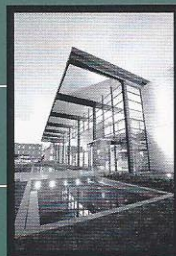


Learning from the Collaborative Process

Igea Troiani



Since the late 1990s I have focused on reflecting on the relationship between architectural practice and the study of modern architectural history, international and local. I have explored the ways in which, by looking back, we as a community – architects and non-architects – might learn lessons that help us move forward. My research has been underpinned by an interest in studying *how* architecture comes to be built rather than how it *describes* a building without giving it a context of production. This interest in the collaborative process, which underlies the way in which our built environment emerges and we as an architectural fraternity and culture generally have evolved and continue to do so, has resulted in a range of projects, some written, others graphic or built.

The most recent of these is a documentary titled *Building Mayne Hall*, the outcome of my collaboration with Brisbane-based playwright and filmmaker Shaun Charles. The documentary records the story of the procurement of Mayne Hall, a 1250 seat hall for graduation ceremonies, examinations etc., at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. In relaying the story of the building, it records the histories of two Brisbane-based architects, Stuart McIntosh and Robin Gibson, who were given the commission.

In 2003, I began research on McIntosh's architecture. As a consequence of my meetings in person with him I became aware of the importance of the relationship between him as an architect and his clients, and the impact these relationships have had on his production of architecture. The notion of studying his collaborations with clients was inspired by the essay, *Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture* written by the American-based architectural historian and theorist, Beatriz Colomina, which I had read three years earlier. In it, Colomina suggests that the personal recollections of an architect's collaborative partnerships – architect/architect, architect/photographer, architect/critic, architect/client etc. – can offer us as much, or more, than the study of *an* iconic building or *a* successful architectural figure for instance.

McIntosh's first successful collaboration with a client occurred between 1953 and 1963, when he was Architect-in-charge of the Melbourne branch of the Architecture Department of the English, Scottish and Australia Bank (E.S.&A.). His working relationship with the E.S.&A. was good, enabling him to design a prolific number of avant-garde suburban and regional bank buildings during the time.

In 1963, McIntosh submitted a design for an open competition by the University of Queensland to design a Great Hall, later renamed Mayne Hall and won. He moved to Brisbane to undertake the prestigious commission, leaving the E.S.&A. with their very best wishes for his future in private practice. In the not-uncommon scenario of the judges for the architectural competition not being the client, McIntosh found that his winning design was not liked by those representatives at the University for whom he

The James and Mary Emelia Mayne Centre was created out of the old Mayne Hall, following a 12-month, \$6.5 million transformation. Architects, Wilson Architects, created a new and distinctive visual identity while recognising the building's cultural history and the importance of preserving its outer envelope. The Centre is the new home of the University Art Museum, which houses a new and developing National Collection of Artists' Self-Portraits, as well as Queensland's second largest public art collection.

worked, hesitant to build such a modern glass building on campus. Regardless of this unfriendly working relationship, he completed the working documents but when tenders to build the hall exceeded the budget by 150%, he was dismissed as architect for the project. Disillusioned by the experience, he was unable to work for several years. When he did return to his private practice, he found it difficult to obtain commissions and eventually closed his office in 1993.

In 1971, a second architect, Gibson – curiously, McIntosh’s next door neighbour at the time – was offered the commission for the Great Hall outright by a new Vice-Chancellor at the University, Zelman Cowen. Gibson had also entered the Great Hall competition of 1963 but not received a place, although Cowen was not aware of this. After a recommendation and introduction by James MacCormick, the newly appointed University architect at the time, Cowen took an immediate liking to Gibson and because of the personal friendship between the two men, collaborated with him, enabling the architect to complete Mayne Hall in 1973.

Cowen was renowned for his patronage of the arts, in particular modern architecture of which Gibson’s Mayne Hall design was an exemplary example. Underpinned by Cowen’s support and promotion of avant-garde design, Gibson gained other prominent building commissions at the University of Queensland and later Southbank. These important Brisbane civic buildings are acknowledged to have contributed to his receipt of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) highest award in 1989, the Gold Medal. Cowen’s early patronage of Gibson and his architecture was a stepping-stone for Gibson’s successful architectural practice which he continues to run.

The story of the building of Mayne Hall relayed in the documentary raises some important issues relating to artistic and cultural production as well as to friendly and unfriendly architect/client collaboration and its consequences. Rather than suggest conclusions, I prefer to finish with some questions relating to these issues: How crucial is the support of a client to enable an architect to build, or their architecture to be built? What is the implication of a good architect/client relationship on the built environment we receive and live in? Do buildings mark friendship networks in our local community? Do successful (and unsuccessful) architect/client collaborations mark turning points in the cultural development of our cities and towns? Do the unbuilt projects mark moments of hesitation in our development as a community?

References

Colomina, B. (September 1999). Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 58, 3, pp. 462-471.

Interview between Stuart McIntosh and Igea Troiani on 21 June 2004 at South Yeronga.

Interview between James Maccormick and Igea Troiani on 3 September at Upper Brookfield.

Igea Troiani is a partner with Andrew Dawson in HAPPENinc, a collaborative architectural studio that began in March 1997. HAPPENinc is the avenue by which the two collaborate together and with others in architectural competitions, theatre set design, exhibitions, architectural writing and documentary filmmaking. Igea has lectured in modern architectural history, theory and design courses at the Queensland University of Technology and teaches on a casual basis at the University of Queensland.