JOSIE ALVARO WAS IN THE AUDIENCE FOR AN ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY SPEAKER SERIES LECTURE BY GEOFF WARN TO DISCOVER HE ISN’T SETTLING FOR “DULLSVILLE” IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

Creative Crusade in the West

Geoff Warn Lecture Review

By Josie Alvaro

A vast array of responsive, arts-inspired architecture and musings on the challenging architectural milieu of Western Australia were presented by the fifth guest in Adelaide University’s 2011 Speaker Series - architect Geoff Warn. While some stamina was needed to sit through what was quite a lengthy presentation, it was worthwhile to hear Warn’s astute observations and to see some examples of insightful architecture exhibiting careful consideration of the human experience.

The lecture opened with an overview of Warn’s 30-year career, including his education at Curtin University, overseas experiences, establishing Perth architectural practice Donaldson and Warn and as a university lecturer. He then shared his observations about architectural practice in Western Australia, particularly Perth. The main focus of the lecture was on Warn’s WA projects, including the Tree Top Walk at Walpole, the Perth Institute for Contemporary Arts and the Victoria Quay Master Plan; intertwined with his personal beliefs and his creative processes. Much like the structure of the lecture itself, Warn described his creative processes as eclectic, non-linear and involving much improvisation.

Warn describes Perth as a place where so often profit is the top priority. Its architecture tends to be very developer-driven with little opportunity for creative discourse, resulting in buildings worthy of Perth’s nickname, “Dullsville”. It was therefore unsurprising when Warn recounted a number of instances in which clients have chosen the designer with the cheapest proposal, implying strongly that design quality is a less important consideration. Warn is certainly not alone in these sentiments. In 2007, Sam Riley reported in The West Australian: “The rush to cash in on WA’s booming housing and construction market had given rise to bland, boring, box-like buildings that would leave a legacy of concrete eyesores across Perth, top architects warned yesterday”.

In describing his own designs, he emphasised the inspiration he finds in other creative fields such as literature, music, visual arts and industrial design. Although this is not a new idea, Warn’s presentation provided some personal stories and specific examples. One of the most memorable was the mismatched kitchenware in Francisco de Zurbarán’s painting ‘Still Life with Pottery Jars’ providing a creative trigger for the composition of disparate built forms in Warn’s design for The Katz Academy project. Warn also drew parallels between the value of improvisation in both the arts and in architecture, but emphasised that it is not as effortless as it may appear. Much like a jazz musician needs considerable training, skill and confidence to spontaneously improvise a composition, so too does an architect in order to achieve that moment in a design where it all clicks as if by magic.

What resonated most strongly with me was Warn’s assertion that architecture is an enabling entity, not only an end in itself and that designing a building is also a social exercise in which a vision of the future is proposed. One example of this was Warn’s proposition for the Multiplex Plaza in which he carefully considered how this publically accessible, harsh concrete expanse could provide comfort and respite through oases of greenery, seating, shelter and wi-fi. However, I disagreed with his subsequent claim that as a student, one tends to design for oneself and it is only later in life that one may design more altruistically. Perhaps this stereotype had some degree of truth in an architecture classroom in the 1970s, but as a current landscape architecture student I am far more interested in designing for others than for myself and I am certain many of my peers would say the same.

As someone who has never visited Perth, this lecture provided a number of new insights as well as a sense of reassurance that someone is bucking the “Dullsville” trend. Learning from efforts such as Warn’s to foster a creative discourse in other cities, we may have a better chance of living up to our own “Radelaide” aspirations.

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