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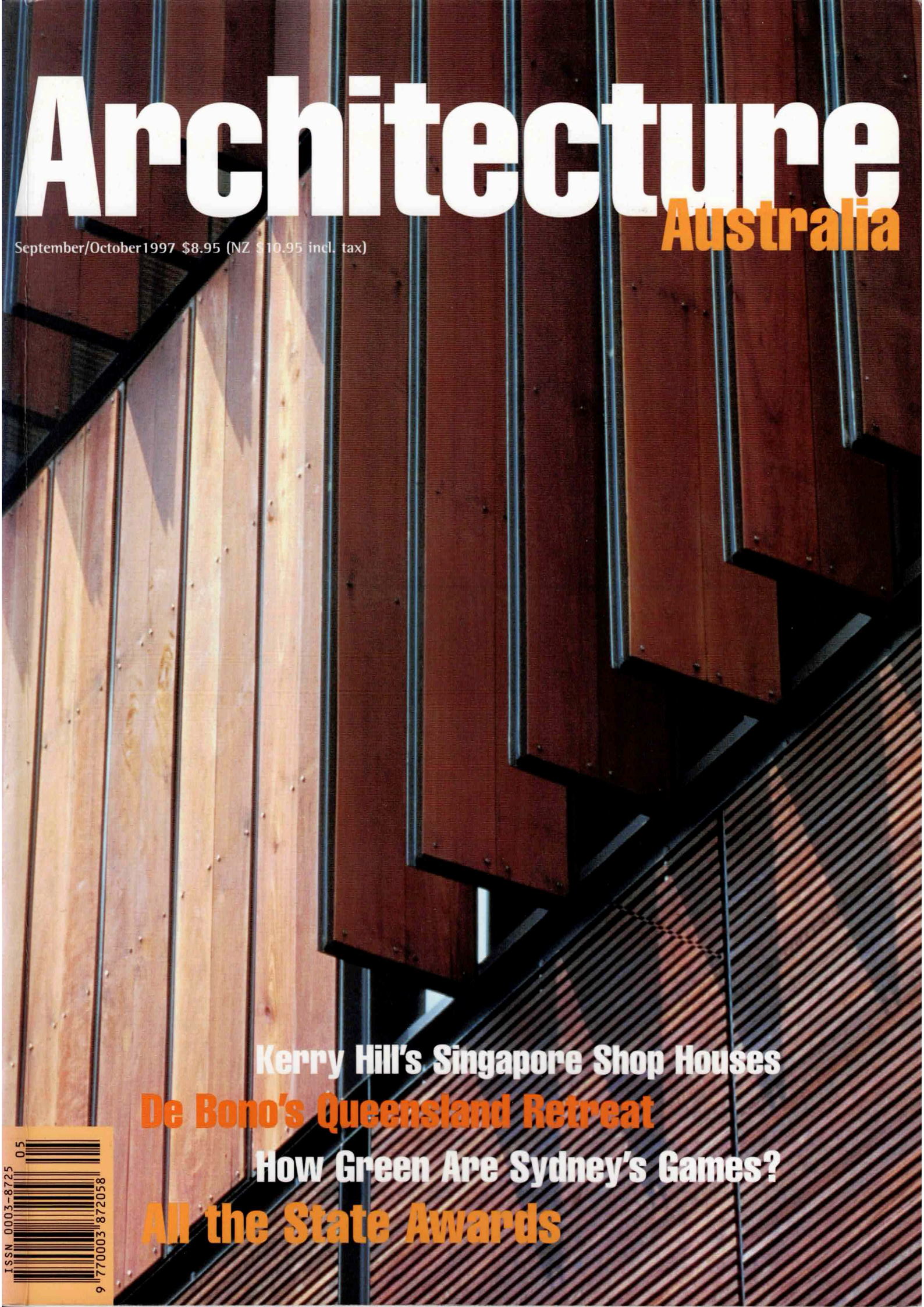

Kerry Hill's Singapore Shop Houses

De Bono's Queensland Retreat

How Green Are Sydney's Games?

All the State Awards

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In or Out

National conference on interior design, arranged by the Queensland University of Technology, at the Queensland Art Gallery and Queensland Cultural Centre, Brisbane, 25-26 July, 1997.

Review by John Andrews

In many ways this conference, convened by Dianne Smith of QUT, exposed the profound dilemmas faced by the interior design 'profession'. The two days embodied a condensed implosion of issues, concerns and suggestions to an audience of educators, practitioners and allied professionals. It was an accurate portrait of a profession without a perception of its own id.

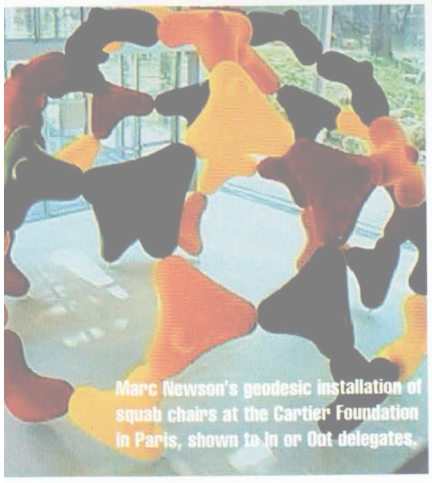
Common to other conventions of this type, the conference spent a disproportionate time trying to analyse itself—buttressed by workshops, facilitators and representatives from professional bodies. The question 'what is interior design' was dissected, probed, laid out and folded back on itself. I suppose this tendency is endemic of a profession which is not quite a profession but really wants to be one. Like many organisations in a state of incubation, interior design is a culture which seems to be pursuing preventions as outcomes instead of flourishing cures. It is not surprising to witness such cultural inertia because it is mirrored in the sad state of education. Departments and faculties of design in universities have been rendered impotent and rehabilitated into a world governed by corporate policy makers. This is ubiquitous in world education and not solely relevant to Australia!

The conference organisers should be congratulated for bringing out the two international guest speakers, John Pawson and Marc Newson, who presented some amazing work: inspiring, unique and challenging. The differences in approach and form were extreme but each were equally powerful. Ironically, these were two designers who did not follow the quality rules of the facilitated methods adopted by industry and education.

The organisers also selected a very strong body of national speakers representing practice and education. Peter Geyer and Sue Carr gave lectures and were forward in their participation in other events. Their contributions were supported by memorable talks by Harry Stephens from the University of NSW, Andrea Mina from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Davina Jackson from Architecture Australia and Marina Lommerse from Curtin University of Technology.

Ultimately, the conference could be described as a success! It also took place in one of the most exquisite galleries I have been to in Australia, with a formidable collection of contemporary art. After being in such an environment for two days, one cannot help but be affected by some of the products of the creative imagination.

John Andrews is Professor of Interior Design at RMIT ✚



Marc Newson's geodesic installation of squab chairs at the Cartier Foundation in Paris, shown to In or Out delegates.

Sydney As A Pedestrian City

Australian Institute of Landscape Architects lecture by Richard Leplastrier at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, 1 July 1997.

Review by Duncan Gibbs

Richard Leplastrier's talk to a packed and shivering house was both inspirational and problematic. Inspirational because he has a humility that is uncommon in Sydney; the talk was free of reproach and full of ideas. However, there were problems in both the way his pro-walking, anti-driving concepts were presented and the urban and political contexts in which they must be understood.

The opening points were that expansive expressions of space have to be developed and that a model can already be found in Japanese calligraphy—the symbol for *ma*, which implies space, void, pause, as well as a gate and a house. Such a model could be measured against the divisive, exclusionary, spatial policies which are being adopted in Sydney to discourage pedestrian activities and threaten the textures which now characterise the city. Cited examples included the casino, East Circular Key and the Eastern Distributor.

Leplastrier's critiques and ideas were all based on one powerful reading of Sydney's topography in relation to his pursuit of pedestrianisation: the relationship between Sydney's historical movement corridors and the locations of its ridges.

As he observed, "it was the black fellas that told white explorers how to cross the Blue Mountains ... by following the ridge lines." He listed Oxford Street, Macquarie Street and other thoroughfares as compelling evidence of landscape's moulding of Sydney's form. Before cars and trains, the easiest way to move about the settlement was to stay on the ridges. Those old routes still can be read as the skeletal bones of the city. Ridges were also traversed by Aboriginals thousands of years ago, and their footprints and oar-ripples may be imagined in a contemporary walk from Balmain across the Glebe Island Bridge, across Pyrmont in a saddle running from the fish markets to the old Pyrmont Bridge, up Market Street and across Hyde Park to finish down at Mrs Macquarie's Chair. This experience is diminished by the blandness of the Glebe Island Bridge and obstructions presented to walkers at critical junctions such as both ends of that bridge, the new abutment to the city end of the Pyrmont bridge, and the abundance of traffic slicing across much of the route. A cacophony of items as useless as the monorail further degrades the experience.

To improve things, he suggested reopening the Old Glebe Island swing bridge, re-establishing a strong link to the Millers Point shoreline by simply removing a series of fences and gates from the Aquarium onwards, and creating intersections in the city where pedestrians could take priority. Macquarie Street was identified as a prime target for incremental pedestrianisation to strongly link key institutions and help build a communal sense of civitas. This strategy would also connect the Opera House to Hyde Park and perhaps initiate a chain of parks down to Prince Alfred Park and Redfern.

Much was also said for the retention of Sydney's old industrial buildings; fast-vanishing items on the cityscape. Old Pyrmont was sadly remembered, while praise was given for the reuse of the Eveleigh Rail Yards building stock. His main hope was that state-owned and abandoned commercial buildings, particularly those on the water, could be reinvigorated to contribute to a new public domain focusing on the harbour.

The simplicity and plain truth of Leplastrier's ideas have great power—and many of his proposals only require the consent of those who hold authority to be put on the ground, with minimal recourse to major capital outlays. However, this is where Leplastrier's most pragmatic ideas founder: Sydney is seemingly ruled and criss-crossed by such a bizarre conflagration of quangos, planning committees, BOOT (builder/owner/operator/transfer) outfits and plain old vested-capital interests that the notion of doing anything but the most irreparable, costly and complex urban operations seems outlandish to those in power. Despite their obvious nobility of intention, the speaker's more fanciful suggestions came across as naive; like a reading from Christopher Alexander but with less chance of daylight.

However, on that frigid night in the railway workshops, when a few hundred of us felt our toes about to drop off, a glimmer of heart-felt hope was expressed in an attitude of warmth. This attitude could generate a new attempt to define a more comprehensive and intimate, and less blaringly iconic, urban self for Sydney.

Duncan Gibbs, an RMIT graduate in landscape architecture and urban design, is now in Sydney "subdividing the eastern seaboard" ✚