Glenn Murcutt
2002 Laureate
Essay

The Architecture of Glenn Marcus Murcutt

By Kenneth Frampton
Ware Professor of Architecture,
The Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation
Columbia University, New York

"I'm very interested in buildings that adapt to changes in climatic conditions according to the seasons, buildings capable of responding to our physical and psychological needs in the way that clothing does. We don't turn on the air-conditioning as we walk through the streets in high summer. Instead, we change the character of the clothing by which we are protected. Layering and changeability: this is the key, the combination that is worked into most of my buildings. Occupying one of these buildings is like sailing a yacht; you modify and manipulate its form and skin according to seasonal conditions and natural elements, and work with these to maximize the performance of the building. This involvement with the building also assists in the care for it. I am concerned about the exploitation of the natural environment in order to modify the internal climate of buildings. Architects must confront the perennial issues of light, heat, and humidity control yet take responsibility for the method and the materials by which, and out of which, a building is made. The considerations, context, and the landscape are some of the factors that are constantly at work in my architecture."

—Glenn Murcutt, 1996

Seventeen years serve to separate the award of the Pritzker Prize to Glenn Murcutt from the first comprehensive monograph on his work; Philip Drew's *Leaves of Iron* published in Sydney in 1985. Despite its somewhat indifferent distribution, this book had the effect of consolidating the nascent Murcutt myth which was by then already an indicator of the resurgence of Australian architecture. Just over a decade before, that is to say, by the earlier 70s, Murcutt had already established something of a reputation as a designer of elegant Neo-Miesian houses culminating in his single storey, steel framed Laurie Short house, built in the Terry Hills near Sydney, a work which already departed in significant ways from the abstract purity of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1950) by which it had been inspired. Apart from its empirical spatial organization, this distanciation was never more evident than in two seemingly inconsequential but nonetheless telltale features; first, the relatively intimate use of terra-cotta and brick paving, a treatment reminiscent of Philip Johnson's Glass House, New Canaan (1949), and second, the provision of sliding louvred screens on the eastern façade in order to shield the living room and patio from the low-angle sun.

The three and a half month world tour that Murcutt undertook in 1973, beginning in Mexico City and Los Angeles, traversing the States and going on to Western Europe with a stop-off in Mykonos before returning to Australia, had a catalytic impact on the rest of his career, most decisively perhaps because of three experiences; his passing encounters with the Californian and Catalan 'regionalists' Craig Ellwood and José Antonio Coderch and the epiphany of Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre in Paris (1932) that in effect demonstrated the possibility of evolving an astylistic architecture in which tectonic invention was inseparable from poetic form. One should also mention in passing the one other French influence that deeply affected Murcutt's *parti pris* in the mid-70s, namely, Jean Prouvé's Maison Tropicale of 1949.

Murcutt's brief contact with the Greek island vernacular took him back to his roots, to the relatively primitive environment of his childhood in New Guinea, to the nature writings of Thoreau much cherished by his father, and above all, to the realization that a revitalized Australian architecture would have to be grounded not only in its greatly varying climate and landscape, together with its exotic flora and fauna, but also in the repressed Aboriginal culture that was to have such a decisive influence on the evolution of Murcutt's domestic architecture. It was this plus a profound respect for the traditional Aboriginal ethic of "touching the earth lightly"—the moral principle of not disturbing nature more than is absolutely necessary—that led to Murcutt's conception of a new Australian domus in the form of a long and

narrow, light-weight, roof work, comparable in its sheltering function to the bower of a tree or, in more morphological terms, to the turned up collar of an overcoat that shelters from the wind while subtly opening its front towards the sun.

Lastly, there was the ubiquitous, long forgotten, corrugated iron roof vernacular of the Australian outback to which Murcutt turned immediately after his world tour to create the louvered Maria Short farmhouse at Crescent Head, overlooking the Maria River in 1974, his second house for the Short family in less than two years. In this canonical piece, he succeeded in combining the Semperian primitive hut of 1852 with the tectonic refinement of Mies' Farnsworth House, along with a vertebrae approach to basic structural frame taken from Prouvé's Maison Tropicale. It is just this somewhat unlikely conjunction that inaugurated a spectacular series of light-weight, single-storey houses, elevated clear of the ground, framed in either timber or steel, or in a mixture of both and invariably roofed and/or clad in corrugated metal. It is important to note that the linear room arrangement and the shallow depth derived from the need to maximize cross-ventilation for every room while simultaneously deploying the roof overhang and the back of the house, facing south, in such a way as to eclipse the noonday high summer sun and to admit at the same time in winter. Over the next fifteen years, he would build well over thirty houses in this unique "outback" manner, ringing the changes on every conceivable frame, truss, louver, vent, gutter, down-pipe, and roof profile, varying from mono- to double-pitch, to arcuated form before arriving at the metal-roofed but otherwise totally timber-clad, Marika-Alderton House, completed in East Arnheim Land in 1994.

Without denying the tectonic elegance of such masterpieces as the Nicholas House, Mount Irvine (1980), the Fredericks House, Jamberoo (1982), and the Simpson-Lee House, Mount Wilson (1994), one may surely argue that the Marika-Alderton house is a particularly canonical work for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it was built for an Aboriginal client, the artist Marmburra Banduk Marika and her partner Mark Alderton. It is significant that it was erected in the face of stiff local opposition and that itwould in all probability never have been realized had it not been for the fact that Marika was a memberof the Australia council and on the board of the National Gallery. The realization of this house had the effect of posing an alternative to the standard of the Aboriginal housing in the Northern Territory, and Murcutt has since realized another house in the same region for an Aboriginal client.

The Marika-Alderton house embodied a number of major innovations, including its assembly from prefabricated timber components and its introduction of outriding fins that aside from reducing lateral wind velocity, and shielding the interior from low angle sun and sunrise and sunset, also provides for privacy between adjacent bedrooms. Built about an elegant structural steel frame finished in aluminum, and fitted with equally elegant aluminum roof vents so as to discharge the build-up of air pressure under cyclonic conditions, it is all together more cubistic and substantial than his earlier architecture. Thus, while the fabric is still relatively light-weight, the house, when fully opened out to catch the breeze, assumes a more palpable, three-dimensional plastic character; an effect that is due in no small degree to the dense red ochre of its fabric when set against the gleaming aluminum finish of its superstructure and roof.

Strangely enough for someone who has been in practice for over a quarter of a century, Murcutt has realized very few public buildings, first, the Museum of Local History, Kempsey NSW, built in three consecutive phases, between 1976 and 1988, second, the Visitor's Information Center, Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory with Troppo Architects (1994) and, at a much more monumental scale, the Arthur & Yvonne Boyd Education Center, in Riversdale, NSW (1996–99) designed in collaboration with Wendy Lewin and Reg Lark. Where Kempsey and Kakadu were really expanded versions of Murcutt's corrugated roof, 'long house' typology, the Boyd Center is in some measure an amplification of the syntax of the Marika-Alderton House. At the same time, its giant, upswept entry canopy, framing the surrounding bucolic landscape, uncannily recalls, together with its large multi-purpose hall, the Doricist massing and proportions of the stone-clad promenade and peristyle of Asplund's Woodland Cemetery, Stockholm (1940). This all but neoclassical character stands in strong contrast

to the proliferation of the bedroom fins that issue from the flanks of the tripartite residential block, located to one side behind the monumental portico and hall. Despite these syntactical innovations, one notes how Murcutt still maintains the "outback" trope of low-pitched corrugated metal roofs in the form of articulated rain and sun shields, covering different segments of the complex.

A more systematic separation between sun and rain roofs will occur in the next public complex of consequence, namely, the Lightning Ridge, NSW, multi-purpose center currently under development. In this case, the shade-roofing will be made up of retractable white cloth stretched on top of steel framing supported by pipe columns. This serves as a protective verandah extending around the perimeter of an elongated complex made up of two converging single-storey wings. The rooms themselves are variously covered by insulated rain roofing, constructed out of monopitched or curved corrugated zinc or iron sheeting. The solid perimeter walls are to be built of an earth/cement mix while openings within these enclosures will be variously filled with sliding components and louvered panels much in the manner of Rudolf Schindler's Kings Road House, Los Angeles of 1921. This complex assembly promises to reconcile the rustic directness of the Japanese teahouse tradition with the free-style montage of occidental constructivism at its best.

The climatic affinity obtaining between New South Wales and California surfaces at this juncture although Murcutt's anti-air conditioning response to the exigencies of climate is perhaps a more sensitive and appropriate approach than what presently passes for normative practice in Southern California today. This is not only evident in the sustainable aspirations of his work, but also in his attitude towards landscape that promises to be particularly well handled in Lightning Ridge where the complex will be folded into the contours and where the promenade linking the two wings will be elegantly paved in cement slabs and the whole will be surrounded by dense stands of eucalyptus and bottle brushes. The net result will be a building that is all too literally inseparable from the landscape.

Murcutt's general principles as set forth in the gloss at the beginning of this essay surely express more adequately than any sequential account of a single project, the fundamentally ethical intention sustaining his architecture. Designing with nature, to paraphrase Ian McHarg, is not a mere slogan with Murcutt, and in all of his works he has remained extremely aware of the way in which every intervention impacts the ecosystem in which one is working, from the drainage of storm water to the modification of native vegetation, from the erosion of soil to the embodiment of energy in all its hidden aspects.

To this end, he has habitually adopted a series of strategies to mitigate this impact both within and without the confines of his architecture; from the provision of southern thermal walls to ward off the winter cold, to the opening of the structure to the north to admit the winter sun; from the provision of storage tanks to collect rainwater to the manipulable screening of windows that open onto the landscape, from the installation of vents and fans to facilitate cross ventilation to paving walkways in dark gray tiles that absorb the heat during the day and release it at night. This is a didactic, proto-ecological building culture that in no way inhibits the poetic potential of the field. On the contrary, it enhances it by deepening its rapport with nature. It is this finally that bestows on Murcutt's work relevance for world architecture as a whole and it is also this that assures the profundity and promise of his approach in terms of its further development.

For more information, please contact:

Martha Thorne, Executive Director
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
71 South Wacker Drive
Suite 4700
Chicago, Illinois 60606
email: marthathorne@pritzkerprize.com