

Portrait ALANA LANDSBERRY Edited by KAREN MCCARTNEY

FLAIR DEAL

Shaped by exposure to ancient European design as a child, this architect's mission is to create joyous structures for the common good that stand the test of time.



Architect Sam Crawford of Sam Crawford Architects in his Newtown, Sydney, office.



This page, clockwise from top left Hidden Garden House opens up to light and breezes. Hurlstone Memorial Reserve Community Centre sports a perforated skin. The bath at Hidden Garden House is planted in vegetation. This premium residential and retail development, Sanctuary in Rose Bay, is a new departure for the practice. The Bara bridge takes inspiration from the skeletal form of eels.

IT'S MY BELIEF that we are all shaped by life's early experiences and so I always like to understand how architects came to choose the profession – or how it chose them.

Architect Sam Crawford is clear that a decision by his parents to take him and his six siblings for a year out in Europe was so formative to his cultural outlook that he characterises it as 'life changing'. "It was the late 70s and southern Europe was cheap. We stayed in an old monastery in Tuscany, halfway between Florence and Siena, and with the luxury of time also rented houses within reach of major cities, spending days in museums and art galleries," he says. Only seven years old, and the youngest of the tribe, he still recalls the impact of the Pantheon in Rome.

All these years later something has distilled at the core of his practice, Sam Crawford Architects, and the working mantra for the ultimate in achievement is "a functional building that brings joy and comfort to users, is sensitive to the environment and stands the test of time".

An early mentor was architect and educator Peter Stutchbury whose acute sensitivity to place and materials continues to influence the practice Sam set up in 1999 after an epiphany while trekking in Nepal. The practice's growth has been slow and steady, adding a staff member per year so that, with pleasing symmetry, there is a team of 25 (of whom he is very proud) at the 25-year mark of its inception.

"I have realised over the years everyone has strengths and when building a strong team the best thing to do is to pick a mix of people and skills, which helps make for a happy workplace," he says.

This diversity forms the backbone of the practice and while 50 per cent of the output is residential the other half is made up of innovative community-based projects, alongside heritage, commercial and educational endeavours.

He defines the residential clients as people who have a house that "needs work. I think of it a bit like you're a tailor and they bring an old suit to stretch out and repair to bring it up to today's fashions, today's standards. Maybe cut off the flare!" he adds.

He tends to champion the existing house and finds satisfying ways to meld old and new. Hidden Garden House, in Sydney's Camperdown, is a good example of a 1980s-built house with a series of ill-advised renovations. It required a radical intervention to create, among other design strategies, light and warm spaces that open up neighbourhood vistas, with passive heating and cooling, and a secret roof garden above a 4.5-metre wall of glass.

"Set into this garden is a bathroom which you can glimpse from the back lane. But in terms of privacy our clients were relaxed, taking the view that you had to be looking very hard to see them naked." The house now opens up to light and the experience of nature while the careful management of sun and

breeze ensures the house requires very little heating in winter, and no air conditioning in summer.

There is a thread of 'common good' that runs through the practice, finding different expression depending on the project but that is most evident in some of their public works. The sinuous pedestrian Bara bridge in Sydney's Centennial Parklands, recognised at the Barcelona International Landscape Biennial 2023, is based on the eel's skeleton in its structure while the form recalls the slow lateral movements of its body as it swims. The variegated tones of anodised aluminium catch the light evoking its silvery underbelly. An important reference to the Aboriginal culture of the area, the bridge sits beautifully in the context of the parklands managing to pull off a series of seemingly contrary attributes – robust, delicate, functional, responsive and poetic.

The practice has gained a reputation for amenities blocks, sports pavilions and community spaces where their ingenuity in the design and the level of experimentation with materials – such as the perforated skin for the roof and facade of the Hurlstone Memorial Reserve Community Centre in Sydney with its lantern-like qualities – allows innovation to constantly loop back into their knowledge bank.

Tapping into the research side of the practice, the Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre involved a fact-finding trip to best practice facilities in the US and the application of those findings in the resulting building design to house 365 cats and dogs – the largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. "A design of six 'fingers' stretching into the landscape allows dogs to connect with nature and minimise distress while cat enclosures have been designed so that they can benefit from daily touch," says Crawford.

And so it becomes clear that by applying the filter of 'common good' to a wide spectrum of project types it is possible to create built form with a halo of wellbeing, both animal and human, public and private, and in an increasingly challenging world this is something to acknowledge and celebrate.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: TOM FERUSON (HIDDEN GARDEN HOUSE); BRETT BOAKEMAN (BARA BRIDGE); NIMACRANE (SANCTUARY RENOV) (RENOV)