

40+1 anniversary:
High Court of Australia, Canberra
..... speech notes: 19 May 2021
Feiko Bouman: co-designer

Some Background

As there is already extensive and excellent information on many aspects of the architecture and the materials used in the High Court, I have chosen to speak about some lesser-known facts and of my involvement.

To re-visit the times when it all started: all those years ago. And how it came to be as it is now and my role in all of this.

Chris Kringas and I won the architectural competition in 1973 for the design of the High Court of Australia.

But firstly, I will give some background leading up to that competition. Some obscure...but of relevance.

I had been working in London for a couple of interesting architectural firms. And on returning to Sydney had several quality projects in my portfolio.

These impressed Col Madigan – a partner of Edwards Madigan Torzillo and Briggs. He invited me to join his excellent design group.

At that time the firm were totally engaged in developing the design of the Australian National Gallery; a project for which they had recently been chosen as architects via a national competition. It was then the most prestigious architectural project in Australia.

They were totally focused on it; no space for any distractions.

Because of this, some other projects in the office were delegated to me; to design and supervise their construction. Col was enthusiastic about my design skills and confident in my

ability. The projects included a small Medical Centre and a Library, both on Sydney's Northern Beaches.

It was during this period that I got to know Chris Kringas; and he became aware of my work.

Stage 1

Then in 1972, a competition was announced for the design of a permanent home for the High Court of Australia. To be built in Canberra.

By-the-way, architectural competitions such as these were far more common then.

The firm, being so heavily consumed with the Art Gallery project, was reluctant to enter – it would have sapped energy and resources. And it was thought to be foolishly ambitious; to dream of winning a second competition so soon.

But this reluctance was not shared by Chris. He was a willing slave to the excitement of the design process and refused to let the idea disappear.

He asked if I would join him to collaborate in a submission. We would do the work out-of-office, fitting it in whenever we could.

Chris lived in North Sydney with his wife Anne and their four children.

Attached to the rear of their house was a Child Care Centre, which they had built and was run expertly by Anne.

This is where Chris and I worked at night, amongst the tiny wooden chairs and tables, surrounded by a kaleidoscope of dripping, wet, technicolour children's paintings.

So, after a full day at the office, we would wrestle with the analysis of the competition brief and search for the most fitting solution.

The excitement of the design process stoked up energy reserves that we both were unaware we had.

And we often scratched away...page-after-page into the early hours.

Chris and I worked well together, despite, or probably because of, our different personalities and temperaments.

During these late-night sessions, I was introduced to a Kringas household speciality – nourishment would miraculously appear and keep us going.

It was exotic – banana-and-cheese on toast.

This national competition was in 2 stages.

Over 150 designs were entered and six were to be selected to proceed to the final stage. It was a long shot.

The telegram

After our entry was finished and submitted, I took a break to do some travelling and visit relatives with Pamela.

On arriving at her parent's house in the UK, a telegram awaited us from Chris.

It read:

"Come back to Sydney as soon as possible. In final six for High Court".

Her parents were unaware of the competition, so were mystified and worried by this telegram. It had arrived a few days before we did.

All of course, well before mobile phones and e-mails.

I guess Pamela's father was thinking his daughter had got involved with some undesirable colonial from down South – who was about to be hauled before the courts.

Stage 2

So, I left the UK alone as quickly as possible and flew back to Sydney.

By now the office was seriously interested.

They allocated time, resources and others to assist us.

It was suddenly embraced as a distant but distinct possibility.

This next stage, (stage 2) took about six weeks, and was again worked on away from the main office, in a few upstairs rooms of a McMahons Point house owned by Col Madigan, which was vacant at the time and undergoing renovations.

I now worked on the design full-time and Chris usually 3 days-a-week;

(as he was also working on the Art Gallery project at head office).

Others were delegated to help us.

Col would check-in at the end-of-the-day to see what we had been up to...and make comment etc.

We finished our submission and waited to hear the outcome.

On 8th October 1974, the announcement was made...

And despite original doubts by some; we won this much sought-after commission. The High Court was to become a robust direct neighbour to the National Gallery.

About On-site Supervision

After the competition win, I made the outlandish suggestion to Col, that I should go to Canberra to head up the office there and be the supervising architect for both projects.

Incredibly, he and the partners agreed.

Very surprising; especially considering my raw youth...I was just about 30.

It was a full-on heavy-duty assignment ... tough contractors ... innovative construction ... a lot of public scrutiny etc.

Still...it was exciting and rewarding.

During this time, I regularly met with Sir Garfield Barwick who was then the Chief Justice.

Fortnightly on Thursdays at 4:30, he would arrive on-site, his car gliding through the construction gates and asked to be shown around his soon-to-be future High Court, which was in early construction stage.

Then one day Sir Garfield put a question to me; obviously, something of great importance to him, which needed clarification...

“Mr Bouman, when will the marble cladding arrive?”

My reply:

“Sir Garfield there will be no marble cladding, for we have proposed a beautiful material, of integrity ... of endurance ... off-white concrete with a bush-hammered finish. I will show you some samples”.

We had produced and experimented with many trial panels. Sir Garfield was unimpressed, totally underwhelmed... He may not even have believed me. Still - it is a beautiful enduring velvety finish.

A more detailed blow-by-blow account is told in my book - Urban Peasant.

Tragically, at age 38, Chris, my design partner, died in 1975 and everything changed ... obviously ... especially, for the Kringas family.

Not too long after, I left Canberra and started further architectural adventures under-my-own-banner.

So, there it is: a snap-shot of my involvement.

And now we are here; more than 40 years later ... unbelievable ... inside a mighty, inviting 3-dimensional interior space of transparency and clarity...readily revealing all the internal components.

A vibrant street-scape with 2 massive pillars, holding up the whole edifice.

A powerful building, but open and welcoming;

Certainly once through the “glass entry curtain” ... all is transformed,

without any implied intimidation so common in major public buildings.

This was our design intent from the start.

.....

Feiko Bouman co-designer HCA

www.feikobouman.com.au