

urban islands



01

edu

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text

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"Before you can cook with confidence, you need to understand the raw materials."

Stephanie Alexander, *A Cook's Companion*

a degustation menu for a design studio

Consider the traditional design studio: after a four month diet of undercooked ideas, served meagerly as a thin gruel, a mere spoonful every week, everyone leaves hungry for something else.

Imagine instead Cockatoo Island, Sydney Harbour, the Turbine Hall. 8pm August 12, a full moon. Eight students, two tutors, four projectors, 1000 candles and a firehose.

welcome to urban islands

"...urban islands constitute a paradox: islands defy the intensity that distinguishes the urban. And almost by definition cities extinguish the solitude and the purity of an island. Cities are heterotopias; islands are utopias."

Martin Komberger, *Business/Culture*

The first Urban Islands Studio was conceived with these contradictions in mind. We created a learning environment that would have a political as well as a physical context, ideological as well as programmatic content, and a continuity outside the short life of the two week term of the studio.

"The history, and the magic, of islands have always been bound up in processes of discovery, communication and creation. Over time, engagement with and development of these special places revolves around what we find there, what we bring there, and ultimately, what we make there."

Altogether Elsewhere, proposal for Cockatoo Island.

first, procure your hare

What we found there: Cockatoo Island. That the place still exists and was available is due to the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, who provided an introduction to the island, four guides for the site visit, transportation across the harbour and assistance from their staff whenever possible. Deputy director Nick Holo opened the symposium and, along with endless goodwill, the Trust was essentially granted free run of the island, for the students to investigate, create, inhabit, and imagine the future of the island.

The island presented an ideal site for investigations both phenomenological and conceptual, as a site both vacant and full, near and far, real and imaginary. The physical character of the

island is itself open to interpretation, as the site has been continuously inhabited, altered and reinhabited throughout its history.

"The fact is that, liberated from the burden of historical knowledge and its fixed codes, every heritage today can be interpreted and transformed by anybody as raw material that is available and changeable at will."

Henri Praeger, *Systems of Change, Reality and Revelation*

add spice, stir vigorously

To provide an operational content and context, we organised a symposium to discuss the greater issues surrounding the island in particular, and urban development in general. The symposium was coordinated by Ingo Kumic; key invitees for the symposium included Alexander Cuthbert, Stephanie Donald, Martin Komberger and Rod Simpson.

Aside from tabling a wealth of insight and experience, these participants also opened the students' eyes to the possibility of disparate and divergent viewpoints – heated exchanges are not confined only to the kitchen.

"The island is simultaneously a place of memory and anticipation, issuing a provocation to the metropolis which surrounds it – challenging its stability, its ambitions, its values and relevance."

Tom Heneghan, *A Collage of Yearnings*

never underestimate the old-fashioned pressure cooker

Studio sessions were scheduled for all days of the program, with all other classes postponed – dedicated secure studio space at the university was made available to the students for the duration. Perhaps belittling an island, the studio was constructed as an immersive experience. Students were expected to work well beyond studio contact hours, as well as collaboratively, and an array of events including site visits, installations, intermediate presentations, lectures by the visiting tutors, the symposium and closing day reviews on the island were scheduled to mandate this.

"...condensed into a dizzyingly short period of intensive creative production, academic projects of this kind can be risky ventures... At their best however, against all the odds, they can sometimes crystallise significant movements and currents in a way that more structured and leisurely projects might not."

Chris Abel, *Soft Responses To A Hard Place*



02



introduce exotic ingredients

What we brought there: emerging voices, theorists, practitioners and educators all, our invited studio leaders were Jin Hidaka and Satou Yamashiro of Responsive Environment, Tokyo; Lisa Iwamoto and Craig Scott of ISAr, San Francisco; Jaime Rouillon of JRA, Costa Rica and Dr Henri Praeger of Berlin (assisted by Chris Abel of Sydney University), while Tokyo-based Matias Echanove (of Urbanology) flew in to document the program and participate in the symposium.

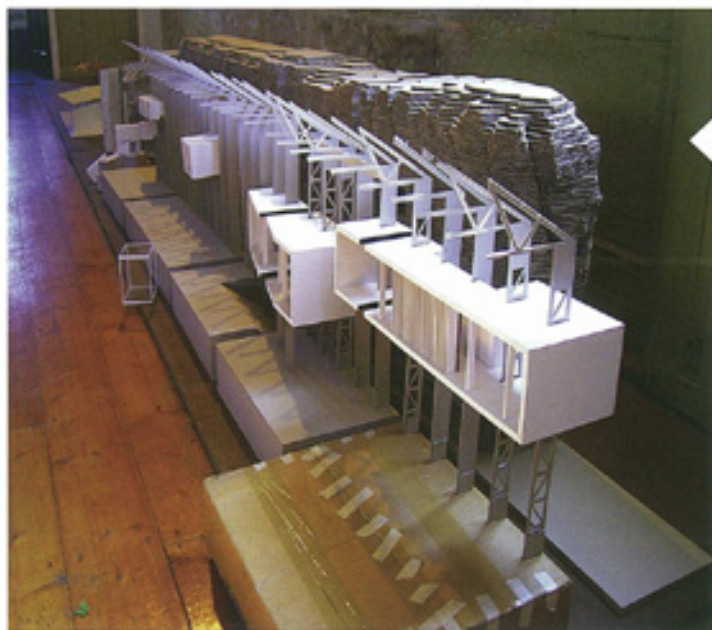
Individual tutors defined their group's area and direction of investigation, resulting in work which varied enormously across the studio, both in its content as well as its form of expression. We journeyed via one minute films, two part harmonies, 3D fly throughs and four metre long models; through ISAr's investigations into systems and operations; Rouillon's obsession with exposed physicality; the Praeger-Abel group's meandering and experiential feedback loop; culminating in the magnificent installations in the Turbine Hall made by the Responsive Environment group, created using only water, sound and light.

"...the island is thus not really the place itself, but a variety of processes that shaped it and continue to do so."

Dagmar Reinhardt, *The Fat, The Old And The Beautiful*

match your wines carefully

What we make there: the Urban Island Studio was not simply an isolated exercise; it was designed to be an inclusive, expansive and, ultimately, transformative experience for those who took part, and the first in a series of investigative events in cities around the world, dedicated to exploring the relationships between the places we find ourselves in and the manners in which we inhabit them.



03

As a gravid full moon rose over the island and the closing party, the roofless guardhouse venting sausage fat and woodsmoke into the air, the loudest sound around made us all realise one significant thing: 20,000 seagulls can't possibly be wrong.

"In such a 'genius loci', the only possible architectural response is that of indeterminacy – an architecture which, through its incompleteness, joins with the island in its yearning for 'closure'."

Tom Heneghan, *A Collage of Yearnings*

postscript

From August 1 to 12, 2006, Urban Islands was an intensive master class studio conceived and coordinated by Olivia Hyde, Joanne Jakovich and Thomas Rivard, run through Sydney University. It was created in direct response to existing university programs and took advantage of the opportunities presented by Cockatoo Island, international air travel, and the goodwill of innumerable friends, colleagues and associated organisations. The primary sponsors were *Altogether Elsewhere*, *Urbanology* and *Leon Productions*; the major corporate sponsor was *Bligh Voller Nield*. The next Urban Islands Studio will take place in August 2007, with visiting tutors from India, Holland, Spain and USA; it will also be open to students from all local architecture schools, who will be able to both work and live on the island for the duration of the course.

Excerpted texts (save for Stephanie Alexander) taken from *Urban Islands 1: Cuttings*. Comprising essays and commentary from participants and guests as well as student projects completed during the studio, the book will be available early 2007.

01.
Installation photograph by
Kota Arai.

02.
Model photographed by
Christopher Bickerton.

03.
Model photographed by Nined
Prakas Patankar.