

DESIGN Three leading Australian architects talk about the relationship between inspiration and the lines on a page, tracing the path from concept to construction.

From sketch to skyline

KERSTIN THOMPSON
Kerstin Thompson Architects

Practicality is at the heart of Kerstin Thompson's choice of the black, A5 gridded notebooks that accompany her everywhere. Thompson, whose projects have included the award-winning visitors centre at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne, and the recently opened Monash University Museum of Art at Caulfield, uses her "precious" notebooks as both personal diary and work tool. Describing herself as "the opposite of mono-focused", she pursues a number of projects across adjoining pages, words and sketches butting up against each other.

"The sorts of drawings I do in the notebooks are more the recording of a thought," she says. "They are like an in-transit recording of things, that's why [the books] are little and transportable."

Thompson carries a notebook even while out walking, something she admits is "sort of ridiculous."

"It's rare that I would stop and draw something or write something down, but I like to know that I could. I probably started carrying notebooks in my late teens. It becomes a habit and you can't go anywhere without them."

Leafing through her current sketchbook, she comes across dried jacaranda petals, the odd drawing added by her son, and "iterations" of the Monash project. "That's a project that's been around for a long time, and I'm surprised at how many notebooks it's turned up in," she says.

Throughout the notebooks, central ideas are highlighted in yellow, a habit she picked up after a friend gave her a yellow pencil some years back. "I'm very attached to the colour, it's a good yellow."

Admitting that most architects

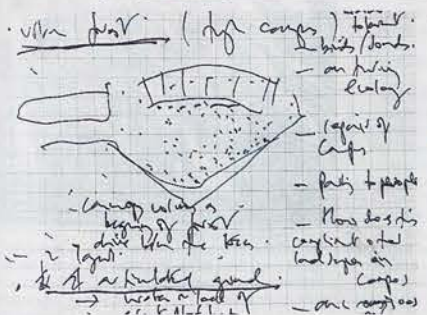
have a "fetish for stationery", Thompson says the gridded pages of her notebooks accommodate her dual processes of writing and drawing. "I like some kind of line, but not being just straight lines means it's also good for drawing."

In her part-time role as a teacher of architecture, Thompson urges her students to abandon preciousness in their drawings. "Sketches are just like speaking. They're not precious, they're just a communication tool to yourself or to others," she says. "You don't even need to think that much as you draw, it's that very direct movement, you think through the drawing... that's how you hold onto it, or capture it enough to progress it."

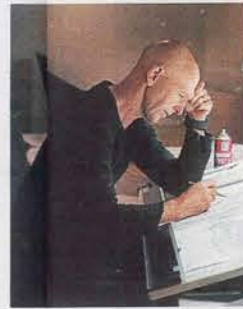
"Some people might have a notebook per project, which makes good sense. But I do cross-fertilise, so in a way, these are a recording of the preoccupations at that point in time. They are a great record of progression. I work through a number of things being parallel to each other. The notebooks show that jumping around, which is how I do things."

Thompson says she lacks the temperament "for one thing over a long time", and finds that by working through the problems in one project, she's often able to find a solution somewhere else. "That movement between things is where a lot of the productivity takes place. So in that sense, the notebooks enable you to hold on to things while you move. It's often in transit that you do good thinking. The notebooks capture something of that mobile mind."

Thompson compares sketches to haiku, the deceptively simple three-line poems in which big ideas are expressed with brevity and precision. "They're very short, there's very few words, but they're incredibly suggestive; they make something much bigger than themselves. Sketches are small and condensed holders of many, many ideas." **LINDY PERCIVAL**



Kerstin Thompson (above) uses her notebooks (top and left) as diary and work tool. PICTURES: RODGER CUMMINS



Barrie Marshall (left) carries ideas in his head until they are ready to sketch (above and top). PICTURES AND COVER: RODGER CUMMINS

BARRIE MARSHALL
Denton Corker Marshall

A pile of sketches lie scattered in a corner of the long, thin room in which Barrie Marshall translates ideas onto paper. One of the team behind the internationally renowned Denton Corker Marshall, his sketches range from free-flowing conceptual works to meticulously detailed streetscapes. Unlike many architects, Marshall eschews the notebook, preferring to carry ideas and inspirations in his memory until he is ready to commit them to the page.

"Drawings are for me just a means of expressing an idea," he says. "When I go around looking at things, rather than sketch something that I think looks good, I'm looking at it and thinking about whether it works or not, but it doesn't become too specific. Later on, when you start designing a building, you're not remembering them clearly, you just

remember that one material worked against another material, for example. It's almost irritating in that you can't remember exactly how they achieved it, but this way, you put your interpretation on what was a good idea. In a strange way, I do drawings after the event - it's almost to confirm an idea."

Marshall, whose sketches are praised by fellow architects for their beauty, says he doesn't approach the drawing board until an idea has already begun to take shape.

"People think that as you're sketching, the ideas are popping into your head and the sketch is sort of inspiring you, but you can't put a line on a piece of paper until you've got a reason for doing it," he says. "On the other hand, you can use sketching, once you've got that idea, to look at it from different views and angles and make sure that it is working. So it is a working tool at one level."

Marshall's sketches capture the firm's architectural style, which is often based on what he calls "a simple, strong sculptural idea."

The trick, he says, is to hold on to that. "It's no good having a great idea for a building just because the shape looks good if it doesn't work. So you've quickly got to run through in your head all the parameters - you've got a brief, a budget, it's got to be buildable, it's got to function properly. A sketch is a lie if it doesn't express the possibility of what you can achieve."

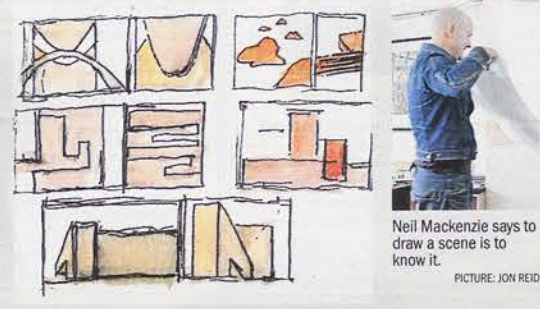
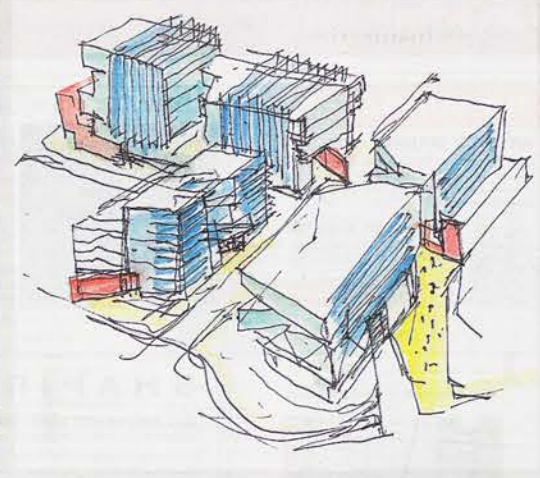
"The drawings I try to do are all about conveying what the essential idea is, not so much the details. Once you've hooked on to that idea, it becomes much easier to then sell the rest of the project to the client because they're already part of the process."

At a time when so much architectural drawing is done via computer, Marshall remains committed to the drawing board. "What I do is just sit at the drawing board with bits of butter paper and the project starts and you do lots and lots of sketches," he says. "I'm about the only person in the office who's got a drawing board. I don't use computers at all.

I've resisted it probably because I'm pig-headed, but also because the trouble with computers is your drawing is too precise. The nice thing about drawing by hand is that it gives you time to think. If you sit down at a computer, you've got the decision straight away: 'Where does that line go from here to there?'"

"A lot of architects can work that way, but for me, I prefer to just think about things and then do a little sketch of it. If you're happy with the little sketch that you've done, if it's a strong idea and everybody likes it, then they go away with confidence, rather than thinking maybe there's a better idea or we should try something else."

"I can see why people like to have a little black book with all their ideas in it, because it gives you something tangible, particularly because a lot of these things never actually happen. But I'm only really interested if something's going to be built. There's not much point doing all these wonderful schemes if it's just a waste of energy." **LINDY PERCIVAL**



Neil Mackenzie says to draw a scene is to know it. PICTURE: JON REID

NEIL MACKENZIE
MackenziePronk Architects

Neil Mackenzie's sketchbooks are more like beautiful visual diaries. He started keeping them just after he finished university, and he still takes two wherever he goes: one small book (good for drawing on the bus) and a larger one (good if he can spread out at a cafe). He keeps two big plastic crates full of these old sketchbooks in his office, an intimate record of his working and personal life. They contain sketches of buildings he's worked on, portraits of friends, writing, his daughters' passport photographs, newspaper cuttings about Sydney's monorail, a ticket to a Paul Weller concert, another to Rolf Harris, and a beautiful watercolour of Varanasi that he spent 2½ hours doing when he was young and on holiday in India. There's another painting next to it of the Ganges, looking down from exactly the same spot.

"It's a total meditation," he says of the painting process. "It's that whole thing that to draw it is to truly know it."

Painting fixes the scenes in memory, for later use. "In the time since looking down and drawing those ghats [stepped embankments], I've probably had five conversations about morphologies of that type of river edge. You're immediately there, because you know it, you've felt it with a pencil."

Mackenzie keeps on his desk at work his current sketchbook and the one immediately before it, because he often dips into them. He draws at every stage of a building's progress, from site sketches through to the end.

"Going to your sketchbook is a way of solving problems. Sometimes, if I can't solve a problem in one medium I'll change medium. I'll use a soft fat pencil, or I'll use watercolour."

"It's a bit like the old adage that if you can't solve a planning problem, you turn the plan upside down. It's just a different way of looking at it."

As he's grown older, and had less free time, the books have become less like journals, more like work books. Their size has changed, too. He used to favour soft-covered, passport-sized ones he could carry in a back pocket; now he likes bigger, hard-covered ones.

He likes them to be messy. "There are some legendary sketchbooks of artists. Donald Friend's books are these utter works of art, where there's not a single mistake."

"I actually prefer the opposite. I like to make a mess on my first page, because then you're not precious about it."

He tried doing a neat one once. He pulls out a book from 2000 that is made of stylishly rough-hewn paper, that's exquisitely and carefully drawn.

"On one level I was really enjoying having the different paper, but then I remember feeling it was limiting. I was treating it too well. The paper was too nice."

That phase didn't last long. Soon he was back to messy. Yet even now, he will occasionally start a book and decide that the first few drawings are too good. Then he'll call one of his young daughters over and say to her: "Can you make a mess in this for me?"

CATHERINE KEENAN