



HASSELL CHAIRMAN KEN MAHER

With ten studios, and more than 800 employees, HASSELL is at the forefront of architecture, landscape architecture, design, and urban development in Australia and South East Asia. Responsible for numerous landmark structures, HASSELL has garnered more than 450 awards for their innovative approach to architectural design, urbanity, and the environment. Interview by Jack Sargeant.

Ken Maher, chairman of HASSELL, spoke to Jack Sargeant from ANCR about the company's history, philosophy, some of HASSELL's signature Sydney projects, developments within the industry, and their ongoing commitment to quality, innovation and environmental awareness.

JS: HASSELL obviously has a link back to European modernism, and Bauhaus, I was wondering if you still see yourselves in that way.

KM: In a way we do, but our application of the lessons of the Bauhaus is evolving over time, and the way it influences our work has also evolved quite a bit. The roots of the practice are in modernism, and that was a couple of generations ago. Jack McConnell and Colin Hassell formed the practice, and they were greatly influenced by European modernism of the '30s.

Then in the second generation of the practice John Morphett who had worked under Walter Gropius, carried that interest forward, and particularly focused on broadening the basis of the practice through a commitment to collaboration. Bauhaus had as its roots the idea of differing arts coming together to engage in some way, and with that influence he really broadened the base of the practice. Not only collaborating with artists, but also broadening the basis of the practice into

landscape architecture, urban planning, and interior design. So while we started as an architectural practice we now embrace a much wider design basis, and we are still very interested in that idea of creative collaboration, of people working together in the studio and exploring ideas. This is a dynamic thing, we still like to collaborate with artists, but the whole notion of environmental issues is starting to influence the way we're thinking, and changing the way we might collaborate with different disciplines. We believe that the challenges of today are focussed on making more sustainable cities. This means in the future we will collaborate more with environmental scientists or people with highly technical knowledge in the environmental field.

I think those modernist roots are still relevant, but it's not applied modernism as a style, it is a conceptual modernism as opposed to a stylistic modernism. That legacy is still quite strong and essential to our design thinking.

KEN MAHER
Chairman of
HASSELL



Hassell Sydney office



JS: That synergy across areas appears to be the way forward.

KM: It's absolutely the way forward. It seems to me there are three interesting things happening now. One is that we are really becoming a globally much more urbanised society. It happened last year that more people were living in cities than not. The rate at which people are moving from rural areas to cities, cities are growing at the about size of London every month. In China and India in particular and maybe even in the future South America so a quite interesting challenge is how to make good sustainable cities. Related to this is the second phenomenon, which is the rapidly emerging recognition of the impact we are having globally in the way we live on the future sustainability of our planet. Thirdly through technology, the shift in the way we are thinking about the world. The last time this happened in a significant way was probably during the Industrial Revolution. I believe the notion of the digital revolution is real. We are now thinking in new ways, we have access to new modelling tools, including predictive modelling. We can now analyse things in a way that just wasn't possible

a generation ago. In addition to this, in our industry, the shift towards an integrated information management system is going to really change the way we do things.

JS: Not just in the process of how you design and make buildings but also in terms of what you put in buildings, the notion of smart buildings.

KM: Exactly. Digital technology is making possible the notion that a building is really responsive. Thirty years ago Nicholas Negroponte was talking about 'The architecture machine', the idea that architecture is almost a living, responsive thing. Now we are talking about the potential of bio-mimicry in buildings. I don't know how far away we are from it but we're actually getting much closer to it now than we have ever been. We have got the tools and also technology is changing. Materials are changing. And this brings us back to the idea of working with other creative people in other fields. Through this collaboration there's more chance of developing our thinking in these other areas.

JS: How do you think this makes your methodology different in terms of a company when designing a building,

given the notion of collaboration and this awareness of the changes?

KM: I think that if you go through a truly collaborative process of design, and this comes from a more open process, we do tend to start coming from questioning and analysing, and reacting and creating. It's about trying to understand the basis of what we are doing. If you collaborate you are forced to do that a bit more, you've got to communicate, explore and engage in ideas. I think that potentially opens up the way you think about something. The shift often comes through the way people interact, an idea comes from something else, or you look at something from different perspective, because somebody's triggered a thought you wouldn't otherwise have had.

It can be quite hard at another level, we tend to be trained to think individually and work individually, so you have to adapt. But, at HASSELL we are absolutely committed to the view that it actually leads to interesting and unexpected results.

JS: Certainly in terms of the amount of specialisation now, in designing a city, a city block, a building, there's too much now for one person to take on.

KM: Absolutely, I think any large building needs many minds and many hands. It's just not possible, sometimes it is made by the creative drive of individual or individuals, and that's necessary in some ways, it's an enormously complex issue. I think what is most important is not whose idea it was but how it's manifest. If you work towards that it can be exciting.

JS: You designed the Olympic Park Railway, which was a radical design.

KM: For this project we had a wonderful client and a great design team. In the beginning the brief envisaged an underground station, and we felt very strongly that you should feel in touch with the environment in this place of arrival at this great venue, that there should be a connection with the outside. So we explored these ideas with the client and challenged the brief, and the client saw the opportunity and the benefit of our responses. Bob Leece, the Deputy Director general of the OCA was great advocate who had an interest in stations, and he also passionately believed that it should be something special for the site. That is an example to me that really good works don't happen unless there's a really good engagement and enthusiasm from the client.

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JS: There's such a sense of movement and space there. Again in the North Sydney Olympic Pool there's that sense of space.

KM: Well there's this notion of a connection or ambiguity between inside and outside. I suspect it's an Asian notion that has been there for quite a long time. In our climate, and in the traditions of South East Asian architecture there tends to be an architecture of roofs where as, in a cold climate, in European architecture it tends to be an architecture of walls. While this has not necessarily been a conscious position in these works I think it is an influence, and this idea of the ambiguity of space between the inside and outside, and the idea of structure and light interplaying with each other

leads to interesting outcomes that are responsive to our climate and landscape.

The station and the pool are very different forms of expression in a way, but each responding particularly to the site. Again those very simple, almost contextual and function observations, that are consistent with the idea of modernism as a way of thinking rather than modernism as a style - stripping back, trying to understand things, and trying to build-up from that essential understanding that arrives out of a particular set of circumstances. That's what I find very exciting about architecture, you start at a point and you aren't quite sure where you are going to end, it's a journey that you navigate your way through yet guided by values and enriched by collaboration.

JS: How do you view the relationship between architecture and the urban environment, the relationship between an individual building and the urban environment, because quite clearly we are in a city where parts of the urban environment beautiful and parts haven't been thought about that much?

KM: That's a good question, because generally speaking in the architectural thinking many of



the modernist works were somewhat devoid of response to an urban context. In a sense, as a practice, at HASSELL we are interested in the idea of making the experience of urban places a more powerful and interesting one through a contextual response. Stitching together and enriching the place, rather than creating isolated objects. There's a place for icons, for wonderful individual buildings that have nothing to do with the structure of the city, but often to me the most successful design provides some interpretation of the nature of our lives and the experience of place.

The fact that at HASSELL we cross over between the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture influences the way we seek to make a building enrich the city, go beyond the things around it, but not deny the things around it. For example at NIDA, where we sought to dramatise the relationship with Anzac Parade, bring the building out, bring its insides to reveal itself to the passing traffic while respecting the form of the street. It's not just the obvious response, clearly there are issues of scale, and it's also about the spirit of a place, the character that exists and can be made more powerful.

To me architecture above all is experiential. In the eye of the public it's often thought of as aesthetic, often it is reduced to how something looks, but to me this is not the essence. It is the way you experience things - public space, streets in the city, parks, gardens, or interior space - in different ways, but they are all part of a continuum of experience, so fundamentally for us, architecture is about stimulating the senses. It's a human centred activity, hopefully about rewarding the experience of things, and you think about it in those terms, then it is equally about the design of a city or a chair. This is all part of a continuum.

Architecture has all sorts of dimensions to it. The notions of space and light are pretty fundamental. With the Olympic Park Station we were trying to make the parts of it around the platform on the ground floor solid, heavy and grounded, and the canopy light and reflective, so then you shifted from this low space up into this higher space, and you felt the transition. It seems to me this sense of experience you get as you move through it makes it successful.

One of the interesting things for us in practicing now is the value of digital technology. When we explore ideas and engage in a debate about our work, we can demonstrate the ideas we are exploring very quickly using digital models. You can explain it to clients much more readily when you can look at a screen, you can help them imagine all sorts of things. That combined with the fact that you can analysis lighting levels, environmental impact, with all sorts of incredible tools makes the communication so much more effective.

JS: In terms of the environmental impact of architectural impact of architecture how attuned as a company do you think you are to that?

KM: We are learning, and we are very committed to understanding more. As a demonstration of this HASSELL is a founding member of the Green Building Council and I sit on the board of directors.

We are currently collaborating with Bovis Lend Lease on the design of the largest office building in Australia for ANZ at Docklands in Melbourne, aiming to achieve the highest current Green Star rating which has got some really significant initiatives associated with it. We are also working directly with ANZ on the workplace interior design, so we have got this wonderful opportunity to make a fusion between the design of the building and the experience of

the workplace. It will be at the cutting edge of the technology with energy generation, passive design, water management, and employing solar collectors and wind turbines. The building has very large floor areas, with narrow floor plates and linear voids to allow penetration of natural light, and will also be an interesting building in the way it sits in the city as well as in the experience within. It will be incredibly light filled and again hopefully create a sense of ambiguity between internal and external. It's all quite exciting and I think it will be an exemplar, particularly for its scale in Australia. I think it's threading together ideas of how you deal with the city and how you deal with the workplace, as an integrated experience.

We're also working on a project in our Adelaide studio for SA Water, which will have a high degree of environmental innovation. So we've now got the opportunity of these quite large projects that will become demonstration projects, and lead the way, and attract others who are interested. This for us is the way of the future, and we are delighted to have clients with whom we can share this vision.



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