

DULUX STUDY TOUR 2014

CHERRY WILLIAMSON



MICHAEL ZANARDO



JENNA ROWE



SUZANNAH WALDRON



BEN MILBOURNE



NEWCASTLE

SYDNEY

MELBOURNE

CHICAGO

NEW YORK

TEAM USA

The 2014 Dulux Study Tour brought together Ben Milbourne, Suzannah Waldron, Michael Zanardo, Jenna Rowe and myself for an intense architectural tour of Chicago and New York. This was the first time that the Study Tour had deviated from its traditional European roots so it was an extra privilege to be selected as the guinea pigs for such uncharted territory. Since my return, I have been asked countless times what the highlight of the tour was and there is no single answer. Indeed, a number of highlights spring to mind – visiting the Farnsworth House with Larry from 'Off the Map Tours'; experiencing Falling Water in all its glory; discovering the spatial complexity of Unity Temple and being welcomed into the studios of Diller Scofidio Renfro, SHoP, Toshiko Mori and LTL Architects to name a few.

In preparing this report, rather than recount the incredible 18-page study tour itinerary, I have decided to focus on three key themes [PLACE, PROCUREMENT + PROCESS] that tie together many common threads and experiences from our travels.



2014 Dulux Study Tour at the Farnsworth House:
Michael Zanardo, Suzannah Waldron, Ben Milbourne, Jenna Rowe and Cherry Williamson



A personal highlight: Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water

THE ENTRY: provided the opportunity to reflect upon my career to date; assembling and presenting projects from 4 years work with Francis Jones Morehen Thorp, Community Development work in Papua New Guinea, 4 years of involvement with EmAGN (The Emerging Architects and Graduates Network) and most recently my work with CKDS Architecture in Newcastle and throughout the Central Coast.

THE TOUR: was an amazing opportunity to explore two cities famous for influencing and reflecting the history of American Architecture, peek inside the practices of established and emerging architects and visit buildings that form the basis of every architect's bucket list. It was also a chance to get to know the others on the tour and pave the way for new networks and future collaboration.

THE RETURN: allowed me to catch up on sleep and contemplate the future direction of my career. While there was no specific research agenda or aims established for the study tour, having unrestricted access to some of the best architects throughout Chicago and New York provided a great opportunity to review how these architects work and the issues they face. I have come out of the tour re-energised and with a deeper understanding of how strategic decisions can help shape a practice in establishing a point of view and maintaining relevance within a volatile market.

PLACE

An important aspect of the tour for me was being able to experience two cities from a number of different perspectives; be it in whizzing by in a taxi between practice visits, cruising down the river of Chicago or pounding the pavement of New York on a guided walking tour. In our day-to-day life, we are often too focused on getting from A to B to really take in the 'place' in which we live and architecture around us. The walking and boat tours allowed us to gain an understanding and appreciation of the way each city had evolved over time; watching on as the cities unfolded and stitched together again at each intersection or bend in the river.



Day 02: Chicago Architecture Foundation Boat Cruise

Outside of the tours, we were able to hear further architectural anecdotes, which built on the story of the city and further developed our understanding of place. In Chicago, Doug Voigt from Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) talked us through their work with the redevelopment of Millennium Park and then accompanied us as we explored what we all agreed was a brilliant piece of urban design. Completed in 2002, the project revitalised a blighted downtown site and marked the completion of Daniel Burnham's 100-year vision for the area.



Grant Park Chicago: View from Krueck & Sexton's Spertus Institute



Millennium Park: Crown Fountain by Jaume Plensa and Krueck & Sexton



New York: Guiding Architects Walking Tour: Pier 15 by SHoP Architects



Chicago: Architectural Anecdotes by Andrew Moddrell from PORT Architecture and Urbanism



Subway Station Canopy by Toshiko Mori: Hudson Yards Redevelopment

Later that day, Andrew Moddrell of PORT Architecture and Urbanism and Dan Wheeler of Wheeler Kearns walked with us down Dearborn Street and shared their views on Mies Van Der Rohe's Post Office Complex and SOM's Inland Steel Building; helping us piece together the influence and progression of Chicago's Architecture throughout the 20th Century.

In New York, we were able to get behind the scenes access to the Hudson Rail Yards Redevelopment and experience the workings of the city from the depths of New York's newest and deepest subway extension. This was a unique experience that even Justin Brown from Toshiko Mori Architects, despite having worked on the beautifully detailed and structurally expressive subway station pavilions, had not yet been privy to. The tour took us down endless flights of stairs to track level where we gained an appreciation for the immense level of co-ordination and servicing involved in delivering infrastructure to a city the size of New York.

Back above ground, we were privileged to walk the High Line with Dustin Tobias from Diller Scofidio Renfro who had been working on the project for the past three years. Elevated above the busy streets of New York, the High Line was a personal highlight and provided new perspective of the city at each cross street or curated shift in the landscape design.

The above experiences have inspired me to explore my own city further; learning more about it's history and keeping my eyes open for hidden gems and opportunities.



Yet Another Highlight: Tour of the High Line with Dustin Tobias from Diller Scofidio Renfro

PROCUREMENT

The Dulux Study Tour opened doors to architectural studios of varying sizes and complexities; SOM, Diller Scofidio Renfro, Studio Gang and SHoP to name a few. A common thread that ran through many of the studios we visited (large and small) was the role of design competitions and the challenges they can present.

SOM shared their experiences of delivering the Masterplan for Central Barangaroo; a topic that was close to all our hearts and brought to the fore the controversies that continue to hinder the process.

At the other end of the scale, Andrew Moddrell of PORT Architecture and Urbanism spoke openly of the frustration behind their City Loop project in Denver, which unfortunately may never be realised due to loss of momentum and commitment by local government. This was something that many of us could relate to having followed the media behind the recent Flinders Street Station international competition and closer to home the Newcastle Art Gallery Redevelopment.



Chicago: Doug Voigt discussing the Millennium Park Masterplan during our studio visit to SOM

While the challenges of taking on competition work were ever-present, a number of firms spoke of how design competitions have allowed them to establish a point of view, diversify into new fields, secure larger commissions and test new design ideas. During the tour we were privileged to visit a number of buildings that were a result of design competitions.

The Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York, was made possible through a combination of public funding by the New York City Bloomberg Administration and support from an number of private foundations. Thomas Leeser from Leeser Architects explained that it was the gamble they took to re-interpret the brief (from a minor extension into a complete overhaul) that won them the competition. The result was a series of folded surfaces and complex spatial planning, which allows for the interplay of image projection with exhibition and event space.



New York: Tour of the Museum of the Moving Image with Thomas Leeser and Scott Miller from Leeser Architects



Museum of the Moving Image: Sunner M. Redstone Theater



Main Entry: Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, New York



John Ronan discussing the entry sequence at The Poetry Foundation, Chicago

The Poetry Foundation on the other hand was made possible through philanthropy; a culture that many of us secretly wished was more prevalent in Australia. John Ronan from Ronan Architects spoke humbly about the integration of a garden courtyard and external oxidized zinc screen to create privacy and shield from the surrounding city.

As you enter from the street into the garden, the layers of materials - zinc, glass, wood - unfold into a spatial narrative. The attention to detail and material exploration was inspiring; John explaining that the team spent months developing the sandblasted concrete to get just the right balance of white silica and slag.

Aside from competitions, the young collective of Family and PlayLab introduced us to an ambitious concept for the generation of new work. This entrepreneurial trio conceived the idea to bring a floating swimming pool to the East River of New York City and have been using the powers of social media and crowd funding, in particular Kickstarter, to build momentum and raise money for the project. The + (Plus) Pool successfully raised over US\$40,000 in 2011 during it's original Kickstarter campaign and has now raised over US\$350,000 to fund the initial water filtration testing currently underway in the East River.

While Dong-Ping Wong (Family) and Jeffery Franklin (Play Lab) were the first to admit that this has been a long and challenging process, the exposure and networks formed along the journey have led to new opportunities and exciting commissions; including a house for Kanye West and Kim Kardashian!



New York: Studio Visit to Family and PlayLab

PROCESS

The studio visits offered an un-curated view into the day-to-day workings of a broad range of practices, from the mega-firms of SOM and Fosters to the emerging practice of Strawn Sierralta. It was fascinating to see the difference in the way the two ends of the spectrum produce their work, in particular their approach to material exploration, conceptual development and project diversity.

The office of Studio Gang was a working example of how models are used in the design development of projects and how materials are developed and tested for each unique application. It was interesting to learn that the practice took on projects irrespective of typology and scale but rather based on design potential and capacity for creative input.

A similar exploration of materials was evident through the work of LTL Architects, a dynamic young practice in Midtown New York. Now with a diverse portfolio, Paul Lewis with his twin brother David and long time collaborator Marc Tsurumaki began experimenting with materials on small retail fit-outs, exploring the 'intensities of surface' to create interest. Aside from project work, Paul shared insights and tactics on running a practice that incorporated academic and extra curricular activities such as publishing and architectural advocacy. The tie between academia and private practice was a reoccurring theme throughout a number of studio visits; in particular emerging firms where financial stability was indispensable.



Discussions and experimental lighting design at the studio of LTL Architects, New York

Our visit to Toshiko Mori Architects (TMA) built upon the theme of academia + practice as we learnt about Toshiko's approach to diversity and project typology. Pursuing a practice model of diversification, Toshiko has four 'branches' to her practice; 'Teaching' at Harvard University, 'TMA' which focuses on built architecture, 'Vision Arc' which operates as an urban think-tank and 'Paracoustica' which explores innovative projects for the developing (non-profit) world. Toshiko inspired us all as she spoke of how each interest cross-pollinates the other. "It is productive to diversify"... she explained ... "and I find it more fun."

On a much larger scale, our final practice visit to SHoP Architects, revealed how the firm has strategically diversified to capture both the architecture and construction markets. After getting the grand tour of their new office in the historic Woolworths Building, Director of Government Projects, Omar Toro-Vaca discussed how the practice had grown through an entrepreneurial approach, taking on development risk and becoming involved in project delivery and construction.

Today, with over one hundred and seventy staff and still growing, the practice operates two legal entities under one ownership structure; SHoP Architecture and SHoP Construction.



Final Site Visit to Pier 15 with SHoP Architects



Team USA: Office and Home Tour of Marina Apartments with Strawn Sierralta (Photo by Michael Zanardo)

It was interesting to hear, through example of the recently completed Barclay Centre in Brooklyn, how the firm evolved 'computer-aided design technologies' to not only produce innovative architectural forms but to streamline the design and construction process and create new efficiencies and cost savings.' In this particular instance, an app was developed that enabled each panel of the façade to be scanned, and crosschecked to a website to determine it's exact status throughout the manufacturing and installation process.

Our practice visits wrapped up with a visit to Pier 15 on the East River Waterfront which was designed by SHoP Architects in conjunction with Landscape Architect, Ken Smith. Joined by Kathy and Jake from SHoP, it was a fantastic way to reflect on the diverse range of studios we had visited and contemplate how these experiences might inspire and influence our work in Australia.

I extend my thanks to Dulux and the Australian Institute of Architects for organising such an amazing tour and a special thank you to our travelling companions Phil White and Sarah Nadenbousch from Dulux and Bernadette Wilson from the Institute. I look forward to sharing my experiences at the Dulux Study Tour Talks in Sydney and Newcastle, and hope to inspire emerging architects and graduates to enter in 2015.