

THE ART OF MAKING PLACES

If, as prominent Queensland architect Brit Andresen claims, “the purpose of architecture is to contribute to [making] us more at home in the world”, Lindsay and Kerry Clare have reached the pinnacle of their profession. In a partnership spanning 35 years, the husband-and-wife team has racked up many notable achievements, including the 2010 Australian Institute of Architects 2010 Gold Medal for Architecture. Words **Rachael Bernstone** Photography **Paul Bradshaw**

From their earliest design projects – starting with houses on the Sunshine Coast – to their largest and most recent works – such as the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane – Lindsay and Kerry Clare have approached each new brief with the same purpose and intent.

“When you look back, we have managed to produce a lot of projects and building types with many different teams, but there is a consistency of approach that exists from the early projects right through to the current jobs,” Lindsay Clare says. “We have a set of principles that we are still working with today, which involves finding the rationale from the brief, context and site, and using the richness of that to develop the architecture. We don’t need abstract theories to design our buildings.”

The Clares – who have been personal and professional partners for more than 35 years – first observed that approach at the elbow of legendary Sunshine Coast architect Gabriel Poole, in whose office they met as young students. At Poole’s suggestion the young couple took an interest in the published works of Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, which helped them to refine their design thinking to the point where they felt compelled to visit Finland with their children, to experience Aalto’s buildings for themselves.

“We loved the way Aalto dealt with topography, light, landscape, tradition, and many other factors,” Lindsay says. “He made spaces that people can occupy and live with for a long period of time. Seeing Aalto’s architecture in the flesh helped us to understand issues that working with Gabriel had taught us.” ➔



Caption...



**LINDSAY &
KERRY CLARE**

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On their first trip, the Clares visited many of Aalto's most famous buildings such as Finlandia Hall and the architect's own house in Helsinki; university projects at Otaniemi; the church, town hall and library at Seinäjoki; most of the Aalto buildings at Jyväskylä and Saynatsalo, and the cultural buildings at Rovaniemi.

"We discovered that his buildings have a richness to them that is much greater than what's conveyed in books, but we had missed some key structures so we went to Finland a second time," Lindsay explains. "During that trip we were invited to have lunch with Aalto's wife [Elissa Mäkineniemi, who died in 1994] at the Experimental House at Muuratsalo with our children, which was a fantastic experience."

Like their design heroes, the Clares interrogate the brief and site to unearth the "found potential" of each project, borrowing the term from Canadian husband-and-wife architects John and Patricia Patkau. According to Patricia Patkau: "This 'found potential' may include such aspects as site, climate, building context, program, local culture, or anything that will facilitate the development of an architectural order which is evocative of the particular circumstance."

Using "found potential" to underpin design means that buildings can contribute to a culture's sense of identity, John Patkau adds. "One of the important ways that a people or a culture defines itself, that is to say creates meaning, has to do with the interaction of the general and the particular – a necessary interaction which establishes

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associations which allow us to make sense of both," he writes. "It is only by defining our generality in the context of particularity, and our particularity in the context of generality, that we establish who we are in the world."

In the Clare's case, this approach has produced more than 100 houses – mostly in south-east Queensland – which sit well within their surroundings. They respond to the sub-tropical climate with shading, overhangs, eaves, shutters, blinds and hoods to keep out the sun. They boast "thin plans" where every room connects to outdoor space or veranda, or a ventilating clerestory skylight, and which facilitates cross-ventilation. They are light weight and economical in their choice of materials, often

employing steel in the form of framing, wall cladding and roofing, which imparts an unpretentious yet elegant appearance to their buildings.

In effect, their houses are so firmly rooted in place that they become timeless, a point that is beautifully illustrated by the Thrupp and Summers house. It was completed in 1987, and re-photographed by John Gollings in 2008, while he waited for the rain to clear at the nearby University of the Sunshine Coast Chancellery (see *Steel Profile* #100). In the intervening decades, the owners have barely altered the house – the furniture is much the same as appears in the earlier Peter Hyatt photographs – and it occupies its bushland setting as elegantly and effortlessly as it did when newly completed.

Part of this grace arises from the Clare's careful consideration of materials and their appropriate application. The Cotton Tree Housing complex on the Sunshine Coast (1992-95) is a case in point. "With a mix of social and private dwellings sitting side by side, and inserted in amongst existing trees, the pilot project aimed to provide a viable alternative to the 'brick veneer dwellings with basement car parking' that were gradually creeping over the beaches of the Sunshine Coast," Kerry says. On that project, corrugated iron cladding was selected for its thermal properties and to reference the familiar materials of traditional Queensland homes.

To the Clare's regret, that acclaimed housing type has not been replicated elsewhere, although affordable housing and urban design are two of

the key areas they intend to focus on in the future. "That project was deemed to be a success in 1994-95 and since, but we've never received another commission like it," Lindsay says.

"We are looking at the types of buildings we want to work on, and starting to become more selective about the types of projects we take on," Kerry adds. "We may have only 10 years of designing left, so we are refocussing our efforts on areas where we feel we can make a positive contribution."

Their recently completed student housing at the University of New South Wales – also won in design competition – is one of only a few major projects the couple have realised in their adopted city of Sydney. "A lot of the time, projects in Sydney don't end up being built," Kerry says. "The client quite often on-sells the site. In our experience, that's not such an issue in Queensland, where we had more 'end-user' clients."

The prolonged gestation of Sydney projects goes some way to explaining why the Clare's largest and most impressive project to date – Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA, 2006) – is in their hometown, even though the architects were firmly ensconced in Sydney when they won the international design competition in collaboration with James Jones in 2001.

A tour of GoMA reveals that the principles the Clares honed while designing beautiful but modestly sized houses translate just as well to a 25,000m²

gallery. The loose-fit plan allows curators to easily reconfigure gallery spaces, store art works in hidden panels between the walls, and work behind the scenes without being observed by the public. This "thin plan" means that visitors are never far from external terraces, observation decks and cafes and restaurants which energise the edges, and from where large expanses of glazing provide gob-smacking views of the Brisbane River and city skyline.

The building responds to its climate with a light and fine cantilevered steel roof comprising 10,000m² of LYSAGHT KLIP-LOK® 700 HI-STRENGTH® profile made from ZINCALUME® steel which is supported by 22 metre-high steel columns that tie it against wind uplift. The facades feature floating fins that protect against rain, light and heat, while providing a metaphorical veranda along the riverbank. All four facades are treated differently, according to their orientation, and are activated by shutters, screens, awnings and blinds, resulting in naturally lit internal circulation spaces.

At every turn, visitors are reminded that this building could only be in Queensland, specifically in Brisbane: the art on the walls competes not with "look-at-me" architecture, but with views of the surrounding city, while the building sits quietly in the background, making it all possible.

Describing their design philosophy at the Gold Medal presentation, held at GoMA in March 2010,

Lindsay quoted Swedish architect Erik Gunnar Asplund, who said in 1916 that, in architecture, "It is more important to follow the style of the place than that of the time".

Throughout their careers, the Clares have striven to contribute to a definition of cultural identity – particularly in their home state – with a series of buildings that are appropriate, economical, sustainable and responsive. Queensland premier Anna Bligh recognised the Clare's significant contribution in the revitalisation of the Southbank cultural precinct, a process she described as having a "transformative effect on our civic heart". Premier Bligh said that GoMA "is a building that welcomes, enlightens, shelters and nurtures the diverse cross-section of society that comes to see modern and contemporary art on display".

As the most readily accessible of the Clare's built works, the Gallery provides visitors with the best opportunity to experience their lightness of touch, but it is typical of all of their projects – large and small, in cities and regional locations, for public clients and private users – in that it embodies a sense of belonging. There is truly an architecture that has the capacity to make people feel more at home in the world.

Lindsay and Kerry Clare are now operating as an independent design studio advising practices on specific projects, and they look forward to completing selected projects in the future. **SP**

