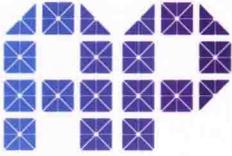




# Mastering Architecture





**Architecture in Practice**

# Mastering Architecture

## Becoming a Creative Innovator in Practice

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Leon van Schaik

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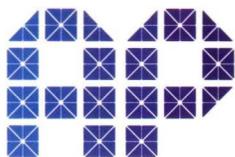
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Published in Great Britain in 2005 by Wiley-Academy,  
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Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex PO19 8SQ, England  
Telephone (+44) 1243 779777

Email (for orders & customer service enquiries): [cs-books@wiley.co.uk](mailto:cs-books@wiley.co.uk)  
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John Wiley & Sons Inc., 111 River Street,  
Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

Jossey-Bass, 989 Market Street,  
San Francisco, CA 94103-1741, USA

Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH, Boschstr. 12,  
D-69469 Weinheim, Germany

John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd, 33 Park Road,  
Milton, Queensland 4064, Australia

John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2 Clementi Loop #02-01,  
Jin Xing Distripark, Singapore 129809

John Wiley & Sons Canada Ltd, 22 Worcester Road,  
Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada M9W 1L1

ISBN 0470092424

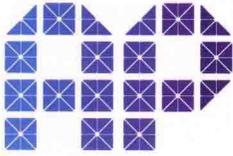
Cover: Minifie-Nixon, Centre for Ideas, Victorian College  
of the Arts, Melbourne, 2003 Photo © Peter Bennets

Series designer: Christian Küsters, CHK Design, London

Layout and prepress: Artmedia Press, London

Printed and bound in Italy by Conti Tipocolor

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Introduction

# Mastering Architecture

## Becoming a Creative Practitioner

How to achieve mastery and convert it into a  
platform for creative innovation in architecture

Photomontage from the series *Tall Tales (But True)*, Peter Lyssiotis



## Proposition

MASTERING A FIELD OF ENDEAVOUR PREPARES YOU TO BECOME A PRACTITIONER IN A FIELD. WHAT KIND OF MASTERY PREPARES YOU TO GO BEYOND THIS AND BECOME A CREATIVE INNOVATOR<sup>1</sup> IN THAT FIELD? IN THIS BOOK I DESCRIBE VARIOUS WAYS IN WHICH ARCHITECTS HAVE ESTABLISHED A MASTERY THAT HAS BECOME THE PLATFORM FOR THEIR PRACTICE AND THEN FOR THEIR CREATIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOMAIN OF ARCHITECTURE. IN DOING THIS I DRAW ON OVER 30 YEARS – 40 IF I INCLUDE MY OWN EDUCATION – OF BEING AN ARCHITECT AND OF BECOMING INVOLVED IN THE EDUCATION OF ARCHITECTS, MUCH OF THIS EXPERIMENTAL IN NATURE. MY OWN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF COLLEAGUES, ESTABLISHED THROUGH MY STUDY AT THE ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION (AA) SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE IN LONDON, AND MORE ESPECIALLY CREATED DURING MY PERIOD OF TEACHING THERE UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ALVIN BOYARSKY IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, PROVIDES THE CONTEXT FOR THE WORK WITH PRACTITIONERS THAT THIS BOOK'S PROPOSITION RESEARCHES AND REVEALS. MANY OF THE CASE STUDIES IN THE BOOK STEM FROM THIS NETWORK, AND THAT IN ITSELF IS AN EXAMPLE OF HOW GROUPS SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR REACHING TOWARDS MASTERY AND ON TO INNOVATION. WITHOUT THIS NETWORK I WOULD HAVE BEEN ILL-EQUIPPED FOR THE LATTER HALF OF THIS TIME, WHICH HAS BEEN FOCUSED ON WORKING WITH PRACTITIONERS WHO ARE ACKNOWLEDGED BY THEIR PEERS TO BE MASTERS IN ARCHITECTURE. THROUGH THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR MASTERY THEY HAVE BECOME INNOVATORS WHO ARE CHANGING THE WAYS IN WHICH WE THINK ABOUT ARCHITECTURE. I HAVE BEEN HELPING THEM TO INVESTIGATE THE NATURE OF THEIR MASTERY, AND WORKING WITH THEM WHILE THEY BUILD A CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE DIRECTION FROM THAT UNDERSTANDING.

## Origin of My Interest in Mastering Architecture

These architects have worked with me and with my team (Sand Helsel and Ranulph Glanville) in the 'by invitation' research programme at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT), henceforth referred to as a 'masters', in distinction from other programmes which are referred to as 'Masters'. I began this programme in 1987 because I could see that there was a broad but unacknowledged mastery in the work of practitioners who had been active for at least a decade,<sup>2</sup> but who felt themselves to be on the outskirts of debate, especially of international debate. I thought that bringing them into contact with each other within a reflective process might develop them personally, but also extend their confidence in the local discourse to the point at which they could argue for their work in any forum. They are invited on the basis of their having established – over at least a decade – a mastery of their domain and they are asked to reflect upon the nature of that mastery within a critical framework. Then they are asked to speculate, through looking at their ongoing work, about the future directions of their practice. Out of this, over and again, has arisen innovation. In the critical framework, we focus on their 'research question', the driving enquiry that motivates them, but which all too often has been submerged into background noise by the sheer demands of practice. A critical shift occurs when their reflection enables them to transcend their often almost compulsive worrying at the actualities of



## Cities

The architects who are involved in this exploration of mastery and innovation come from many cities. Some now reside in Antwerp, Austin, Brisbane, Christchurch, Hobart, Hong Kong, London, Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne, New York, Perth (Western Australia), Singapore and Sydney. Some have lived in Tokyo. Many met as students in London; others were invited to participate in the research programme at RMIT that has provided so much of the material for this book. Their individual journeys and their supportive interactions

with others are the evidence on which the propositions of this book rest. Over and again their stories reveal a consistent pattern of development as creative individuals. Over and again we see their successes playing out in accord with certain basic principles of engagement in any domain of knowledge and practice. Their mastery is forged in their experiences of city regions, and collectives that tend to network across more than one city support their innovations. City life is vital to mastery and to creative innovation. To know about the vibrancy of

the intellectual life that a city region supports in a domain, we need to know how many fields that the domain sustains, providing ongoing attention to the good ideas of practitioners. Where a city is dominated by one position, architectural culture is weak. Where it is contested between two positions, it is robust. Where it is contested by three, it is vibrant. The stories of individuals, collectives and cities are interwoven in this account of achieving mastery and transcending it to become innovative and creative practitioners in many places.

their situation: a threshold between tribal repetition and innovation is crossed. Invariably they are surprised and elated by the command that this process gives them over their future practice. They report that being more aware of the nature of their mastery enables them to transcend it and to attract the clients who have similar interests. No longer are they trapped in generic public relations talk about the services they provide. They are different and they can demonstrate how and why. They come from around the world, mostly from the city-states of Australia – Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane and Hobart – with a group from the Chinese diasporas in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and individuals from Christchurch, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai and New York. Conversations about the work have been extensive, with foci in Austin, Helsinki, London and Singapore. This is facilitated because architecture is an international practice and it is true to an extent that practitioners in a domain have more in common with each other than they do with members of their family who practise in other domains.<sup>3</sup>

## What Is Mastery?

I began by defining mastery as a form of peer recognition. It seemed to me that people whose work had won awards, had been professionally reviewed in journals and had been the subject of monographs and exhibited in curated exhibitions were being acknowledged as having a mastery in a field of the domain of architecture. In the main such people have been working in the domain for a decade and they are ready to consolidate their position in a field and move into creative innovation. This, I have discovered, is a very common way of defining

### Opposite Top Charles Jencks, Diagram I – Critical Modernism; An Imminent Dialectic, Evolutionary Tree, 2000

This was developed while Jencks was teaching at the AA in the 1960s and was published in Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods, New Concepts of Architecture*, Studio Vista, London, 1971, p 46. It is interesting to review this seminal diagram in the light of 'the law of small numbers'. The notion that mastery is a local phenomenon, while innovation is necessarily projected into global discourse, makes this of critical moment. Jencks identifies six traditions in the domain of architecture: logical, idealist, self-conscious, intuitive, activist and unselfconscious. Within these traditions are the movements or 'fields' at play in any given era. In 1990, for example, neo-modernism, post-modernism, minimalism, corporate modernism, classical revivalism, biomorphic, deconstruction, ecstatic, CAD and internet are all at play. Further to this, Jencks suggests that the diagram needs to be more complex: 'it should be in three dimensions showing all the traditions simultaneously'. Even though there are large holes or tears in the two-dimensional diagram, the environment that this conjures up is counter to all of the evidence about intellectual change. I suspect that this is because what is lacking is not the third dimension but a cultural topography. The diagram suffers from a dislocation of place. This is similar to the way in which the conclusions Richard Florida draws from analysis of the cities of the USA become meaninglessly abstract when applied to the former nation-states of Europe. Apply 'place' to Jencks's diagram and the traditions at play at any given time shrink to no more than three.

### Opposite Bottom Leon van Schaik's Pictogram of today's Melbourne Architecture Community: Civics, Technics and Poetics



**PROVINCE AND METROPOLIS**

**This cube reconciles three sets of conditions that are needed for creative innovation to occur**

Cascading down the face of the cube which has the word 'INDIVIDUAL' inscribed on the top arris are the qualities of the natural history of creative individuals. Such people undertake a journey that begins on the fringes of a domain of knowledge: they are drawn to the centre, engaging for a formative period with peers who are undaunted explorers of the chosen terrain or field within the domain, where they find a problem that obsesses them. They become isolated through their sense of being on the verge of a breakthrough that they cannot quite explain. As they master the field they crave recognition but throughout their careers they maintain their marginality and exploit their awkwardness with existing structures as a source of the energy that drives them to transcend mastery and achieve innovation. Much of this takes place through 'weak' connecting – that ability to find linkages where conventional wisdom can see none. These characteristics have been identified by Howard Gardner through decades of studying creativity.

The arris between this face and the next is incised with the word 'REBELS'. Both faces have some of the qualities of the rebel and of rebellion identified by Albert Camus: to design is to assert an alternative future.

On the other face of the cube cascade the characteristics of the ritualised behaviours or social

structures that support intellectual change. These structures have a public order but are not ossified into establishments. They often begin life as Salons des Refusés. These informal and often unconscious fields are subject to a 'law of small numbers'. Their members are intellectually enchained in small groups and divided by substantive differences into two or three positions. They thrive on competition and are motivated by ideas rather than material gains. These informal public orders encourage mastery and support creativity with the sustained attention that it needs in order to become innovation. Such public orders can thwart intellectual change by focusing on technical refinement, becoming the tools of an overshadowing personality, or by being complicit in the forgetting of cultural capital. Randall Collins, in his comprehensive survey of intellectual change, has identified these characteristics.

The top face of the cube is incised with 'ENVIRONMENT'. Here, between education and enterprise, and between the eidetic, subjective actuality of the province and the generalising abstracting discourse of the metropolis, these forces are played out in iterative achievements of plateaus of mastery and breakthroughs into innovations that demand new masteries. These processes are served by scholar-interpreters and calcified by curriculum definers.

Mastery is of the province, innovation is of the metropolis.



- SCHOLAR-INTERPRETERS
- NO CURRICULUM SYSTEM

- WEAK CONNECTIONS

PROVINCE & METROPOLIS  
Lyon & San Chaik

