

CB: You have to demonstrate a kind of seamless integration of these two components, and the only way to show this is to go through the process and then build the outcome. However, the biggest roadblock for every young architect is lack of built work; projects take between two and 20 years to get going, depending on how big they are. And that is increasingly so, as the nature of clients changes to become even more risk averse. For example, the Sydney Opera House would have never happened if you looked to an architect that had built five opera houses before.

At the end of the day, for us, it means we have to keep pushing that and deliver built outcomes over the next five years. We have projects under way in China, in Saudi Arabia; once they are built, hopefully in the next two years, we will be able to demonstrate how that works in practice.

Andrew Burns
Andrew Burns Architect

Practice type: Sole practitioner, with collaborators
Staff: 1 plus contract staff and part-time assistants
Role: Director

Matt Chan: Can you describe how you have currently organised your practice, and what you are aiming to achieve by this?

Andrew Burns: My practice is about two things: design excellence and social transformation. I sit between these things, with

a couple of people helping me.

I'm aiming for design excellence, that idea of architecture that you might find in a 1960s monograph on Louis Kahn. My focus is on that old-school definition of architectural excellence, but I'm trying to find new forms of it. For instance, Australia House has a foundation in the domestic architectural traditions of Australia, say, in the work that Glenn Murcutt has done, and very much what Nick Murrutt and Rachel Neeson did. It's a response to that, but I'm striving to find something slightly more abstract: the idea that the building can have an object quality rather than a tectonic quality. Abstraction offers a sharper experience. So when I think of an object quality, I am more interested in what Donald Judd would do as opposed to Jurgen Mayer H.

I think, strangely enough, that my practice is on a continuum between an architectural practice and a contemporary art project. I can see myself in the future taking on contemporary art projects as well as architectural projects. It's a forum for precision of thought, and an area that allows self-initiated investigation. I enjoy that mode of engagement with the world, and I can see myself shifting towards that in some ways.

MC: So, would you describe your current practice structure as traditional or contemporary?

AB: The residential clients perceive it as a traditional model and the other clients perceive it as a traditional model with an artistic sensibility. I would say I am a traditional person, but I want to make exceptional architecture, and that traditional

approach gives people confidence.

I'm attempting to suppress personal authorship; this is something that perhaps questions the traditional approach. I am not seeking to have a signature other than clearly articulated geometry and a material consideration, because I think if you have a signature, it puts a barrier between the visitor and the work.

MC: In the absence of signature, what would you say is your current area of design expertise?

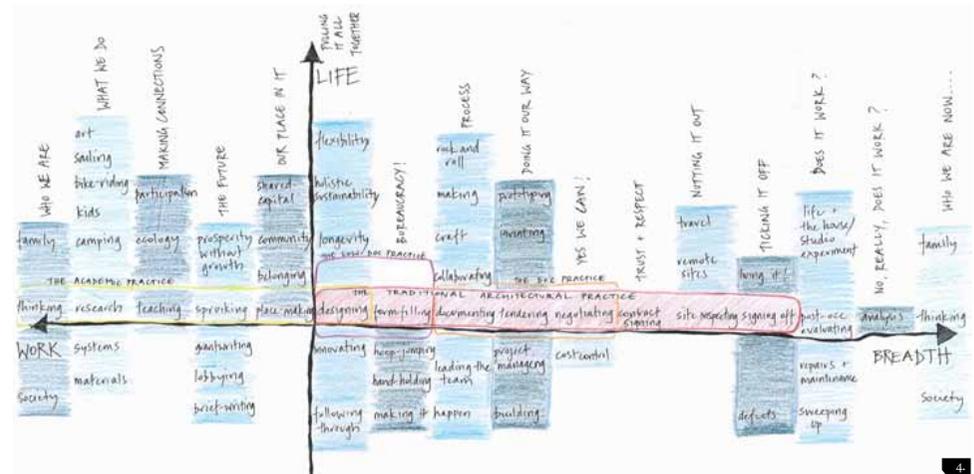
AB: I'd say projects that have a cultural function in themselves, beyond being a cultural venue. They're of a scale that is very controllable and are able to be documented quickly. Yet there are still many stakeholders – my work in London and Japan, and for Sherman Galleries, all had multiple stakeholders – funding partners, authorities, and consultants... I think of it as training for working on complex projects, yet these are simple projects.

MC: You could say that if you were a more commercially focused practice, you wouldn't necessarily invest time in putting together competition entries and expressions of interest?

AB: I would say that I am focusing on opportunities for excellence. I can see myself doing commercial work but I want to do it really well. The strongest thing I can do is maintain a pure level of architectural thought; a sincerity of thought. People recognise that and it creates opportunities, so I guess I am getting behind that and seeing where things lead.

MC: Australia House is particularly amazing in terms of how quickly it was realised as a built work, but also on an intellectual level, without compromising the quality of the design outcome. It seems like a picture of ideal circumstances.

AB: I think it was. I also have a good way of understanding what things are critical to a project – what needs to be hung on to and what doesn't – and that allows me to be fairly flexible while still achieving a high level of design outcome. With Australia House, I didn't have any angst about resolving and modifying it; one of my priorities was to be someone good to work with and assist the project's flow. It was finished three weeks before the opening, which was pretty tight, but it had to run to program. It's an important part of my approach in that I can balance a precise outcome with flexibility.



Ashley Dunn
Dunn & Hillam Architects

Practice type: Small office with a regional focus
Staff: 5
Role: Co-Founding Director (with Lee Hillam)

Matt Chan: Can you describe how you have currently organised your practice, and tell us what you are aiming to achieve from this?

Ashley Dunn: It's collaborative; it's about integrating life and work as one thing. Lee and I set up the practice 12 years ago in Newtown, and as soon as we decided to have children, we built the studio in Botany so we could carry on working together. Having children meant we either had to stop working together or outsource the care of our kids – neither of which we wanted to do – so working from home allowed us to stay in touch and allowed us to both be involved in the kids' growing up.

We've also been interested in building our own work, which is what we did in Botany. We've set our studio up to have an ideal maximum size of 10 people. The way we go about employing people is to engage people that aren't necessarily like-minded, but have similar interests in the way in which they want to live their life: being interested in community, being ethical and sustainable in all meanings of the word. As a result of that we have managed to make a stable environment where we work collaboratively on projects when they come in.

MC: With your regional work, do you have local partners on the ground?

AD: No, we've never partnered with another office; although we've toyed with the idea, we tend to just go out there. With the library in Junee, we moved up there for about six months. It's on the train line, so we could easily move between there and the office. We have invested in a really good IT set-up with a virtual private network, so that wherever we are we have access to everything all the time. For instance, with our current Alice Springs House project, which we're working on now, we have a webcam and we're able to screen, share and look at images on site and drawings as if we were sitting around the table. So rather than going up there every fortnight, it means going up there every month.

MC: Do you think it matters if you are seen as a traditional or contemporary office?

AD: I don't think it matters. I think it's detrimental to label yourself one or the other, or to overtly try and be one. I think if someone looks at us from the outside, we are very conservative in the way we practice, but I don't think the things we are trying to do are traditional or conservative in any way. But there is a lot to be said for tradition. As an architect, you can get lost in the idea of being original, however, it's not always about being original, it's about being appropriate.

MC: So with this response of appropriateness, what is your area of design expertise then?

AD: Expertise is something that we fight against in the traditional sense of the word. There's a need for expertise in designing hospitals or laboratories – in technical projects. Our expertise is in complex projects: difficult sites or briefs, multiple stakeholders,

reduced budgets... We also have a lot of experience in dealing with community. We're willing to be part of and work from within a community as well, and not just engage with a community as outsiders.

We also put a lot of focus into life-cycle cost analysis. We examine the economics of how much things cost now and see what will save money over a five or 10-year period. To do this, we monitor and measure the performance of our buildings, working with our clients to collect performance information about projects we've built. We commission this research, working with the University of New South Wales, who have the facilities to crunch the numbers. The data we collect is overlaid with questionnaires and other qualitative means of understanding our buildings. We use this as research, and with it we've been able to better educate our clients, and ourselves.

MC: So do you think small practices have the ability to compete with larger practices?

AD: I think we can, it is a misconception that small practice can't compete on delivery, but I actually think they're better at delivering on big, complex projects. There are a number of studios in Sydney doing fantastic work, who could take an opera house or a theatre tomorrow and do an amazing job in a timely fashion and at a competitive price. But we've never given the option to do it, because people believe you've got to be an office of 50–100 people. Caruso St John's Walsall Art Gallery was done by a team of four people, on time, on budget, and it is an amazing building, and highly detailed. ■■■



3. Australia House by Andrew Burns Architect. Image: Brett Boardman. 4. Mind map of the practice structure of Dunn & Hillam Architects. Image: Ashley Dunn.