

Emerging architects

Despite talent and years of training, many young



Young architects make exceptional moments in architecture.

I started practice in 2000 with Tai Ropiha after winning the TKTS competition. Steven Fighera joined us in 2003 and 10 years on the practice has grown to a team of ten people working across residential, public, and urban design projects. The journey has been challenging. The initial competition win [TKTS Times Square, New York] gave us significant media exposure, but we still began the same way as most young architects; with residential work and design tutoring at university. Though this was adequate to sustain us, our ambition to do significant public oriented work remained distant.

Originally, we had hoped the combination of competition wins and our prior experience in a number of award-winning projects would bring public project opportunities. However, we had little success achieving more than the final shortlist in traditional EOI (expressions of interest) and tenders. Instead, our early opportunities for public work and competition invitations — such as Binhai City Master Plan, Ballast Point and Green Square — came through the patronage of fellow architects and landscape architects. Though we now have an increasing number of direct commissions and invitations, we still share the ‘emerging’ frustrations.

We still find that public and corporate clients prefer more established architectural practices. These practices offer experience in the relevant building type, design excellence expressed through peer-recognised awards, and the office capacity to deliver projects. In this context, why would anyone risk commissioning an emerging practice over an established one? What does an emerging practice offer?

Perhaps the past can provide some answers. It has often been relatively young architects that make exceptional moments in architecture. In Sydney, consider Utzon and the Sydney Opera House, Harry Seidler and Australia Square, Ken Woolley and Fisher Library at the University of Sydney. Internationally, consider Renzo Piano with Richard Rogers and the Pompidou Centre, Norman Foster and the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank. They all had limited experience in the project type and scale prior to these projects. These ground breaking projects had tremendous impact on their respective cities, providing lasting cultural and economic value.

Big leaps in innovation often come from emerging practices because their inherent lack of experience frees

them from established norms and client expectations garnered from previous work, so they naturally approach projects with a fresh set of eyes. Those early years of unbuilt designs, research and teaching, combined with passion and hunger are a potent recipe for exceptional outcomes.

Despite this, larger opportunities for emerging architects have become rare, and almost extinct in New South Wales. Public expectations on accountability make it difficult for an institutional client to select an architect based on latent capability over demonstrable experience. In today's climate it is hard to imagine a public project as significant as the Fisher Library being designed by a talented graduate, or Lend Lease taking on the next ‘Seidler’ for Barangaroo's main tower.

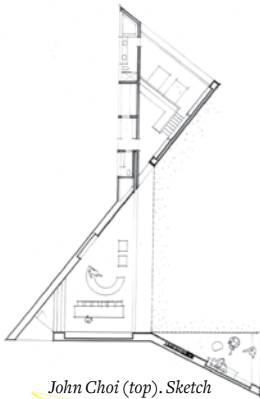
While current procurement practices minimise the risk for clients, they reinforce the status quo and limit places for aspiring architects to enter the market. This may be a safe method of delivering competent buildings but does it push the boundaries of innovation? It's vital to foster a small portion of public projects focused on the mission of ‘innovation’ — and priority to designs by young architects.

As a cultural investment in our future heritage, I would like to see the city actively pursue emerging practices as a

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vital player in the healthy evolution of the city. With fresh ideas not curtailed or tethered to industry norms, emerging practices have the latent intellectual capacity to challenge the built environment and produce work that brings new and, importantly, unexpected layers and dimensions to the city. With this vital shift in thinking, emerging practices can play a part in the making and understanding of our built environment, helping to reinforce youth and vigour within our cultural identity. ■■■

John Choi
Choi Ropiha Fighera



John Choi (top). Sketch (above) is an early study by Choi Ropiha Fighera of the lookout at Port Botany Foreshore, part of the expansion by Aecom for Sydney Ports Corporation. Sketch in yellow is a guest studio on a rural property in the hinterland of Byron Shire.