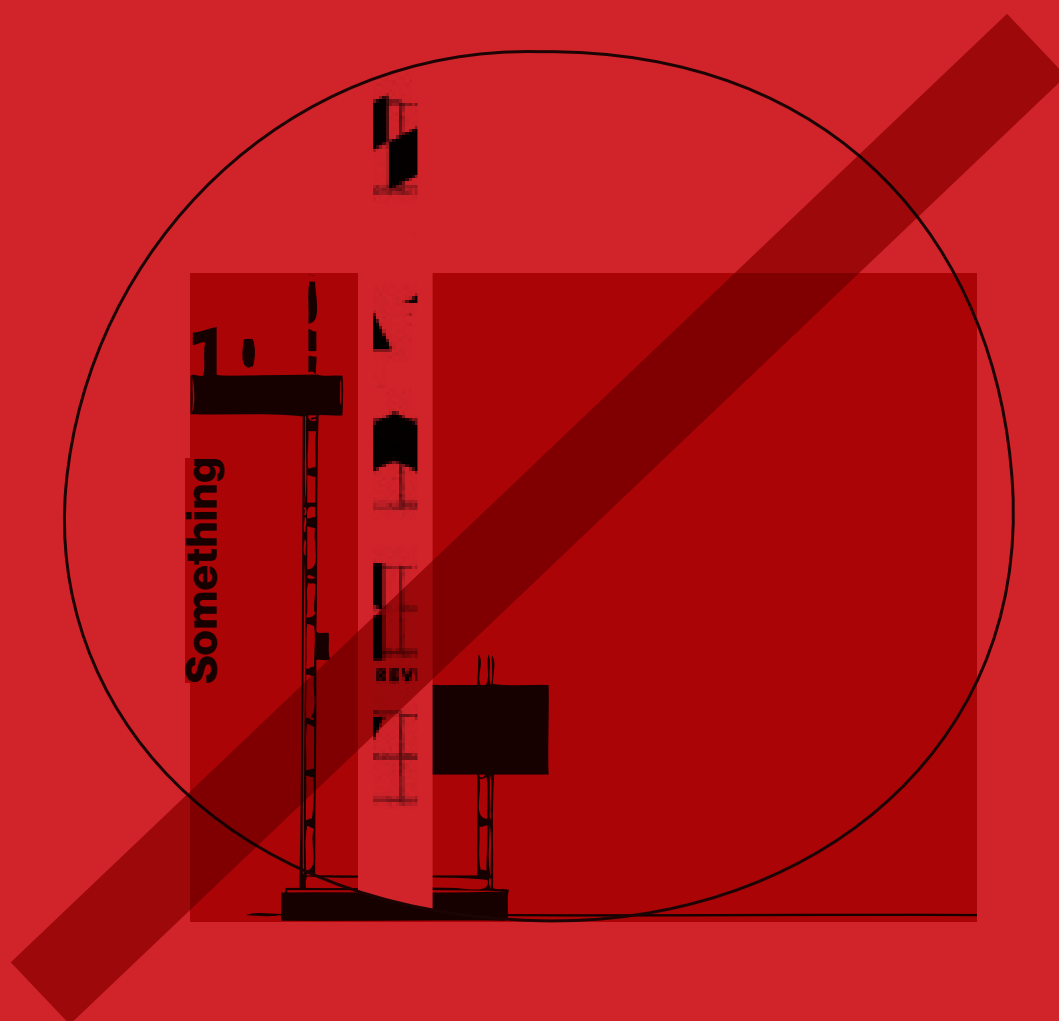


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LAHZNIMMO ARCHITECTS
A TWENTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE





LAHZNIMMO ARCHITECTS
A TWENTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

Part reflection, part celebration and part contemplation of the future, this book charts the progress of lahznimmo architects, from its establishment in 1994 by Andrew Nimmo and Annabel Lahz to the multi-faceted, accomplished studio of today. The book explores the perception of lahznimmo's work from several viewpoints: the architect, the critic, the photographer and the illustrator.

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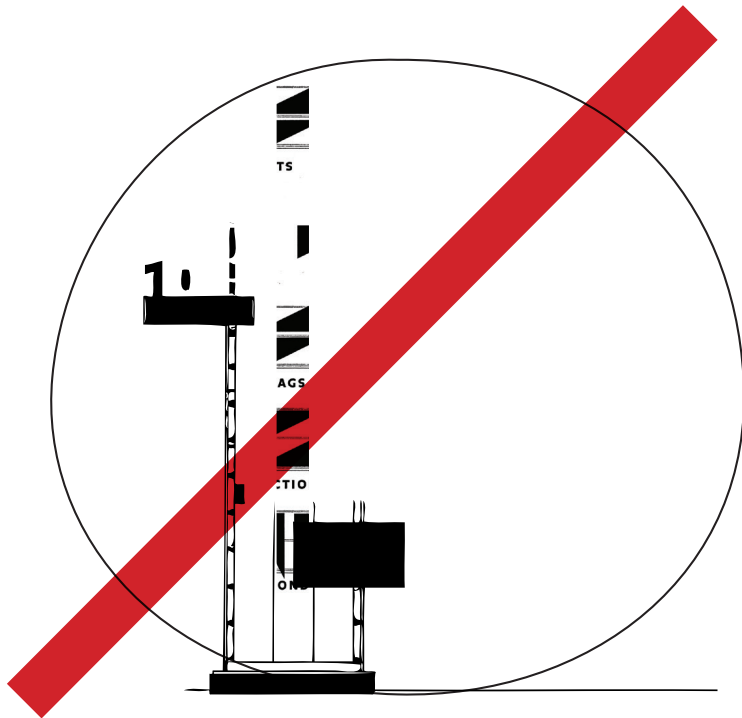
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COLLABORATORS



ESSAY ONE:

Something

Andrew Nimmo

lahznimmo did not start out with grand ambitions. It stumbled into existence with its principals thinking, naively, that this is what young architects did – you started your own practice. Like so many others, we started as a wife-and-husband team, and that defined us for the first ten years of practice.

COLLABORATION - MANY HANDS

Now, after twenty years, the practice has evolved into something of a design collaborative, in which many hands can be seen to be at work and no design can be attributed to a single person.

This has been a deliberate approach. We were never comfortable with the image of the lone architect as genius and hero. We saw architecture as much more complex than one person's single-minded obsession. Even the early decision to merge Lahz and Nimmo into lahznimmo was about de-emphasising the individual. This is very important in understanding how our studio works.

There are now four partners and all have an important influence on the work that we produce, as do all those who work with us. Each of the newer partners, Brad Cogger and Hugo Cottier – and, until recently, Andrew Lamond – have been with the practice for half of its life. In that time each has been influenced by the design culture established before they arrived – and they, in turn, have pushed the practice towards a confident maturity that is reflected in the broad range of project types and scales that we now work with.

By necessity, architecture is a collaborative art. Many people are involved in the creative process and making of architecture and its many competing (and contradictory) requirements. While the architect sets and leads the creative direction, others also contribute to the craft of the outcome. The process is long and at times painfully slow. Architecture usually involves spending large sums of someone else's money; and although seen as one of the 'arts', it is not created for its own sake – it must work if it is to be a success.



SOMETHING

We see the architect's role as more like a facilitator, though not an impassive one. Architecture should never be design by committee. It requires a clear initial 'something' to drive its direction.

All architecture projects need to have a basis in 'something'. This 'something' can be anything that draws together a coherent narrative rooted in the project. It does not need to be particularly literal or readily understood by others at a glance, but should have a sense of rigour to guide decision-making. For us, this means each project grows from two specific dialogues: client and site.

The dialogue with the client involves understanding brief, culture and program. It is achieved primarily through listening and observation, but also through research into precedents and by challenging client assumptions. The dialogue with the site requires analysis of both the physical attributes and the social and cultural memory of the site, as no site is truly a 'greenfields'. It involves research and observation, but that initial spontaneous response can be surprisingly insightful.

The narrative of the project is key. It is process and outcome. It should grow from a rigorous interrogation of the project in the early stages and be subject to ongoing evaluation. It should become the framework against which all thoughts and ideas are tested and should inform decisions about form, space, materials and detailing.

The narrative will evolve and have subplots, and there is always room for the intuitive and speculative. Being rigorous does not mean limiting the outcome in a reductive way. The beautiful complexity of architecture is that there are always competing requirements, and the greatest skill of the architect is to respond to this complexity (not necessarily resolve it) without losing that clear initial 'something'.

EARLY HISTORY

The early work of lahznimmo has strong roots in our upbringing in Queensland and our education at the University of Queensland in the 1980s. Under the leadership of people like Michael Keniger, Brit Andresen, Peter O'Gorman, Max Horner and Donald Watson, we were given a sound grounding in the sensory aspect of architecture. Through the writings of theorists such as Christian Norberg-Schulz and his seminal work *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980), we were encouraged to look beyond the limiting 'form follows function' mantra or the seductive obsession with the image.

Annabel also spent a formative year at the Architecture Association in London in the studio of Peter Wilson. Wilson's exploration of how the figurative can imbue a building with its own sense of life and character showed that wit, humour and playfulness do have a place in the serious business of architecture.

The Queensland 'timber and tin' vernacular we grew up with validated the idea that architecture could be experienced through all of the senses. More importantly, a generation of Queensland architects, from Robin Dods to Gabriel Poole, had revealed that the vernacular could be re-imagined as modern architecture.

Lawrence Nield wrote in an introduction to our work in 2001, "lahznimmo's architecture is not concerned with the arrogance of the eye but the warmth, restraint and modesty of buildings that depends on all the senses. It is an architecture that works against the sensory impoverishment of the modern world and Australian architecture. Let us hope as lahznimmo get larger commissions (and surely they will) they will not give away their warmth and tactility, they will not join the mainstream of images and assertiveness of the architecture of the eye." Larger commissions have come in our later history.

LATER HISTORY

As the practice has grown, its work has grown in scale and complexity. The projects are now predominantly public and institutional and include public spaces that sometimes have little or no architecture. This reflects our interest in the public over the private, and the humanising potential of architecture as part of a civilised community. There is an added responsibility when designing public buildings and spaces as we are often designing for users that have no voice, users who we will never meet.

In the second ten years of practice I believe that our response to site has become stronger and more committed – and more mature. Each building is a product of its site, such that it cannot be imagined anywhere else. By extension, we create something that feels as though it was always there, or cannot be imagined not being there.

In a lecture delivered at the RE:HAB student conference in Canberra in 2009, I used the analogy of 'grafting' to explain our approach to site. In a literal sense, a graft means to join one thing to another to bring about a close union. In science, we graft to gain the advantages of two separate organisms so that the grafted whole has enhanced qualities that the separate parts do not possess.

There is an obvious correlation here to Steven Holl's 1989 essay 'Anchoring', in which he writes "... construction is intertwined with the experience of a place. The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is the physical and metaphysical foundation." Holl's essay could almost serve as a manifesto for lahznimmo (should we ever feel the need to have one). However, I prefer the word 'grafting' to 'anchoring' as it goes further and suggests a condition of mutual benefit – that a site might be enhanced by our intervention.

While we strive to make each of our projects particular to a site and program, a number of recurring themes have emerged during our twenty years of practice.



RECURRING THEMES

Tempered space

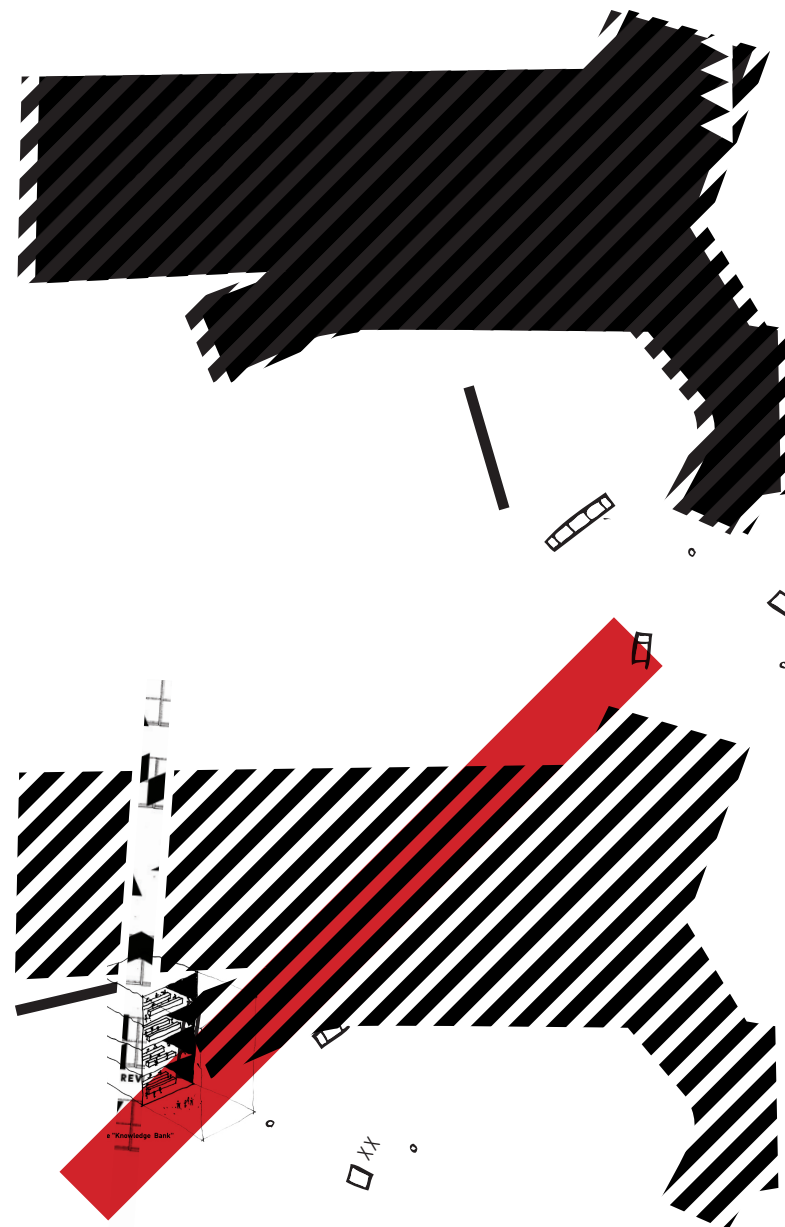
Provided you are protected from summer sun and rain, the benign east-coast climate of Australia allows you to be relatively comfortable in a semi-outdoors environment. Supplemented by a jumper in winter and a cool drink in summer, you can inhabit these spaces for most of the year. We have explored these spaces – not entirely outside, not entirely inside – consistently in our work. Less formal, loosely programmed and often at the building threshold or entry, they are also the social spaces. It is in these gently tempered transition spaces that the sensory aspect of architecture really comes alive.

The Neighbourhood Room in the Helensvale Library (2013) is the largest tempered space we have created. This naturally ventilated and lit indoor plaza is the focus of the building and a cool, shaded reprieve from the relentless Queensland sun and sudden summer downpours. Without a fixed program, it is a much-needed public gathering space; acting as an entry and address for each of the building functions that surround it.

The figurative

This is not to be taken literally – the figurative in architecture is intended as a point of departure. It allows us to explore abstract forms and motifs outside the traditional language of architecture. It also introduces something abstracted from the everyday. Architecture is a balance between the pragmatic and the conceptual – in one sense it provides a backdrop to the everyday activities of living, on another level architecture should provide us with uplifting moments for singular experiences.

The crane-like silhouette of the Armory Wharf Cafe (2008) has an unambiguous formal reference, but it also happens to solve the utilitarian necessities of kitchen extraction, gas flue and toilet exhaust.



LOWY



ARMORY

Materials and assemblage

The nature of materials and assemblage has always been an important part of the expression of our work. It allows us to explore surfaces, solidity, translucence, texture, colour and weathering, and their relationship to structure, joints and fixings. Understanding the nature of materials leads to an understanding of their origins and appropriate methods of fabrication and the craft of building. We often think about a design from both ends of the scale – simultaneously preparing large-scale plans and small-scale details. The details can help to explain much about the design intent of the whole as they capture subtleties often missing from the macro.

In the St James Station Environs project (1999), the canopy defers to the original sandstone structure. The contrasting of lightness and delicacy against solidity and permanence is explored through the expression of materials – steel, zinc and timber battens.

Observation

As a practice we have always been interested in how people use and respond to the built environment, and how the built environment can influence how people interact. Buildings and the spaces in and around them are dynamic three-dimensional environments. We can admire the physical beauty and craftsmanship of architecture, but it is not until it is inhabited by people that it becomes meaningful.

We learn so much about how architecture works through observation and analysis of how people interact with architecture, and this includes both the designed and the accidental. It is this kind of empirical research, which looks beyond the accepted wisdom, that can lead to genuine innovation in design.

Public amenities are a well-understood and reviled typology – necessary but unloved. In preparing our competition proposal for the Centennial Park Amenities (2006) we wanted to avoid the baggage attached to this type and innovate through observation and first principles analysis. The simple decision to externalise the washbasins as part of a communal sheltered space freed us to imagine a social place and refocus the type to civic functionality.

Mutual benefit

Architecture is a very public form of art. Everyone shares in architecture. Even the private house will address a public street. There is an implied social contract for all architecture that it benefits not just the instigator and users of the building, but future users and anyone who comes into contact with it. Contact can include using, visiting, occupying a neighbouring space or simply passing by as part of a daily routine. The impact of architecture does not end at the site boundary. Tamarama Kiosk (2013) has a functional role (public showers and amenities) and a commercial role (cafe) – but its impact as an activator and theatrical backdrop to the daily spectacle of Tamarama Beach and Gaerloch Reserve is the primary contribution.

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Twenty years. We are proud to have reached this milestone. After two decades of practice you evolve a culture that defines you and marks your difference. I would like to think that ours is a culture that both transcends the individual yet remains open to individual influence.

I expect that our third decade will continue the process of generational change and renewal. This is important to ensure that our ideas are continually challenged and remain relevant. We do not aim to grow the practice into a corporate entity. Our strength lies in the very individual and personal approach for which our studio is known.

ANDREW NIMMO,
ON BEHALF OF AND WITH INPUT
FROM LAHZNIMMO ARCHITECTS



HELENSVALE

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