

Derham Groves

The art of the brick

Reviewed

Abstract

To celebrate Australia's strong tradition of brick architecture, as well as the largely unsung art of bricklaying, Australian architect and curator, Derham Groves, organized two complementary public exhibitions of full-scale brick structures designed by various architects and artists. The results were an intriguing mixture of art and the everyday, as Groves describes in the following article.

Keywords: Bricks, architecture, bricklaying

Abstrak

Derham Groves, die Australiese argitek en kurator het twee openbare uitstalings oor volkskaalse steen strukture wat deur verskeie argitekte en kunstenaars ontwerp is, georganiseer om die sterk Australiese tradisie van steen argitektuur asook die kuns van messelwerk te vier. Die resultaat was 'n intrigiese mengsel van kuns en die alledaagse soos wat deur Groves in die volgende artikel beskryf word.

Stelutewoorde: Stene, argitektuur, messelwerk

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1. The Ubiquitous Brick

Bricks are part of everyday life. They are the fabric of countless buildings – everything from cathedrals to privies. They also hold open doors, support drawing boards and prevent cars from rolling down hill. Before the advent of the half-flush toilet, two bricks placed inside the cistern worked very nicely. Children contentedly play for hours with toy bricks, constructing imaginary worlds on the living-room floor. Significantly, one of the first lessons we learn as children is that a brick house is far superior to one built of either straw or wood. In the popular nursery tale, “The Three Little Pigs”, bricks not only represent durability and strength, but also security and wisdom. Therefore, it is not surprising that most people in Australia live in a brick house. We all want to be like the third little pig. Bricks are also the source of some very colourful expressions: a dependable person is sometimes described as ‘a brick’, while a fool is said to be as ‘thick as a brick’, and who wants to ‘hit a brick wall’, or worse still, ‘shit a brick’, either literally or metaphorically?

In Australia, Melbourne boasts so many splendid brick buildings that it might justly claim to be the brick capital of Australia. However, locals largely overlook this unique aspect of Melbourne’s architecture due mainly to the fact that the humble clay brick is simply taken for granted. A good example is the impressive domestic brick chimneys found around Melbourne that demonstrate the variety and versatility achievable with brick construction.

On one hand, chimneys are part of our cultural ‘DNA’. For example, Santa Claus climbs down the chimney to leave Christmas presents. A person who smokes too much is said to ‘smoke like a chimney’. A child’s drawing of a house invariably has a chimney with smoke pouring out of it. In “The Three Little Pigs”, the wolf falls down the chimney and into a pot of boiling water. American poet Robert Frost wrote a poem called “The Kitchen Chimney” (1923). In the Walt Disney film, *Mary Poppins* (1964), a chimney sweep named Bert falls in love with Mary Poppins. People once fixed a tree branch to the chimney to placate Woden, the Anglo-Saxon god of fury and violent death. People now fix an artificial tree branch – a TV aerial – to the chimney to obtain a clear TV picture. British author Agatha Christie wrote a crime novel called “The Secret Of Chimneys” (1925). The Stork delivers babies down the chimney – and so on.

On the other hand, few people have noticed that brick chimneys are slowly disappearing from the Australian suburban skyline, due to technological advances in heating and cooking and also concerns about polluting the atmosphere. As authors Elaine and Douglas Baglin noted more than twenty years ago in their book, "Australian Chimneys & Cookhouses" (1979: 8):

Houses don't have chimneys now and cookhouses are regarded as a nightmare of complex inefficient technology. When the Australian chimney and cookhouse began to disappear, a stable creative healthy life style went with it. Perhaps it is safe to say that family life also was the poorer as the focal point of warmth and conversation had to a large extent been lost.

To celebrate Australia's strong tradition of brick architecture, as well as the largely unsung art of bricklaying, I organized two complementary public exhibitions of full-scale brick structures – the first was called The Brick Show in 2000, and the second was called "Not Brick Chimneys" in 2003. Both exhibitions were sponsored by the Clay Brick and Paver Association of Victoria, erected by students from the Bricklaying Department of Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, and held in the park around the Monash Gallery of Art in the outer Melbourne suburb of Wheelers Hill, a brick stronghold. Following is a description of "The Brick Show and Not Brick Chimneys".

2. The Brick Show

Ten architects and artists were invited to each design a polychrome brick wall, twenty-six bricks wide and thirty-one bricks high. Pairs of walls were built back-to-back, so there were five freestanding walls in the park. At the end of the exhibition's three-month run (20 February – 31 May 2000), the walls were demolished. The idea conveyed was that not all brick structures are 'permanent'.

Melbourne printmaker and painter Mary Newsome is interested in images of small iconic domestic objects, such as cakes, slippers and teacups. For example, in her series of artworks entitled "The Art of the Cake" (1999), she documented Parisian patisseries in digital image prints, collages and glass paintings. Bricks are laid in certain bonds or patterns for strength, with the most common one being stretcher bond. Newsome's brick wall, entitled "Zip", highlighted the similarity in appearance between bricks laid in this particular

way and a zipper. At the same time, it also emphasized the contrast between a heavy, immovable, rigid, brick wall and a light, speedy, flexible zipper.

Joy Smith is a Melbourne tapestry artist. Her brick wall, "Under Southern Skies", featured a pair of kangaroos standing either side of the Southern Cross constellation, bordered by geometric patterns. The stylized kangaroos and patterns helped to point up the similarities between knitting and bricklaying. The process of knitting stitch after stitch row upon row is like laying brick after brick row upon row, and the different styles of stitches in knitting are akin to the different styles of bonds in bricklaying. For many years, Smith has been interested in the Australian nationalist style of architecture called Federation, which was most popular between the late 1890s and the end of the First World War, 1918. The kangaroo motif was a characteristic of Federation, and she has also incorporated kangaroos into her work on other occasions, most notably in her woven tapestries.

Melbourne architectural firm Six Degrees undertakes a varied range of projects including housing, bars and restaurants, sporting venues, and retail. Inspired by the stoical role that a brick wall sometimes



Image 1: 'Zip' by Mary Newsome.

plays in children's games, the firm designed a wall that would make an impassable wicket-keeper in a game of backyard cricket, a target to practice handballing an Australian rules football, and an opponent with an unbeatable return-of-serve in a match of backyard tennis. Hence the wall was called "Brickochet", after 'ricochet'. Six Degrees steered away from a flat design. The brick bull's eye at the centre of the target protruded from the face of the wall and the bottom panel of bricks, which represented a tennis-net, was laid 'higgledy-piggledy'.

In 1985, Malaysian artist Anthony Sum immigrated to Australia, and lives in Melbourne. Trained in both Chinese and Western art, he was selected as the Artist in Residence at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997. In China, a freestanding screen wall is sometimes built a short distance in front of a doorway to block the path of evil spirits or sha qi. Sum's brick wall, "Dancing of Life", featured two rearing Chinese dragons. It was reminiscent of the famous, larger, free-standing Nine Dragon screen wall in Beihai Park, Beijing. In addition, according to the Chinese horoscope, 2000 was a Year of the Dragon.



Image 2: 'Brickochet' by Six Degrees

Melbourne artist Karen Casey works in a variety of media including painting, printmaking and installation. Her works are often informed by her experience of natural environments and their regenerating and transformative potential. Her brick wall, "Ochre Field", looked like a cross-section through the earth's strata. Two vertical lines of white bricks 'pulsated' through the wall, to symbolize seismic energy. Her design emphasizes two important facts: (1) bricks are made from clay; (2) the colour of the clay determines the colour of the bricks to a large extent.

Melbourne architect Peter Corrigan is arguably Australia's foremost brick architect. In 1999, he was included in the prestigious "Allgemeines Künstlerlexicon" – the international reference published in Leipzig on artists of all periods, regions and cultures. A blank wall is an open invitation to a graffiti artist. Before graffiti became an art form, graffiti artists often drew pictures of a comic character named 'Foo', peering over the top of a wall nose first. This helps to explain the inscription "FOO TOO" which was 'punched-out' of the brick wall designed by Corrigan. The letters had a mirror backing for emphasis. Of the ten designs, this one proved the greatest test for the apprentice bricklayers.



Image 3: 'Foo Too' by Peter Corrigan.

Born and educated in England, sculptor Andrew Leicester immigrated to the United States in 1970, and lives in Minneapolis. He has created over twenty major public art works since 1980, which range in size and scope from small courtyards and amphitheatres on university campuses to municipal plazas, park entrances and water gardens. Leicester's brick wall, "Wordplay", also made reference to writing on walls. It took the form of a giant crossword puzzle. To achieve a grid of squares, the bricks were laid using stack bond. The numbers in the squares of the crossword puzzle were sand-blasted into the bricks. When Leicester first visited Australia in 1984, he was so taken with Melbourne's polychrome brick buildings that polychrome brickwork has featured in most of his projects ever since, such as his award-winning "Cincinnati Gateway".

The bricks that make up a brick wall are analogous to the pixels that make up a television picture. This was the main idea behind Melbourne artist James Verdon's brick wall, "(Frame) Reticle". It resembled a huge, old-fashioned, dot matrix computer screen, perpetually switched on 'play'. He spelled out the word 'play' in red bricks on a background of white bricks. Verdon works primarily with time-based media and emerging technologies.

In 1996, Melbourne architects (and brothers) Corbett, Cameron and Carey Lyon established Lyons, an architectural firm with a strong passion and commitment to the intellectual and cultural qualities of architecture and urban design. In recent years Lyons has designed some of the most exciting brick buildings in Victoria, such as the Swinburne Institute of TAFE (2000) in Lilydale, the Sunshine Hospital (2001) in Sunshine, and the Department of Botany (2002) at the University of Melbourne. The pixilated quality of polychrome brickwork was particularly evident in Lyons' brick wall, "babyFACE BRICKS", which featured a baby's eyes and nose. The title is a play-on-words. "Face bricks" is the term used for "bricks of pleasing but not necessarily uniform colour and satisfying texture, used to cover common brickwork", (Scott, 1974: 128).



Image 4: 'babyFACE BRICKS' by Lyons



Image 5: 'Equinox Solar Fire' by James Birrell

Sculptor Mark Stoner teaches at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. In recent years he has made several installations using bricks, which have engaged with ideas of the module and also the role of the single unit within the greater whole. Stoner's brick wall, "Continuum", utilized the tonal quality of bricks, ranging from white to chocolate brown. Perhaps more than anyone else, he used the bricks like paint. Certainly from the bricklayers' point of view, laying the bricks was like painting-by-numbers. Although Stoner's 'painting' was over six metres wide and nearly three metres high, it appeared to be merely a tiny fragment of some much larger 'canvas'.

Artists Andrew Leicester and Mark Stoner and architects Peter Corrigan and Lyons were obvious participants in this exhibition because of their previous excellent work in brick. The other exhibitors were selected because I thought that their style of work would translate successfully to the 'new' medium.

3. Not Brick Chimneys

In "The Roof-Tree" (1938), author James Kenward described the evolution of the humble domestic chimney. At first, smoke from the fire escaped out of the house wherever it could. Then a hole was made in the roof above the fire. But smoke still drifted about indoors, so a ceiling was built to separate the smoke from the living quarters. When the living quarters expanded into the space above the ceiling, a flue was built from the fire to the hole in the roof. Finally, when the flue was extended beyond the roof, the chimney was built.

"Not Brick Chimneys" was an exhibition of 3-D brick structures designed by 10 architects and artists after they had pondered the future of the brick chimney. Only five of the 10 structures were constructed. Like "The Brick Show", after the exhibition's three-month run (4 May – 3 August, 2003), the structures were demolished.

James Birrell is a Brisbane architect who has designed some of Australia's finest Modernist buildings, such as the Wickham Terrace Carpark (1958-61) in Brisbane, Queensland, which is an abstract work of art in concrete. For the exhibition, he designed an "Equinox Solar Fire", an Aztec-style structure that echoed the brickwork of his Agriculture and Entomology Building (1966-69) at the University of Queensland, which is one of my favourite brick buildings. It was one of the structures to be built (although the bricklayers had terrible

trouble following the architectural drawings). There is an interesting story about the bricks that Birrell used in the Agricultural and Entomology Building, which illustrates his innovative approach to architecture in general. When the time came for construction of the building to start, the brickyard had hardly any bricks in stock apart from a huge pile of speckled and splattered seconds that nobody wanted. As the markings on these bricks reminded him of Jackson Pollock's paintings, and the bricks were selling at half price to clear, he decided to use them to stunning effect. So much so, in fact, that when the time came to construct the second stage of the building, these bricks had become so popular that they had trebled in price. To avoid going over budget, he had to plead with the brickyard to sell him the bricks at the original price, arguing that he was responsible for making them fashionable in the first place.

Warren Langley is a Sydney artist who usually works with glass – a big contrast to working with bricks. His “Not Brick Chimney”, entitled “Glimpse”, was perhaps best described as a deconstructed chimney. It had two perpendicular red brick walls, representing the chimney, with several rectangular openings in them, representing



Image 6: 'Glimpse' by Warren Langley

the smoke hole, each housing a tree branch, representing the firewood, which were painted blue, representing the smoke. As he explained, the structure explored the thought processes triggered when somebody catches a glimpse of something. The mind's eye kicks in and fills in the blanks. This was another of the structures to be built in the park.

Gregory Burgess is a Melbourne architect with the remarkable ability to design buildings that appear to grow out of the ground, such as the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre (1990) at Halls Gap, Victoria. His "Not Brick Chimney" had two polychrome brick cylinders, one tapered in the middle and the other bowed in the middle, which touched each other at the top and bottom. Both cylinders had a semi-circular opening at the base, like a fireplace, and a spiral column at the centre, representing smoke. He specified an interesting 'hit and miss' style of brickwork, which was similar, at least in spirit, to the brickwork of his Church of St. Michael and St. John (1987) in Horsham, Victoria, where mortar oozes between the bricks in places (a technique also used by James Birrell in his Agriculture and Entomology Building), and the rough patches of cream brickwork around the windows give the false impression they were installed well after the apricot coloured wall was built.

Traditionally, architects have used chimneys to make a statement. For example, Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi designed whimsical spiral chimneys, while American architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed serious rectangular chimneys. But Melbourne architect Suzanne Dance, a specialist in the housing field, is not sad to see chimneys go for environmental reasons. Her "Not Brick Chimney" had five twisted, polychrome brick columns, which were arranged in a Southern Cross constellation pattern on a square brick base. She explained that it "represents our ambivalence toward this symbol of the happy hearth and home, now that we are aware of the destructive consequences of its emissions". The columns did not symbolize chimneys, as one might have assumed, but the trees 'that have survived the logger's axe'. While the visual reference to the Southern Cross was perhaps a reminder 'that Australia's reputation as one of the industrialized world's largest producers of greenhouse gas per capita is assured.'

Post Modern architecture will never die in Melbourne, thank goodness, so long as architect Norman Day is still in practice. For the exhibition, he designed "a chimney for cooling", which worked like

the wind-scoops featured in the book: "Architecture Without Architects" (1964) by Bernard Rudofsky. It consisted of a hollow, four-sided, polychrome brick 'cube', which appeared to balance on one edge. Inside the cube was a polychrome brick screen wall. Day made a cardboard model of the structure to demonstrate how it worked, which gave me an idea. The Post Modern thing to do, which would have also made life much easier for the builder,



Image 7: 'Aedicule' by Leo Morrissey

would have been to build the cube from sheets of fake brick, which were used in the past to give weatherboard houses a brick appearance. Although not everyone would have agreed with my idea—least of all, perhaps, the sponsor of “Not Brick Chimneys”, the Clay Brick and Paver Association of Victoria.

Garry Martin is a Melbourne architect with a true passion for fine brickwork and its application in modern buildings. He believes:

When you are faced with a whole facade of brickwork, you can create a change of texture with pattern. What the eye reads is not pattern but texture. You can change the texture of brickwork by recessing planes and different brick patterns.

He put these principles into practice, for example, in his design of Randall Hall (2000) at Scotch College in Melbourne. His “Not Brick Chimney” was a garden retreat in the form of a Gothic-style, square, polychrome brick tower, with one tall arch on each of the north and south sides, and one squat arch on each of the east and west sides. At the centre of the tower was a square polychrome brick column, which was attached to the sidewalls by a small arch on each side.

American artist Leo Morrissey lives in Melbourne, Florida, and draws inspiration for his art from his time as a construction worker. His “Not Brick Chimney” took the form of a surrogate hearth, a place where people could sit and talk. It was a 3-D development of some paintings he did of candy-striped houses, which were influenced by candy-striped canvas sunblinds. Hence his structure had a gabled form and bands of coloured brickwork. The best word to describe it was ‘aedicule’. According to Summerson (1964: 3), a British architectural historian

The Latin word ... for a little building is “aedicula” and this word was applied in classical times more particularly to little buildings whose function was symbolic – ceremonial. It was applied to a shrine placed at the far end, from the entrance, of a temple to receive the statue of a deity – a sort of architectural canopy in the form of a rudimentary temple, complete with gable – or, to use the classical word, pediment. It was also used for the shrines – again miniature temples – in which the “lares” or titular deities of a house or street were preserved.

Morrissey’s aedicule was the third structure to be built.

Melbourne artist Cathy Drummond was invited to participate in "Not Brick Chimneys" because her paintings of brick buildings capture the colours and pointillist nature of brickwork extremely well. Drummond's structure, entitled "Ladder", was a brick staircase to provide easy access to the roof of a house. As the James Taylor song 'Up on the Roof' says: "On the roof, it's peaceful as can be/ And there the world below don't bother me, no, no". Furthermore, a staircase would have made life a lot easier for Santa Claus.

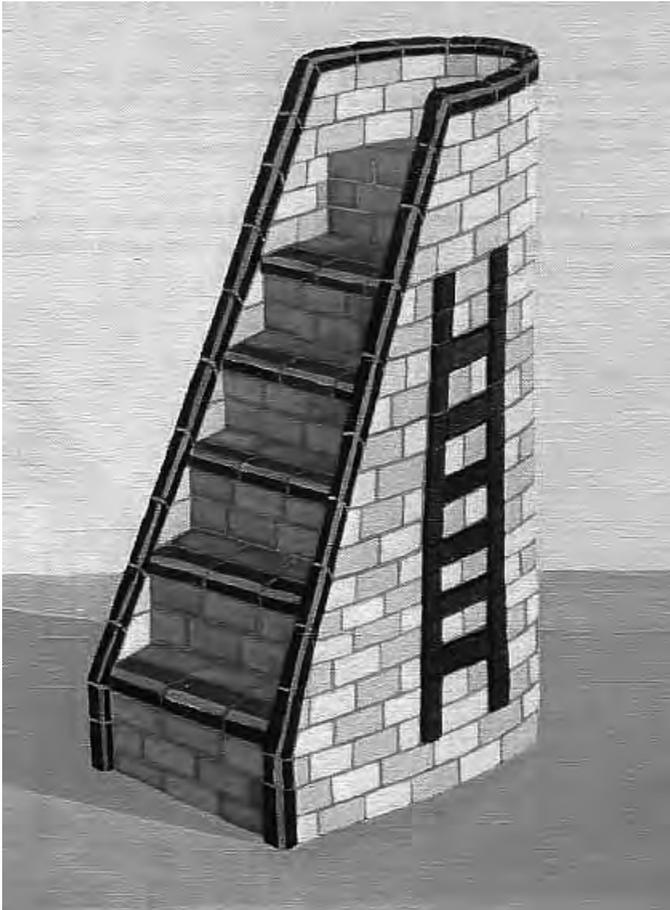


Image 8: 'Ladder' by Cathy Drummond

Drummond did three paintings of the staircase, and I enjoyed the processes of trying to turn them into architectural drawings. I even roughly built part of the staircase in my backyard, to see how it worked. Drummond wanted the extruded bricks laid unconventionally facedown, so the holes in the sides of the bricks would have been in full view. A fresh approach to brickwork design was what I was hoping for, especially from the artists in this exhibition.

Jason Pickford is a design tutor at the University of Melbourne. His wonderful pen and ink drawings of ruins, inspired by the etchings of Italian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi, have in turn inspired countless architecture students over the years. Jason designed two "Not Brick Chimneys", which both took the form of sham ruins. One consisted of 11 parallel brick walls, each 50 mm apart and crumbling at both ends, which looked like a large block of sliced cheese gnawed by a plague of huge mice. He explained:

Apart from the Romantic melancholy associated with ruins, the serrated edge of a ruined wall makes a strong comment on the overwhelmingly normal straight edges and joints in most architecture. It is anarchic. Compositionally interesting. Sometimes a structure yet to be is imagined differently to one which once was. A sham ruin teases us into remembering what never was. It steals its qualities from the real thing. A novel, not a biography. Disorder ordered by a designing mind. And often more fun. Fakes, including human ones, can be like that ... Bricks, being made from earth, take on its colours, browns, yellows, reds, which are also the colours of autumn leaves. Today a "solid" brick wall is one built in two layers, separated by a gap. Each layer is called a leaf ... Present day Rome stands upon the metres-thick rubble of its old self. It is as if the modern city sprouted from the leaf mulch of the dead past. That is probably hopeful. I think these things are what my "Not Brick Chimney" is about.

Pickford's other structure, entitled "Secrets", was one of those built. It consisted of a cream brick box that encased a smaller red brick box. A hole smashed through the front walls of the two boxes revealed a toilet inside the red box. A cut on the back wall of the cream box appeared to ooze blood (red paint). Pickford

wrote: Imagine the distant future, and us in it. Perhaps we are archeologists. Clearly, the newly discovered "tomb" (or is it a treasury?) has been broken into, violated. The object seen through the hole is marked "E. A. Poe". It might be a casket or a vessel for offerings of some kind, a ceremonial vessel, because of its beautiful shape and its remarkable

material. The word "Poe" suggests something, but what? Why is the inner compartment red? Are there other compartments? Should we rupture the skin elsewhere? If our motives are pure, breaking through may not be considered a violation. Would what undoubtedly has been stolen from it have helped us understand this monument/tomb/womb/treasury (and certainly not a brick chimney) and those who made it? Has anyone associated with it become ill, or died prematurely, will they? There are many difficulties!

My own "Not Brick Chimney", entitled "Footy Replay", was designed to support a TV aerial. This was not only practical, but also very symbolic, as the introduction of television in Australia in 1956 marked the beginning of the end for chimneys in this country. Most people put the TV set in the lounge room, however, they were afraid that it might overheat if it was too close to the open fire. So they put the set as far away from the fire as possible, and consequently 'froze' in winter, which gave them a good reason to get a more efficient gas or electric heater, neither of which required a proper chimney. And the fact that the TV aerial on my Not Brick Chimney was not connected to a TV set was also symbolic of the early days of television, when some people felt so ashamed that they could not afford a TV set, they bought a TV



Image 9: 'Secrets' (detail) by Jason Pickford

aerial just to fool their neighbours. In "You're Certain to Have One of These Gadgets on the Roof" (1955: 35), the Australasian Post journalist, Charles Roberts, wrote:

The average American family man without a TV aerial on his roof is a social pariah; he condemns himself as being unprogressive, insane, or just plain mean. So he buys an aerial. Until he can afford to buy a receiver he lives a strange life. When neighbours dim the lights in their lounge rooms to watch TV, he must do the same, for appearance sake. A New York clerk [confessed]: "We were ruining our eyes trying to read in the dimmed-out lounge room, so moved to the kitchen. We sat there, reading behind shutters, until the TV station went off the air, then limped to bed. When we expected guests, we had to hire a [TV] receiver for one dollar a night."



Image 10: 'Footy Replay' by Derham Groves

4. Conclusion

"The Brick Show" and "Not Brick Chimneys" clearly demonstrated the artistic possibilities of brickwork at the present time in Australia. Without doubt, they helped to change many people's staid views about brickwork, including even some members of the brick industry, who were amazed to discover that the humble clay brick can be interesting, let alone artistic! They also demonstrated the potential for creative collaborations between art and industry, attracting generous support from arts' funding organizations including the Australia Council and VicArts, and the building industry. Furthermore, they generated plenty of healthy discussion in the media about the links between architecture and art. There is no reason for boring brickwork, in my opinion. Often the problem is that many architects and builders do not design brickwork, but allow it happen of its own accord.

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