

THE DYNAMIC DUO



DEVELOPING OUR CITY \

If it's conservatism you want in your building, then don't go to this couple, writes FRANCESCA CARTER.

Architecture practices, like architecture schools, can often develop a particular aesthetic. They casually throw around words such as “design-driven” and “innovation,” but few consistently challenge the norm.

The people at multi-award-winning practice McBride Charles Ryan (MCR) reinvent themselves with every project. Whether it's irregular-shaped houses with names such as Dome, Cave, Letterbox or *Harry Potter*-inspired schools, each work stands entirely apart.

“I think you always have to consider where you are,” says interior designer Debbie Ryan. “Sometimes you acknowledge what is there and see a need for something else.”

Ryan is just one half of MCR. The other half is her husband, architect Rob McBride. Over the past 20 years, their daring experiments with form and finish have influenced the way architecture is practised in Melbourne's often-conservative topography.

“I would say Rob has more to do with form and I have more to do with finish, if you really wanted to break it down,” Ryan said in an ABC documentary, *Life Architecturally*, which aired in February. “But we are highly dependent on each other.”

After working independently for a couple of years, Ryan and architects McBride and Anthony Charles decided to open their own practice in 1988. At the time

the economy was buoyant and, according to Ryan, “anyone who could basically pick up a pen had a job”.

Four months later a recession hit, and the newly established practice had to walk the streets to find work. To get by, they each took turns to work as consultants with other firms, which would pull in the money.

“There was this day called black Thursday, where I think three quarters of Melbourne's architects got the sack. It was a pretty grim time,” says Ryan.

Eventually Charles left the business, and the two survivors strengthened their vision – promoting innovative solutions, technical excellence and design integrity.

“We got this dumpy office in Queensberry Street and cleaned up the six inches of pigeon poo ... In the winter, it was colder in our office than it was outside, and it was hotter in the summer because it had a tin roof. Every morning we would come in and there was grit on our drawings ... but it taught us to be frugal and we slowly built up a good base of clients,” says Ryan.

“No matter what the economic circumstances are, we have always got a commitment to design ... We are continually trying to improve ourselves, our practice and the people who are working with us, so they've got better opportunities in the future.”

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Winners: the Klein Bottle House (top) won world's best house in 2008. The Dome house (above) remains a company favourite. (COURTESY MCR)

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Being in such a parlous financial situation, McBride and Ryan were forced to take a gamble on a small block of land in Port Melbourne. It had been on the market for two years and was down a lane. It was by no means a desirable block. But the savvy designers had ideas.

Inspired by Antoni Gaudi's Parish School in Barcelona, their project, Legon Street House, consists of three houses with an internal open plan, deck and mezzanine. They are unified by an undulating curved zinc wall/façade/Mansard, allowing inhabitants to feel ownership of the larger whole.

"That first house has taught us a really big lesson," says Ryan. "You've got to stick your neck out, you've got to live by what you believe in, and if you're committed to design there's always a way ... We did put it in the institute awards, which we didn't win that year, but it got us on people's radar."

Legon Street strongly encapsulates ideas that remain fundamental to MCR's thinking – it is a bold piece of architecture that enriches the urban experience. Ryan explains that at the time of construction, Port Melbourne was full of run-down workers' cottages and derelict streets. But the project changed the iconography and gave the suburb "something to be proud of".

One of their most celebrated projects, the Klein Bottle House, which won world's best house in the 2008 World Architecture Festival, also turns the traditional idea of a house on its head. A fusion of fibrous, form and colour, it demonstrates just what is possible through clever design.

"The house was on an inclination, which was the genesis," says Ryan. "We wanted to touch the earth

lightly because of that particular location, and we kept thinking about how we were going to do this. That's when Rob had the idea of the Klein surface, because we could wrap it up and around."

A Klein bottle is described as a closed surface with only one side, formed by passing the neck of the tube through the side of the tube, like a loop, to join the base. Virtually unheard of outside the world of high mathematics and science, the shape has no boundary; its inside is its outside.

Using this shape unlocked a new series of relationships and a sequential spatial experience. The top of the spiral, was pushed down to intersect itself, and the contents of the bottle, a rectilinear platform and walls, make the abstract geometry inhabitable.

Entry to the house is upstairs and rooms spiral around an internal courtyard.

"I personally think, we're in the business of entertainment," says Ryan. "Unusual forms always capture people's imaginations, and that's partly our aim in architecture."

The Dome House, one of the firm's favourite projects, is also a direct response to the site and the brief by the client (Ryan's mother). Embedded at the end of a court in Hawthorn and backing onto a Victorian mansion, the house MCR designed tested the boundaries of art.

"Mum said she wanted a close connection to her garden but she didn't want it to be huge," says Ryan. "We observed what people love about Hawthorn, and its nature. They love the fact that there's detail on buildings, there are chimneys, dovescotes, turrets ... that's what gives us some sort of delight to that suburb. We thought why don't we try and reinterpret those in a modern way, and deal with a way people like to live now."

Described by McBride as the "perfect project",

"You've got to stick your neck out..."



2001 odyssey: Wynnstay Road accommodated 10 houses within the block's length. (COURTESY MCR)

the idea was to take a pure form – a copper sphere, the shape borrowed from Roy Grounds' Australian Academy of Science – and use sophisticated methods enabled by digital technology to produce several cuts, slices, grafts and amputations, resulting in a highly wrought composition outclassing its neighbours.

Architect Stuart Harrison has been following MCR's career over the past decade. In his radio program on Triple R, *The Architects*, Harrison and colleagues Simon Knott and Christine Phillips regularly debate their unusual and unexpected designs.



PEGS

"We have been real champions of MCR because the architecture never gives in," says Harrison. "They take projects that some architects are unable to do. They are really dogged and hard working, and the work itself is hard working. It's often pretty rich formally and in terms of colour; I like it because it's not a traditional architectural palette."

Expressive form making is not just limited to residential projects. The pair believe it is part of their role to contribute to the iconography of the city and, in turn, Melbourne has been blessed with some

fantastic public projects, from Monaco House in Ridgway Place to the jewel-like Yardmasters Building in the Docklands railyards.

"They say if you can make it in Melbourne you can make it anywhere," says Stephen Crafti, a design and architecture writer. "MCR have always had this huge talent, and they were persistent, always sticking to their guns. People have slowly begun to recognise their talent, and look where they are now. They have a staff of over 25 and are winning huge projects."

In the past few years, MCR has cemented a reputation for producing educational designs that have simultaneously changed the learning experience while activating the setting. Although each project fulfils a different purpose, they all serve as testimonies to a new approach to literally building the education revolution.

From the street, it's hard to miss the tall, multicoloured brick wall of Fitzroy High School, that moves in and out like a wave. But perhaps more significant than this appearance is the consultation process at the school, with students and teachers encouraging a design that included flexible spaces, team teaching and a focus on inquiry-based learning.

"Fitzroy High School really did explore other ways of education, and other ways of space," says Ryan. "They had a different model that worked for them, and I think the biggest thing in our practice is we listen very carefully to the sorts of things our clients are trying to get out of the project."

"Fitzroy wanted people to know they were a public facility, to get adult education and things like that going. So it was important to be a public marker."

Nestled among traditional school buildings, including a distinctive grand Italianate construction, and simplified structures from the 1960s, the new Penleigh and Essendon Grammar Junior Boys' School (PEGS) also has a robust façade with a touch of the whimsical.

Loosely derived from the silhouette of a Federation-style house designed by well-known

architect Beverley Ussher, the new building has a glazed black-brick façade, devoid of windows.

"We really wanted to ignite the imagination of young boys," says Ryan. "We sort of see it like a Ron Mueck sculpture. There is this oversized nature; you know what it is, but it's that sense of reality and unreality. And it's the same with *Harry Potter* books. People know this is a made-up story but they still get involved with it."

One of the practice's most complex geometric projects has been the Penleigh and Essendon Grammar Senior School, in the shape of an infinity symbol. It was recently completed and students from years 11 and 12, who moved in during February, are now discovering how far architectural boundaries can be pushed.

Watching an animated Ryan point out the individual features on a complex representation on the computer, it becomes apparent that this school embodies MCR's core mission: it is only through solving the problems to complex geometries that design and construction innovation can be achieved.

At the heart of the loop is the library, with specialist precincts such as art and science being distributed throughout the form. Each precinct has its own unique quality yet is seamlessly connected to the next – embodying the journey of education, the crossover between disciplines and the idea that learning is boundless.

The metaphor has attracted much enthusiasm, and while it is an ambitious project, it's one that will no doubt turn judges' heads.

"Clients often come in and say they want something timeless, but everything is relevant to a certain time; even the concrete boxes that you see now will date," says Ryan.

"But good architecture will always be popular, and I like to think our buildings will have that life cycle."

fcarter@theweeklyreview.com.au

» www.mcbridecharlesryan.com.au