**Architecture's everyman**

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*Glenn Murcutt has just been awarded the 'Nobel prize of architecture'. Linda Vergnani meets the uncompromising loner 'whom every architect would like to be'.*

Driving an ancient Citroën through a forest of gums, Glenn Murcutt makes his way to the house of a client in Australia's Blue Mountains, two hours from Sydney.

The gleaming silver Simpson-Lee house, named after its owners, is built on stilts between great pillows of sandstone covered in moss, and is separated from its studio by a long dark pond. Designed for an economics professor and his potter wife, the angular corrugated iron house has multiple layers of retractable metal shutters, fly screen and sliding glass doors that can be opened until the dwelling becomes like a giant veranda. Then all that separates it from the forest is a single metal railing on which birds come to perch in the summertime.

Murcutt likens the screening layers to clothing protecting bare skin. He explains: "The houses breathe, and as occupants you must work them like you would work a yacht, sail them like you sail a yacht." He tries to weave each house into the climate and ecology.

notes that the pond is actually a fire-protection device. Fed by rainwater collected from the roof, a "dam" is linked to a pump that can supply roof-top sprinklers during the infernos that sweep through the bush.

Dubbed the "tin-shed" architect, Murcutt has become internationally recognised for thoughtful, finely crafted, eco-friendly buildings such as the Simpson-Lee house.

This week came the culmination of that recognition - he was awarded the $100,000 (£69,000) Pritzker prize, the Nobel prize of the architecture world. Previous winners include Frank Gehry, Ieoh Ming Pei and Oscar Niemeyer. J. Carter Brown, chairman of the Pritzker jury and director emeritus of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, says Murcutt "occupies a unique place in today's architectural firmament". "In an age obsessed with celebrity, the glitz of our 'starchitects', backed by large staffs and copious public-relations support, dominate the headlines." In contrast, Murcutt "works in a one-person office on the other side of the world from much of the architectural attention".

Thomas J. Pritzker, president of the Hyatt Foundation, which gives the award, also emphasises the contrast between Murcutt and other big-name architects. "His works are not large scale, the materials he works with, such as corrugated iron, are quite ordinary, certainly not luxurious; and he works alone." He says Murcutt's influences vary from the Nordic tradition of Alvar Aalto to the Australian wool shed. Moreover, says Pritzker, "all his designs are tempered by the land and climate of his native Australia."

Murcutt, the subject of several books, loves teaching. He has served as a visiting professor at numerous universities, including Yale and the School of Architecture in Aarhus, Denmark. Currently visiting professor at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, he flies to the US once a month to lecture for a week and then returns to Sydney for intensely concentrated work in his studio.

He describes his recent graduate classes in America as "electric". "To teach is to educate oneself, to clarify one's own thinking, to bring out the best in students and other people. It's a great free education."

Now 66, Murcutt was astonished to hear he had won the award. "It's a great honour to be part of a group of architects whom I have admired like Sverre Fehn and Renzo Piano - to be considered in their calibre is amazing." But he rues the loss of work time spent dealing with press queries. "I have to learn to say no," he says.

However, the week before the award was given, Murcutt did find time to travel to the Blue Mountains to inspect new extensions to two of his 1978 houses and to see a client. At one shed-like house, he knelt to examine a problem the builder was having getting a proper fit between the old house floor and the new wooden veranda, gently pointing out a mouse-size hole that the builder had omitted to fill when fitting the new aluminium door.

Why doesn't he employ an assistant? "I love being by myself, it gives me time to think."

He focuses almost exclusively on homes, designing only for Australia, where he has a four-year waiting list of clients. "Because I decided to stay small, I can do ten to 15 houses for every one big building. It gives me the opportunity to experiment ten to 15 times more than if I went bigger."

He claims he has no need to feed his ego. "I just want to work quietly, out of the mainstream, out of the publicity, just let me get my work done."

Sheila Simpson-Lee says she and her late husband found working with Murcutt a very good experience. She notes: "It is this sense of being in a particular place that strikes you with Glenn's houses. He has a very deep understanding and great love of the Australian landscape. My husband used to say: 'This house pleases the eye, it satisfies the intellect and nourishes the spirit.' When you enter the house you feel the world dropping away and you are in a new and rather contemplative world, which is rather beautiful."

In contrast, Murcutt and his architect wife, Wendy Lewin, are renting a mundane suburban house in Sydney. It is an interim arrangement while they renovate their own home. In a room hung with vibrant Aboriginal paintings, Murcutt describes some of the influences on his architecture, including the landscape, plants, Aboriginal traditions - learnt from an Aboriginal client - and ancient rock art shelters.

The roots of his singular architecture can be traced back to the powerful impact of his father, Arthur. An itinerant bootmaker, carpenter, sheepshearer, boat builder and jack-of-all-trades, he was a phenomenal traveller with a passion for architecture, ecology and philosophy. Murcutt says of his father: "He was just non-stop. He was always reading, reading, reading - Freud, Jung, Thoreau."

Murcutt was born in London in 1936 and spent his early years in Papua New Guinea, where his father owned a gold mine. He remembers living near cannibals in a "very isolated and dangerous region". Raised by four servants, Murcutt could speak only pidgin English, "a language so descriptive it has a visual connection". He rattles out the word for helicopter, which translates roughly into an "electric eggbeater belonging to God".

When the Japanese invaded New Guinea in the second world war, the Murcutt family fled. Five-year-old Glenn arrived in Australia unable to speak proper English. He grew up on the wooded shores of Sydney Harbour in Clontarf, where his father started a building company. Murcutt senior helped reforest the area and taught Glenn how soil, water tables, altitude and winds affected the vegetation.

Murcutt was struck by the extraordinary eucalyptus trees and the connectedness between their surface and structure. "In Australia, a lot of the leaves turn their edges to the sun. The leaves hang down from their stems and track the sun across the sky. This lets a lot more sunlight get through to the trunks and down to the ground."

His father showed him how buildings changed the water table, killing off vegetation. So Murcutt positions his buildings on the most degraded part of the site, keeping the best areas to enjoy. His houses are usually raised on pillars about a metre from the ground, for minimum impact. "If you build on the ground outside the urban fabric, you are going to have spiders, lizards and snakes coming into the house. Take it off the ground and you provide a platform for yourself, and these things go under the house. There's a place for wildlife to survive as well as ourselves."

Murcutt fared poorly at school, failing twice. He says: "I hated education. I was so bored." At home his father would hand him copies of *Architectural Forum* with articles on famous architects and then drill him on the contents. He recalls: "I had to read about Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth house three times before I got all the answers right." As a teenager, Murcutt worked in his father's joinery shop making windows, doors and staircases, and helped build boats and houses. "Going into architecture was almost an inevitable direction," he admits.

He worked for two architectural practices while completing a degree at the University of New South Wales. After travelling and serving in a top Sydney practice, he decided to go it alone in 1969 because he considered he was becoming "disruptive".

Haig Beck, a professor of architecture at Melbourne University who has co-authored a book on Murcutt's work, describes him as the "constant outsider. He's always had a different view of the world than the conventional one."

"Every architect in their heart of hearts would like to be Glenn Murcutt at some point in their lives," Beck says. "They want to work alone, with absolute commitment to the project without ever having to compromise - which is how they perceive Glenn. I think, in that respect, he is the everyman for every architect."

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