

ntil recently, with the impending completion of his Islamic Centre in Melbourne, Glenn Murcutt's most significant building was Bundanon, the residential education centre on the southern coast of NSW, which provided something of a new direction for Murcutt. One sensed that he had tired of the limited challenges of small domestic building, and if previously there were doubts that Murcutt might struggle with the scale of a larger building, the Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Education Centre rose to the challenge and has become, perhaps, his masterwork. It is his most sophisticated building, and is the project which resulted in Murcutt winning

the Pritzker Prize in 2002.

The Boyd Centre at Riversdale (known colloquially as Bundanon) is an exceptional building that demonstrates how a sophisticated programme can be married with Murcutt's enduring themes of landscape and climate, and in particular deals beautifully with the reduction of scale from the vastness of landscape, down through the collective, into the personal. Bundanon also represented something of a stylistic departure – particularly the accommodation wing with its white projecting bays and concrete spine.

in Melbourne embraces a rich cultural context, writes *Piers Taylor* 

Having scratched the itch of a larger project, Bundanon represented something

of a temporary full stop for Murcutt - until now. He won the Pritzker Prize shortly after Bundanon's completion, thrusting him into the spotlight that, as a private man, he was not prepared for. Murcutt talks of how the Pritzker distracted him from the serious business of work, and over the next 10 years, Murcutt became a commodity on the world stage, commanding huge fees for teaching and speaking internationally, and living for much of the year out of a suitcase on a 747. It was a period that culminated in his son, Nicholas - also an architect - dying from cancer, which devastated Murcutt and left him depressed and unable to work. It was also a period where one might be forgiven







for asking whether Murcutt would or could work again.

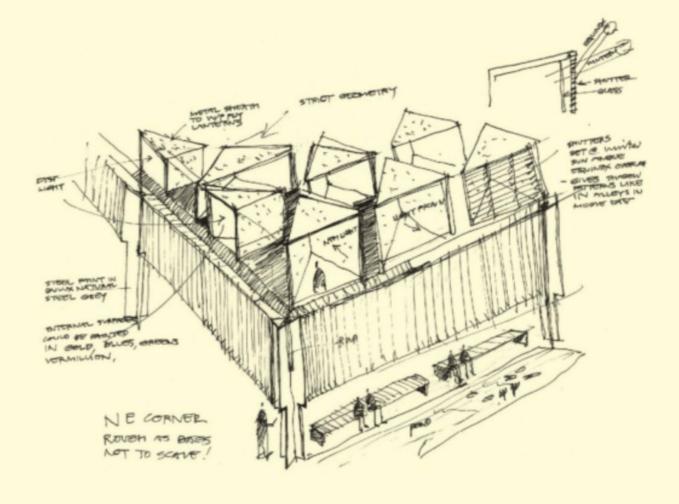
In the intervening period since Murcutt completed Bundanon in 2001, much has changed in the world. Architecture, as with politics and everything else, is operating in a Aga Khan jury, because the Islamic world on fast-forward. The year 2001 was also, of course, the year of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the beginning of increasing tension of relationships between Islamic and Western worlds: a tension that is ever heightening with the newly elected President Trump, and in particular his recent banning of Muslims from entering America. That Murcutt cites his almostcompleted mosque and education centre for

Melbourne's Islamic community as his most important project to date feels appropriate, and its explicit inclusiveness welcome.

Murcutt was initially approached almost a decade ago by his client while he was on the community in Melbourne realised Murcutt was open to Islam. Designed in collaboration with local Islamic architect Hakan Elevli, the project represents a relative departure for Murcutt. This is partly because of its size (it is much bigger than any other building Murcutt has delivered) but mainly because of the rich cultural context within which he has had to work and the resultant complex programme of a large mosque with

sophisticated nuances between various spaces that need to be reconciled and allowed to change over time.

The site is also a departure for Murcutt. Neither rural nor truly urban, it is instead in Newport, a low-rise, open-grained residential suburb of Melbourne, 10km or so from its centre. Most of Murcutt's buildings are set up to mediate between aspects of landscape and their human occupation, and in many ways the mosque is no different. Unusually for a mosque, this project has instead been designed as a continuous piece of landscape that begins at the street edge some distance from the building. If many of Murcutt's rural buildings have adapted the



language of the rural shed, this suburban building feels as if it has adapted the language of the large suburban shed, and from the street presents an ambiguity not typical in a place of worship.

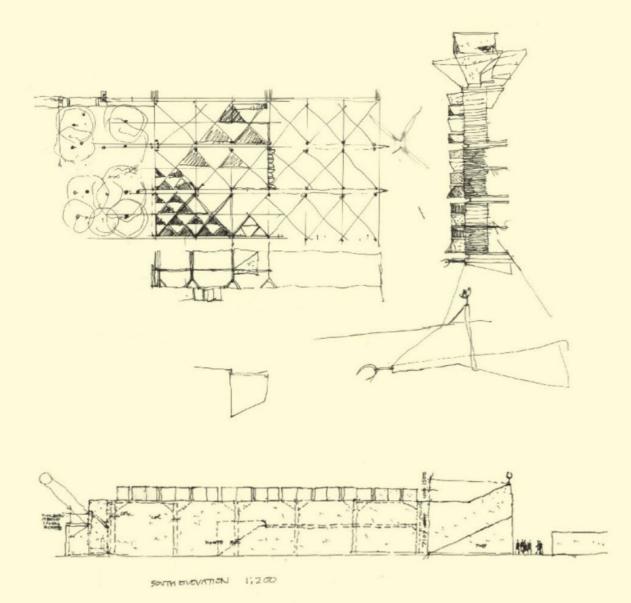
Curiously, the mosque has no 'fourth' wall; instead of entering into a private courtyard through a small opening, the public side of the building has a transparent glazed facade at ground level that pivots and almost disappears, allowing visitors to filter seamlessly in from the willow bottlebrush and olive trees that have been planted to shade and shelter the external spaces. The mosque intentionally presents an open and encompassing face to its

community, inviting people to enter who may not be Muslim.

There are key Murcutt hallmarks here though, such as the sculptural, blade-like concrete wall that draws visitors into the building. This takes the place of the traditional minaret, which Murcutt persuaded his client to abandon. The mosque also embodies his key working themes of light and ventilation. The roof lanterns are designed to face variously north, south, east and west, with alternately coloured glass that moderates the light from each direction and changes the character of the main worship space accordingly from morning to afternoon. These lanterns, which dominate the external appearance of the building, also, with their intense coloured light, provide the dominant experience of the main double-height worship space. Other Murcutt hallmarks are the external louvres that provide cross ventilation, and the expressive rainwater hoppers.

The mosque is not quite finished, and the key experience that it needs to offer is difficult to read yet: that of atmosphere. This is perhaps the biggest challenge for Murcutt, and the biggest departure from his previous buildings where the making of an architecture from the rudimentary has served him so well. Here, he has had no choice but to deal with that foremost of



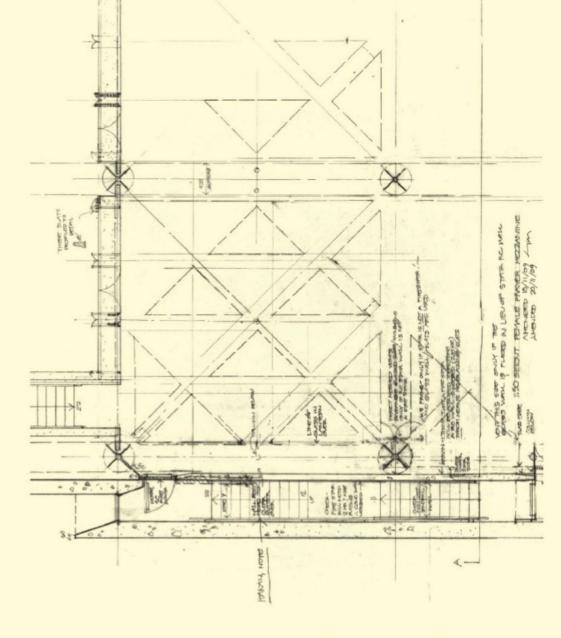


architectural preserves: a spatial experience designed to imbue visitors with reverence. It is refreshing to see him grappling with the issues presented here: the suburban site, the large scale and the cultural context, and offers, hopefully, a taste of things to come as Murcutt enters into another busy phase in his 81st year, having rediscovered his zeal for work. Working harder than ever, Murcutt is undergoing a late career renaissance and the mosque is an interesting development of Murcutt's ethos into a public building. Although he refuses to work outside Australia, with the mosque's central themes of bridge building between Western and

Islamic cultures Murcutt shows how world politics can be addressed from the suburbs.

Although the mosque is relatively distinct from Murcutt's earlier work, it sits very much within an orthodox canon. Now, there is a prevalent desire by many architects that each project is distinct from those designed previously (think Herzog & de Meuron, Niall McLaughlin or even Zumthor). Murcutt's work, however, always dealt with the continuing refinement of an idea: typically a linear, responsive shallow plan, a framed, almost shed-like pavilion with an expressive roof, perching over landscape, clad with corrugated metal. Almost insect-like, these

buildings spawned many imitations in Australia – but none as interesting or as thorough as his, and typically his imitators misunderstood Murcutt's work as a style. He never talks of style, aesthetics or even spatial experience – presenting everything as the almost inevitable outcome of a consideration of place and climate wrapped up in tectonic immediacy. He presides over a school of thinking that moves critical regionalism beyond the orthodoxy of its slightly pious initial protagonists, and includes among others Peter Stutchbury whose work develops the purity of Murcutt's into a more demonstrative idiom.



Since 1975, when Murcutt completed the Marie Short House, his work has presented a new ideal about landscape that has since become familiar to many. Freed from the European fear of uncultivated landscape, his pavilions were perched delicately in an untamed and untouched wilderness, able to be unbolted and packed away with little impact on the landscape. These buildings embodied an attitude that became Murcutt's calling card: Touching the Earth Lightly. Murcutt didn't just mean the literal raising of a building above the ground, but also the conservation of resources and frugal application of means, in an age when

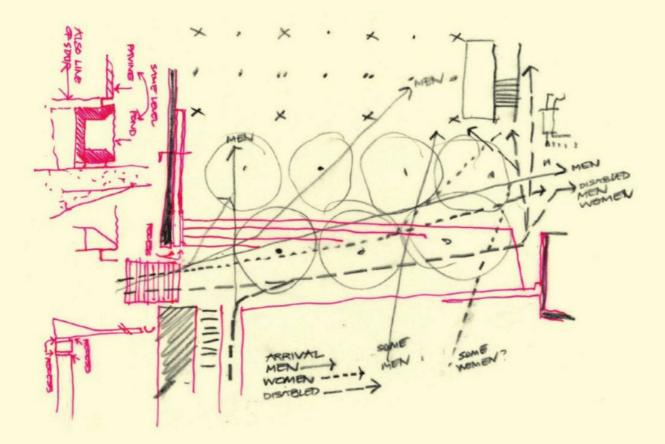
many architects still considered materials to be abundant and resources endless. These houses were the precursor to a series of similar projects, each one an iteration of the last.

The culmination of Murcutt's thinking in his domestic buildings was the Simpson-Lee House (1993), which was a decisive essay on the nature of connection with landscape, and the use of a highly controlled plan to deal with arrival and place occupants perfectly within a vast and fragile piece of virgin bushland. In many ways, the Simpson-Lee House was so evolved that it was difficult to see where Murcutt could go next

if he continued to work exclusively in the realm of domestic architecture, and represented the final project in a series of pavilions that had begun nearly 30 years before with the Farnsworth-derived house for his brother in northern Sydney.

Although Murcutt has, at times, been criticised for dealing mainly with the singular, single-family dwelling in rural locations, his work transcends the limited scope that most projects of this nature offer – each acting as a prototype for something bigger and something better than itself. In particular, his Marika-Alderton House for an extended aboriginal family in the Northern





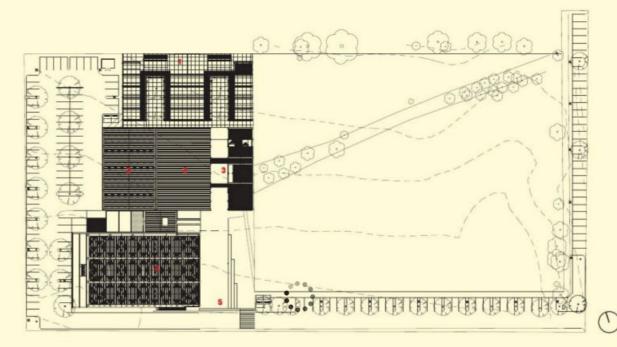
Territory offered a model for a building that effortlessly dealt with extreme weather conditions. Mainly consisting of planned but indeterminate space, the skin of the building opened up and allowed the regionally prevalent cyclones to pass through, offering a widely applicable, low-cost model of shelter to a people largely bullied by unthinking and uncaring local authorities into airless, windowless concrete bunkers.

Collectively, Murcutt's projects represent a remarkable evolution of the Miesian pavilion into a sensitive, climatically responsive, locally adaptive development of the primitive shelter. His work embraces such issues as the fragility of a continent dealing with cultural identity, drought, suburban sprawl, climate change and the wanton squandering of resources to prop up lifestyles fuelled by oil and imported goods. Looking back now with the benefit of having seen his later, larger projects, his houses present an extraordinarily persistent and diligent refinement of an idea that is rare in a world hungry for novelty.

While Murcutt tends to prefer to describe his projects in practical terms – in terms of shading, cooling, ventilation and rainwater collection – this hasn't stopped many others feeling very deeply that his work embodies a continent's existential search for its own identity and demonstrates its confident coming of age, shedding the need to appropriate other cultures' architectural languages. His work has been important in allowing Australia to recognise that its home-grown architecture is none the poorer than that which exists in other cultures in Europe, America, Japan or anywhere else.

Scrupulous, relentlessly uncommercial and focused on dealing with the design and delivery of one project at a time, Murcutt continues to occupy a unique position on the world architecture stage. Unlike his fellow Pritzker Prize laureate Peter Zumthor,

- recreational / office / library
- 3 Imam's residence
- 4 mosque
- 5 minaret



Murcutt is not interested in running an office and has never employed staff. Instead, he documents almost every project himself, by hand, from his modest home studio in suburban Sydney where he operates without email or CAD, still communicating by faxing handwritten letters.

One of the first architects whose work acted locally, but took on global themes, Murcutt's buildings seemed extraordinarily exotic in a pre-internet age, well before this way of working was corrupted by multinationals and turned into meaningless rhetoric. Murcutt was also one of the first architects to successfully re-present

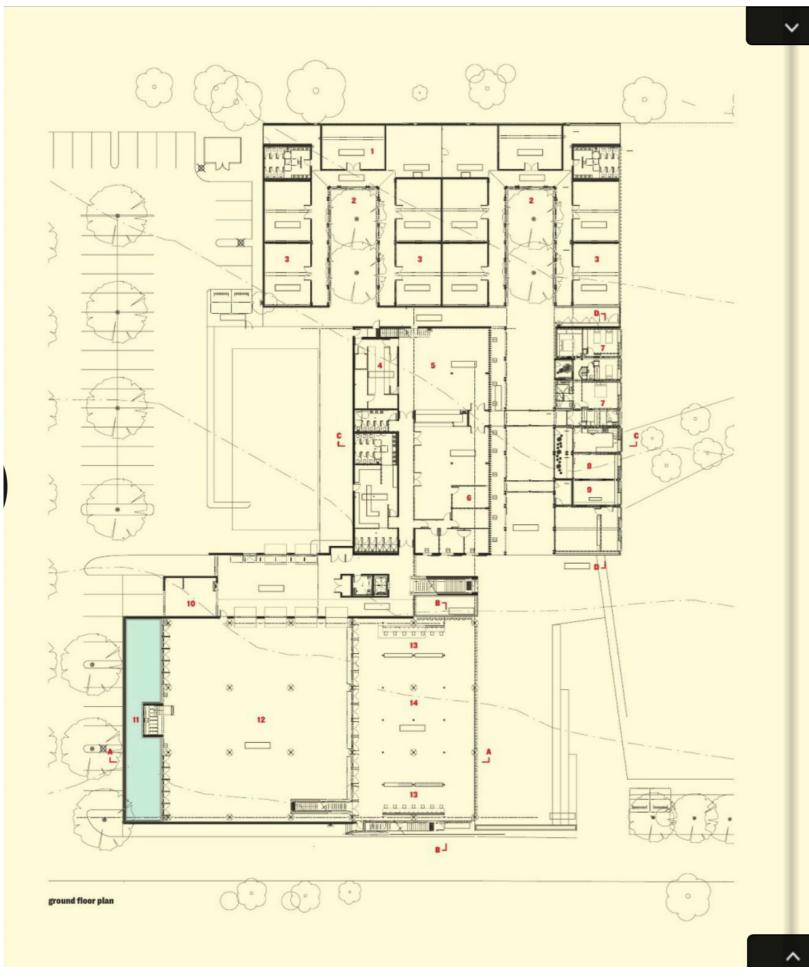
Modernism as a language that could be regionally adaptive to an audience tired of a bombastic and macho International Modernism and bored of the buffoonish Postmodernism that characterised much of the 1980s.

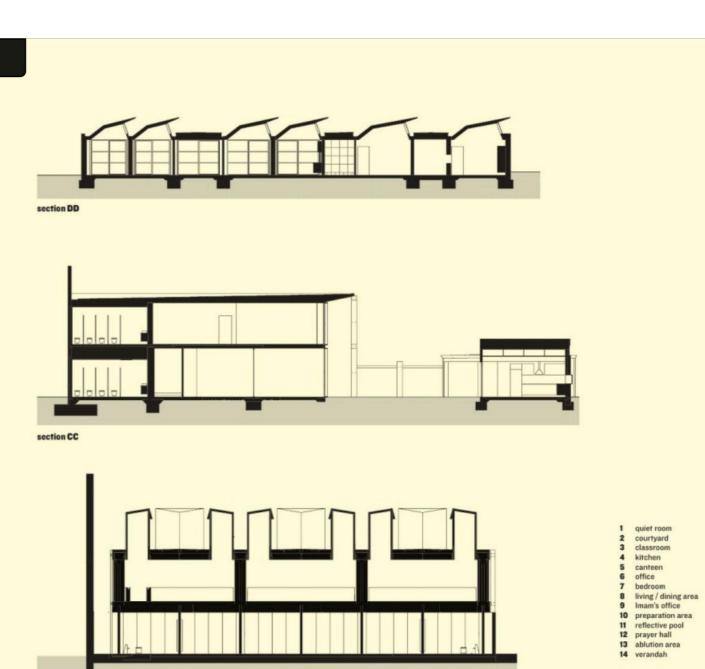
Murcutt presents a way of working that is principled, theoretical yet down to earth, practical, regional yet international, and potent to many architects who can imagine the potential of their own small project to speak of bigger issues. In addition, Murcutt spoke of climate change way before it was the norm for many well-meaning practices, and his work continues to be driven by

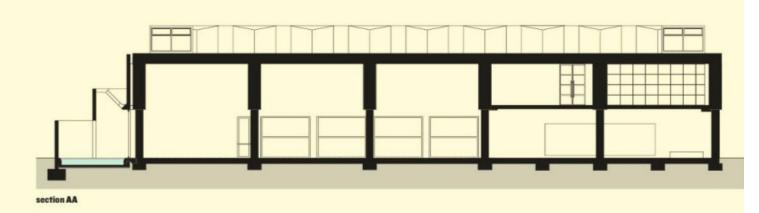
environmental issues. Indeed, in many ways Murcutt invented the notion of an intelligent passive architecture that dealt with climate through clever thinking rather than complex engineering.

We have much to thank Murcutt for. In an age of the publicity-seeking wannabe stararchitect and the image-fuelled context of contemporary architectural discourse, Murcutt and his oeuvre offer a model of dignity and consistency. If Murcutt's work had a particular potency in a pre-internet era, it now also seems super relevant once again as we plunge headlong into global political and environmental turmoil.

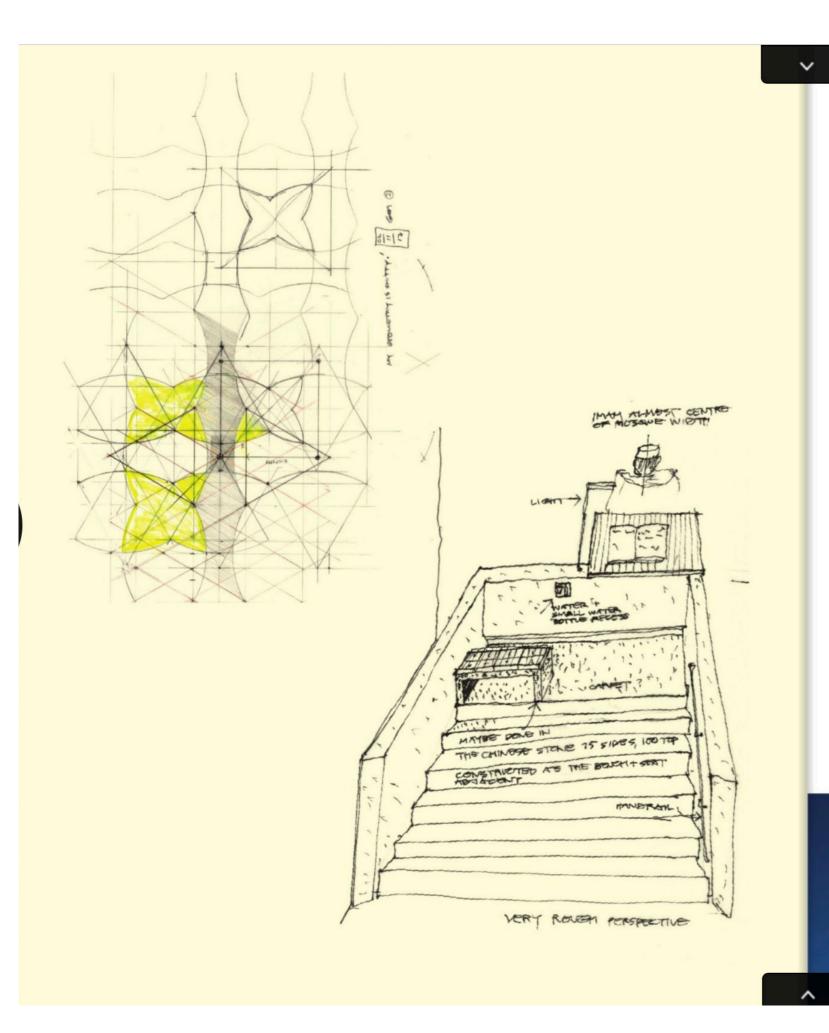


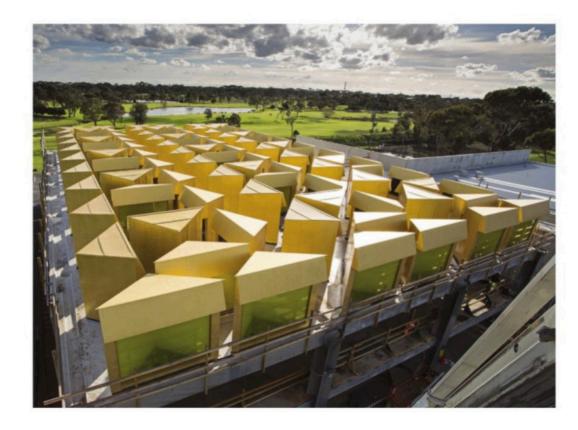




















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67 centre left, 69
Tobias Titz, p67 top and
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Drawings
Courtesy of Glenn Murcutt



