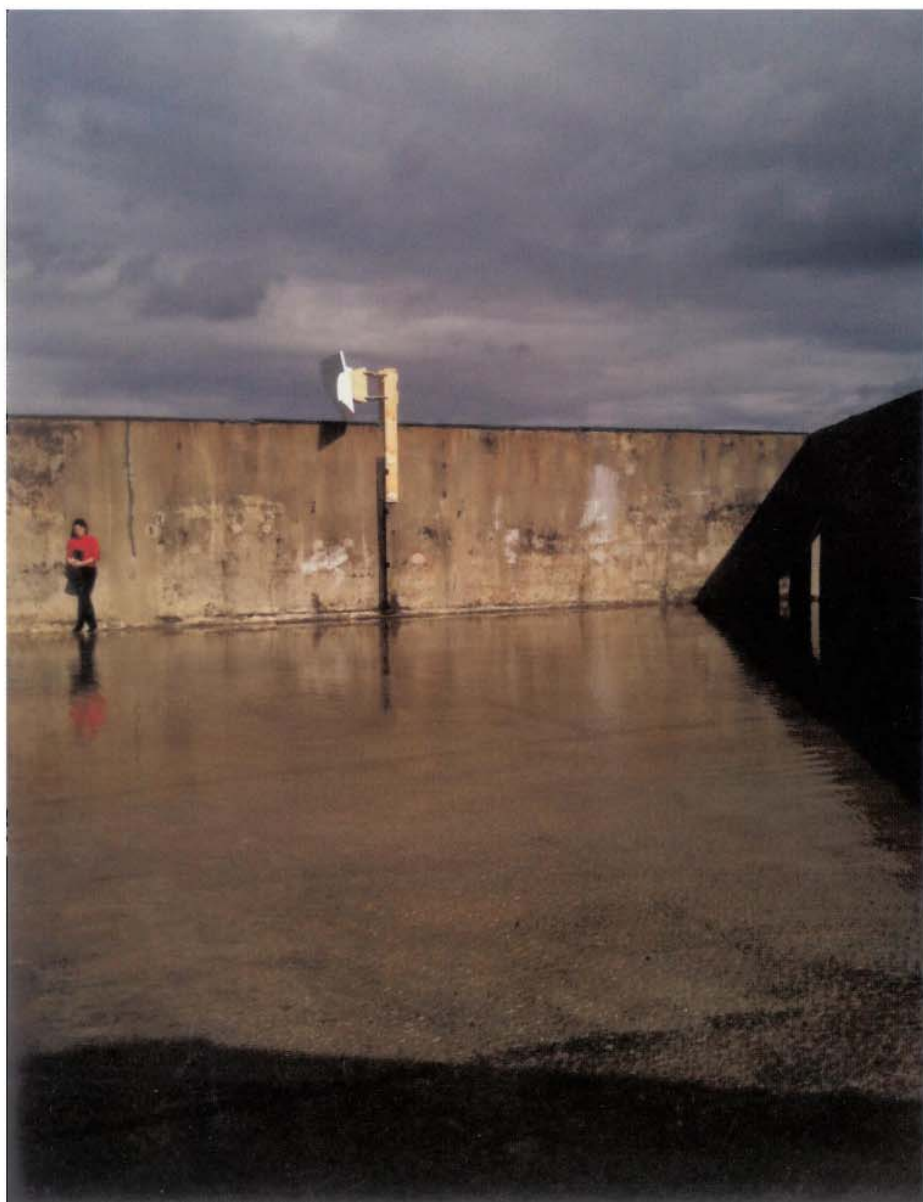


URBAN ISLANDS

Reform through Making

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Sound Mirror. Nat Chard's studio, UI 2011.

Sydney's Urban Islands workshop, now in its fourth incarnation, aims to liberate architectural education from the shackles of the academy by bringing it to, of all places, the prison of Cockatoo Island. As Gretchen Wilkins reports, the program's success can impart important lessons for the tricky business of resilient city-making.

text Gretchen Wilkins

photography Tom Rivard and Mark Szczerbicki

Established in 2006 by a group of Sydney architects, Urban Islands is a two-week, international architecture workshop sited on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. The project emerged in response to a collective sense amongst the organisers, Tom Rivard, Olivia Hyde and Joanne Jakovich, that conventional studio teaching was becoming increasingly constrained by the overarching university system, that is, tightly bound to calendar semesters, coordinated pedagogy and a regular pool of staff. They sought to fashion a new model, which was (more or less) free of these constraints, an open network of students, staff and design methodologies situated somewhere between practice and the academy, linking northern and southern hemispheres, and offered periodically.

What better place to release architectural education from the tyranny of the university than Cockatoo Island, the site of decades of incarceration, forced labour, mechanised production and disciplinary reform? This seemingly unlikely, even ironic choice of site proved keenly appropriate, given the island's history as host to a long series of institutions, each in some way predicated on an idea of reform through making.



Shipbuilding at Cockatoo Island. Photos courtesy Sydney Harbour Federation Trust.

Established as a penal institution in 1839, the first inmates of Cockatoo were put to hard labour quarrying stone and forging steel to build their own barracks, guard houses and staff residences. Later established as a maritime centre, they built the dry docks, workshops and factories where shipbuilders manufactured colonial, naval and commercial vessels. And when the maritime industry subsided, several buildings were appropriated for use as an industrial school for girls, where they practised sewing and embroidery. Thousands of apprentices learned their trades through the industries located at Cockatoo including sheet metal workers, painters, electricians, plumbers and even draughtsmen.

Despite the immediate goals of these institutions – disciplinary or otherwise – each practice was predicated on an idea of making as a transformative act: social reform through prison labour, military reform through manufacturing, educational reform through industrial skilling. This fundamentally pragmatic model holds that the production of something – buildings, boats, blankets, whatever – is simultaneously the production of oneself. Reflection through action, learning through doing and behavioural psychology are all

contemporary versions of this same idea, effecting change by doing, and often by making. Urban Islands is of this ilk, as both an educational and an architectural model. But this type of practice also resonates at a much greater scale, such as in the production (and regeneration) of cities.

Over five years and four workshops, and now joined by Mark Szczerbicki, Urban Islands has taken shape as an independent studio program, working in collaboration with local and international universities and architectural practices. Students enrol directly in the program and ballot for one of three studios directed by invited international architects, while receiving academic credit through their home institution.

BVN Architecture, TTW Consulting Engineers and the University of Sydney are regular supporters, and the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust generously allows access to all of the facilities at Cockatoo Island. The result is a collectively formed network, a public-private, local-global, cross-institutional, vertically integrated studio, whose staff, program and students change every year. In effect, Urban Islands is a university without the university.

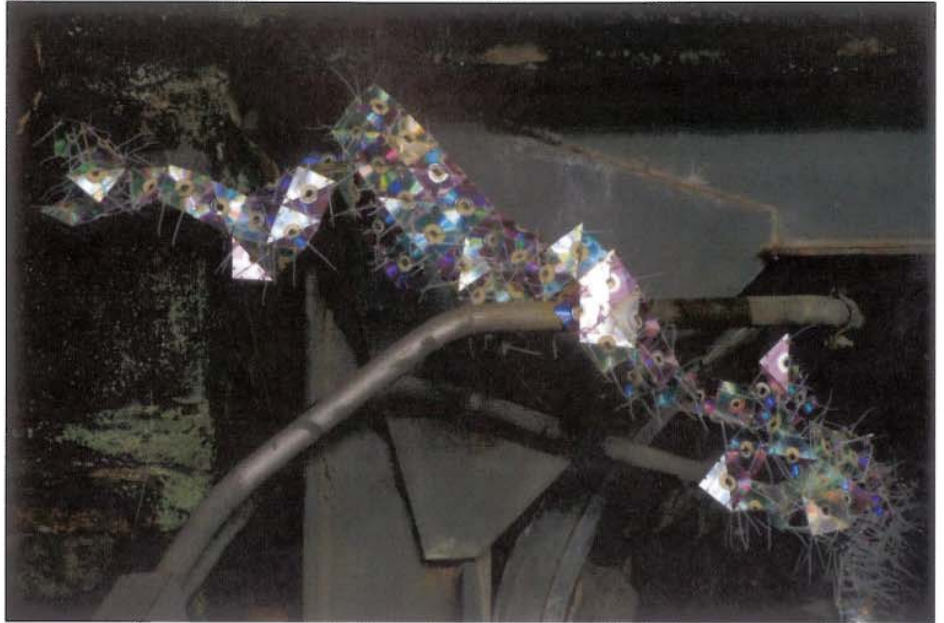
The 2011 workshop featured Nat Chard from the University of Manitoba, Nataly Gattegno from San Francisco's Future Cities Lab and Victor Marquez (Victor Marquez Arquitectos) from Mexico City, with students from Sydney and Melbourne universities and visiting reviewers from Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle. Previous workshops took place in 2006, 2007 and 2009 and included international guests Iwamoto Scott Architects (San Francisco), PR ARCHITEKTEN (Berlin), Geoff Manaugh (Los Angeles), Morphogenesis (New Delhi), Mark Smout (London), Mette Thomsen (Copenhagen), studio SUMO (New York), Superstudaca (Chile), Jaime Rouillon (Costa Rica) and Responsive Environment (Tokyo).

The invited guests define the studio's focus, which seems to naturally emerge as a hybrid of their own research and the intense environment of Cockatoo Island. For example, Chard's students produced a series of exquisitely crafted devices, foregrounding an idea about the remoteness of island life. They honed in on very specific phenomena such as echoes, crevices, shadows and even the patterns of seagulls, and fabricated site-specific mechanisms through which these local conditions



Melody Williams. Nat Chard's studio, UI 2011.

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2 *Light+Wind*. Nataly Gattegno's studio, UI 2011.

In a much broader context, the organisational structure of Urban Islands follows the momentum everywhere toward networks and away from centralisation.

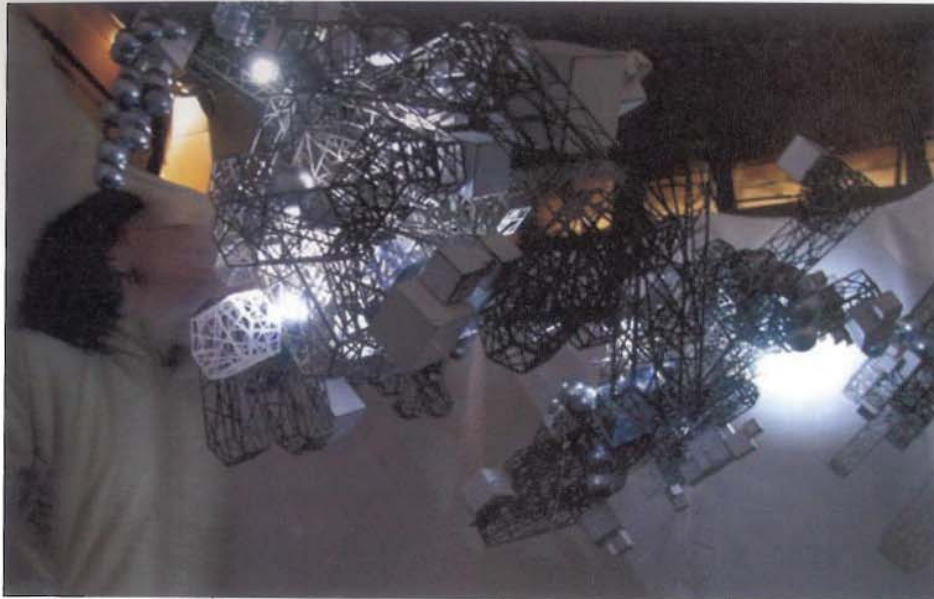
could be amplified or dislocated across time and space. Gattegno curated two projects in her group: one charted soil conditions of the island and proposed a system by which future changes in toxicity could be visualised; and the other constructed a surface to literally produce light at the end of a tunnel. Marquez's group curated a series of ephemeral installations that could change appearance by day and night. The final projects were reviewed in situ and representationally, and collectively fostered a much broader discussion comparing pedagogical approaches (across countries, universities and/or methodologies) and architectural practices.

The impact of the workshop on Cockatoo Island is already becoming tangible, if only subtly visible. When it started in 2006 there was no ferry service to the site, and the island had been dormant for over a decade, with only a series of disused factories, rusty tools and unprotected cliff-side pathways. Despite these hazards, the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust allowed the organisers free and unrestricted access to the site, which now, several years later, has proven to be a useful way for them to envision new types of programs as they develop a heritage plan for the island. Indeed, some key aspects of the workshop have set the

tone, and pace, for recent developments on Cockatoo Islands, characterised by short-term, slowly incremental or small-scale changes.

Opening to the public came with only the slightest amount of visible alteration, though with strong effect: the addition of a campground, a coffee shop and a very thin layer of largely self-guided program. A schedule of events, including the Biennale of Sydney and Nick Cave's All Tomorrow's Parties music festival, establishes a link back to the activities of the city. It also works to intensify public engagement, but in a way that is open and resists fixing a singular type, theme or market for future development. It's the anti-master plan, more legible and more effective the more "incomplete" it remains.

Seen in a much broader context, the organisational structure of Urban Islands (and the ongoing development of Cockatoo Island) follows the momentum everywhere around us toward networks and away from centralisation: cloud computing, workplace hubs, remote manufacturing. In any of these systems, the power is held in the components, not the larger form, which is constantly shifting. As an urban model, this is fundamentally resilient because it absorbs (and



Spatial Clusters. Victor Marquez's studio, UI 2011.

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Cockatoo Island inspires speculation about future city building, as an urban model that visibly connects the way we make things to the way we make places.

triggers) change at nearly any scale. Urban Islands works like this, gaining strength and identity through the links and people involved, without which it would have no form. As such, it's closer in nature to an urban archipelago than an isolated island, forming as a cluster of bodies aligned along a particular (architectural) fault line.

Network, cluster or urban-archipelago structures suggest viable, if nascent, models for an urbanism that is by nature incomplete and polycentric, autonomous yet interdependent, potent but not necessarily volatile. This is a city comprised of many dispersed sites, both virtual and local, a larger collective of people and places connected across infrastructures already in place, and new ones yet to emerge. The shape of this city may change, like the network itself, but we can be certain it will look less like the large centralised metropolises and more like a network of 'sister cities'.

Cockatoo Island inspires this sort of speculation about future city building, as it is an urban model that visibly connects the way we make things to the way we make places. As these production methods change, as industries transform and techniques expand, so does the city around them, sometimes incrementally, sometimes drastically. This may sound like an obvious correlation,

but extreme examples of such a close link offer deeper insight, and caution. Detroit, Dubai and China's mono-factory cities were all tooled for a singular type of output, and when that industry dissolved so did the city. Rather, contemporary production integrates across any number of techniques, a combination of processes only possible at this point in time: the industrial craft of Cockatoo, 20th century mass-production, 21st century mass-customisation, digital mass-collaboration.

What is the urbanism of this city? Like the Zen saying 'how you do anything is how you do everything', reforming the way we make anything will reform the way we make everything, and this is especially true of urban form. **ar**

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Toxicity. Nataly Gattegno's studio, UI 2011.