2025 Dulux Study Tour Report / Nicholas Souksamrane

Mend and Make Do.

July 2025

The *Dulux Study Tour* was a rare opportunity—filled with big conversations, lots of coffee, good cycling, and plenty of memorable architecture. It was a privilege to join a group of thoughtful peers and meet talented architects trailing through Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Barcelona. The experience was energising, at times intense, and one I'll carry forward—both for what I saw and who I shared it with.

In trying to summarise the trip—I've put together a collection of reflections, with the title and theme of this report borrowed from a short essay of the same name by Grace Charlton, published in Monocle's *Fifty Ideas for Building Better Cities*. A book a friend had given me in London just after the study tour, after I'd shared some of these reflections over $32 martinis (!) on the trendy footpaths of Marylebone.

It's a rather uncanny title, actually.

The very first moment of landing in Europe—arriving in Barcelona before the study tour began—the handles of my checked luggage had completely disintegrated somewhere in baggage handling on the way from Sydney. The rubber had crumbled away, leaving only a blade of metal that cut into my hands every time I had to lift it—off the luggage belt, up staircases, wherever. The friends I was meeting there suggested, "Let's find some heavy-duty duct tape to rebuild a handle." And so we did.

Ah, the contrast to the posh martinis!

At the time it felt like a small, scrappy fix. But looking back, it now feels like the perfect theme for the days ahead: visiting these four incredible, yet distinct cities—each one striving toward something greater with what they have.

The pages that follow are recounts of some of the conversations and thoughts had during the study tour. These are loosely threaded together by themes that I've managed to remember along the way—and are in no particular chronological order.

So, as our tour "*momager*", **Abbey Czudek**, would remind us each time: helmet on, and let's get crackin'!

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01

01 Jimmy Carter, Marni Reti, Alice Lempel Søndergaard, Kate Sphepherd, Gumji Kang & myself at Karen Blixen Plads (COBE Architects), Copenhagen (Image: Adair Windair)

01
Making good.

A few of us had just landed in Copenhagen on a Sunday afternoon, only a few hours before our official "kick-off dinner" with the whole gang. With some time to kill—and the spirit of a pre-tour adventure—we wandered aimlessly toward the city centre, ducking into a few trendy, upcycled clothing stores along the way. But once we reached Købmagergade, the main shopping strip, the sight of familiar global brand storefronts—mirroring those back home—it quickly dulled our excitement, as you could imagine.

Over the next few days, it was striking to learn how cities like Copenhagen (and later, Rotterdam) had to completely rebuild in the aftermath of World War II—wounds much deeper than the little cuts on my hands at this point. Gerard Reinmuth of **TERROIR**, who practices in both Australia and Denmark, noted his fascination of the city's reconstruction: it was fast, collective, and full of intent.

As we reflected after visiting the shared studio of **Johansen Skovsted**, **Djernes & Bell**, and **Office Kim Lenschow**, just the second day into the tour, we were all struck by the "can-do" or "just do it" mentality—a kind of pragmatic optimism we'd already witnessed while weaving through the city on bikes the day before with guide **Alice Lempel Søndergaard**. It felt worlds apart from the risk-averse, heavily regulated systems we often work within—even with our varied architectural practices and experiences back home.

That spirit of transformation was clear from the start. On our first morning here, we jumped into the city's refreshing harbour—something unimaginable just 30 years ago due to its recent industrial use. But **Bjarke Ingels**' Harbour Bath project challenged that. It wasn't just leisure infrastructure; it forced the city to clean up the harbour. A small architectural move, with a big systemic effect. It showed the ability of design that can pressure change—mending what's already there.

At the studio, Justine Bell of **Djernes & Bell** spoke about their practice's focus on taking on work within existing building footprints only (yes, really). Their commitment extends to rethinking material culture too—often seeking funding from foundations for research, into reuse strategies that challenge the norms of how we build. "Making good" is the ethos that runs through all their work—whether it's with existing structures, materials, community, or the natural environment.

Justine shared their "rules for selected demolition": a process of carefully cataloguing materials to understand where they are, and where they could go next. As she showed us images of neatly laid-out bricks waiting for reuse, we began to grasp just how labour-intensive—and value-driven—this work is. **Kate Shepherd**, a fellow study tour participant, asked whether there was a specialist to handle the extensive cataloguing, Justine smiled wryly and said no—it falls under us.

This careful approach echoed through other projects we visited—like **Pihlmann**'s Thoravej 29, where Isabella Priddle explained how removed materials were reused elsewhere in the building. When new materials were necessary, they were left raw and to the dimensions of how they were manufactured, fixings exposed, assembled visibly rather than hidden. It made me wonder: every time I hit "Trim" in Revit, or add an "Align" annotation on a construction detail—am I contributing to unnecessary waste—both in material and time?

Across the studio space, Søren Johansen offered a complementary view: rather than chasing the next new material, why not work with what we already have? Precast concrete panels, for instance, could be optimised to be as sustainable as possible, then standardised, and made more accessible to all—impacting change now, not in ten years when it may be too late. My thoughts return to the storefronts of the giant retailers at Købmagergade—is there someone like Søren nudging these bigger players, if we were really to make wholesale impact?

Naturally, we all wanted to know how these ideas make it off the page. "How did you get the clients on board?" **Gumji Kang** asked. "And when do you find time for all the research?" The answer: they didn't know at first. But by pushing one project at a time—or rather, one client's agreeance at a time—momentum built. It's slow work, but real.

What stood out most across Copenhagen was the shared sense of purpose. Every practice we visited—big or small—was, in its own way, working to mend and transform what's already here—we were delighted that what we would call "refurbishment", they would describe as "transformation" projects. And it was clear: if this work is to really take hold, it needs chipping away from all fronts—including from government and institutional platforms.

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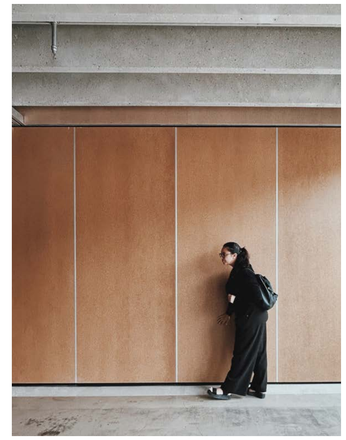
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"Buildings that have included the most labour are taken care of the most"

–Justine Bell, Djernes & Bell

04

02
Adapt. Again and again.

Unlike the near-perfect urban environment of Copenhagen—where government support often feels like a given—Barcelona tells a different story.

As our guide on wheels, Lorenzo Kárász (**Guiding Architects Barcelona**), explained, public initiatives in Barcelona are often limited. In their absence, citizens have found creative ways to get meaningful projects off the ground—especially those tackling social challenges. That's not to say the city hasn't led impressive transformations. Across Barcelona, we saw civic interventions reclaiming space from cars and returning it to people: thoroughfares turned into parks, intersections reimagined with benches and oversized chess boards.

Coming from cycling havens like Copenhagen and Amsterdam just before, we were surprised by the level of foresight in Barcelona's own cycling infrastructure. As we glided through the chamfered blocks of the Cerdá Plan, Lorenzo pointed to a once traffic-laden street now transformed into a street-park. "We're redefining the street section," he said—bitumen and lanes giving way to greenery and community.

This is adaptation on a city-wide scale—changing again and again in response to the needs of its people. It recalled the layered uses of projects like Santa Caterina Market by **EMBT** and, more recently, Sala Beckett Theatre by **Flores & Prats**, where we paused for lunch. The building, like the city itself, has shifted forms and functions across time—a montage of uses preserved rather than erased. It was revived through grassroots effort, with locals lobbying the city to restore cultural presence in their neighbourhood.

But Barcelona's challenges extend beyond cultural space. Housing affordability was a recurring theme in conversation—a quick Google search is enough to grasp the scale of the issue here. For Maria Charneco of **MAIO**, adaptability must happen at the domestic scale, too—so people can survive and thrive in the city.

Standing across from MAIO's 110 Rooms project in Eixample—a historically privileged district—Maria spoke of a brief centred on inclusive housing that could respond to changing life circumstances. Inspired by the neighbourhood's 19th-century buildings, the project rejects the "open-plan" default we see today in many real-estate listings back home. Instead, it embraces defined rooms that invite flexibility: a living room one year could become a bedroom the next.

Each floor contains 20 rooms, currently divided into four apartments of five similarly-sized rooms each. Organised around a central shared space, these apartments eliminate corridors entirely. Their beauty lies in potential: apartments can grow or shrink as needed by adding or subtracting rooms from neighbouring units. A quiet story of "enoughness": for downsizers or when a family member is added.

To navigate building regulations and preserve flexibility, MAIO designed hinged doors within 1600 mm openings—disguised as walls, and without frames when completely opened. This allows rooms to flow into one another or be closed off, depending on how the occupants choose to live.

"This idea of adaptability in time… life can go through buildings without affecting its structure"

–Job Floris, Monadnock

This idea brought me back to Rotterdam, to **Monadnock**'s studio. Job Floris spoke about adaptability, but it is through time. He showed photos of the older buildings near one of their current project sites. "Life can go through buildings without affecting its structure," he said—reminding us that our ways of living are always in flux. Good architecture makes space for that.

His words echoed again in Amsterdam, in a one-bedroom apartment of a new public housing development. The resident's daughter, visiting that day, showed us together with her mother the subtle adaptations made—some cosmetic, like kitchen upgrades, and one more radical: a DIY, illegal doorway from the entry hallway to the ensuite, allowing guests to avoid passing through her bedroom. It was a small act, but deeply thoughtful—born not from rebellion, but necessity. In just 18 months, the apartment had already been reshaped to better fit its occupant's life. One wonders what other stories this building will hold in 15 or 30 years' time.

Across every city we visited—Copenhagen, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Barcelona—we saw architecture and urban life shaped not by a single ideology, but by responsiveness: to context, to history, to people, to change.

In Copenhagen, we rode through a city rebuilt with deliberate intent after war—where collective effort and future-thinking governance enabled a shared vision. In Rotterdam, we heard from architects like Job Floris who see buildings not as fixed artefacts, but as frameworks for life to move through and around. In Amsterdam, even the smallest of changes—like a resident's quiet reworking of her apartment—spoke volumes about ownership, agency, and the deep personal relationship people have with their spaces. And in Barcelona, we saw a city adapting—led by grassroots energy, cultural resilience, and small but meaningful acts of redefinition.

These cities showed us that architecture isn't only about permanence or perfection—it's about the ability to respond. To flex. To absorb. To shift alongside the changing lives it holds.

And this wasn't just something we observed—it was also something we lived whilst on tour. When **Lucia Amies**, from **Architecture Media**, fell ill a week before the tour, **Adair Windair** stepped in without hesitation, picking up the brief and adapting to the rhythm of the group with warmth and ease. Abbey's itinerary was a living document—constantly adjusting to picky architects, travelling in a big group, or whatever curveball the tour threw our way. We navigated these changes the way the best cities do: by staying open, flexible, and good-humoured.

Maybe that's the lesson we carry forward: architecture that endures isn't necessarily the most polished or permanent. It makes room for change, for disruption, for reinvention—*again and again*. It's a backdrop that grows with us—not just for now, but for whatever comes next.

And so, as I write this while glancing at my taped-up suitcase, I'm reminded of Lorenzo's words: "*The scars are what make our cities beautiful.*"

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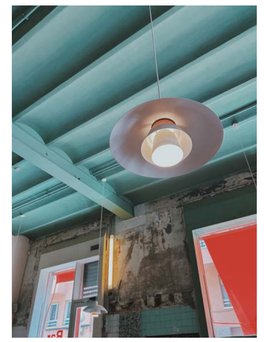

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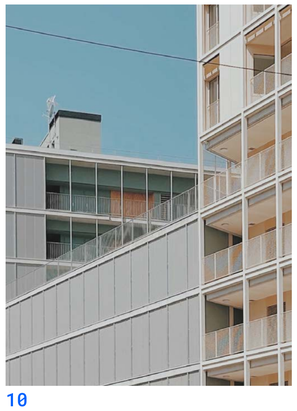

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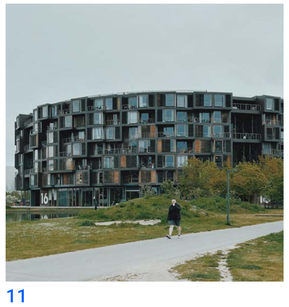

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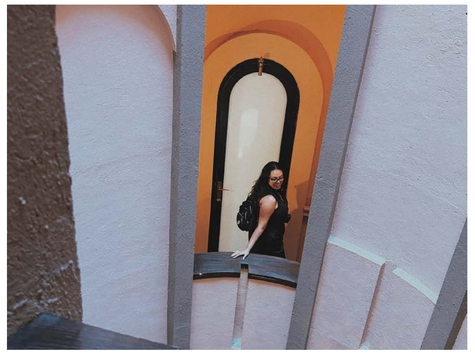

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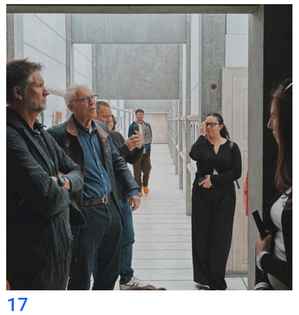

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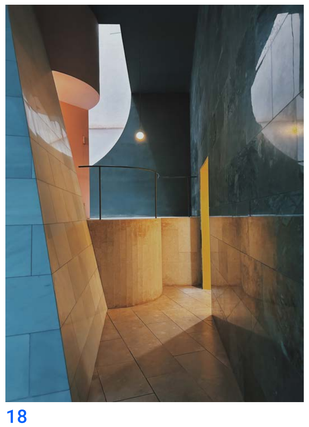

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07 Kate Shepherd & Gumji Kang at Borneo & Sporenberg (West 8 Architects), Amsterdam
08 Kate Shepherd in Sala Beckett (Flores & Prats), Barcelona
09 Lorenzo Kárász, Gumji Kang, Kate Shepherd & James Kennedy in Sala Beckett (Flores & Prats), Barcelona
10 Social Housing Project (Peris & Toral), Barcelona
11 Tietgen Dormitory Student Housing (Lundgaard & Tranberg), Copenhagen
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13 Jimmy Carter at Sala Beckett (Flores & Prats), Barcelona
14 Adair Winder, Gumji Kang, Jimmy Carter & James Kennedy at Depot Boijmans van Beuningen (MVRDV), Rotterdam
15 Les Aigües Library (Renovation by Clotet and Paricio), Barcelona
16 Marni Reti at Ricardo Bofill Studio, Barcelona
17 Gerard Reinmuth, Jan Utzon, Scott Balmforth, Emily Slevin, Jimmy Carter, Marni Reti & Maridza Riccioni at Bagsværd Church (Jørn Utzon), Copenhagen
18 110 Rooms Collective Housing (MAIO), Barcelona

03
To Try is to Trust.

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In architecture, we often introduce our practices with lines like: "*We specialise in single-residential housing*,"or "*Our team has extensive experience in workplace design.*"

But for **Lundgaard & Tranberg** partners Peter Thorsen and Pil Thielst, that kind of pigeonholing is what they believe stifles curiosity. Pil put it plainly: "If you've done the same thing for the fifth time, there's probably little outside-the-box thinking happening."

Ouch. That hit a nerve—especially since the last email I sent before flying out was a proposal covered with that very phrase: *extensive experience*.

As Peter and Pil shared drawings of their now-celebrated Tietgen Dormitory project in Copenhagen—which we'd visited the day before—they revealed it was actually their first time designing student accommodation. We asked how they knew their unconventional planning would work: shared spaces turned inward to a circular courtyard, dorms facing out to the public realm.

Peter didn't hesitate: "Well, we were all young and students once. So we based it on our own lived experience—some of us more recently than others," he joked.

Marni Reti asked how they learn from projects once they're built. Pil responded: "A lot of us live nearby. We walk past often. We see people using the spaces — and they've got smiles on their faces."

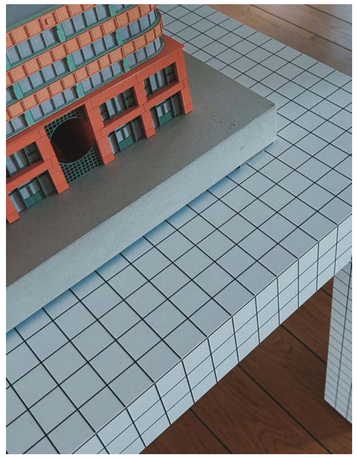
It was simple—maybe too simple—but honest. Not every metric needs a spreadsheet. Sometimes it's just seeing people enjoying a space that tells you it works.

We heard a similar sentiment at **Monadnock** in Rotterdam. Job Floris showed us a rendered image of what looked like their largest housing project to date. The building felt well-scaled, but its closeness to neighbouring buildings stood out — especially to Australian eyes.

Kate Shepherd asked, slightly cautiously, "How do you know the distance between buildings is right?"

Job's response was disarmingly straightforward: "It just felt right." He spoke of physical and computer models, intuition, and urban precedents in Berlin and Paris—cities that have already proven what good density can look like. There were no rigid metrics, just trust: in observation, in precedent, and in architectural judgement. And critically, a system that trusts architects to make those calls. As we walked across Rotterdam with **Ben Milbourne**, he noted that in the Netherlands, simpler development guidelines are possible because that trust exists.

Kate later reflected on how different this is from her own context. Now working within government —she moved there because she saw a gap where design leadership should be. Sometimes our policies weren't just lacking vision; it lacked faith in architects to shape it—perhaps this was the only way to have architects have some influence right now? In Australia, we often design by control, not by confidence. The process doesn't just miss bold ideas—it's structured to prevent them.



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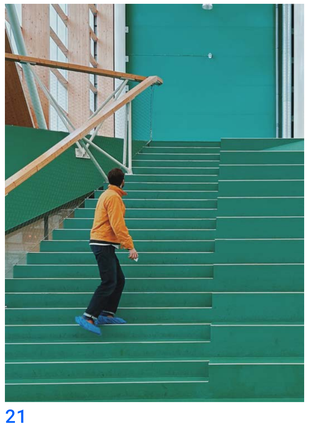
"If you've done the same thing for the fifth time, there's probably little outside-the-box thinking happening."

-Pil Thielst, Lundgaard & Tranberg



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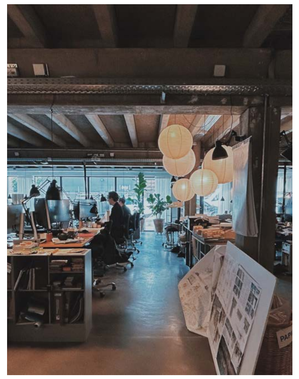

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This echoed in a conversation with fellow Study Tour recipeient **Jimmy Carter** earlier in the tour. We'd been talking about how difficult it is to even enter public work—even something as modest as a local park amenities block. Authorities and organisations—even those promoting "emerging practices"—still demand typology-specific experience just to be considered. Relevant but work outside the typology often gets overlooked. For practices like Jimmy's, the path in seems rather out of reach.

Why is risk treated so cautiously at home? Why is trust—especially in emerging architects—so hard to come by? Compared to what we'd seen in Copenhagen and Rotterdam, where new ideas are tested and celebrated, the contrast was stark. And it hits hard to Pil's point: *what kind of architecture are we missing simply because we don't allow someone to try*?

Because trying—especially when unfamiliar—is an act of trust. In others, but also in yourself: in your judgement, your lived experience, your willingness to learn through doing. That kind of trust isn't naive—but what I now think is vital.

Without it, we default to repetition.

With it, there's a real chance for new ways of thinking and building.

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19 Monadnock Studio, Rotterdam / 20 Lundgaard & Tranberg Studio, Copenhagen / 21 Jimmy Carter at PrIsmen Spots Hall (Dorte Mandrup), Copenhagen

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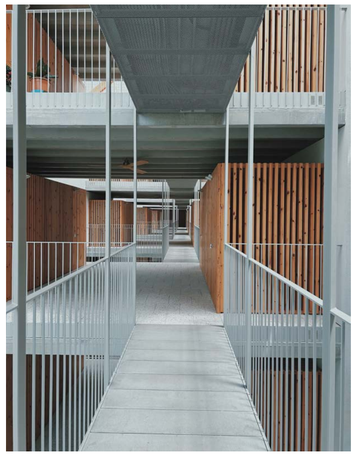
04
Sharing is Never a Compromise.



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I'm writing this from an Airbnb I booked post-tour —a "shared" apartment where I use the living spaces and bathroom alongside my lovely host, Carmela. Believe me, this is new territory for me. But after visiting cities where sharing is deeply embedded into daily life — something we in Australia might learn from as we move toward higher-density living — I've come to appreciate the connection it fosters. Conversations, even the occasional heated one, can create meaningful relationships in close quarters.

Travelling solo in a new city, this setup has offered me a glimpse into local life—plus some great neighbourhood tips from Carmela. More importantly, it's a conscious, small step toward reducing my personal impact on housing displacement. In Barcelona, we saw how apartments are now reserved exclusively for tourists, reshaping the housing economy in the inner city. A necessity is being priced and prioritised for leisure.

In Amsterdam, our group followed **Alex Hendriksen** by bike through both long-established and newly transformed neighbourhoods, eventually being welcomed into two recent social housing developments—the homes of people Alex knew personally. These visits offered insight into how affordability, dignity, and a culture of sharing can meaningfully coexist when supported by the right systems and intent.

The first home, at **NL Architects**' B1 and B2 Overhoeks, was compact—just 50 square metres—but abundant in light and ventilation. The apartment's restraint allowed for a remarkably generous 3.8-metre-wide shared corridor—a width comparable to a living room under our very own NSW Apartment Design Guide. This dimension wasn't just spatially generous, it was socially generous too—you can imagine residents pulling out chairs, host a casual coffee (or wine) with a neighbour, and occupy this shared space as an extension of their home.

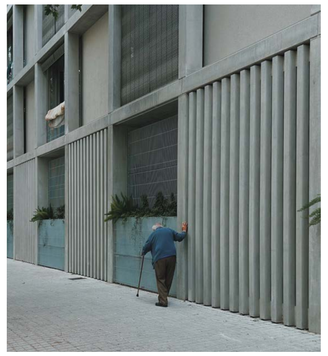
The second apartment belonged to a resident who was initially unsure about moving to live so close to the building's main entrance—a modest 12-unit block accessed directly from the footpath. She has access to an outdoor space, created by the building's setback from the street, shared with neighbours but unfenced and open to passersby. To gently define the space and soften the threshold between public and private, she arranged some outdoor furniture and potted plants — not to claim it, but to offer a subtle buffer from the street. The space remains part of the public realm, but with her touch, it also feels cared for.

During our brief visit, she'd already greeted and updated two neighbours that we were a group of visiting architects from Australia. Her daughter, grinning, told us:

"She just can't help herself… she's very social now."

Similarly, at the **Bofill Taller de Arquitectura** studio in Barcelona, the idea of privacy is not a thing, explains our architect host. If you want privacy, there are places to retreat to.

This more generous understanding of sharing—spatial, cultural, and civic—is far less common in the Australia I know. In Amsterdam, it even extends to school playgrounds. At Borneo Isle, a masterplanned neighbourhood by **West 8 Architects**, we learned from Daniel Vasini that limited land prompted schools to borrow space from surrounding public plazas and quiet streets. The logic was simple: when schools are active, much of the neighbourhood is at work—so why let open space sit unused? A similar idea, although reversed, is used at Barnes Schippers Bridge & School by **NEXT Architects**, where the school playgrounds become public spaces after hours,



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and the school rooftop serves as an access point to the bridge that spans the river.

But sharing isn't only about the built environment. For Pil Thielst and Peter Thorsen of **Lundgaard & Tranberg** in Copenhagen, sharing also defines how their practice grows. They spoke of a recent travel together as a whole studio to study vernacular architecture in southern England—not for the answers, but to build what they called a "common root system." A shared bank of experience, memory, and observation to draw on later—or not. It's a reminder that colleagues, like neighbours, thrive when there's something between them: a willingness to share, and the space to do it.

Reflecting on the idea of sharing in the Australian context, it's often seen as a compromise—a loss of autonomy or privacy. For decades, this has been reinforced by the dream of the quarter-acre block, secured by 2.1-metre-high fences. In contrast, the bench seats, potted plants, and unfenced thresholds we saw in the cities we've visited suggest a different spectrum of living—one where space is designed to be shared, not defended. But perhaps our idea of privacy needs to shift.

At this year's **Venice Biennale**, we saw how the *Home* exhibition in the Australian Pavilion explored how sharing—of stories, spaces, and experiences—can be the foundation of belonging. A reminder that connection doesn't diminish ownership; it deepens it. And if we are to build cities that are more dense, equitable, and resilient, then we'll need to see sharing not as a compromise, but as a way forward.

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05
There's Gotta be More...

Alice Lempel Søndergaard spoke to this compelling idea that, in Copenhagen, architecture gives back more than it takes. Michel Schreinemachers of **NEXT Architects** echoed a similar ethos, describing their ambition on each project to "extend the brief to benefit the people."

In Rotterdam, the **MVRDV** team have this playful mastermind—injecting a "happy factor" into every project. Sometimes cheekily placed, it becomes a delightful surprise for occupants (or even the authorities) once built. Similarly, Daniel Vasini at **West 8** believes every project should carry a smile: "that's really where the life and happiness is," he says.

Lorenzo Kárász took this further, reminding us that people aren't the only stakeholders in our cities. Animals and natural systems, too, deserve space, consideration, and design responses—if we're to create urban environments that are genuinely resilient and whole.

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Job Floris at **Monadnock** spoke of functionality—particularly the kind seen in the industrial buildings of the past—but argued that when paired with just the right amount of character or flair, architecture can transcend time to become this notion of 'timelessness'.

But perhaps its the other way. The late **Ricardo Bofill** instilled in his team a beautifully abstract idea: that a project is never truly finished. It continues to evolve and accumulate meaning—a truth we saw reflected in their studio, in Barcelona, but also the richly layered cities we visited.

Peter Thorsen and Pil Thielst of **Lundgaard & Tranberg** offered another lens: that architecture doesn't emerge simply from a client brief, but from the recognition that something is missing—in the place, or in the life of its community.

Or, as Justine Bell of **Bell & Djernes** and Søren Johansen of **Johansen Skovsted** suggested, is it about care? About making our built environment better—not just for those who use it, but for everything it touches: the people, the place, and the planet.

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But perhaps, above everything, architecture is about the rare, shared moments that remind us why we build in the first place. At Bagsværd Church, **Jan Utzon** reflected on his father's design, describing how light moves through the vaulted ceiling as if the building itself were breathing. As we stood in quiet awe, he turned to the group and asked if anyone played the piano. After a pause, **Gumji Kang** stepped forward and sat at the very instrument Jan and his father had designed specifically for this space. Her playing filled the church with warmth and stillness.

In that moment, it became clear: architecture isn't just about making perfect buildings—it's about creating the conditions for something meaningful. For moments that move us, that are shared, and that become part of the stories we carry with us. A bit like my luggage—taped up, scuffed and far from pristine—it's not about how flawless it looks, but it's been places, been through adventures, and the quiet reminder that sometimes, ***making do*** is more than enough when what really matters is what we share along the way.

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Thank you.

This was an incredible experience—made possible by the tireless work of the *'Krew'* at the **Australian Institute of Architects**, **Dulux**, and **Architecture Media**. A heartfelt thank you for the time, energy, and investment you poured into this project—and into us, the very lucky recipients.

Maridza Riccioni and **Pete Wood**: A huge thank you for your warmth, generosity, and genuine care for each one of us—and for our industry. It was a pleasure to get to know you both.

Adair Winder: Thanks for the laughs—and for tirelessly editing late into the night to get our daily blog posts up. You made it all look easy.

James Kennedy: Thank you for always looking out for us—whether we were sick (or hungover)—and for capturing some incredible moments along the way.

Abbey Czudek: The biggest thank you for the many months of meticulous planning that made this tour run so smoothly. I'm sure you'd giggle knowing how lost we all felt in the days that followed without your guidance.

Marni *'Kylie'* Reti: The first person I met from the group—and a fellow Sydneysider. Your warmth and generosity made such an impression. Thank you for being unapologetically you and for bringing so much fun to the experience.

Kate *'Khloe'* Shepherd: Undoubtedly the funniest person on the tour—and somehow also the kindest. I can't wait to see how you continue shaping our industry—no doubt toward something bigger and better.

Jimmy *'Kendall'* Carter: Thank you for the thoughtful, engaging conversations, and for asking some of the most insightful questions during our visits. I'm excited to see what you create next.

Gumji *'Kourtney'* Kang: You are gracious, intelligent, and incredibly humble. It was inspiring to see how generously you gave your time and presence to everyone around you.

And finally, thank you **BVN** for allowing me the time to join this tour—and for the extended leave. This has been a truly special time to disconnect, reflect, and re-engage with architectural practice.

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