

AIA Dulux Study Tour Report 2022

Nick

Roberts

Tour

Travel writing in this format can be a fraught process. Written in the six weeks following a return to regular life – it is both fresh in the mind, while distant enough to raise the expectation of some meaningful reflection.

The Tour also came at a transitional moment for me professionally – having recently made the difficult decision to leave John Wardle Architects and start Roberts Gray Architects with two close friends. The challenges of starting a practice were given additional weight as my family and I had recently left Australia and returned to New Zealand.

While navigating these challenges, the Tour gave a rare and wonderful opportunity to maintain

connection with a design culture that I so strongly identify with and intend to remain a part of. All the usual logistics, costs and indecision of travel was taken away by a dedicated and generous team from the AIA and Dulux, freeing up our group's energy to focus on seeing extraordinary things and meeting extraordinary people.

Speaking with the other recipients since the Tour has ended has been a strange but reassuring contrast. While the intensity and discovery of spending every waking moment together is now substituted with a mix of long form catchups, social media reactions and sporadic messaging, the continuity of exchange is something that will continue to be built upon - extending the personal significance of the Tour into the future.

Many thanks to those who made this extraordinary experience possible:

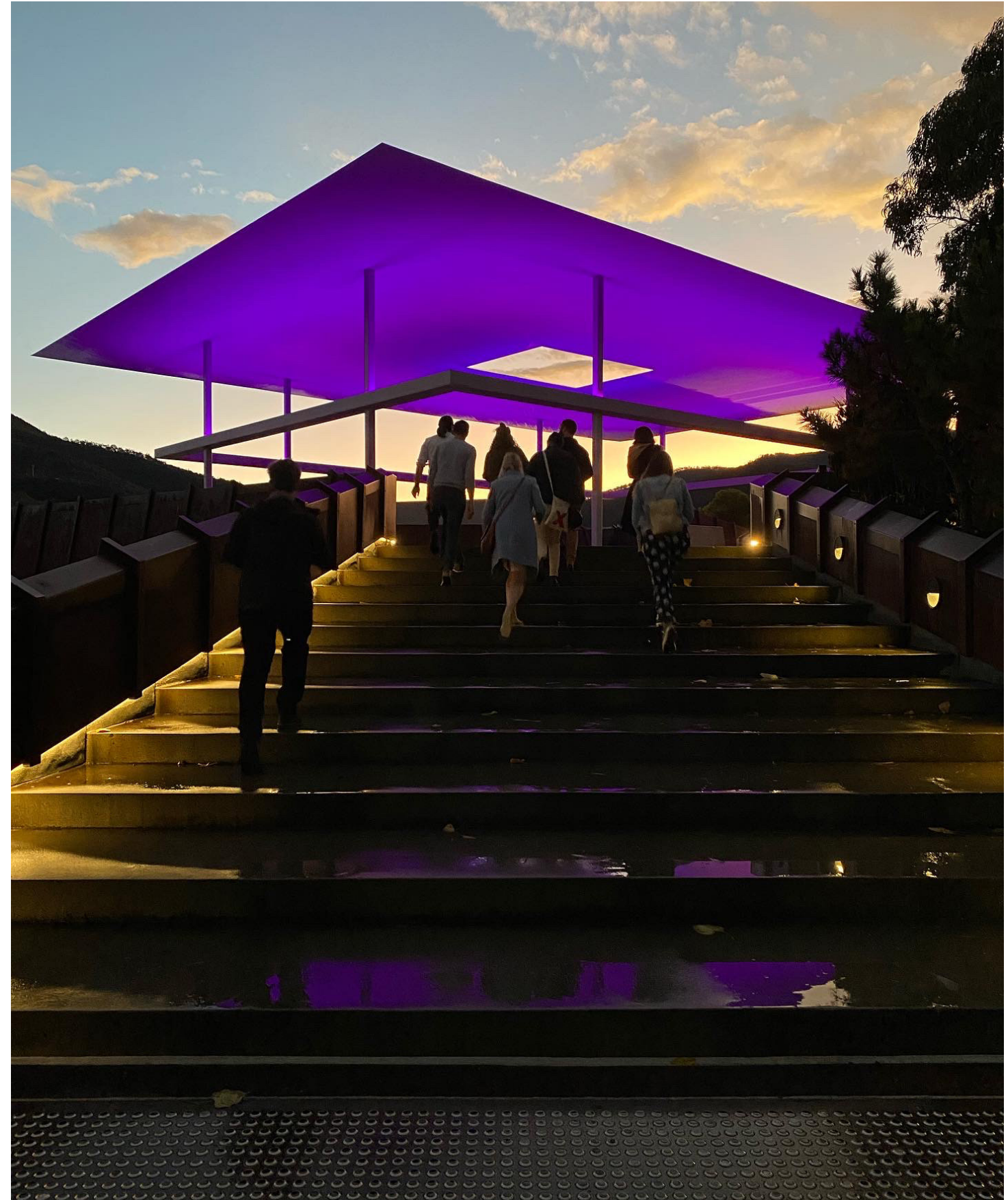
The Australian Institute of Architects
Dulux Australia
Mai Huynh
Abbey Czudek
Peter Wood
Alison Mahoney
Cameron O'Brien

And to my fellow tour members:

Madeline Sewall
Sam McQueeney
Bek Verrier
Elizabeth Walsh
Tahnee Sullivan
Keith Westbrook
Simon Rochowski
Carly Martin

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Overview



↑ James Turrell providing a fitting backdrop to our last night in Tasmania.

Tasmania

12-16 May



↑ Krakani Lumi . Taylor and Hinds in collaboration with the palawa community.

Our experiences in Tasmania set an exhilarating tone and pace for the Tour. We travelled by air to the state's edges, had the privilege of being exposed to indigenous knowledge of country, bonded over the shared experience of immersive art installations, and were granted rare insight into a series of houses that told unique stories of those who made them.

↓ The UTAS Library and Student Experience Building . John Wardle Architects





↑ Waterview . John Wardle Architects



The Dorney house . Esmond Dorney →



↑ 20:50 by Richard Wilson . MONA

The Tour before the Tour

The tour began a day early for me, in Launceston. Over the past few years, I have been steadily working as a design lead for John Wardle Architects on the University of Tasmania's Inveresk Campus developments. Returning offered a moment to take pleasure in seeing the projects in various stages of completion and construction.

Crossing the new pedestrian bridge and experiencing the Library complete and lived in, next to 'River's Edge' (the Learning and Teaching Building) in progress was a real privilege and a reminder of the power of architecture as a collective urban project. This day in Launceston provided a perfect re-entry to Australia as I drove south to meet the other recipients in Hobart and begin the Tour proper.

Infill and Intervention

Our tour began at the Moss Hotel by Circa Morris-Nunn Chua Architects. This accommodation was among the most memorable and provides an appropriate starting point for reflecting on the relationship between architecture and the city. In a tour of great diversity, the Hotels were a constant. Enlivened by CMNC Associate Alex Nielsen's tour, we experienced a hotel that provided an engaging internalised world to briefly retreat from our packed schedule, while creating constant awareness of the site's history through its nuanced infill that threaded the rooftops around Salamanca Place.

Several days later, Leigh Woolley gave a crash course in the development of Hobart's urban form. The principles he set out at a civic scale provided a parallel to the ideas that have been realised at the Moss Hotel – where an often-anonymous building type gains identity and atmosphere by settling into the historic grain of its context.

Lessons in Custodianship

Wolley's call for a deep understanding of landform as the basis for any urban form that follows was given added complexity in many of the residential projects of the tour. In Tasmania, complex histories of custodianship were registered in details of care and decay in dwellings as diverse as the Dorney House, John Wardle's houses at Waterview, and the Krakani Lumi camping structures. The stories that each dwelling held were only partially evident in the architecture and ultimately made real and vital through the story-telling of their custodians.

Crescendo

An early highlight of the trip was the dinner at Faro which took place within the MONA complex on our last night in Tasmania. The energy of the trip had been set in previous days with an extraordinary range of experiences and there was a real shift in the social cohesion of the group on this night. The overlay of a unique dining experience, great conversation, and full immersion art installations perfectly captured what is great about the tour and heightened our anticipation of what was to come.

New South Wales

16-20 May



↑ Tour of William Smart's home and studio . Photo by Alexander Mayes



Punchbowl Mosque →
Candalepas Associates

The second leg of the Tour combined pilgrimage to seminal projects and a broad range of practice visits. We encountered works of relentless refinement, civic projects that anticipated their future context and architects whose careers were marked by intention, care, success, loss, purpose, and resistance.



↑ Practice Visit . Durbach Block Jagers



↑ Simpson Lee House - Looking inward, looking outward



Slow Down

The crescendo of the Tasmanian leg was swiftly upended with a 4am alarm clock and an early flight to Sydney. As the margins of Sydney give way to the Blue Mountains, we make our way to Glenn Murcutt's Simpson-Lee House and a full schedule is substituted for slow conversation. Discussions gravitate toward the theme of custodianship. Many of the houses we have visited, and will visit, can be understood in this way – their architectural significance providing the basis for inter-generational care. Single houses hold an especially precarious position within this framework of custodianship. The motivations of the real estate market tends to produce an ambiguous understanding of how these buildings hold value. Are they ideal models, assets, or liabilities?

Looking Inward, Looking Outward

The hours spent in the Simpson-Lee house were an opportunity to explore a building composed of both standard and custom profiles, where junctions are playfully expressed in cut, folded, tapered, bolted, and welded arrangements – each recording a process of relentless refinement. While the house appears complete – delicate, resolved, composed – its relationship to the broader site is still unfolding. 30 years on, it's position in the landscape continues to require careful observation. Recent years have seen increasingly intense rains and fires, splitting our focus between an inward appreciation of its detail, and an outward acknowledgement of the rapidly changing environment that surrounds it. And so,

the demands of custodianship take on another layer, extending beyond the preservation of a single object to an expanded notion of houses that contribute to the repair of landscapes they exist in.

How to Practice

Each practice we visited in New South Wales presented very particular visions of an architect's working life.

Durbach Block Jagers intimately occupy the floor plate of a building they designed, sharing this space with several other practices. Partitions are infilled with models that embody the beauty, struggle, and elegance of their creative process. Glenn Murcutt and Renatto D'Ettore took the scale of practice down a notch, describing their careers of passion, defined by a resolute commitment to each project, a stubborn/inspiring ability to say no, and an investment of emotional energy in those who gave it in return. Finally, William Smart's home and studio was a complete vision and a purposeful exercise in control - where 40 staff represents a magic number he feels can be mobilised to handle projects of all scales, while benefiting from his constant focus and involvement.

While the various practice structures resonated differently across our group, the overarching message was clear (despite modest assertions they were figuring out as they went); building a career of intention and integrity in the face of endless opportunities for compromise remains the motivating force sustaining the critical project of each practice.



Glebe House, Chenchow Little →

Northern Territory

20-24 May



The Tour concluded in the heat of the tropics - a rise in temperature was met with a slowdown in pace and a deeper sense of togetherness within the group. The layers of city and practice were stripped back as we were exposed to ancient landforms marked by rock art that was a densely layered, collectively worked on, and purposefully sited. The best architecture of the Northern Territory was resolutely in-tune with its environment, while also drawn from diverse international influences that are fitting for this frontier location.

← Kakadu National Park

↓ Guluyambi Cultural Cruise





↑ Ubirr Rock Art Site . Kakadu National Park



Group Snap . Nawurlandja Lookout →



↑ 1930's S Type House . Beni Burnett

Buildings that Breathe

The work of Troppo Architects remains a major presence in the Northern Territory architecture scene. The practice is well known for being regionally networked and while they have been operating for over 40 years, this structure is especially relevant in today's re-evaluation of workplace expectations.

Extending the ideas of their mentor and collaborator, Glenn Murcutt – the work presents itself today as a humble, colourful and accessible evolution of climate responsive architecture. Despite the regard this practice has nationally, the idealism, humour and practicality of their approach still seems far from an accepted norm. Each building authored or influenced by Troppo reads as a struggle for an open, climate responsive architecture in the face of a building culture and code that is deeply resistant to it.

Encountering their work on the Tour was also a chance to see the early housing experiments of 'Troppoville' bedded in. Where original photos describe spare, pure forms in a barren landscape, the intervening years have seen dense planting engulf the neighbourhood, while the houses themselves have become layered through infill and the accumulated objects of their owners. The cumulative effect is an architecture that is completely unpretentious, unaffected and approachable.



↑ Troppoville . Troppo Architects

A Collective Cultural Project

The Ubirr rock art site was an opportunity to reflect on the possibility of art as a collective project. Often set in places of gathering and shelter within the vast landscape, the status of art as a record of indigenous knowledge and narrative passed down across generations, extends earlier ideas on custodianship to a completely different timescale. The 1:1 experience of the work today rewards viewers with further readings as the images shift between figuration and abstraction, before fading out into the colour fields of the earth.

The Late Revelation of Beni Burnett

With exhaustion high and enthusiasm waning on the final morning of the Tour, it was extraordinary to feel everyone's energy shift when we visited David Bridgman's House, designed by Beni Burnett in the 1930's. Burnett was the Commonwealth architect for the Northern Territory, but his work and influences span Singapore, Japan, China and Malaysia. These influences were registered in the precise composition of rooms which took on another character entirely as ceilings floated over walls, and top-hinged shutters animated the building's edges. David himself is an architect specialising in heritage work in the Northern Territory, and as he spoke about Burnett's life and work from the central living space, the possibility of a globally influenced, regionally appropriate architecture felt eminently possible.

Further

Reflections



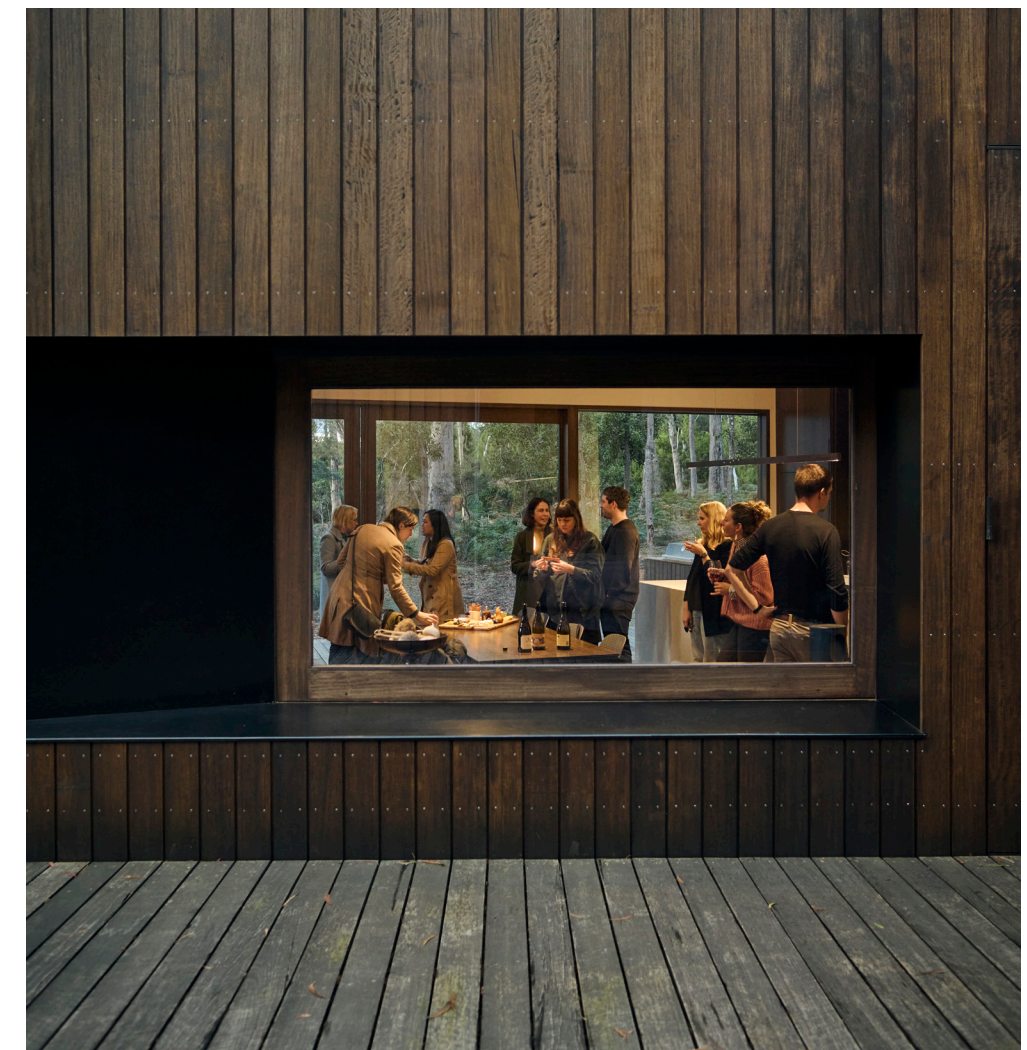
↑ Waterview, John Wardle Architects . Photo by Rémi Chauvin

↓ Group Snap . Sydney



The lasting impression of the Tour was the sense of social cohesion made possible through shared experience. The privilege of travelling with a group of people who are engaged and insightful, elevated the appreciation for each place we visited.

↓ House at Killora Bay, Tanner Architects . Photo by Rémi Chauvin





← Aigantighe Art Gallery
Layered views through public circulation and education spaces

Melbourne to Timaru

Immediately following the tour, I spent a few days reconnecting with friends and clients in Melbourne which made the idea of maintaining a Trans-Tasman practice feel idealistic, but possible.

With the intensity of the Tour taken away, my mind drifted to responsibilities that had been ignored and would soon become pressing, in particular – a competition for a contemporary extension to the Aigantighe Art Gallery in Timaru, New Zealand that we had been shortlisted for alongside 4 other practices. At the time of writing, this project has been submitted and is currently under jury review.

A common thought amongst architects returning from travel is how these fresh experiences and influences might affect their work moving forward. As these questions began to shape conversations with my partners back home, several underlying themes began to emerge.

The project is set in a residential neighbourhood and so we began to consider the notion of initiating, or making civic space in reference to Punchbowl Mosque by Candalepas Associates and Green Square Library by Studio Hollenstein. While the Punchbowl Mosque proudly makes the case for civic architecture existing in the suburbs,

the Green Square Library anticipates a density that is still arriving. Both principles motivated our proposal to be civic in form, while being deferential in scale and relationship to the sculpture garden and Heritage House it shares the site with.

The principles of custodianship found in several of the significant Australian houses we visited further informed the extension's disposition toward the Heritage House and grounds. The careful alignments and playful tectonic exchange between John Wardle's Shearer's Quarters and Captain Kelly's cottage influenced the inter-generational relationships in play at Aigantighe.

Set within an established sculpture garden, our proposal removed a series of unsympathetic additions to Heritage House Gallery and shaped the new wing to create breathing space around it while reinstating the original entry. This gesture allowed the sculpture garden to flow through, creating a constant sense of orientation and connection to the history of the site.

It was these principles of recovering diminished histories, amplifying the existing qualities of the site, and making civic space in contexts where it is needed but not expected, that defined the experience of the Tour and which ultimately shaped the resolution of this proposal.



↓ Aigantighe Art Gallery
An interior extension of the sculpture garden

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**Roberts
Gray**

Architects