National Awards of the AIA 2012

The Walter Burley Griffin Award for Urban Design
University Lawn Precinct, RMIT University, Melbourne. Peter Elliott Architecture + Urban Design

A gravel car park that served as the back door to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology city campus has been transformed into a pedestrian precinct, thanks to RMIT’s Urban Spaces project and its 12-year collaboration with Melbourne’s Peter Elliott Architecture + Urban Design. The city campus had never made much use of its outdoor spaces and few urban design projects have had to cope with such a mismatch of buildings. The lawn, located in the heart of the campus, interlinks myriad spaces including courts, a grand stairway, remnant walls of old Melbourne Gaol, a belvedere embankment and the former City Watch House. New facades were added on to the backs of the adjoining buildings; a series of new entry lobbies, lifts, terraces and stairways connect the buildings, while the lawn unites several pathways across campus. A north-facing courtyard flanks the lawn, with a cafe opening onto it. Other features include a wide timber walkway with seating, an avenue of deciduous trees, a screen hedge, and an embankment of newly planted shrubbery. The judges thought it a “clever, thoughtful intelligent plan to create a public space”.

The lawn has recyclable synthetic turf and underground water tanks designed to save 220,000 litres of mains water each year. As the judges said: “What was once an uninviting rear entrance to the campus is now a celebration of myriad building topologies that are stitched together by a series of successful landscape interventions.”

Taronga Zoo Upper Entry Precinct, Sydney. BVN Architecture

For years, arriving at Taronga Zoo was something of a punishment. The messy carpark and bus depot were invariably clogged, with the scores of visitors arriving on foot to buy tickets forced to make the best of it. But extensive rebuilding and reshaping has occurred, with the aim of pushing landscape to the fore and buildings to the background. One exception: rescuing the original 1916 entry building, lost amid the clutter, as the zoo wall and giant fig trees had been.

For this work, Sydney’s BVN Architecture was awarded a national award for what the judges said “created a sense of arrival, theatre and anticipation”.

The zoo, sited on a sandstone plateau that descends to Sydney Harbour, has always been a beautiful environment marred by an ugly entrance. Now the idea of the zoo as a walled garden, with its entrance a promenade, has been reinstated. Elongated timber pavilions move visitors towards the ticket windows and the entry point, which are connected by a draped steel canopy. The new carpark means cars and pedestrians have been separated at the entrance, with plenty of parking and room for turning buses. On exit, a timber ramp leads visitors to one last animal enclosure – and a final, somewhat revolutionary flourish: patrons are no longer forced to exit through the gift shop.

It was “a good year for houses”. And for notions of community, which have given us new art galleries and a children’s hospital.

Romance is back, we declared in these pages when we revealed the honour roll of Australia’s best buildings 12 months ago. This year, as WISH announces the winners of the 2012 National Architecture Awards, we find that power of romance has been augmented by notions of community, philanthropy and, yes, even love. How else to explain the Museum of Old and New Art, the Tasmanian “un-museum” incising a sandstone peninsula. It’s already an architectural celebrity, thanks to the unique vision of its founder, the professional gambler and art patron David Walsh, and his architect, Notre Katsalidis, founding partner ofender Katsalidis. The winner of the Sir Zelman Cowan Award for Public Architecture already lays claim to being the state’s premier tourism attraction, despite only opening last year.

“This building is so unusual but it works,” declares jury chair Beau Zulakis. “It’s a complete tour de force of love, and he’s chosen the right architect.”

Love, in the form of benefaction, was also present in the restoration of the Victorian mansion Swifts, in the creation of the John Kaldor Family Gallery out of a basement storeroom at the Art Gallery of NSW and in the contributions that helped to build the $1 billion Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne.

In contrast to last time, this was a stellar year for buildings. If the awards are the architectural equivalent of the Oscars, then the 2012 winners chosen by the Australian Institute of Architects included blockbusters (MONA, Swifts, 1 Bligh Street, Australia Square), art films...
(Inner House, Garagistes), short films (Perth’s Cultural Centre Amenities), sequels (AGNSW’s John Kaldor Family Gallery) and, for the first time, even a student production (Real Studio: Murphy’s Creek Bicentennial National Trail).

“There were some really impressive pieces of architecture this year,” says jury member Richard Johnson, of Johnson Pilton Walker and an AIA gold medallist, who pointed out the prominence of public benefaction in so many winners. “I don’t recall it being strong driver for excellence or a strong contributor in an awards year before.” For that, he praised clients, who don’t have their own AIA category, because “their drive, their energy, creates the climate that architects work in. It demands more of architects. They want something exceptional.” The return to traditional patronage was welcome. “It has historically brought out the best and we don’t see enough of it, but this year there have been some exceptional works.”

While the winners’ circle included the world-famous (Harry Seidler and Associates) and the feted PTW Architects, the awards looked to the future, with the winners including architecture students for the first time. Step forward So students from the Queensland University of Technology, who beat established firms to the small projects national award for rebuilding the flood-ravaged agriculture shed on the Bicentennial National Trail at Murphy’s Creek.

The diverse members of the jury bonded during their unique road trip of more than 22,000km. Zulaikha, founding partner of Tonkin Zulaikha Greer, and immediate past president of the AIA, was gently probing and quietly provocative. Johnson would clap his hands in halls to test reverberation. Kerry Hill, another gold medallist and international architect, would measure spaces and compare costs, as Amy Muir of Muir Medes provided insight and energy, while Juliana Engberg, the artistic director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and director of the 2014 Sydney Biennale, supplied humour, grace and eloquence. Here was a jury not afraid to assert its independence; it bypassed Exeter Farm, the NSW winner, to hand the Lachlan Macquarie Award for Heritage to the restoration of the late-Victorian mansion Swifts.

There were two big winners this year. BNV Architecture, which won an unprecedented four awards, and Tasmania, which scooped two of the biggest prizes, thanks to MONA and the stunning Shearer’s Quarters, which collected the Robin Boyd award. A national award for the funky interior of Garagistes added to the ‘Tasmania tally. South Australia remains an underperformer, with only one award, while Queensland surprisingly only went one better. Western Australia scored three this year, including its “Cabinet of Dr Caligari” toilet block in Perth’s Culture Centre, while Victoria and NSW dominated with 11 and 14 apiece.

Zulaikha is convinced we are riding the crest of a wave. “All the winners in all the categories were all world-class, without a doubt,” he says. “The quality of the architecture in Australia at present is equal to anywhere in the world.” Last month’s World Architecture Awards in Singapore, backed him up. Local firms won eight categories out of 32, an exceptional presence on the world stage.

Despite this, architects are doing it tough. David Parken, chief executive of the AIA, forecasts a “choppy period”, while the Australian Construction Industry Forum declares the next 12 months will be “make or break time”. Despite the uncertainty, it’s inspiring to turn to the words of Richard Johnson, as good as any as an industry creed: “Buildings are about supplying functional needs, but unless the soul is moved or the mind is challenged, it’s not architecture, it’s as simple as that.”
And the winners are ...

**The Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture**
Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania. Fender Katsalidis Architects

**National Awards for Public Architecture**
Narbethong Community Hall, Victoria. EVPN Architecture
Royal Children’s Hospital, Victoria. Billard Leece Partnership and Bates Smart
Ravenswood School for Girls, NSW. EVPN Architecture

**The Robin Boyd Award for Residential Architecture – Houses**
The Shearer’s Quarters, Tasmania. John Wardle Architects

**National Award for Residential Architecture**
Cliff Face House, NSW. Fergus Scott Architects with Peter Stutchbury Architecture

**The Frederick Romberg Award for Residential Architecture – Multiple Housing**
Monash University Student Housing, Clayton, Victoria. BVN Architecture

**National Awards for Multiple Housing**
Heller Street Park and Residences, Victoria. Six Degrees Architects
Bell Romero Houses, NSW. Chan + Little Architects

**The Harry Seidler Award for Commercial Architecture**
1 Bligh Street, Sydney, NSW. Architectus and Ingenhoven Architects

**National Award for Commercial Architecture**
Adelaide Studios, South Australia. Grieve Gillett and Cox Richardson Architects in association

**The Lachlan Macquarie Award for Heritage**
Restoration of Swifts, Darling Point, NSW. Clive Lucas Stapleton and Partners
National Award for Heritage
Ormond College Academic Centre, Victoria, McGlashan Everist Pty Ltd

The Emil Sodersten Award for Interior Architecture
The John Kaldor Family Gallery, Art Gallery of NSW, FTW Architects

National Awards for Interior Architecture
Garagistes, Tasmania, Paul Johnston Architects
Inner House, NSW, Bates Smart

The Walter Burley Griffin Award for Urban Design
University Lawn Precinct RMIT University, Victoria, Peter Elliot Architecture + Urban Design

National Award for Urban Design
Taronga Zoo Upper Entry Precinct, NSW, BNV Architecture

National Awards for Small Project Architecture
Petal Studios, Murphy’s Creek BNT, Queensland, Queensland University of Technology
Cultural Centre Amenities, Western Australia, Coniglio Ainsworth Architects

National Awards for Sustainable Architecture
1 Bligh Street, Sydney, NSW, Architectus + Ingenhoven Architects
Heller Street Park and Residences, Victoria, Six Degrees Architects

The National Award for Enduring Architecture
Australia Square, Harry Seidler and Associates

The Jorn Utzon Award for International Architecture
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, FJMT and Archimedia in association

The Colorbond Award for Steel Architecture
Milson Island Indoor Sports Stadium, NSW, Allen Jack + Cottier Architects

The jury is in (from left):
Brian Zulakha, Juliana Engberg, Kerry Hill, Richard Johnson and Amy Mur.