

The Odd Couple



Rodney Wulff and Steve Calhoun hard at work in their Melbourne Office

After nearly thirty years together, what keeps the 'odd couple of landscape architecture', Rodney Wulff and Stephen Calhoun, directors of Tract (Melbourne), together? Is it as Rodney says, "It doesn't matter if you're Cheech and Chong. You've got to have something."

And that something is a very deep affection between the two of them, honed through years of professional symbiosis. Steve with his laconic manner and John Wayne drawl - a legacy of growing up in Iowa - is a perfect foil to Rodney's lanky, straight-shooting demeanour. Steve is the newest Fellow of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects being welcomed into the professional fold by his partner - a Fellow of over ten years standing.

When asked the piercing question of what he wanted to be prior to discovering the existence of landscape architecture some time in the late 1960s, Steve's answer was, "It's very simple. The only thing that I ever liked to do in life was draw." My parents asked my aunt 'Whatever is gonna happen to Steve?' because I was a very poor student. And my aunt says 'Well, what does he like to do?' They answered 'He likes to roller-skate and draw.' And she said they better encourage the drawing 'cos he's not going to earn a living roller-skating!

Rodney and Steve met while both were studying for their Masters at Harvard - Rodney starting in 1971 just as Steve was finishing. In 1976, Steve was looking for a challenge and willing to come to Australia for a year to replace Rodney while he did his Ph.D. As Steve reflects, "One year turned into twenty eight... I never decided to stay. I just never left. It's a bit lame." Amid some laughter,

Rodney loyally declares, "It's been a fascinating, wonderful experience." Like all good friends, they have the mutual admiration happening. "Rodney and I are the two sides of a coin," says Steve. "Rodney is the more logical and I'm the emotive one." With a rueful grin, Rodney says. "He's insightful. Deceptively insightful". He hastens to add "And I can be emotional," just in case he comes across as too straight.

All around, the warm grey of the Tract offices are pulsating with energy, the low hum of voices punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter. It is a Friday afternoon, and thoughts of the coming weekend are permeating throughout the large building. 'Relaxed and efficient' is how the partners like to describe Tract, as they look out over the central courtyard, cocooned within the offices.

Duty calls Rodney away. Steve however stays on to relate an experience he had at a conference he attended last year. In a voice still thick with a mid-western accent, he says "It was the 100th anniversary of teaching... landscape architecture at Harvard and they had someone talk from each decade. They had Dan Kiley speak, who was 94 years old. He went to school there in the thirties. So he got up and gave a little talk. He was very, very lucid." He pauses in admiration. "After the talk there's a little question period and one of the students said 'What about Garrett Ekbo?' who was one of his classmates who was still alive. He wasn't at the conference. And Dan Kiley says (in disgust) "Oh," he says, "I don't know what's wrong with him. He retired when he was 86." He said 'How can you stop doing something you love?'"

Shaking his head admiringly, Steve says, "That's the way I want to live my life."

When asked if there was anything happening in the industry that concerns him, Steve thinks for a moment and says, "I'm afraid that we're all becoming slaves to style. I think that clouds our ability to see the basics behind it. We've always had a major problem, with particularly the awards system. They tend to give awards based on style rather than value. Our best projects have never received awards. If you take the Newcastle Foreshore. We won that in a competition. It won the Architect's Institute Urban Design Award and it won a Planning award and it didn't win a Landscape award... I think it's because the Landscape Awards are more about what you see... I suppose they're looking at the superficial... A lot of work we do really does affect the culture and the economies of the cities. And the landscape architects institute ... through the awards and the rest of the profession, doesn't see that as ... what landscape architects do, by and large."

His opinion on the current education of Landscape Architects is not high. "I think the one thing that universities must do is give students a few basics so that they're able to get that first job. In my opinion, certain Universities are failing to do that. They're training students to do a lot of superficial things. We interviewed six or eight students from a particular university and honestly, they didn't even seem like they were in the same profession... all they knew was Photoshop... I just don't see how they could get jobs."

In wrapping up, Steve thinks that if he had to make a final comment, "...it would be about the optimism of our profession. I suppose it goes back to what I was saying about the profession's values. Our profession has the capability to profoundly influence the environment in which we all live. And we should not get distracted by the same things that architecture is getting distracted by because I think that in doing so, we could become irrelevant."

And what distracting architecture - Fashion. "I'm not saying it's not important. I'm just saying it's not the important thing. The work we did in Newcastle has profoundly changed the entire community. It went from a really, really grimy, grotty 19th Century City, all of a sudden, it just changed overnight. People saw new possibilities for a new lifestyle like other people had in other places. So to me, that's the great thing we're capable of doing. I know there are a lot of other landscape architects as capable as Tract in doing that."

It is after 6pm and there is a lot of lively chattering and laughing in the background, the merri-ment of a business week drawing to a close. Time for another glass of wine.