

YURI DILLON

*final report*

Dulux Study Tour 2011



## OVERVIEW

The Dulux Study Tour (DST) takes five emerging architects from Australia overseas for an exclusive look inside the think tank of international architectural practices. The 2011 DST visited London - England, Barcelona - Spain, and Copenhagen - Denmark, over 12 days through May 2011. The tour is organised by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA), and sponsored by Dulux.

The DST aims to expose emerging Australian architects to an international architecture. The framework is developed to stimulate conversation and thought about the practice and education of architecture. The tour included 15 practice visits, guided walks of buildings and cities, networking functions, and meetings with key individuals and industry organisations.

During the course of the tour a number of themes emerged. These themes became important reference points for the group. They allowed us to question firms, and really start to understand the differences cultures have on the practice and education of architecture. Interestingly, the different approaches firms undertake seem to result in a continually high quality of work.

Cocktail functions with the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and the Danish Architecture Centre (DAC), provided great opportunities to discuss the initiatives of Australian Architecture and the AIA with our European friends. It was subtly surprising to see how well the international community responded to Australian architecture.

Architecture remains a dynamic discipline with a diversity of perspectives and approaches. Our ability to engage with architecture can occur on many levels. On a personal level, the DST provided the space and time to fully explore this engagement. I remain humbled and appreciative for the opportunity, and believe the experience will undoubtedly make me a better architect.

*london*  
*barcelona*  
*copenhagen*

The interactive walking tour of London with Ken Allison (Archigram) was a great introduction to the City of London. Ken gave us an insight into the history and development of London. We came to appreciate how cities are shaped over time; Architecture responding to political, cultural and economic factors, creating an organic growth pattern steeped in rich historical layers.

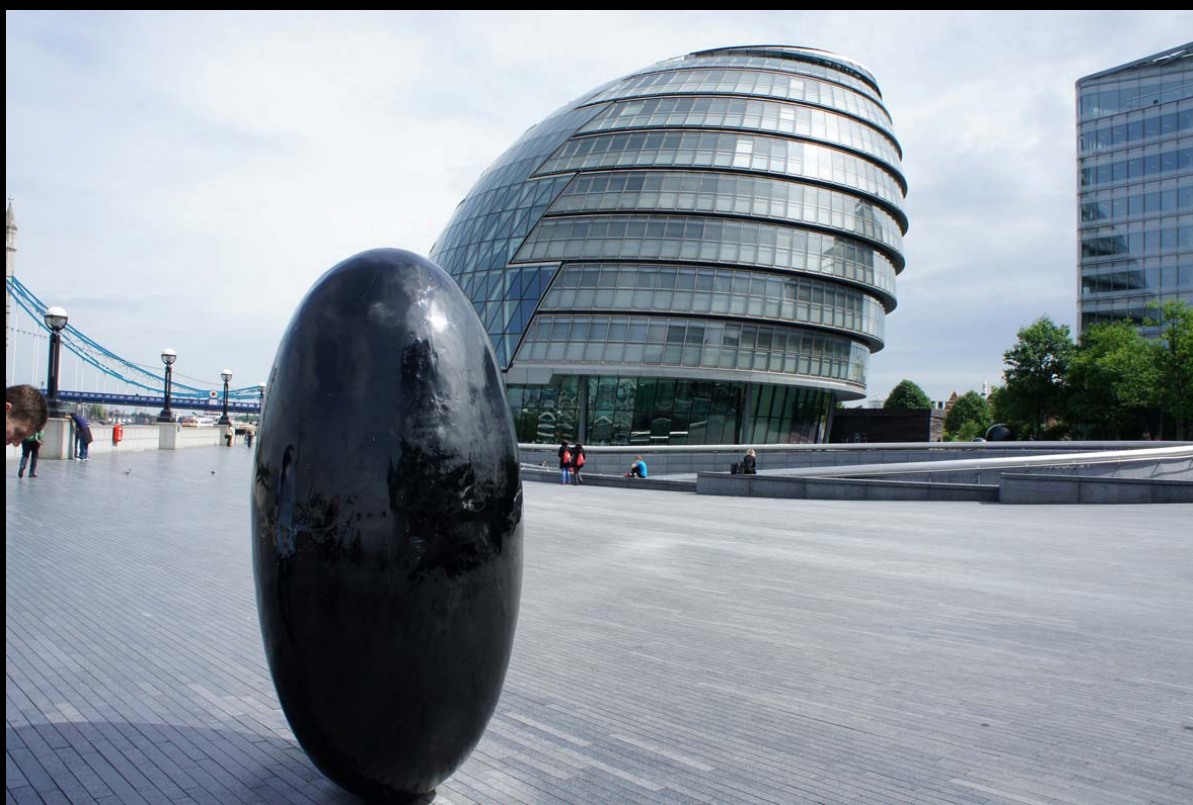
Allison provided valuable insights into the workings behind leading International firms including, Foster's, Roger's, and Renzo Piano to name a few.

We visited an array of historical and contemporary iconic London masterpieces; The British Museum, London Bridge, St Pancras Station, Lloyds Building, The 'Gherkin', and a number of projects under construction including London's tallest building, 'The Chard'.

The practice visits to Foster and Partners, Rogers Stirk Harbour, Carmody Groarke, David Chipperfield and Wilkinson Eyre provided unique insights into creating architecture in a city with strong historical references.

In contrast, the London Olympic Site 2012 was an exploration into monumental proportions and future ideals. The story a city tells itself is certainly different to the story it tells the world.

The architectural solution is certainly more greatly appreciated when the rationale and politics at play are more widely understood.



## BARCELONA + COPENHAGEN

Barcelona has a great mixture of architecture, Gothic; Classical, Contemporary - one can firmly see the integration of the Spanish culture in the spaces and buildings. The urban landscape is vibrant, playful, and sculptural; mixing historical references, with a passion for advancement.

It is a culture which places great value on design. There is a strong sense of tradition in Spain, but certainly no fear of embracing new ideas either.

Practice visits with EMBT, Ricardo Bofill and Arriola Fiol provided a great 'sense' of the architect working in Spain. This was highlighted through visits to the W Hotel, Sagrada Familia, and Diagonal Mar Park.

The offices of EMBT were very inspiring. The quality of design process and outcome were notable in every way. This practice excited me most from the design and design process perspective. Something about Spain...it makes you fall in love with architecture again...

The City of Copenhagen only emphasised how beautiful a city can be when it is planned and developed so carefully. In our practice visit with Jan Gehl, he posed the question, "Why are Architects not interested in people, and only form?"

Copenhagen is a progressive city with a mixture of 'cutting edge' development and 'refined' craftsman like design. Everything is controlled and elegantly executed to the finest of detail.

Copenhagen is a city where the bike rules the road and architects are like artists. A society which values design to a degree it is recognised, (not in the ministry of education), rather, in the ministry of culture.





## HIGHLIGHTS

So many special moments. I enjoyed visiting the three countries in short succession as it allowed a better understanding of the different cultural approaches to architecture. The full backstage tour of Sagrada Familia in Barcelona was awe-inspiring. It was amazing to see a project of such magnitude being fully funded and developed by 'the people', for 'the people'.

Ricardo Bofill's office would have to be the most unique environment; a post apocalyptic concrete plant with vines growing up 4 storey high walls. They almost completely enveloped the old silos. The large rusticated spaces containing meeting rooms, offices and Bofill's own contained apartment had a timeless modernity balanced with a rich history. The spaces resonated with my own sense of life as an architect.

The connection to landscape was executed beautifully. Like an organic controlled chaos – a natural wonderland that is captivating and gripping. The spaces suggest that any design less than brilliance would be unacceptable. This is truly an understanding of environment effecting life.

The N M Rothschild & Sons London headquarters construction site visit with the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), provided an interesting look at design, detailing and construction methodology. Spending time in one of Rem Koolhaas' buildings made it all 'real'. It was nice to know procuring the construction of a building is not that different, even in Australia.

Sitting in the main chapel listening to Jan Utzon talk about the Bagsvaerd community church project was another inspiring moment. After seeing many Danish examples of modern architecture, Utzon's church goes beyond the clinical, towards the natural; a true craftsman like approach. The spaces are masterfully controlled with light, expansion and compression (like breath), concrete and timber playing with light, and sound from the white stained piano. The architecture in Copenhagen left us all feeling like we needed to enrol in another architecture course.

Practice visits to EMBT in Barcelona, 3XN and Terroir in Copenhagen were both insightful for their design methodology, office environments and business models.



## Firms + Global Financial Crisis (GFC)

We questioned firms about how they managed through the GFC and found they had employed many different ideas and techniques to sustain business. Many of the leading firms had globalized their project base. Taking on projects in foreign countries like China and South America was common.

Project specialities were also diversified allowing firms to pitch for different project types. This type of 'all round' diversification seemed an effective tool in mitigating economic issues and maintaining a strong market share.

## Architectural Practice - Competitions

The difference in architectural practice between Europe and Australia remains vast. Competitions remain one of the major sources of projects for established and young firms in Europe. The competition platform rewards creative talent rather than past history and experience. European firms seem far more aggressive in marketing their creative skills to the international community, and this seems to be framed through the competition process.

## Model Making - The Future

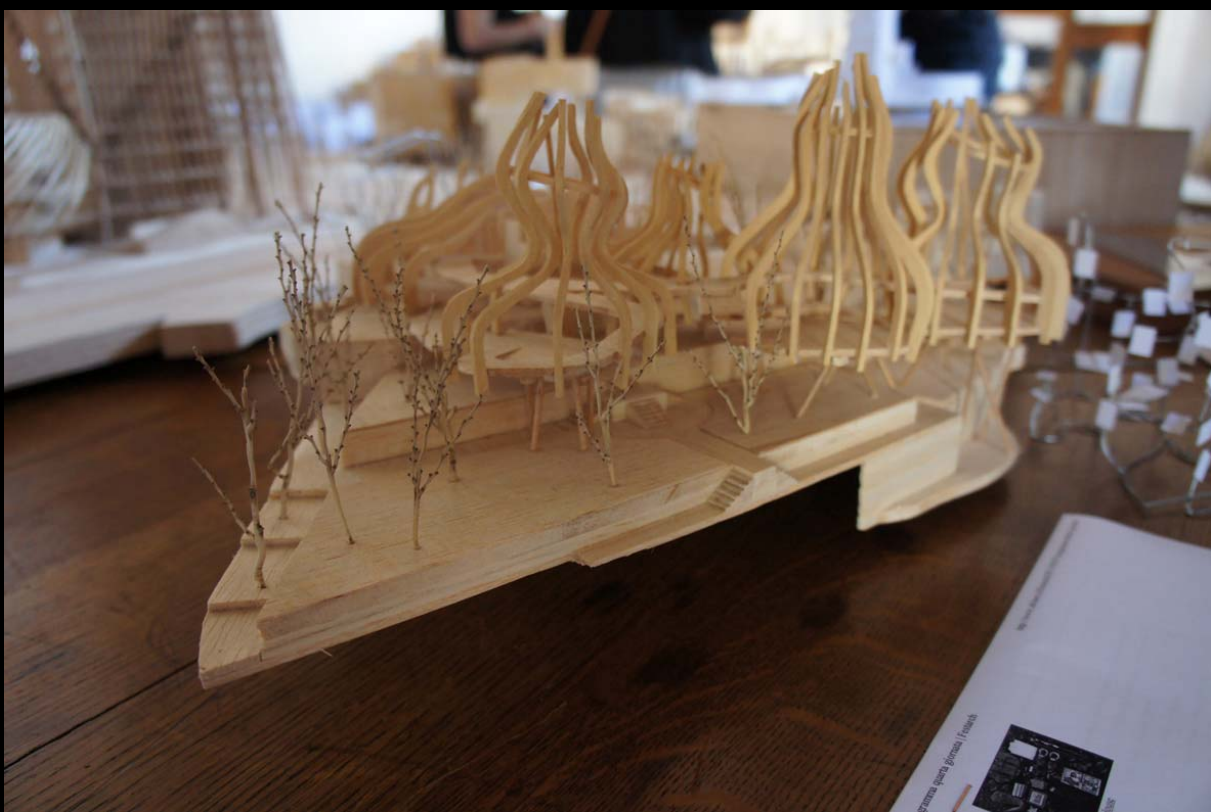
Models and more models - what is the future?

Interestingly, the use of physical models was an important part of the design evolution in all practices we visited. The breadth, detail and variety of model techniques is impressive, with some firms employing professional model makers and fine arts graduates.

The design process in firms like David Chipperfield and BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) could see 200 models built in all types of materials including foam, timber, acrylic, metal, and card, for a single project. Scales would vary from 1:1000 up to 1:5 for some sections.

There is a huge commitment to testing, prototyping and experimenting throughout the design process.

It raises the question of our reliance on 3D modelling? Ultimately we are creating 3D artefacts, yet favour techniques which divorce us from the craft.



### The Culture + Architecture Connection

The City; Parks; Beaches; the 'sense of space', lifestyle and culture, have such an influence on architecture. When one understands these factors the architecture becomes more relevant. The development of larger urban planning interventions and their relationship to architecture was represented beautifully in 'Parc Central'; the master-planned urban space created in Barcelona by Arriola & Fiol after winning a competition.

In Copenhagen, Jan Gehl emphasised the form of a building needs to come from interconnections, and create conditions of life for people. He does not call his services design, but rather a reprogramming of cities. Jan has championed the change in the urban design of Copenhagen, creating shared spaces, where streets have become pedestrian plazas, and bicyclist make up 37% of peak hour traffic.

The Municipality (or Council) of Frederiksberg shared the vision for their community in Copenhagen. The identification of Urban development areas are considered not only on Physical development, but more importantly on social redevelopment. Importance is placed on spatial planning and dialogue with stake holders.

In all of these places we see architecture responding to culture; the people, the vision, the geography. It is interesting to notice such differences, but in such close proximity also.

### Workspace Conditions + Culture

With reduced timelines for projects and a varying range of new procurement methods changing the profession, we asked the practices about the working conditions and culture of their respective offices?

It seemed constant that long hours of work were just 'part of the industry', and offices did

what was required to meet the deadlines of program.

Firms offered a range of services like private full time chefs and caterers to keep staff. Shared bicycle systems were even introduced to provide staff transport.

Barcelona seems to have a great work life balance; this was reflected in the office environments of EMBT and Ricardo Boffill; classical music playing softly, light filled green courtyards, organic models and designs scattered everywhere pleased the eye...

Our visit to the office of Terrior, and Jeppe Utzon (nephew of Jorn), provided an interesting perspective into the differences between Australian and Danish business etiquette, office culture, and education of architects. Projects in Denmark are not awarded based on merit and experience in the specific building typology, but on the Architect's ability to provide intellectual and creative solutions to the brief.

Competitions are well paid, and wages are controlled by unions, making Danish Architects some of the most well paid in Europe.





### Brand Management and Quality Control

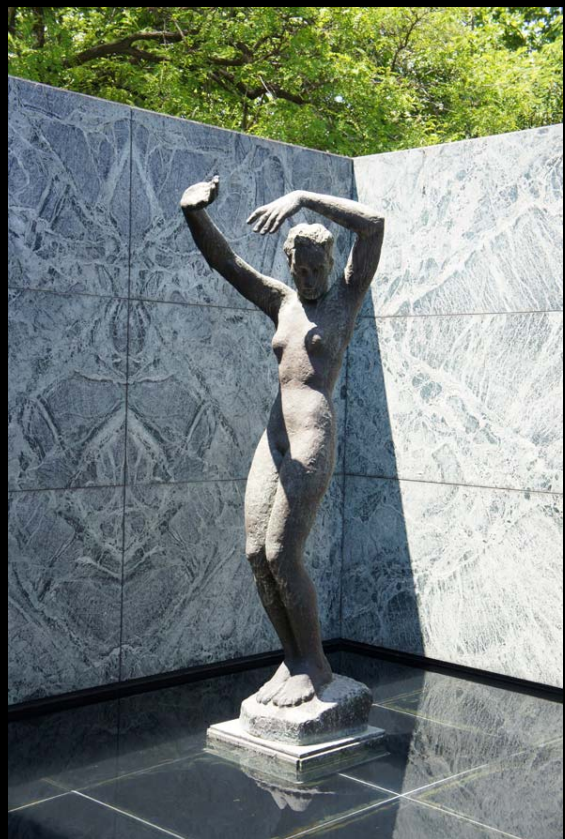
The strategies used ranged from a highly structured system to more flexible team oriented versions. We certainly heard a lot of 'David this' and 'Richard that') - no offence David Chipperfield or Richard Rogers.

I came to appreciate these extreme types of models (eg: David Chipperfield) for their relentless pursuit of perfection; the commitment to process, materials and standards, design exploration and overall eccentric behaviour.

The idea of managing a brand within an architectural organization is both critical to the development of business and highly integral to the culture within that business. Architects are seemingly treating this aspect with great care to ensure their success on the international stage. In a time where economic instability and sustainability is changing our approach we must remain cognisant of how our brand can transform the possibilities of our practice.

Quality remains heavily linked to brand. The systems implemented range from the highly flexible to the 'control on steroids' degree. We remain both excited and intrigued by such methods, but equally concerned with the effect on people within practices.

In a culture which is all about icons, brand recognition, and customer perception, are we building sustainable practices, or are we just merely responding to global demands in order to remain relevant? What is the effect of such processes on the people in our organizations and how we deliver our projects?





## Opportunities for Young Emerging Architects

There are many opportunities for young architects in Spain, through the competition process. We came to realise, winning a competition did not mean you would get the project, and could not guarantee they would build the design you put forward either.

Interestingly, the competition process that we tend to associate with European practice appears to be having a detrimental effect in Spain, with the chances of winning so low that practices are no longer as interested. Remuneration is very poor also. Reform to the system appears imminent. If that is the case, it prompts the question what model would be a suitable replacement?

## Architecture as Form Making

Speaking of tall buildings, and in stark contrast to the Sagrada Familia; the Bella Sky Hotel in the Ørestad neighbourhood by 3XN is located on the urban fringe space of Copenhagen in an area recently developed with educational institutes and accommodation units.

This 'open', 'unused' landscape is home to a truly monumental scale of architecture, complete with railway system and expansive urban spaces. The question begged: How successful is architecture when it is allowed to be an exercise in 'form' or 'object' making? and how do we respond to an architecture developed in isolation, and at such speed?

## Experimental Technology

Leading Copenhagen firms such as 3XN and Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), are pushing the boundaries of form making and experimental technologies with success. It wasn't uncommon to see rapid prototyping machines and 3-Dimensional printers.

3XN was very experimental in their approach with materials and sustainable technologies. They have a sophisticated and robust business model. I remain captivated with the business approach and how much success they are having. This struck me as the type of architecture business that is continuing to reinvent itself in a way that makes the business more relevant and leading.



## EXPERIENCE

The tour is not only about architecture, but people too. Spending time understanding how people think and engage with architecture in other cultures has created an expanded framework for my own ongoing exploration. There are so many elements you can take away from the experience; design, form making, business models, strategy, methodology, to name a few. They all cogitate around giving you such an enhanced perspective of what architecture is, and how you want to interact or play with it.

As architects, we must remember to continually develop ourselves in order to provide the most value for the people whom inhabit the spaces we create. Being an architect, is the celebration of this role in which communities entrust to us. The proposition is exciting and daunting at the same time. The Dulux Study Tour is an experience which allows complete immersion in this space.

The experience of being on tour helped to crystallise answers to many questions I still had about Architecture. The process really allows you to cement in place why you become an architect.

Words would not do the Dulux Study Tour justice. Entering leading international practices and engaging with senior staff about the discipline of architecture, and visiting dozens of iconic buildings on 'behind the scenes' tours, is awe-inspiring - a visual feast.

I would strongly advocate any emerging architect in Australia to enter the Dulux Study Tour. The tour provides a wealth of knowledge, learning's, and an amazing opportunity to invigorate any young architect's passion for our profession. It has transformed my own approach to, and thinking of architecture in a profound way.



## FINAL THOUGHTS

We sincerely thank the Australian Institute of Architects and our now, beloved sponsors, Dulux. Particular thanks to Bernadette Wilson from the Australian Institute of Architects, Phil White and Jason Anderson from Dulux.

Speaking of people again; what makes an experience so special is often the people you share it with.

*‘Perhaps the greatest experience; spending two weeks with four other amazing young architects, all of whom have become the closest of friends and most talented of minds I’ve had the pleasure to know.’*

Rephrased from the DST group 2011 final blog

