

MAGNUM OPUS

Glenn Murcutt's Australian Islamic Centre in Melbourne embraces a rich cultural context, writes *Piers Taylor*

Until 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.

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.

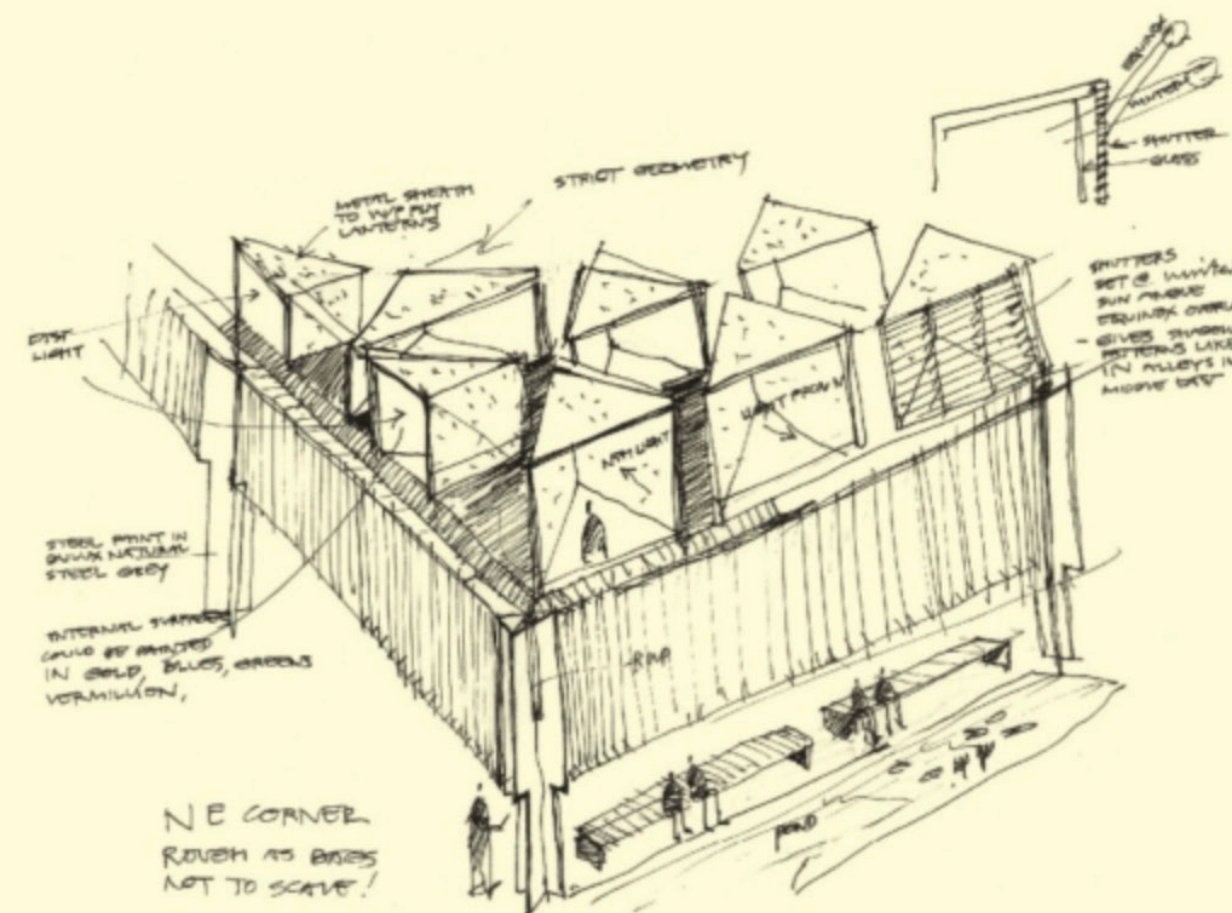
In the intervening period since Murcutt completed Bundanon in 2001, much has changed in the world. Architecture, as with politics and everything else, is operating in a world on fast-forward. The year 2001 was also, of course, the year of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the beginning of increasing tension 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 almost-completed 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 Aga Khan jury, because the Islamic 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.

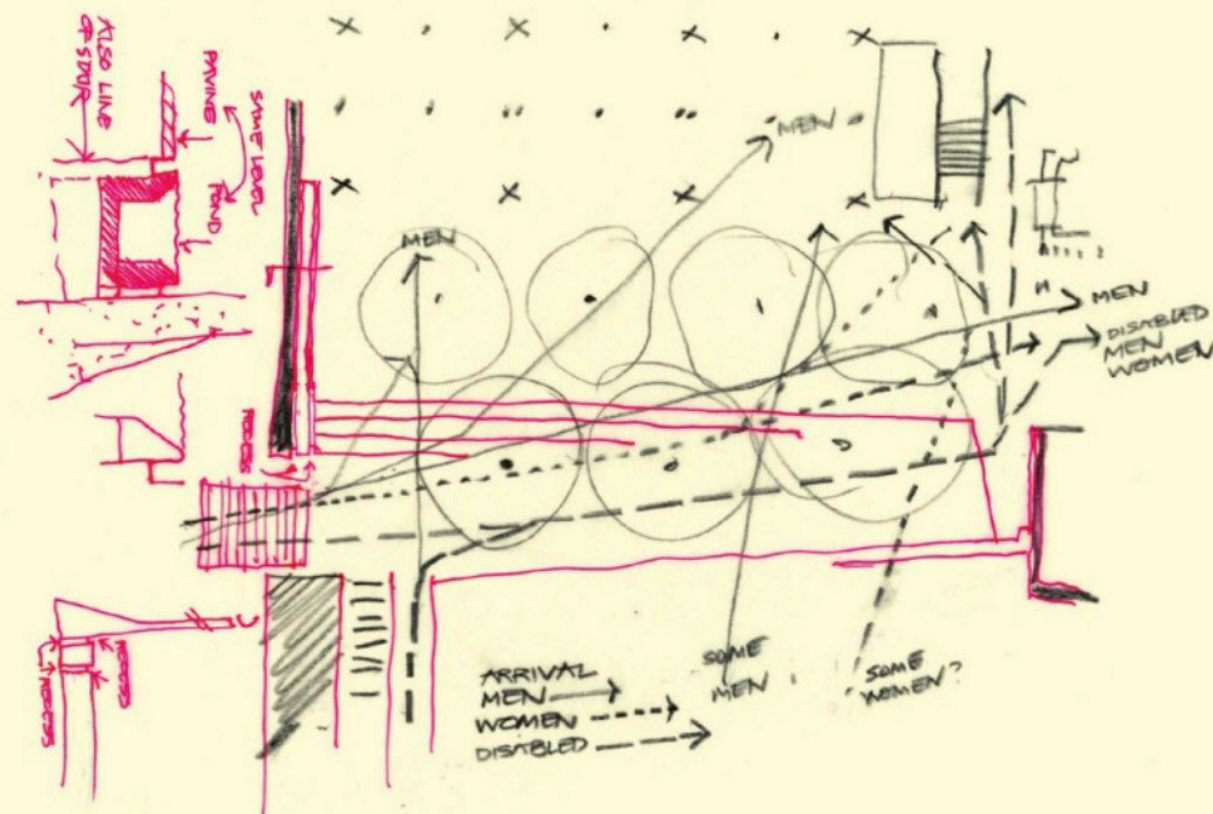
Curiously, the mosque has no 'fourth' wall; instead of entering into a private courtyard through a small opening, the public side of the building has a transparent glazed facade at ground level that pivots and almost disappears, allowing visitors to filter seamlessly in from the willow bottlebrush and 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.

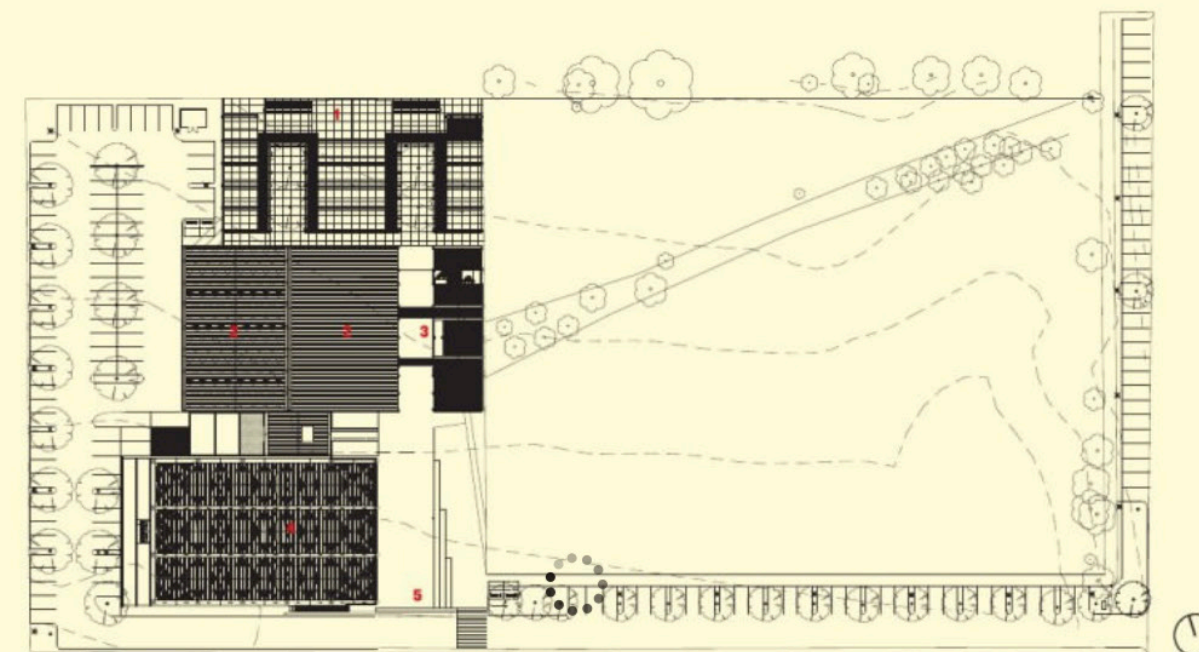
There are key Murcutt hallmarks here though, such as the sculptural, blade-like concrete wall that draws visitors into the building. This takes the place of the traditional minaret, which Murcutt persuaded his client to abandon. The mosque also embodies his key working themes of light and ventilation. 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



- 1 education centre
- 2 recreational / office / library
- 3 Imam's residence
- 4 mosque
- 5 minaret



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,

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.

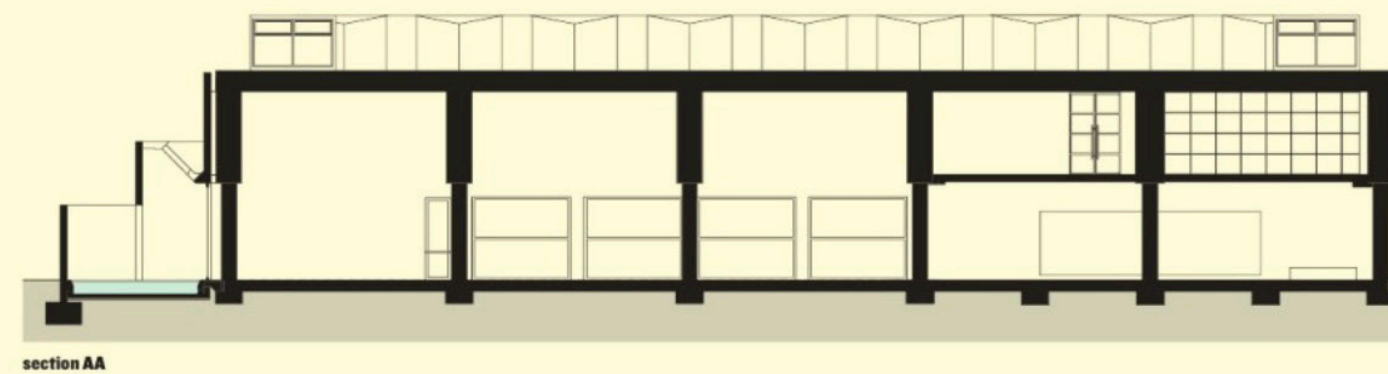
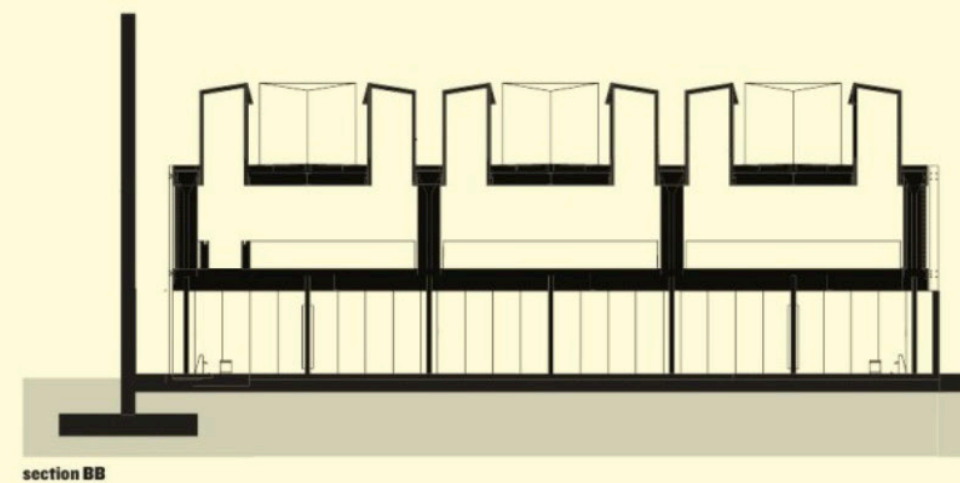
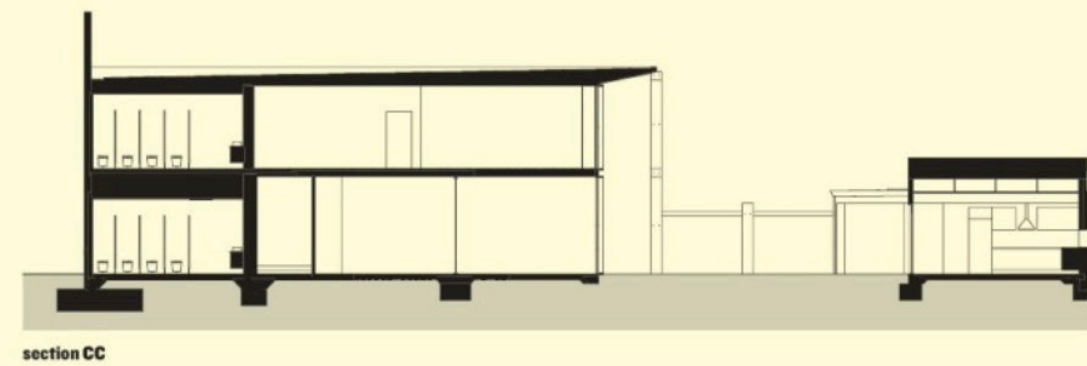
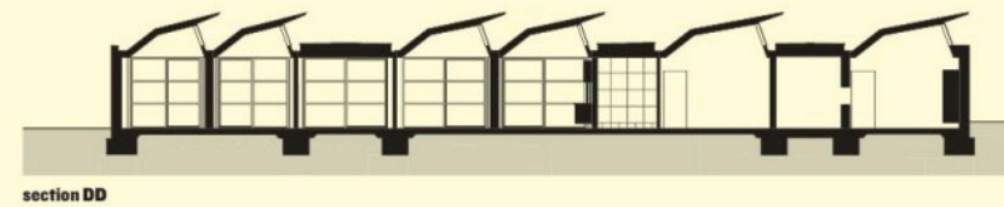
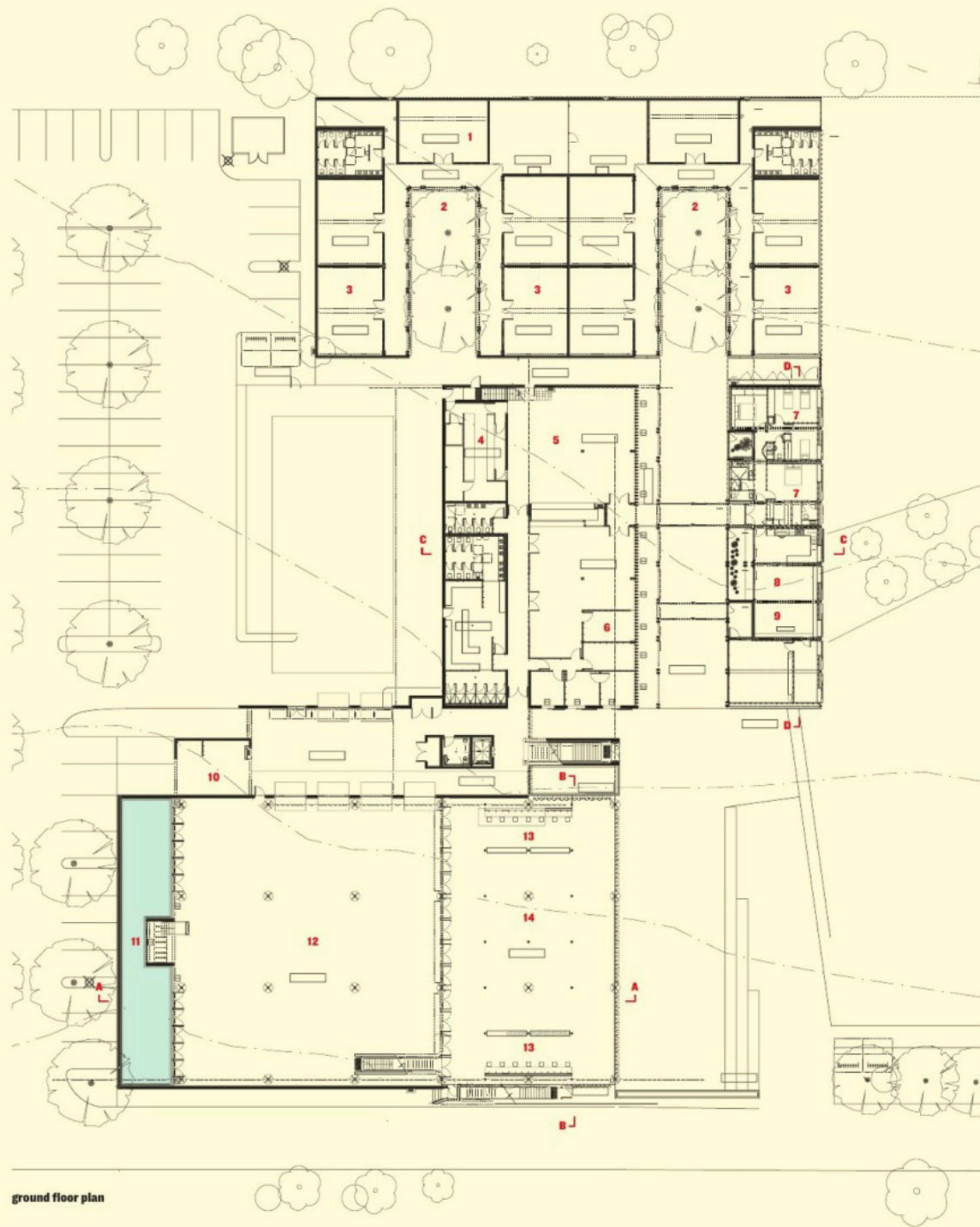
One of the first architects whose work acted locally, but took on global themes, Murcutt's buildings seemed extraordinarily exotic in a pre-internet age, well before this way of working was corrupted by multinationals and turned into meaningless rhetoric. Murcutt was also one of the first architects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

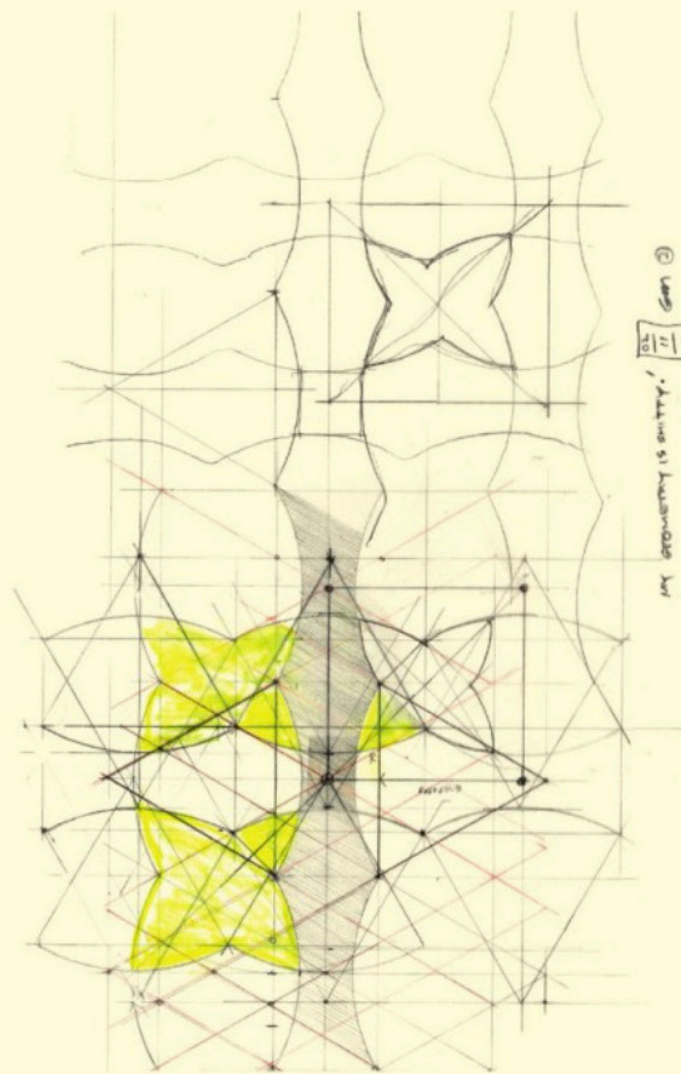
Modernism as a language that could be regionally adaptive to an audience tired of a bombastic and macho International Modernism and bored of the buffoonish Postmodernism that characterised much of the 1980s.

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

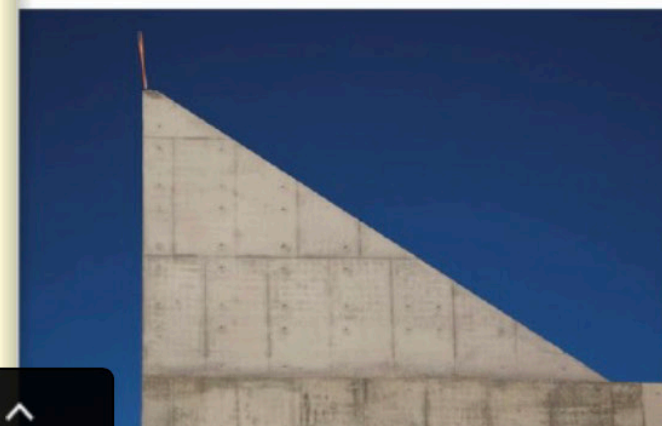
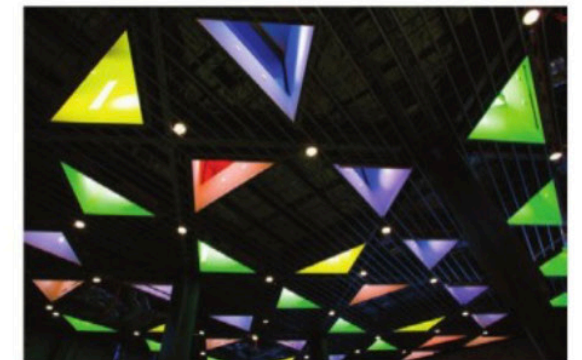
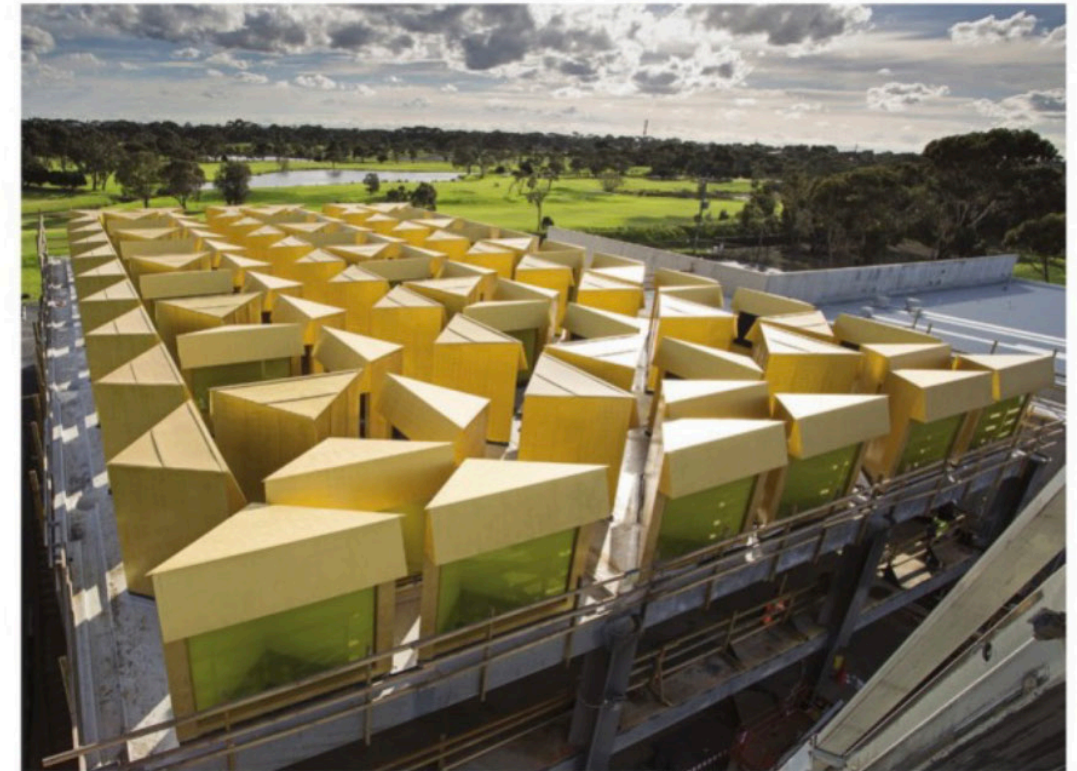
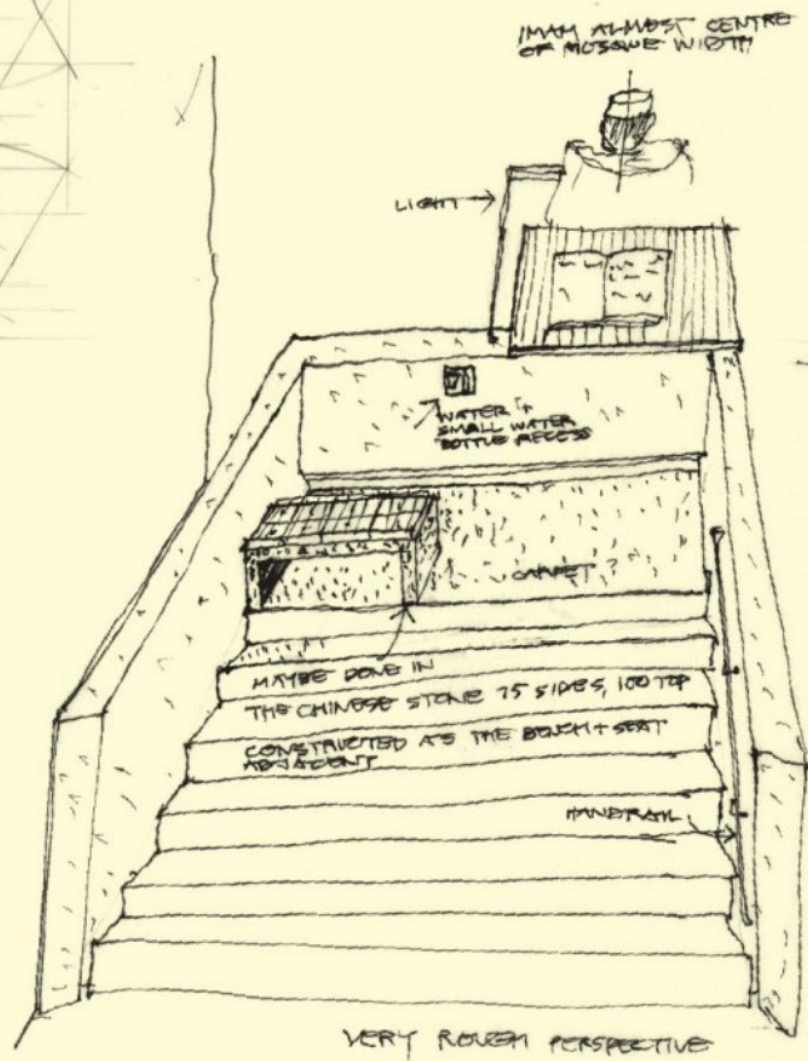
environmental issues. Indeed, in many ways Murcutt invented the notion of an intelligent passive architecture that dealt with climate through clever thinking rather than complex engineering.

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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Architect
Glenn Murcutt
Associate architect
Hakan Elevli of Elevli Plus
Photographs
Piers Taylor, pp56, 58,
67 centre left, 69
Tobias Titz, p67 top and
bottom left and right
Drawings
Courtesy of Glenn Murcutt



The Architectural Review