Dulux Study Tour 2026 Report
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Overview

I have long thought that the real value of the Dulux Study Tour must lie not in the buildings we visit, spectacular as they are, nor in the practices we have access to, interesting as these might be, but in coming to grips with the specific context in which these buildings are created or in which these practices operate. In other words, what is it to make places in Singapore, Paris and Vienna right now and how has this evolved. In many ways, architecture is a hyper local pursuit; the parallels between how I work and projects or practices overseas is always going to be limited. And so it is in trying to tease out the broader issues – how history, politics or policy has informed the built environment – that I find the greatest relevance of the Tour to my professional life.

In writing this report, it is also interesting to reflect on what has stayed with me several months after returning from the Tour. What sticks? What doesn't? Why?

Singapore

Singapore felt like a city defined by its sensible and rational approach to planning. Hyper aware of its limitations as a city state and the need to manage both its natural resources and its growing population, it is a city that approaches all forms of planning – strategic, housing, transport, biodiversity – with a thoughtfulness, sense of civic responsibility and laser focus on delivery that is very much at odds with Australia. In Singapore, strategic plans are put in place, masterplans developed and complex integrated projects are delivered on time and generally on budget. Punggol Digital District by WOHA went from a disused rubber plantation on the outskirts of Singapore to a fully fledged part of the city with a university campus and commercial accelerators (not to mention the train station, hawker market, community facilities and residential apartments) in 20 years. By comparison, Sydney's been talking about a second airport for longer than I have been alive. There is something desperately appealing for architects in a system that produces well-developed strategic plans and then consistently delivers them. Maybe it is the predictability of it for a design professional – you know what is expected of you and there seems to be a social consensus around what is important or good. I'm not overlooking the specificities of planning in Singapore – it's easy to make the planning rules and stick to them when the government officially owns almost all the land in the state and has the political capital to do what they believe is right.

This brings me to my other observation. Singapore's long-standing commitment to housing affordability and equity through their Housing & Development Board public housing projects seems to go a long way in creating the state's political capital. Close to 80% of Singaporeans live in HDB public housing. While housing varies in build quality depending on the decades in which it was delivered with older 70s projects perhaps less well designed or not as efficient as newer projects, there is always a focus on creating communities that are well connected to transport and green space and have good access to amenities. The HDB projects we visited, such as Admiralty, were community focused, simple and – importantly for a bunch of young Australian architects abroad – affordable. I should note that it is not a housing utopia and that Singapore's historic tendency towards social engineering means that eligibility for accessing HDB apartments is discriminatory against LGBTQI people and singles.

Given the overwhelming sense that Singapore's planning and housing bureaucracy was both effective and vast, I wondered whether working within this “red tape” as a design professional was in fact cloying, overbearing and often unproductive. One of the few illuminating conversations that we had with design practitioners on the trip came when I put this question to Richard Hassell, one of the two founding directors of WOHA and an architect with extensive experience working in both Singapore and Australia. Fully expecting an answer that reflected my own world view that there is a natural limit to the amount that bureaucrats should direct or intervene in the work of architects, the answer surprisingly was that the system worked better than you would think. That continues to be food for thought.

Finally, a word on something that made a big impression at the time, but which has waned since our return, and that is the amount of urban greening in Singapore. It is a truly verdant city that has introduced world-leading policies for integration of landscape into new projects. The Parkroyal on Pickering Hotel,

where the Tour stayed, is a perfect example. While the hotel occupies the entire city block its design doubles the area of green landscaping by distributing this across multiple upper level terraces. Why has this not stayed with me? I think it is the result of this being a hyper local design element and not translating immediately to Sydney – Singapore is very dense and focuses on the need to connect Singaporeans to nature and increase biodiversity within their city state; it is also a climate where almost anything will grow!

Paris

Paris has changed more than I would have imagined in the 13 years since I last visited. You would think that a city as historic as Paris would change little and in many respects that is true – the Haussmannian vistas remain as iconic as ever. What has changed is the streets themselves! The first observation was how few cars there are in the central arrondissements. This is the result of concerted efforts by Anne Hidalgo's city administration to create a more pedestrian-friendly Paris, both for ordinary Parisians and for visitors in the lead-up to the 2024 Olympics. This has proved highly successful, with many former riverfront roads now fully pedestrianised. Runners, walkers, cyclists and – in summer months – bathers, abound! Cycling in particular has taken off in central Paris. The city experienced a surge in cycling during Covid and this has only grown in the years since with the city introducing extensive cycling infrastructure – new bike lanes, dedicated traffic management at intersections, bike parking and the ubiquitous share schemes. We spent an entire day riding from the Seine out towards Parc de la Villette and were surprised by the number and variety of cyclists on the streets (and the number of older above ground parking garages being converted to apartments!)

Another, more discreet, change to Parisian streets is the focus on urban climate change mitigation, specifically dealing with urban heat island effects and increasing stormwater runoff. Many traditional European cities are surprisingly ill-adapted for hot weather and flash flooding with few street trees and many hard paved surfaces. As we rode through Paris, we identified many instances of streets being reconfigured to reduce car parking and increase soft landscaping. These are clearly exemplar “parklets” that incorporate both greening and water sensitive urban design. While this sort of approach to streets has been a feature of Australian inner city urbanism for some time, the major difference is the quality and variety of the underplanting in these new Parisian “parklets”. They appear as endemic meadow planting and on closer inspection their biodiversity value becomes clear from the sound and movement of insects. By contrast, Australian street underplanting is almost entirely focused on the hardiness and maintenance of the plant species and very rarely on biodiversity.

A more noticeable change in Paris has been the proliferation of new buildings for private art foundations associated with luxury fashion and lifestyle goods – whether that be the Gehry designed Fondation Louis Vuitton completed in 2014, which we did not visit, or the more recent Fondation Cartier by Nouvel and the Bourse de Commerce for the Pinault Collection by Ando et al (the Pinault family controlling Gucci, Saint Laurent and Balenciaga), which we did. It is somewhat unsettling to think that the most significant cultural buildings delivered in Paris over the last 15 years have all been “private” rather than “public” arts buildings. While undoubtedly spectacular – the floors of the Nouvel literally move to accommodate any format of exhibition in an otherwise complex heritage building – and drawing huge crowds there was something uncomfortable for me about the ostentatious display of private wealth, in the form of these art collections, for “public benefit”. Perhaps even more so as some of these buildings are in view of the Louvre, which is so underfunded as to be struggling with security and experiencing leaks.

This question of public funding of the arts or heritage came up again when we visited Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye just outside Paris. Delightful as it was to walk around such an iconic modernist building, it was shocking to see that it was not in a good state of repair. Europe has such a wealth of architectural heritage, spanning all types of buildings and many millennia, that the sheer quantum must strain public resources; perhaps this is the reason for the neglect. That being said, Villa Savoye is definitely the most important modernist house in Europe and one would think would be high on the list for care and conservation.

Of everything in Paris, it is this tension around public and private stewardship of culture that has stayed with me most – more than any single building. Perhaps because it isn't really about Paris at all; it's a question I recognise from home, about who gets to fund and therefore shape the things we call public.

Vienna

Vienna, unlike Singapore and Paris, is not a city with many recognisable contemporary buildings or internationally renowned practices. What Vienna lacks in star power however it makes up for in a masterclass on housing. It is particularly well known for its early 20th century public housing projects – the Red Vienna period – which were conceived and constructed by a social democratic city administration to alleviate the appalling post-war living conditions of Vienna's working poor. Famously funded not through public debt but entirely through wealth taxes, projects like Karl Marx Hof, which we briefly visited, were revolutionary in the amenities they provided working families (basics like electricity and running water but also central laundrettes, child care centres and medical clinics).

While Red Vienna lasted only 15 years, the ethos and approach to housing appears to have continued right throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. Mid-century developments in Vienna were a mix of sensible low-rise public housing and more ambitious mid- and high-rise affordable housing. Mega projects like Alterlaa, with its own shopping district, school and sports complex, were experimental in scale (accommodating almost 9000 residents in 3200 units) but continued to be civic and civil in character. Later projects like the Biotope City redevelopment have also focused on urban living and the natural environment – not only the benefits of integrating landscape and greenery for residents' wellbeing but also what a project can do for local biodiversity.

Affordable housing in Vienna adopts a built-to-rent model in which not-for-profit and for-profit developers provide effectively rent controlled housing that offers long tenures to residents. Curiously, in contrast with Australia, where this model of housing is fairly new and is not readily accessible for people who earn above the median wage, affordable housing in Vienna has such generous income eligibility that more than 75% of Viennese – a large swathe of middle income earners – can access affordable housing. Rental rates for these affordable units differ depending on size but the average appears to be somewhere around 10% of median post-tax earnings. With many renters and mortgage holders in Australia regularly devoting more than 35% of their income to housing, Vienna comes across as a housing affordability utopia.

In speaking to Viennese practitioners, it appeared that many of them source the majority of their work through open competitions – a figure as high as 90% of all projects. An astonishingly high number for Australian practitioners, we quizzed our generous hosts – the teams at Shibukawa Eder and Querkraft – in detail on the mechanics of their offices while they walked us around their projects or showed us through their space. The benefits of a purely competition based system are well known: they are egalitarian, allow younger practices an opportunity to get a good start and, in theory at least, mean the best design wins. The drawbacks are also well known: they are expensive for an office to undertake. This is quite a reductionist view, however. In truth there is a fair bit of complexity in the model and towards the very end of the Tour we enjoyed discussing this in some detail. The first point to make was that many of the winning schemes that we saw, whether still in development or built, actually seemed a bit under developed to many of us – almost like a very good university project but lacking the depth we would expect of a real project. We wondered whether this was not the result of all of the design thinking effectively being done at competition stage and there being limited if no design iteration through concept or approval phases. Australian clients and approval authorities insist on and are regularly very involved in the concept stages and while we may bemoan this when at home, abroad we realised that it often leads to richer and more nuanced design outcomes. The second point is that even for an emerging practice in Australia, a professional life of competitions is not a desirable goal. Several of the Tour participants who run their own practices preferred a model that is increasingly common in NSW where established architects are encouraged to include emerging practitioners as part of their design team for larger projects – a model that leads to a much greater degree of potential design innovation through collaboration but also engenders knowledge sharing and upskilling. The third is that the financial model of competitions does not appear to be a competitive proposition for clients. In order to absorb competition losses, practices inflate the fees for their competition wins. Particularly for public authority clients this does not seem to be good value; competitions create a significant amount of “free” but redundant work that is then recouped by someone, somewhere. While it is common to look at the European competition system and think that it would lead to better design outcomes in Australia, in truth I think we all preferred to evolve the system we have at home.

Of the two, it is Vienna's approach to housing, not its approach to competitions, that has stayed with me. The numbers around affordability are easy to forget, but the underlying idea – that housing can be treated as long-term civic infrastructure rather than a market outcome – is harder to shake, and it's the one thing from the Tour I keep coming back to.