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 unassumming, 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 road our bikes on the verandah, and the roof cracked 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?

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 not only consider their appearance, but see design as an essential part of the setting, can only be of short-term benefit to place.

How we see a project as a place, not just a building, is crucial. It’s a question when the ambition for a project runs ahead of the thought about how the project is made. Aligning the ideas about a project with how it is to be, is where the best work occurs, and is an important role for the architect.

Some of the most amazing projects emerge from collaboration. They are often a product of the 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 ideas 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.
This was my first project where 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.