

Radio Architect



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Most people know why they need a doctor or a lawyer – usually because of a health or a legal problem. But why do you go to an architect? In theory you go to an architect when you have a design problem, like what to do with an old house or cramped office. In practice, however, approximately 95 per cent of all buildings in Australia, as in most countries around the world, are designed with little if any help from a certified architect. Instead a myriad of ‘building professionals’, from interior designers to engineers, architectural drafters and project managers are responsible for the large majority of the buildings that surround you. It’s a fact that begs the question to be asked again – what exactly do architects do? Answering this question is perhaps the best way to summarise what is most important about *The Architects*: a weekly radio show that has been discussing and debating architecture for almost eight years. The show is hosted by Stuart Harrison, Rory Hyde, Simon Knott and Christine Phillips.



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Importantly, this discussion is not convened within the hallowed halls of academia or soapboxed from the podiums of professional conferences, but delivered every Tuesday evening on the open airways of one of Melbourne’s longest-running community radio stations – Triple R. The show is also available for download online and has a growing global audience. Although architects are a key constituency within the show’s loyal listeners, the structure, language and spirit of the show is unashamedly aimed at a general listening public. “The show speaks to a bigger idea of architecture and how it might communicate to a wider public,” says Harrison who is also an award-winning architectural writer in his own right. “The idea of the show was to try to bridge the gap between professional discussion on architecture and the wider community.”

Some of you might be tempted to think, ‘What’s the big deal about an architecture radio show?’ It’s a good question. One of the reasons it is a big deal is that this modestly resourced weekly radio show is possibly unique in the world. There may be some architecture radio shows that pop up here and there, or the occasional guest slot on a general design show, but the longevity and consistent high level of discussion generated by *The Architects*, makes this show a truly global one-off. All from a modest community radio studio in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

In some ways the very idea of a radio show about architecture could seem anomalous. Architecture after all, is best experienced in person. Nothing beats standing in front of a great building. If that’s not possible, for most people the ‘next level down’ of experience is to see architecture as mediated through the image, in glossy, large-format magazines and books, and increasingly in online portals that have together created a vast sea of what the profession disparagingly calls ‘archiporn’ – glamorous photo sets showing immaculately crafted buildings shot in dramatic wide angle and bathed in the honeyed light of sunset.

In this context the idea of communicating architecture through nothing but the human voice, transmitted by electromagnetic waves (pretty much the same technology as used almost a century ago) might seem a little outmoded. But *The Architects’* presenters think differently. “I would say that our definition of architecture is something that goes beyond both the physical and the visual. It’s about people, trends, ideas and society,” says Hyde, the show’s international correspondent based in the Netherlands. “The formal aspect of architecture – what it looks like and feels like – is obviously very important,” adds Hyde, “but sometimes if you put that to one side you can have a deeper conversation about why architecture matters.”

Recurring themes within the radio show include debates about what impact technology has on both design practice and building construction, how new public architecture is funded and procured, how architecture can help make a better city or improve housing in Australia, and what it means to talk of sustainable architecture. These kinds of questions go to the heart of understanding the contemporary world, and the place architecture plays in forming it.

The proof in this pudding, you might say, lies in numbers. As media empires around the world wring their hands at the rapid rate of change in the media environment, and the consequent uncertainty around their business models, *The Architects* show sits gloriously immune to the vicissitudes of this turmoil. Since the radio station which hosts *The Architects*, is funded almost entirely from subscriber/listeners, the show’s producers do not have to beat to the drum of advertisers and business development managers (with the ever-present threat to editorial independence), but must simply ensure that the listeners like what they hear and stay tuned.

So far that has not been a problem. *The Architects* boasts increased radio listeners and podcast

downloads, proving that old and new media can sit happily side by side (all four presenters are committed bloggers, tweeters and social networkers). “In some ways the radio format is much more inclusive than other visual forms of representing architecture,” says Phillips. “There are lots of people who don’t buy architecture books and don’t necessarily know which website to look at, but if they happen to tune in, they stay tuned and engage.”

Despite the show’s successes, including winning the prestigious Bates Smart Architecture in the Media Award in 2005, *The Architects* remains committed to its lo-fi origins and to direct style. “It is important that the show has spontaneity and is unedited. This somehow allows us to have a more honest conversation about architectural ideas,” says Phillips.

Harrison agrees, “There is definitely something Australian about the show – a certain willingness to talk robustly and directly, and also an attitude to working with the bare necessities. This is especially important when it comes to live outside broadcasts. In a way we are exploring the idea of what is the least you need to do to make radio? This of course comes out of a long tradition of independent community radio.”

This spirit of doing a lot with little will be evident in their project for the Venice Biennale. While some architects invited to participate in the world’s most prestigious architecture event might be tempted into hubris, creating extravagant installations or seductive media-grabbing stunts, *The Architects’* presenters have kept it practical and immediate. A wooden cart has been made, not unlike the distinctive carts used by Venetian traders to hock their merchandise around Venice, on which will be transported a small mobile radio set-up: one radio transmitter, one mixing panel, miscellaneous microphones and cables, and a laptop.

This ‘seat-trolley’ will act as table, bench and seat, and will be pushed around the streets of Venice, placed here and there to capture live interviews and engage with those visiting the Biennale. As if a symbol for the itinerant nature of these large global cultural events, *The Architects’* presenters have created an undecorated cart as their mobile media centre that wears its vagrancy on its sleeve.

When not moving through Venice, *The Architects* will be broadcast from the Australian Pavilion and from a series of ‘flash formations’ related to the exhibition that will occur at discrete locations in the city during the Vernissage.

Although the curatorial theme of the overall Biennale was announced well after this idea was formed, it turns out that *The Architects* show has been remarkably prescient. The Biennale theme, launched by British architect David Chipperfield on 2 May in the Aula Magna of the Faculty of Architecture in Rome, is *Common Ground*. A twist on the medieval English idea of Common Land (a place where all citizens, even the lowest, shared many equal rights), *Common Ground* captures what Chipperfield describes as “that shared space where two or three people state they have probably found a point of encounter”. What better expression of common ground than two or more people gathered around a bench discussing the meaning of architecture, and broadcasting this across the free airwaves to those with a mind to listen.

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