An investigation into Australian architects working globally

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Final Report

Interviewee Questionnaire (Appendice A)

Synopsis (Appendice B)

25min video - DVD

An Investigation Into Australian Architects Working Globally

In 2008 I undertook a study aimed at revealing some of the unique experiences that Australian architects encounter when working on projects abroad. The study, titled " An investigation into Australian architects working globally" has sought through interviews with Australian architects working overseas, to reveal what qualities make Australian architects successful and how one might capitalise on these qualities. In addition the study looked at how these experiences overseas affected their practice at home. To understand these issues I chose practices both working remotely from Sydney and those with a physical presence in Singapore, China and the U.A.E. (unfortunately due to unforseen circumstances Bob Nation from Kahn Finch had to cancel the interview I had travelled to Dubai to have with him.)

The impetus for the study came from a discussion hosted by the University of Technology in June 2007 entitled Import/Export, Australian Architecture Abroad. In this discussion numerous issues were canvassed, all pointing to a market for architectural services that was becoming an increasingly global one. With flexible tools of production and information technology that allows for unhindered communications and document transfer, the opportunity for medium and even small firms to access these global markets has opened up a whole new client base. While Australians have worked in foreign offices for some time, the ability of an Australian practice to establish a presence in abroad is a relatively new phenomenon opening up new opportunities as well as requiring updated and flexible business practices suited to new environments.

The initial intent was to focus on the global nature of architectural practice, seeking to highlight the differences between Western and Asian based practices. However, I ultimately decided to focus on the expanding base of Australians practicing within the complex and diverse region of Asia. This decision was in part made due to the inherent complexity of the Asian market. I selected PTW Architects in Beijing, BAU International in Shanghai and Kerry Hill Architects in Singapore. In addition I have included the practice Choi Ropiha who work on projects abroad from within their Manly based practice in Sydney. The choice of practices was designed to include a diverse range to illustrate the differences associated with the large, medium and small scale office, and those practices with a physical presence in the foreign environment and those working remotely from Australia.

The questionnaire produced (see appendices 2.) was divided into three main areas:
- What qualities Australian architects bring to international practice
- What practice in a different culture entails
- The globalisation of architecture

While all questions were asked not all questions produced insightful or valuable commentary. In this report I have outlined the responses from which useful information was obtained and provided my conclusions based on these responses. In addition to this written report, interview excerpts have also been incorporated in a 25 minute video designed to highlight the most significant

conclusions (gathered from over four hours of interviews.) The interviews in the video show that while the interview framework, involving the three main areas, imposed a useful structure, the conversations provided insights and ranged over rather broader areas than had been anticipated. It is highly recommended that this report be read in conjunction with watching this video.

Interviewees
1. **John Pauline** – PTW Architects Beijing
2. **James Brearley & Shirley Fang** – BAU International, Shanghai
3. **Kerry Hill** – Kerry Hill Architects, Singapore
4. **John Choi and Tai Ropiha** – Choi Ropiha, Sydney

The first main theme considered the general area of what Australians bring to international practice. This began with an initial conversation with each subject on whether there was anything uniquely Australian that we brought to international practice and then focused on what that might be.

Interestingly, while it did appear we brought particular beneficial characteristics to our work, there was no consensus on any unique Australian quality. The consensus seemed to be that "serious" architects brought the same qualities to international practice the world over.

"I think serious architects wherever you come from, whichever country you come from, do serious architecture wherever they are." – Kerry Hill

While Australians broadly were thought to be more "laid back" and had a confidence in design, this was tied more into the fact that they were well trained and experienced. A key point outlined by James Brearley was that because westerners and Asians are so different, whether one is an Australian or an American practicing in Asia makes very little difference.

"*Its hard to compare Australians to other westerners when you are comparing westerners to Chinese….Its such a dramatic difference that any comparisons of Australians to most other western cultures kind of fades, they become just shades of grey. Where as compared to China its like grey is to red." – James Brearley*

A particular issue raised in the interviews was the importance placed by the client on the architect living in the foreign location. This was seen by some interviewees to be a vital demonstration of commitment to the country.

"We're living here, that's also appreciated…the Chinese clients think that we must understand the Chinese context and that's probably more important than having an exotic flavour to their projects." – James Brearley

"…Your local developers read that as being a commitment…You're not on a hit and run mission, times are good, lets get in there and grab what we can." – Kerry Hill

Others, not operating in a foreign environment, however, considered it was important to maintain their 'foreignness' as a point of difference. In the case of Choi Ropiha, their agent in China does not want John, who is Asian, to represent Choi Ropiha when trips are made to China as it is believed this would undermine what makes their practice unique over there. At the same time it was only their practice (which was the only office interviewed without a foreign base) which identified a quality that they believed was a particular strength of theirs as seen from Asia.

"I think what has always been the strength of our practice is our ability to think strategically…and that works well anywhere in the world. That's probably more where our practice comes from as apposed to exporting an Australianess." – Tai Ropiha

John Pauline and Choi Ropiha agreed that working in Asia trained them to "work faster and design faster". However, all acknowledged that there were often sacrifices made in the quality of the final product as a result of this and because as a foreigner working with local practice one does lose full control to a certain degree.

"Asia does teach you to design things very quickly and that is actually a skill in some circumstances. So going back to Australia I feel much more confident and capable to produce pretty competent schemes potentially a lot faster than I did before." – John Pauline

It appears that while Australians may not bring anything uniquely Australian to their Asian practices they certainly take home with them experience that is not otherwise seen as a defining attribute of Australian architectural practice.

The second main theme examined what practicing in a different culture entails. Specifically this considered:
- What it means to design in other cultures
- How cultural differences impact on the operation of the practice both in a business and design capacity
- The speed of development
- The role of government planners and officials in shaping the direction of architectural projects
- The issues at stake with any co-operative projects taken on with local practices.
- The pros and cons of operating on international projects from within Australia and abroad.
- Differences between local and Australian staff and the importance of each.

The consensus around designing in other cultures was that the rules were different and the place is inherently different from what we know of architecture and urbanism in Australia. This appears self-evident.

"The rules at home are different. The way you produce a building, the way in which you collaborate, the way in which the entire process works from concept

design through to final delivery of a project is different in Australia." **– John Pauline**

"…and its taken me seven years to get to a position where I understand their urbanism may be inherently different. Maybe they just don't want active streets, maybe they don't want public communication, and maybe that's ok?" – James Brearley

However, the implications this has had for each practice have been quite diverse. John Pauline suggested that there are two approaches to design in foreign environments. The first ignores the culture in which you are positioned, developing ideas that are in some sense universal and the other involves a complete immersion in the foreign context. A hybrid of the two was deemed an ineffectual solution. Choi Ropiha and Kerry Hill, on the other hand, argue that the location is of no importance to a design approach which is consistent across locations. This is, in part, due to the lack of clues often given by many sites to what would be an appropriate response. Neither suggests that there are no differences but Choi Ropiha propose that being out of country actually allows one to see these differences more clearly and abstractly. The consensus from those working in their foreign environment, however, was that to really know a place one needs to live there. It is only when one is living there that problems and opportunities can be appropriately dealt with.

"…Each one of these places you do have to have a different approach to business. You cant apply the same model to all…"– John Pauline

"…You've got to be here, you've got to be working here. You have to know how things are done…"– James Brearley

Despite this, both Pauline and Brearley barely feel they know the Chinese culture they have been working in for years. The question then would be, why do you need to have a physical presence in order to work effectively in other cultures?

Differences are not only apparent between Australia and Asia but also on a regional level. One province in China is not the same as another and differences are only perceptible when you are there. According to Choi Ropiha there are so many things that make a place specific it is not necessary to be there in order to see what they are.

"…the notion that one particular place is completely unique and has one set of responces completely unique to that location is also highly overated…" – John Choi

Despite the lengthy stay of all overseas interviewees in their chosen location, the differences between home and abroad was still very apparent, although this was less the case with Kerry Hill who, despite working with a local architect in Singapore, regarded the offices in Perth and Singapore as being the same.
Two significant points were made in respect of the differences between home and abroad. The first, pointed out by Pauline, was that producing and refining a

single design option, while suitable in Australia, was not appropriate for Chinese clients. In China more than one option is required in order to prevent 'loss of face' in the event one design is not chosen. According to Brearley and Fang, communication was a major difference. Communication was seen as poor (and this was not because of a language barrier). In the opinion of Brearley this was due in part to everyone being too busy and also because it is part of Chinese culture to be quite independent. In addition to this, overriding consensus was that the speed and unpredictability of operating in China was the main factor separating home and abroad. The ramifications of this are that working overseas requires flexibility and adaptability and to import one's work practices from home, while not preventing one from working, will make operating successfully a lot harder.

Of the four practices selected, each has a different organisational structure. While Kerry Hill has their main office in Singapore, they work with a Singapore architect in order to get the appropriate approvals. PTW is an Australian firm with offices worldwide. While maintaining a small office in Beijing in joint venture with local offices it is able to work on very large projects. BAU International on the other hand is a medium sized practice with a Chinese partner allowing it to do all of its documentation in house. Choi Ropiha, being the only office without a physical presence abroad, works with engineers in Dubai and London and procures their work through an agent in China.

Although the view of most was that one really needs to work and live in the foreign environment in order to work effectively, whether this is the only model for successful practice was uncertain.
Brearley and Fang were quite clear that in order to navigate the minefield of relationships in a project you needed to be "on the ground." Because communication and 'teamplay' is so predictably bad you will not be able to practice successfully without a foreign presence. While Choi Ropiha can see that their removal from the process is problematic in this respect, it also means they don't have the hassle and expense of setting up an office in a foreign country and they don't get sidetracked by unimportant issues. Pauline also acknowledges that this type of structure means that one is able to sell oneself entirely as an international practice with "international ideas."
According to Hill this shows a lack of "commitment to the country." In order to be successful you need to "take the good times with the bad" and practices like Choi Ropiha do not do that. While the line is quite clear for Kerry Hill, Pauline also acknowledges that it is not a simple transition to set up in a foreign environment. Work practices cannot be simply transferred from back home and while you need local staff, it is important that they "do not nullify the point of difference" that one is trying to promote as a foreign practice.

It appears that the importance each architect placed on being in country was mainly due to the significance of relationships in Asia. While worldwide this is important, in Asia, relationships according to Pauline can be more important than the contract itself.

"…Relationships are sometimes more important than contracts themselves…if you've got very good relationships with your local design institutes then it's going to make your work and your life so much easier…" – John Pauline

Again, while Choi Ropiha practice from Sydney they also recognize the essential value of their agent in China in maintaining the appropriate connections. According to Pauline servicing these relationships needs to be treated with the same importance that is given to work and this is something that is quite difficult to adjust to in coming from Australia. In also noting the importance of relationships, Brearley and Fang from BAU point out that due to the problems of communication and a certain lack of importance placed on quality in detail, maintaining relationships is not an easy task.

When you work with local practices you can get extremely lucky…but generally you get the large design institutes who are a mercenary bunch a completely unstructured amoeba…it's like working with a backyard bunch a lot of the time.- James Brearley

In my preliminary research other interviews I had read suggested that designing "boldly" or "conceptually" was what one needed to do to successfully operate within Asia and that it was important not to get tied up in the detail. While in China this appeared to be true to a degree, owing to the importance of concept and metaphor, attention to detail was equally important. This was because Chinese architects and engineers are "extremely technical" and without a thorough technical backing, even great ideas will fail.

"…You have to get caught up in the details to make a lasting impact here…"- James Brearley

The last theme to be considered was the issue of globalisation in architecture. Such a topic could of course be the basis of an entire study. The intent of selecting this theme was to gain some insight into what views these architects had on an issue that was the result of their own work on foreign ground.

The main question posed suggested that a key concern of globalisation was the erosion of authenticity and identity. While a concern for homogenisation was apparent among the architects, more evident was the belief that international practice was producing a hybridisation that was seen as a positive outcome of architectural import and export.

"…More so now than any other time in history have students and architects been exposed to world wide ideas and the so the trend is more palpable, more quick shifting, harder to catch up with…" – John Pauline

It was also noted that each culture brings something of itself to any building and that any piece of architecture is not only the product of the architect. The example put forward to support this was the Opera House in Sydney. Designed by a Danish architect, it is not viewed as Danish but as a building which defines and is defined by the harbour.

In the case of Kerry Hill, 'appropriate' was the word used to describe his approach to architecture throughout Asia. While it was acknowledged that there was probably no localized vernacular in Singapore and that an 'International' solution was appropriate, designing in a place like Bhutan was understood to be more complex. In order to avoid destroying a local vernacular the design approach could be the same but a consideration of local cultural conditions played a larger part.

While Pauline recognised that there does need to be a balance between local and foreign architects he also points out that for some time architecture has had "a universality to it" and that this has been the result of media influence and also the reason it continues to change so quickly.

According to Brearley, this hybridisation or re-interpretation is the nature of Chinese architecture. While seemingly an "easy" explanation, the diverse influences from Chinese history would suggest that this was a fitting rationalization for the built environment.

"Shanghais authenticity is that of the inauthentic, that of the import and re-interpretation….In a way a misinterpretation of a local architectecture is sometimes a way to move forward on it….I don't mind bastardising a bit of Chinese architecture."-James Brearley

Both Choi Ropiha and Kerry Hill point out that it is important to distinguish between what is building and what is architecture. Both posited that it was more an issue of what was appropriate rather than whether the building was the result of localized ideas.

"Most architects regardless of the architectural trends will try and adapt, merge or morph trends into whats best for those local cultural vernaculars." – John Pauline

In conclusion while my questions provoked a varied range of responses some general points could be made:

Interestingly there does not seem to be anything uniquely "Australian" that benefits Australians working overseas. What appeared to be more of an issue was that as a first world foreigner one receives a quality architectural education with valuable domestic experience that equips one well for work in any country.

There did not seem to be a real consensus on whether it was vital to be based in a foreign country when working internationally. However, from the depth of understanding articulated by architects such as James Brearley and Shirley Fang it was clear that to build an ongoing concern in a foreign environment will inevitably require a full time foreign presence. At the same time, John Pauline and Choi Ropiha pointed out that there were a number of ways this could occur.

Clearly there are differences between working at home and abroad. It was those architects based overseas however who appeared to be more acutely aware of these differences and adapting to those differences more effectively. While I only had one Sydney based practice in my group of interviewees, the level of insight and understanding shown by them and those working overseas was marked. Communication and relationships were clearly as important as the work itself and only with a local presence were these issues able to be tackled most effectively. All practices acknowledged that working overseas gave you

some unique skills that were of benefit to working back in Australia, whether this was simply a broadened experience base or the ability to work faster and more efficiently.

While homogenisation and erosion of authenticity are genuine concerns of globalisation there was a belief that international ideas, hybridisation and a population's ability to bring its own meaning to a building were positives that would prevail.

The time and effort contributed by my interviewees to this study was considerable. I would like to thank John Pauline, Kerry Hill, James Brearley, Shirley Fang, John Choi and Tai Ropiha for their time and consideration. Thankyou also to Sandra Kaji-O'Grady for her help in formulating the study.

Appendice A

AIM:
To investigate Australian architects working globally

SPECIFICALLY:
- What uniquely Australian qualities are brought to international practice.
- How these qualities are used to their advantage
- The conditions encountered in these culturally different environments.
- Globalisation in architecture and the role of authenticity (effacing difference)
- Broadly, the journey taken by expat australian architects

OBJECTIVES:
- To understand what sorts of conditions architects encounter abroad, how they respond to these conditions and how they are different to those in Australia.
- To gain insight into what unique approach (if any) Australian architects bring to international practice and how they operate abroad.
- To establish whether the lessons learnt overseas are of use for practice in Australia
- To look at what the future of a specific local architectural vernacular is in a globalised world?
- To look at the role of the Australian architect in the globalisation of a foreign vernacular.

INTERVIEW APPROACH
- Series of semi-structured interviews asking the same questions of each interviewee.
- Flexible so that additional issues I have not broached can arise and be explored.

<u>Introduction</u>

- Could you tell me who you are a bit about your story to this point
- give a brief history of the practice and how it is that you and the practice setup here in …

<u>What qualities do Australian architects bring to international practice?</u>

1. Do you share the view held by many that Australians have unique and idiosyncratic qualities which they bring to the practice of professions such as architecture? What do they bring?

2. Is the 'Australianess' something you use to distinguish or market

yourself/the practice? Could you give an example?

3. What specific qualities enable you and your office to operate effectively over here?
    -Are these qualities different from those at play at home.
    -Are the skills and approaches learnt abroad transferable to practice at home?

4. In what ways (if any) does working outside of your own backyard allow you to reflect back on your work within Australia?

Practicing in a different culture

1. What does it mean to design in other cultures? (Issues at stake etc)

2. How do cultural differences impact on the operation of the practice both in a business and design capacity? Does this vary at a national and regional level? E.g between Beijing and say Shanghai? And Singapore and Bhutan or Malaysia? Could you give an example?

3. **KERRY HILL**- Your reinterpretation of indigenous building forms seems to have evolved quite a bit since your first buildings e.g Datai Hotel in Malaysia and your more recent buildings e.g …could you comment on this change?

4. Can you comment on the way your office here has and is evolving both as a business and in terms of a design approach? (South east asia will be the centre for massive urban expansion in the future how do you see your office changing and adapting to this?)

5. In contrast to Australia where development approvals can be a very long process from what I hear this is not the case in China where there is little discussion or hesitation. Things just proceed. Could you comment on this? (Is this the same in the U.A.E and Singapore?)

6. What is the role of government planners and officials in shaping the direction of architectural projects and how does this impact on the way your practice operates?

7. What are some of the issues at stake with any cooperative projects you take on with local practices. How do you proceed with these projects?

8. (*According to BAU-"New markets cultural differences" article*) Winning competitions in China doesn't necessarily mean selection. Contract can be handed over to local office. And selection doesn't mean implementation. Have you found this to be the case? What measures, if any are available to navigate these sorts of issues?

9. A lot of international work is being done by practices from within their own country. As an architect living and working abroad could you comment on what you believe might be the benefits or problems with this?

10. A couple of interviews I have read mentioned that designing boldly or conceptually with strong ideas in China (don't get tied up in the detail) is where foreigners need to operate because either: *(China specific. Is this relevant to Dubai and Singapore?)*

    1.skill level in the industry is still not at a very high level, so you wont get the fineness of detail you want.
OR
    2.because government authorities cannot unilaterally and openly select a direction or take a position.
    Could you comment on this?

11. A recent study of foreign practitioners outlined several perceived differences between the Chinese and foreign workers including among others, a lack of initiative in chinese staff.

    Have you noticed this to be the case?
    (If so could you give an example of this?)
    How do you manage these differences?
    (Are these issues the same in Dubai and Singapore?)

12. Is there any one thing you would have done differently from when you first arrived?

Australian architects and the globalisation of architecture

1. A key concern of globalisation in architecture is the erosion of authenticity and identity. (opposite opinions seeing heterogeneity or even an emphasizing of the specific as a result of homogeneity)
- What is the impact of an imported architecture on the authenticity of a local architecture in…?

- What has been the reaction to the importation or architectural ideas into…
- Are western models of design taking over in countries such as Singapore, U.A.E and China?

2. Does your practice have a particular strategic approach to these issues in the way it addresses design?

3. I've heard it described that the arch of China and Dubai is a "grab bag of overseas aesthetic trends" Would you say this was correct and is there any evolving local vernacular of architecture?

4. **(Addressing Kerry Hill and James Brearley)** Your practice in (Singapore & Shanghai) seems to be the result of a personal choice while PTW in Beijing and Kann Finch in Dubai is the result of the flow of capital investment. Does the difference in this sort of move have ramifications for the type of architecture produced in these?

5. **(Addressing John Pauline and Bob Nation)** The presence of Kerry Hill and BAU in (Singapore & Shanghai) seems to be the result of a personal choice by their directors while PTW in Beijing and Kann Finch in Dubai is the result of the flow of capital investment. Do you believe this difference has ramifications for the type of architecture produced in these countries?

6. How are your local staff important in the successful integration of your practice in a foreign environment? Could you give an example?

Appendice B

Synopsis:

The report titled, 'An investigation into Australian architects working globally' aimed at revealing some of the unique experiences that Australian architects encounter when working on projects abroad. Through a series of interviews with architects working In Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing and Sydney this study sought to discover what qualities make Australian architects successful and how one might capitalise on these qualities. In addition the study looked at how these experiences overseas affected their practice at home.

The practices selected included, PTW Architects in Beijing, BAU International in Shanghai, Kerry Hill Architects in Singapore and Choi Ropiha in Sydney. These choices were designed to include a diverse range to illustrate the differences associated with the large, medium and small scale office, and those practices with a physical presence in the foreign environment and those working remotely from Australia.

The study was divided into three main areas:
- What qualities Australian architects bring to international practice
- What practice in a different culture entails
- The globalisation of architecture

In summary the first main theme revealed that while Australian architects did bring beneficial characteristics to practice abroad, it was uncertain as to whether these were uniquely Australian. What did appear to be clear was that foreign clients did regard those Australian architects working and living in the foreign location highly. On the other hand it was important to maintain ones 'foreignness' as a point of difference whether working in country or from home.

While it appeared Australians may not bring anything uniquely Australian to Asian practice all interviewees gained valuable experience they believed was useful in practice at home.

The second main theme broadly examined what it means to design in other cultures. The consensus was that the rules were different and these foreign places are inherently different. While appearing self-evident the implications this had for each practice were also quite diverse. On one hand it was regarded as essential to know and live the culture and on the other this was perceived as highly over rated and prevented one from gaining perspective. Considerable differences and hurdles are encountered by all approaches. The consensus was that flexibility and adaptability were the essential characteristics of any successful practice operating abroad.

The last theme approached the issue of globalisation in architecture. The question here suggested that a key concern of globalisation was the erosion of authenticity and identity. While this was a genuine concern there was a belief that international ideas, hybridisation and a populations ability to bring its own meaning to a building were positives that would prevail.