

South Australian architect Guy Maron AM LFRAIA this year enjoyed the unique experience of having two major modern buildings heritage listed in the same year.

At age 26, and the 'youngest' building ever to be listed in South Australia, the Bicentennial Conservatory, winner of last year's Enduring Award of the SA Chapter of the Institute, is the recipient of some ten national as well International design awards including the Sir Zelman Cowan Award the BHP architecture of the Decade Award, and the International Pacific Asia Gold Award for architecture and landscape.

The other building is the Headquarters of the Australian Automobile association building in Canberra. The 36 years old building, winner of the RAIA ACT Chapter Award of Merit, now also appears on the official RAIA list of significant twentieth century buildings in Australia.

Guy Maron looks back on his achievement with a great deal of satisfaction, particularly since these examples of his work express the architecture he has always pursued and embody his evolution as an architect and the work he has produced since graduating in 1960.

Yaara Plaves' interview throws an interesting light on the personal development of Guy, whose work has been described as structuralist, although he believes that it is rationalist.

This article was originally written for Place Magazine, which discontinued publishing in July 2015.

YP. Guy, can you tell us a little about your background and the early influences on your life?

GM. I guess I need to go back to my childhood to put things in perspective. Born in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, I spoke French with my parents, Dutch at school and Malay in the streets. That, and the occupation by the Japanese in World War II, made me realize early on that the world is one big place where cultural interaction is paramount to one's understanding of both cultural and material world.

The material influences were poignant, particularly in regard to climate, which later in life, as an architect, was to play a pivotal role. The Dutch colonial houses we lived in were designed with deep verandas, sunscreens and high ceilings, which helped moderate the unpleasant tropical climate.

You can imagine how delighted I was when I came to Australia aged 17 and met with the Australian verandas; although they were often a stylistic device rather than a response to climate.

By the time I started studying architecture I had discovered the extreme heat and cold of this vast country and realized that there were many climates here, each demanding different functional solutions, which could only be solved in a scientific manner rather than through whimsical architectural "stylism".

YP. What about your architectural education?

GM. I was very fortunate to have enjoyed the leadership of Professor Towndrow, Dean of the faculty of architecture at the University of New South Wales, where the Bauhaus tradition was very strong. All architecture students had to undergo training in the building trades for three years. This gave me the early tactile appreciation of the material world and prepared me for the act of 'making' as an architect.

The 1950's and 60's in Sydney were a very dynamic environment to practice architecture, as it was the time when my mentor Harry Seidler did some great work and the Opera House was being built by Utzon. I worked at Edwards Madigan and Torzillo, architects of the national Gallery and the High Court as well as working with Ken Woolley when Glenn Murcutt was one of the boys in the firm. It was a very vibrant time with architects generally following what was then referred to as the "international" school of architecture.

YP. Who are the primary influences on you and your designs?

GM. The Opera House was, in my opinion, one of the great industrialized buildings in Australia with its highly repetitive identical precast roof element which was to form this whole magnificent edifice. This is probably the one building that influenced me more than any other because of its roots in the structuralist approach underlying a great work of art.

I was exposed to a number of disparate approaches to architecture at the time in Sydney. One approach was the works of Sydney Ancker, Harry Howard, Bruce Rickard, Phillip Cox, who designed in a Wrightian manner and were referred to in Sydney as the 'Nuts and Berries' School and whose followers at the time included such architects as Ken Woolley and Glenn Murcutt.

Later, I experienced a very seductive style in Sydney where everything was painted white, a style practiced by a group of architects referred to as 'Whites'. Both styles soon ran out of puff, as most stylistic approaches to architecture do, and this demise of ephemeral architecture clarified for me that architecture needed a more intellectual and rational approach to be viable and more sustainable.

In North America, where I worked and studied for 4 years, until 1971, I was struck by the works of John Andrews, who like myself had his early apprenticeship in the form of Edwards Madigan and Torzillo in Sydney.

His Scarborough College in Toronto was to have a strong impact on me as it was new and inventive and followed no particular school of architecture and yet displayed an intellectual strength and sense of purpose that gave it great authenticity. The connectivity, plan rationale, and materiality was refreshing and gave me an understanding of the issues in master planning of educational complexes, which was to guide me for the rest of my career.

The meeting with John encouraged me to study the works of the great Canadian architect Arthur Erickson whose Simon Fraser Campus in Vancouver is so very strong in both planning terms as well adopting a timeless architecture of great clarity.

The works of Utzon, Seidler, Andrews, Madigan and later the design of the parliament House in Canberra instilled in me the vital importance of clarity in architecture. Sense of purpose unfettered by any adopted style proved to be the central theme of my work and I have never veered from the search for rationale and new intelligent solutions to the art of “making”.

YP. Can you tell us about the design process for both the Conservatory and the AAA Building?

GM. Whilst they are very different buildings the process I go through is to identify what makes the circumstances of any building’s brief unique. What is the contextual environment of each situation and what makes the building program different to any other building. So much of architecture today is not contextual; in fact so much effort today is seemingly spent on ensuring that the new neighbour has little or nothing to do with the existing architectural environment. Being different for the sake of difference has never been my direction. As Harry Seidler used to say: “I do not invent architecture every Monday morning”.

I then submit the program to a rigorous examination of the things the building needs to be in a functional sense in order to work well. In the case of the conservatory it was of foremost importance to explore the requirements to sustain plant life through the correct interpretation of the requirements of temperature, humidity and sunlight and then design an envelope to provide the right conditions. All this scientific analysis was reinforced and based on research I carried out overseas on existing conservatories.

YP. There was some high tech detail involved in the Conservatory, how did that come about?

GM. The conservatory had to be large enough to grow a forest ecosystem with trees in excess of 20 meters in height and the structural envelope analysis showed that the glazing on a slope of such a high building was to prove very difficult indeed, until I discovered that a prefabricated segmental building, erected section by section, was to be the answer.

This is where my experience with the ‘industrialized’ building concept of the Opera House came to bear and the search for a geometry that would produce identical pieces or building blocks led me to the adoption of a geometric cone leaning against another adjacent cone with the radii of all the cones being identical, allowing repetition of a structural theme.

Thus prefabrication, as was the case at the Opera House, became the obvious solution, enabling glazing on the ground prior to lifting glazed trusses in position. This was the critical moment of invention that made the conservatory both unique and feasible.

The form of the tropical house had to allow East and West sun to do its job during different parts of the day and in so doing the misting systems offered the ‘cloud’ formation required to keep the building cool and the insulation correct at any time of

the day and year. Standard computer systems and programs help to keep conditions right for plants. In the final analysis this building is a 'machine' for plants to live in.

YP. Do you feel that your design principles have evolved through the years?

GM. From early on in my design life I was guided by a desire to achieve the most building for the least effort. I had observed that nature operated that way and it was a design approach that came naturally to me and I can now reflect that the war and the famine and the want that followed in my old country as an impressionable kid had a great deal to do with finding this direction naturally.

The University education I was privileged to enjoy brought home the need for a rational approach to design and the work of my mentor, Harry Seidler, became a significant influence as Harry always put forward the belief that in his work he had to achieve the most with the least. I find the opulence of architectural work today questionable to say the least, in light of the issues of sustainability and the scarcity of resources.

Perhaps the most significant influence on my evolution as an architect is the realization in recent times that the world has to come to terms with the dwindling resources and that all design has to be sustainable in contrast to "the less is more" of the Miesian credo, which is an aesthetic mantra suitable for another era gone by. I do believe, as previously expressed in an article I wrote for PLACE, that the credo should be the adoption of "more for less" ideology if we are going to survive on this planet.

It is this newly found and adopted belief in sustainability that has underlined and strengthened the design direction I had adopted decades ago. Rather than an evolution of my design principles, which have never changed, I find that the circumstances we find ourselves in today have strengthened the beliefs and philosophy I espoused a long time ago.

I find it particularly satisfying that my rational approach to design and architecture and my life long belief in the "more for less" credo has been rewarded by the heritage listing of two very modern buildings which followed this credo very closely.

Guy Maron AM LFRAIA.