

03: Reflections on reflecting: an archaeology of reflective design practice or research in the medium of design

Richard Blythe

Terroir and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

My practice, Terroir, is a small office founded in 1999 by Gerard Reinmuth, myself, and Scott Balmforth. We set this practice up with the intention of investigating architecture as a research practice, using architecture and design as a way of questioning the world around us. The practice was established in two cities simultaneously, in Sydney and also in Hobart. That was partly because we all came from Hobart originally and so we were particularly interested in how the spatial condition of our growing up there affected the work that we did. At the same time, we were very keen to be part also of a wider discussion, so we located ourselves not just in the relatively isolated city of Hobart but also in Sydney so that we could engage in a wider and more international architectural discourse.

The decision of dual location was somewhat complicated by Gerard who, on the eve of us setting up the practice, accepted a job with Richard Murphy in Scotland, and I said to Gerard, "How do you think we should handle this?" and he said, "Well, we should just do everything." So on the same day as starting the practice, I took a fulltime academic position, Gerard went to Scotland, Scott accepted our invitation to join us, and we started our first project. That led to a particular way of working, with us all located separately and communicating through e-mails and faxes, but it turned out to be quite fortuitous. The three of us insist on designing together. It is a collaborative practice; we do not design projects separately. What this has meant in terms of communicating with each other is that we have had to be very particular about what it is that we are intending to try and do and how we do it.

This paper will begin with a project that we have been working on in the last month and will then trawl back through a series of projects that have been undertaken in the practice through the RMIT University Graduate Research Conference (GRC) programme that Leon van Schaik has set up – we are experiments of Leon's in that sense – and what I want to do is pick up on the ways in which presenting our work in that critical context has allowed us to transform how we see the questions that we are asking and has allowed us to move our practice on in what we think are significant ways.

First, a project in our home town of Hobart. The local politicians are very excited about this scheme because it is a missing tooth in the waterfront – you can imagine the politicians' dreams of a new iconic museum and art gallery. It is for the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), which is one of the oldest cultural institutions in Australia with a very important collection, 90% of which is in storage because they have no space to show it, and that institution occupies this site. The brief was to design a new building on this site, to sit next to the existing institution. We are undertaking this project in collaboration with Johnson Pilton Walker (JPW) of Sydney.

Of course, one of the first things you are presented with in such a competition brief are the urban studies and the planning discussions of urban morphology and you are asked to address those in the submission. There has been a series of local debates about the connection of the city up the hill to the waterfront and the way that these connections should be promoted and encouraged. The urban form of the space itself has been described as the "flat floor of the cove", which is built out from the original

waterline as a series of concrete decks described as being “a space within which it is appropriate to place objects in space” and that space is then defined by a wall which wraps around its edge on all sides.

The problem that we identified when we first started looking at this project was that, in relation to the site for the TMAG competition, the urban logic breaks down and the “wall” becomes uncertain, so it was unclear whether the project that we had was to fill in the gap, to plug the hole and continue the wall, or whether the wall somehow needed to wrap around the back of an object sitting in free space. This was the first question that opened up in relation to the project.

There were two other critical questions at stake for us in this project. All three questions gained their substance within the critical context of the RMIT GRC process. The second question concerns the virtuality of projects, their virtual potential. All projects contain within themselves a sort of virtuality, a potential to change the existing condition into something new. Designing is integral in that process. What we are looking to do with that virtual potential is to find some kind of familial extension, to look for the DNA of the project and to create something that is entirely new but that contains some kind of familial resemblance with what went before, to create a new generation of the contexts as they come together in the project.

Where that gets a little bit complicated is that one of the contexts that we are interested in is the cultural context, so we are not just interested in looking at the physical circumstance of projects but trying to understand also the cultural context. What interests us in relation to this problem of ‘cultural context’ is the way in which “culture” in contemporary cosmopolitan and global cities works as a kind of amalgam. The question for us is how this amalgam should be conceived. We see two possibilities: as globalized and homogenised, or as a cosmopolitan condition that takes a certain specificity from the approximate alignments of multiple contexts that projects bring. Therefore this second and cosmopolitan possibility works as a kind of foil to the forces of globalization and this is a position that interests us. The specificity that operates as a key resistance to the homogenising tendency of globalization becomes possible because each project gathers to itself a specific set of contexts. No two projects are the same because of the unique overlap of a project’s specific contexts that might include, for example, the physical context, legislative context, client context, user context, designer context, temporal context, political context, economic context, and so on. Design then begins as a questioning of the contextual amalgam of a project within this problem of a cosmopolitan condition.

The name of our practice is one thing that we have come to understand to be a question rather than a description and the GRC process has been critical to that discovery. We have reframed the name as a question: Terroir as a question of the nature of ground in this cosmopolitan condition.

It is with that framework in mind that we embarked on the TMAG project and we began a sort of excavation of the site, tracing the history of its built form back to first interventions as a way of trying to begin to uncover the patterns of the place – not in a Christopher Alexander sense, nor in terms of a vernacular or regionalist sense – but rather in order that we might understand its virtuality and in order that we might make some new proposition that provides a kind of familial extension to the specific circumstances of the project that includes not just the physical site but also the various contextual agencies at play in an architectural project.

What we discovered was that Hobart is not actually a waterfront city. For years it has been presented as a waterfront city, but the reality is that it is actually a town that is clipped onto the back of a ridgeline, over the hill from the water, which makes perfect sense because it then faces north and the sun and it is protected by the ridgeline from the cold southerly winds. We made this proposition of a 'not' waterfront city connected to the cove by a 'hook' in our entry for the 2006 Hobart Waterfront Competition. When we began work on the TMAG competition we extended that speculation by reviewing early maps of the city which showed that key streets originally terminated on that ridgeline, so those streets were not originally extended to the waterfront. The TMAG site, acted as an entry point to the city itself, the hinge point of the 'hook' if you like, and you can imagine this space as the first port of call in Australia, as a colonial gateway. You could see also how the water's edge was poking right back in to the land-form at the point of our site.

We began to think of the site as a critical component of the TMAG collection in that it had great potential to tell the story of the origins of the city. To that end you can see in the built fabric of the city, in its misaligned titles and roof lines, a trace of the original Hobart Rivulet that spilled in to Sullivan's Cove at the TMAG site. This trace is evident because all the titles were originally set out according to the line of the rivulet which is now covered by urban development.

We presented overlays of maps of earlier versions of the city and tried to explain the connection of the city to the water as a hook rather than as a lineal thing (illustration 1). We pointed out that in fact – this is one of the first buildings, the Commissariat store – the whole city was set out by Governor Macquarie off that building. We explained that this site was absolutely fundamental in cultural landscape terms and in terms of understanding the way this place works.



Illustration 1: overlay of maps created by Paul Sayers of Terroir from various maps held in the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Having briefly described the TMAG project, it is worth looking at some earlier projects to try and uncover how it was that we were seeing TMAG in those terms and to suggest that the GRC process has been fundamental in developing Terrior's reflective practice. The GRC process involved presenting our on-going design work twice annually to critics from all over the world and reflecting on their comments and the body of work. This is therefore research whose method IS designing, not research about designing or about designs. I propose that it is critical, if you are trying to understand how research works in architecture, to understand that research happens in the act of designing; research about designing is a different kind of research. Research about designing and designs is certainly legitimate, but it in no way constitutes all that is relevant in the area of design research. In fact, I would argue that it excludes the most significant ways in which new knowledge or the extension of our discipline's body of knowledge are made.

I will take this story back to the question of spatial intelligence that Leon van Schaik has referred to by telling an embarrassing story about growing up in Hobart, caught as it is on the shoreline of the Derwent River under the shadow of Mount Wellington that rises behind it, and travelling for the first time to Melbourne as a small boy. Melbourne is a gridded and relatively flat city – it is a rectangular grid with narrow streets running in one direction, big streets running in the other. One would suppose that it would be quite difficult to get lost there. On my first childhood visit however, I could not find my way round to save myself. I eventually worked out that the reason for my disorientation was that every time I wanted to know where I was I looked to orient myself to the mountain and the water, neither of which was visible. I did this because, when I was in this space that I had grown up in, the way that I knew where I was, the way that I knew what the weather would do, would be to look for the river and that tip of the mountain. This experience of a new city was made even more disorienting when my friends took me out to a place called Auther's Seat about an hour's drive from the city. We got to this "mountain", which was in profile only a minor hill in my spatial vocabulary. We rode a chairlift to the top, stood there looking out and my friends were marvelling at the mountains in the distance. When I looked out what I saw was a flat horizon, with a couple of little blimps. What I understood from this was that my spatiality, my spatial intelligence, was entirely different from theirs, and this began a questioning about how our different spatial intelligence works in the way that we construct and make places.

The three directors of Terroir grew up in Tasmania during the time of the Tasmanian Dams debate. This concerned whether or not the Franklin River should be dammed for the production of hydro-electricity. The image *Morning Mist Rock Island Bend* by the photographer Peter Dombrovskis and others like it inspired rallies as far away as Piccadilly, and eventually the pro-dam decision was overturned. Our socio-political reality was then one in which landscape mattered, even in playgrounds and on sports fields, in pubs, offices and at cafes. We began to realise that dramatic images like *Morning Mist Rock Island Bend* are highly constructed views, and that they depend for their meaning on a very clear working of those structures (illustration 2).



Illustration 2: Peter Dombrovskis, Morning Mist Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Tasmania, photographic image 1979 copyright West Wind Press Pty Ltd., with annotations by Richard Blythe.

A very simple demonstration of this can be made by explaining that, to understand how this wilderness image exists, we need to be able to step back behind the photographer and see the technology that allows the image to exist, but in a more complex way we could understand the Tasmanian wilderness not as being some idyllic previously undiscovered space, an *a priori* condition, but rather as being a political construct. We became interested in the way that those constructs were used in various forms of representation. Compare, for example, an image by the German Romantic painter Casper David Friedrichs such as *Wanderer Above the Mist*, with a contemporary bushwalking photo. Bushwalking photos depicting the Tasmanian wilderness appear endlessly in walking magazines and the structure of their presentation is consistent with key themes from the sublime and picturesque aesthetic traditions. It is these aesthetic structures that we suspect underpin much contemporary reading of space. They can be seen for example in children's literature at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century in stories such as *Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Secret Garden*, and others.

Terroir became fascinated with the idea that as architects we could begin to use architecture to explore these constructs, to critically open them up as a way of discovering new spatial modalities. We used competitions as vehicles for this purpose. The competitions provide Terroir with one kind of platform for these explorations, while real projects have provided another. What we have found is that the play between competitions and real projects is productive. I totally reject the idea that design research is applied research. It is absolutely not, because we are not

solving questions, we are actually opening up questions, and designing provides the grounds for other forms of research, theoretical and technical, as much as it draws from them. So contrary (or in addition) to RIBA President Sunand Prasad's proposition (in Paper 01) that designing is a form of applied research in which designers apply pure basic research developed elsewhere, designing can also be a form of pure basic research.

What is interesting about projects that involve clients is they themselves contribute a specific layer of contextual richness. The Burns McDonald Residence was for a well-known critic who needed a library with kilometres of shelving for his library and his sculptor wife who needed a studio and a place to display her work. Between them, they had a keen interest in Greek and Mesopotamian art, and so the conversation quickly turned to how we might use these interests to locate the buildings in the landscape. This project demonstrates for us how clients become a kind of contextual consideration in projects along with others such as topography, topology, history, socio-political circumstance, aesthetics, spatial intelligence and others.

In more recent domestic projects in the Tasmanian landscape, dealing with awful residential fringe developments, we became interested in the way that other architects had dealt with similar sites and where those architects had refused to engage with a limited commercial domestic aesthetic but had rather sought to relate to the greater landscape. What this demonstrates for us is something that is perhaps blindingly obvious, namely that design is about selection, about choosing to work with some contexts and to ignore others. This raises a critical question of the ethics of that selection process and of the architect's right to select from a cosmopolitan point of view. Terroir were intrigued that these fringe sub-urban developments had this kind of sublime quality to them, so we played around with that and thought about how our architectural objects in the landscape might relate to its bigger context by working with this inherent sublimity (illustration 3). We were fascinated with the kinds of shadows and the farm buildings. We hoped to find ways that this building might be part of a conversation about these kinds of sub-urban conditions.



Illustration 3: Acton House, Terroir 2005. Photograph by Ray Joyce

There was one project, Peppermint Bay, which we thought we had unravelled, that we had spent considerable time reflecting on, that had been published and written about by others, in short, that had apparently been exhausted in terms of what it might deliver through critical reflective practice. At that apparent end point however, we became involved in another project that allowed us to see Peppermint Bay in an entirely new way – and this is one of the fascinating things for me about design research, that new projects can often open up insight into earlier projects, or rather that through new projects, earlier projects are re-opened, ones that you thought you had done with. The project involved a restaurant and function facility in an amazing landscape, located in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, south of Hobart in Tasmania (illustration 4).



Illustration 4: Café and restaurant, Peppermint Bay, Terroir 2003

We were interested in trying to unpack the landscape. We were looking at questions of landscape and aesthetics as a way of trying to understand the building through its site as a kind of extension of the landscape and how, even though the building might be only of a small size in relation to its site, whether meant in terms of the boundary delineated by the legal title or the landscape, we could begin to think about the building as the site and extend that thinking even into the wider landscape. We were also interested in questions of the relationship between the interior and the exterior. Our buildings are about trying to open up questions through a tension between what they look like on the outside and what your experience of them on the inside such that these landscape considerations are brought into play through a kinaesthetic experience of the interior.

We had given these issues consideration both during the design process but later a new project opened up another layer of discovery. This is one of the fascinating things about design research, and its iterative and non-linear quality. We were asked to go to the Wolong valley in China to look at the development of what was going to become a tourist valley in the Tibetan foothills which currently attracts few tourists but where panda bears had been bred in captivity. The pandas were expected to draw about a million visitors a year to the valley. They wanted to know whether there is an alternative to building faux-Tibetan tourist infrastructure as a way of coping with the influx while at the same time retaining some of the qualities of the place. So we tried

to think how could we apply the things that we had learnt through our practice to understand how you would provide that infrastructure. What we did was to talk to them about the patterns of their place to try and understand what the virtual potential of the valley was that they lived in. We looked at things like the stories that they told about the valley and its structure. “Wolong” means “the dragon that lies down”, and the naming of the valley gave rise to a certain mythology of place which was interesting to us as one layer of the patterns of that place. We used very simple concepts like the idea of the tiger in the grass to explain in a very difficult language that the way that people see space comes from our capacity to recognise and understand patterns. This is the basis of, for example, our ability for language, but what we do with that capacity to recognise patterns is that we build explanations, stories and mythologies about the places that we live in and it brings meaning to the way that we occupy space. It also provides us with information about our environs, it tells us about the dimensions of agricultural equipment, it tells us about the relationship of the terrain to the sun and in examples of architecture where the fall of a shadow is registered it provides a very special relationship between the particular point at the tip of the shadow and the casting object such that a connection is formed between us, the object and a cosmic pattern of inter stellar movement. From the moment of experiencing this ‘magic’ the sun is no longer just a source of light and warmth, it is made meaningful to us. This ability to see patterns is something that is intrinsic and what Terroir began noticing – this image is from a Chian village in the Wolong Valley – are these incredible white markings on the buildings that were repeated in the geological markings of the place. We proposed that there were already very strong patterns of landscape mythology, economy and commerce at play and that these patterns could provide a means of understanding how you could accommodate a radically new place capable of responding to the demands of an exponentially expanding tourism market that would nevertheless retain a familial resemblance.

We used our Peppermint Bay building, which we had previously understood in terms of questions of landscape, as a way of explaining what we were talking about. What we discovered in illustrating that explanation was something that we had not understood ourselves, that in fact what we had done was to play with patterns. We had sited the building related to other structures and facilities that were operating very successfully in the region. There were apple crates just up the road, with the kinds of textures and materials that ended up somehow being incorporated within the materiality of our building. This was a dimension of our earlier project that only became apparent through the process of a later project.

I would like to end with a story of an experience of this space, the key function room of Peppermint Bay in which I had the pleasure of participating in an unusual wedding between my cousin who is half Indian and comes from a traditional Muslim Indian family and who decided to marry a Jew. We had this incredible ceremony with Australians drinking too much beer, a very traditional Indian Muslim family and the Jewish family. What was interesting to me was sitting in the middle of that wedding just trying to imagine a diagram of all the various spatial intelligences that were going on, and seeing that this is the problem that we have as architects. This is the context that we work in. We work in these incredibly complex cosmopolitan conditions and one of the problems is how do we understand ground, how do we understand site and how do we understand which contexts we choose to work with within such a cosmopolitan complex? One of the questions Terroir have at the moment is trying to understand the ethics of selection of contexts because we live in a time where there is no canon, so there are no prescribed contexts, and we must choose them in relation to

each project. Our question is: how is it that we embark on a kind of ethics of selection for the contextualized project?

That is the subject of our recent book, for which we collaborated with two philosophers to extend those conversations and explore them a little further.¹ What is important is that while we were having these conversations with philosophers, what we were doing was thinking about the questions in terms of projects. Take, for example, our competition entry for the Prague library from last year, where we worked through as many contexts as we could in order to understand the project and then to make a proposition. We were fairly playful, so at one point someone said “Prague, the velvet revolution, let us think about the site in terms of a bit of velvet”, but we were also wondering about how it is that you would build on this site that previously had not been built on and whether or not thinking about it as a fabric that got scrunched up in the corner might be reasonable. Of course, we were reading Kafka and Kundera, another obvious thing to do in terms of trying to understand the context of the project. Someone started talking about cockroaches and looked up cockroaches on “Wikipedia” and found this fascinating description of the structure of cockroach eggs, which suggested a geometrical/spatial solution for arranging the archive. But it also became interesting in terms of how you might understand the poetics of an archive in a city like this, where the archive might contain secrets yet to be uncovered, potentially unsettling truths, so the poetic normativity for our design process coalesced around this idea of a slightly uncanny cluster of cockroach eggs hiding under a sheet of velvet. This then is also an example of an ethics of contextual selection, a kind of Darwinian selection by fitness, a retention of those traits that are most productive within the project and that retain a certain veracity as the project moves forward.

If we now return to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery project on the Hobart waterfront, a project we are currently working on and the starting point of this piece, I have shown how the design practice of Terroir has developed through these earlier projects and is evident in the way in which we have begun this one. Critical to that development was the RMIT GRC process during which Terroir presented these projects as either just completed work or work in progress to a panel of international peers twice per year (illustration 5).



*Illustration 5: Scott Balmforth and Gerard Reinmuth, RMIT GRC Masters examination 2007.
Photograph by Shannon McGrath*

The regular presentation of developing works has given us an important pause, a time to reflect. Because this bi-annual activity was intimately linked, however, to the projects we were doing, rather than becoming a separate piece of ‘research’ work, because it was research BY designing stuff rather than research ABOUT design or indeed about architecture more generally, the research work did not take us away from the activity of designing buildings and the time committed to this process was efficient from a practice point of view and also directly productive for the projects. It allowed us as a practice to better understand how we worked, our processes and methods, and, from our perspective at least, to be better architects by requiring us to articulate what often remains unexplored and inarticulate in the practice of design and to place what we are doing in context with the work of our peers.

ⁱ Scott Balmforth and Gerard Reinmuth (eds.), *Terroir: cosmopolitan ground*, Dab Documents, Sydney, 2007