

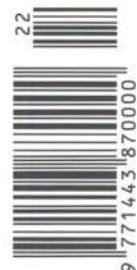
**Vol.22**

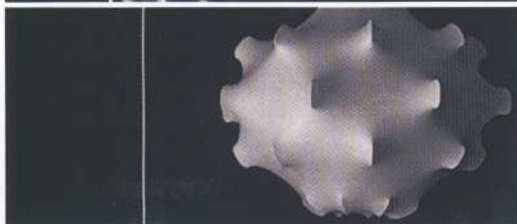
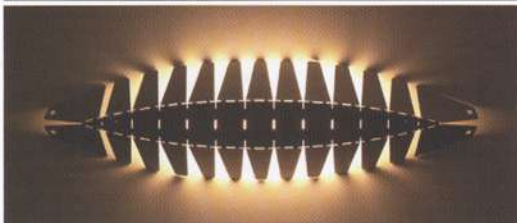
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Ian McKay's masterpiece  
Geyer's MBF makeover  
Cohnsidering Susan Cohn  
Prefab in arcadia  
Made in Sweden  
Hullo David Chipperfield  
Firefighting at  
Homebush Bay

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Susan Cohn has not only re-defined the art of jewellery-making, she has helped set a new level of sophistication for Australian design. In fact, she now operates in a category all her own.

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**EXPAT****Australian designers overseas**

Riccardo Tossani is an Adelaide boy who made a reputation for himself at home for sustainable architecture before deciding to broaden his horizons. He is now based in Tokyo (via Italy and the U.S.), but Paul McGillick caught up with him on a recent visit to Australia where he is designing two houses.

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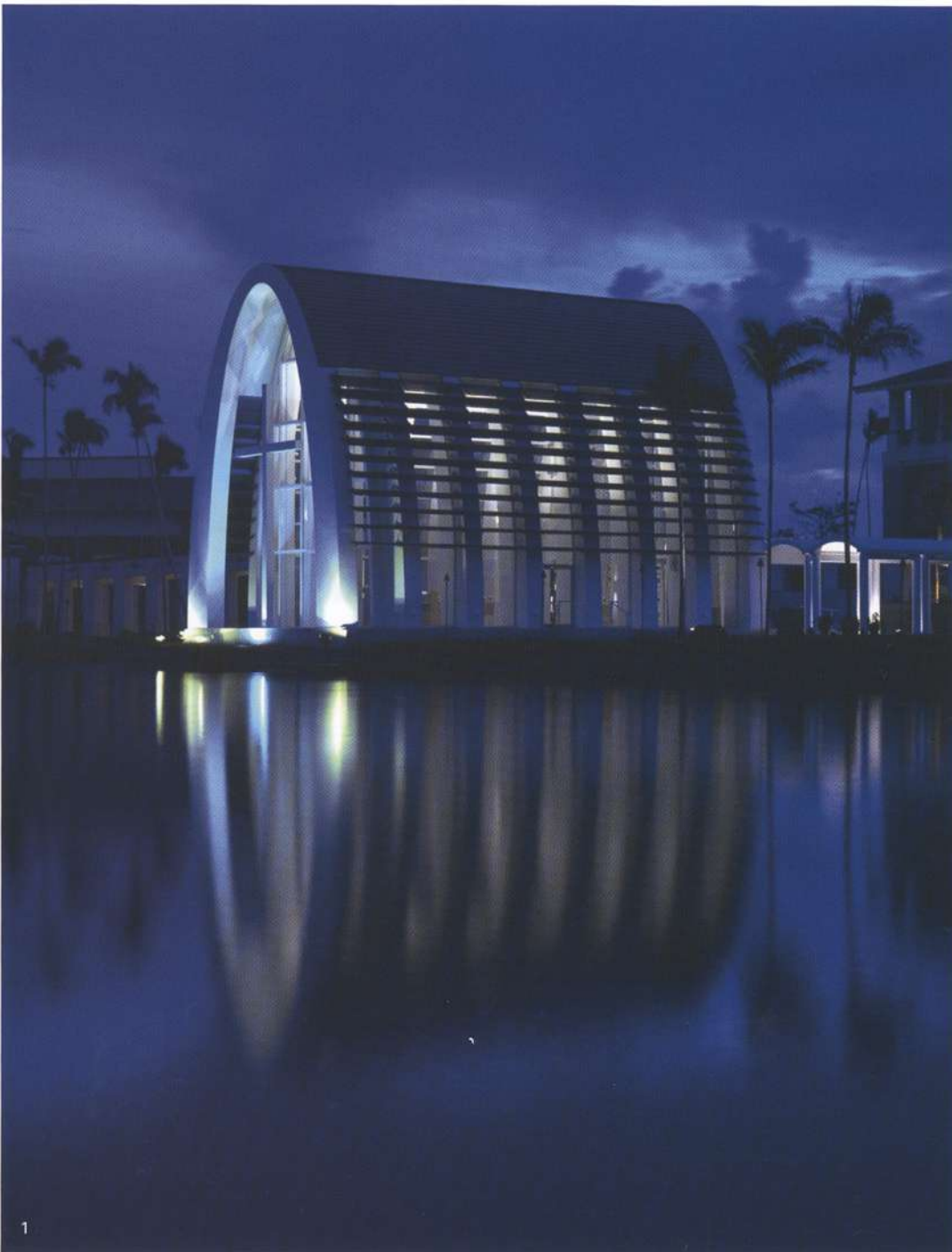
**EXPO****Salone Internazionale del Mobile, Milan 2005**

David Granger visits the iconographic Fiera in Milan for the last time before it moves to its new location and reports on trends and expectations.

# EXPAT

## It's Not Just Science and Technology

Riccardo Tossani is an Adelaide boy. His family is still there and he is currently designing a house in the adjacent hills. But for a long time his career has been pursued elsewhere – in the U.S. and, for the last eight years, in Tokyo where he and his wife and design partner, Atsuko Itoda, run a practice of ten people. Here he speaks about his journey as an architect and about practising in Japan.



Architecture became a possibility when I began to look into what it meant to be an architect. The role of the architect was described to me as "one who designs our environment." I was intrigued by that. After acceptance to the University of Adelaide's architecture programme, I developed a fascination with the issues that surround architecture – the human and social issues. Around fourth year I became interested in environmental design – architecture that engages the physical environment in a responsible way. In the late 1970s that was the talk of the town in the U.S., but institutions in Adelaide had yet to address this direction.

In Melbourne however, people like Alistair Knox were doing very creative things in terms of earth building – and so was his protégé, Robert Marshall, who was advancing the design of contemporary, mud-brick architecture. He was also the Eltham Shire President and very involved in the community.

Marshall came to Adelaide to give a talk at the University and I was able to arrange 18 months of work experience in his office, during which time I realised that architecture is about understanding people, history, culture and environment. It's not just science and technology.

I began my own practise before I'd finished University. I had been interviewed by someone who knew of my interest in traditional building techniques and thermal performance design. They wrote an article in The Sunday Mail where I mentioned I was giving a lecture. That lecture turned into a lecture series at a TAFE college venue with a seating capacity of 400. For the next two years, every month or so, I would give a lecture to a full audience on earth building techniques, thermal performance design and the architecture of mud brick and pisé building (compressed or rammed earth walls) examining historical precedents, but looking primarily at how contemporary architecture can create beautiful and meaningful buildings in a variety of environments.

Based on the interest my lectures had generated, I was able to build a practice with clients desiring contemporary residences that used responsible construction technology, efficient in terms of thermal performance, and properly engaged with the natural environment. They were looking for an approach to building that was very different to the red brick bungalows that are so typical in Adelaide. Mud bricks were just a component of this broader view towards creating an energy efficient and environmentally friendly home. Traditional building technologies were appropriate because these materials require



- 1 Guam Chapel.  
Photography: Koji Okumura, Koji Okumura Photography Office, Tokyo
- 2 Guam Chapel.  
Photography: Koji Okumura, Koji Okumura Photography Office, Tokyo
- 3 Belvedere Hotel, Guam.  
Photography: Koji Okumura, Koji Okumura Photography Office, Tokyo
- 4 Riccardo Tossani and Atsuko Itoda.  
Photography: Nikki Keller, avgst

very little non-renewable energy to create, for example sun-dried bricks and large jarrah columns and beams re-cycled from old woolsheds.

I had a number of commissions for wonderful houses for enlightened clients in the Adelaide Hills as well as the city. On the basis of that I formed a partnership with another architect, also as a way to satisfy the requirements of the registration board, and to gain exposure to conventional building practise. Together we were able to cultivate our firm into one that looked at appropriate technologies for a variety of building programmes, not just houses.

After several years I became anxious to further expand my horizons and decided to travel. During my travels in Asia I became fascinated by urban design and recognised that what I really needed to do was get involved in architecture at a larger scale - a scale that involves city-making. So, I decided to leave my practise in Adelaide and worked with a firm of architects in Florence called Arcoprogetti. They are a collaborative of professors at the University of Florence who were doing very interesting urban design projects. I was fluent in Italian and my family's from Tuscany. So, it wasn't a very difficult thing for me to practise there.

This extraordinary office did everything from renovations of old Tuscan farmhouses to master plans for a new university campus and central business district for Florence. In between they were doing urban studies of a proposed new motorway through the city, and detailed studies of the areas impacted - and, of course, engaging all the issues of history, culture and society as a process, vital in a place as architecturally sensitive as Florence.

I taught American architecture students studying in Florence. There was a programme there for Penn State University and I became one of the tutors. I also translated various books and papers on architecture written by academics at the University, worked full-time at Arcoprogetti and had just a wonderful time.

But I realised that I needed to get more involved in the academic side of urban design. At that time, in 1985, there were only a handful of universities around the world offering urban design programmes. One of them was Harvard University. I applied and got in. And it was the most extraordinary two years of my life. It was an intensive programme at the GSD (Graduate School of Design) in a building designed by Australian architect John Andrews. Professor Peter Rowe, originally from Melbourne, was my adviser and soon after became Dean of the School.

Renowned architects and academics would converge on Harvard to teach and present their work. It was a place where the stars came to you instead of you having to visit them, which is what I'd previously been doing.

The urban design programme consisted of ten American and ten international graduates. The average age was thirty and all were expected to have had some professional experience. All had a professional degree in architecture, bringing to the programme collectively an international perspective on the issues of urban design...and place making.

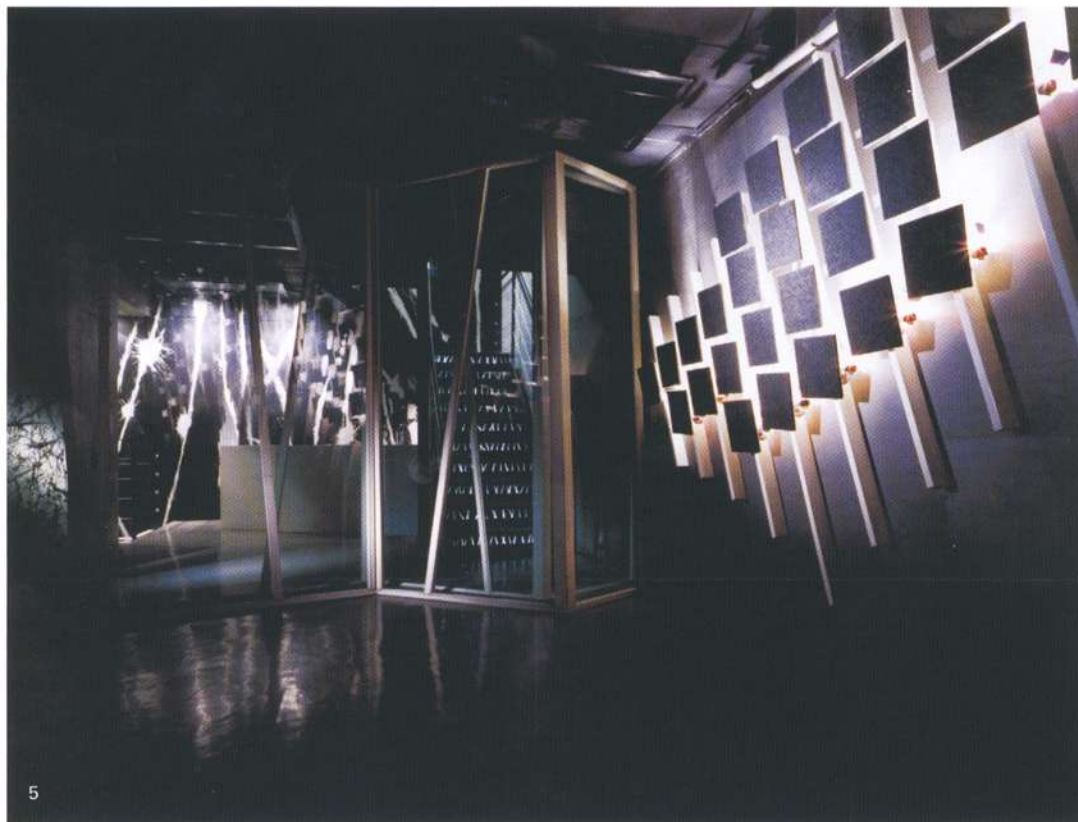
When I graduated in 1988, one of the most exciting places (in America, at least) for the production of new ideas and creative solutions to culture and architecture was Los Angeles - the so called "Santa Monica School" led by Frank Gehry and Morphosis.

And one of the most dynamic offices at that time was Johnson Fain Pereira, the old William Pereira office, where two young partners - Scott Johnson and Bill Fain, both Harvard graduates in architecture and urban design - were doing very exciting things.

I stayed with them for nine years and progressed from just a young designer to an associate in the firm. I worked on a variety of projects from the research campus for the Superconducting Super Collider in Texas to new campus and city plans for Sacramento and Bangkok. The office was unique because one was able to practise both architecture and urban design. It was still small enough not to be too functionally specific - a common problem with a lot of American corporate firms: once you get put in a particular box you remain there. I've never been interested in that.

Over the years with JFP I worked on a variety of projects and I founded their office in Guam (we worked on a large resort project there.) I was able to get more projects for the firm and soon we were doing everything from private residences and master planned communities to the conversion a naval air station to civilian use as Guam International Airport. All these projects involved extraordinary collaboration between the community and government, they required an understanding of history and in particular the consequences of the Second World War; how land was taken away, given back and taken away again.

At the end of the day, that's what architecture's all about. It's about the impact the cultural and physical environment has on people and how they reflect that impact, through built form, back into the environment.



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I had met my future wife in Los Angeles – Atsuko Itoda, a Japanese-trained interior designer working at LFP and SOM. I'd always been interested in contemporary Japanese architecture – the post-Metabolist, Kenzo Tange period. And I'd visited Japan several times – enough to realise that you can't really pretend to know anything about that country unless you live there. You can see the architecture, but you won't necessarily understand it. It is not a culture that's easily fathomed.

Atsuko and I decided to take leave from our firms and spend six months in Tokyo. When we first arrived we were lucky enough to get a commission, a simple residential multi-family building which was supposed to be somewhat typological – a building conceived to be replicated in different locations. Atsuko and I came up with a concept that did that in an innovative and responsive way and it ended up winning a national design award. That led to more commissions and before we knew it we were very busy running our own practice.

Our practice spans from industrial design to urban design. At one end, we have done conceptual design work which has been picked up by furniture manufacturers and have furniture in the *Idée* catalogue – a very popular contemporary furniture brand in Japan. At the other end, resort master planning and urban design projects, with in-between everything from private residences to a 29-storey residential building, chapels, and hotels. All our projects incorporate the kind of design input I feel is necessary for maintaining design integrity – an awareness of all the issues which surround a design problem. It is not just about form-making, it's not just about a trendy interior. It's really about understanding what the motivations and aspirations are of the users and the clients, how the building fits within its urban, historical and cultural contexts, especially in a complex society like Japan, which is becoming increasingly international. We're hired to introduce an international sensibility to the problem. So, there are issues of fusion between Western and Japanese ideas that are incorporated into much of our work.

A talented designer in her own right, Atsuko's input is key to this process.

The residences, hotels, clubs and cafes we've designed all address issues in some way or another. We work on projects at every level, from interior design to architecture and landscape architecture. That way we are able to talk about issues in an integrated way and apply the discussion evenly across the design.

One of the things I realised in Tokyo was that not all opportunities for building and design are exploited by architects. In fact, it is so sad – especially in Japan – to see those opportunities squandered by designers who are far more interested in putting up a building quickly and efficiently, and one that doesn't break any rules, than they are in thinking about culture, environment, history and the future. That's led to an extremely mundane and mediocre urban context. Quite frankly, Japanese cities are a disaster. They have the most efficient infrastructure in the world – trains that run to the second, crowd and traffic control which is very good. But what they don't have is an integrated sense of self in post-War Japan. They're not sure who they are at an architectural, physical or cultural level. At a micro-cultural level, they still have a very strong sense of culture – traditional crafts, the way food is served, ceramics, the display of items, ikebana.

But, when it comes to architecture, something has happened. The traditional architecture and urbanism of the country has been totally under-appreciated. It has been slowly eroded and replaced by the most disgracefully under-thought, meaningless construct that you can imagine. I've not seen anything like it anywhere. Even the Soviet architecture in China that I saw in three months of travel there was better, more meaningful. At least you could see the imperative of the Soviet revolutionary ideals. You could read something in that architecture.

In Japan, it is just so mundane, boring and often horrible. For complex reasons, the post-War Japanese population has yet to develop a strong



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sense of who they are as a culture. They are not able to lobby for change easily because of the restrictions placed upon them by a social structure in which it's an unseemly act to challenge authority.

There's also a very sophisticated linkage between politics, the construction industry and the yakuza or mafia, who are enormously influential. And there is an implicit understanding on the part of the media and the academic world not to question that triumvirate of Japanese power. Which means that the individual is quite powerless.

Consequently, what we have in Japan is a society ill equipped to think critically. People are unable to articulate their displeasure with what they see. Perhaps there is no displeasure because they're not critical thinkers in the first place. They are seemingly happy to live in 40-50m<sup>2</sup> apartments with their spouse and a kid. And they appear content for these boxes to be in buildings that are completely image-free and have no character. At the end of the day they perhaps rationalise all these things according to the historical values of Japanese society, where humility is stressed and where being a faithful subject is an honourable role.

Japan is a country full of paradoxes. But the more I learn about its top architects, the less paradoxical they become. Almost without exception they are critical thinkers and have studied internationally – Suzuki, Taniguchi and Maki at Harvard, Shigeru Ban at Sci-Arc and Cooper Union. Most of them have either spent significant time abroad or they didn't study architecture at all – Tadao Ando was a boxer who did the Corbu pilgrimage, came back and used his will-power – which is another universal requirement of architects, whether you're in Japan or not, but especially in Japan – to force change upon a conservative social environment.

These guys have been a shining hope for architects in Japan, but their work is being replicated rather than understood and extended. It's as though the new heritage of self-examination and critical reflection in the work of these few people and



- 5 Morph, Tokyo. Koji Okumura, Koji Okumura Photography Office, Tokyo
- 6 Morph, Tokyo. Koji Okumura, Koji Okumura Photography Office, Tokyo
- 7 Bridal Salon, Tokyo
- 8 Waitze Residence. Rendering by Riccardo Tossani
- 9 Yotsuya Tower, Tokyo - Hallway Concept. Rendering by Riccardo Tossani

the generation before – Kenzo Tange and the Metabolists of the late 1960s - is being squandered because the new crop of indigenous Japanese architects is not performing the same kind of social function. And largely it's because of the inertia that's placed on the individual in Japan.

It is fascinating to work in this country of 130 million. The quantity of interesting production is not that great, but much of it is concentrated in this city – in fact, in just a few neighbourhoods. It's also very frustrating to practise here, but very rewarding when you do make a difference.

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