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PEOPLE *are the* FOUNDATION

 By Nick Helm

A life-changing experience left MAS Member John Durkin with a new outlook on the world and what it means to be an architect.



In his late 20s John Durkin had a diving accident. It was bad. He surfaced into a boat propeller and could have died, but for circumstance and a very skilled doctor in the right place at the right time. The ordeal claimed an eye and left him with months of rehabilitation.

As an architect, he was anxious that his partial loss of sight would affect his ability to design, to appreciate light and space, and to properly perceive three dimensions.

Caught in the profession's 1980s' fascination with star-chitects and showy post-

modernism, he had worked on his fair share of commercial developments, some of which he now describes as "glassy bloody lumps of crap", but the accident forced him to look at things differently.

Learning to look

"What I discovered through the quite tricky rehabilitation process was that having vision has little to do with seeing, and while it is a wonderful gift to be able to see the environment we live in and be able to appreciate it in that way, it is the feelings that are engendered by that environment

or place that are truly memorable and uplifting,” says John.

“Well designed places can make people feel fantastic, and we can all remember the places that we have been that have felt uplifting. Sometimes those places are simple, perhaps a walk through a forest, but that forest is no less architectural than, say, the Taj Mahal.”

Architecture, he says, should be a conduit to being – a means for people to access and become close to their chosen environment. The simple Kiwi bach is a good example.

“A bach is not a means in itself – it is a means to the water, to an involvement with the edge of the land and the sea or a lake, and the wonderful things that happen there,” he says. “The building is really only there because of a need to connect with that landscape – and the design should be all about the connection with the context of where it is. It is just a means to an end.”

As a child growing up in northern England during the 1960s and '70s, John was exposed to the stark architectural contrasts of very old and formal Victorian-style municipal buildings and the semi-modernist, mass housing projects of 1950s' Liverpool. Emigrating to New Zealand as a teenager in the '70s came as something of a shock, with the local building style striking him as much lighter and airier for the most part – optimistic almost – by comparison.

“I'd always had an interest in the architecture around me. I used to look at buildings and wonder at the reasons behind them – what is it for, why is it done that way, how does the design serve the purpose of the people using it?” he says. “The context of a place has always fascinated me too – where and how it sits on the land, the circumstances of the architecture from the building's uses and requirements, right through to the environmental aspects and the landscaping,” he says.

John graduated from the University of Auckland with a Bachelor of Architecture and his interest in design matured into a promising career in the early 1980s. After recovering from his accident he launched his own architectural practice, ABRI Architects, a firm he has built up around the insight from that event for more than 25 years.

The right vibe

John also sees his role as an architect as to think outside the square, to try to find ways to achieve functionality that other people may not have considered.

“Architects are essentially just assemblers of components – we put together walls, roofs, floors, windows and doors, which are basically simple, easily produced components that fit together,” he says. “The trick is to put them together in a way that is appropriate to the people and function of the building. A way that somehow makes the sum of all those parts much bigger than it really is. To take a pile of timber, glass and other materials and turn it into something that is enlightening and inspiring, and can be a wonderful place to be.”

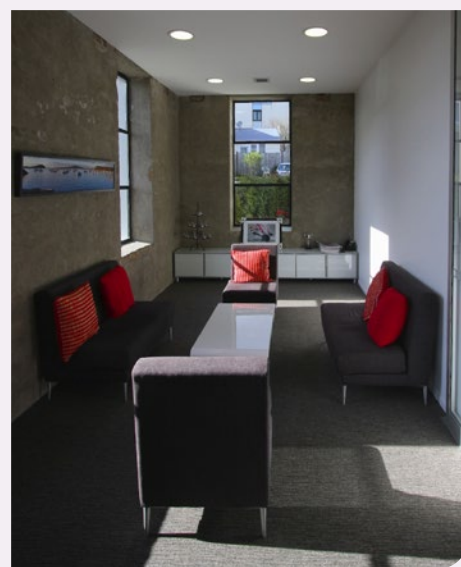
He adds that the point is not necessarily to produce something different, but to think differently in order to do things better. His approach is to get back to the basics of what the client is trying to achieve and how they want it to work.

“Do they want it to be formal or relaxed? Should it be quiet or noisy? Is it enclosed or all encompassing? It's more about designing for those needs than a requirement for rooms that are so many metres long and so many metres wide,” he says.

“There are certain parameters you can't avoid though, such as the size and height of the building, environmental considerations and the physical attributes of the materials. But the architect should arrange and shape the building, and manipulate those parameters, to engender certain feelings that will not only make the function of the place work well, but also increase the enjoyment of that function.”

He recalls a recent project on the Tongariro River near Turangi.

“The building sits up a little bit and snuggles in among the trees. It's such a lovely place to be. You can sit there, look out through the high



windows and see the trees, and you really feel as though you're sitting in the forest and you're so close to the river," he says.

"That's the beauty of it – it's the experiences that you have using that architecture rather than the monument of the architecture itself. People react to architecture with their bodies, senses and feelings. It doesn't have to be a beautiful place, it just has to give you a beautiful feeling."



Art versus design

It might seem obvious to design a building, especially a home, with people foremost in mind, but John says it seems to have fallen out of fashion in modern architecture.

"I see these architectural magazines that say they're all about architecture, but I think they're more about sculpture and showing off

carefully detailed materials. They usually show an empty house photographed beautifully in fading light with the interior illuminated against a wonderful backdrop, to show how clever and wonderfully choreographed the dance of materials is," he says.

"A lot of these minimal glass houses that we see designed by many modernist architects look great and are sculpturally wonderful, and when you stand in them you think, 'Wow this looks pretty amazing,' but could you actually live comfortably there? In many cases the answer is no, and that's the real kicker," he says.

He believes this is due to a disconnect between the real function of an architect and what is commonly portrayed as good design. A friend whose architect designed house has won several design awards for one of his residential buildings recently approached John for advice.

"His house looks fantastic, but day to day it feels cold and sterile to the owners, so he wants me to suggest ways to make it easier to live in," he says. "I really question whether a thing is well designed if it just looks good. If an architect tries so hard to make a house look so good and beautifully contrived that it doesn't actually work as a house for the people it was made for, is it really an award winner?"

He believes the success of architecture should instead be gauged by the client on how well it translates their needs and desires, wants and dreams, into three dimensional spaces.



"I judge the success of a design by how happy people are being a part of a house in their everyday lives. Whether you've actually been able to touch them in a positive way and help them find things out about themselves they perhaps didn't know," he says.

"I did a project up north for a friend recently and he said to me, 'John, I was up there in the evening, you wouldn't believe it – the sun in the evening just glints into this end room in an amazing way. It's just incredible,'" he says. "That's the kind of thing I look for. I get a lot of satisfaction when a client points out how much they enjoy being in the space."



Have a little faith

However, achieving the best results requires the client to be fully open about their needs.

“That’s always the difficulty with architecture, particularly when you’re trying to do the very, very best that you possibly can for the client. There’s very much a level of trust that has to be established,” he says.

“The most enjoyable work I’ve done and the work that I’m most proud of is always where the client has actually learned to trust me. I say learned to trust because some bloke turning up saying, ‘I’m an architect and I’m going to change your life’ can be a bit daunting for some people.”

He says another problem is many clients are unfamiliar with how architects work.

“Most people would only use an architect maybe once in their life, some people might do two or three buildings, but for most people it’s a one-off thing to design a new home or renovation that they expect to live in for the next 20 or 30 years,” he says.

“They often don’t know how building and design works and they’re probably a little bit frightened of how it’s all going to fit together. So there has to be that establishment of trust based on the idea that I’m essentially an advocate for their interests. I’m an advocate for them, for their life, for quality and for how they want to live.”

It’s a concept that some clients find difficult to accept at first.

“I’ve come across situations where I’ve met people and they just can’t tell you what they want. I’ve had clients who show me around their house and explain that they want to alter it to make it better for them to live in. So I ask, ‘What sort of ideas do you have for how you would like to live?’ and they reply, ‘Oh no, we don’t want to tell you any of that, we don’t want to spoil your creativity.’”

But the same skills that lead to good design can help win client trust.

“It is that ability to think differently about places and situations that can open clients’ minds to ideas that they might not have considered, to reveal things that may be obvious once seen, but were hidden in plain sight,” he says.

“It’s a really enjoyable experience and, best of all, through that understanding and process, places are created that make people’s lives better in sometimes small and often, really inspiring ways.”

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