



Is it time to take a risk?

AA ROUNDTABLE 06



Despite this golden age of prosperity and wealth in Australia, perpetual crises seem to surround us: environmental disaster, global warming, financial cooling, political indecision and a loss of trust. For architects, the challenge is not only designing solutions to such crises, but also to challenge the culture of how we problem solve. In the face of increasing rules and regulations, the sixth AA Roundtable, held at the UTS Architecture Warehouse, asked: Can architects take greater risks?

ROY GREEN Risk is about the possibility of failure, and we make decisions all the time about prospects that have an uncertain outcome and an uncertain return, and we make a calculation about risk in that process. Some people fear risk, and avoid it at all costs, and build systems that reduce the possibility of failure but also reduce the opportunity for success. Others embrace risk, and make decisions that potentially have a high possibility of failure because they

also have the potential for huge transformative effects, like changing our communities for the better. And where would we be without those kinds of risk takers? Failure is something we learn from. In many companies, if you fail you are given another chance, as long as you don't make the same mistake twice. That's the only requirement in innovative firms around the world.

In the context of innovation in Australia, it's very clear from studies we've undertaken, including one for the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research in which eighteen categories of world best practice were measured, that the area of management in which we fall furthest behind is one called "instilling a talent mind-set." This is a kind of proxy for innovation, a proxy for a creative workforce. And the government is doing something to change that, introducing new criteria to programs which in the past have been giveaway schemes. For example, in the R&D tax credit, new rules that require a risky and innovative enterprise in order to justify funds, as opposed to business as usual, have thrown up a huge storm of criticism. And it's exactly the kind of example that Machiavelli once described of moving to a new order of things. Those who lose from the current order are in a position to make a lot of noise, while those who would potentially gain don't know it yet.

ANDREW CORTESE
Grimshaw
Architects

ROY GREEN
Faculty of Business,
University of
Technology Sydney

TIMOTHY HILL
Donovan Hill

HELEN LOCHHEAD
NSW Government
Architect's Office

TIMOTHY MOORE
*Architecture
Australia*

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Fenelon.

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TIMOTHY MOORE Shifting from the new order to the current order, Helen, in terms of your experience working across broad scales of geography and politics in New South Wales, do you confront a risk-averse or proactive culture in your practice?

HELEN LOCHHEAD Governments across the board are pretty much risk-averse and all the structures within government are really about conforming and minimizing risk and, inevitably, limiting innovation as a consequence. In recent years, governments have been divesting themselves of any risk, and that happens even when we go to public-private partnerships or tenders – any one of you who has done a government tender recently would know just how onerous it is to comply with all the requirements. While we think “we’ll minimize the risk and we’ll maximize the return,” in fact, you minimize the innovation and often minimize the value-add and the benefits of such a way of thinking. So, from inside government, I think that we are stifling innovation and it has to change.

TIMOTHY MOORE You recently undertook a Churchill Fellowship to northern European and American cities to observe proactive approaches to sustainability. What kinds of activism did you find?

HELEN LOCHHEAD The greatest observation was that, as architects, we are into creative problem solving, and creative problem solving can happen at any level, whether it’s political, through policy making, architectural designers or the person on the street. We all have a part to play in the making of our cities. And where I visited, the cities had a very strong stewardship and leadership in terms of a vision of where they want to be. And it was often a mayor, and sometimes it was an extraordinary government employee, and sometimes it was a designer. But they all brought people along with them into the fold.

TIMOTHY MOORE Collaboration is key in collectivizing risk. At Grimshaw Architects, Andrew, is it a strategy of diversification to overcome risk, considering that your office works in Sydney, Melbourne and Asia? And do you find difference in these disparate locations?

ANDREW CORTESE I’ll start with the PPP [public-private partnership] process with major infrastructure and public projects because it is emblematic of one of the problems in Australia. Because of the lack of support for innovation in Australia, we therefore seek to import it. When we go and partner with specialists from other countries, who have come out of the investment of their societies, we bring that and we can verify it. That’s then represented as a partnership, and through that collaboration between an external consultant and an Australian consultant, we prepare a government-funded project, but to a defined brief within a process, which doesn’t then allow you to engage with the client to seek to manifest the value of that contribution. We constrain ourselves constantly, and then we seek outside influences to give us a lift, and then we constrain it back. So the way we work is that, given any opportunity, we are obliged to seek the very best intelligence, wherever that is, and then facilitate that into a project that we’re doing. We keep our vision open to wherever it is, whether it’s Asia, Europe or the Americas. That’s our model of managing the constraint of risk within a process.

TIMOTHY MOORE Timothy Hill, how do you manage and constrain risk?

TIMOTHY HILL I don’t think we’re more averse to risk, I just think we’re more conscious of it. If you set aside all the insurance issues, the amount of compliance that goes on in everyone’s practice in order to reduce risk – not to protect

people, which is different – keeps a lot of people in jobs, because it’s not only discovering if there is some risk and then allocating it and then abrogating it and then communicating about it, and then rebundling it into a PPP. PPP takes you to the point where a government has claimed to be risk-averse, taken a risk so massive that they have lost consciousness of it. Because governments are unconscious of the risks they take, and corporations don’t have a good risk – they don’t seem to be handling it at the moment – I think that going collective and relying on other people, and connecting with how other people could take risk, is an area to go. To participate in all this, in our profession, we would need to ban the use of the word creative, because as professionals we’ve got a lot of obligations. And the last thing that anyone who has a lot of money to spend, and who has got people selling the possibility of risk to them, wants is to have someone like us tell them that we’re going to be creative.

ANDREW CORTESE I think that what we’ve experienced is the obligation to be creative, the expectation that we will genuinely, and with a great degree of intellectual rigour, be creative, and it’s when we’re not being creative that we are undermining the integrity of our practice. We have had clients come to us and say, “You’re failing in that obligation,” and we are often doing that because we’ve had so many constraints and so much pressure has been applied to us, but what they’re expecting us to do is to have a voice back against that. And that’s been quite a revelation, that while you live in that environment, they expect you not to be submissive.

HELEN LOCHHEAD Working at the other end of the spectrum from where you’re working in your practice, creative thinking is extremely important because in government, logical, linear thinking is the mainstay of business, and the value that we add to government is not by responding to a brief and doing an architectural project that is designed well. It’s actually in our strategic value to government. And so, often, I feel that where the NSW Government Architect’s Office should be going in the future, and where I spend most of my time, is on projects which haven’t actually been formed yet. It’s at the front end of a project, where a client comes to you from the government space and says, “We’re thinking about this and we’re not quite sure how to achieve it. Can you help us with it?” A lot of it is about developing scenarios, it’s about imagining our future, it’s about imagining things that they haven’t even contemplated, and putting that back into the briefing process. It is not just about answering a question, it’s about redefining what the question or the problem is that they’ve come to you with in the first place. We don’t always have the privilege of doing that; often you’ve got a very specific brief to respond to in a certain time frame, and for a specific purpose. But I’m also finding that in our role in government, you get involved in a range of confidential projects which are flyers, in a way, and it’s really about testing ground and incubating the possibilities, which I think is a role of government and the way government can move from being prescriptive and regulated to something which is much more creative and innovative.

TIMOTHY MOORE It is pertinent to bring Roy back into the conversation, because one of your goals at UTS is to have a dynamism between the engineering, business and architecture faculties. You are looking towards creative problem solving. And you have employed Frank Gehry to help you.

ROY GREEN The famous management theorist, Peter Drucker, once said that the modern twentieth-century corporation was about technology and markets. But the twenty-first-century corporation will be about business analytics and design thinking, making use of that mass of information that’s out there and interpreting it, not just analytically, but intuitively. And that’s where we began with our new business school building. It didn’t begin with the architecture, it began with a vision and philosophy of business education that Frank Gehry has bought into. This building will be built around ideas of design thinking, around interaction and collaboration, and around producing graduates with new attributes of creativity and innovation.

TIMOTHY MOORE Do you apply the idea of “design thinking” to the relationship between yourself as a client and Gehry’s office?

ROY GREEN If we look back to his previous commissions, for example the business school in Ohio that he built for the Case Western Reserve University, called Weatherhead School of Management, it was only in the process of interaction with Frank Gehry that the business school identified the principles of design thinking and began to incorporate them within their programs. We are already developing new programs and innovation labs at UTS to bring together students from different disciplines to do creative problem solving, so Frank has applied the metaphor of a treehouse to our new building. Interactive spaces and discipline groups and research centres will be treehouses at the ends of branches, all connected up by sight lines, by crevasses of light, by an environment that fosters collaboration. So that’s what we want to exemplify in our architecture, and you asked at the beginning, is that a collaborative process? Well, it’s seamlessly collaborative. We fire ideas at the Gehry team, they fire theirs back, and in fact solve problems that we haven’t even thought of, and out of that process is emerging what I think will be an extraordinary piece of architecture.

TIMOTHY MOORE Is this notion of design thinking something that architects just *do*? This idea of collaboration and working with different constellations of people, Andrew, is it simply something that you do day-to-day?

ANDREW CORTESE The circumstance of collaboration changes in every project, and it starts with the culture of the client. There are circumstances where there is no client; it is an institution and there are layers of management and there are project leaders. Architects can retreat to their cave and design, but we have the ability to design the process of how we work. Creativity is not about the kind of outcome, it’s about the way that we can construct the opportunity, and collaboration is one of those ways of achieving that process. Now, I think the opportunity to be creative – I’m going to use that term – comes if you can have that process, partnering as much as possible, so that you’re not delivering something where the risk is attached to the outcome, but investing in a very deep relationship where you consult and understand what the needs, what the possibilities are. If we go back to relationships – anyone can determine a relationship between two things, but when you put the whole things in context, if you get that deep engagement through a collaboration of individuals around a project or a problem, that’s when you can be creative.

TIMOTHY MOORE Helen, how is collaboration handled at the state government level?

HELEN LOCHHEAD The Government Architect's Office is in a privileged position because we work right across government, and what we can often do is actually see connections which nobody else can see within their silo of Health or silo of RTA or whatever; they're all getting on with their core business. If you do a project for both of them, you can say, have you guys actually talked to each other? Because you've got a site here where if we worked together, you could actually make something much more than the sum of the parts. And so we're often in a position of bringing teams together who didn't even know they needed to talk to each other.

At other times, you do get great opportunities. For example, the City of Sydney had a development application for the Gold Fields House site right down on Circular Quay, and it complied with all of their controls for the site, and it was less than exceptional, and they just went, "We've really got this wrong on this particular site. Why don't we just throw out the controls and think from first principles?" And so they, as an excellent client in this particular case, demanded a design-led planning process and this enabled us to develop a different approach and outcome with them.

TIMOTHY MOORE Timothy Hill, you worked on the Brisbane City Centre Master Plan. How did you find your involvement with government?

TIMOTHY HILL Doing a project like that, of course, you'd never make the claim to be being creative, because the focus is on trying to have all these interactions with all these people. But where is the risk? Having lots of conversations and interactions with people is logical, civil behaviour. In listening to the recount of Frank [Gehry]'s scheme, where people have actually been considered from an almost anthropologic point of view of how they get along, he didn't describe anything that sounded in any way risky; everything was quite rational.

ROY GREEN Here is the risk: this building doesn't just have me or the business school as a client, it has the senior management of the university and the university council, which is bound by legislation, which is very onerous and which imposes great liability on financial decision making at that level. A week after we made our first communication with Frank Gehry, we were to put a design competition in the newspapers – this was all being planned at the time – and we had to go back to this university council, a very risk-averse group, and say to them, "Look, we've cancelled the design competition. We've found an architect from overseas who sounds really good. We like him. You might not have heard of him. He has done some interesting things. Here is a picture of something in Bilbao, and he plays with models, he designs from the inside out. So you won't actually see the building as you would have done in the design competition until very near the end; you won't have any idea what it looks like, and by the way, it's going to cost a third more than your budget. Who wants to vote for that?"

ANDREW CORTESE I think the Gehry building is an exceptional circumstance, and most of us practise in the common area of architecture. But the normal process that we encounter with risk is prohibitive, and most of the people that we encounter when we try to suggest a different possibility within that, they kind of take a moralistic – anyone who is working with a lot of the statutory authorities, they're prohibitive. Their actions are very like a schoolteacher; you're doing something wrong if you try to break that or change the way that that is understood.

TIMOTHY HILL I'm very optimistic about how architects could do things, and my concern is that our conversation is shifting to learning how to skill up. For a university to occasionally make a very expensive building is completely well precedented, and even though we might be dealing with a few Australians who have got some anxieties about that in this particular time, making an occasional expensive building is incredibly uncontroversial in the history of making cities. So that's one thing. And then the idea that you'd use a person who is just a gold imprint standard – because not only did Frank guarantee the cost, he guarantees the work, so that once you use Frank, you take no risk. So the idea that they're going to get a valuable icon – because he organizes it all up front. He never is over budget. And no-one ever drags down the value of his buildings.

I just find it odd that we're saying that to get a good architect, to make an expensive building on a university campus, is something that, as architects, we all have to be worried about arguing for. Hiring really good architects at very good fees to make expensive buildings isn't risky.

ANTHONY BURKE I'm Anthony Burke, the Head of the School of Architecture here at UTS. One of the recommendations from the RIBA "Designing the Future" report earlier this year was that actually the title, architect, will have no relevance in the future. I wonder what the panel's opinion is about whether that would be the best risk we could possibly take as a profession, to get rid of the title of architect altogether?

TIMOTHY HILL Architect is a great term and I wish architects would conduct themselves the way the media understands the term. The term architect is used seven or eight times every day in print publication. Yesterday, the papers came out revealing the real architects of the carbon tax. That's because the public all understand that what architects do is to rationally organize, in difficult situations with possibly contentious results, to actually make a new reality, and then are able to communicate it to people along the way who might either be resistant or need to be reorganized. Now, that took me an entire paragraph, but people who read any form of newspaper, however tabloid, understand that whole spectrum of what the architect's role is, because they are endlessly calling brilliant football coaches, and people who bring about carbon taxes or changes to legislation, architects. These people are called architects by the media because the media, and people who read it, understand that there is a particular business of looking at something that's complicated, being lateral about it, involving a whole lot of other people. That's a reasonably commendable thing, so they give it a word. Now, what's interesting when they use the word is that the person is given the title "architect" not because they're powerful; they're given it because they're smart. That's why I think it's very important for our profession to get on with the business of admitting that we have no power, and just show that we've got the smarts. The media are using the term architect in a way that's far ahead of the way our profession knows. Keep it.

MATT ELKIN Hi, I'm Matt Elkin. I'm an architect and quite proud of the term. Timothy Hill, I have a question for you about how you communicate some of the risk of what you do – particularly, I'm thinking of some of your domestic projects – to the clients. When I look at your buildings, a lot of what is there is not rational; it's beautiful, but there might be say a tile pattern that's a bit experimental. Are you communicating that



in a way where the client is aware of a risk, or is that on the basis of trust built up over time?

TIMOTHY HILL We take very few risks in our buildings. There is a current fascination with how people won't make a decision unless they can visualize it. We're in a climate where you've got to see a picture of exactly what it's going to be like, which is a bit of a distraction. I would see myself as a very low risk taker. I would aspire to take bigger risks, but we're extremely conservative. A real risk would be to do town planning in reverse, where instead of doing all the worrying about the application at the start, you've got all of the resources of all those town planning departments, and you transfer them into measuring what actually works, and you get automatic town planning approval within forty-eight hours, and if it's no good after a year, you're asked to knock it down, which is the way they do it in Taipei.

HELEN LOCHHEAD There is always scale of risk and scale of consequences. In government, what is happening is that we are putting more and more pressure on the big players to take all the risk, and that really cuts out all the middle players, the little players, anyone who may have a different way of doing something, able to respond nimbly and innovatively. It's risk-averse and therefore the possibilities are limited. Whereas if we had a different risk profile, and said we actually are going to accept some of the risk, what are the potentials? You could get so many more players in the field. And the field is getting bigger and bigger. I don't know whether you're conscious of it, but here and overseas, the architecture firms are getting bigger and bigger and more global. The small practitioner will be the person working from their back room, and then there will be the conglomerate AECOMs of the world who employ around 50,000 employees worldwide. That, to me, just completely polarizes the possibilities in the landscape. You can deal down here with the insignificant, or you can be one of the big players. And we all know that cities and the built environment come about through all the complexities in between, and if we sterilize it to those two polar opposites because of risk, that would be the most devastatingly banal outcome for the future of urban environments.

TWITTER FEED

DNEUS DAVID NEUSTEIN

#AAROUNDTABLE I MUST SAY I'M QUITE DISARMED BY THE LACK OF AN ACTUAL ROUND TABLE IN THE CAVERNOUS SETTING OF THE OUTSDAB WAREHOUSE.

UTSDAB UTS DAB

#AAROUNDTABLE ROY GREEN: FAILURE, LEARN FROM IT, DON'T MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE AGAIN.

LIQUIDARCH MELONIE BAYL-SMITH

#AAROUNDTABLE ANDREW CORTESE WE ARE RELYING ON BRINGING INNOVATION INVESTMENTS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES INTO AUSTRALIA FOR VALIDATING OUR IDEAS

DNEUS DAVID NEUSTEIN

#AAROUNDTABLE LOCHHEAD: 'IT'S FLAMED TO IMAGINE THAT ARCHITECTS ARE IN CONTROL OF THE PROCESS.' THEY ARE PART OF A COMPLEX METABOLISM.

GINTASREISGYS GINTAS REISGYS

SHAME THE 'RISK' #AAROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WAS THE ANTITHESIS OF HOW SAFE THE DISCUSSION REALLY WAS.

ADAMJOHNRUSSELL ADAM RUSSELL

ARCHITECTURE IS POLITICS. "@LIQUIDARCH: #AAROUNDTABLE USING A UNIVERSITY BLDG TO CREATE A CASE FOR HIGHER FEES, AMONGST OTHER 'BENEFITS'."

TARSHAFINNEY TARSHA FINNEY

PERHAPS OUTSDAB COULD POINT OUT TO UTS SOME OF THE MORE CRITICAL FEEDBACK IT GETS ON THE GEHRY COMMISSION @DNEUS #AAROUNDTABLE

AA Roundtable 06 was held as a precursor event to the Sydney Architecture Festival.

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