

## INTERVIEW WITH NOEL ROBINSON

DATE 28 FEBRUARY, 2013

**RR**

00:00:04      The 28<sup>th</sup> of February and we're in the office of Noel Robinson and he is about to be interviewed by myself, Robert Riddell and Janine Gosseye.

**NR**

00:00:25      Hi team.

**RR**

00:00:27      The first question, what architecture qualifications did you gain and from which institutions?

**NR**

00:00:35      Well, I went to QIT and I did the primary courses of course, the Diploma in Architecture, which I from – I think, 1964 to, graduated in 1970 and then I had a break for a few years and I did the Diploma in Urban and Regional Planning at QUT.

00:01:01      And, I actually stretched that out for a number of years, till I threatened, if I didn't finish it on time I wouldn't get it. So, I finished it in time, so I've got two degrees from – well, they're not degrees they're diplomas from the QIT.

**RR**

00:01:20      What do you remember about the people who taught you in those courses?

**NR**

00:01:25      Well, they were quite informative, well Cam Scott was really one that I really enjoyed from a design point of view and I also worked with Ian Charlton who studied under Cam Scott and the, like – I learned a lot from being in the office with Ian of course as well, and there was a number of tutors down there, and I mean, one from professional practice was of course, Tom Cross and Tom was – actually, I enjoyed going through that part of the course as well, because, unless you're sort of very carefully dealing with the legal issues, of course you'll get yourself into trouble.

00:02:12      And so, that was part of the whole process. There were a lot of students like you of course and Gil used to drive 356's and stuff like that that always made some interest in that course. And, during that period I was working with a number of architects as well.

- 00:02:35 I started off with Powell Dods and Thorpe, which I did first year there and I was basically the print boy. And, I used to run out and get the prints because they didn't have a print machine in those days. But, I certainly learned the basics there, with Robin Dods and also Stuart Thorpe. In fact, Stuart really gave me my first break into architecture.
- 00:03:02 His daughter used to go to Wavell Heights, where I went to, and it was actually through – sorry, it wasn't his daughter it was through Anstey, who was the principal, and his daughter was the school captain there, as I was the school captain. So, anyway, Stewart gave me the first break as a student.
- 00:03:29 I, sort of, learned how to do banks and supermarkets and they actually had a very good practice in those days and I didn't, sort of, learn Robin Dods' work ethic, he used to come in about 10:00 o'clock, so, and he had a great time and I remember Stewart Thorpe driving this fantastic Studebaker. Big fins, you know, so I thought architecture was great.
- 00:04:07 So, and then I, sort of, was looking – I mean, I was always doing the odd little private job because that's the way you, sort of, did things in those days. You needed to get some experience outside of work and I started to do a few private jobs and competitions, from fairly early days.
- 00:04:33 Anyway, I went then to work with Danny Nutter and Ian Charlton. It was Curro Nutter and Charlton and Curro hardly ever came in the office. I got on very well with him because he was a musician and so was I, so, basically John Curro would come into the office and say to me, "Noel, you're designing all these pitched roof building, you're not in the snow," sort of thing.
- 00:04:58 Anyway, I did learn a lot there. Danny Nutter was a great technical guy, good specifications, really good – like, practical things, you know, he was also quite good designer. But, Ian Charlton was the key designer in that firm. And, I did Clive Foyster's house with him out at Yeronga on the river. It was a huge house, like, you know, as a student you're working on this massive sort of house with beautiful Scandinavian pitches and you know, big rooms and billiard rooms and all sorts of stuff, and wine cellars. The first time I've ever seen such a house.
- 00:05:36 Clive was the, sort of, mining magnate, he had Consolidated Rutile and he obviously sold mineral sands and things, so he had a fair bit of money, and so, a few of those things, it was a really nice time, I spent four years with Nutter and Charlton.
- 00:05:52 Then, in my final year I moved over to Prangley and Crofts where I actually had a pretty good run. I designed Eagle House, just up the road, which was my first crawl type building. Big concrete fins, and it's still there today. It's number 82 Eagle Street. And, I was given, basically a free run on that which was terrific. I left that when it was coming out of the ground, I left it when it was about the first floor, and

that was the first time I had the power to be able to knock over a concrete wall. Because, it was all white-off form concrete building.

00:06:23 So, setting the standard coming out of the ground was really important. E A Watts were the building contractors and the first wall they just poured it just buckled, so it was quite a pleasure to be able to say, that's not the right outcome.

00:06:35 Anyway, then I went off to London for a year and worked for James Cubitt Fello Atkinson and then I worked for the Greater London Council. And, the Greater London Council I did a major project over – it's a housing project – over in Heston, the old London airport. Which was, I don't know, it was major in terms – it was about 300 or 400 hundred units, you know, the public housing.

00:06:57 I went back a number of years later and saw the guys and they said, that didn't get built. They said, "After you left Noel, they did all the tests on the ground and it was full of cyanide and poisonous gases coming out, so they couldn't build on it. Anyway, so that was interesting.

00:07:15 But, going back to the course, I was playing music quite a lot during the course. So, my regular day would start, like, I'd go to the office at about 9:00, you'd finish and you'd go straight down to QIT at 6:00 and then you'd finish there at about 9:00, then I'd go off and play music. I'd either go and play at JC Williamson's in the theatre or I'd go and play at the Playboy Club, I used to play there six nights a week, with Bernard King and Judy Kennelly.

00:07:54 So, that was, sort of my life was music, or on the weekends you'd do pubs and clubs, then I had a rock band called The Movement, which we came second in the National Hailey's Battle of the Sounds, and then I did quite a bit of different sorts of things. I mean, I started music when I was five and I really finished at 25, when I was in fourth year I, sort of, really stopped, I said, "Architecture's the way now and music was behind me."

00:08:21 But, music actually helped, like, pay the way through. I mean, in the days when I started at Powell Dods and Thorpe, I mean, I think I was getting about £4 or £6 a week, I mean, it was not a lot of money. But, like, I was going nonstop 24 hours, so, sometimes, I mean, when I was playing at the Playboy Club I'd get home at 2:00 o'clock in the morning, so, you know, I don't think Ian Charlton knew that.

00:08:50 So, yeah, like, it was pretty full on and I think music's got something to do with architecture anyway. I think, you know, it's just – it's a creative thing and I'm not a classical musician, I'm a jazz musician, so, and I'm a jazz architect, I'm not a classical architect. Rob's a classical architect probably, but I'm a jazz architect.

00:09:18 And, you might be different, you might think differently to that, but, that's the way I sort of equate where I was heading. And, so, for a quite a time – and I mean, look I played in Festival Hall, we did various things and one of the sort of, notable shows, was the Who, the Small Faces and Paul Jones and Manfred Mann. I was the backing

group – I didn't back the Who, but I backed all the others, so I was up on the stage with the trumped with a whole group of people, so I used to belong to the Professional Musicians Union, or association, whatever it was called.

00:09:55 My dad was a musician. So, he was the one that put a brass instrument in my hand. I played French horn, played for Dame Joan Sutherland and Die Fledermaus and things like that, so I've had quite a wide range in experience in music. So, but, as I say, it sort of – it didn't fully completely stop when I was 25, but it was about that time.

00:10:22 But, you know, like, in fourth year I got really serious about architecture. So, you had to. Something had to give and obviously, well – like, because architects pay wasn't very good, I mean, I had, Robyn my wife, she used to work at the bank, so she really supported me, so she got sort of, banker's salary, and anyway, it eventually changed.

00:10:49 So, in, as I was saying, I think we went overseas in '71 for a year, that was out gap year, and worked over there and then I came back and essentially I started private practice straight away. I didn't go into anybody else's practice. I felt confident enough to go and have a go.

00:11:11 And, before we left, actually, we'd saved enough money to buy a house in Spring Hill, in fact we bought two houses in Spring Hill, up in Sedgebrook Street, it was, 26 and 22 Sedgebrook Street, we ultimately bought and then we leased those when we were away, so we were actually quite young property owners, in those days.

00:11:32 And, I think that was again, something that helped us establish and you've got to have some, particularly to start a practice, you need to go to the bank manager and show him you've got some assets that you can borrow against, because, I've found in most of my architectural life I had to borrow against projects. I haven't been lucky to have huge surpluses and so I think that having assets to be able to work from has been a help from day one.

00:12:04 Anyway, the Main Roads came along, they wanted to put a freeway right through our property, actually, sorry, it was the Brisbane City Council. And, so we made a 100 percent, more than a 100 percent profit. I think we paid about \$6,000 or pounds, maybe pounds, and we got 35,000 when we sold them, so we made quite a handsome profit.

00:12:24 Which then, I was able to buy a property up in the other part of Spring Hill, which was 149 Fortescue Street. So, that was an old public house, dated late 1800s and I managed to get that property and fix it up. It wouldn't have been fixed up to Rob's tastes in terms of – because, I ended up by painting it bright yellow, and - - -

**RR**

00:12:54 I remember it.

**NR**

00:12:58 - - - and, we – Robyn and I started the Marimekko shop out of that property and kept that business for many years. We ultimately sold that property and moved out to Clayfield and Ascot, so, our business the Marimekko shop moved out to Clayfield and we bought a house – an art deco house – out at Rupert Terrace and ultimately did some work on that and that was our family home, out there, for 25 years.

00:13:25 But, our younger two children were born in Spring Hill and I think that the exercise in Spring Hill was a lot of fun and I'm an advocate of living in the city, as you are Rob, I think it saves a lot of time and effort and all sorts of things and probably, you know, in terms of sustainability, it's obviously a very good thing. I currently live across the road from the office, and I walk 150 metres to work.

00:13:55 It's too convenient, but, there you go. And, I suppose it depends how you value your time, in terms of commuting, and that sort of stuff. So, yeah.

**JG**

00:14:07 Can I ask what made you decide to study architecture? Because you said you were into music heavily.

**NR**

00:14:12 Yeah. Good point. I actually was very good at technical drawing in high school. And, I really enjoyed drawing. And, I had a reasonable skill in it and that's what got me towards architecture. And, I suppose, you just suddenly – gradually rather – you approach each different bridge and you go across it and suddenly you're where you are.

00:14:40 And, I think that I didn't, sort of, consciously start high school thinking I was going to do architecture, it emerged.

**RR**

00:14:49 In those days, the primary school education included manual training - - -

**NR**

00:14:56 Absolutely.

**RR**

00:14:57 - - - it did for me, so you did carpentry, you did sheet metal work, you did - - -

**NR**

00:14:59 Exactly.

**RR**

00:15:00 - - - geometrical drawing. I think that was a great incentive to find out that you were good at those things and - - -

**NR**

00:15:07 Well, you knew how to put things together. And, I think one of the other things that I did during my course actually, was actually to build a house, the Institute of Architects, we put on a display village and Eddie Codd was there and some others and we built a display village out at Middle Park, which was again a great experience because I think you've got to actually get in and build and develop a few things yourself. And, the architects had to build their own house – a house, a display house.

**RR**

00:15:34 And when did that happen?

**NR**

00:15:35 It must have been - - -

**RR**

00:15:36 When you were a student or after?

**NR**

00:15:38 Yeah. I think it was – well, I think it was – must have been, it was either late '60s or early '70s. I'd have to find out exactly, but – no, it would have been early '70s. No, it was when I'd actually started practice.

00:15:52 It was – again, it was – I did a lot of houses in the early days that were post and beam, I spent a lot of, well, put it like this, I was influenced a lot by Scandinavia, when I went to the UK for my gap year, I had a Danish mate and architect who I'd met at Prangley and Crofts and so, I'd spent some time over there in Denmark and Finland and Sweden and there was one particular project which was called Moduli in Finland, that I really sort of was incentivised by because it was just beautiful post and beam timber and many of those early houses that I did when I came back were like that.

00:16:31 Either on a three metre grid or 3.3 metre grid or a 3.6 metre grid, depends on the sort of scale of the house I was doing and they were just simply post and beam with timber ceilings and we started to do, basically, modular wall panels, which were fibre cement which had polystyrene inside them, we were actually making the panels and sticking them in.

00:16:55 So, one of the first houses we did was out at Chermerside, which had these bright yellow panels, post and beams and inserts. So, they were really easy to go together and I still believe that, sort of , modular construction is obviously important.

00:17:16 We're doing a number of modular projects right now, that aren't really based on that but they're based on different philosophy at the moment, but, I think that the influence of Scandinavia, in the early work that I did, is very evident the way that they go together. Because, again, a lot of them were sitting on sloping sites, so, you could actually just run the posts down and let the building float over the top.

00:17:43 Then there were some buildings, like the one that I did in Blart Street [00:17:40]. It had a big space frame, that was a – Gabriel used to call them quadropods – but, we just did this big square in the pod and just anchored it back in into the back – into the rock. Adrian Den Ouden [00:18:04] was an engineer from McWilliams that I worked with in those early days and we did a few of those type of buildings where we sort of cantilever them out and put the buildings on top and then strutted them back to the site.

00:18:12 So, obviously in the earlier days where it's poor in structure and how that might work in the process of developing residential buildings. And, it took seven years when I started, I suppose I started – I started around '72 in private practice, I actually started initially with Dan Callighan, for a year. Danny and I got on really well together during university and we were always sparring off each other and sketching and drawing and doing our one-day design studies together.

00:18:44 Because, back in those days at QUT you had to do a one day design exam where you'd be set a project. I remember the last project that we were set was a prison. So, we ended up by – I mean, in one day you had to draw – you were given a brief in the morning, you had to sit down, you had to design it, draw it up and present it, hand it in at 5:00 o'clock and that was your exam, your design exam.

00:19:06 And, like, that really taught you to be pretty pragmatic about getting an outcome. So, techniques and presentation are really important and we used to have a toothbrush, get the ink and do this all over it – you probably remember this – and, so, you'd end up with this texture. You could actually do textures, you'd mask them all up and so, yeah, it was like – the way that you present it as well as obviously design a building within a day.

00:19:33 So, anyway, Danny and I started for a year and at that stage the Cultural Centre competition was on. We had a go at that and we were really pissed off because we didn't get anywhere on it. Robin Gibson got the job. And, anyway, but they were the things you did when you're starting up.

**RR**

00:19:54 So, was that an open competition?

**NR**

00:19:55        Yeah, I think it was, yeah. And, like, after that, sort of like, architecture pretty hard to start your own office. It took me seven years before it turned a profit.

**RR**

00:20:06        And, this is, you started in your home it was, in Fortescue Street?

**NR**

00:20:11        No, no actually started in Sedgebrook Street, 26 Sedgebrook Street. And, I think Margaret Olley used to do painting under the house and stuff, because we found a few of those paintings. I'm quite sure it was a studio before we actually bought it. I just can't remember who we bought it off.

00:20:29        But, we actually started in that property at 26 Sedgebrook Street. It had a beautiful courtyard on Sedgebrook Street, and a little bit of work to it and, yeah, so.

**RR**

00:20:43        Well, in your student years, who were the architects you most admired?

**NR**

00:20:50        Well, I think the ones that really influenced me were obviously Le Corbusier. The Alvar Aalto was really big then. I suppose – they were the main two ones, I mean, local influences, there wasn't a lot locally, some of it – I mean, Harry Seidler I suppose was a local influence and I mean Glen Murcutt really hadn't got going then, but certainly he was an influence as well, local.

**RR**

00:21:42        Although the course didn't teach anything about those people, to my knowledge.

**NR**

00:21:47        No. No. Not really, no.

**RR**

00:21:48        So, how did you even know about them?

**NR**

00:21:52        Well, good question. I think that Corbusier and Alvar Aalto I did know about, I'm not sure how I studied them, I mean, you buy books and these sorts of things. I can't remember exactly when those things happened, you know. I mean, Mies was another one that I really liked in the early days, because I ended up doing a number

of steel buildings, that were influenced really by that direction. One being my parents house, when I came back, so, I don't know. I'm not exactly sure Rob. But, they did influence me.

**RR**

00:22:39 And, did you – when you were in Europe did you go and look at the Corb buildings?

**NR**

00:22:44 Absolutely. Yeah. Did the whole thing, absolutely.

**RR**

00:22:49 Sure them all?

**NR**

00:22:51 Just, as many as I could see. Yeah, Robyn was dragged round to everyone of them. La Tourette, Marseille and all of those, you know, they were all part of the pilgrimage.

**RR**

00:23:02 Is there one in particular that really you honed in on?

**NR**

00:23:09 Not necessarily. I mean, La Tourette was really beautiful, you know, the setting there and yeah, that was pretty special. =

**RR**

00:23:19 So, you've already told us when you start practicing, and what – how many different offices have you had?

**NR**

00:23:30 Well, after Spring Hill I moved down to the old Shell House building in Ann Street. I think it was 301 Ann Street, it was an art deco.

**RR**

00:23:43 Next to the Masonic Temple?

**NR**

00:23:45 Masonic, next to the Masonic Temple and I think I stayed there 11 or 12 years and I had a fabulous office. That was my best office ever. Had a whole floor in the building and in a beautiful art deco building. You know the old elevators that you

closed with the concertina metal doors and it was a really beautiful building. And, I lived in an art deco house at that stage, so I was living in my own era, if you know what I mean, sort of, and I just enjoyed the character of those buildings and having that as a studio space. And, not only that, I had – I'd probably had the best collection of Artek furniture in Australia.

00:24:32 Because, what happened was, when we had Marimekko the same, Russell Whitechurch was the guy in Sydney who was actually the importer for all of those things, so we had access to buy heaps of Artek furniture and of course I love Artek furniture, here it is here, still. And, I've got a storeroom full of it at the moment but that's fitted really well into that office as well.

00:25:59 It was the whole '30s – '40s design, beautiful simple stuff, but, you know, but it's really classic and timeless pieces of work. Then I moved, after there, we had to get out of there because the Public Service Credit Union owned that building and then they sold it to FKP to turn it into a hotel. Which, in fact, was a terrible shame because it got all cut up into rooms instead of being these beautiful office floors.

00:25:31 And, Shell House was the first high rise in Brisbane, steel frame, clad with beautiful stone and it was – actually had a beacon on the top, like the tower and all the aeroplanes in Brisbane used it as their sighting line to come to the old Brisbane airport. So, it was quite an historic building.

00:25:50 And, it was a shame all the floors got cut up, but, anyway, that's the way life goes. Then we moved down to the National Australia Bank building, again, that's a classic building in my view, it was designed by I think, Yuncken and Freeman out of Melbourne. And, it's just a very simple classic building, like the BHP building in Melbourne, where it's a simple, nicely proportioned anodised aluminium facade with flush glass windows. And, at that stage we were on level 11 and I had a view straight down to the river. Which was terrific.

00:26:31 We were there again for about 11 or so years. Again, we had to get out of there because they were going to do a full refurbishment on the building. So, we came here and we're going to be here for at least ten to 15 years. We've got a long lease on this building, and this is the best location we've ever had. Because, we're right in the golden triangle and this is great for going having coffees with people. It's a fabulous block.

00:27:59 And, of course I live across the road, which makes it even better. So, that's all the offices, I mean, essentially, five offices all together, but four that have been a reasonable length of time. So, this year's my 40<sup>th</sup> year in practice and so, this will continue to be the home probably of my office until I retire, whenever that might be, or sell out for a fortune like you.

RR

00:27:29 I don't know about the fortune but. There's a question here that says, "What do you consider to be your most important work and why?"

**NR**

00:27:40 That's a good question. It's hard to say that there's one important work. Everything's sort of – it's timely of what you do. I mean, at the time you think that what you've done's important and the way that I answer that is I haven't built my most important work yet, right?

**RR**

00:27:58 Okay. The next one.

**NR**

00:28:00 But, I think – well, there are a lot of buildings that shape you, you know. And, they depend on obviously, what the project is, how challenging it is and what you can achieve. And, you know, there are a number of projects that I think have been important. Like the Mincom Building, was an important building. It was a difficult building because it went over three railway tunnels.

00:28:25 It was a project that had to convince clients that they should be in the city, rather than out in the suburbs and it was the first large office plate in Brisbane, so it was a massive footprint. It was about a 3,000 metre footprint. And, it had 30 metre beams going across these three railway lines and so, you ended up with a building that's got – like, it's got an underground swimming pool and gym that runs between the railway lines. Some of the stuff you can't see in it.

00:28:57 And, then it's got this massive scale because it basically goes over a full city block, so you've got a scale it horizontally and then you've got to scale it vertically and the top two floors you lighten it up so that it doesn't look so big. I mean, that building was quite challenging for engineering and architectural and urban design reasons.

00:29:18 Then, you go a building like the Kingsford Smith Memorial at the airport, which was a beautiful building and, like, it's the people who work with you. John Hockings worked with me on that and John and I were very close for many years, and still are, and John worked on a number of buildings with me. He worked on KSM and he worked on the Kenlynn Centre, which is a really interesting building that we did. It's got this layered facade along the front and, sort of, exposed elevator within the layered garden. So, yeah, you work with people you get reasonably good outcomes.

**RR**

00:29:54 And, you've been in partnership with a few people?

**NRMA f**

- 00:29:58 Well, the process that I've been through is, in 1988 we came together with, well it was Bligh Jessup Bretnall, then, we then turned that into Bligh Robinson and that went for three years, which was a good three years.
- 00:30:26 I don't have any complaints about that process, for me it worked very well and we did a number of award winning buildings together, The Golden Carts, with the Police Headquarters and Lake Crackenback which was a Zelman Award building, and that resulted, in fact – at that time when I came together I had an office in Sydney and an office in Canberra.
- 00:30:53 I tended to do that over the years, I mean, I'd expand into those offices and I started this office in the Rocks, and I had Colin down there and then an office in Canberra running together, which was out of Northbourne Avenue out of the Sir Winston Churchill Building and we did a number – or, I did a number of projects down there then for the NCDC, did a number of housing projects for Greg Deitz, who was running NCDC at that time.
- 00:31:25 So, basically, what happened when I came together with Bligh Jessup Bretnall, our offices merged and they gained a Sydney and a Canberra as part of that merger. Anyway, after three years I felt that I still wanted to do my own thing. But, my office structure – because I was – my office was always a shareholding office in that merger, and they did the same thing.
- 00:31:54 It was quite easy then to let the shareholding drift apart. It was quite easy to do that. And, in those days, both Shane Thompson and James Gross, they were with me and I think I went some way to training them a little bit and I've also had Brian Donovan in the office, up at Spring Hill, when he was going through.
- 00:32:21 So, there were a number of good people have, you know, been with me and I've enjoyed working with, so – and, I hope they think they've been able to get some decent training and mentoring out of me at the same time.
- 00:32:33 So, that was bit – and then in, I'm not sure of the exact year, but a number of years later I put together an alliance with Richard Dinham out of Sydney which we ultimately branded as Design Inc., which was a generic name, and that was really to get a national practice easily put together without having to deal with shareholding issues and all those sort of things.
- 00:33:03 So, it started off as an alliance and I stayed in it for ten years, but I started it with Richard Dinham, which was SJPH out of Sydney, he was basically ex-Leighton's guy, their design head guru, and again we did quite a lot of work with that. We put together Melbourne, which was something McDonald, and then we put together Adelaide and Perth.
- 00:33:34 So, we had a national alliance. At the end of the day, it didn't work for me because we couldn't get it all together as a share hold. So, I mean, as an exit strategy, as you know Rob, you've got to look at it – when you're in practice – where you're going to

end up potentially. And, you either end up like a Harry Seidler or Glenn Murcutt where you finish your practice and that's it. Or you look to how you might deal with the business growth and whether you're looking at leadership and ownership transition and all these sorts of things.

00:34:05 And, so, to me, at that particular stage, which is probably now 15 years ago, to look at a generic, put together a bit practice and that was a means and strategy where your names not involved, again our business that we'd started 40 years ago was still a share hold in that process, but, I think the issue is, again for me, it didn't work because, ultimately, we just couldn't put the whole thing together. I couldn't put it together in the way that I would like to see it, that's all, so it was a difficult thing at the end to pull out of.

00:34:41 I pulled out about five years ago and now heading into a new phase. I'm not sure where I'm going yet.

**RR**

00:34:49 Well, it looks pretty convincing.

**NR**

00:34:51 Well, it might work and it might not.

**RR**

00:34:55 So, which buildings, now we're talking about the years for this study is 1945 to 1975, so think about those, which buildings constructed in Queensland between those years do you consider significant, either personally or generally?

**NR**

00:35:16 Good question. Well, I think you'd have to say that the Art Gallery was a significant building, I'm not sure what year that was built.

**RR**

00:35:23 It must have been about '83 or '84.

**NR**

00:35:25 So, it's out of the '75 range.

**RR**

00:35:47 But it was probably designed – no - - -

**NR**

00:35:31 The competition was, sort of, around when we – Danny and I, sort of, first started. So, maybe it was around then, I mean, that is a significant building. Forty-five onwards, wow, that's a good question.

**RR**

00:35:49 Well, I mean, the modern buildings in the city at that stage, you had the T & G Building, you had the Executive Building, you had the SGIO, you had the MLC, the Hammerson, I mean, Prangley and Crofts were doing some pretty nice buildings.

**NR**

00:36:08 And, I think, well, that's correct and that was one of the things that attracted me to that firm at that particular time. Because, they did have the majority of the major commercial work around town and I wanted to certainly get experience in doing major commercial building. And, you're right, they'd started to do all of those things, plus – who was the other firm doing all that? Peddle Thorpe and Harvey were the other ones and they were obviously the Gold Tower, the Blue Tower - - -

**RR**

00:36:41 AMP.

**NR**

00:36:42 And all that sort of stuff, so, these two commercial firms were, sort of, in competition to, you know, to be the main commercial architects in the city. So, I think that, yes, I mean from the city point of view those buildings were significant, whether they were ultimately appropriate for a subtropical climate's another matter but they were the forerunners of what commercial building should be all about.

00:37:12 And, like, designing a commercial building I'm always very interested in, I mean, in – it must have been '89, because I was a partner then at Bligh Robinson – Suncorp commissioned me in the firm, myself, to do this – to go around the world with them to pick an architect to do the project, they had a big site down at Coolangatta on the beach, and they had the – where the current BAC Building is.

00:37:45 So, we went round and we actually selected Ricardo Legorreta to do the Surfers Paradise one and I'm trying to think who we got now to do the one in Brisbane. But, going around and seeing all those different firms was quite an exciting part of understanding what was going to happen in the city. And, I think that – that's getting off the track actually, talking about which are the most important ones.

00:38:12 But, I think that we didn't see anything like CP1 or CP2 until, you know, the mid to late '80s and they were obviously very important international architects and probably where I was, sort of, heading and drifting off towards is we still had local architects challenging and designing buildings that were being developed in the United States of America and Europe that we really hadn't seen here before.

00:38:40 So, going and testing these things and seeing how you get them into gross as working, and all these sorts of things, became quite interesting to me and I think that that's something, as I say, why I ended up looking at that part at the end of my studies, with getting into a firm that was doing that.

**RR**

00:38:59 Well, there was Birrell as well. I mean he was - - -

**NR**

00:39:00 Of course, and mate, he was just sensational. Thanks for reminding me of Jim. He's not very well at the moment, but, I mean, he was doing some sensational work, you know, not only universities, and in fact, in particular his universities, things like the Astor Terrace Carpark and that sort of stuff.

00:39:19 He was a real true artist. You know, he was a great and still is a great raconteur. And, he thought wider than just the building and did some beautiful work, you know, his sculpture that the – the outcome of the buildings were just really great buildings.

**RR**

00:39:40 I mean, how do you compare him to someone like Dalton for instance?

**NR**

00:39:45 Well, I think Jim's really a – again, I respect John Dalton's work immensely and again influenced a number of things, his beautiful simple white buildings and pitched rooves and those sorts of things are quite memorable. But, Jim, I think, was probably, in my view, one of the leaders in that era. Because, he could challenge and get buildings that had a larger scale and yet build them as pieces of sculpture as well.

00:40:21 He was able to deal with, like you know, like the Townsville Library and the way it sits and the big rooves and the overhangs and the curves. I mean, you know, he was sort of a bit of a Louis Kahn, but, you know, probably better.

**RR**

00:40:33 And, he had some good people with him.

**NR**

00:40:36 Absolutely, and, John Kershaw I worked with. John was there for ages. You know Jack? And, Jack ended up by doing work on Parliament House and I spent a lot of time with Jack in Canberra and all sorts of stuff. Jack's been a good mate of mine.

00:40:48           Actually, Jack used to work with Curro Nutter and Charlton, so I became good friends with him, yes. But, yeah, Birrell had some great people with him that he mentored through the process.

**RR**

00:41:02           I mean, Curro Nutter and Charlton was a pretty outstanding practice at that time. Were they in Ivory Street when you worked there?

**NR**

00:41:07           Yeah. Yeah. I was, down the bottom, we used to look right down the river. Little office under the bridge, it was just great. And, that office has been since demolished of course, but, it was a great spot.

00:41:20           And, I mean, like, in those days – well, we then moved up to Fortescue Street, into the McWilliam Building and we had the top floor up there, overlooking the back, but, I developed quite a work ethic from working with those guys.

**RR**

00:41:36           Well, Ken Stevenson was there.

**NR**

00:41:39           Absolutely, Ken's a good mate of mine too. Ken, I mean, Ken was a really good guy too. But, the work ethic was good because you just – well, you just got stuck into it and because you enjoyed it, you know, the day went really quickly and always there always, always there late, you know, that's the way it happened. Yeah, they were a good team of people and young Bruce Thiedeke was there at the same time, and Ken and Danny and I, we were part of the team.

00:42:09           All part of what was happening. I mean, the thing about Ian, Ian would sit down at the end of every day – in the morning he'd come in and he'd have a fully marked up great set of drawings, which was terrific, I mean, it teaches you a lot about quality control and dealing with detailing and I learned a lot about detailing.

**RR**

00:42:29           So, did he stay there all night?

**NR**

00:42:30           Probably just about all night. But, Ian was very methodical and very good at the way he did things, and as you know he went ultimately to Conrad and Gargett too. In those days.

**RR**

00:42:48 I'll ask this question and you probably have answered it in a way already. Who were the significant architects who have worked in your office?

**NR**

00:42:57 Yeah, well as I say, Brian Donovan, James Grosse, Shane Thompson and probably many others on the way through, but, they're probably the ones that have, you know, made their own mark in their own practices in their own way.

**RR**

00:43:14 And, do you feel your practice has had any impact?

**NR**

00:43:17 Sorry. Definitely John Hockings, very significant. Out of all those people I've got the greatest respect for John, he's just sensational. And, he's just retired, you know, and it's a pity because he's got so much work left in him, do you know what I mean?

00:43:38 I think, you know, out of all those people that have worked with me, John and I have had the best working relationship.

**RR**

00:43:45 I mean, you did work with Richard Allom

**NR**

00:43:49 Yeah, absolutely.

**RR**

00:43:52 In the capacity of consultant, but - - -

**NR**

00:44:53 Yeah. Richard and I are great mates and he's – again, I've got a great respect for Richard and, like, our families knew each other and, yeah, we've got a good working relationship.

**RR**

00:44:07 Just going back to the Mincom building, I mean that was to be the site of the world's tallest building before Mincom was there and, yet, in its position in the city, it was kind of next to, a listed building, another one across the street.

**NR**

00:44:24 Correct.

**RR**

00:44:25 There were a whole lot of issues there about that site and how you related to those things, which were really not explored in Brisbane at that time in terms of how one responds in an urban way to whole buildings.

**NR**

00:44:42 Exactly. Well, I mean, the council were challenging me also on that development, because, the School of Arts was an important building and that building going down Ann Street to keep the view corridor, there's this huge, sort of, three storey volumetric space that you can see right into the School of Arts.

00:45:05 And, also, stepping the building back to the School of Arts was an important issue. And, right now, they're going to stuff it up.

**RR**

00:45:11 Yeah. They're going to fill it.

**NR**

00:45:12 They just absolutely mess it up, you know. There's a sense of there's some things in the city that happen that shouldn't happen, you know, and that's one of them that's going to happen right now.

00:45:21 But, yes, there were those things, but I mean the scale of the building, actually, like, from a – it was really hard to make that building work financially because they wanted a lot of money and of course it was the old Canberra Hotel site, that was the dry hotel, without any beer.

00:45:35 So, the way actually that project worked is what we could actually fit in, around all the tunnels, we could actually fit in 360 cars underground that you couldn't see under the main podium. And, that, because we could get the number of cars in actually made the project work. For a low rise project.

00:45:56 I mean as you know, Manutso and Joe Bjelke Peterson had this model of this 80 storey building or something on the site. And, it was a very innovative idea because it actually came down and missed all the tunnels, it actually straddled them, so, to do that obviously we needed to get a bit of height out of the thing to make it work.

00:46:13 Anyway, we had to come up with a different methodology on the site and it does sit pretty well up there, I think, at the moment. And, as I say, it's going to be stuffed up with another building right up against the edge of it, so, that's the way life is.

**RR**

00:46:30 The only other question here, is, do you feel your practice has had any impact on present day architecture in Queensland?

**NR**

00:46:41 I would hope it did. I'm not sure exactly how. I currently sit on a number of panels and boards that I'm able to have some influence on, like, at the moment, we're developing the new Central City Master Plan. I chair the Independent Design Advisory Panel for the Brisbane City Council, I chair the Urban Design Advisory Panel for the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. I sit on the Board of Urban Places, I sit on Urban Futures Brisbane Board, which reports directly through the City Cabinet.

00:47:20 So, I do have some influence on mentoring and reviewing projects on all those locations around South East Queensland. The Board of Urban Places, as you know Rob, has had quite a bit of influence on major infrastructure projects. And, I think that that's one way that I've had an influence.

00:47:44 I suppose the built work, I'm not sure exactly how much I've been able to influence the outcome of architecture. I've always had a sustainable bent. In the '70s I was probably one of the first firms that wrote environmental policies and I think that we have always, I mean, nature and climate drives you, the way you design things and I think from the early houses that I did, they've always been driven by climate and simple ways of putting things together.

00:48:17 So, I don't know, I suppose in some ways, it's something for other people to judge just how much influence I've had. I think through people I've had influence. People that have worked with me and just the way of practice. I mean, practice is a difficult thing to do. You go through lots of pressure points in practice, because, you've got deadlines and you've got legal issues to deal with, and, you know, you've got great buildings to put up.

00:48:48 So, it's not easy to actually get through it all at the end of the day. So, it's just hard to stand back and say, what have you achieved.

**RR**

00:48:57 Yes, it's probably for others to say that.

**NR**

00:48:59 Exactly.

**RR**

00:49:00 But, you did have an idea about the profession and having the image of an architect.

**NR**

00:49:09 Correct.

**RR**

00:49:10 I mean, you dressed like an architect, you were known as an architect, you were a man of style.

**NR**

00:49:15 Exactly.

**RR**

00:49:18 You thought that was a necessary part of what you did?

**NR**

00:49:22 Well, to some degree. I think that – I – in 1979 I won the Institute of Architects Sisalation Scholarship. And, that was for marketing architectural services. So, I ended up by going around the world and talking to all sorts of architects about how they marketed themselves, of getting work and developing their business.

00:49:44 One of the people I interviewed was Norman Foster. And, I had a discussion with him in his London office, ground floor office, with his neon sign in the front street. And, Norman told me that he'd never really marketed, okay, so, but he told me that he designs everything from first principles.

00:50:04 And, he told me that he gets also, around him, the best consultants in the world so that he can have a really strong team around him to get a really great outcome. And, that's stuck with me, from, sort of, like day one.

00:50:18 And, yes, I live the dream and I think living the dream is important. You need to live the dream. I think that you've got to be very careful that you manage your ego when you're an architect, and I think as years have gone on, I've managed it a lot better than I had previously.

00:50:40 I think that, like, I used to get a lot of publicity in those days. And, I think that I've, sort of, I don't need the publicity at the moment, I just like to be fairly quiet in the background and just do whatever work I can do. But, publicity starts to chase you and I think the money chasers like the talent, always.

00:51:04 So, I think that when you're a – like, I wouldn't ever call myself a superstar, but, when you're in the limelight, and you are winning awards and you've got lots of articles in the paper, which I had a lot of them, you do – people, sort of, turn to you to become somebody who leads opinion.

00:51:23 And, I think that you need to be careful about what you say and obviously, say the right things about having your opinion is important, and, it's important to get that opinion across where it's needed. And, you and I know, just recently, we needed to get our opinion across on a certain matter about a heritage issue in the city and you need to do that – you don't have to necessarily blurt it across the newspapers, you have to know how to get it through the political channels and how to be effective, I think.

**RR**

00:51:57        Yeah.

**NR**

00:51:59        I think, like, yeah, I suppose yes I wore bowties and all the rest of it and, you know, I think that we - - -

**RR**

00:52:07        It was white suits.

**NR**

00:52:08        And, white suits, I mean, the issues was hats and sunglasses. It was to do with what architecture was all about, and it was hats and sunglasses. And, that's really that period where people were thinking about climate and, you know, it was the beginning of that thing, so.

**RR**

00:52:24        Well, Harry Seidler certainly did those things too.

**NR**

00:52:25        Yeah.

**RR**

00:52:29        I mean, was he someone that you ever knew?

**NR**

00:52:33        Well, not intimately until later in his life. I started to get to know him very well when he was designing Riparian and I – actually, that's not quite true. I got to know Harry sometime before, I'm just trying to think when. Because, he put me in touch with Lin Utzon who was over in Elsinore and I went to see Lynn in her ceramics studio over there.

00:53:00        And, it was through Harry that – made that introduction. So, that must have been, I don't know, 15 – 20 years ago. But, then, I mean, Harry actually said some very nice things about me, he actually got me into Docomomo, which is the thing in New York, you know, about modernists and he used to call me one of the last modernists.

00:53:26        But, I think that maybe I am – maybe I'm not, I don't know. But, I didn't ever fit into a style. Harry, sort of, fitted into a style, you know, Harry developed a very unique style and I don't think there's any of my buildings that actually are stylistic where, you know, they're not really, any of them aren't the same, so to speak.

00:53:45        They've always been something new.

**RR**

00:53:50 It would be very difficult to have Harry Seidler's career in a city like Brisbane. It just didn't have the money and the power to - - -

**NR**

00:53:57 Exactly.

**RR**

00:53:58 - - - to get those clients.

**NR**

00:53:59 You're absolutely right and I think Brisbane, it's a very good point you've raised Rob, because, Brisbane, in terms of, particularly in the residential scene, never had enough money to build decent houses. And, it's only in the last then years that I've seen and you've seen, some serious money come in to people building houses that have got some substance to them.

**RR**

00:54:24 And, I guess houses that might actually go on and be preserved because they have some quality.

**NR**

00:54:30 Exactly. Exactly. So, yeah, I think that – yes, you're right, I mean, Seidler wouldn't have survived in Brisbane. Obviously, he's got a stamp in every city in Australia and I suppose that's something that, I mean, I haven't necessarily aspired to, but, one of the things I have done, I've always had a global reach.

00:54:49 I mean, I've spent 20 years going to China, we've had an office in the Middle East for the last five years. I've got an office in Muscat, we just finished a big university at Sohar and we designed a \$200 million palace for the Sultan, that he calls his guest house. He's not building it at the moment, but – I think the global reach has always been important for people in the office.

00:55:15 I've worked in eight overseas countries. We did five Expo projects in Seville, and we did those, again with local architects and Fitch out of London, because, we did the British Pavilion in '88 with them, and I had a Spanish architect who worked in my office, so I went and set an office up there in Seville.

00:55:34 We did the Australian Pavilion and Expo in Daejeon in Korea. And, projects designed in Japan, we did a 100 storey building in Japan. It never got built. But, Tim Fischer who was the Deputy Prime Minister was up there and signed the contract.

00:55:49 You, sort of, you know, you have to have a global reach, you really can't stay... insular, because we live in a globe that is now, even more, expanding. You know, electronics exposes us to everything, you know. You buy a radiator for the Mercedes off the, you know, whatever it is, you know, everything you can do.

00:56:11 So, you've got to really think global.

**RR**

00:56:16 Well, you can do everything but you haven't got enough time, actually, to do it. So, you have to be selective about what's important.

**NR**

00:56:26 Exactly. You do. Correct. Yes, time is a very important element in one's life.

**RR**

00:56:37 Well, thank you, I think we've covered a lot of ground.

**NR**

00:56:41 We've covered a lot of ground.

END OF TRANSCRIPT