



## INTERVIEW – GLENN MURCUTT

*Mr Murcutt, you emphasised the importance of environmental sustainability years before it turned into a global trend. Can you please tell us about your architectural philosophy and how you try to take local climatic conditions into account?*

I've been working on environmental issues since I started to practice. For my very first job, I was looking for orientation, for ventilation, no air conditioning. I always looked at prospect and refuge, and the integration between the space with the environment. I've been working on those themes for forty years in my practice.

Architecture has to come through as a consequence of many other issues, brought together. We can sit down and do a fancy building and lots of fancy buildings have been done, they absolutely rely on air conditioning, they rely on heating and cooling and huge consumption of energy. My work doesn't have anything to do with that, I've got to minimise the energy, I've got to minimise the consumption, I've got to respond to the local climate. Go to the tropics and you will see all my buildings are off the ground, if you go to a hot arid area they get closer and closer to the ground. For example, my wife and I have been doing a building which is almost entirely underground - the Australian Opal Centre - because it gets too hot in summer and too cold in winter, it goes from 48°C in summer and it goes to -10 C° in winter. And when you are in that sort of environment the ground is 21° during the year and after below two metres under the ground you use the thermal mass of the ground as an asset.

*Can you elaborate on the importance of nature for your work?*

I grew up in Sydney about seven kilometers north of the city. The landscape was typical of the coastal Sydney sandstone basin with its abundance of eucalyptus and other remarkable native Australian plants. In this environment, I learned about the propagation of the flora. I learned about which plants grew where, and which drew the superb native birds, insects and animals. I learned about how a particular species of plants grew differently, very differently, from the lowlands where the water table was higher, where the wind pressures were less, where the nutrients were greater from the very same type of plant at the top of a hill which was shaped by wind shear, less moisture and few nutrients. This was about place, and was, for me, extremely important. I learned about the strength, the delicacy, and the transparency of much of the Australian landscapes, where the clarity of the light level separates the elements compared to much of Europe where the light level serves to connect those elements in the landscape. This gave me a clearer understanding of the legibility of elements, of structure and delicacy within the Australian landscape which has informed my work.



When I entered the University of Technology in 1956, I undertook a part-time course in architecture. I was fortunate enough to have had a teacher by the name of Noel Bazeley, who taught building construction. He was largely dismissed by most students, but whilst the other groups studied the construction of footings and foundations, floors, walls, ceiling joists and roofs for the whole year of three terms, Bazeley gave us the subject continuity in nature. What a wonderful subject, continuity in nature, discussed for a full term. Having understood the importance of continuity in nature, the second term was devoted to the understanding of continuity in nature related to the built environment. For term three, we studied foundations, floors, walls and so on. What a wonderful start for a young architect and for me particularly. This was an extraordinary teaching for a man in 1956.

*What significance does Aboriginal culture have for you?*

The Aboriginal culture changes those of us who are listening. I was raised by black people in Papua New Guinea and I had a very easy relationship with them. It is very important to have a connection with and learn from Aboriginal people. For example, they taught me about building on access. If you look at classical public buildings in around the world, they are symmetrical with a window here and a window there, with a central door. Aboriginal culture taught me to enter the house on the edge, never in the middle, you can see this in the Simpson-Lee House.

*Can you tell us something about the Marika-Alderton House, which you designed for an Aboriginal artist and which adapts to the tropical climate of the Northern Territory? Is this another good example of "bridging the cultures"?*

It is just a house the way it is, it is just designed for Aboriginal people. They've got privacy when they sleep, the parents stay at the western end, the children always on the east of the parents, the children stay on the east because east is the beginning of the day, it's the future, the west is the end of the day, so it's the past, the parents are part of the past, the children are part of the future. Every time you look out of the window, you're looking at the view, so you can see who's coming, who's going. It's a very Aboriginal house... in the tropics.

*You have always persisted in working on your own, without the support of an office or secretary. Why?*

I work alone because I love silence, time to think and discard work less than I know is worthy of architecture. By working alone, I freed myself of the pressures of responsibility towards staff. I am able to travel and conduct design studios in many universities internationally where I am able to teach and convey ideals and attitudes to students. They are the architects of the future. Yet when a project warrants it, I work in collaboration with those architects for whom I have great respect. That is the way I'm able to expand my



practice. The work I cannot do, I send to young, very fine architects I have taught, so that they are able to set up their own practices.

I have not wanted to undertake large scale work because I know that I require a lot of variation in stimulating my energies. I tire of working on one project for too long, and larger projects mean years. To work on many smaller projects involves many clients. This provides the opportunity for much experimentation and hence stimulation for me, and yet I am aware that there are offices like Renzo Piano's and Frank Gehry's where they do achieve much of what I expect, but at large scale.

*Has taking on a project in Europe ever been an option for you?*

To take on work outside Australia would mean that I would have to take on staff. As a sole operator, it would be impossible for me to work overseas and in Australia at the same time because I would lose my practice in Australia. Australia offers me hugely diverse landscapes and ranges of climates. Being the size of the USA, or extending from the west coast of Spain to Israel, and North Africa to the Arctic Circle, you can imagine the potential. Add to that, coastal, inland and altitude, the possibilities are enormous. Ironically, by understanding my imposed limitations, I found that opportunities increased. Working with students and academics is enormously rewarding. I've established wonderful friendships with staff and students which satiates my somewhat nomadic spirit.

Interview courtesy of the Architecture Foundation Australia, edited from an interview by Simone Corda with Glenn Murcutt in Australia for AREA Magazine, Milan, in 2009.