

## **A Personal (Pro)position: Finding a Place in Design**

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**Abstract:** *The paper will describe an Interior Architecture studio entitled 'South' that aimed to develop students' idiosyncratic design positions. The intention was to establish an individual and regional theoretical approach to underpin and influence a design methodology. This was achieved through a series of personalised design projects which focussed students' design response to the cultural, social and economic possibilities that characterise their home-state of South Australia. The paper will discuss how the unique projects responded to ethical, political, environmental, cultural and social considerations of occupation and place and resisted stylistic design responses that are often the result of globalisation.*

**Keywords:** *regional design identity, interior architecture studio pedagogy*

### **A reason to stay**

Published discussions of spatial concepts as elements of regional identity have identified the contribution of geography, landscape and built form, and the social and economic activity they generate, to developing identity of place. To evaluate the contribution of spatial considerations, Larsen's study (2004) focuses on the characteristics of geography and landscape in resource-based regions of British Columbia and Gospodini (2004) discusses recent innovative architecture in European cities using Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain as a case study.

The theoretical position of both authors recognises the current paradigm shift away from, or reaction against, modernism and globalism. In identifying space as '...both a product and catalyst...' for the development of the identity of places, Larsen (2004, p. 947) further asserts that our sense of place results from '...the way we understand and experience social and economic change from a particular location and [is] the reason we continue to find meaning in our surroundings' in the contemporary world (p. 958). Concentrating his study on European cities, Gospodini (2004) cites migration and the rise of the European Union as key factors in the growing focus on regional identity and establishes an argument for the importance of new and innovative architecture and design, as opposed to built heritage, as a potent contributor to the identity of place.

The *South* studio project encouraged eighty second and third year interior architecture students to contextualise a personal position through consideration of what a regional

identity might be. It attempted to fine tune the focus of spatial contribution to place identity to the scale of interior space and elements that may occur within it such as furniture and exhibition.

*We all experience architecture before we have even heard the word. The roots of architectural understanding lie in our architectural experience: our room, our house, our street, our village, our town, our landscape – we all experience them early on, unconsciously, and we subsequently compare them with the countryside, towns and houses that we experience later on. The roots of our understanding of architecture lie in our childhood, in our youth; they lie in our biography. Students have to learn to work consciously with their personal biographical experiences of architecture (Zumthor, 1998, p. 57).*

In building upon what Zumthor describes as 'biographical experiences', the notion of regionality accords with current professional directions in developing a truly Australian architecture and design identity which has historically been culturally Eurocentric with often inappropriate conventional deference to western traditions. By gaining a better understanding of what constitutes identity, in a personal, local and global context, students are better equipped to consider ethical, environmental, cultural and social responsibilities of dwelling and place, thereby instilling an informed international perspective as both citizens and professionals.

In our studio teaching experience, students frequently source their design influences from images of stylised interiors in glossy publications heralding an abundant use of fashionable surface finishes and develop them using computer driven geometries employing highly expendable and processed materials to produce universally recognised environments. These could be best described as generically anonymous and not identifiable by culture, region, or in many cases, even by the hand of the designer. This approach is also reflected in practice. Research (Cys, 2004, p. 59) has revealed that although design practitioners can identify numerous means of continued learning and professional development in technical and management skills, they feel that there are few options available when it comes to developing and sustaining design creativity and inspiration and cite '...looking through design journals...and travel' as the most common means of seeking inspiration. As cynically argued by one architect at a public design debate in South Australia, 'We all know that design is nothing but *Wallpaper* and AutoCAD' (Bonato, 2001).

In an attempt to introduce students to an alternative, relevant and more sustainable approach to design, the *South* studio program asked students to demonstrate a specific and grounded knowledge of at least one unique and relatively unknown provenance of South Australian culture. This aspect of regional identity was to become inherent in all of their subsequent design outcomes.

In a series of five cumulative projects, students were required to research and analyse the personal, cultural, economic and physical characteristics of their place of origin in order to contextualise their design methodology. In acknowledgment of the diverse student population, those who came from outside of South Australia were encouraged to make comparisons between their homeland and South Australia. This analysis fuelled a passionate response to specific aspects of local or regional cultures which they individually identified from their own explorations and reminiscences. By harnessing personal responses to historic, cultural and environmental briefs based in South Australia, this studio deliberately aimed to resist the homogenising effects of globalisation and a common tendency to defer to other parts of the country and/or world as a frame of reference.

It has been a commonly held belief for students and graduates that South Australia holds limited possibilities for prosperous employment potential in comparison with the progressive and moneyed eastern state design practices and lure of working overseas. Consequently many South Australian students are dismissive of their state of origin and the future it can offer them. The exodus of these graduates may go towards explaining the dearth of good contemporary design in South Australia that is only now manifesting itself legitimately on a national basis. There is a commonly held view that the best way for South Australian designers to work on local projects is to relocate and work for interstate practices who are increasingly being commissioned for both government and private projects in South Australia.

The potency in acknowledging the influence of local origins is embodied in the biography of internationally renowned South Australian interior graduate, Steven Blaess.

*BLAESS lived a nomadic life for the first half of his childhood travelling with his family throughout South Australia.*

*He experienced its magnificence and solitude and with this, developed an early inventiveness with objects available to him in order to occupy an inquisitive and growing mind.*

*The open uninterrupted space and simplicity within the bush and coastal landscapes around The Great Australian Bight, formed an unconscious awareness in BLAESS, that is now displayed in his purpose to create forms and environments which express simplified beauty and freedom within form (Blaess).*

In South Australia, there has been recent public debate as to what characterises the region's design identity. Partly driven by the continual deference to design expertise from elsewhere, the debate has occurred not just at the level of strategic direction – 'Are we a quaint little Victorian town or a 21st century megacity...I don't think we are either. I'd like to think we could have explored some form of unique regional identity' (Bonato, 2006) – but also on the more serious issue of ecological and intellectual sustainability '...the built environment is a barometer to the creative and intellectual health of our state. If we do not develop a considered style – with our own skills and resources, we will continue our perceived slide into irrelevance. By failing to address such a critical issue of identity, we will fail our young by giving them no vision of a sustainable future. No reason to stay' (Bonato, 2003).

### **South studio structure**

Five idiosyncratic assignments formed the basis of the *South* studio program. The first was an introspective project to analyse and represent an aspect of personal identity. The second assignment required students to focus on a specific and relevant cultural characteristic of South Australia. The third and fourth projects were conducted simultaneously and required students initially to brand the subject matter in consideration of the broader demographic profiles of the user groups and the fourth accompanying project asked students to illustrate a concept for a spatial design. For the fifth and culminating project, students were given a plan of a small commercial tenancy and series of five generic briefs ranging in typologies for example, retail, hospitality or commercial. Students had to select one and spatially design the interior environment integrating all of their previous projects. The autonomous nature of the five projects enabled students to develop highly personalised and self-generated design proposals and subsequently no two schemes were alike.

### **me, myself, i**

The first project was a self reflective exercise titled *me myself i*. Students were required to illustrate a biographical narrative with images and carefully integrated text. They were asked to valorise their interests and influences, not as a critical undertaking, but one in which they could engage in self reflection using the pre-eminence of memory.

The tenant of memory has been widely acknowledged by design educators<sup>2</sup>, as fundamental in creating culturally specific and socially rich environments. Educational theorist, Bastea proposes that 'Memory creates a special relationship with space, holding on to the essence of it, the best and the worst, letting the rest of the details fade to gray...As writers, scholars, and architects we are constantly in an open dialogue between form and culture, space and memory, images and psyche (2004, pp. 1–2). Architects Lyndon and Moore claim in *Chambers of a Memory Palace* that by drawing upon one's memory, designers can create truly memorable places, '...places that are memorable are necessary to the good conduct of our lives; we need to think about where we are and what is unique and special about our surroundings so that we can better understand ourselves and how we relate to others. This mental intermingling of people, places, and ideas is what makes architecture interesting' (1994, p. xii).

Students produced self effacing, culturally specific outcomes with the most common themes based upon childhood reminiscences. These included familial recollections such as treasured and intimate moments with grandparents; places, often quite ordinary; and significant childhood events, such as annual family vacations to familiar destinations. Many of these were recorded and recalled from aged sepia tinted photographs snaffled from family albums which were invariably accompanied with succinct and poignant (hand) written reflections, narratives and descriptions. Students also used everyday objects or collections as prompts for their project, such as concert tickets – the sacred physical remnants of a first date '...those who possess very little or whose attachment to those few precious things suggests a healthy nurturing of self-identity' (Cooper Marcus, 1997, p. 71).

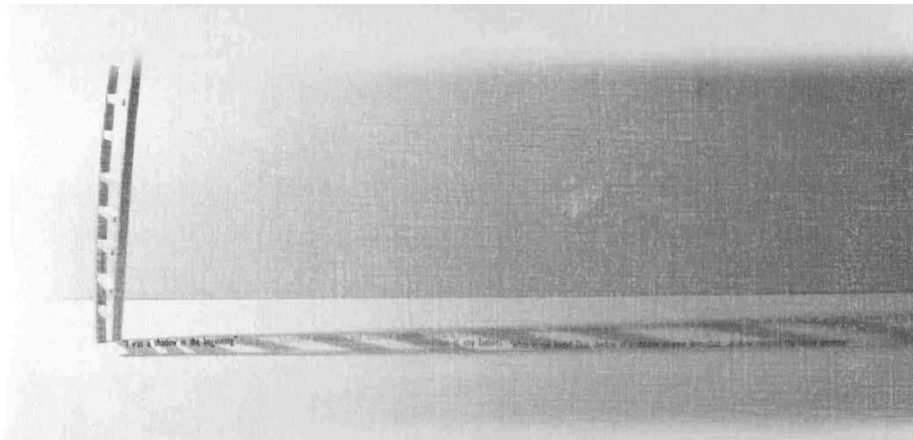
Throughout the studio, the topics and sincerity of these very personal projects were never challenged by the teaching staff, reflecting Jung's position that 'whether the stories are true is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is my fable, my truth. An autobiography is so difficult to write because we possess no standards, no objective foundation, from which to judge ourselves' (Jung, 1969, p. 3). For some students having to situate personal aspects about oneself and submit it publicly for assessment was initially confronting. As a response, over half the group gravitated towards the refuge of humour or humility which engendered the most optimistic responses. Commonly, through these critical ruminations, what students once may have regarded as ordinary and banal emerged as exquisite and extraordinary. However, what became overwhelmingly apparent in this exercise was that through these diverse expressions, the greatest majority acknowledged the influence

and presence of family friends and their attachment to place as being critical to their r'aison d'être.

*There is no doubt that for most of us, the childhood dwelling and its environs is the place of first getting in touch with who we are as distinct personalities. Indeed, we may have a clearer and more accurate sense of our true selves at that time than in later years, when the demands of societal and familial expectations create mask like overlays on the psyche, hence the critical importance of looking back at childhood places as sources of understanding more deeply who we are (Cooper Marcus, 1997, p. 31).*

### **something other**

In the second project titled *something other* students were required to continue an examination of their ardent interests and passions. In this stage of the studio the foci was a specific cultural aspect of South Australia to broaden students' cultural, political and social understanding of the region. For many, this was not an erudite endeavour but an investigation into a new field, prompting an unearthing of insightful, curious and contentious phenomena that were both diverse and enlightening for all involved in the studio. Some sensitive issues were investigated through projects that revealed controversial indigenous and environmental concerns. These were manifest with moving images and narratives exposing for example, the notorious history of the forgotten generation; the long term (and in part irreversible) environmental damage brought on by over farming by white settlers; and social justice achievements of the State. Other more contemporary examinations included photographic narratives on the local urban sites used in South Australia's renowned film industry and visual studies of burgeoning artistic subcultures emerging in the State.



*Figure 1: something other. (Trine Norberg)*

This submission was followed by two (non assessed) projects which students developed in concert with one another to further develop their subject matter into a conceptual spatial strategy and 'brand' their proposal. The most successful outcomes demonstrated a clear connection with their initial explorations, exploiting the resource of information and translating that into considered and sophisticated two and three dimensional propositions, the detail of which clearly echoed the preliminary submissions.

The *South* submissions were unlike traditional studio projects where students commonly regard theory and research as separate undertakings removed from the actual process of 'doing' design. In this studio, the design outcomes of these accumulative projects was the research and not ill-perceived as a separate, conventional exercise that can be only be best justified in studio pedagogy as mirroring the contractual phases of a real design project to be completed chronologically.

### **South**

In the fifth and final project students were issued with a site plan and the opportunity to select from five typological generic briefs. These were hospitality, commercial, retail, furniture and exhibition. Students were required to revise their conceptual design and with their chosen brief, produce a schematic design to accommodate their specific area of research. By this point, students had developed an informed and passionate connection with their subject in a manner not normally attained through traditional studio experiences. Their specific knowledge-base, in fact, exceeded that of their studio tutors and their design position was personally rather than externally generated.

Discussion of the following projects illustrates the cross-section of subject matter and describes the progression of idiosyncratic ideas of identity, memory, place and experiences and how these were translated into self generated design projects that projected the personal design position of the student.

### **Case studies**

The legacy of being raised along the lush, fertile strip edging the River Murray which had once more than adequately supported generations of families influenced one student to contrast the existing condition with recollections of her close knit family in a project she called *two lives living* as one. In the following project she recounts and counts down through the decades, the decreasing numbers of yielding fruit trees and the demise of the livelihood of this region which once supported a flourishing orchard industry fed by the now dwindling Murray. The work communicated the social and economic effects on the Riverland

community due to shrinking waterways and cheaper imported orange concentrate which has resulted in the loss of fruit trees, production and livelihood. In the final project, alternative viable uses for now worthless citrus trees were explored, resulting in the design of a series of furniture pieces using the forsaken citrus timber. These were curated into a politically motivated and highly creative public exhibition.

In a characteristically candid and idiosyncratic account of her eccentricities another student confesses in barely visible tiny flaxen script 'I like to dress a bit punky...I wear my socks when I should wash them...I fall off my bike usually when I'm drunk.. I don't understand what rhetoric means... I love dictionaries... I like bogans too I think I'm a bit of a bogan<sup>37</sup>'. This self effacing biography informed the subsequent study in which she further documented her passions and described both visually and eloquently the retreat of Warilbin (windy place) on the Yorke Peninsula 'governed by brown snakes and march flies. A place so quiet you can hear your thoughts as clear as the summer sky'. Her passion for and familiarity with this region culminated with an ambitious scheme to design an eco-tourist retreat responsive to the local environment and 'bogan' demographic. The design utilised only natural materials from the region and in consideration of the site characteristic, allowed for natural cross-ventilation and explored the threshold between interior and exterior.



*Figure 2: me myself i. (Michelle Lunnay)*



*Figure 3: something other. (Michelle Lunnay)*

The poignant memory of another student learning to tie shoelaces was represented through an unbroken swirling line of text in which she lyrically pens the rhyme her mother chanted... 'watch her tie her shoelaces my tiny little girl she looks so innocent trying my darling Gabrielle'. This theme of the continuous line was threaded through each of her subsequent



projects. In the second project, the student trod a path along her own street, mapping each of the early 20th Century inner-city workers cottages, photographically framing and recording each resident at the threshold.

The unselfconscious narrative of the everyday comprising ordinary, visceral and ubiquitous objects of daily life revealed itself again in the final project with a design for an exhibition of interpretive retail elements housed in a re-created interior of an old corner store. Through evocative images she recorded its morphosis from once being the foundation of the neighbourhood to become a fashionable inner-city upgraded domestic dwelling rendered invisibly into the greater urban context. The power of the supermarket conglomerates, increasing property values and changing demographic of dual income residents in inner-city Adelaide symbolically revealed itself in a lament for the loss of this local icon. This project not only celebrated the history and importance of the almost extinct corner store but also communicated a deeper message about the demise of the self supporting local neighbourhood and once strongly-held community values.

### **No reason to leave**

The perception of what a regional identity could be was rich and varied within the studio. Given the student cohort predominantly consisted of white Anglo Saxon twenty year old female students, there were some unexpected and perceptive outcomes. Although the strong notion of community bordering on familiarity arising from South Australia's parochial condition fondly referred to as 'the 2-degrees of separation factor' (Adams 2004), was a common phenomenon in many of the schemes. Not all students ventured beyond identifying this notion and failed to distinguish a regional condition. Some students persisted with cultural aspects that lacked the potential to develop into any type of spatial endeavour. It was apparent that these students had not undertaken enough specific investigation to broaden their cultural awareness peculiar to South Australia and therefore produced nothing more than a prosaic translation from the preliminary exercises into the final design proposal. Understandably, students naturally persisted with the things that were familiar and an intrinsic part of their everyday lives. As identified by Lefebvre, the everyday at 'its most basic...is simply "real life", the "here and now"; it is "sustenance, clothing, furniture, homes, neighbourhoods, environment" – ie material life-but with a "dramatic attitude" and "lyrical tone"' (Lefebvre cited in McLeod, 1997, p. 13). A small number made clear that their frame of reference, in the most banal cases, did not extend much beyond clubbing.

However, in more delightfully ordinary studies, students described and illustrated sensitive recollections of afternoons spent counting cars with grandpa on the front porch bench. In

another unpretentious project a towering student made joke of her loftiness with a depiction of herself as a giraffe in her work 'BIG'. The student ingeniously utilised reminiscences of family holidays to the giant tourist edifices<sup>4</sup> that signified the naive and honest local industries which for years successfully supported the progress of small country towns. As Berke describes 'there is poetry and consolation in the repetition of familiar things. This is not to romanticize dreary and oppressive routine...the everyday allows for personal rites but avoids prescribing rituals' (Berke, 1997, p. 224).

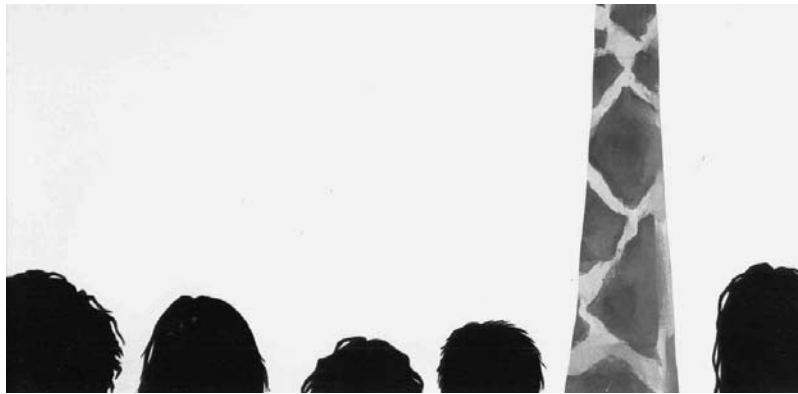


Figure 4: me myself I. (Meaghan Williams)

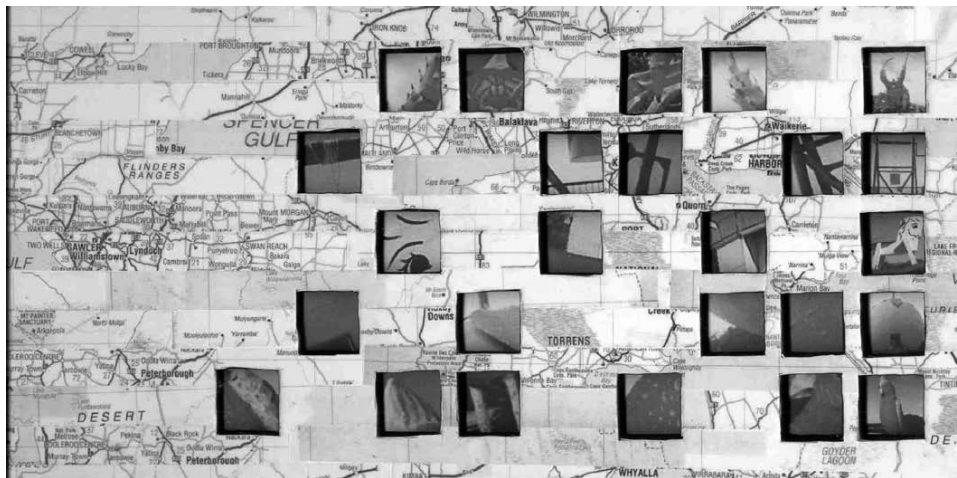


Figure 5: something other. (Meaghan Williams)

The majority of students successfully developed their design position in similar ways to those discussed in the case studies above and similarly expanded their research into an

inspired and comprehensive spatial proposal. For these students, the *South* studio provided a clearer direction for their future career path. For example the student from the Riverland has ambitions to specialise in furniture design practice and has identified possibilities to work locally with citrus timber. The student who recalled family holidays to visit giant tourist attractions is now undertaking an honours thesis on the theory of collections and the everyday, using “big” things as the focus for her proposition. An investigation into the sites of South Australian film production has resulted in another student securing set design and production work experience with a renowned film director. It has become apparent that the *South* studio has provided students with not only the knowledge but also the confidence to identify and explore individual practice options. Within the broad curriculum of this studio, students readily identified specific individual and idiosyncratic areas of study with which they have personal interest. This opportunity has stimulated their learning to the extent that some have become proactive in planning their future careers in unconventional areas.

As design educators recognise, theory is a critical and inseparable component of the design process. Design educators also recognise, however, that a theoretical or research-based design approach can be a difficult practice for students to embrace due to the ‘disconnectedness’ between research and theory and the doing of design. Students (and some practitioners) often perceive them as separate and discreet activities. The individual and local specificity of the *South* studio increased students’ confidence in their own philosophical and theoretical thinking. They recognised that their research, which in this studio was not only a necessary but also a creative activity, was critical to, and inseparable from, their design outcomes.

The *South* studio successfully provided an alternative design driver to the magnetic appeal of anonymous global sophistication and allowed students to use regionality as an incubator of ideas. Students’ awareness of regional identity and the opportunity to draw upon it as a design generator was unreservedly amplified. The notion of the commonly understood premise, ‘think globally; act locally’ in this studio was transposed to ‘think locally; act globally’. Most poignantly, students recognised the extraordinary possibilities that exist around them even in abandoned orchards, corner stores and little towns with big things in them.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Francesco Bonato's speech at the opening debate at the 2001 [X]periment Design Symposium, Adelaide, 26 October, made reference to the diminishing consideration that designers were able to spend on the actual conceptual design process as a result of client budget and time restrictions. Bonato cynically identified the two main tools of contemporary interior architecture as AutoCAD drawing software and the international design, interiors, lifestyle magazine *Wallpaper*.
- <sup>2</sup> Seminal publications on the tenant of memory as a design generator include Bastea (Ed.) (2004), Lyndon & Moore (1997) and Cooper Marcus (1997).
- <sup>3</sup> Bogan is a colloquial term for a person who is, or is perceived to be, unsophisticated or of a lower class background. The stereotype includes having speech and mannerisms that are considered to denote poor education and uncultured upbringing (mostly applied to white, working-class people).
- <sup>4</sup> In South Australia some of these include The Big Rocking Horse, Gumeracha; The Big Lobster, Kingston SE; and The Big Orange, Berri.