

Rachel Nolan

Building memory



Rachel Nolan set up her practice with Patrick Kennedy in 1999. Kennedy Nolan has since developed a reputation as a design-focused practice with a distinctive approach to built form. The practice is dedicated to the production of architecture that is highly responsive to its context and seeks to form a strong relationship with landscape.

Design at Kennedy Nolan draws on the optimistic precepts of Modernism empowered by technology. This perpetuates a positive view that the design and arrangement of spaces can support and reinforce relationships, adding piquancy and zest to life. Less tangibly, the practice is compelled to distil the impalpable;

to draw on the reaches of memory. Essentially exploring the power of recognising form, colour, texture and light, the resonance of shared memories, of history and landscapes. Here we seek to make more tangible Rachel's desire to make the experience of architecture memorable and meaningful.

Parklane
This is an inner-city house on a long, difficult site that explores what contribution can be made to the urban realm. Abstracted form and civic scale contribute to the lane and small park that flank this site. The magnificent Bluegum towards the rear of the site is the hero of the design.

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From the ground up

From a young age I was very aware of the environment around me. I enjoyed change and was bossy and determined. Being the eldest of my siblings and sixteen cousins, I would often ‘project manage’ hideouts in the bush and down by the river. My best friend and I spent most of our time in a carefully constructed cubby under her house with a floor-to-ceiling height of about 1200mm. In the late 1970s I convinced my friend’s Dad, Bert, to properly renovate her timber cubby. This involved Bert working the tools to build a new internal wall and the construction of a space-saving hinged table for the ‘kitchen’; all in under 6-square metres. Constraints and limitations appealed to me—they still do. Changing, what I could later call ‘designing’, space gave me a huge kick. I had a taste for it.

Being one of three girls, we were always taught we could do anything boys could do. It was always assumed we would leave home and attend university. I was creative and worked hard and there was something that attracted me to architecture—what I perceived as a ‘male’ profession. There were no architects in my family and the role models available to me in 1980’s film and television were sophisticated Saab drivers, rushing about with large roles of drawings and professional freedom. It’s a superficial admission but it looked good from the sidelines.

Learning spaces

At 17 I enrolled in architecture at University of Melbourne. Architecture seemed substantial and useful compared

Photography — Derek Swalwell



to other areas of design. It promised to be an exciting profession that could make a difference and contribute to society. I lived in a residential college on campus for the first two years of my degree. My new home was Newman College, a sandstone building designed by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney in 1918. Not just a beautiful building, Newman College is a powerfully memorable building.

This was a building where the architects had a hand in everything from furniture and lighting to the surrounding landscape. Long, low cloisters and dark corridors, set around a central quadrangle supported and enhanced our communal life. Needless to say I was distracted by new freedoms and not very studious. Elements of this place are still powerful memory triggers for me: the smell of lemon scented gums after rain, the warm colours associated with western light, and the feeling you have when you move from dark space into natural light.

When I experience any of these I am transported back to this important building. In second year I met Patrick Kennedy, my business partner and close friend. Newman College affected

us in similar ways. It gave Patrick and I common ground to talk about what makes a building or an environment ‘memorable’. We talk about this in the work we make together today. We use this language to explain to our clients how our architecture might make them feel.

Starting in practice

I worked in two architecture studios before completing my degree, both were run by women. We drew in pencil, dyed-lined prints, hand wrote fee proposals and sometimes smoked at our desks.

I continued to work in small practice after I graduated. Patrick and I lived close by and would often meet for a drink to discuss our day. For graduates we were given a lot of responsibility and were exposed to all aspects of practice. By this time we had a few friends who were keen for us to take on their commissions. So we bit the bullet, resigned, bought a fax and set up our practice in an old shoe factory that I was living in with my partner.

We worked hard but were free and happy. We smoked and drank beer at our drawing boards in the early days;

before quickly realising the importance of bringing other architects into our practice.

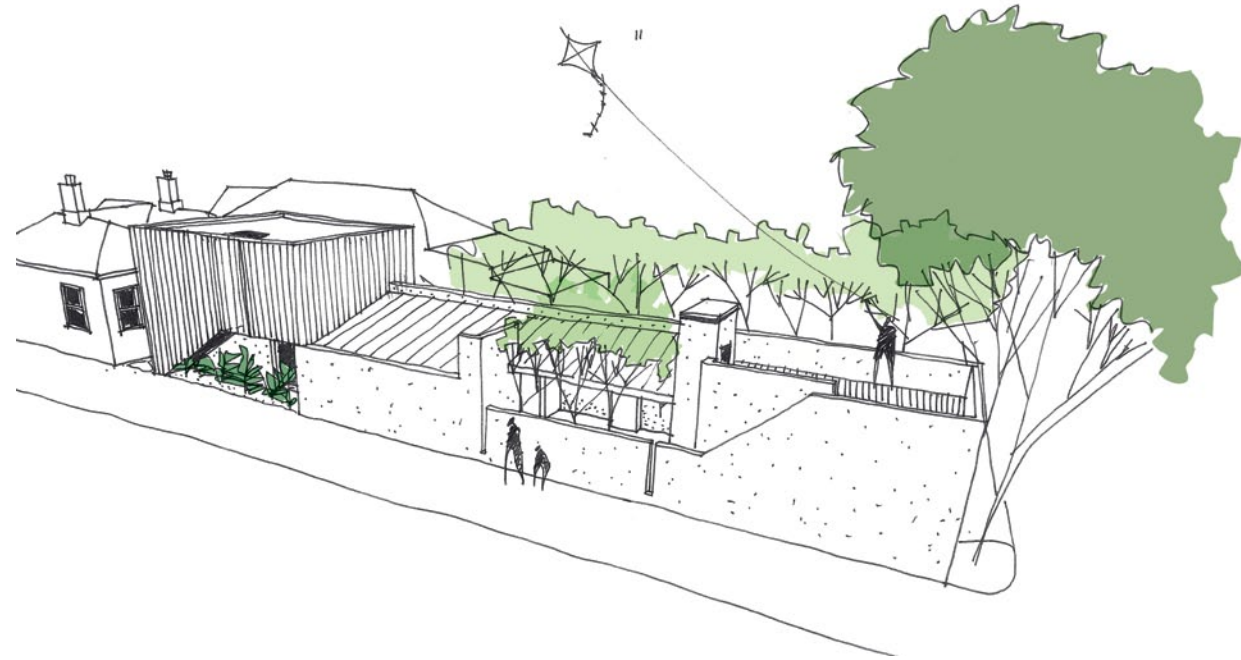
Patrick and I set up our studio in our late 20s, so we really haven’t experienced many other architectural practices. Neither of us had been exposed to issues of gender.

In my personal experience it has never been a disadvantage being a female architect. In fact, when I was younger I was nurtured and supported on site, perhaps even more than my male peers. Tradesmen on site took time to explain and resolve details with me. Maybe if I was a young bloke they may have been keen to make me feel foolish, then again maybe not.

However, there is no doubt that having children changed our practice dynamic. Generally gender in our profession becomes an issue when we have children. It wasn’t for me, because I ran my own practice and have a very supportive business partner. Patrick had to step up and run the show, which he did effortlessly. I was eternally guilty and sleep deprived, but determined to not disappear. Many female architects struggle returning to the profession part-



Merricks Beach House
 To design for yourself is a real privilege. This is my family's house. This is a weekender, available for short term rent on Mornington Peninsula. It is a small building that is nostalgic yet contemporary. This project continues to make me think about seasonal and temporary habitation. It satisfies my desire to do the most with the least.



time after they have had their children. Within our practice, Patrick and I have always encouraged our staff to return when they are ready and on their own terms. At some point you realise the beauty of running your own practice is that you can make the rules. Babies just became part of the landscape. Since 1999 there have been sixteen babies born to women at Kennedy Nolan. This shared experience and understanding are a part of what our practice has to offer.

Beautiful reward

Architecture has given me the opportunity to be creative and practical at the same time. It is the synthesis of so many elements. Good architecture benefits from all your life experiences, travel and relationships. There are not many professions that do this. Great enjoyment comes from watching a building come together on site; to see an idea move from the page into its physical form. There are very few quick fix projects in our practice, so it is exciting when we finally get building. It is a long complex affair with so many parties invested in the outcome.

After sixteen years in practice there is now a large body of work to look back on and learn from. In a busy studio it is not always easy to find the space to do this. This opportunity to stop and observe is one we should take more often.

In the early days, design was instinctive. Now we have many projects to reflect on,



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we have been able to give these instincts words. We are able to articulate our position on how we want our buildings to make you feel. Personally I really enjoy returning to early projects to see how they have settled into the background; to see how they are being used and how the landscape has matured, this is when the full vision is realised.

With the introduction of Instagram into the architectural community we are exposed to more projects during construction. I think this has been a wonderful addition to our profession. Not only does it increase the support and collegiality we have towards each other but it allows the public to understand the complexities of the service we provide—an education if you like. To ensure the progression of our

profession, society has to be educated in design. They have to understand its value. They have to understand that architecture isn't just what a building looks like. I believe that this is what it has been reduced to for the average punter, a flipbook of 'looks' or 'vibes'. We need to advocate for quality over quantity. We need to be inventive and not lazy. We need to make the experience more meaningful.

Rising above commonplace

From time to time, we are involved with running design studios at Melbourne School of Design and the University of Melbourne. I would like to see students more engaged with the architecture of their own city. To learn and develop

you need to experience good buildings, visit them, use them if you can. There is only so much that can be gained from studying plans and looking at professional photographs. Students need to engage with practising architects in their own town; this is an obvious resource to tap into. Every year each Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects hosts their awards. Over one or two days architects present their projects to a jury for award consideration. These are open forums where the public can listen to architects speak about their work. They can see real people have to explain why they think their work is deserving of an award and how they visually show this, all in under 10 minutes. They can hear the stories of how long it takes to make good work; how hard it is





Deepdene House
A recently finished house for a family of seven in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Much of what Patrick and I have been exploring together over the last sixteen years exists within this project. We are immensely proud of this.

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and how rewarding it can be. Architecture is alive and real in this setting. There is so much for students of architecture to learn from this.

Inspired thinking

To find inspiration ironically I seek sanctuary away from the built environment. I am drawn to big landscapes. Out of the city it is clear to me where my stresses sit in the order of things. My clock gets reset. Often when I return home, I am more interested in the bare essentials—the core ingredients of how to do the most with the least. In my home on the river in Melbourne the focus is more on the garden than the house. Away from work, this balance suits me.

Whilst reading an essay on Robin Boyd by Kerstin Thompson, she introduced me to this quote: ‘the object of a design, in architecture as in anything else, is to say or do the essential thing as simply and directly and purely as possible.’ I often refer back to this simple commandment.

— *What qualities do you look for when hiring?* There are sixteen people in our studio, including Patrick and I. We think this is a good number, large enough to deliver the projects we are interested in and small enough to maintain the office culture we are determined to protect. Our studio is as important to us as the architecture it produces.

Most of our staff have been with us for many years and are very experienced. In the last few years we have employed a number of graduate architects to even out the ranks. We need our people to be competent and independent. It is also wonderful when we gain team members who are willing to share a part of themselves. Our studio benefits from

Photography — Derek Swalwell



people whose interests are broad, and those who know a sense of humour helps at times.

Radical transformation

In the last five years there has been a far greater sense of community within our profession. Practices are talking to and supporting each other. This is in part due to the culture of our Institute and social media. Our generation of architects experienced a lively studio life when we were at university, particularly in the final two years of our degree. The studio was a space of our own making, and a stage set for high drama (design crits can provoke this). I made close and lasting friendships during my time at University of Melbourne. These friends and peers continue to support me in my working life. I hope the present education system understands the value of this and how it benefits future generations of architects. I am not so sure that certain Facebook or ‘virtual’ studios are a suitable replacement.

Pencils and pixels

Over the last sixteen years in practice, technology has constantly changed.

Things are faster, and undeniably more efficient. Like anything new, we have to work out what suits us and sometimes have had to take a few steps back.

We have found that three-dimensional modeling is a useful design tool within the studio but can be dangerous when in the hands of an overly curious client. We need to educate our clients that good design takes time, that you don’t get to see everything at once. It is important that we lead this conversation with words as well as pictures. We need to teach our clients how to trust our design instincts.

Before this technology we would present plans, sometimes elevations and often a few hand sketches for Sketch Design. This was enough to initiate the design process. Good design takes trust. A building needs a certain amount of time to develop and technology has not changed this.

Both Patrick and I still hand draw. He tests and resolves with a thick green pen on layers of butter paper, then he moves quickly into plans on CAD. His ability to move to such resolution at this stage still impresses me. My hand drawing is a little looser and probably

more emotive. When I draw I feel like I occupy the building or place; it is a process I can get quite lost in. Often a Sketch Design presentation drawing will be a mash-up of all the technologies we have available to us: a hand drawing over a computer model, with some colour and real folks photo-shopped in. I enjoy this hybrid of past and present technologies.

Recently Jeremy McLeod from Breathe Architecture has had us all thinking hard with the success of his project—The Commons in Brunswick. Jeremy has made apartment life desirable by offering an alternative to the dross that needs ‘spin’ to sell it. He is currently rallying his community of fellow architects, arming them with information and setting up a model for well-designed high density housing outcomes. He has endless energy and huge faith in his peers.

He is an outstanding supporter of good design and you can feel that his mobilisation of architects has the ability to transform the future of Melbourne housing. Architecture can be a stressful and isolating practice. Most architects I know work hard. We have to stand up and promote good design and work together as a community.

Fairfield

This is project on the Yarra River in Fairfield, is not typically about a habitable building. A number of 'nodes' have been designed on this steeply sloped inner-city bush block. One of these is this circular natural swimming pool surrounded by Castlemaine slate and indigenous grasses. The swimming pool uses a Biotop system that uses plants to purify the water.



Photography — Derek Swatwell

