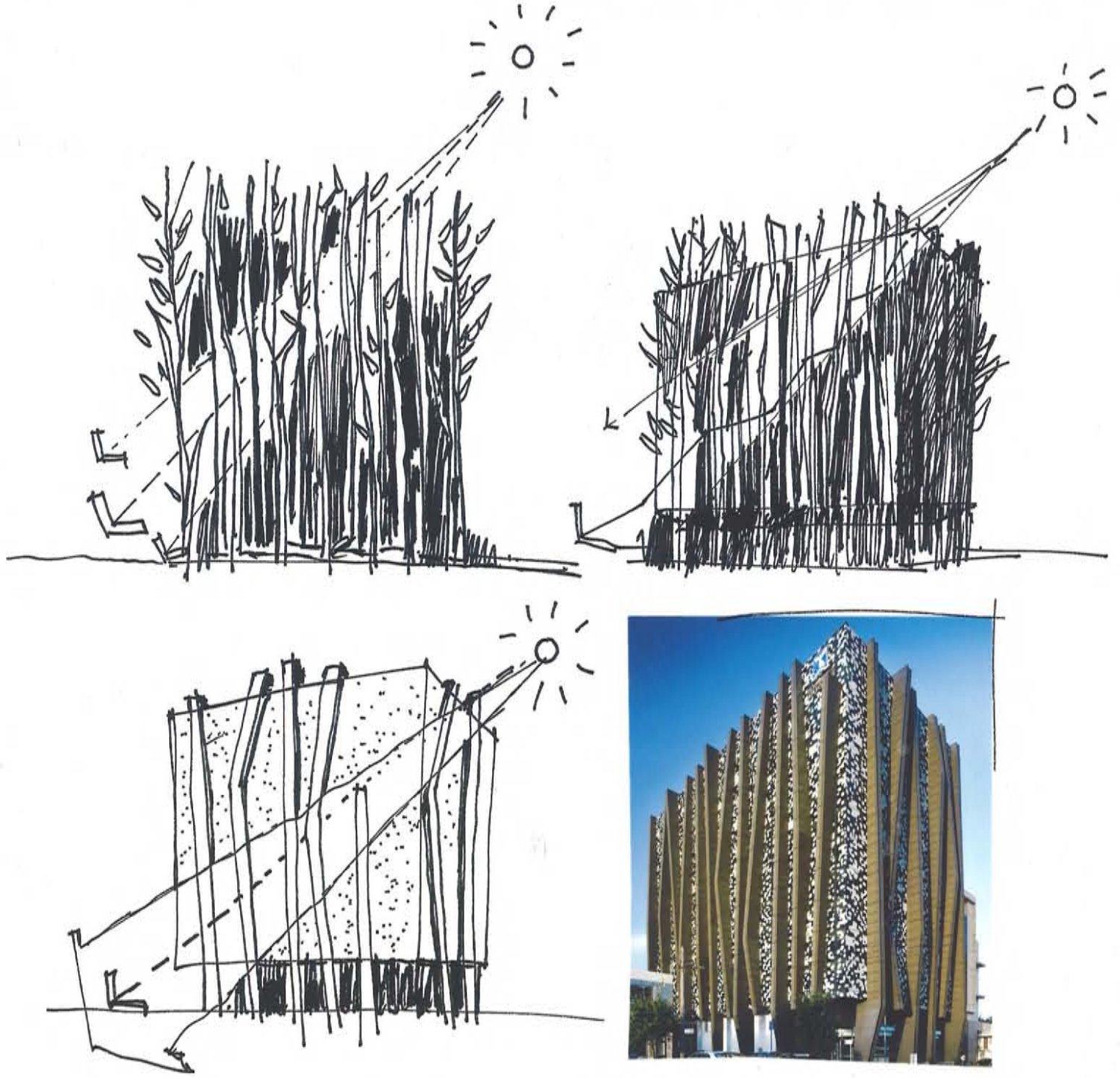


# MONUMENT <sup>92</sup>

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## THE SECRET EVOLUTION OF ARCHITECTURE

PUBLIC PROJECTS THAT  
TAKE US TO THE NEXT LEVEL



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# in the public eye

A quality approach to public architecture, with public interest at heart, should be the rule, not the exception, argues TERROIR Director Gerard Reinmuth.

**T**his issue of *Monument* is, perhaps unintentionally, a critique of the way public buildings in Australia are procured. I say this because the projects featured in these pages are exceptions. We produce some of the best houses in the world, yet we rarely produce public buildings of similar international standing. When success stories occur, it is often in spite of the lack of a procurement process designed to encourage quality outcomes but via the architect resorting to guerrilla tactics to deliver a level of innovation or excellence from within a hostile environment.

Unfortunately, it is the experience of many architects that public clients actually do not want high-quality buildings, and that those who do are not fully cognisant of the connection between the design and procurement.

Working for government today often commences with a lowest-price tender process, after which adversarial contracts are signed: contracts that transfer all risks to the design team, deny intellectual property rights and contain numerous other components that have the potential to void professional indemnity insurance cover. These engagement methods and contract conditions create an adversarial culture from the outset. The result of working in these conditions can be the suffocation of the design process and potentially of the research and development that leads to innovations. While most states now have government architects, their traction is still limited when one considers the proliferation of poor procurement practices from their adjacent agencies, some of whom are now black-listed by quality professionals who do not bid for work with them.

The simple lesson here is that quality outcomes are based on who takes responsibility for them—and taking responsibility and the offset of risks are mutually exclusive. In the residential arena this situation occurs regularly, given the proliferation of engaged individuals

who select architects that share their ambition and work with them in a process that encourages quality outcomes. In a public sense, this can mean an organisation like the Art Gallery of NSW or the Historic Houses Trust, where an enlightened Director (Edmund Capon and Peter Watts respectively) builds capacity within the organisation to deliver high quality projects. This culture leads to procurement processes where the quality of the building is central to every decision. Spared from the vagaries of the political cycle, the Directors of these institutions have been able to build and retain intellectual capital and thus the capacity to procure works of the highest calibre.

**T**he lack of public clients insistent on quality has accompanied a general disconnection between architect and client over the past 20 years. For many this disconnection commenced with the presence of project managers who often sit between the design team and client. While an excellent project manager is worth their weight in gold, too often they consume fees (often charging up to half as much as the architect), fracture communication

"... THESE INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO BUILD AND RETAIN INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL AND THUS THE CAPACITY TO PROCURE WORKS OF THE HIGHEST CALIBRE."

lines and diminish the capacity of the design team to advocate their own project. A more collaborative process, where the management of the project and the head of the design team sit side by side would lead to a far more refined process than at present, where projects are run by the team member furthest removed from the design.

Similarly, the design team has lost connection with quantity surveyors, who are often separately engaged by the client at the start of the project to work with the project manager to determine the brief and budget. This leads to projects that commence on a distorted basis where the target program and budget can be incorrect by as much as 100 per cent. A system for comparing budgets and time forecasts, which >>

>> have been made at the start of a project with the final outcome, would quantify the better project management professionals. In the interim, time that should be spent on design is consumed in negotiations to change impossible parameters to barely achievable ones.

The disconnection with the client has reached an apogee with Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and other contractual arrangements. With the stimulus package cleaning out government coffers, this model is set for greater use in the coming years. In principle, PPPs make sense. The engagement of the private sector is a necessary step in the evolution of urban governance and how our cities are made, particularly given that the procurement of the city is now so expensive. However, as they are currently structured, PPPs are a crude approach to development of land as a property portfolio rather than an investment in the public.

“EVER FEARFUL OF APPEARING TO CRITICISE GOVERNMENT, MOST INDUSTRY GROUPS HAVE BEEN PUBLICLY SILENT ...”

**T**he crudity sits with the sophistication of the public development agenda; that is, the public sector should factor in the objectives of the private sector, not substitute one for the other. At present, governments seem to be asking private investors to define the project for them—problematic given that private organisations must inevitably balance the cost-benefit equation in their own interests. Major projects become orphans, lacking a visible advocate and left in the care of secondary-level management structures. Why is this a problem? Because if no one is present to advocate that treatment rooms in an oncology ward need natural light and a view, then they are unlikely to be provided.

In the UK, where PPPs have been prevalent for some time, there is now a body of research undertaken by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) that outlines how this process has led to poor outcomes, from budget control to functionality to built quality. CABE highlighted Denton Corker Marshall's Manchester Court for Civil Justice as a noteworthy exception, where the simple act of involving the design team up front to work with the government to define the project, before

putting the remaining 95 per cent out to a PPP, resulted in a building short-listed for the Royal Institute of British Architects premier award, the Stirling Prize, and much loved by those who work and visit there.

Significant risk minimisation occurs in that first five per cent of expenditure, producing a set of drawings and specifications that capture the ambition of the client far more accurately than an untested written brief full of mother-lode statements and the dreaded 'comparator' drawings which often forms the basis of PPP tenders.

**T**he Rudd Government's stimulus package has had the consequence of focusing further attention on the way that governments procure buildings. We have watched as funding has been released according to Department of Finance models, which determine that the economy should be flushed with a certain amount of cash in a certain time. While most support the stimulus concept, little regard is given for the time it takes to procure quality buildings and little consideration has been given to how this package might have been deployed to enable more considered outcomes.

Ever-fearful of appearing to criticise government, most industry groups have been publicly silent, yet newspapers are now awash with stories about schools being funded for buildings that do not suit their needs. The simple process of allocating funds based on a strategic overview of each school would have resulted in a far more nuanced selection of appropriate projects. By establishing more realistic time frames to implement these projects, the Federal Government could have created a legacy. Instead we face a proliferation of hastily erected projects designed according to standard template designs and at low value for money, given the temporarily overheated market created by so many hundreds of schools being built simultaneously.

**O**n a more positive note, almost half the exceptions featured in the following pages have the Sydney City Council as client, where engaged design managers within Council appear to be supported by the Mayor and senior staff who share their ambitions to build a better city. The Council's approach addresses many of the issues raised here: the reconnection of the architect and client and the design of procurement arrangements that has seen a new breed of architect working on public projects.

Perhaps as a rearguard to the State Government in NSW, the Council has staked its credentials on the delivery of high-quality exemplar projects that include a high level of investment in innovative responses to urban or environmental conditions. While the current governance of NSW has limited Sydney City Council's ability to fully describe a cohesive plan for its future, these discrete projects certainly proclaim its ambition loud and clear. This is a model of public agency as leader, setting benchmarks for others to follow.

This issue of *Monument* is a provocation. The featured projects should not be the select few, but the tip of an iceberg. However, they will remain in the minority until our state and local governments take greater responsibility in ensuring the public interest is embedded in the conception of these projects and in procurement processes that support these ambitions. **M**