

Global-Eco Conference 17-19 November 2015, Rottneest island
By Daniela Simon Architect & Sodaa

1- The Value of architecture as an investment in eco tourism

Image

Bremer bay House

Moort (Resort) Hut

2- Introducing the team:

Daniela Simon Architect Sodaa Perth

Sarah Primuz Designer Sodaa Perth WA

Nicola Chiavarelli Architect Mqaa Italy

Image

Innovative architecture is a larger term to indicate the newest idea for sustainable projects. I will be focusing on small-scale projects for a landscape that is often described as '*empty, with nothing there*', or the seemingly untouchable because of national park status.

This image is one such place and there are many similarly 'empty' looking places in Western Australia that, in my view, have great potential. I will return to this later.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the architecture and its relevance with eco-tourism; tourism is not my usual professional territory, but it is very much part of my background. I have been living in Australia for 41 years I come from the Italian Alps where my family still operate within and depend upon the tourist industry. I grew up with tourism being the main source of income for my family and indeed my town and valley. Over the last 50 years, the Dolomites, a newly listed UNESCO World heritage Site, has evolved to suit the ever-changing face of tourism; it has transitioned from accommodating high yield visitors of the 60s to serving mass tourism from the 70s onwards; it is currently evaluating a shift to more sustainable practices and to new horizons.

3- UNESCO: the big eco-listing

Image

The Dolomites (Photo Alessandro Simon)

San Martino di Castrozza

The experience there shows reliance upon the extraordinary beauty of the landscape as its main asset; in some areas more than in others, investments have flowed towards forecasting trends and remaining competitive by choosing the eco-path within its biosphere. The more 'visionary' communities have responded to this trend with focusing more vigorously on local food and re-valuing the *genius loci*. Much has been invested in architecture both contemporary and restored to address this issue of reliance. This long-term focus is with enriching the visitor's experience, the landscape and its ethnic culture. The more conservative communities, by communities I mean authorities and operators, challenged by the young UNESCO status and current economic downturn, are trying to catch-up and there is evidence of emerging innovation; alternative offerings are part of an attempt to address the declining numbers of visitors and/or the declining level of servicing. Visitors are still turning up but for shorter periods and for discounted packages. The more innovative communities have a steady, healthy and increasing market.

3 Relying on 'our way of life' as our main asset

Image

The Beach

The Wine region

Bremer Bay

By comparison I believe that in Western Australia not enough has been invested in the renewal of offerings, especially since we is not a cheap destination; I believe the tourist industry here relies too heavily on '*our way of life and our natural assets*'.

Where I come from, the landscape is extraordinary, like here and like here operators have not always been particularly progressive in offering a multitude of options to attract higher yielding visitors. The Dolomites has almost 100 years of hospitality history. But till, some of the structures are risking bankruptcy because lowering prices has not helped attendance. 30% of traditional hotels are on the market. However 'destination Dolomites', having made it to UNESCO listing and wanting to maintain that listing, has promoters recognise the need to be innovative and very dynamic. The most progressive operators are addressing these challenges with architecture as a priority.

4- Cultural events paired with architecture

Images

Photo of Mezzano Romantica (photo Luigi Valline)

Photo of the Piazza 'Brolo' (photo Luciana Tomas)

The 'new' is based on renewal of old traditions in the form of festivals, the introductions of a myriad of activities as a response to increasing fitness-wellbeing interests, Nordic walking, renting fruit bearing trees and the like. For us the indigenous culture may continue to be an exceptionally valuable asset if offered appropriately. The arts are prominent and, as an example, in my town it has recently come in the form of an invitation: they have invited the *New York International Music Academy* to holiday in town gratis and, in exchange, the town is getting world-class classical concerts for the tourist, free of charge. The benefit of this initiative has extended to turning this into a seasonal event and to guaranteeing funding for the building of a school of music. In addition a new market has opened up for an increasing number of New Yorkers heading to the Dolomites. The hope is that *the School of Music* itself will be architecturally innovative ensuring a long and fruitful lifespan; a good start, from a design point of view, is evident with the renewal of the town square even with initial resistance by conservative authorities and town dwellers.

5- the big Architectural Statements

10-11 Images:

Mona Hobart

Guggenheim Bilbao

As a side issue I just wish to name the idea of architecture as investment at a much bigger scale. Here is Hobart and Mona. They're the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao. These two now world famous destinations have in common the following:

- They are both museums of Contemporary art though not exclusively,
- They have been designed by famous architect though one much more famous than the other
- That they are situated in a relatively small city
- That they are privately funded or funded by a Trust
- But more importantly they have changed the economy of those cities just by their existence and that they have generated new unexpected initiatives.

I personally might have never been to Bilbao if it weren't for the museum though I might have gone to Hobart, though I have been there three times already because of Mona and other events it has generated. I am using these examples to set a comparison but the focus of my talk is much closer to the possible realisations than these two examples illustrate.

6- Simple and Sophisticated

12-13 Image

Tree house Mqaa (photo Mqaa & P)

My house (sodaa-mqaa collaboration)

Just a month ago in Italy some local/regional governments have approved legislation to regulate construction of tree houses as an example of '*the new*'. This form of accommodation (*not so new in Northern Europe, nor in Australia*) is strictly in tune with all the sustainable principle of Eco tourism but it primarily responds to an ever-growing demand for '*simple and sophisticated tourism*', responding to the desire for closer contact with nature. This alternative to camping and *glamping* is well provided in all the States but rare in WA except for the North West and the South West, still very few though. The opportunity of aiming at accessing locations off the beaten tracks is wide open here in regions such the great Southern and the Mid West. In Europe some hotels luxury have added this type of adventure/accommodation as an additional experience like '*a night in the wild*', to add to a normal package.

Alberghi diffusi Wide spread/virtual hotels

Castiglioncello del Trinoro (Siena)

Abrolhos Islands

Italian concept of the early 1080s as means of reviving small, historic Italian villages and town centres off the usual tourist track conceived as a hotel that is not in a single block but converted out of various buildings in a small community. (Wikipedia)

Small-scale architecture plays an important role here in ensuring '*the exquisite and the unexpected*'. It is not necessarily tree houses but it is such an architectural experience that we would start with, no matter how small. We should look for a new architectural icon that suits both our climatic zones and our remoteness. Indeed there are good examples already, around the Country but not enough in WA.

7- Architectural destinations- satellite packages

Examples:

Abrolhos Aerial views

Sardinia Signage

The green getaway hut

Visitor centre????

EMB Fitz

The Western Australian version of tree houses may be part of an excursion package ex Perth, as an example, that offers a series of *'in the wild location, in the apparent emptiness'*; this may be where 4 and 5 star hotels can expand their packages and consider new types of architectural investments in addition to those in the city and invest in *satellite properties* to add to their accommodation packages.

Developing architectural extraordinary destinations over and above the norm may be part of the new horizon. All this is already available in Eastern Australia, Tasmania, Kangaroo Island; I am proposing that the missing ingredient in this state involve more experimental eco-architecture that would list as *'the exquisite and the most desirable'*, to be located off the beaten track, on the way to already known holiday destinations.

8- Staying longer and returning

Image

Saffire Tasmania

'What is on offer to visitors bound for Perth and what will encourage them to stay longer and to return?' I leave that question hanging because I will only answer in part while I focus on architecture: for that the answer obviously lays with new collaborations between authorities and operators. Changing the mindset of investors must begin with a changed vision that goes beyond the current prescribed path. For this I think regulatory bodies should find a way of directly supporting commercial enterprise. If I personally approached a Shire offering an architectural initiatives along the lines I am discussing and looking for support. It is mostly the case that that I would be pointed to the Planning Scheme the basis that the Shire cannot be seen to support commercial initiatives outside the TPS, even if these initiatives may really be aiming at transforming the status quo of the tourist culture and more importantly that of rural or remote communities. The practice of no involvement outside the Town Planning Scheme often stands in the way of real change, hence the developments of strategic documents like those mentioned throughout the conference. I think the openness to changing the

economic models in tourism is still much too slow and it does not put enough emphasis on innovative accommodation and on openness to new forms of structural engagement with the landscape.

9-Architecture as Destination

Image

The Tree Top Walk

The floating Hotel

Could we imagine some such architecture like the one illustrated for stopovers along the Cape-to-Cape trek?

Could we set aside a small lot in the Karri Forrest for such small jewels? Could we propose this for the Southern ocean coast along the multitudes of trails currently being constructed? Would visitors return to such accommodations? Could we put them at the Pinnacles? Could we catch the train to Kalgoorlie for architecture as destination on locations between here and there (Wave Rock?)?

Would that option attract interstate visitors?

How about along the spring flower route in the Mid West?

Who are our visitors and how can we lure them further afield?

May I suggest the idea that small-scale architecture, as destination, may be opened to architects for a completion of ideas addressing both projects and *in between* locations?

11-Architecture as investment for the 'In Between' destinations

Images:

Stirling Ranges

Much closer to home and our reality we can boast about the Tree Top Walk, or Ningaloo Eco Accommodation or Karijini National Park, El Questro/ Emma Gorge, Cruise to the Buccaneer archipelago, Margaret River of course, just to name a variety of the most famous e perhaps the least affordable and most desirable. What these locations have in common is their vast distance from Perth and from each other. I believe that the investment opportunities for architecture lay on the way to these destinations, the Mid West, the Gascoyne, the Wheat belt and the Great Southern. We have the possibility of developing a number of exiting destinations between Perth and Exmouth, Perth and Broome, Perth and Kalgoorlie, Perth and Esperance, Perth and Meekatharra and beyond if we considered architecture as the '*in between destination*' and by architecture I mean sustainable architecture in all its eco applications.

12-Addressing the issues: subscribing to architecture for eco-tourism Image

The Midwest Tourism Strategy Cover Picture

Fitzgerald Biosphere Action Plan Cover Picture

The first document recognises the potential for development and the second addresses the requirements for the UNESCO site by naming architecture in its plan of action, for serious considerations. This plan is responding to the Seville Strategy and the Madrid action Plan 2008-13. Forgive me if my terminology is not exact when I refer to these documents but having the word architecture within is indeed exiting, though I think architecture, as a requirement, is yet to find proper strength and determination as a principle guideline. Of course I would say that, I am an architect and I promote my own profession but I am also a passionate road traveller and I am confident that I represent the very tourist type that these documents seem to be targeting.

<http://www.greengetawaysaustralia.com.au/tag/camping/>

14-The National Parks and Reserves as destinations: Who is in Charge?

Images:

The Ahwahnee Hotel

The Ahwahnee® Hotel History

In the early 1920's, Stephen Mather, the National Park Service Director, realized that the Park needed accommodations to suit the affluent and influential traveler. The concept of a hotel such as The Ahwahnee® became the impetus to draw such a visitor.

The site for The Ahwahnee, once a village of the native Miwoks, was chosen because of its exposure to the sun and stunning views of Yosemite's icons – Half Dome, Yosemite Falls and Glacier Point.

In July 1925, Gilbert Stanley Underwood was selected as the architect for Yosemite's new luxury hotel. Due to its remote location, the construction of The Ahwahnee was the most complex trucking endeavor of its day.

To book this hotel one has to try one year ahead of reservation time and my point is that this was the type of investment I am talking about. Yes we are talking about California and cannot be compared with Western Australia but say we take this place and there is a stark difference but what if we made 'apparent emptiness our new horizon?

15-Fitzgerald National Park: What if?

Image

Fitzgerald National Park

Pods

Innovative architecture

For the destination 'in between' imagine that every 200km on an imaginary road trip, the road trip to get to the big destinations, we found truly remarkable landscapes of indigenous significance and we proposed accommodation of the type that people would travel from all over Asia to come to and might have to book months ahead, just like the Ahwanhee. This type of investment could never be modelled on the generic as a type, not necessarily on the exclusive either, but it would consider the extraordinary and the exquisite. Transportable pods might fit that idea; learning about truly sustainable practices may be on offer as a link to the unspoilt. What if every town between Perth and Exmouth offered world-class accommodation that attracted interstate travellers on the way to overseas destination? A stopover on the way to Asia/Europe? By that I don't mean the Gualias or the Atacamas desert resort of the world but a much more humble and more sophisticated and humble ideas.

I don't think we can propose beautiful beaches alone or beautiful forest forever. They have them all over Asia, America and Europe crowded as they may be. Why do we go overseas? To experience what we don't have here. We know what is unique here. Currently what is not unique (apart for small instances) is accommodation as a destination. Not even Rottneest, our only Island, beautiful as it is, is a remarkable, unique and innovative architectural destination yet.

Images: Mqaa treehouse prototype

"Architecture can frame the big landscapes and put us into them better than anything else can" Nathan McQuoid- Landscape Ecologist.