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Under the Skin

Scratching beneath
the surface on recent
work by Lyons.



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Foreign Office Architects
Marc Webster-Mannison
Neil Masterton
Melbourne Docklands

Architectural Review Australia 079

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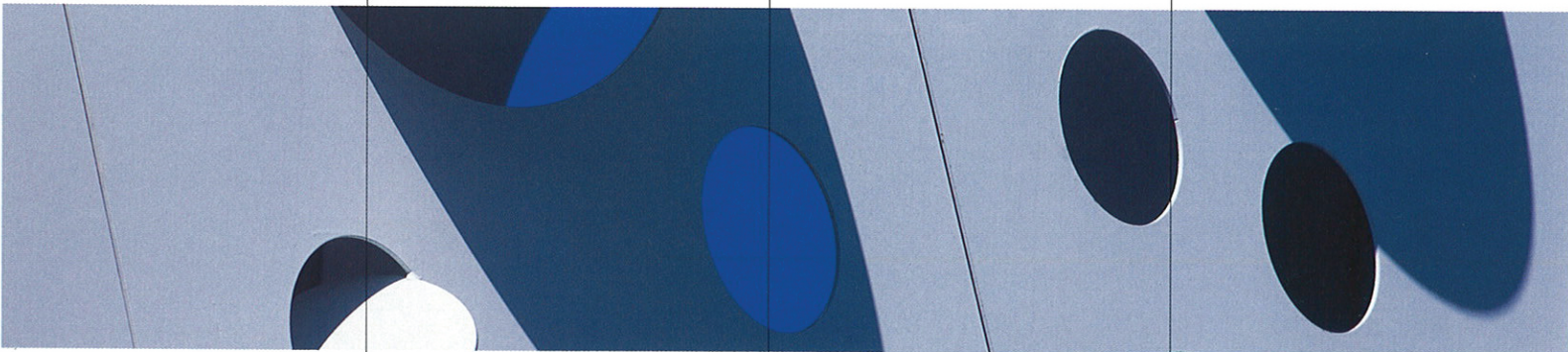
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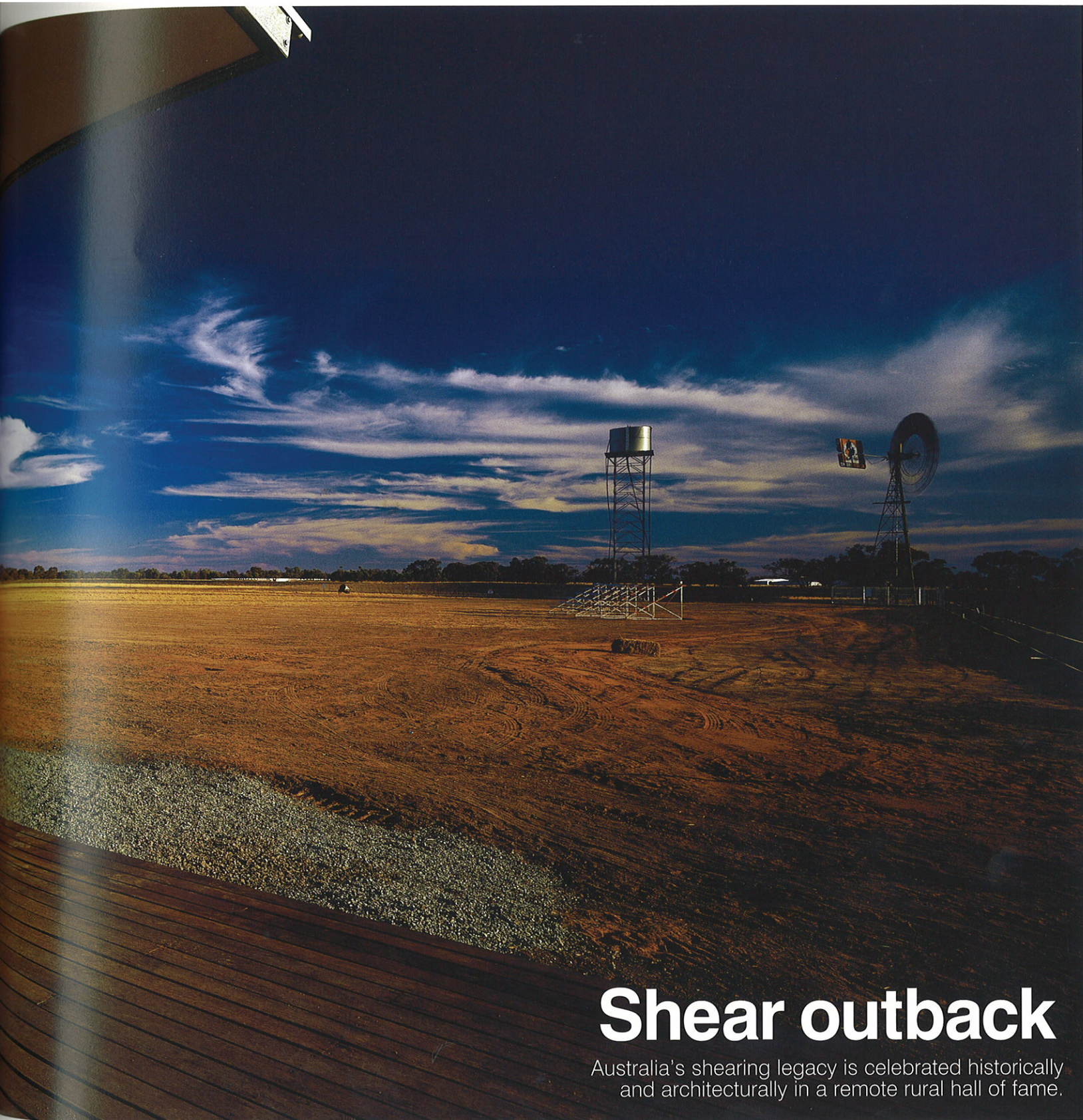
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Australia's shearing legacy is celebrated historically and architecturally in a remote rural hall of fame.

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02

Architect's statement ■ Shear Outback, Hay NSW ■ Shear Outback is a museum and interpretive centre on the outskirts of Hay. It documents and celebrates the role of shearers in Australia's history. The brief required a new museum and associated facilities, a re-erected 1920s woolshed, gardens, dams, windmill, tanks and levee banks. The site organisation and building design evolved from careful analysis of the place, landscape, climate and regional precedents, as well as the functional requirements of a small museum. ■ The new building is placed near the Sturt Highway, forming a protective barrier to shelter the site from traffic disturbance. Two long earth berms engage the building and landscape, overlapping to define the entrance. The re-erected woolshed has been placed at a distance from the new building so that it is seen as an object in its own right, displayed against the broad horizon. ■ The museum is composed of sloping planes that define the major spaces. The tall upright blades on the highway side punch skywards to form a dramatic silhouette; the main roof beyond covers the exhibition spaces, café and shop, and sweeps out to create a cantilevered verandah that runs the length of the building. ■ Contemporary museums demand full temperature and humidity control. Given the modest budget it was logical to reduce the floor area of the formal exhibition spaces to a minimum. Less expensive spaces with natural ventilation and evaporative cooling are used for exhibiting large sturdy objects, such as carts, presses and steam engines, which do not require full museum conditions. Thirteen-metre-high steel blades shelter the Hall of Fame, a robust space that evokes the character of the great woolsheds. Large heat extractor boxes at the top of the blades harness the stack effect to draw hot air out of the hall and adjacent roof cavities, replacing it with air drawn across the cool ground under the building. The long, low verandah forms a contrasting space to frame the horizon and contain the never-ending sky of the Hay plain. ■ Paul Berkemeier.



03

As I looked out into the dim night, I mused that Hay locals must be well-practised in recognising architects by now – in our case, a car-load full, kerb crawling the back streets of town at midnight, peering out at the numerous examples of ‘small town’ architecture from the Victorian era onward. However, this peculiar introduction to Hay revealed something of our host’s enthusiasm for this place, such that we had to endure this guided tour after a long drive and before we could settle down to a cool drink at the local motel. Paul Berkemeier has even become something of an honorary resident of Hay, not necessarily for his transformation of a major area of roadside via his recently completed Australian Shearer’s Hall of Fame and Museum, ‘Shear Outback’, but for his embrace of the local culture and landscape in the scheme.

Shear Outback has a dual role. Firstly, it is a living centre for the celebration of the shearing lifestyle – a nomadic existence that in many aspects has continued unchanged for the past century. And, while Shear Outback cannot expect to recreate a sheep station, it can evoke some of the qualities of the shearing lifestyle for consumption by city-dwellers sprinting along the highway between centres. Secondly, the centre provides an archive for shearing memorabilia, serving an important, almost civic role within the shearing community.

Our bizarre midnight tour revealed Berkemeier’s primary concern in the project, that of responding not only to shearing but also to the impressive precedent of rural civic buildings in the town and in outback Australia generally. A moonlit parade of fire stations and other public buildings from the 1970s confirmed the demise of this building type where modest but impressively handled buildings have now been augmented and/or replaced by brick-veneer dress as commercialisation and short-term thinking has taken hold in public architecture over the last 20 years. Given this pattern, Shear Outback can be considered something of a triumph in its staunch resistance of the mundane, a difficult feat given the budget and procurement method of such works.

So why is Shear Outback located in Hay? This question is answered by the dominance of the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers as a transport route from rural areas to the export centres of Sydney and Melbourne. Hay is one of many towns lining the banks of the Murrumbidgee, its path delineated by a fleshy margin of red gums snaking their way across the outback. The dominance of these transport routes led to the location of the first mega-grazing land in the Riverina and to the settlement of Hay at the crossroads of the Sydney-Adelaide Sturt Highway and Melbourne-Brisbane Cobb Highway. Some local initiatives for sustaining the town’s economy and culture, the rise of One Nation in the mid-90s, and a renewed focus on the outback at this time, all led to the funding of a new museum.

Federation funding was granted for a centre comprising a number of reconstructed shearing sheds. This simplistic notion was then given a more purposeful form by Deputy NSW Government Architect Peter Mould (the local Department of Public Works and Services branch was the only local organisation considered capable of running the project), who wrote a schematic brief for an interpretive centre and museum. While this intervention at the executive end of the DPWS has led to a vastly improved outcome, it is a pity that the Department could not see the benefits of engaging the architects for Contract Administration to ensure the delivery of appropriate quality and attention to detail throughout. Instead, a hybrid situation where the architects were engaged for occasional advice (advice without any contractual clout) was tolerated.

Berkemeier won the project in a limited competition. The selection of his scheme seems obvious, considering its rigorous basis in an urban design analysis. The scheme addresses “the dilemma of the Sturt Highway and truckstop”, while also responding to the need for the shed to present a sense of independence and isolation from the town. For Berkemeier has observed that shearing is an individual, itinerant

03 The East elevation best illustrates the tilt of the expansive roof, stretching the length of the new museum building.



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06

Our midnight tour revealed Berkemeier's primary concern in the project, that of responding not only to shearing but also to the impressive precedent of rural civic buildings in the town and in outback Australia generally.

pursuit and not one upon which towns are founded. The solution was a double-sided building that presented a Venturi-like sign to the highway (north face) and a more familiar rural 'shed' roof to the south. In driving the design by urban design considerations as opposed to simpler and arguably more 'digestible' romantic or pseudo-environmental ideals – "the building must face north", for example – an appropriate response has emerged that gains additional richness via the strategies required to address this 'reversed' orientation. A major garden (designed by Jane Irwin) featuring exotic species is another key move, anchoring the building in the rural tradition of marking major buildings with a line of poplars or similar.

This understanding of the highway location, and of the scale of the mercilessly flat landscape, led to Berkemeier's other key design move – a deliberate inflation of the building's scale (both in plan and via the giant tilted blades that provide the building's 'sign' to passers-by) – beyond that expected for a building of approximately 2000 square metres and with a fully-serviced museum of 300 square metres. Achieving this on an equally merciless budget, which at \$2.3 million equates to less than \$1200 per square metre, is a real triumph for the architect and project team, delivering to Hay and the shearing community a building of sufficient presence as warranted by the importance of their contribution to Australian culture, politics and economy.

Such economy was achieved by a series of clever moves – the grading of exhibition environments to limit the amount of expensive fully air-conditioned space and a very pragmatic trimming exercise, reducing the initial brief to something more appropriate to the scale and economy of the town. The only disappointment here is that, having solved these scale issues so well at a strategic level, Berkemeier then let secondary considerations within the architectural rationale lead to a segregation of the line of giant blades into two groups, missing an opportunity to throw the momentum of the building into the landscape with even greater power.

Berkemeier freely admits to "knowing nothing at all about shearing" prior to the project. This is perhaps one of the greatest luxuries in our profession, to learn about a variety of cultural and professional issues in designing buildings to house them. Berkemeier's crash course in shearing consisted of some studious research and a site visit during the competition stage, later refined during the design process as the contributions of his collaborators, including Bannyon Wood (exhibition designers who were also on the panel that chose Berkemeier) and Sara Hector, the project director. Berkemeier pays testament to Hector's role, managing the procurement of the

building as the sole woman working in a testosterone-laden environment (if there ever would be a 'Museum of the Bloke' then Shear Outback would be it). Berkemeier notes that, "shearers are absolute individuals, and will do only what they want to do... but they also somehow manage to remain part of a group. And this group spawned the strongest union in Australia's history; the whole idea of workers' rights came through shearing, the birth of the Labor Party, and so on."

The organisation and detailing of the building sees the same combination of strategic thinking, astute observation and measured pragmatism upon which the key moves were based. In contrast to the shearing sheds (one of which is reconstructed adjacent to the museum) and in response to the highway, Berkemeier wanted "the building to read not as 'volume' (like the traditional sheds) but as 'plane'", and this conceptual strategy has driven the resolution of the project. Two spaces in particular provide a distillation of the quality of the architecture, the Hall of Fame – a galvanised volume located between the main blades and main hall – and the front verandah that provides the key circulation space between functions and which beautifully harnesses the horizontality and never-ending horizon of this landscape. The only real disappointment at this more detailed level is in the nature of the detailing itself. A curious blend of the domestic and civic, the building is put together sometimes as 'public building' and in other locations as 'house', while in drawn form the end elevation evokes the explorations of the Pittwater School – Berkemeier's balsa wood models describe a more 'blocky' and monumental solution.

However, this is a minor criticism of 'technique' in what is an extremely successful project overall. The requirements of a surprisingly complex site, brief and client have been resolved while addressing that toughest of architectural tasks – giving form to a particular culture. Projects of this type are the 'world series' in the game of architecture and outcomes are not always successful, so challenging is the task. That Berkemeier has forged a path between these complex requirements and achieved something of quality is a testament to a humble sense of his own role in the process – maintaining that he was "not trying to design a self-conscious work of architecture... but trying to give the visitor a sense of the setting for the exhibition... for in the end, it is about context."

Gerard Reinmuth is a Sydney-based partner of Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth TERROIR.