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COVER PROJECT The Hangar

PHOTOGRAPHER Michael Nicholson



ENDURING ARCHITECT

In celebration of *Steel Profiles*' 30-year anniversary, Peter Hyatt spoke with the father of Australian steel architecture, the unparalleled Glenn Murcutt, whose works are amongst the most longstanding and defining projects to have graced our pages.

Words: Peter Hyatt. Photography: Bob Saeny (portrait), Peter Hyatt.

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Glenn Murcutt has already spawned great homes. Lauded in the architecture media and blogosphere, he's also attracted anonymous criticism that comes with blistering success.

Even by the end of the post-modernist 1980s when many of his contemporaries were immersed in an architecture of symbols, Murcutt was swimming flat-out in the opposite direction. Those sculpted-strokes of steel and glass quickly stimulated international interest.

His call-to-arms to "touch the earth lightly" quickly found a worldwide audience.

The chond he struck was an approach that demanded less and offered more.

A refusal to subordinate the landscape was replaced with a Henri Rousseau-like innocence that celebrated the primitive, natural disorder. Murcutt's lightweight metallic pavilions shimmered by day and gleamed by moonlight. His Marie Short House at Kempsey on the New South Wales north coast (1974) *Steel Profile #15* & #16 and Magney House (1989) *Steel Profile #35*, characterised his jeweller's eye.

The Magney House at Birgine Point on the NSW South Coast confirmed Murcutt's emerging international reputation. His reinterpretation of the Australian verandah defined a remarkably robust delicacy. Birgine's pre-fabricated elegance was at once lyrical and sustainable well before most architects clamoured to embrace the environmental opportunity.

The Marie Short farmhouse at Kempsey in NSW put Murcutt on the map as an architect of exceptional promise. A pair of elevated pavilions constructed from timber, steel and glass embodied the notion of permeable aspect and filtered light. The house became famous for his emblem to "touch the earth lightly" as much as its feathered, rippled steel roof and operable screens.

The Marie Short House received the Australian Institute of Architects' national and New South Wales 25 year Awards in 2004 and the Magney House received the re-titled Australian Institute of Architects NSW Ending Architecture award in 2011. Murcutt stopped entering awards in the mid-1990s "to clear the way and let a whole heap of other young architects receive their due. It's not on for me to shut the door on others."

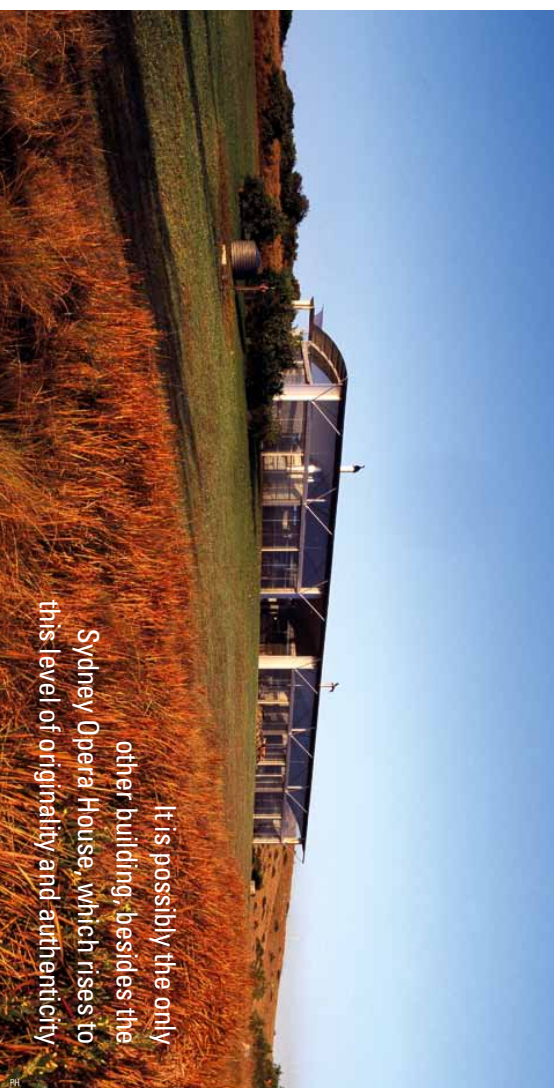
Awarded *Steel Profiles* architect of the decade in 1991, his citation acknowledged Birgine and Kempsey's vital modernity: "Glenn Murcutt's houses, almost alone in contemporary Australian architecture, are neither copies nor pastiches... they are fresh. Full of inventive ideas... completed in 1989, Birgine is a building which sits comfortably alongside the best architecture this century has produced. It is possibly the only other building, besides the Sydney Opera House, which rises to this level of originality and authenticity. The essence of Murcutt's achievement has been to take one of the central Australian metaphors, the verandah, and convert it into an entirely new thing – the long thin verandah-house. The house represents the climax of the development of this type which began back in 1914 with the Marie Short farmhouse." ⁷



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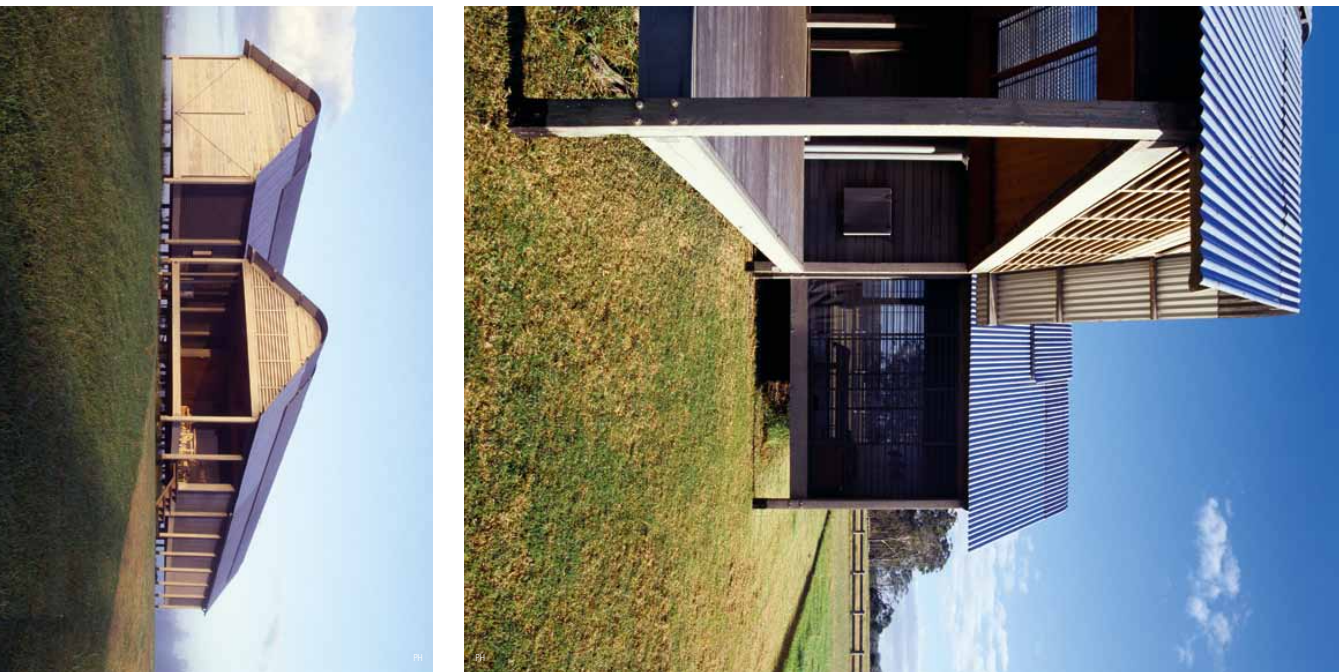
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ABOVE: The Magney House is the poem born of the epic. Murcutt's design vocabulary fuses technical precision and lyricism
LEFT: Slender verandah with floating, parallel roof, the "thin-slit" approach to cladding houses takes the 19th century verandah into the 21st century



ABOVE: Like the man from Remington, he liked the company so much he bought it. Similarly, Murrcutt purchased the Marie Short House from his original client. As with all enduring architecture, the house retains an entirely convincing modernity 37 years on.

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And the recognition of his originality continued. "I'm still scratching my head about the Pritzker Prize in 2002," he says. Last year Murrcutt received the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal and he sits on the Pritzker and Alvar Aalto medal juries. Acknowledging the value of awards – "They can bring some very good work" – Murrcutt has experienced a veritable award blitz. So many in fact that he says they're the last thing on his mind. There's Denmark's Green Pin Award, and another Danish award for Making the Difference. Then of course the Alvar Aalto Medal (1993) and Pritzker Prize are among the highest accolades world architecture has to offer. He has a string of professorships that tug him towards half a dozen places apace.

"The Laine Short House in Terry Hills (1971) was my first steel building," he recalls. "About the same time I visited Col Madigan's Warrigha Library in Dee Why and it was just beautiful. I thought: 'My God, here is someone who really understands another way of dealing with steel.' That really set me on a path of seeing steel in another way. I wanted to express it perhaps without quite the same decorative quality." The Maison de Verre (1932) in Paris by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet made me realise the finesse possible with steel. "Steel is the skeleton that also sets the rhythm. It permits the flesh between it all. It sets the grid and real order. You can't make mistakes once you understand that order."

"Walk come off grid. Walk go between columns and on a particular axis so that column so 'trades' never get that wrong. I've never had to pull anything out after some sub-contractor got it wrong. The frame sets the parameters and steel does that. It gives you a manoeuvrable structural finesse as well as detailing finesse." Despite being a household name, Murrcutt can walk around with a level of anonymity most celebrities from the stage and screen would envy. "Being under the radar suits me," he laughs, aware he is pursued as a keynote speaker at architecture conventions the world over.

Success, though, has brought a level of financial security unusual in an increasingly challenged profession. As architects are aware, their services are too often regarded as discretionary. His zeal for the natural world is well known. It's reminiscent of the 86-year-old David Attenborough. Always on a mission, Murrcutt shares that boundless energy that contradicts his age (75). "I've been dealing with what are termed 'environmental issues' all the way through my work," he says. "Hearing it time and time again and how everything's given a green label these days gives me the s...s, quite frankly. I could put holes through all of that."

"Sensitive structures survive. Buildings of 15th and 16th century Britain in the north country, and houses on the Bahaman coast of Croatia of similar age are still working and real houses."

Even great men can be laid low, as Glenn was with the news 16 months ago that 46-year-old architect son Nick had terminal lung cancer. Nick's death in March 2011 saw Glenn slide into depression from which he's only just beginning to recover.



FRANÇOIS HALABD
Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet's seminal Maison de Verre (House of Light) in Paris (c.1927-30) influenced Murrcutt among other design luminaries

"Steel is the skeleton that also sets the rhythm... it sets the grid and real order. You can't make mistakes once you understand that order"



MAX DUPAIN (1973)

Warrigha Shire Civic Centre and Library, Don Why

"It has been the worst experience of my life. It has crippled me. Quite frankly, I feel like I've been in hell. I'd like to have had that time out of my life. I'm only just coming out of it," he says. "Nothing prepares you for it. Nick was a non-smoker, very talented and with the best ahead of him."

Public acclaim rolls off Murrcutt like water off the proverbial duck's back. He's learned to deal with celebrity and criticism by shutting most of it out. He knows its potential for corrosive distraction. "Success is very nice," he says, as if describing a pleasant afternoon tea under draped shade. But rather than seeking it out, he says, it simply increases his anxiety. "Every time I receive some award it makes me nervous and anxious. Given the number of medals and decorations he's received, Murrcutt by that measure should be a nervous wreck."

He says anxiety remains a constant companion. "It's a pretty good thing," he chuckles. "If you're not nervous before stepping out on stage you just might send everyone to sleep. I don't think about what I've done, but I do worry about what I've got to do. I'm just little old me stung here in Sydney knitting one plain and one purl with my eye-brows." His laughter returns and speaks of gradual healing. Always the voice of dissent, he continues to express an intense curiosity.

"Find a better solution," he urges his students. "I've had 14 court cases, all about design. I've lost only one of them and I should have won that. As an architect, if you haven't had a court case or two by the time you're 45 or 50 then if not, why not?" "Every good building has a very good client," he adds. "Otherwise you get the same old stuff – concrete slab on grade, concrete block walls designed as a concrete box, tactically unthinking for those who have to occupy it."

He likes to believe that on balance, his stay on earth has been for the better and a power for good over bad, and he likens his contribution to that of another great Australian, the artist Fred Williams. "I greatly admire his work. He completely understood place-making. His painting taught us about how the light levels here served to separate the elements in the landscape, the translucency of trees and the force of the environment in a very new way. Unbelievably he died of a similar disease to Nick. Fred was 56. Nick 46." The irony and coincidence of premature loss brings Murrcutt snr back to earth.

My first meeting with Murrcutt for *Steel Profile* took place in November 1980, in Mossman on Sydney's north shore. His house was a narrow-waisted villa bristling with horizontal louvers for breeze, striped light and shadow. He was then just 44 and well on the way to fulfilling his destiny. His conversation shifted like a pebble skipping across a pond, travelling on and on. He leapt from one thought to another – each an arc connected to a much bigger rhythm. He was Peter Pan-like except that he was tanned and with a physical presence quite unlike the pale, sedentary figure I imagined of most desk-bound architects.

Tough, Energised, He has skipped effortlessly across a glossy surface, creating delicate ripples that have bloomed into a new wave for world architecture. SP