CLAIMS TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ST. LUCIA HOUSE
AS DESIGN RESEARCH & CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE.
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Summary
A. The fundamental claim for the significance of the St Lucia House is that it is a novel spatial configuration for housing that demonstrates an economically feasible, socially and environmentally sustainable and aesthetically and culturally desirable model of higher density family living for South-East Queensland.

B. A secondary claim is that the St Lucia House demonstrates a high level of achievement in the art and science of architecture.

C. A third claim is that the St Lucia House and associated publications have served to exemplify and influence academic, professional and public acceptance of a 'regional modernist' theoretical position and its values in Queensland.

D. A fourth claim is that the St Lucia House and associated publications, exemplify an appropriate model for future research by design within the field of architecture.

A. The component arguments for (1) Environmental, (2) Urban Design, (3) Social, (4) Spatial, (5) Constructional, and (6) Theoretical propositions advanced in this design are outlined on subsequent pages.

As the design is manifested as a built architectural work, some of these propositions are now assessable through direct measurement and analysis (1, 5), some through modelling and projection (2) and some through expert assessment (4). The component arguments could all be appraised and debated against existing theory and built precedents. Some of this assessment has been done (4), or is being done (1) by others. Some (3, 6) will require the passage of time for conclusive evaluation.

The fundamental claim for the significance of the work is not that it breaks radically new ground in any one of these six areas (although there are demonstrable innovations in most) or that it represents an optimisation or ideal solution in any one of the six individual areas. The central claim is that it is an original and singular architectural design synthesis that results in a simultaneous and appropriately balanced attainment of ambitions in all six areas, with a resulting beneficial synergy.

In practical terms: should this housing model be seen as desirable due its perceived social, cultural, or aesthetic qualities, and its principles widely adopted in new housing, there would be community benefits across the broader issues of environmental, urban and social sustainability.

B. Supporting evidence from peer review follows in (7).

C. This is a personal perception of the impact of the ideas summarised in (6). Peer appraisal may support this view.

D. As a built work of architectural design research, the St. Lucia House is limited by specific site, client and budget constraints. At the same time, the design proposal seeks to exemplify particular strategies and principles with much broader application and impact. As a built work, the proposal is also now amenable to cross-disciplinary assessment and evaluation, in a way that is not always possible with more theoretical design research propositions.

Current personal design research investigations extrapolate the principles underlying this model to smaller sites, multiple-residential applications and taller house-forms. This theoretical work is based on generic rather than site-specific applications and, like the St Lucia House, is primarily creative and projective ('theory-building') rather than analytical and evaluative ('theory-testing') research. Like the St. Lucia House, the work will primarily aim for dissemination and peer review from within the discipline of Architecture.
This is a mode of architectural research by design, important to myself and my architectural colleagues, that would benefit from explicit endorsement or comment from the Academic Board of the University of Queensland.

Design research as a contribution to architectural knowledge.

Design research is a creative enquiry that seeks to propose answers to the most general architectural research question, “How should we build, at this place, at this time”. By its nature, design research is not solely an examination of the built environment as it is, but a projection of what it could be, or should be. Design research involves analysis, experimentation, evaluation and judgement, and its outcome is often polemical.

As architecture has both physical and cultural dimensions it is the subject of scrutiny across a broad spectrum of traditional research paradigms within the physical sciences, engineering, social sciences, humanities and arts. The architectural design is an integrative creative act that seeks to construct a successful and original synthesis of these disparate and sometimes competing considerations, through three-dimensional material and spatial constructs. Excellence in architectural design can be assessed not just on the validity of component propositions within each separate science/humanities paradigm, but also in their creative synthesis, the art of architecture.

The St Lucia house project is presented here as architectural design research that investigates the improved design of a common and problematic building type, that proposes innovative and replicable responses to a broad range of significant issues in contemporary architectural practice and that demonstrates the succinct synthesis of these ideas in a single built work which is presented for expert testing and peer review.

This project, designed collaboratively with Elizabeth Watson-Brown and built in 1997-98, is the most significant outcome of my architectural design research to date and has been recognised by significant awards and critical attention within the discipline of Architecture. The project is the culmination of earlier investigations into lightweight construction methods, passive climatic design for the coastal sub-tropics, critical regionalism, local and international modernism, small-lot housing, flexible intergenerational living arrangements, inside-outside space and spatial sequence in architecture, and has been used to exemplify and illustrate some of these arguments in subsequent research publications. The major claims that can be made for its significance are briefly summarised in the following broad areas:

1. Environmental Design.

The startling rise in the percentage of air-conditioned houses in South-East Queensland from 17% to 56% over the past decade, in an era of apparently rising environmental awareness, highlights the urgent need for architecture to make a significant contribution to environmental sustainability through the design of socially-desirable low-energy buildings which provide acceptable physiological comfort in our climate.

Most prevailing ‘environmental design’ models (including those encouraged by the Building Code of Australia) adopt a defensive attitude to climate, accepting air-conditioning use as inevitable and promoting defensive envelope design using insulation and a reduction in openings and infiltration to “conserve” energy in extreme situations. The St Lucia House is premised on the counter argument, that there is little energy to conserve if buildings are designed to be thermally comfortable without the use of air-conditioning. Passive solar gain can mitigate winter discomfort and efficient shading and ventilation can make above-average summer temperature peaks more tolerable. More importantly, the 10° annual average monthly maxima and minima thermal variations should be seen as not only tolerable, but as a positively pleasurable aspect of sub-tropical living if accommodated in the design of the building fabric and celebrated in planning for appropriate seasonal lifestyle.

The St Lucia House employs generally well-established climatic design principles but the following major strategies are specifically emphasised in this design for environmental and polemical effect:

- **Orientation & Form.** A very shallow height/depth/length ratio gives due north orientation to every major room.
- **Microclimate.** Shade, transpiration and evaporation in the heavily treed northern court pre-cools summer breezes.
- **Ventilation.** The tall, one-room deep house has a 50% openable north wall and high southern openings to maximise cross-ventilation, venturi and convection effects. Internal spaces are designed as openly as possible to maximise air movement, supplemented only by occasional bedroom fan use.
**Solar Gain.** The tall north window wall is fully shaded in summer and maximises winter sun penetration.

**Thermal Zoning.** Lightweight upper storeys vent and cool rapidly in summer evenings, while earth-coupled lower rooms provide ‘retreat’ spaces using thermal lag effects.

**Appropriate Lifestyle.** Outdoor summer living is promoted through easy interrelation of open living, kitchen, deck, barbeque, court and pool areas. Pool-side living spaces are designed for informal use in wet clothing.

The house is not claimed as an exemplar of total energy conservation. It does not address the issue of ‘add-on’ engineering efficiencies available through energy harvest, water heating or selection of fittings and appliances, but focuses on the more fundamentally architectural problem of appropriate integration of form, function and fabric for thermal comfort. It seeks to exemplify and promulgate an attractive and desirable model of housing that responds to and celebrates our climate, rather than to seek to neutralise it through energy expenditure.

The principles employed are simple, economical and widely applicable in our region. An ARC project team from the University of Adelaide is currently undertaking an independent quantitative appraisal based on 12 months of thermal monitoring, and I look forward to analysing their findings.

It is premature at this stage to comment on any possible impact that this work may have had on architectural or constructional thinking in South-East Queensland or similar subtropical climates elsewhere. In conceptual terms it is no more than an application of climatic design principles developed at the University of Queensland over sixty years by Langer, Saini and Szokolay. The only greater significance that could be claimed lies in an attempt to disseminate and elevate these principles in contemporary design thinking through their strong and visually memorable architectural exemplification.

2. **Urban Housing Design.**

The Draft South-East Queensland Regional Plan proposes that new subdivisions in the region should be between 300 and 600m². The St. Lucia House lot is 400m², and the house is designed to exploit the urban and environmental advantages of more compact urban housing while addressing some perceived disadvantages. The two prevailing residential models in Brisbane are the vertical strata apartment model that achieves high densities, and the low density detached suburban house and garden, widely preferred as an environment for family life. This project, for a comfortable and affordable family house and garden on a ‘small lot’ site, incorporates a number of simple design strategies that aim to maximise amenity in this compact urban house-form.

The most fundamental premise underlying the design is that current small-lot housing models use external space inefficiently and cover excessive site area to the detriment of outdoor living, urban trees, solar access, ventilation and stormwater absorption. Although the St Lucia House was built within the parameters of the BCC Small Lot Code, the design tests many of these regulations to the limit and may be seen to suggest alternative housing possibilities beyond these constraints. The house is a built demonstration of the following design principles:

- **Minimum Footprint.** The 209m² house has a 116m² footprint (29% Site Cover) leaving a 12 x14 m usable court for family recreational use, landscape and pool. Greater allowable height could liberate even more external space.

- **Maximum Height.** Through careful sectional manipulation the building achieves three storey-high living within the allowable 7.5 metre and two-storey height limits. The use of split-level planning utilised here allows five connected and open half-levels, allowing spatial and functional differentiation while maintaining easy circulation by short intercommunicating stairs. This vertical arrangement allows all major rooms to share the prime aspect.

- **Optimal Orientation.** The placement of the tall, thin building mass minimises east, south and west boundary setbacks in order to maximise sunny and breezy northern exposure and garden space. The square site proportions, achieved through re-subdivision of two existing small allotments, affords a 20m northern aspect that is atypical of existing 400m² (16 perch) sites in Brisbane, but could be regarded as a useful format for future subdivision that seeks to optimise orientation for sun and breezes.

- **Outlook and Privacy.** The abundance of sunlight, breeze and outlook derived from the generous primary northern aspect enables secondary openings to south and east to be designed as translucent openings that afford light and ventilation, while reducing overlooking into and from adjacent properties.
• Urban Trees. The house is planned and constructed to retain and incorporate very large existing trees in its overall site design. Native and flowering trees are key elements in Brisbane’s sub-tropical visual character, and treed gardens filter and oxygenate city air, provide cooling transpiration and shade to reduce urban heat island effects, slow and reduce storm run-off and provide an important reminder of nature and the seasons in an increasingly built environment. This project dramatically exploits the potentials of treed space in urban housing.

• Character Constraints. Planning approval for the scheme required conformity with existing BCC ‘character’ controls, generally interpreted to require faux-historical detail on contemporary architecture. Argument for the appropriateness of the architectural character proposed was based on a post-war historical tradition of modernist architecture in St Lucia, the heterogenous nature of the precinct which contains both traditional house-forms and high-rise unit blocks, and the primacy of preserved vegetation in establishing street character. Two subsequent adjoining houses have adopted the modernist form of the St Lucia House as a character precedent. It is noted that the draft regional plan now explicitly endorses the contribution of contemporary design to character and diversity.

• Regulatory Constraints. Much mediocrity in housing design comes from the rote application of standardised solutions to performance-based regulations. In this project, many of the desired design outcomes were only achievable through a critically questioning and technically pedantic approach to code compliance:
  - Two-storey Limit: A third uppermost study space is technically not a storey as it conforms to mezzanine rules.
  - 7.5 metre Height Limit: Allowable reduction of ceiling heights in ‘non-habitable’ kitchen and study spaces allowed three levels of stacked construction without exceeding the permitted height.
  - Ships-ladder Stair: A compact unconventional stair to the study was only possible by ‘non-storey’ classification.
  - Boundary wall: Zero setback of the two-storey western wall (a common wall with the planned adjacent house) was technically possible only through inclusion of a long, low garden wall in calculation of a 3.5m average height.
  - Pool Safety: The close house/pool relationship is achieved without obtrusive safety fencing through the design of self-closing entry gate and door. The pool-deck/entry-bridge at 1 metre height requires no handrail; the addition of a small vertical hob gives requisite child safety from the lower courtyard without spatially divisive fencing.

Beyond inclusion in the BCC sponsored RAIA Subtropical Housing exhibitions, and the Inner City Living monograph it is not possible to more fully assess the impact of this project on planning or architectural practice in Brisbane. At a personal level, living in this house has sufficiently convinced me that even greater residential densities can be achieved through small-footprint vertical house models with access to both sky and ground, and current design research pursues this strategy in small-lot, multiple residential and taller house applications.

3. Social Design.

Truly sustainable urban residential design should aim to locally accommodate variation in accommodation requirements at different stages in the life-cycle without requiring disruptive relocations. The St Lucia House, together with the adjacent small-lot house with separable flat designed by Elizabeth Watson-Brown for her parents, has created a small neighbourhood enclave designed to flexibly accommodate three generations of a family plus various partners and friends. Over six years, the resident population has ranged between seven and eleven adults and teenagers on an original 800m² single-house suburban lot.

The social dimensions of housing that the design of the St. Lucia House itself specifically address include:

• Generational Independence. The strategy of a long, thin planning array that winds over five levels allows a very high degree of ‘social depth’ to maximise independence of parents, two sons, partners and friends. Six separate entrances allow flexibility and privacy of access and five discrete common spaces allow independent living for three social groupings within a 210m² house.

• Household Focus. The physical and symbolic centrality of the open living spaces within the vertical arrangement reinforces family intercommunication while sliding doors permit sub-division into three different social settings.

• Privacy Gradients. The sectional half-level vertical alternation gives free spatial intercommunication between all five levels of the open arrangement, while solid waist-height balustrades preserve an upward visual privacy gradient even when the house is fully open. Internal sliding doors allow further control of internal privacy zoning.

• Lifecycle Flexibility. The semi-independent and well-connected ground floor plan allows for flexibility of future usage for the following possible scenarios over time: second studio and guest room; home business professional office; or a two-room flat for aging relatives, fourth-generational family, or family friends.
• Neighbourhood Engagement. The openness of living spaces and decks to the street allows visual and social engagement with street and neighbourhood activity. It seeks to re-invigorate traditional front verandah, front porch and front fence community socialising threatened by more defensive and introspective housing design.

Assessment of the success of the social design ambitions of the St Lucia House at this stage is obviously highly subjective, but from direct experience over six years with varying configurations of household make-up, I am sufficiently convinced of the success of these principles to seek to develop them further in future designs.

4. Spatial Design.
In formal architectural terms, the most experimental aspect of the house design, and the one that has formed the focus of subsequent refereed papers has been a focus on the innovative manipulation of spatial organization and experience. The principal spatial issues explored here, in brief, include:

• Primacy of Space. The design de-emphasises formal, tectonic and material qualities through the adoption of simple orthogonal geometries, planar elements and neutral surfaces to highlight the architectural space as the primary and most fundamental medium of architectural design. In this design, a strategy of rich and complex spatial design enables a commensurate simplicity and economy of materials, craft and detail.

• Spatial Complexity. The adoption of an abstract modernist approach to spatial configuration and organization in plan and section. Sectional half-level vertical alternation allows spatial intercommunication of all levels and enables the plastic manipulation of ceiling height and subtle manipulation of space and volume. Sliding door, wall and window elements allow further mutability of internal and inside/out spatial enclosure.

• Inside-Outside Space. As a consequence of its specific climate, history and culture, architecture in South-East Queensland offers a rare opportunity to design principal architectural spaces which are neither fully internal nor fully external, and that offer the stimulating experience of ambiguous enclosure. This quality is explored in the site plan, decks and balconies of the house, and particularly in the central space, and discussed in subsequent papers.

• Prospect and Refuge. Hildebrand’s evolutionary psychology reading of the aesthetic power of prospect/refuge, hazard/mystery and complexity/order in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright was the key theoretical concept that was tested in the spatial design of this house. The significance of the prospect/refuge gradient to contemporary architectural design thinking is that it is a key to the establishment of centred ‘place’ within ‘free’ modernist ‘space’, or in historical terms a resolution of the raumplan and plan libre.

• Spatial Sequence. The experience of arrival and movement through the house is a heavily orchestrated application of Le Corbusier’s promenade architecturale using Hildebrand’s psychological-aesthetic polarities and specific spatial and planning techniques derived from Wright, Rietveld and Mies, Japanese and Picturesque landscape precedents, and conventional signification of threshold and entry. The spatial modulation of tension and release here is reinforced by an experiment in visual perception that contrasts a sequence of focussed axial perspectives with the immersive visual field of the principal outlook.

• Spatial Narrative. The abstract spatial promenade achieves a lyrical dimension through the choreographed alternation and equivalence of landscape and architectural elements and spaces as foci and destinations in the water to firepit journey.

• Spatial Figuration. A zig-zagging sequence, from study to firepit, of intimate balcony niches and sitting spots at each level of the inside/outside sequence, overlays a ‘call/response’ dynamic of identifiably human-scaled elements within the abstract orthogonal composition, and underscores the long diagonal and axial view-lines of the composition.

• Temporal Spatial Effects. The simple, unadorned surfaces of the architectural spaces were designed to be enlivened by diurnal and seasonal movements of light, shadow and reflection made possible by the solar orientation and extreme adjacency of trees and water. Planned and realised visual effects include the alternating seasonal dominance of sunlight or shadow, animated leaf shadow and dappled light cast on wall planes; tracery silhouettes on translucent glass and canvas screens, and rippling water reflections and sparkles on walls and ceilings. An unexpected and beautiful winter phenomenon of slow moving linear spectra refracted from multiple ground glass edges was a serendipitous discovery during construction that triggered the adoption of neutral white interior finishes.
The aesthetic impact (or even the purported existence) of the spatial explorations described above is almost impossible to appreciate or assess without direct experience of movement through and occupation of the house. To that end, the judgements reached after visits to the house by each of the architectural juries and eminent national and international critics, historians, academics and practitioners are highly valued. The skills of the distinguished photographers who have recorded some of these spatial qualities as 2-D images are also greatly appreciated.

5. Constructional Design

The direct corollary of a design approach that emphasises the expression of spatial complexity and subtlety is that the physical fabric of the building necessarily assumes a secondary, neutral and background importance. In practical terms, simplicity, economy and frugality of construction and materials acts not to diminish, but to enhance the aesthetic experience. At a time when the most celebrated examples of architectural design in the region were highly articulated and highly-crafted buildings constructed from fine materials, the St Lucia House was a study of the architectural potentials of commonplace materials and elements and conventional trade skills.

Like most project housing in Queensland, the house is a slab-on-ground construction with pine stud-framing, timber framed upper floors and roof, plasterboard-lined walls and ceilings, and proprietary aluminium framed windows. This suite of techniques was chosen for economy and to allow experimentation with contemporary vernacular construction practice. The cheap cladding materials utilised, plywood, unfinished fibre-cement, corrugated metal and lightly bagged block-work, could be regarded as below general housing industry standards. Detailing of the construction generally sought to simplify, not elaborate, materials, surfaces and junctions. The following minor constructional innovations and adaptations are noted:

• Footings. The stability offered by deep, engineered pier footings (necessitated by soft alluvial soils), encouraged the decision to build unconventionally close to the substantial existing trees as a fundamental siting decision.

• Framing Economies. The ‘inverted’ sectional strategy of cellular bedrooms downstairs and open living spaces above generated economy in both floor and roof framing (both of composite timber I-beams) and structural bracing. Mezzanine joists similarly provide restraint and economies in tall wall framing.

• Structural Economies. Dramatic eight metre bridge spans and three metre balcony cantilevers were simply achieved through gang-nail timber trusses, subsequently clad as solid up-stand parapets.

• Revaluing Standard Components. Standard powder-coated sliding and louvre windows are sandblasted for privacy and ‘shoji’ effects. Proprietary sash-less double-hung window detailing provides continuity of ceiling plane and child-safety between family room and pool. Proprietary internal sash-less horizontal sliding windows used externally in the bedroom disappear entirely when open. Single and triple-stack sliding door panels utilise and highlight cheap and efficient industrial hardware. The substantial timber benchtop was constructed on melamine cabinetwork using economical hardwood flooring timbers and details. Silky-oak veneer cabinetwork doors are detailed without handles and full-height internal hoop-pine doors detailed without heads. Techniques of casting and polishing a large concrete kitchen countertop and bathroom benchtops and grinding and polishing exposed concrete family room floor were developed experimentally at a time before these techniques were local trade knowledge.

• Modular Coordination. An important strategy in developing coherent spatial design is the use of coordinating dimensional intervals to establish linear relationships and planar and spatial proportions. This project is based on a 900mm E-W structure/cladding interval, a 900/900/900 service/served zoning to the southern edge, and 1100mm vertical grid derived from window wall and parapet parameters. The superimposition of the dimensional systems at the key living room stair landing, where floor to floor differentials, stair riser/going constraints and adjacent louvre window modules further complicate coordination which finds resolution in the purpose-built stair screen.

• Stair Screen. The one small hand-built element within the building that aspires to associational richness, visual intricacy and art/craft ambition is the small structural screen at the intersection of the east-west, north-south and vertical circulation routes and at the locus of the dimensional system. Independently exhibited as a commissioned furniture piece ‘responding to the geography and climate of Queensland’ in the Degrees of Latitude exhibition at Brisbane City Gallery, the ‘Memory Screen’ is a layered array of small glass and timber-fronted cabinets for the storage and display of small memorabilia and photographs. In this decorative element, modernist ‘crafting’ of the silky oak-lined cabinets is achieved through assembly of off-the-shelf galvanised channels, patterned louvre glass samples, and forestry timber display packs, and broom-stick dowels.
• Window Wall. The most technically innovative physical component of the house is the northern window-wall, a 4.2 x 7.2m glazing array that provides 50% ventilation opening effortlessly through counterweighted vertically sliding sash-less glass panes. The glazing system is an inventive adaptation of a proprietary system, originally designed for two-pane mode providing only limited top and bottom ventilation. By extending the side tracks and adding fixed panes at top and bottom the opening system can be reversed to give a substantial central ventilation opening in addition to a glazed balustrade. This (unpatentable) design innovation, which required refinement of assembly and glazing procedures, has since been adopted as a standard detail in rival manufacturers’ technical literature and has been utilized in a number of other glazing applications in Brisbane.

• Mullion System. The slender steel mullions in the window wall are detailed to allow direct fixing of each rafter, eliminating lintels and enabling a shadow recess detail at the head, and run continuously past the floor plane to create a pocket for possible future blinds. The utilitarian frame and mullion cruciform array is also conceived as a wry critique of one of architecture’s canonical details.

The process of technical problem-solving outlined above is not unusual in creative architectural practice, and the only specific creative innovations from the St Lucia house with a clear documented impact beyond the project itself are the exhibited ‘Memory Screen’ and the double-hung window wall system. The suite of cladding materials used does appear to be more widely employed in the housing industry.

A constructional approach that seeks to achieve design quality through the creative utilisation of everyday materials, standard components and common trade processes, is possibly the only way by which architecture can realistically hope to exert significant influence within the larger housing industry. Although the 1998 construction costing of the St Lucia House of $1000/m² was not economically competitive at the lower end of the project home building industry it was comparable with rates at the upper end, and almost half that of other architecturally-designed projects commended in the 2000 RAIA national architectural awards.

6. Design History & Theory

I would argue that the architectural theory with the strongest impact on design practice in South-East Queensland in the period from the mid 1970s to mid 1990s was that of Critical Regionalism, and my own design and research work from that period derives from this thinking. Critical regionalism was a term coined by Alexander Tzonnes & Lianne Lefevre, based on the philosophical writings of Paul Ricoeur, disseminated in the architectural writings of Kenneth Frampton, and applied to Australian architecture in the Architecture Review by editor Peter Davies and critic Rory Spence. Critical Regionalism called for an architecture rooted in local conditions of place that would act as a critical foil to the implicit placelessness of international modernism. In Queensland, architects whom I would loosely describe as representing a critical regionalist position in this period would include Rex Addison, Russell Hall, and John Mainwaring, who worked from local formal, constructional and material traditions to fashion an architecture responsive to place, climate and culture. Architects Brit Andresen, Peter O’Gorman, Timothy Hill and Brian Donovan could also be seen to be developing a critical, abstracted and nuanced architecture based on a phenomenological reading of place.

As with most architectural achievements, critical success often triggers imitation, appropriation, approximation, dilution and debasement over time. By the mid 1990s, only the faintest echoes of the worthy exemplars could be found in the ‘Queensland Style’, ‘Sunshine Coast Style’ or ‘Beach House Style’ of the real estate press, where lightweight cladding, multiple skillion roofing and timber battening were signature clichés. Among the mainstream architectural firms, over-articulated form, over-stated tectonics and over-wrought detailing was also rife.

The formal, spatial and constructional ambitions of the St Lucia House were established against this context. It aimed for a simple orthogonal massing with a single roof plane, planar materials, simple details, and modulation of light and shadow achieved without resort to battening. The critical ambitions of the project were to seek to demonstrate a modern regionalism, or more specifically, a regional modernism, focussing on spatial explorations.

The spatial ideas of the St Lucia House are developed from the early twentieth century work of Wright, Loos, Rietveld, Corb and Mies, though the fabric relates more closely to Neutra. The link back to these earlier modernists, came through belated examination of the Brisbane architects of the 1950s and 1960s, Langer, Froud and Job, Hayes and Scott, Heathwood and Dalton. These figures were little discussed in my undergraduate education, at a time when notions of modernism were often elided with those of the formalist ‘International Style’ then under severe criticism. It seemed clear, however, the post-war Brisbane architects who made an early impact on the new suburb of St. Lucia, had little trouble in seeing themselves as both modern and regional. Siegfried
Gideon’s influential, but subsequently under-valued, polemical history, Space, Time and Architecture was helpful, both as an insight into early modern examinations of the temporal experience of architectural space, but also, in the forward to the 1950s edition, through his championing of a ‘third generation’ of modernism that would arise from the distant regions and reinvigorate the modernist cause. The positivism of the regional modernist architectural surveys that arose in this era, were wonderfully refreshing to one whose own undergraduate education was marked by both ‘the death of modernism’ and the rise of post-modernism.

The case for a 21st century regional modernism is reasonably simple. With globalisation of communications and economies, architectural modernism provides both an academic lingua franca and a common consumer currency. Architectural aspirations this century are more strongly shaped by trans-cultural television, film, journals, websites and travel, than they are by memories of one’s childhood house. Building components, furniture, fittings and software are more likely to come from Germany or Taiwan than Greenslopes or Toombul. The most complex problems of architecture, however, are specifically local, and relate to topography, landscape, climate, energy, water, lifestyle, social and urban patterns. The rate of change is rapid, and there is no guarantee that the solutions that have worked in the past will solve the problems of the future. The architectural language of modernism offers a simple, direct and economical framework from which to look at the contemporary issues specific to our region. Most specifically, it is hoped that focus on the abstract medium of spatial design and its utilitarian and aesthetic capacities should occasion a freer experimentation in alternate ways to build, at this place, at this time.

It is my belief that the St. Lucia house has served to demonstrate that the modernist model is robust, yet sufficiently flexible and mutable to be reshaped to significant regional issues. My perception is that much local architecture in more recent years has demonstrated a regional modernist position. It is less clear whether this project or my proselytising has had a critical impact, or whether they are both part of the larger zeitgeist.

7. Peer recognition of significant contribution to the art and practice of architectural design.

• The project was awarded by three different juries of leading design architects at local, state and national levels: RAIA Regional Commendation 2000, RAIA Robin Dods (Qld) Award 2000, RAIA National Commendation for Housing 2000. With 9,500 practicing architects in Australia, the national program of annual architectural design awards is highly competitive.

• Selection for publication in all Australian architectural professional journals: Architecture Australia, Architectural Review, Houses and Monument. Architecture Australia is the internationally respected journal of record for Australian architecture.


• Publicly exhibition in: Subtropical Housing, New Millennium Architecture of South East Queensland (RAIA Brisbane 2003, Tasmania 2004); A Short History of Brisbane Architecture (Museum of Brisbane, 2004).

• Selection in: Atlas of Contemporary Architecture, Phaidon, London, 2004. This is the first exhaustive and rigorous global survey of architectural design, and thoroughly covers 75 countries in the period 1998-2003. Following invited nomination by distinguished practitioners, historians, critics and academics the editorial board selected 1052 buildings from 4000 nominations. The stated selection criteria are contribution to the art and science of architecture. With more than 1.2 million registered architects globally, selection and publication in this comprehensive atlas is significant. The atlas includes only 46 projects by Australian architectural practices of all sizes, eight from Queensland, with only three full-time Australian academics represented.

Although the international publication of a work of architecture contributes to historical and global knowledge, architecture is much more dependent on the specificities of place and time than most research fields. To this end, the recognition of architectural work in national and regional professional forums, and even in popular local publications, should not be underestimated as a mode of achieving significant impact on our built environment.

Note: This written argument was prepared to explain the nature of architectural design research as it may be manifested in a built work to a university committee comprising predominantly scientists and engineers in 2004. Subsequent publication, exhibition and recognition of the work further strengthen these claims. (PS 02/02/2009).