

Glenn Murcutt 2002 Laureate Biography

Glenn Murcutt is either one of Australia's best kept secrets, or one of the world's most influential architects. Perhaps, both. On the other hand, we should temper "secret" somewhat since he has been the subject of numerous books and magazine articles throughout the world. One of the first definitive works was *Glenn Murcutt Works and Projects* by Françoise Fromonot, first published in 1995. In that book, she describes Murcutt as the "first Australian architect whose work has attracted international attention."

His relatively low profile can best be explained by the fact that he works alone, primarily for clients who want houses that are not only environmentally sensitive, but provide privacy and security in a structure that pleases all the senses. In stark contrast to many of his contemporaries, Murcutt has declared, "I am not interested in designing large scale projects. Doing many smaller works provides me with many more opportunities for experimentation. Our building regulations are supposed to prevent the worst; they in fact fail to stop the worst, and at best frustrate the best—they certainly sponsor mediocrity. I'm trying to produce what I call minimal buildings, but buildings that respond to their environment."

"I have had to fight for my architecture. I have fought for it right from the outset because councils have clearly found the work a threat. For many designs I put to council, we either had to resort to a court for the outcome or better, negotiate a satisfactory result, always trying to avoid a compromise. I have had the greatest trouble with planning, building and health department staff, many of whom have backgrounds unrelated to architecture, but offer very conservative judgments in taste and aesthetics."

What manner of man and architect is this who could so openly state his opposition to the people who exercise so much control over what and how things should be built? A look at his colorful family, as well as how and where he was raised is a partial explanation. And "colorful" is a mild adjective in this application; Murcutt's life is the stuff of which movies are made.

Glenn Murcutt today readily credits his father as being a strong influence toward his architectural career. This brief reflection of family history further explains some of the influences that have shaped his work.

His father, Arthur Murcutt was born in Melbourne in 1899. By the time he was thirteen, he ran away from home, seeking something more than what he would describe later to his son, "the ugliness of life." He worked at odd jobs, from station hand to well sinker to sheep shearer before shipping off to Port Moresby, New Guinea, which had just been declared an Australian Mandated Territory at the end of World War I. There he worked as a bootmaker and saddler, as well as learning carpentry, before setting off with a partner on an adventure to prospect for gold in New Guinea. When they failed to find the precious metal, he landed work as superintendent of a plantation and builder of houses, and even had time to indulge his interest in music, buying a gold-plated saxophone.

When he returned to Port Moresby, he teamed up with another of his mates to build a yacht in which the two of them would sail across the Pacific. The mate was a fellow Australian, Errol Flynn, before he achieved his movie stardom in the United States. Their cruise was canceled when the boat sank shortly after being launched. As his father related the story, it sank due to sabotage to prevent Flynn from leaving the country owing money.

By the time 1932 arrived, Arthur Murcutt was operating a sawmill in Wau (still in New Guinea), but gold lured him and another partner into a second venture in prospecting, this time with enough success that it made him a fairly wealthy man. Two years into his gold mining days, he met and married Daphne Powys, the daughter of a photographer from Manly, Australia.

In 1936, with things going well in the gold business, Arthur Murcutt and his pregnant wife decided to go to the Berlin Olympics. During a stopover in London, their first son, Glenn Murcutt, was born. Their return to Australia was via the Aquitania to New York, and then a cross-country car trip to Los Angeles where they sailed the Pacific to reach home. With such round-the-world travels under his belt before

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the age of one, it's no wonder that Glenn Murcutt would later visit nearly every continent as a lecturer or visiting professor at leading universities. Of this, he says, "Teaching has proved a wonderful way to learn. Not only have my students provided challenges, but they are sounding boards for ideas, and my association with other teachers has provided great stimulus."

But back to 1937, when the Murcutt family goes into the wilds of New Guinea where they remained until the approaching Japanese at the outset of World War II drove them back to Australia in 1941. Those first five years of life in New Guinea had a profound influence on Glenn, whether actual memory or family recollections. That family now included a brother and sister for Glenn, Douglas and Nola.

Glenn's mother recounted to him how his father would take several books with him each day when he went up to the gold mining area, and his father confirmed that when Glenn was older, telling him, "I got my education in the forests of New Guinea because I had time to read." Jung, Freud and particularly Henry David Thoreau were his father's favorites, and the latter became one of Glenn's as well. "There is no doubt my father was a compulsive reader. He had many of Freud's first publications."

Glenn quotes a passage from Thoreau, "But the civilized man has the habits of the house. His house is his prison, in which he finds himself oppressed and confined, not sheltered and protected. He walks as if the walls would fall in and crush him, and his feet remember the cellar beneath. His muscles are never relaxed. It is a rare thing that he overcomes the house, and learns to sit at home in it, and the roof and the floor and walls support themselves, as the sky and trees and earth."

Murcutt wanted to experience his Marie Short house for a 24-hour period, which he did starting after the evening meal and every two hours going to a different part of the house to see what was happening. Says Murcutt, "It was wonderful to be there. I was in command. I was able to say if I wanted the wind to come in or not. I wasn't enslaved by the building. I could hear the frogs, the crickets; I could tell the day was coming by the sounds of the birds waking. The moon came through the skylight—patches of blue light entered the room. You can't experience that easily in the forest because you would be eaten by mosquitoes. Here I was in a man-made environment that is insect meshed, but able to experience ninety per cent of the outside environment. I could open up the house and freeze or close it and stay warm. That's what a house should do—to operate the building like sailing a boat."

He continues, "I also say that we should, as architects, observe how we dress according to our different climates. We layer our clothing, put more on when its cold, take more off when its hot—and I think our buildings should equally respond to their climates. Very few of my buildings have air conditioning. To my very good Finnish friends, I point out that they tend to put on more clothes, and we in Australia think more about taking them off—that's of course what most of my buildings do."

Glenn remembers their home in New Guinea, built by his father, with a roof of light weight corrugated iron, and perched on stilts a full story above ground to keep water and reptiles out, as well as affording some protection from quite dangerous local people, who at least once were discouraged from attacking when his mother fired a rifle over their heads. He elaborates, "The local people were very angry about our living in their land; we simply occupied it and took from it. Yes, they were dangerous. They were known as the Kukuku people, feared also by other national New Guineans, and even today, they are still feared."

Another childhood memory is that of aviation, which was a primary means of transportation, as well as the delivery of mail and materials. Glenn quotes the statistic that in the 1930's, the Wau and Bulolo airports in New Guinea had three times the number of passengers and cargo arriving and departing as any other airport in the world. Many of the planes were Junker G/31 and W/34 models whose wings and fuselage were covered with corrugated duralumin.

At one point, Glenn says he was concerned that he was becoming known as the "corrugated Gal Iron King." He points out that he hasn't used galvanized iron just to be using it as a gimmick. He says, "I use

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it because it's an important material for the things I want to do. It's capable of giving me that thinness, that lightweight quality, an edge, a fineness, economy and strength and profile. I'm able to bend it and curve it in two dimensions. I love it because it reflects the quality of the light of the day and surrounding colors. On a dull day, the building dulls down; on a bright day, the building is bright. When laid with the ribs horizontal, the upper surface of the corrugation picks up the sky light and the lower surface, the ground light—accentuating the horizontal. That's a material which responds to its environment."

Speaking further about his use of corrugated iron, Murcutt says, "Horizontal linearity is an enormous dimension of this country, and I want my buildings to feel part of that. Take the iron sheeting on outside walls, for example, generally it runs vertically, and I believe it should run horizontally. It's not only logical in terms of the material itself, but it's logical in terms of a stud frame to fix it horizontally. If it runs vertically, it competes with the trees. I don't want to compete with trees, let them complement the horizontality of the man-made iron sheets."

But to return to earlier history, his father, Arthur Murcutt, proved to be an astute business man, investing his gold earnings in land in Sydney, Australia, so when World War II was over, he established a joinery shop in Manly Vale, having learned carpentry from his work in New Guinea and in the Royal Australian Air Force. He became increasingly interested in architecture, subscribing to Architectural Forum, where he saw Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth house, and was so impressed by it that he made it required reading for Glenn, who studied the article three times before being quizzed by his father about the design.

This Miesian influence on the architecture of Glenn Murcutt would prove to be long-lasting. He wholeheartedly adheres to the well-known principle "less is more," and another that "form is not the aim of our work, but only the result." In 1974, when designing the Marie Short house in Kempsey, Murcutt protected the house from insects, snakes and large lizards during floods when they would swim to the high ground. He says, "A house set on the ground would see frogs, snakes, etc. inside; being off the ground provided a place below the floor for these creatures and dry, reptile free platform for human habitation." There is a similarity to the way Glenn suspended the wooden floor above ground for this house to the way Mies had done with Farnsworth house to protect it from floods of the Fox River in Illinois. His father also introduced him to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Gordon Drake, the Keck brothers, Harry Weese, Edward Larrabee Barnes, Schindler, Philip Johnson and Charles Eames, as well as some of Australia's post-war modernists such as Sydney Ancher and Arthur Baldwinson.

Murcutt senior designed and built several houses for his family (as well as several speculative houses) over the years—all of which are evidence of his interest in modern architecture. When Glenn was 13, his father assigned him the task of making of a model house of where they lived at the time, and then photographing it. Anyone looking at the model could see further evidence of his father's efforts to design in what would now be called a modernist idiom.

Glenn remembers that his father had a keen awareness of the environment, saying, "He would take me up the hillside and analyze a plant with me. We'd do that with all manner of species of plants and trees. He tried to stop people from cutting the trees, and when he couldn't stop them, he'd go out and plant seeds for more."

"There were lessons to be learned from dad every day," continues Glenn, "whether it was the landscape, nature, music, swimming, woodworking, and household chores. I had learned to swim by the time I was two and a half. Dad taught us to be disciplined, and how to accomplish a lot in every day. Yes, he scared all five children, but he was also very warm."

Glenn admits to doing rather badly in elementary school and the early years in high school, but later on in high school, he had what he describes as some really great teachers, singling out one particular piano teacher as being the best and most gentle in Sydney. "I became quite reasonable at performances and started to play some really interesting classical compositions by Bach, Liszt and Beethoven."

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At university, he remembers “the most grueling experience” he’d ever had. “Sixty students,” he recalls, “undertook the final year five-day design exam. At the end of the third day, three fourths of them had ‘designed’ and completed some beautiful final drawings. By day four, only six of us were still there. By the end of that day, only three of us remained. On the fifth day, I found a worthwhile idea and went on to complete seven large freehand drawings.”

Murcutt continues, “What I learnt from that experience was that architecture often requires time to evolve if it is to be of any consequence. I recall that those who completed the design examination quickly, presenting some beautiful drawings, were somewhat short on thinking!”

With a diploma awarded in December of 1961, he took a walking tour of Tasmania with a school friend before starting work. A year later, he was able to take a trip to Europe where he visited Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, France, Holland, Germany, Poland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland over a two year period. It was on this journey that he saw his first Alvar Aalto building, a cultural centre in Wolfsburg, Germany. He found it “remarkable in its sections, planning, use of materials, detail and form.” He went on to Bremen to see Aalto’s 22-story high-rise apartments. Glenn’s reaction: “Everything Aalto did started from first principles and had a quality of being thoroughly thought through.” Little did he know that in 1992 he would be presented with the seventh Alvar Aalto Medal.

The jury for that award, specifically praised Murcutt’s work for “the convincing synthesis of regional characteristics, climate-conditioned solutions, technological rationality and unconstrained visual expression.” Glenn has since commented that he thought it significant that Jørn Utzon, Alvaro Siza and Tadao Ando were all previous winners of the Aalto Medal, and in his words, “all of them sought to marry modern architecture to the place, the territory, the landscape.”

Following that trip to Europe, Glenn returned to Sydney to work in the firm of Ancher, Mortlock, Murray & Wooley, until 1969 when he founded his own architectural firm. He had long ago decided when he was still at university that he would prefer to work at his profession as a sole practitioner, which he has done ever since. He feels that by working alone, figuring where that next dollar is coming from is far less pressing than in a large firm. “When the need arises,” he says, “such as a very good project offered requiring more input than one person is able to do alone, I work in association with other architects whom I greatly respect. This rather than employing staff—that way, we share an equality. Further, as a one-man office, I have been able to experiment with wind patterns, materials, light, climate, spaces, and the characteristics of the site.”

As a result of a travel grant awarded to him by Royal Australian Institute of Architects for “a degree of creativity in upgrading older houses using new techniques without destroying them,” he made a second tour of Europe in 1973. It was on that trip that he first saw the Maison de Verre by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoët in Paris. Murcutt describes his visit there as “a liberating experience.” On the way to Europe, a stopover in Mexico afforded him the opportunity to see Mies van der Rohe’s Bacardi office building, which he described as “beautifully put together.” He notes, “I saw some beautiful sculpture, water gardens in Mexico City, but didn’t find out that they were by Luis Barragán until I returned home.” Barragán has been another continuing influence on Murcutt. Another highlight of that trip was a visit to Chicago where he saw the Robie House (by Frank Lloyd Wright) and a trip to Racine, Wisconsin to see the Johnson Wax administration building and research tower. He also saw more of Mies’ and Louis Sullivan’s works.

Visiting Boston, he had the opportunity to visit Walden Pond, and the site of Henry David Thoreau’s home. “I lived 25 years in one day, in terms of memory and what my father had talked about concerning Thoreau,” says Glenn. “I was so excited, I was tearful.” His father had read Thoreau and responded positively to his philosophy, passing much of that on to Glenn.

In New York City, which he found incredibly exciting, but somewhat frightening, he was, to quote him, “really impressed with the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Centre and the Ford Foundation

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Headquarters by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo; to produce that environment in an office building was terrific.”

His travels have continued over the years, particularly as he has become a much in demand lecturer and visiting professor in architecture schools all over the world, visiting some twenty countries. In 1997, Murcutt married Wendy Lewin, a fellow architect with whom he has worked on a number of projects. He has two sons by a previous marriage: Nicholas, 37, who is an architect; and Daniel, 35, who is an assistant library technician; and a step-daughter, Anna Lewin-Tzannes, 13.

Some seventeen years ago, in the foreword to a book by Philip Drew, titled *Leaves of Iron* and sub-titled *Glenn Murcutt: Pioneer of an Australian Architectural Form*, Murcutt wrote: “Landscape in Australia is remarkable. I have learned much from scrutinising the land and its flora. There is an over-riding horizontality. The flora is tough. It is in addition, durable, hardy and yet supremely delicate. It is so light at its edges that its connection with the deep sky vault is unsurpassed anywhere. The sunlight is so intense for most of the continent that it separates and isolates objects. The native trees read not so much as members of a series of interconnected elements, but as groupings of isolated elements. The high oil content of so many of the trees combined with the strong sunlight results in the foliage shimmering silver to weathered greys with an affinity towards the pink browns to olives. The foliage is not dense generally and the shadows are therefore a dappled light. This distinguishes our landscape from that of most other countries where the soft light serves to connect the elements of the landscape, rather than separate them. My architecture has attempted to convey something of the discrete character of elements in the Australian landscape, to offer my interpretation in built form.”

And further, “When I consider the magic of our landscape. I am continually struck by the genius of the place, the sunlight, shadows, wind, heat and cold, the scents from our flowering trees and plants, and, especially the vastness to the island continent. All these factors go to make a land of incredible strength combined with an unimaginable delicacy.”

So it is not surprising when his words go on: “I am stirred to the point of anger when I see what continues to be done by so called progress. The destruction of the flora, the displacement of the fauna and all of it with the blessing, if not active collusion of our subdivision regulations. I am not rejecting urbanization. I am not seeking a kind of utopia in the bush—far from it. I am involved with and recognize the importance of a varied milieu. I am opposed to the total taming of this land and the loss of the wildness of the native scene. The land appeals for care and we need to become friends with the landscape and not be threatened by it.”

But his design decisions are not simply based on aesthetics, his houses are designed using materials that have consumed as little energy as possible in their manufacture, and will consume as little as possible in the operation of the house. His houses respond to all manner of climatic conditions, producing their own shade, ventilation and in most cases function without air conditioning or heating other than a fireplace. Some houses in the colder regions have back-up under-floor heating which is not often used.

The Aboriginal people in Western Australia have a saying, “to touch this earth lightly,” which is a plea for man not to disturb nature any more than necessary. Because Glenn Murcutt’s architecture conveys that thought with his houses that float above the land, if not on stilts a full story high, but on footings that disturb the land minimally. It is not surprising to find another book authored by Drew in 1999, titled *Touch This Earth Lightly*, and subtitled *Glenn Murcutt in His Own Words*.

A typical passage from that book about the Marie Short farm house illustrates his passion for fitting the architecture to the site: “It gave me the opportunity to really begin to understand what Australia was like. What its climate was like, the humidity level, the amount of shade we require, the wind pattern, the sort of evaporative factor we require in order to be comfortable in shade, in a climate such as ours. One of the main discoveries was that anything less than a fully opening wall was inadequate in our

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climate (at Kempsey). In my opinion, an opening wall for summer conditions is essential to cooling all spaces. In summer and the change of season, everyone, without exception, has commented on what a delightfully temperate building it is, even on the most extreme days.”

The Australian bush fires are world-famous, and while Murcutt acknowledges fire is important in his country especially for the propagation of many plants, he has to plan ways to save his structures if they encounter fire. In the Simpson-Lee house at Mt. Wilson, there is a pool alongside the entrance walkway that holds part of the water necessary for the built-in sprinkler system in case of fire. (It also provides a reflective medium for the sunlight that bounces onto the ceiling of the interior of the house.) In the Munro farm house at Bingara, he devised a plan that had two wells to collect the roof water. These supplied enough recirculated water to sprinkle the house for 5-6 hours a day during the hottest season.

Controlling how much sunlight penetrates his houses and manipulating the breezes at various times of the year and the day is another important facet to his design process. He’s re-introduced in Sydney storm blinds, a version of Venetian blinds for outside that are made of metal. He had learned in his school days that once the heat entered a building, there was little else one could do but air-condition the building so the sensible solution was to provide a system of screens or blinds that prevents the sun from reaching the glass in the first place. Murcutt has developed forms of slatted timber and metal screens for sun control which also achieve privacy yet maintain the movement of air.

He also uses slats set at particular angles as screens above glass not only as sun control, allowing the entry of winter sunlight and excluding it in the summer, but also to allow for the appreciation of the sky from within the house day and night and seasonally. Even the pitch of the roof is variable according to the latitude and climate of the region. In some areas, he does overlapping layers of roofs so that the air can move between the layers, extracting roof space summer heated air.

Murcutt says, “A building should be able to open up and say, ‘I am alive and looking after my people,’ or instead, ‘I’m closed now, and I’m looking after my people as well.’ This to me is the real issue, buildings should respond. Look at the gills of a fish, or animals when they become hot. When we get hot, we perspire. Buildings should do similar things. They should open and close and modify and remodify and blinds should turn and open and close, open a little bit without complication. They should do all these things. That is a part of architecture for me, the resolution of levels of light that we desire, the resolution of the wind that we wish for, the modification of the climate as we want it. All this makes a building live.”

One of Glenn’s favorite quotations, which he is not quite sure whether it comes from his father or from Thoreau, whom his father was so fond of quoting: “Since most of us spend our lives doing ordinary tasks, the most important thing is to carry them out extraordinarily well.”

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