

2025 Dulux Study Tour Report

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Ten days. Four cities. Five architects. Countless kilometres on bikes.

The 2025 Dulux Study Tour moved fast, but it asked us to slow down. To shift our gaze away from icons and towards edges. To question not just what buildings *are*, but what they *do*.

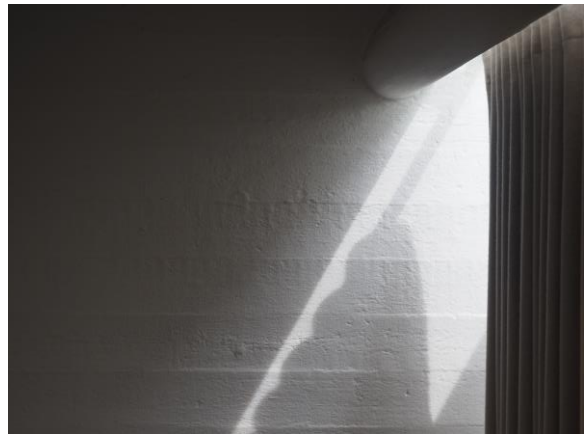
This was my second time visiting each of these cities. The first, I was a student chasing architectural canon. Pilgrimages to big names and monolithic masterpieces.

This time, the lens shifted. We weren't seeking out the monuments; we were observing the moments in between. How people occupy space. How policies shape behaviour. How architects can act not only as designers, but as translators between civic need and built form.

Across the tour, a few themes kept resurfacing:

- transformation over demolition,
- co-creation over control, and
- architecture as infrastructure for public life.

It was less about spectacle, more about systems. And above all, it was about how cities shape people, and how, in turn, people shape cities.



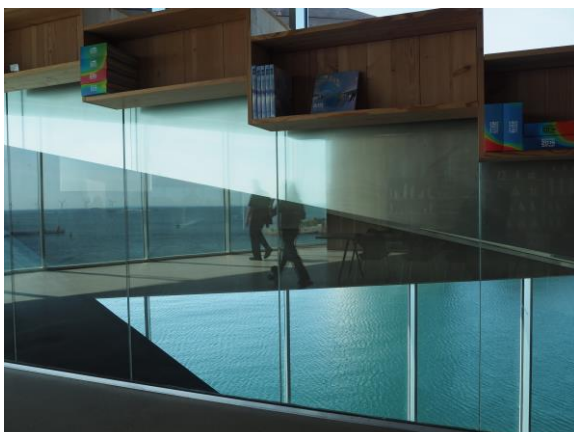
Copenhagen

Design as Governance



We began in Copenhagen with a literal shock to the system. A plunge into the icy waters at Kalvebod Bølge. It set the tone for a city built on bold, public gestures. Our cycle guide, Alice, embodied the Danish approach: calm and organised on the surface, yet quietly panicked as she hustled us through a tightly packed itinerary. In that duality, I saw Copenhagen itself; once precise and strict, now gradually loosening at the edges, allowing joy and life to emerge in the spaces between the rules.

This was more than a tour of buildings; it was a lesson in civic structure. From the Five Finger Plan that prevents urban sprawl to the integration of policy and planning at city scale, this was a city where architecture and urbanism worked hand in hand. Studio visits to Johansen Skovsted, Djernes & Bell, and Kim Lenschow revealed collaborative office models, shared spaces, shared lunches, shared values.

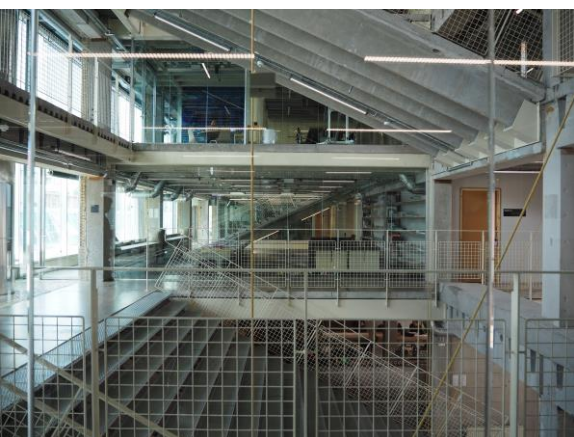


Materials were local. Processes were slow. Details were simple, not simplistic. There was a focus on nature-based thinking, resource mapping, and building for the climate, not against it. Thoravej 29 stood out as a model of this approach, an elegant, adaptable community focused project where old meets new with care and intentionality.

We ended our Copenhagen journey in the Bagsværd Church. Gumji's unplanned piano performance at the insistence of the piano's designer, Jan Utzon, brought the spatial resonance of his father's vision to life. It offered a quiet moment of reflection. A reminder that architecture is not just about form, but about the experiences and moments that connect us.

Two values stood out to me as particularly important for city design. Gerard Reinmuth at TERROIR said, "Young people make the city." And Justine Bell noted, "Buildings that require the most labour to make are the ones we look after."

The takeaway? Good design is not a decoration, it's a form of governance that creates opportunities for people to shape, care for, and invest in the places they inhabit.



Amsterdam : Rotterdam

Tempo, but relaxed

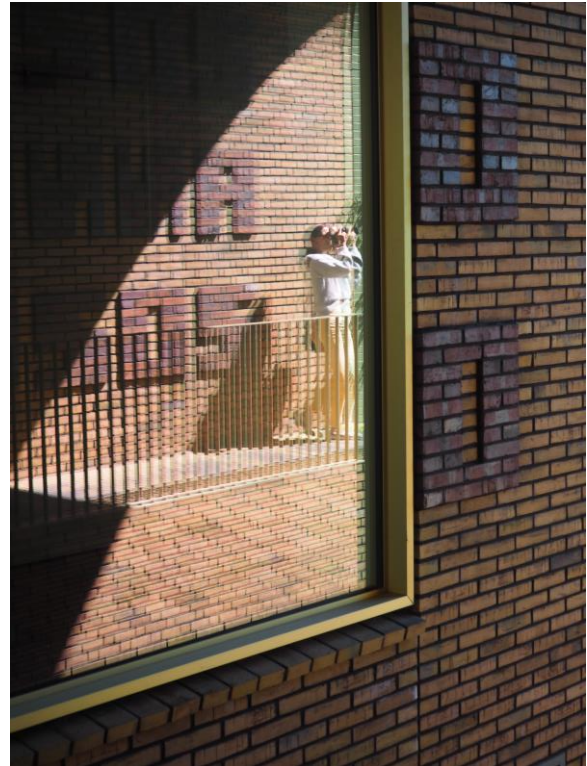
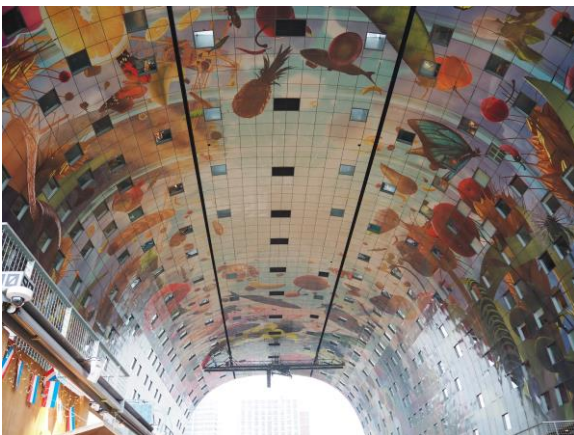


If Copenhagen was about control and coherence, the Netherlands, particularly Amsterdam and Rotterdam, offered something messier, looser, and more improvisational. It started with our cycling guide, Alex, who set the tone early and instructed us to move with “tempo, but relaxed”. It was how he moved through the city and how the city seemed to move around him. Fluid, self-assured, and not without its quirks.

In Amsterdam, bikes outnumber people and chaos somehow functions. Beneath the tangle of canals and leaning terraces lies a strong civic framework. We toured the city by bike, again the focus was less on the monuments and more on the lived-in spaces: repurposed buildings, cooperative housing, and waterfront developments like Borneo Sporenburg where tight site conditions yield clever solutions for high-density, low-rise living.

Here, we learned that planning isn’t static. In the 1980s, Borneo Sporenburg was strictly zoned: residential only, no retail. The way people wanted to live changed that. A bakery on the corner suddenly made the area desirable. The city learned, and rules shifted to accommodate real life. That quiet pivot from regulation to responsiveness was a theme across the Dutch projects.





Whether we were visiting the floating homes of Schoonschip, the social housing at Sparrdammerhart, or the repurposed industrial site of NDSM Werf, it was clear that cities evolve best when they leave room for people to push against the rules.

Studio Ninedots' De Jakoba project showed this pragmatism in action. Prefabricated, cross-ventilated, no fancy finishes. Fast, affordable, dignified. No car parking, but ample bike storage. It made me wonder why in Australia we're still building detached houses on the fringe and calling them "affordable". They may be cheap to build, but the long-term costs to infrastructure, environment, and community tell a different story. The real economy of construction includes access to services, connection, and care.

In Rotterdam, the mood shifted. Bigger, bolder, more speculative. From the iconic Markthal to the FENIX Gallery's layered reuse, the focus was on stitching past and present at scale. Responding to history without being beholden to it.

The Netherlands showed us that looseness isn't the opposite of structure. It's knowing the rules well enough to know when to bend them. That's something we could take more seriously back home, not just in design, but in the way we could make space for communities to shape their cities.

Barcelona

Peeling back the Layers



By the time we landed in Barcelona, we'd mastered cycling with one hand on the handlebars and the other on the camera, yet nothing prepared us for the layers this city held. From the chaotic beauty of the Gothic Quarter to the wide, ordered boulevards of the Eixample, Barcelona unfolded like an onion, each layer revealed a different take on how cities could, and should evolve.

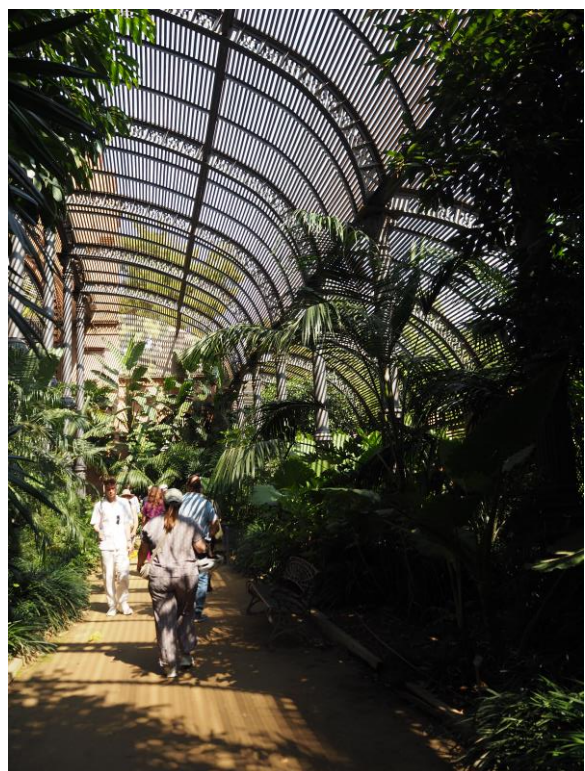
Its meanings accumulate through contrast. Structure and play, history and invention, informality and order often coexisting within the same project. Over three days, we moved through a city where architecture feels less like a finished object and more like an ongoing conversation between preservation and provocation, legacy and experimentation.

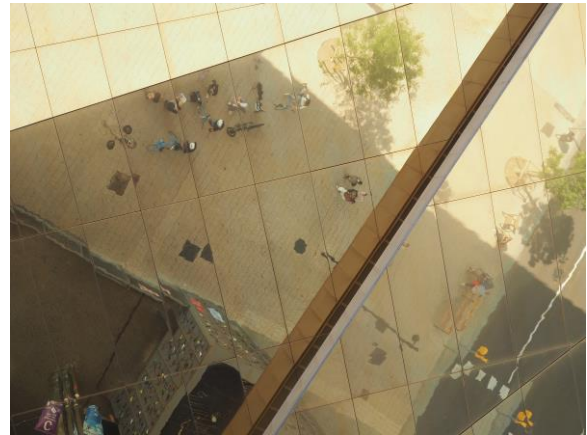
We traced the city's modern urban fabric from the saddle. At *Sala Beckett*, a former workers' cooperative transformed into a theatre and writing workshop by *Flores & Prats*, we encountered a blurred dialogue between old and new. Rooms unfold like movie scenes, scenographic, textured, and emotionally rich. Compared to *Thoravej 29* in



Copenhagen, where the transformation was didactic and orderly, this was layered and expressive, a site specific improvisation that simultaneously celebrates and blurs the traces of time.

Barcelona's housing projects pushed this layering further. At *The GreenH@use* by *Peris + Tora*, shared courtyards, modular planning, and a stripped back palette delivered housing flexibility with dignity. *MAIO's 110 Rooms* takes it further again: a grid of identical, non-hierarchical spaces that shift with need. Texture, colour, and simple, manually operated shading bring human scale and passive climate control. A refreshing antidote to our obsession with sealed, climate-proof boxes.

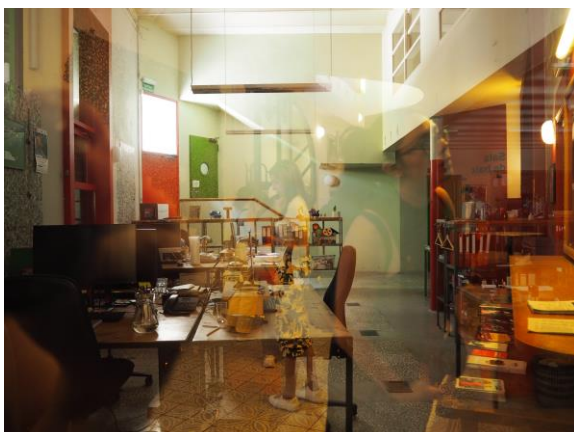
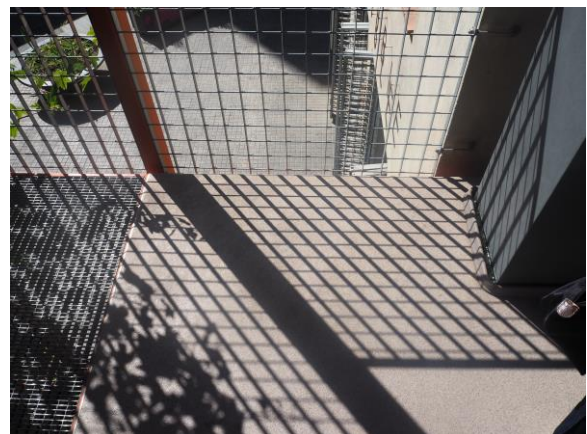




Later, *Ricardo Bofill's* office and *Walden 7* offered a glimpse into the surreal and the speculative. At *Walden 7*, the spatial ambition is striking, but the reality is slightly unnerving. "It's not really practical," said Rosa, a resident since 1979, "but we're still living." At *Mateo Arquitectura*, even amid a looming "project catastrophe," Director, Josep Lluís Mateo, spoke romantically of the city as a palimpsest. Layered, fragmented, but whole.

Our final visit, to *Lacol*, felt like a synthesis of it all. A worker-owned architecture cooperative, *Lacol* reframes housing as a civic act. Drawing from agricultural models and self-build methodologies, they create robust, zero-equity housing that prioritises process over polish. Their buildings are resilient, their funding models unconventional, and politics embedded in every decision. It's not architecture as image. It's architecture as infrastructure for equity, community and care.

Barcelona doesn't pretend design alone will solve complex housing issues. But it did show us what's possible when we embed experimentation, generosity, and agency into our urban fabric. The result isn't always tidy, but it's alive.



Final Reflections

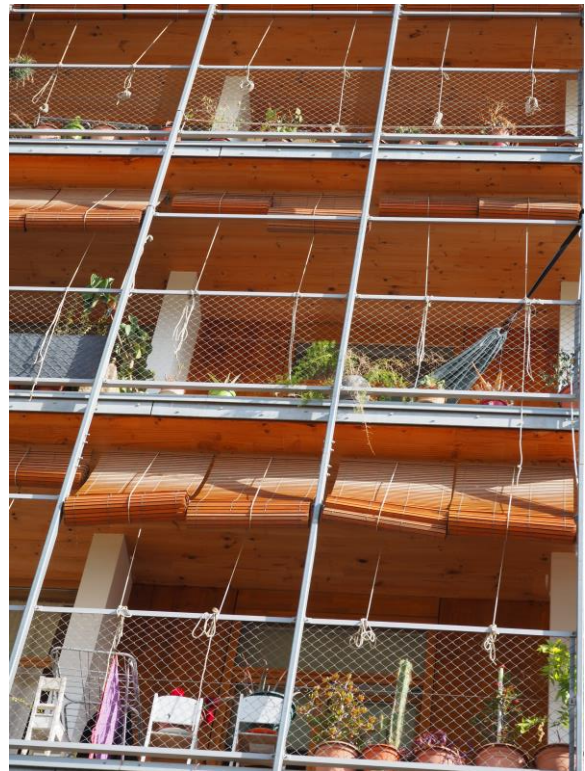
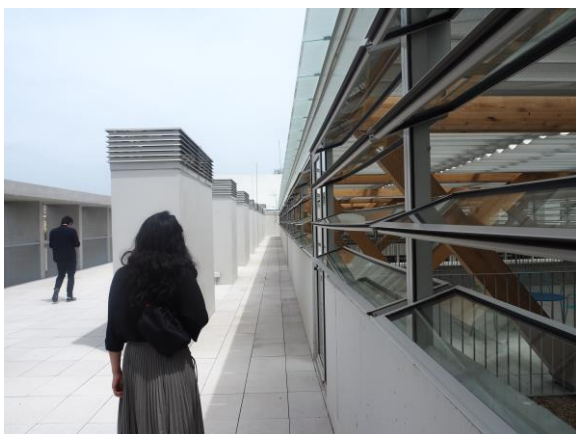
Layering Lessons for Australian Practice

The 2025 Dulux Study Tour took us through four incredible cities. Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Barcelona. Each with its own unique architectural language and urban rhythm. What struck me most was how all four cities are grappling with shared challenges: housing affordability, urban density, sustainability, and how to design cities for people, not just buildings.

Cycling through these cities gave me a unique, ground-level perspective. In Copenhagen, the emphasis on architecture that “doesn’t take more than it gives” revealed a commitment to design as a civic gesture. Buildings that belong to the city, and spaces that invite everyone in. Amsterdam’s mix of anthropological urbanism and social housing pragmatism showed how political will and community activation can shape inclusive, resilient neighbourhoods and the lives they nurture. Rotterdam demonstrated a fearless embrace of transformation, where heritage and innovation coexist in a city defined by rebuilding and reinvention. Finally, Barcelona unfolded as a palimpsest of layered histories and gutsy experimental housing models, where architecture acts as an ongoing conversation rather than a fixed statement.

Together, these cities move beyond the ‘starchitect’ era of monumentality, focusing instead on urban infill, shared spaces, and human-scale interventions. The offices we visited reflect this ethos: collaborative, experimental, socially conscious, and deeply embedded in their local contexts.

This has clear resonance for my work as an architect in Australia, working for government. Here, we are still too often shackled by a narrow view of architecture as aesthetics or assets rather than a civic framework that has the ability to shape values, strengthen cultural identity and lift the quality of life for everyone. The hesitancy to embrace design leadership fully and to embed design thinking into governance holds us back from creating equitable, vibrant, and sustainable communities.



From this experience, I’ve seen the value of design governance models that foster early collaboration between government, architects, builders, and stakeholders, where procurement is flexible and allows space for creative innovation and produce meaningful outcomes. I’ve seen the power of low-tech, climate-conscious design strategies that engage residents in their own comfort and wellbeing. And I’ve witnessed how cooperative housing models can shift housing from commodity to human right, from investment to collective good.

For me, the lessons from Europe are clear. Cities are layered, complex, and continually evolving. Their success comes from embracing that complexity, integrating history with innovation, policy with design, and individual needs with collective wellbeing to build a sustainable future that benefits everyone.

As I return to practice, my challenge, and opportunity, is to bring this layered thinking into the Australian context. To champion architecture that serves the many, not just the few, that respects place and people, and that sees housing and public space not as objects to be owned but as shared foundations for better lives.

The Dulux Study Tour has expanded my understanding of what architecture can be. It has shown me that the future of our cities depends on how well we can peel back the layers, learn from the past, and imagine new ways of living together for a collective future.