

## Quiet architecture Richard Kirk



Richard Kirk is the founder of Richard Kirk Architect (RKA). Since he established RKA in 1995, the practice has grown from designing humble timber houses in the suburbs of Brisbane to developing major urban and institutional projects all over the region, with studios in Beijing and Kuala Lumpur. Major recent works include the University of Queensland's flagship Advanced Engineering Building, the ABC Headquarters in Southbank, Brisbane, and first prize in the recent two-stage international design competition for the National WWI and WWII Memorials in Canberra. Throughout this journey though, his work has consistently reflected a desire to make places that are memorable and relevant to the communities that they serve. Here, he elaborates on how growing up in a graceful and intimately detailed timber Queenslander has shaped his love of unassuming, but quietly powerful buildings and the craft of making.

### From the ground-up

Can you tell us a little about your personal architectural journey, in particular your early years?

I spent time in Western Queensland as a young boy. Here, the importance of making things that last was very important to the way the place functioned and endured, as it was an incredibly harsh environment. Building was an important event. It was a mysterious process that intrigued me.

I always had an interest in drawing and I spent a great deal of time making things and was drawn to people who had the skill and knowledge to do so. There is a sense of integrity to the process of making something.

The place I remember first is an old timber Queenslander house we lived in. It had a grace about it, with its high ceilings and intricate detail of screens and fans adding to its mystery and memorable quality. It also, in some ways, had a personality, as it was a living building – it creaked as you walked around it or when we roared our bikes on the verandah, and the roof crackled when the sun rose and roared in the rain. These houses are more like tents made of timber, which is possibly why I have such an affinity with it as a material. Every surface was timber, including the fine detail, and all of it was crafted in an image of grandeur.

The early work of Frank Gehry resonated with me as a student. The work then was of a scale and budget that you could imagine yourself doing. The simplicity and contextual response in terms of materiality and form made a lot of sense. It was probably more than a coincidence as there were so many parallels with South East Queensland and California – the same blue sky, the coastal setting and the same level of decay in the surrounding context. It was a reassessment and revaluing of a place irrespective of the consensus. It was this keen eye that obviously set Gehry on his amazing trajectory, but I like his contemporary work much less.

Over the past few years I have been interested in the work of Álvaro Siza, a modernist Portuguese architect. His architecture is the opposite of Gehry's – it is completely restrained but is incredibly stimulating to visit and experience. He is completely focused on the spatial experience and ordering that in a very controlled manner. The materiality and forms then take a secondary role as the facilitators of the experience – in a way it is what I call a quiet architecture. Quiet architecture is unassuming, but it provides for a very powerful experience that is unfortunately not so fashionable in comparison to the current obsession with shape-making.



## The ugliness of expediency

**To what degree do you believe Australian social and cultural conditions have an influence on Australian architecture?**

Expediency underpins many things in Australia. So often the discussion is about speed, economy and simplicity, rarely about quality, longevity and legacy. There are moments of excellence, such as the Sydney Opera House, when the country received this absolute gem. Equally, in the late 19th century we built stone public buildings, clearly with a sense of place and of a particular future in mind. We rarely build today for the long term or with the sense of the importance of making streets and public places that are beautiful. Admittedly, many of Australia's places, towns and cities are very young and, in a sense, we are in a pioneering period. So, I'm optimistic this phase will pass.

It is crucial that the public sector improves its governance in the delivery of projects. Our public sector skills here are possibly some of the worst when viewed in an international context. Other places have a much greater ambition for design quality and innovation. In many instances, here we see it as something to be suppressed or denied – the ugliness of expediency.

## Architecture on the edge

**How do you see the role of architecture and the architect?  
How do you develop your architectural ideas?**

Architecture's highest role, responsibility and privilege, is making places that are memorable and relevant. In short, designing buildings of enduring beauty that are confident in their environment and respectful to the needs of the communities they serve. Buildings that only consider their appearance, as opposed to their role within the setting, can only be of short-term benefit to place.

How the vision or idea is realised is crucial. It is a concern when the ambition for a project runs ahead of the thought about how the project is made. Aligning the ideas about the project with how it is to be, is where the best work occurs, and this is an important role for the architect.

Some of the most amazing projects emerge from collaboration. In our projects, the rule is it doesn't matter where the idea comes from. It's adopted if it's good and good ideas always have consensus.

Architecture needs to be pushed to the point where there is potential for failure. The projects that are safe don't teach us anything in our practice. Sometimes we complete a project and it is not clear until it is finished how far we have pushed certain aspects. The idea that projects are a journey, where you don't know where you are going to end up, is the most stimulating part. I'm not talking about doing really crazy things, but the internal challenge you give yourself about how to push what it is you do. This is why great projects are always great partnerships with the client and builder.

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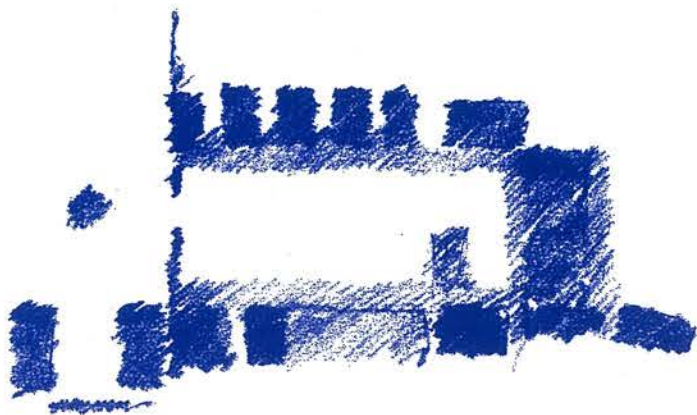


Figure-ground drawing of Brookfield Residence, capturing the play of solids and voids around a central courtyard

Architects have to engage with an increasingly wide range of people in delivering a project. We need to communicate an abstract idea to our collaborators, which they convey to a client, and they in turn need to express it in physical terms to the person who has to assemble or make it. In that sense, architects have to walk their ideas through an incredibly complex process. Some of our major projects can run for five or six years and the only thing that all the participants in the process seek from us is clarity of communication – we are simply the nexus in a very heterogeneous process.

## Building futures

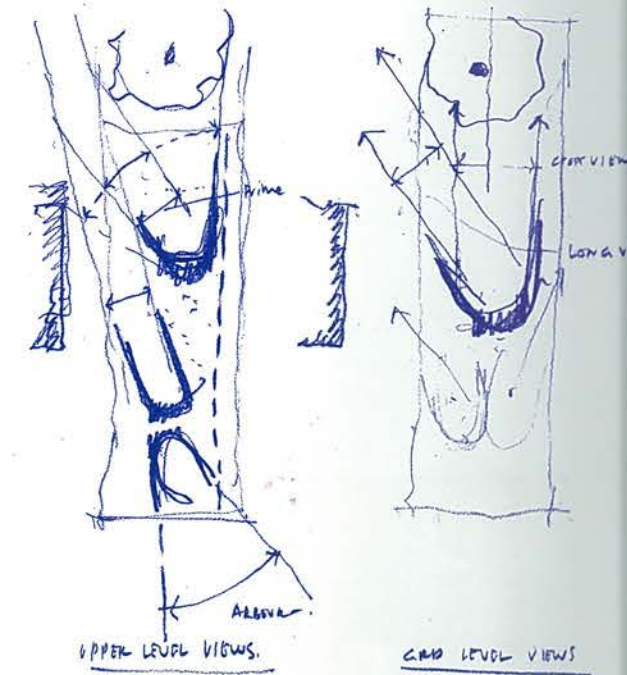
**What have been the major changes in architecture since you started out? What do you believe the future will bring?**

The first key change has been the shift from hand-drawn production to CAD. The process itself was not a pretty one – superb hand production skills were initially replaced by turgid CAD-based production. I embraced the potential of this form of production and it is amazing how the mode of production has impacted what it is we make.

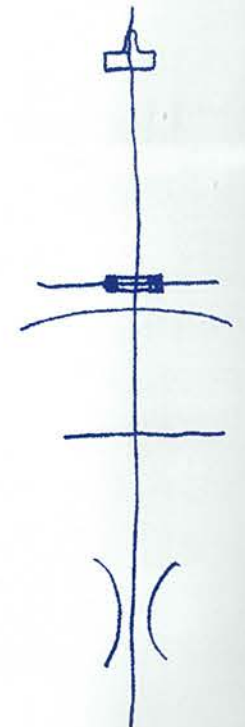
The pervasiveness of the internet in architectural publishing has also moved the focus on to imagery rather than a highly measured and articulated discourse. The traditional hegemony of a few English architectural periodicals is largely over and with the overload of information there is hardly any time to keep informed. You have to fight to find the time to stay informed.

This movement towards novel imagery has tracked the growth of branded architecture and the 'starchitect,' coinciding with the greatest urban expansion in history – in China. I think the predilection for the use of the 'starchitect' for the sake of simply acquiring one of 'their' objects will wane. There is a lack of intrinsic value to the communities that these buildings are being developed for.

Recently, I gave a lecture in China comparing Zaha Hadid's Guangzhou Opera House and the Sydney Opera House by Utzon. They are useful to compare, with the two buildings having the same function, completed by architects working in another country, and realised through an international competition. The lecture focuses on the importance of procurement and of the architectural idea being one that is about occupation, not only about form. The Utzon idea is a powerful one about the plinth and the roof as key elements defining the place. Conversely, Hadid's building was entirely about form and nothing about the experience of the place. Which is why Guangzhou has something alien, whereas Sydney has an object that has almost defined it as a place – it has become the place.



Sketch illustrating sight lines for Arbour House



Sketch from the competition winning scheme for the National WWI & WWII Memorial Canberra, describing the proposed memorials' relationship to the Griffin land axis





This was my first project where the project brief was incredibly ambitious. It was ambitious because it expected the architect to make a building that was transformative – one that would make a real difference. It sought to change the way engineers learn, establish a new benchmark for sustainability and to be a place that elevated the social and collaborative aspects of learning.”

RICHARD KIRK

2013

— **Advanced Engineering Building, University of Queensland**  
Brisbane, Queensland  
Richard Kirk Architect / HASSELL  
Richard Kirk / Paul Chang / Yee Jien / Mark Loughnan / Mark Roehrs / Mark Craig

The result of a limited design competition, the Advanced Engineering Building (AEB) is a benchmark for sustainable architecture with a particular focus on the aesthetic, environmental and structural strengths of using locally produced timber in a building. Structural timber forms the facade and long span glulam roof trusses feature in one of Australia's largest timber-framed auditoriums. The use of local Queensland timber became central to developing sustainability initiatives beyond the singular energy strategies typically targeted in large projects.  
Image — Peter Bennetts



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2012

1 — **ABC Brisbane Accommodation**  
Brisbane, Queensland  
Richard Kirk Architect  
Richard Kirk / Karl Eckermann / Mathew Mahoney / Paul Chang / Glen Millar / Sam Clegg

The 15,000m<sup>2</sup> headquarter building for the ABC's Brisbane operations has become a new landmark destination. It reinforces and contributes to the Queensland Government's vision for the South Bank precinct, maximising activation and engagement with the public. Containing offices, specialist radio and television spaces with associated support spaces, a 600m<sup>2</sup> rehearsal studio for the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, and café and retail facilities, the building is designed to a 5-star Green Star rating and a 4.5-star NABERS as-built rating.  
Image — Christopher Frederick Jones

2012

2 — **Fitzgibbon Community Centre**  
Brisbane, Queensland  
Richard Kirk Architect  
Richard Kirk / Yee Jien / Luke Hayward

A mixed-use cultural centre for the neighbourhood of Fitzgibbon. The heart of the scheme is a large covered space, which forms a gateway on the axis from the new commercial centre of Fitzgibbon to the bushland trails to the north. This gateway acts as a starting and finishing point for the trails, with amenities and a retail outlet. While formally abstract and demure the centre makes provocative use of materials, which highlight it as a landmark in the community.  
Image — Christopher Frederick Jones

Unbuilt

3 — **UQ Business School, University of Queensland**  
Brisbane, Queensland  
Richard Kirk Architect / HASSELL  
Richard Kirk / Yee Jien / Paul Chang / Sam Clegg / Lynn Wang

The winning entry in a limited design competition for the University of Queensland Business School (UQBS), this building will occupy a prominent site in the university forecourt while establishing a new identity for the business school. The design organises planning in two volumes joined by a central atrium, locating functional areas horizontally and vertically to create a communal building considerate to the hierarchy of the Business School. ESD initiatives will include operable facade systems, mixed-mode ventilation, a solar array and rainwater harvesting.

Unbuilt

4 — **Brookfield Residence**  
Brisbane, Queensland  
Richard Kirk Architect  
Richard Kirk / Jonathan Ward

The proposed new residence replaces a house built by the client's family on the site 35 years earlier. The residence occupies a high spur line west of the city, with its elevated position affording panoramic views. The house follows a courtyard typology, using this idea as an organising principle to create a serene centre. From the point of entry the visitor transitions through a series of courtyards, each organised around water features reflecting the sky above and drawing it down into the house.

Due 2015

5 — **WWI + WWII Memorials**  
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory  
Richard Kirk Architect  
Richard Kirk / Jonathan Ward / Fedor Medek / Karl Eckermann

RKA received first prize in an international two stage design competition for the National WWI & WWII Memorials, located on the Griffin land axis, on a site of national significance in Canberra. Enduring symbols of loss, separation and sacrifice, the memorials' design avoids overt symbolism, narrative or figuration. The design process uses the neutral forms of the monolithic blocks and then cuts and slices through the blocks using the sun's location on key dates and times from important events during the two world wars.

