Presentation

2018 UQ Architecture Lecture Series

Held on 1 May, 2018

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Adam Jefford:

Welcome. It’s great to see you tonight. I notice that it’s getting a little bit colder. I’ve got my ugliest jumper I could find for tonight’s event. My name is Adam. It’s my pleasure to welcome you here tonight.

To begin, I’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

For those of you joining us for the first time here at SLQ or online, we use a great system called Slido. It allows you to ask questions of tonight’s speaker, and really get involved in that conversation. You just need to open your browser on your phone or on your desktop there if you’re watching remotely and navigate.

Also by the way, you can review tonight’s lecture. Get those points, and we’ll publish it online. Thank you for those people who have been sending those in.

Where’s Slido now? Great. Slido. Browser, open, slido.com. Tonight’s event code is 2658. Don’t stress if you don’t catch it in the next ten seconds, because we will put this slide back up at the end, and you can send those questions along for the conversation at the end of the lecture.

I think it would be timely for Janina to come up and introduce tonight’s speaker. Thank you Janina.

Janina Gosseye:

Good evening. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet tonight, and pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

So, welcome to the sixth talk in this year’s UQ Architecture Lecture Series. For those of you who have been to the previous five, I apologise for sounding like a broken record, but I would like to introduce the theme of the lecture series once more for the benefit of those who are just joining us for the first time tonight.

As you can see on the slide behind me, the theme for the lecture series is ‘In-terre-vention’. As curator of this year’s lecture series, I’ve chosen to invite practices whose projects I believe are highly sensitive to the context that surrounds them, and have also had an impact beyond their immediate sight. This is the reason why I’ve change the middle syllable of the word intervention to ‘terre’, the French word for earth. In doing so, emphasis in this year’s lecture series is also placed on the invention component that goes hand in hand with each intervention as the projects and practices that are featured in this series demonstrate.

After tonight’s event we have two more talks scheduled. Next week Amalie Wright, founder of the Brisbane-based design studio Landscapology will be joining us, so if you’d like to attend and you haven’t registered yet, please make sure to do so through the Event Bright system.

But now to this evening’s event. After tonight’s lecture, Andrew Wilson will join me on stage for the question round. Andrew is a senior lecturer at the UQ School of Architecture, a fellow of the AIA Queensland, and currently also serves on the Chapter Council.

That said – and I’m sorry Andrew, but you didn’t come here to hear me or Andrew – you came here to hear Simone Robeson speak. Simone has joined us all the way from Perth where she founded Robeson Architects in 2014. Robeson Architects is an intentionally small practice which focuses predominantly on residential architecture interiors and commercial fitouts. One of Simone’s best known projects is the so called ‘Triangle House’, which received a commendation in the small projects category in 2015, and I’m sure we will learn all about this magnificent building tonight, as well as about many other projects that speak to Simone’s passion for urban development, modern lifestyles and housing flexibility.

So, without further ado, please join me in welcoming Simone to the stage.

Simone Robeson:

Thank you very much Janine. I’d firstly also like to say thank you to you and the School of Architecture, the University of Queensland, for inviting me over tonight. I was really excited to come over here. I haven’t been to Brisbane before. Well, except a quick fly through, so it’s been really nice the last few days seeing your lovely city.

So, as Janina said, I’m Simone Robeson, Director of Robeson Architects from Perth. I’m very excited to share some projects of mine tonight with you and how they relate to the theme of ‘In‑terre-vention’.

So, before I jump in and start discussing some of my projects, I thought it might be worthwhile to talk about my practice and how I started and how I structure the business. So, this is my office on the left hand side here. My office is in an inner city suburb called West Leederville. So, it’s a few kilometres from the city. Lots of other architects are around there. Really nice vibe, great coffee next door, and I also share an office with another company. There’s about ten of them. They’re a landscape architect firm. That has proven to be a really great move, because working for yourself when you’re starting a business can be really tough, and I did it for a while, and you’re at home and you’ve got no one to talk to about certain things.

So, being in that creative environment is great to bounce ideas off. We share a meeting room. We share printers and sample libraries. So, there’s a lot of benefits to it, and the biggest benefit I think – this is a photo of our Christmas party – it’s a real community feel and I absolutely love working there. This is a photo of inside the office, and it makes the office look really big, which is really impressive when clients and consultants come. So, your business looks a lot bigger than what you actually are, so it’s really fun.

About how I set up the business. So, it’s a little different in that I don’t hire full time staff, so it’s very much a satellite office or my employees are on a contract basis, and I employ them on a per project basis. They will come in say weekly if need be, and we talk about projects and we have a lot of air time on the phone or over the internet. It means that I can stay quite flexible and quite nimble, and just take on the projects that I want to and actually get to design rather than passing it off. That is an intentional move, because I do want to be involved in every project, and that’s why I started a business, not to manage people. So, the aim really is to do less projects but hopefully better ones.

Also, being quite niche with what you do. I know lots of people say when you’ve got a bigger practice diversify, diversify. If one industry goes down, you’ve got something to fall back on. I get that, but when you’re as small as I am you can be flexible, so that’s not as big a consideration for me. It also means that you can get quite efficient with your systems and your business systems when you really focus on one type of job and the delivery of that type of job. So, that’s the benefit, and that’s a bit about how I set the business up.

The ‘Triangle House’. So, a bit about how I started the business. I started it about three years ago, and unlike many other small firms I probably played it quite safe to start on my own. So, I was contracting part time to a builder in a design and construct kind of scenario, and started getting some private work, and it was only when I landed the one bigger job, which was a full house, quite a reasonable sized one, that I was brave enough to go out on my own.

At the same time my husband and I also found a little block of land, which is this Triangle House here. I was really extremely lucky for this opportunity, because when you’re the client it allows you to trial things that you might not have otherwise trialled or be brave enough to trial with a client when you’re so green and you’re starting out. So, I feel this was a real great start to the career, and I was very lucky.

It’s amazing what happens when you design something true to your ideals and without the consideration of the client. The clients I have now seem to come to me because they like that aesthetic or they like the ideas that I’ve played with and trialled in this project. So, it means that I can actually work with people with similar ideals on small house living.

Since then I’ve worked on over 30 projects, so residential interiors and a few commercial hospitality projects. So, these next few slides are just some interiors, external new housing. As many of you are probably the same, I’ve been drawing houses since I was about ten years old. So, it’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. So, the majority of these are housing. This is a new house in Cottesloe, which is a seaside suburb in Perth, and we’ve used Corten Steel, so slowly getting into this theme of relating to your context, and that should weather really nicely with that salt air over time. A few more detailed shots of commercial and some residential.

This house is a recent one I finished in a suburb called Shenton Park, and it picks up on a lot of the themes that I’ll discuss tonight. It’s located in a mixed use area, so residential/commercial zoning, and I find that really interesting. I love working on projects like this, because it allows you to experiment with different ways of living. This house for example, this is a photo of the rear courtyard, but at the front, which is in the next slide, we have created a commercial tenancy of about 60 square metres. So, it can actually generate income if they lease it out for the owners, and they also have the option when they’re a bit older to work from home in a more commercial environment. That’s the front. You can see how it relates to one side to the commercial aspect and then it’s set back from the single storey residential on the other side.

A bit about the philosophy of my practice just quickly. It’s pretty straightforward. I’ve had this Post-It next to my desk for a very long time, and I’ve done so many business courses and things and there’s so much to think about, but at the end of the day do great work to me is something that I have to always remind myself, because I believe the rest will follow if you really put everything into it and just try to make it great for your clients. This quote from David Chipperfield, one of my favourite architects – and it’s in reference to residential architecture – he says ‘the intention for houses, to create a series of rooms and to make the daily ritual of life more enjoyable. Nothing more. Nothing less,’ which I really try to do. So, I think that was a great quote.

These are just some renders of some of the things on the drawing board at the moment. Very different in form, materiality, all quite very responsive to what’s going on in the neighbourhood or the character of the area.

Now, talking about some case studies tonight. The first one. So, interventions. Now, the way I’ve organised my talk is I’m going to start from small to smallest, and yes, this project here is actually the largest of the small projects I will talk about tonight. It sits on an 180 square metre site, and I think all the projects I will discuss tonight share that similar process and have a strong response to the context, whether that be its physical location or the preoccupations of the client.

Often in the cases I’ll discuss, the built form of the design is really driven and drawn from these contextual conditions. Like I mentioned before, all of them will be located in activity zones or town centres or mixed use zoning, which allows you to be a bit experimental and play with this idea of the home.

Flexibility is a really key driver in a lot of my projects, this one in particular. Like I mentioned before, the ability for owners to sub-lease to produce income. In this one it’s quite flexible in respect of there’s a home office built in to the ground floor, or it can be a bedroom or it could be whatever it wants to the next owner of it. So, it’s adaptable for future uses.

I also think these ancillary uses cultivate activity at street level. So, you’ll see in this project as I’ll go through the plans, ground floor is an office, and usually in normal suburbs you get people going to work and they don’t come back. But with these kind of projects there’s activity during the day, which I really like.

So, entering into this project, the shape of it is very much driven by the shape of the site, so the triangular site. I really wanted to utilise every last bit of space with this one. This slide here gives you a bit of context. So, that’s my site there, and the site was actually an offcut of land. So, it was owned by the Catholic Church and it was someone’s back yard, and actually it used to house two cars from that neighbouring property who used to park on it. I remember when we were looking at purchasing the property people would say ‘What are you going to fit on there? This is the most ridiculous thing’. This is a very Perth thing as well. I mean I don’t know if it’s the same here, but this was considered very small. It was the smallest block in the suburb at the time, and it would still probably be one of the smallest now.

Right opposite is Hyde Park, which is a really beautiful park which I’ll discuss later on capitalising on that and using the beautiful views and taking advantage of that. This is the church right behind, which I also have views to from the master bedroom. A short walk, which would be about 50 metres down the road, is a town centre of Mount Lawley. So, Mount Lawley is an inner city suburb two kilometres from the Perth CBD. Lots of restaurants, cafes and that kind of thing. So, it gives you a bit of an idea on the context there.

Now, this is a photo of the block, and I have to explain that this isn’t even the whole block. The right of way which you’ll see in the site plan is three metres wide. From that fence, come three metres in. So, we had to seal that. So, it’s tiny, and it was really, really scary to think what we were going to do with it.

There was a lot of interest in the property. It was on the market for nearly three years, and lots of people would take the site plan to local architects and say ‘What can you do for me,’ and many of them said ‘Look, I can’t guarantee anything is going to get through. It’s a risk’. So, at the end of the day it was quite affordable for the area, because no one else wanted it.

In Perth, like, I said, contextually the average block size has just dropped to 415 square metres now, so this is smaller than most people’s back yard. A bit on that. I thought this was a really interesting diagram to talk about Perth and just quickly discuss residential development in Perth. Urban sprawl is what our city is all about, which is a huge problem, and it stretches 150 kilometres along the coast north to south, and these are the projections to where it’s going right now.

The state government does have a goal for 60 percent infill development, and we’re sitting at about 40 percent now, although it still doesn’t feel like it. Perth is very resistant to height and density, and we have this acronym called NIMBY, which is what many people call us Perth people, which means not in my back yard. So, we’re very happy to discuss all the great examples in Europe and America, but actually when it comes down to it no one wants it in their own back yard in Perth.

Now, while I realise my projects are not dense by any means, or high rise or anything like that, I do believe they’re examples of an alternative to the project home market and housing on larger blocks, which is prolific in Perth. So, I hope this shows what you can do in a city infill development and how to develop these small, odd offcuts of land in creative ways.

Also, I think my goal with it was to prove that you can have high amenity in a really high quality building and a sense of spaciousness on a relatively small amount of space.

So, the brief. It was to be a home and a home office for a couple and their dog. There was to be no superfluous spaces, so doing away with unused circulation and unused rooms. With the project home model – it might be a similar situation here – the project homes are very highly programmed. So, you’ll have your theatre rooms, your games room, no flexibility. This was really meant to be an antidote to that.

Also with the brief, very functional, secure, lock and leave kind of thing, low maintenance, which is very much the typical brief I get from most clients these days, and site. So, you can see on the left hand side here Hyde Park, and the driver was to capitalise on these views, grab them, get as much as you can from them. Some of the photos will better demonstrate this, but the project was really about grabbing this and also needing to balance these views and city views with the need for privacy.

So, you can see here we used acoustic glass throughout. So, this type of glass sits between your double glazing and your standard single clear, and it’s a more cost-effective way to get some acoustic separation with the building. This window here is actually one way glass, which some other photos will better demonstrate, but during the day you can sit in the window seat and no one can see inside.

The site plan. So, you can see here the right of way runs through here. This dotted line is actually the sewer, and it sat 1.5 metres into the block, further reducing your building footprint of it. So, this was a huge deterrent to a lot of buyers as well. So, response to that was to build as close as possible to it and then pile down, so the engineers had to be consulted to make sure that we could do that.

Vincent Street. This is the north facing side, so the longest bit of the block was actually facing north. Now, this is also quite a busy street, so that posed another problem. How do you deal with a busy street and house which you’re really trying to get quite close to the setback so you get useable spaces on it?

Just a quick walk through the plan. So, this carport here, it’s enclosed on two sides but the access is from the right of way at the rear, and there’s enough space for two cars here. Originally my plan was to have a crossover on to Vincent Street which would be a drive through situation which I thought would be fantastic, but the council unfortunately didn’t support it because it was too close to the intersection. But it still operates two cars no problem. The formal entry is from the street. So, you come up to this little concrete plinth, and then this area here is designed as an office. So, meeting table, inbuilt desk towards the rear, and the stair leading up to the living areas above.

There’s this thing in Perth, and it might be here, but everyone wants to design for resale. ‘What if we sell it? We need that third bedroom for resale’. As much as I don’t love the idea of that, it’s the condition. I get so many clients asking for that third bedroom when they really don’t need it. In this house I thought for future occupants this office space could be quite easily converted into a third bedroom, simply extending the corridor and blocking off the edge of the stair through there.

There’s also a laundry/bathroom with a bath, so it’s quite a reasonable size, and a guest bedroom with built in robes through here which leads out into this little courtyard. Now the tightest bit of the block back here was only a metre, so couldn’t really do too much with that, so I put a planter box and planted a Chinese tallow tree to green it up a little bit and use those tight little corners through there.

Going up a level, the main bedroom and living areas are located upstairs, and that was to separate it from the street below and to also grab some of those views I was discussing. So, coming through to the left, there’s a huge full width sliding door. So, once that’s open this top floor effectively acts as a studio apartment, because the intention is it’s a couple living here, and it was really designed for that intention and not thinking about anyone else. It was the way we lived, and that’s how it was designed. So, often that’s open. A relatively smaller bedroom, but with a walk in robe, lots of storage through here and an ensuite. Then coming through here, kitchen, living, out to a very small balcony in the pointy end.

Talking about flexibility, in two of my projects tonight I don’t have dedicated dining rooms. Reason being they’re small projects, and the amount of times you entertain is quite rare in modern lifestyles and you don’t have that many people over, and if you did, my idea was you could have a long table in the carport. But for day to day if you have four to six people over, this small portion of the island bench is actually moveable, so you can move it out into this space here and then get eight people around the table when you have guests.

This is the window seat you saw in the earlier photo looking out into the street, so a little spot to read a book facing north, which grabs that nice north light into the living area. All built in storage along here, low level storage with glazing out. This window is the window that picks up the views to the trees further on.

Now, the next few slides are a walkthrough of the project. So, up in this corner, this shows you where we are. So, we’re on the ground floor here looking at the office and the open stair. Aesthetically I was quite influenced by Japanese architecture, and I love their small houses and how they use light. And, keeping it really simple. So, artworks and your own belongings really characterise the space and give it character rather than the architecture itself.

This is the stairway. So, a silicon join to get that nice clean seamless look, and it’s also an acoustic separation between the bedroom and the living areas and it draws some beautiful shadows to this study below. Again, this idea of privacy, it’s more upward looking rather than focused towards the street below.

Some shots upstairs. So, as you can see, the waterfall window through here, and then this is the concealed slider door into the main bedroom. A bit about materiality. It had to be quite cost‑effective, so we kept burnished concrete floors, really simple walls and some plywood cabinetry, which kind of cocoons the walk in robe, tiles that I sourced at quite a good price. But we kept the palette really minimal, and I think that’s really important in small spaces to make them feel larger.

The kitchen area. So, this is that table I was discussing. So, it’s built as a dining table. So, I designed up these legs for it, and the marble stops at the level of the tabletop. So, it does read as one continuous bench, but you can move it to get people around like I was saying. Also, materiality and colours. I used white for everything on the back wall. This was really so you read the space as a wall and that cabinetry reads as a wall to really extend that, and likewise with the island bench, keeping that quite dark to tone in with the concrete floor. Keep it nice and calm on the eyes and make it feel a bit larger.

The perception of space in this house is a huge one. It was in the open house for two years now. We had over 2,000 people through, and the main comment that it got was ‘Wow, you come upstairs and it actually feels quite big’. Part of the reason is the openings obviously, but the upper floor plate overhangs the ground floor by a metre on each side, so that’s the largest floor plate. To really put the area and the money into the areas you use the most rather than extra bedrooms and things like that.

Through here, these are the views to the park beyond. Now, we didn’t have enough room for a balcony or an alfresco, so the idea here is these sliding stacker doors open right up and makes this living room feel like a balcony and feel like you’re outside, and also frames the trees really nicely. It was when I was on site that I decided to change the sill height on that. It was approved to be a lot lower, which meant you could see into the neighbour’s property but it also picked up on their solar hot water systems on their roof and it just wasn’t that great. So, when we were on site, I opted to lift that, and it just cut that all out. So, when you’re sitting and having dinner, all you read is the treetops.

Some art. So, just a note about this. I commissioned a local artist to do some artwork on the front wall. The brief was for something organic in form to contrast against the bold forms of the building. This was his typical style, and the birds and the leaves reference Hyde Park nearby. On this wall through here, it’s been white for three years, and it was only last week that someone graffitied it unfortunately with a profanity about Donald Trump, which I was really upset about. But the council came and cleaned it off, so the artwork is restored and it’s still there today, which is really nice. My dog in the office. Happy client there.

In conclusion for this project, how did it impact the larger context for Perth? Well, I do think it’s an example of smaller footprint living. It’s very uncommon in Perth. We still have this project home, large home, everyone wants it, so I really wanted to prove that you can have really high quality living on much smaller sites and use these offcuts much smarter. The locals and the local media coined it the Triangle House, so it’s become a bit of a landmark, which is really nice to see. There are a lot of small unutilised sites still in Perth, but we’re seeing more of it. So, that is my intention for the project and I hope we see more of it.

Now, moving on to my next project, I’ve called this one King George, because it’s an alterations and addition project on the corner of King Street and George Street in a suburb called East Fremantle. So, Fremantle is a port city, maybe 15 kilometres south of Perth. It’s got a lot of history. It was one of the first settled areas in Perth. So, there’s a lot of stone workers’ cottages, things like that around there.

This elevation along this street is George Street. So, that’s the activity centre where all the cafes, bars, restaurants and little boutiques are located. This terrace house is one of four in this street, over 100 years old, and it’s a Grade A listed heritage building, so the highest classification you can get, which created many challenges. I wouldn’t say restrictions. Just challenges, and how you deal with that.

How do you make a functional house for a young family but yet be very respectful of the existing building? That was the first challenge. The other one was also I had to deal with three elevations on this project. So, obviously the front, then this elevation along George Street was very important, and the rear laneway one which you’ll see later.

This project also is located in a mixed use zone, residential/commercial, and there’s a very distinct flavour in East Fremantle. It’s very much this red brick, limestone port city vernacular, so I really tried with the extension to tie into that and look at what’s there and really make it a part of its place, and something that’s not trendy but that really fits in.

A site map of it. So, running east/west is George Street, and the project is located here. So, you can see these are the kind of buildings that surround it. A lot of the red and limestone. Then this is some images of other buildings. So, this industrial style building is directly opposite. Adjacent is these ones, and old heritage listed pub. So, it’s not very residential this street. Any residential on the street is usually behind or quite high or set back from the street and put behind. So, it was really tough. What’s this project going to look like? Is it a house or is it an office?

You can see here. So, I put this photo in. So, this photo really is trying to describe my conceptual response to the site and to the planning of it. So, this is the existing cottage. The George Street elevation is what we’re looking at. This part here is the home office with a guest suite above, the black box. This lower level black box is the kitchen through here, existing brick wall all the way through here, and to meet them I’ve inserted this little steel portion here.

The office really was meant to be the part of the building that relates to the commercial aspect on the street, whereas the black boxes I wanted to recess into the background so you read this single storey street height rather than reading a double storey building. So, the intention was to let that set back. Also, the bulk was pulled to the back of the site, let’s the existing house be the star. You don’t want to compete with the beautiful heritage building. So, I did put a lot of effort into depressing it through the centre, keeping the roof under the eave line, and then put the bulk at the back. This parapet is a bit of a contemporary play on the existing parapet of the front house also.

On this corner, this is the right of way, so another elevation which people generally see. I really felt like this corner had to be solid, and a little nugget on the corner really anchoring the site. As this section really was to relate as the commercial portion, we had a bit of fun doing some custom glazed tiles, which were done for us in Melbourne, just to get those burgundy tones to play on the typical red brick of the area. Concrete lintels, which kind of reference the limestone but we put a white oxide in the concrete floor and these lintels are simply an extension of that floor coming out also. The window frames within the commercial element are steel, whereas everywhere else they’re aluminium. So, just in the commercial section they’re steel, with again one way glass for privacy inside the office.

So, the brief. A young professional couple with one child. They loved the character of their area. Born and bred in East Fremantle, so they wanted something that really fit in the area, but yet they also wanted a luxury hotel feel. So, we had these quite opposing briefs, so it was a matter of how do we do that and how do we fit it in with the street. They travel often. It had to be low maintenance.

Also, in the original brief they wanted a portion of it to be able to be leased out on Airbnb or as accommodation. So, the original plan was for this back section, the office and the guest bedroom upstairs, they could close that off from the rest of the house and use it as an Airbnb. As they use it now, they use it for their parents to stay, but it’s fully self-contained and they have their own space in the project.

Part of the brief was also to upgrade the existing house. So, there wasn’t too much work to that. It was more about how we link the old and new, which was quite important, and that’s where I lead to this slide. So, given the historical significance of the house, we had to be very considerate of altering the existing building fabric. So, there was only I think two existing openings that were replaced with new, and the link to the old and the new, this window here, I simply opened it up to the ground floor and widened it, and that becomes the corridor to get from the old to the new.

The planning of it. So, this is the demolition plan. This dark hallway here, we’ve inserted two very deep skylights to brighten this area up, a new veranda, reinstated the original bullnose veranda to the front. So, this is the two front bedrooms both with fireplaces, their lounge room, which is still the lounge room, and in this back area there were 70s and 80s additions to both the kitchen and the bathroom, so we gutted all this section and put a new family sized bathroom in here. You can see here this is the opening penetration to get to the new extension.

Now the ground floor plan. So, the dark shading is the existing house, then the works to this section at the back. So, a new large bathroom, a powder room tucked in here, and also a laundry tucked in here. So, not a full sized laundry, just a hidden one in a cupboard, which was part of the brief. I find that less and less people are wanting large laundries, especially with a young family and when they choose to just have the one child, and also flexibility with this toilet. This also acts as the guest toilet and the family toilet, so you walk through there, so less of a need for more fixtures.

Now, coming through to this area, the kitchen is through here with an east facing courtyard in the middle with bifold stacking doors, a little window seat. This is all the garden through this area here, and then a link to this back portion which was originally going to be that leased out section. Space for one car in the carport, the office down here, and then the stairs lead up to the guest suite. So, bedroom and robe and then a little north facing terrace above.

This is a photo that shows the before and after of the original corridor. As you can see we’ve done just very simple skylights through there. I also put this photo on, because I think this describes the biggest concept for me in the planning stage of this project. It was a 228 square metres site. So, the original house was 110 square metres, and we added about the same on to that. So, it was quite a big program to put on such a small site, so the key consideration was how do we make this space feel large? How do we get this sense of spaciousness on such a small block with not much garden as well?

And, we’re actually looking through here at the back at the right of way, the planting. So, I wanted to keep this corridor open and really extend that access of the site and keep it open, and people walk in and go ‘Wow, how far does it go?’ You don’t know. You kind of question it. It’s also dually effective, because it keeps circulation to one side of the house and it allows you to be quite effective with your use of space.

A few quick photos of what we’ve done to the existing. So, upgraded the mantlepieces and then inserted robes. I say inserted, because little details like this, offsetting it from the walls, really does make it read like someone’s placed it in there, and if need be you can take it away later. So, it still retains the importance of the existing house.

Likewise with the living room. This little cupboard, the ribbed profile which we designed up is also replicated in the ceiling through here. So, this is a closer view of that shot I showed you looking right through the site. We depressed the space through the transition, so the ceiling drops low and dark and then you pop out into the extension, which also deals with lots of things. So, you can see here these art recesses were not really designed and it was something that happened on site. When you’ve got this condition of an existing wall meeting a new wall in the same plane, you have say 10/20mms out where they don’t align and it’s a bit awkward. So, we patched that out and created these art recesses in there, which work quite well, and in here the hidden laundry using all recessed door frames. So, it does read as a wall as opposed to these chunky frames in this really quite small space.

The family sized bathroom and powder room through here. Like the last project, I used this same marble throughout the project, and I think it’s really important in small projects to keep that quite consistent. I don’t think you need to be mixing up every wet area and every living area. It’s also quite effective for cost, because when you can purchase a slab from the producer you use it as much as possible. You’ll see in the next photo we’ve used it in the kitchen also around the rangehood, that same marble.

Again, I brought in this idea of this moving dining table. So, we had a collaboration with a local furniture designer who created this custom base for us, and again it’s freestanding, so it’s designed to sit in there. But this little window seat here becomes seating for this table when it moves across, which again, you can get eight people around there. Concealed fridges, pantries, to keep it quite simple, less going on. All hidden storage through here as well. So, you’re really using every last bit of space. Again, the depth of the window seat we put in cupboards. These are all drawers along here. That’s a pantry. So, wherever we can grab a bit of space for storage we did in this project.

This is the floorplan of this kitchen. So, you can see better the difference, this square little dining table sitting on the end and the little hidden cupboards either side of the window seat.

This view is looking back the other way, so looking through to the existing corridor, and you can see where the existing timber meets the new concrete. So, this was the concrete where we added the white oxide and we chose black aggregates to keep it quite consistent, because I didn’t want too much colour going on in this space.

Stepping further back now, we’re in the courtyard looking back into the kitchen. The bifold sliding doors, they face east, which is really ideal for kitchens, to get that nice morning sun. The idea here is to bring the floor finish internally externally with a recessed threshold, which really makes this space read as one large dining room. The courtyard. This concrete seating becomes seating if they do have an outdoor table here in future when they want to entertain more guests.

Talking about the long axis of the site, I also tried to do the same thing with a short axis. So, this view is looking across the site, so standing on the boundary wall looking to the red brick boundary wall. So, keeping that glazed makes you read the site, makes you read the full width of the site rather than cutting it short, which again opens up those views.

Similar view looking up to the west facing bedroom above. Now, west facing is a bit of a nightmare in Perth because of the sun and the heat, so these custom steel fins were designed to shelter that sun, but you’ll see when I go to the photos upstairs, also to shelter some of the views and add a bit of privacy from the street below.

The burnished concrete floor in the carport extends out and forms this seat. So, that’s all formed in one piece and then it comes up to form that barbecue top. This is a photo of the office. So, you can see it’s dealt with a little differently to the rest of the house. It’s got its own commercial style door and can be shut off with a sliding door to let that operate totally on its own or for guests.

The one way glass I used here as well, because George Street, there’s a lot of activity, and you want to sit here when you’re working and have a look out, but you don’t necessary want people to look in and you don’t want curtains down all day. So, I really like the one way glass.

This is upstairs, so the big black hovering box. This is an image of what’s going on inside. So, this is looking north when you open the doors, out to the northern treetop view. So, a bit of borrowed landscape there. A few images of the ensuite and looking out to the west and the chimneys below.

So, in conclusion, similar to the first project flexibility key, and I feel the main thing with this project was to make sure it was very much a part of its context, but it had to fulfil the brief for the client. There was a lot of program to get in, so it was a matter of balancing that with trying to do something that’s lasting in the area.

Now, to my smallest intervention, and it’s very small. This is a 22 square metre fitout for a coffee store in an area in Perth called Claremont. So, it’s a shopping precinct, quite a high end shopping precinct, lots of shiny white new stores. So, this was intended to be a bit of a cocoon and a bit of a refuse for coffee. These guys who own it are specialty coffee makers. They’re barista champs. So, there was a lot of equipment. Everything had to be measured to the absolute millimetre to get all the equipment and fridges in this tiny space and still make it functional. So, we laid out a lot of things on the floor and made sure that they could operate and turn over a lot of coffees. So, practicality I think was the biggest challenge in this one.

Aesthetically used a lot of raw high quality materials, and I think fitouts can become quite on trend, and the intention is to swap them over in three to five years’ time. That’s definitely the case in shopping centres, and sometimes in more individual tenancies like this. So, with a long lease in place we really did have that opportunity to look at some higher quality materials and how they could age, and really move away from the more applied finishes with this job, which is what we’ve done.

We ripped off the existing walls and put lime paint, and that’s in a dado finish. So, we custom coloured two tone olive. That was part of the brief I should say. He loved olive, and they wanted a saloon. So, their mood board was cactuses and swinging barn doors. I didn’t want to interpret that literally of course, but we took some of those items and we interpreted them in a bit more of a subtle way I hope through the colour also, and a bit of retail. So, these are all custom little steel shelves to keep it off the ground to utilise the space better.

A bit on the context. So, this just shows you what’s around there. There’s your David Jones, your Coles, your high end boutiques. So, very shiny and new, so we did want to do something quite different to what was around in this case, as opposed to the last two projects.

The existing building is on the left. So, you can see it was an 80s style brown brick building, and often you can’t do too much with the base build. It’s a lease, so that brings up its own challenge. There’s a limit to what you can do, and it’s not like a house. It’s not there forever I suppose. So, what we did here, ripped off that timber look wallpaper, cladded it in a CFC board and then brought that lime paint internally and externally, again to keep the palette really simple and consistent through the project.

Looking at the entry, we also reinstated the existing arches, cleaned them all up. I thought that was a nice part of the existing building, so we used that and kept it, just interpreted it I suppose in a more contemporary way. You can see here with sites that are just small, this just shows the things you can do just to grab some space. This was tin, which we could have used, but we found out it was on battens and the brick wall was behind. So, we grabbed another almost 50mms around the whole shop by removing it, which was really important when you’re trying to get in all this machinery and equipment. So, we took that off. The concrete floor was paint, slated paint. Ripped that all off, took the ceilings out, and these mirrors I kept. Because when you’re on a minimal budget you use what’s there, and I was quite stoked that there was mirrors, because in small spaces mirrors make things look bigger. So, we worked with them. We worked with what was there.

So, the floor plan. So, the mirrors were located along this wall, so I used that as a backdrop to the back service bench. Wash up area here, and the island bench here with food display. On site we had to replace the window sill, so I thought well let’s put a little hole in the wall, an openable window here. So, that was something that we decided on site. Then over here just a simple floating steel bench for people waiting, and in the bay window we got a custom steel planter box to fit exactly in there to put their cactuses. So, that came through somewhere in the project, which is good. These are some of the coloured elevations you can see. So, mirrors, steel shelving, which were all open just to make sure that mirror read wall to wall, and the island bench here which I’ll talk about here.

Firstly I should have said the verticality was a huge one I think in a small space when you remove the ceiling. I wanted to enhance that height. So, hence these taller skinny shelves and hence the shape of these tiles here, because it just defines the size of the place. It does feel bigger than what it actually is. So, you can in that photo it probably better demonstrates that. Also the light fittings. Even down to selecting the light fittings. They’re long and skinny. It all ties in.

Materiality. So, this was quite fun These tiles are GFRC, so glass fibre reinforced cement. So, they can be food safe, they can be used as benchtops, and you can cast them into anything you want. So, this was a real experiment. We could cast it on to wood or plastic or any shapes we wanted, but I decided on this long skinny tile to fit in with the rest of the fitout, but also so it could be laid in a shingle. So, behind this is a batten system, just simple timber battens, and we cast on little hooks to the back of these tiles. So, literally I was on site arranging them all in the pattern I wanted, and it was simply a matter of starting bottom to top and shingling them over and fixing them through.

Also, with the colour we did lots of trials and added pigments to them to get the right tones – so there heaps of trials to get those colours right – and what you cast them on. So, we tried plastic, we tried canvas. In the end I ended up using a fire blanket, because the concrete didn’t stick to it and it also gave it a really nice texture and every single one of these is different. So, there was that really handmade element to this fitout which was really fun. Detailing with brassed trim, and then a really, really find 6mm porcelain top, which is quite a new product, very hard wearing. So, it’s great for commercial spaces, but it’s also quite elegant if you detail it properly. Obviously the edges are vulnerable, but by doing it in this way it’s made it rigid, made the edges quite rigid through there. This moodiness, I think that was achieved. It’s a little refuse from the area.

That brings me to the end. I hope you enjoyed hearing about how we dealt with the challenges amongst these three very different projects, and also what the home typically is. I think in each one the character of the area or what’s there was a real driver for me and really what I wanted to use. I hope that the passers by can enjoy it too.

Thank you very much for listening to me tonight.

Adam Jefford:

Thank you Simone. Maybe our discussants can come on stage tonight. Alright. There are some questions starting to roll in, and we’ll look at those shortly. So, please do add them. It is really great to see them come in, but we can probably start with our discussants just asking some questions. Thank you.

Andrew Wilson:

So, Simone, thank you for that incredible overview of your practice. It seems like you’ve got a real sense of the suburbs and the cities that you’re working in, Fremantle and Perth. I was just wondering, looking at your website I noticed that you spent some time working in London, and I was just wondering what that experience might have brought to you and your practice.

Simone Robeson:

Sure. Well, straight out of Uni I had a year experience in Perth and then took off and worked for two years in London, and intentionally I wanted to work at a bigger practice. I think it’s really important when you finish Uni – your projects and what you work on at Uni are very different to real life, so to work at a big firm on large regeneration, commercial/residential projects was great experience. I suppose I worked out that wasn’t what I wanted to do ultimately, but you need that experience of working in teams and knowing deadlines and knowing how to run a commercial practice and seeing that in practice before you go out on your own. I think that’s really important.

Andrew Wilson:

You seem to have quite an innovative business model. It seems quite successful. You’ve got a good range of work from doing interior work as you said through to houses and interventions into heritage projects. So, I was just wondering, the triangular house I’m interested in because of the irregular plan, but it strikes me that it’s quite a modernist project. I was just wondering if the modernist architects of the recent past in Perth are architects that you look to for some reference or as a precedent for your work.

Simone Robeson:

As much as I love modernist, and there is a few examples in Perth, I would have to say no. With that project in particular, it was the Japanese projects, international – David Adjaye, Dirty House. Absolute favourite of mine in London. It was more those I think.

Andrew Wilson:

That’s interesting. I guess you talked about working with particular people for each project to document. I was just wondering if you could give some insight into how you work with builders as well.

Simone Robeson:

So, I’ve had several projects. I’d probably have two to three builders that have had more than two projects with me, and half the time, increasingly more so now, they’re the ones that will bring the project to me, because we’ve worked together and often clients will come directly to builders. I’m not sure if that’s a common thing here, but it definitely is in Perth. It’s the first place often clients go to. So, that’s a way we work, and it’s more of a DNC type model. So, I will document it up to building permit and then just go to site as need be, because it’s really driven by the builder. Otherwise, if the client comes to me first I will generally suggest three builders very early on in the process in a more negotiated style contract rather than going to tender. It’s not my preferred procurement method.

Janina Gosseye:

The questions are rolling in. I think I might try and combine. I don’t know if they were intended to be combined, but I’ll try and combine them.

Somebody has remarked that you actually seem to trial a lot of different materials or also new materials in your projects, and then there is also a question about budget, what the budgets are. Perhaps you could say if the trialling of materials is also a way of trying to reduce the budgets, or does it actually elevate the budget.?

Simone Robeson:

That’s a really good question. No. I don’t think it elevates the budget. I think it’s about allocation of budget, and in all the projects we’ve kept the base materials very simple. So, you’ll see a lot of them were concrete, cavity brick. Very cost-effective in Perth. That allows you a bit of play to try these things with the bricks, the fitout. So, they weren’t expensive at all. We had a friend who was doing that, so that’s a bit different when a friend is making up those tiles for you. But no, I think it’s allocation, spending the money where you want and just being smart elsewhere with it.

Janina Gosseye:

Can I ask another one, or do you have one? There was one that came in very, very early and that is very popular at the moment. People can like questions. There is a question from some anonymous person who says:

Online Question:

*What kind of obstacles have you had to overcome as a professional woman in a male dominated industry? #girlpower.*

Simone Robeson:

That’s a great question. Surprisingly I have not found that since I’ve had my own business, but when I worked for someone else the opposite. So, especially when I was young, you’ll notice you’ll be at a meeting and sometimes especially the older guys – not the younger ones, but the older directors – you definitely feel inferior. But since I’ve had my own business, I don’t find that at all, which is really weird and sad in a way, but that’s been my experience.

Janina Gosseye:

Well that ties into something that we were discussing, a question that Andrew had that we were discussing before you started, because you said it was actually good to get experience in the bigger processes of what you don’t want basically.

Simone Robeson:

Also, the more you can trial out of University. You’ll gravitate to one type of project, one scale of project, so it’s great to get that experience in a firm that does multiple types of projects.

Andrew Wilson:

What about your education? Were there people that taught you that influenced the approach you’re taking in your design work, or has that come more from your experience after?

Simone Robeson:

In design?

Andrew Wilson:

In design.

Simone Robeson:

In design, yes. Probably past bosses would be the most, especially one of my earlier bosses. The way he designed had a lot of impact on me, so I think definitely your bosses and your older superiors when you’re working for people. Which is a really good point, because going out too young you miss out on that. I struggled with that, because sometimes I thought if I only stayed a few more years working for someone to have a bit more experience. So, that’s really valuable, and it’s hard. It’s a hard decision to make.

Janina Gosseye:

There is a question here that might be related to what you just said. The question is:

Online Question:

*If you had to do your own building over again, what would you change? Would you change things if you had to do your own house over again now that you have more experience under your belt?*

Simone Robeson:

Yes, and it would have to do with shading. I was quite young when I did that one, but you talk about modernist and the aesthetics, and I love the house and I love the look of the house, but there’s one window that I just wish I put a bigger eave on, or an eave on it full stop. I think you’re in Australia, and there’s got to be that point where you go it needs eaves. So, that would be my biggest thing, the one window in particular.

Andrew Wilson:

I’ve got more of a question about the general economy. So, I guess during the mining boom we’ve had architects from Perth talk about the cost of labour, because tradies could get work with mining companies. So, I guess now with the end of the mining boom, how does that affect the relationship between material costs and labour costs for projects?

Simone Robeson:

With the Triangle House, there was no work on it for over two months because we couldn’t get bricklayers. But now it’s the opposite situation. So, it’s a lot more competitive. It’s quite a noticeable turnaround now.

Andrew Wilson:

So, Brisbane is a concrete town.

Simone Robeson:

I noticed. I love it.

Andrew Wilson:

How would you describe the sort of background material options available to someone practicing in Perth?

Simone Robeson:

Perth is brick. Perth is absolutely notorious for their brick, cavity brick. There’s so many times where you might trial SIPs panels or reverse brick veneer, and when it comes to pricing, when the client wants to chop some money it goes back to cavity brick. It’s just the brick companies have a lot of power in WA, and it’s just the way it is. It’s a very cost-effective way to build.

Janina Gosseye:

There are several questions rolling in, but they’re not really related to what you said. There’s questions more that go to what you were talking at the beginning, how you run your practice. Because you mentioned that you just bring staff in as you get different projects. Are those the same staff members, or do you get different people in, and how does that work?

Then there’s a related question – what advice you have for young architects wanting to start their own practice?

Simone Robeson:

So, the first one with contractors, when I first started I had about three that I went to and would give them each a project. In the last year or two I’ve cut that down to two. So, they act as a part time staff. So, my business is all on the cloud, which means everything is remote. So, they can work from wherever they want, and they have their own email address with my business on it. So, they’re effectively a staff member, but they work from home and they’re paid like a business. So, it’s still that model.

And, the second question?

Janina Gosseye:

What advice you would give.

Simone Robeson:

Like I said earlier, I think get experience early on in a large firm and ask for the experience you want. I know when I started I wanted project management experience, so I asked for that. They’ll put you in to drafting or photoshop for a very long time unless you ask for the experience you want. So, that would be my best advice.

Janina Gosseye:

Where do you use the contractors that you work with? I suppose you want to keep the design for yourself. What kind of work would you typically - - -

Simone Robeson:

I do. I love doing the design, and that’s why I’ve kept it that way. So, there’s obviously a limit to how many projects you can take on under that model. So, I would do all the sketches to concept design, almost to DA stage, and then I use Revit, which isn’t that common in Perth. I’m not sure if it’s common here or not yet. But they would build the model in 3D in Revit just before it goes for development application stage, and then they’ll take it through documentation. But I’ll still be the lead. I use Revit as well, so I can get in there and make changes, but they will do the bulk of it.

Andrew Wilson:

Just thinking about your business model, which I think seems to work very well. Have you got any ideas about how you might extend your practice in the future? I mean one obvious thing would be to think about larger projects, or would you consider urban design projects?

Simone Robeson:

Not really. That’s been a really hard decision to make, to say no, I don’t want to go down that typical route and get larger projects, get more staff. It’s been a matter of I really enjoy working on these projects, and eventually I’ve love to do a few of my own little projects, so allowing myself to have that time and do some smaller projects. It’s taken me a long time to get there and be comfortable with that as well. I think you always think you just need to grow and grow for growing’s sake. So, that’s the plan for now anyway. It changes all the time.

Andrew Wilson:

So, would that be maybe developing, taking on development?

Simone Robeson:

Absolutely. Smaller kind of developments.

Janina Gosseye:

Well I think the questions are sort of rounding up, but there is one that we haven’t touched upon, and it’s relating to infill. What are the main obstacles and what interesting solutions to building on these infill sites have you had to devise to resolve obstacles that emerge? You already had the sort of right of way, but are there other things that emerged that you sort of had to find - - -

Simone Robeson:

Well, it’s really tough, because often your infill site will be in a standard zoning. So, that was in an R60, and there’s no special zoning or codes for these weird plots of land. So, that’s he biggest challenge first of all. So, you’ve really got to rely on a progressive council who’s looking to get some – and in this case the council wanted something on this block, and we also got a lot of support from the neighbours. So, I went around and introduced myself and showed them the project and talked it through. Because getting a letter from council is quite intimidating, so if you can explain the project to them, I think that really helps.

Janina Gosseye:

So, you went around to the neighbourhood to explain the project?

Simone Robeson:

Just the very close ones. I always get my clients to do that as well. So, talk them through, because a letter from council is these are the variations, and very straightforward and quite scary, so it’s good if you can explain it to them in person.

Janina Gosseye:

That’s very impressive. Very time consuming as well.

Simone Robeson:

I don’t go around for my clients. I just advise them to do it.

Janina Gosseye:

Andrew, do you have a final question?

Andrew Wilson:

I think I’m done.

Janina Gosseye:

You’re done? Well, before we round up I’ve been asked to remind you all that next week Amalie Wright is speaking, so please all join us then.

Join me in thanking Simone for an excellent lecture tonight.

Simone Robeson:

Thank you for having me.

[End of Transcript]