup> when he described Murcutt's work as a «new form of a consciously endemic Australian architecture». I understood that the direction of the seam is consciously counter-clock wise in order to add an antipodean character to the detail. I still like the idea, but I now think that the direction is simply a result of the fabrication process, specially because Murcutt himself insists on the fact that he is not consciously trying to add an Australian character to his work:

«If by any chance people think my work is Australian' he says, 'so be it, but I am not setting out to do it».<sup>35</sup>

These words seem to have no sobering effects on Phillip Drew, who continues to see a romantic idea of the Bush in things that respond to a very specific need, such as the sprinklers in the Ball-Eastway house

«In some ways, the sprinkler installation is even more significant symbolically than it is in terms of the physical protection of the dwelling. [...] Fire maintains the landscape and was used by aborigines to control the land. So the architect who seeks to come to terms with Australian nature, will need to accept fire, not as an enemy, but as a creator factor acting on the landscape, and, by extension, on his buildings».<sup>36</sup>

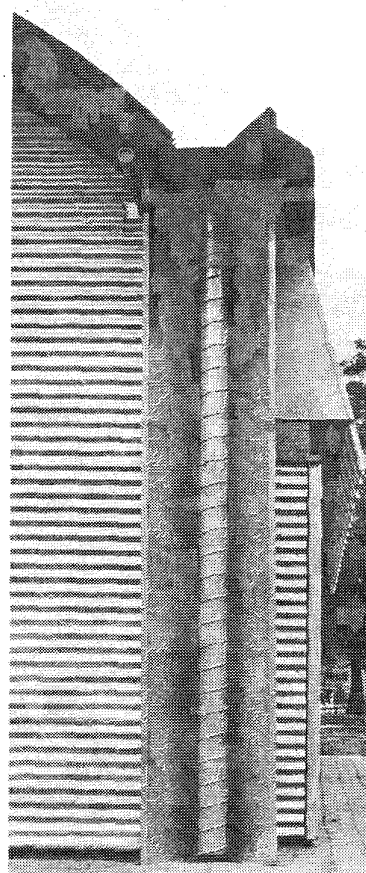
It is undeniable that fire is part of the reality of the bush, but that reality cannot be seen as anything else but an enemy, especially when we consider that in January 1993 alone, one hundred homes were destroyed by bush fires in New South Wales.<sup>37</sup> The sprinklers are not there to strengthen the ties with the fire, but to protect the owners and the house from it. F. Farrell<sup>38</sup> describes how the whole design responds to the need of protection against fire:

«The house is in a fire zone, so wood is used sparingly and finished with retardant paint. [...] What mostly happens in a bush fire is that burning gum leaves catches (sic) in the gutter and burns up into the roof; the curved roof was cheap and spatially pleasant, but crucially gives no lodging place for leaves, while the gutters, too, seemingly oversized for a parched climate, are in fact a direct response. During a fire, these broad, tapering dishes, are filled by the sprinkler system: in normal times their tapering sides and the funnel-headed downpipes are designed to use the centrifugal flow of water to solve

the notorious tendency of eucalypt leaves to clog any available opening».

The Ball-Eastway house is shaped almost entirely by function—even the opacity of the building is due to the fact that the inside is used to exhibit paintings—, resulting in a building which is not, «by any stretch of the imagination, a primitive hut».<sup>39</sup> In fact, if we had to relate it to any architectural precedents, more than any aboriginal dwelling, I think Archigram's «walking city» is a very suitable one.

Glenn Murcutt, Local History Museum,  
South Kempsey, 1987



<sup>34</sup> Drew, P., *op cit.*, 1985, p. 115

<sup>35</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *op cit.*, 1996

<sup>36</sup> Drew, P., *op cit.*, 1985, p. 126

<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, December 3 1997.

<sup>38</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *op cit.*, 1996

<sup>39</sup> Farrelly, E. M., *op cit.*, 1996





Glen Murcutt, Ball Eastway House and Studio, Glenorie, Sidney, 1983

Although they both seem to belong to the same alien world, the similarities are not purely esthetical: Archigram's walking city takes us back to the previously mentioned idea of the «portable house».

Airstream caravans are one of the best embodiments of Archigram's «walking city» idea, so it should not surprise us to find many similarities with Glenn Murcutt's buildings:

The outer skin in both cases is made of metallic sheets. Although slightly different—smooth for the caravans, and corrugated in Glenn Murcutt's houses—the choice of the material is due to the same reasons: light weight, resistance, durability, and the possibility to bend it and shape it into forms unachievable with other materials. Round shapes and aerodynamics are not only important for airstream caravans, for Murcutt's rounded roof shapes are in response to specific needs such as resistance to fire and burning leaves, (Ball-Eastway house), or wind, as F. Fromont<sup>40</sup> explains when describing the Nicholas House:

«The roof is curved on one side to deflect prevailing winds, which run along the slope».

Glen Murcutt, Nicholas House, Mt Irvine, 1977



Another obvious similarity is the need for independence and self-sufficiency, which is expressed in a very similar way: two metallic cylinders at the back. These are the storage devices which contain water in one case and gas in the other.

Unfortunately, the similarities do not end here:

The interiors of airstream caravans seem to renounce to the modernity of the exterior. As if technology and comfort were incompatible, all the rounded shapes and smooth metal of the envelope are abandoned to produce a classic «cosy» interior with sharp edges and wooden furniture.<sup>41</sup>

Glenn Murcutt's houses suffer a similar fate: the lightness of the exterior is left aside in favour of a heavy timber-lined interior. All the sincerity of every detail in the outer skin is betrayed by segregating it from the interior with a layer of wood. Phillip Drew<sup>42</sup> describes this characteristic in Murcutt's houses:

<sup>40</sup> Fromont, F., *op cit.*, 1995, p. 70

<sup>41</sup> Dr. Allan J. Brookes, «Portable architecture», lecture of the series *Connections*, at The Oxford School of Architecture, 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Drew, P., *op cit.*, p. 85

«The delicacy and warmth of the timber lined interior stands in marked contrast to the primitive, even tough, appearance of the outside of the pavilions. There are two different characters, one for the inside, relating to people and another for the outside which responds to the landscape».

The timber-lined interiors of Glenn Murcutt's farmhouses are clearly opposed to the principle of «Less is more» which he claims to adhere to wholeheartedly.<sup>43</sup> The reason for this contradiction is because his architecture does not follow any principles blindly, but, as explained previously, is shaped by a stimuli-response attitude towards design. The Australian character in his architecture is the result of this: it is the response to a stimuli which comes from the land, and therefore one can see it reflected in his buildings. As he himself explains, his architecture «...has attempted to convey something of the discrete character of elements in the Australian landscape» to offer his «interpretation in built form».<sup>44</sup>

Glen Murcutt, Marie Short House, interior view, Kempsey, 1975



<sup>43</sup> Fromont, F., *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 19

<sup>44</sup> Drew, P., *op. cit.*, 1985, foreword

## SYDMELPERADBRISHO

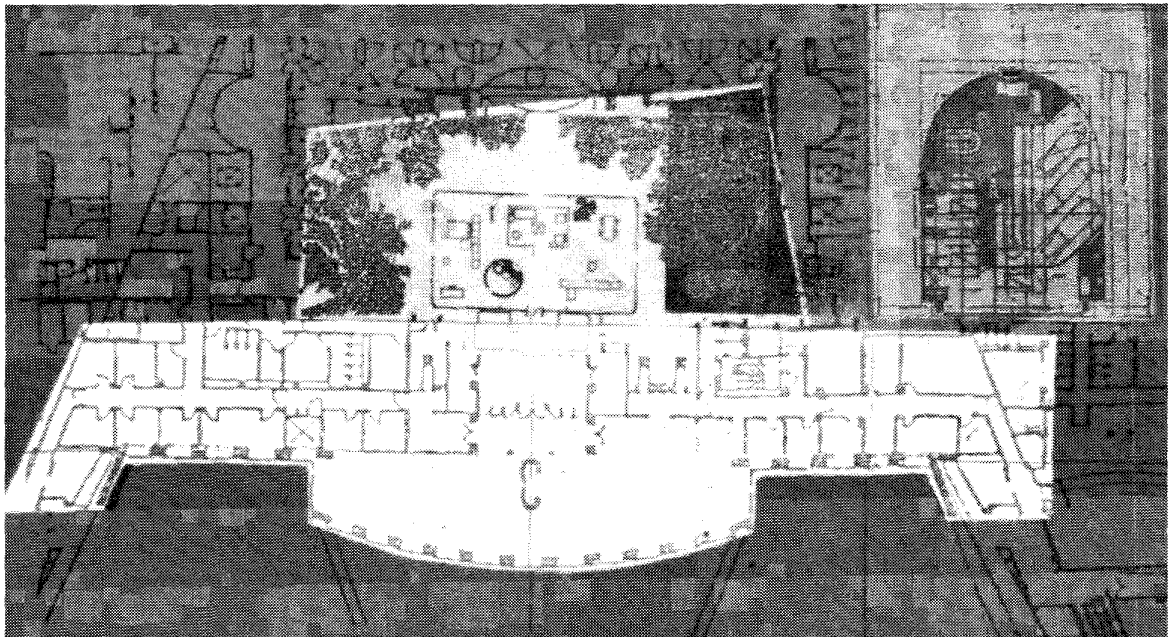
«This petit dejeuner is immediately recognisable by its new Expressionist forms, and also by its broad use of collage. Characteristically no project is based on one simple (read profound) idea. They are textured, multifarious, opaque, murky».

Ian Mc Dougall. (RAIA Student Biennale)

## ASHTON, RAGGAT AND MC DOUGALL (ARM)

*Ashton, Raggatt and Mc Dougall create a building for an institution (RMIT) which in championing working class education, and alternative views of Melbourne and the globe, has sited itself in opposition to Melbourne University, located further up Swanston Street; an institution which, for much of its history, has operated as a provincial Trinity College, Dublin, catering to an aspiring bunyip (sic)' ascendancy. (In colonial cultures, such as Melbourne, old world representations of power continue to be given currency by insecure cultural elites.)<sup>2</sup>*

ACER, Conceptual Plan Collage



<sup>1</sup> As described by Martyn Hook, a bunyip is «a mythical creature which is rumoured to exist in the Australian bush or your own backyard. ie bigfoot, abominable snowman, yeti etc it is generally considered friendly but stupid!»

<sup>2</sup> Fox, P., «At night», *Transition*, # 52-53, 1996, p. 22

In this statement, Paul Fox is opposing Ashton, Raggatt and Mc Dougall's view of «*Melbourne and the Globe*» to that of the «*insecure cultural elites*» which still find overseas tradition a source of inspiration. He makes this point clear when saying: «Ashton, Raggatt and Mc Dougall's ideology is not to faithfully copy the overseas original but to engage with it critically».<sup>3</sup>

This statement is the starting point to a discourse about the position of Australian architects in relation to overseas architectural precedents. ARM's architecture is a series of experiments on this theme, as H. Raggatt<sup>4</sup> explains:

«So instead of bemoaning as Robert Hughes has done the great Australian Cringe (sic) and the thousands whose unwonted humility perpetuated the cultural imperialism of the Centre (sic), it is this Cringe itself which becomes for us a strategy and an operation of design.

So now, we in the Fringe can be free from invention and able to pursue the benefits of *Distance*. Not the distance of Kenneth Frampton's Regionalism but something which provides a special kind of critical space. Not just a safe distance from the Centre from which to explore our own peculiarities or struggle for identity but instead a distance from which to watch and a dark space in which to engage free of the burden of invention».

Ashton, Raggatt and Mc Dougall's work can be read in these terms as a continuous process, in which every project is a step further in the search for an architecture free from pre-conceptions, characterised by a «complete disregard for an architectural aesthetic that may be held as normative throughout the profession, or for any single pre-determined aesthetic»,<sup>5</sup> as G. London describes it. A process which has a very clear starting point but which, due to its experimental nature, has no clear paths and is open to any new directions which might emerge as a result of their investigations.<sup>6</sup>

Harry Seidler talked about the «cleansing procedure» which the Modern Movement meant in the architecture of the beginning of the century.<sup>7</sup> In a way, ARM's architecture is similar in that they are erasing all overseas philosophical or aesthetic influence from their work. *Tabula rasa*. Only then, free from all these foreign influences, can they attempt to find an Australian character in their architecture:

«The aim is to pull down whatever symbolises —stands for— the old and usually repressive order, the order which one wishes to replace with a new and better one. One removes the visible vestiges of the past. To pull down the images of a rejected order or an authoritarian and hated one is to wipe the slate clean and inaugurate the promise of utopia».<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Fox, P., «At night», *Transition*, # 52-53, 1996, p. 22

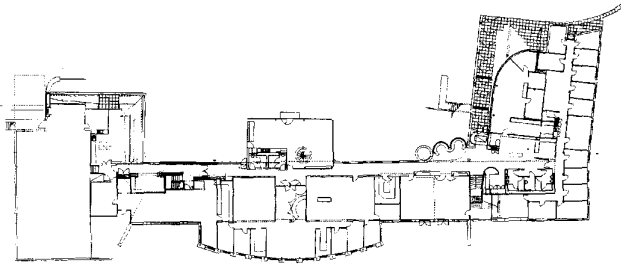
<sup>4</sup> Raggatt, H., «NOTNESS: operations and strategies for the Fringe», Faculty of Environmental design and Construction, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, *Fin de siècle? and the twenty-first century ARCHITECTURES OF MELBOURNE*, RMIT, 1993

<sup>5</sup> London, G., «Ashton Raggatt and Mc Dougall: are they serious or flip?», *Architecture Australia*, March-April 1993, 57

<sup>6</sup> London, G., *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See *Cromwell*, 5

<sup>8</sup> Freedber, D., *The power of images*, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 390



ACER, Ground floor plan

This is D. Freedberg's<sup>9</sup> description of what he calls «*political iconoclasm*», to which he adds: «This form of iconoclasm is one of the oldest as well as the newest: it is found in Egypt and Byzantium [...], but also in all those countries which wish to shuffle off the imperialist yoke or cast it off more vigorously: as in the Philippines in 1986, etc.»

As I will explain in the following section, I believe ARM's early works «*Villa Savoye et al*» and «*Not Vanna Venturi House, etcetera*» are the latest manifestation of this form of iconoclasm, because in these projects, it is their aim to discredit two of the most respected icons of the Modern Movement in order to «wipe the slate clean and inaugurate the promise of utopia».

«*Villa Savoye et al*» is the name Ashton, Raggatt and Mc Dougall (ARM) have given to their design of offices for the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). As H. Raggatt<sup>10</sup> explains, «Et al because the project aims to test by close proximity the presence of four icons of architecture including Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, Aldo Rossi's Modena Cemetery, Philip Johnson's own Glass House and Romaldo Giurgola's new Australian Parliament House».

Under the cover of a «scientific study», (a test by proximity), ARM find the means to criticise the way other architects have «borrowed» overseas precedents without questioning their ideological value. It is for this reason that their plan drawing is nothing but the addition of each one of those icons without any critical experimentation. This project is not just informed by these precedents, but it is these

precedents, one beside the other, as in a collage.

Looking carefully at their plan drawing, one can see there is a purposeful misreading of the precedents, as H. Raggatt<sup>11</sup> explains:

«For ACER the whole of the open space behind the Great Verandah of Parliament House has been filled in as office [...]. In this case, the result is to abandon the hope of direct entry via the one time grand loggia and verandah. [...] The entry is permanently displaced to the 'back door' as the open loggia is bricked up».

Everything which seems to be important for the Original is blatantly violated: in Phillip Johnson's Glass house, the purity of the perimeter is corrupted by placing some toilet units in the corner, and then pressing the whole house into the adjacent building—none of Johnson's intentions remain. Villa Savoye suffers a similar fate: the beautiful proportions of the rectangular plan are blurred when attached to the main body; its perfect symmetry becomes purposeful asymmetry; and then, the most irreverent of all: the awkward angle at which it is joined to the main body is a blatant mockery of Le Corbusier's rational orthogonality.

All of this purposeful misquoting and misreading is a sharp critique of the attitude of architects who borrow overseas precedents in a passive way, who by not being critical nor analytical, may miss all of the intentions in the Original—their architecture becoming meaningless and purposeless references to overseas icons.

The most interesting thing in «*Not Villa Savoye et al*» is the fact that ARM, by misreading all of these icons of Modern Architecture, are actually caricaturing them. They are irreverent and rude to them, in an attempt to take all ideological value away from them. H. Raggatt<sup>12</sup> is aware of this, and he describes Villa Savoye as «completely shrouded in black shadow and wounded by a shot near the heart».

In this attempt to discredit the Modern Movement, ARM have followed Voltaire's<sup>13</sup> advice:

«Fanatics want to be feared and accept being hated, but hate to be the subject of mockery. They dislike more the one who mocks them with a joke that everybody will repeat smilingly, than he who refutes them with twenty volumes».

<sup>9</sup> Freedberg, D., *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 390

<sup>10</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993

<sup>11</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993

<sup>12</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993

<sup>13</sup> Savater, F., *El jardín de las dudas*, Barcelona: Planeta, 1997, p. 111

Indeed, Ashton Raggatt and Mc Dougall have wounded «the grand lady of them all»,<sup>14</sup> as Raggatt describes Villa Savoye, just as Marcel Duchamp did with «La Gioconda»: a caricature, an irreverent gesture, to prove that it is not untouchable.

ARM's project for the Howard Kronborg Medical Clinic (also known as «Not Vanna Venturi House, etcetera») is what I consider another iconoclastic attack on one of the Modern Movement's untouchables. But as H. Raggatt<sup>15</sup> explains, this attack is of a different nature from that on «Villa Savoye et al»:

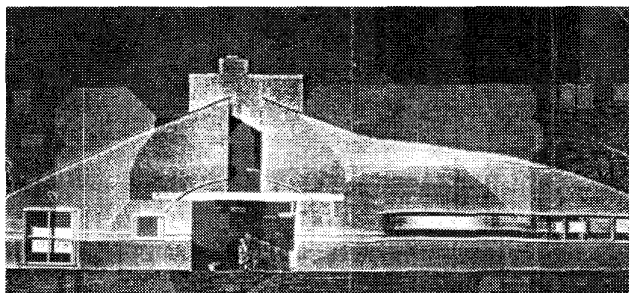
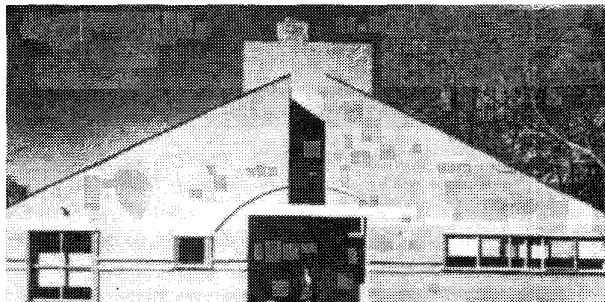
«Meanwhile in Not Vanna Venturi House, etcetera the temptation to operate directly upon the original was not resisted as it was under the Not Villa Savoye, et al strategies.

Instead, splicings, slippings, scannings and pixelatings are developed not so much as a test by proximity and resultant mongrelism but instead a test of pedigree, perhaps a test of disbelief, being not completely convinced, from this distance, especially in the face of other evidence, and many other latencies».

Howard Raggatt<sup>16</sup> explains the process which has been followed in this project:

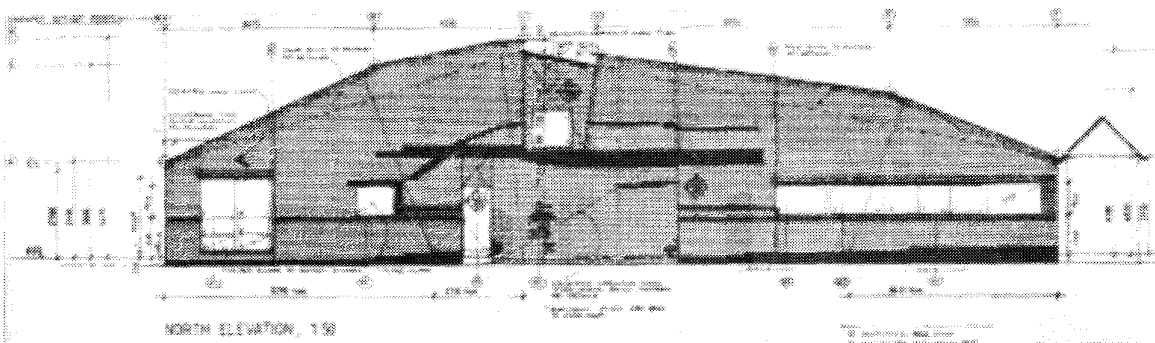
«For this project a primitive slide top photocopier has been used with the book bound illustration restricted by hand against the moving glass. The output becoming thereby manually stretched (I say manually to distinguish it from digital stretches)».

Robert Venturi, Vanna Venturi House, 1962



ARM, Not Vanna Venturi House, manual stretch

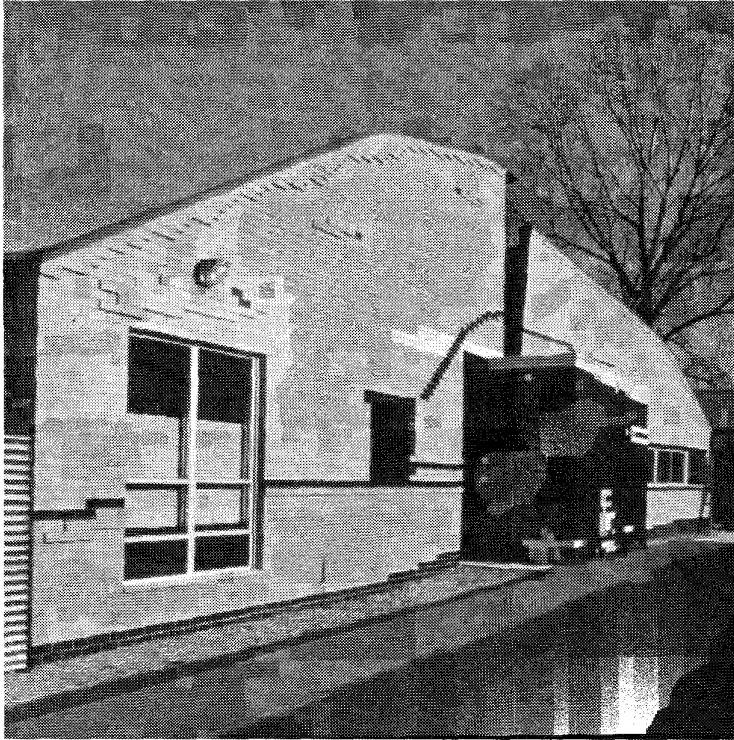
ARM, Not Vanna Venturi House. nord elevation



<sup>14</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.* 1993

<sup>15</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993

<sup>16</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993



ARM, Not Vanna Venturi House. Howard Kronborg Medical Clinic, Footscray, 1993

The next step in the process was to scan the image into a computer and pixelate it. Thanks to the fact that the size of the pixel can be determined by the user, they can easily be set to have the dimensions of a brick, so the pixelated image turns into an perfect elevation of the new facade. This process, as in all of their projects, is a very simple one:

«Their design strategies are not secret unspeakable processes shrouded in artistic mystery but operations that can be examined and discussed. This is a deliberately original method, which itself can be understood and copied and which aims to make knowledge available».<sup>17</sup>

As the images of the *Howard Kronborg Medical Clinic* show, the project is, once more, a caricature of the Original; another blatant attack to one of the *untouchables*.

In their experimenting with the photocopier, they come across some images such as the ones shown on the previous page, of which Howard Raggatt<sup>18</sup> writes:

«The rolling-in of the front of the facade at the cleavage of the original pediment is equally reminiscent, evocative of the Staals', Kropholer, Kramer et al Housing where the closely cropped thatch corroborates the texture and form of our reproduction. Frampton refers to this work as 'organic to the point of being literally biological', but our reproduction seems to contest the root of such analogous description».

Not content with mocking the Modern Movement, they make fun of their most famous chronicler: the book which was thought of *indispensable* in every architectural library turns out to be a fraud!

<sup>17</sup> Markham, M., «Originality», *Transition* #47, p. 36

<sup>18</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.* 1993

Phillip Drew is also the subject of their scorn because he sees an Australian character in every detail of Murcutt's long houses:

«Instead the plan is metamorphosed into a long house type in which the ends instead of the front and back facades become dominant.

This emphasis seems to exercise a peculiarly Australian motif according to the analysis of some». <sup>19</sup>

According to Freedberg, <sup>20</sup> «Iconoclasm is never any more than the removal of the symbols of a hated order», so in those terms, we can agree that ARM's early works can be described as iconoclastic: with these two projects, ARM have shaken off their backs half a century of architectural development, (as H. Seidler describes the Modern Movement <sup>21</sup>), and are now free to pursue a new architecture free from the burden of any overseas tradition.

Howard Raggatt <sup>22</sup> explains the design process followed in their project «A house for a Superman»:

«This project begins as a strategy for the precise definition of the blurred. To this end, our first operation toward defining Grey areas was to generate a digital semblance of the original Fastplan by means of scanning.

Such digitising quantises the greys exactly into a binary integer somewhere between 000000000 and 111111111. This enables Grey to be judged precisely as the original terms of the opposition black and white.

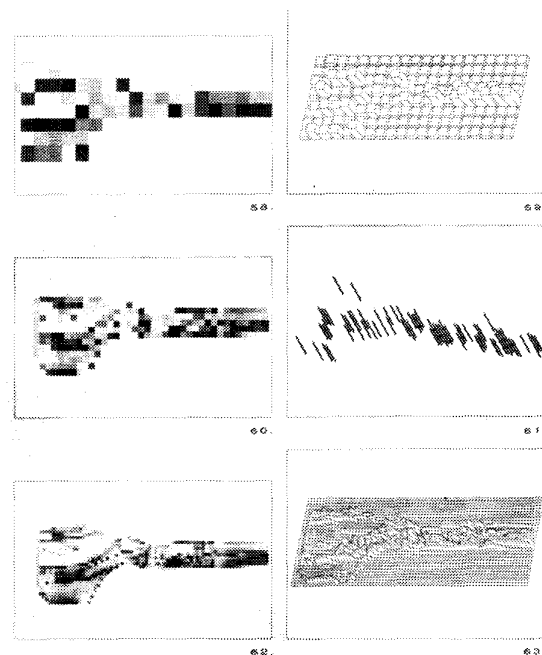
By investigating the same Fastplan at various degrees of resolve the project begins to test recognition and interpretation.

The base level of the house is a built pixelation, a stepped grid of an as yet unrecognisable averaging of its original, a step towards recognition.

Next we increased the degree of resolution. Now where a number in the grid exceeded a particular value a nail like column was inserted.

Then, at the threshold of recognition, points defined the shape of an elaborately distorted skin structure, its undulations generated by a partial *smoothing* of a three dimensional grid. This structure becomes the ceiling. These operations were bounded by a glass prism the scale of which corresponds to a large house but could just as easily be a new city».

ARM, Generation Process for «A house for Superman»



<sup>19</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993

<sup>20</sup> Freedber, D., *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 390

<sup>21</sup> Mendini, A., 'Colloquio con Harry Seidler', *Domus* July-August 1985, I.

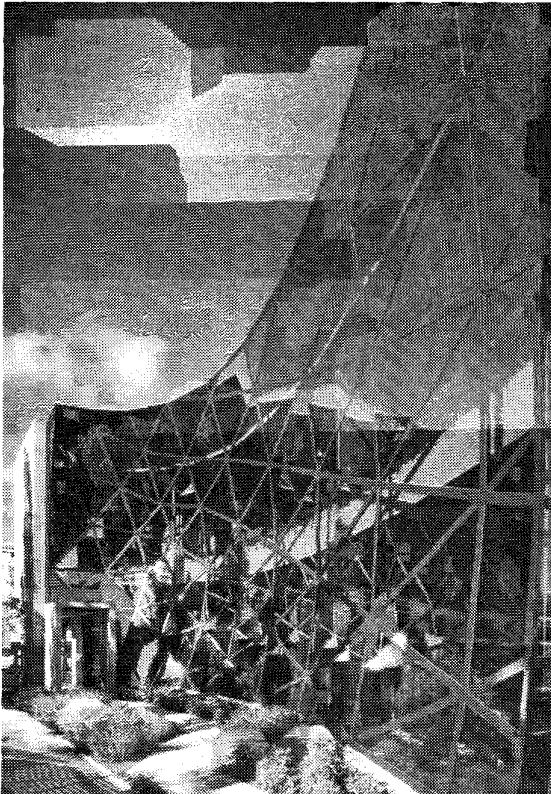
<sup>22</sup> Raggatt, H., *op. cit.*, 1993.



This is an example of one of the completely arbitrary processes that generate ARM's architecture. This dullness and lack of architectural intention is a result of their desire to free themselves from any overseas influence: knowing that their architectural knowledge is based on precedents, they have to find a way of producing designs where their 'corrupted' mind (let's say memory) doesn't take part in the process (at least until the direction the design is taking is very clear), as M. Markham<sup>23</sup> explains:

«The architect becomes open to suggestion and tracks the work, rather than assuming the work is unquestionably tracking the architect. In effect ARM's research into the copy is but one among many potential techniques which might delay the hand long enough for knowledge to play out its scope».

ARM, Promedicus, Burnley, 1995



So in order to *detach* their minds from the design process, they rely on computers, not only as descriptive tools, but as an active participant in designing.<sup>24</sup> The result of this is a series of buildings which often are unlike any other piece of architecture ever seen,<sup>25</sup> and which have as starting points intentions as simple —shall I say dull?— as these:

«The architect described this process as 'taking bites out of a building' whereby another shape is pressed into the original building leaving behind a shiny surface. [...] The architect used Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome as the main emblem, because the dome epitomized the 'shape of technology'. The architect introduced the egg shape because 'it is so seductive'».<sup>26</sup>

This is the design process followed in the Promedicus project. The «*shiny surface*» left behind is of an indubitable interest, a shape which would have been extremely difficult to model without computer technology. It is very deceiving, though, to see how all of the experimentation is carried out only on a philosophical level: when it comes to actually executing their designs, they show little interest in taking their experiments a step further and investigate in new techniques of building assembly:

«The architect prepared numerous schemes for alternative surface structures (I counted 10 variations on a theme on examining the pile of drawings) searching for a buildable, affordable solution. [...] In the end the project team produced a clever design solution to build the complex window from ordinary curtain wall technology. [...] The project team literally had to start from the ground up to solve the construction problems».

Mc Intyre's<sup>27</sup> use of the term 'ordinary' seems to contrast tremendously with the spirit of their innovative designs and ideas. Their lack of interest in construction strategies leads to poor detailing and numerous construction faults, specially because considerations such as buildability and structural logic are not part of their design process.

<sup>23</sup> Markham, M., «Originality», *Transition* #47, p. 39

<sup>24</sup> London, G., «Ashton Raggat and Mc Dougall: are they serious or flip?», *Architecture Australia*, March-April 1993, 57

<sup>25</sup> London, G., *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Mc Intyre, A., «Promedicus», *Transition*, 52-53, 1996

<sup>27</sup> Mc Intyre, A., *Ibid.*

RMIT Storey Hall is ARM's most celebrated project.<sup>28</sup> It is an extension to and refurbishment of the Storey Hall, built in 1884-87. ARM<sup>29</sup> describe the day the scaffolding was removed from the facade, the first day their building was shown to the public:

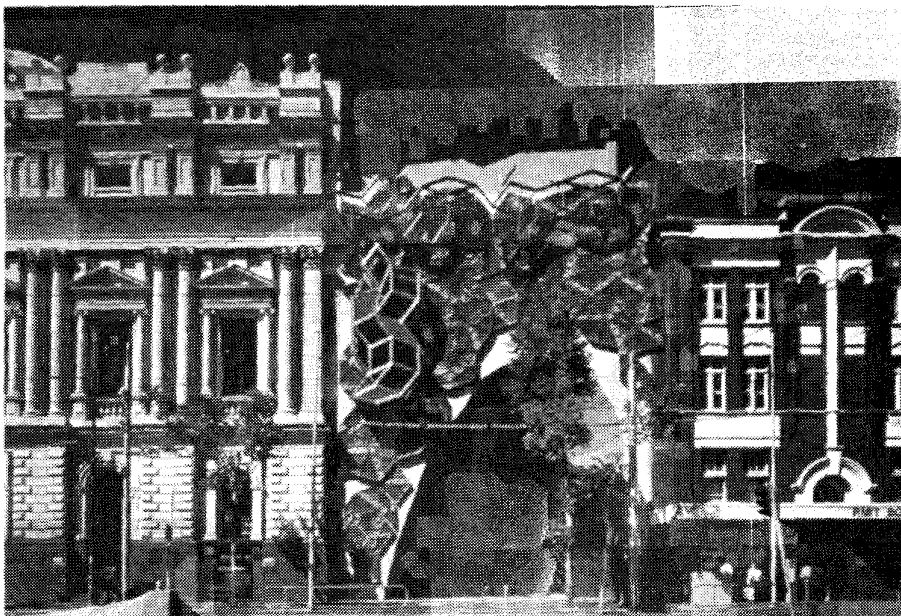
«People smiled, people laughed, people stopped mouth opened, people talked to strangers, people waved their arms about, people walked up and down, people came back again, people pointed, people fell off their bikes, people stopped their cars, people got almost run over by trams, people actually looked at a building, people went over and touched it, people had an opinion.

Like the Hon. Robert Mc Lellan, the Minister for Planning, immediately asking: 'Why does it have to look like a broken Vegemite jar?', everyone began to talk. Someone said it looked like a cryptonite building prepared for another superman. Someone said it looked like the gates to Heaven, or hell, with a window like an angel speaking. Someone said God help us if RMIT wants to join the ivy league with all that creeper in the front, and someone said the strange bay window looks like Roger Rabbit went through the concrete wall. [...] Eventually somebody said (presumably an

erudite) that it had too much decoration for them, although the translation from the piano-nobile of the pedimented windows of the original (Storey Hall) across into the perspectival hypercubes of the projecting Annex window does seem to test the morphological discourse of contending harmonies as each protests its claims to the true geometry of space, from Plato's to Einstein's Cave. Amen».

We could spend some time talking about the design process, about how the facade is a reconstruction of the smudge formed by a slipped photocopy of the original Storey Hall,<sup>30</sup> or how the interior spaces are modelled by computer (the use of trapezoidal and triangular shapes to define a three-dimensional surface is characteristic of computer models, as Zaera Polo's design for the Yokohama Pier shows), etc. But in their description of the 'joyous strip-tease', ARM are telling us they are not interested in this any more. What interests them is that 'people had an opinion'. They are interested in the impact of their work: it is consciously provocative.

ARM, RMIT Storey Hall, Melbourne, 1995



<sup>28</sup> Van Schaik, L., Faculty of Environmental design and Construction, Department of Architecture, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 'RMIT Storey Hall', *RMIT*, 1996

<sup>29</sup> ARM, «New patronage», Faculty of Environmental design and Construction, Department of Architecture, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 'RMIT Storey Hall', *RMIT*, 1996, 9

<sup>30</sup> Selenitsch, A., «Seven kinds of resurrection», *Transition*, 52-53, 1996, 18

D. Freedberg claims that all iconoclasts are aware of the greater or lesser publicity that will accrue from their acts.<sup>31</sup> ARM's case is not an exception, and their clients know that too, as G. London<sup>32</sup> explains:

«Beyond the meeting of these functional requirements and budget and contractual constraints, they (the clients) are prepared to entrust ARM to explore the architectural possibilities. These clients have become increasingly aware that an ARM building will generate considerable critical attention».

So in the end it might be that ARM's «*political iconoclasm*», as Freedberg<sup>33</sup> called it, which seemed a justified reaction against the «*hated order*», is nothing but a deliberate search for notoriety. They create some kind of a symbiosis with the client: ARM get to experiment and become famous (the same way iconoclasts aspire to become *immortal* through their attacks), and the client gets a building everybody will talk about, that is, *free publicity*.

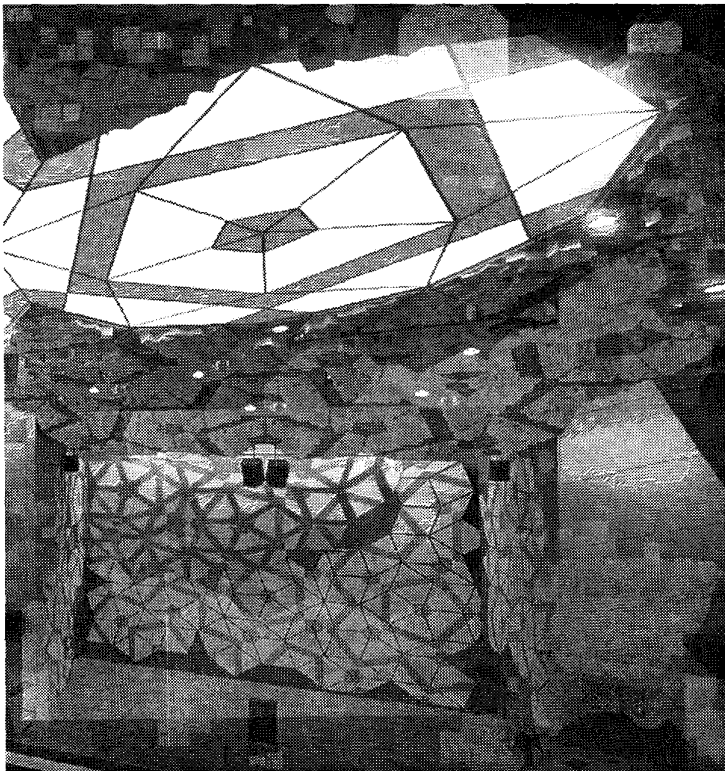
«ARM's interest in the ideas and imitation is reinforced by their specific design strategy of using ornament, not structure, as the primary medium of expression».<sup>34</sup>

I believe their abusive use of ornament is another means of provocation, for by doing so, they are challenging Adolf Loos<sup>35</sup> and «the orthodoxy» they consciously reject:

«Modern ornament has no forbears and no descendants, no past and no future. It is joyfully welcomed by uncultivated people to whom the true greatness of our time is a closed book, and after a short time is rejected».

Their provocation has been successful amongst the people in Melbourne (as already described), but probably the greatest reward is the following letter which appeared in the Journal «*Architecture Australia*». It is written by David Mackay,<sup>36</sup> from Martorell Bohigues Mackay, Barcelona, and I describe it as the «*greatest reward*» because it is a reaction from someone who represents the overseas orthodoxy ARM are rejecting.<sup>37</sup>

ARM, RMIT Storey Hall, Auditorium, 1995



<sup>31</sup> Freedber, D., *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 409

<sup>32</sup> London, G., «Ashton Raggat and Mc Dougall: are they serious or flip?», *Architecture Australia*, March-April 1993, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Freedber, D., *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 390

<sup>34</sup> Kohane, P., «Ashton Raggat and Mc Dougall imitative architecture: real and imaginary paths through Storey Hall», *Transition*, 52-53, 1996, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Frampton, K., *Modern architecture: a critical history*, Thames and Hudson, 1980, 91

<sup>36</sup> Mackay, D., «A crit from Barcelona», *Architecture Australia*, September-October 1996

<sup>37</sup> London, G., «Ashton Raggat and Mc Dougall: are they serious or flip?», *Architecture Australia*, March-April 1993, 57.

### «A CRIT FROM BARCELONA»:

[...] While I find both projects interesting and even startling contributions to what is now being tagged 'post platonic' (by Peter Eisenman) or fractured architecture, or even close to what is called the theory of chaos, I have serious doubts about the architectural viability of these expressions; which tread on the discipline of architecture itself.

That the modern movement in architecture responds to the basic changes in our society brought about by democracy-responding to function, place, climate, logical construction and a social response to changing uses-I think can be agreed by everyone.

What is good about these passing fashions is that they allow us to consider other aspects of architecture to which little attention had been placed (sic). Post-modernism allowed us to reconsider the role of decoration in architecture and only became abusive when it possessed architecture as total decoration. [...]

In Storey Hall, the auditorium is clearly abusive, allowing no freedom for the performer: [...]

But you were right to publish these works and defend them as they stimulate thought about where our architecture is leading to. The danger is that they can take possession of architecture and convert our profession into a frivolous activity».

From David Mackay, Martorell Bohigas Mackay, Barcelona

What Peter Eisenman signals as the «Post Platonic» period of architecture, which he defined as one suitable for the next millennium, is a period of fuzzy logic and inextricable order, where rules of Platonic harmony and prescription no longer apply.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Norman Day explains,<sup>39</sup> «there is a cultural propensity for things to do with chaos theory and a view of a world ordered more by mayhem than generic and social regulation».

How does this fit Australia? How does this architecture «ordered more by mayhem than generic and social regulations» satisfy the need for an Australian character in architecture?

The answer might be in M. Markham's<sup>40</sup> thoughts:

«... an Australian urban landscape prepared and undercoated for what is to come: the menu of the new world. Start with the Szechwan Hot Sour Soup, move from the Falafel to the Beef Wellington and finish with the Schwartzelde Kirsch Torte and Greek Coffee. What sort of culture is this? Is this no culture?».

Eric Trillo-Fox es arquitecto. Este artículo es un fragmento de su tesina «Vers une identité», presentada en la Oxford School of Architecture en el Graduate Diploma of Architecture en 1996-98

ARM, RMIT Storey Hall, Foyer, 1995



<sup>38</sup> Day, N., «Storey Hall: ARM's impact on Swanston St.», *Architecture Australia*, January-February, 1996

<sup>39</sup> Day, N., *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Markham, M., «Originality», *Transition #47*, 44