

# **Glass 21**

**Melbourne 2009**

**A few words at the Opening Event**

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Design Partners

I am flattered to have been invited to say a few words at the launch of this milestone exhibition of Australian Architectural Glass.

My own architectural training, and a working life that has revolved around architecture as an artist, photographer and graphic designer working in environmental graphics, wayfinding, branding and exhibition design, has given me a particular point of view about the architectural realm and our place in it. Perhaps it is this experience that brings me to the microphone tonight – I hope it might offer a helpful perspective on an occasion such as this.

Rick Allen and I are here as partners in Glassplay, and we have a couple of works in the gallery upstairs. Glassplay is a collaborative enterprise between us and our respective businesses. We have worked hard for over twenty years to ensure that it brings together quality design, technical virtuosity and all the potential of a practice that integrates art and technology at the same time as it fuses what we consider to be the best of the future with the best of the past.

Our intention is to bring bespoke design to architectural applications where imagination and intelligence lead and technology follows. With our roots deep in traditional practice and our world view driven by the dynamics of ideas and digital know-how, we like to believe that there are few limits to how we can play with glass today.

I imagine that there are a large number of people here tonight who, like Rick and I, identify themselves as Architectural Glass Artists, are engaged professionally in the business of glass, are members of AGDA and have pieces in the exhibition.

Leaving the issue of earning a living aside, I suspect that the reason we are in the glass business today is that, somewhere in the past, we all fell in love with this extraordinary material because of the way it made us feel.

But why does glass in the architectural context have the power to make people feel something that bricks or steel or gyprock cannot?

The answer lies somewhere between the primal human need to engage with light, and the unique, and almost mystical capacity of glass to capture, contain and transform it. Glass is able to modify light in such a way that it creates an emotional 'charge' in architectural space, and in skilled hands, the nature of that charge can be predetermined by the designer.

Whilst we are all more or less familiar with the history of glass, we must recognise that its timeless reality is its metamorphosis. Over the millennia, what has driven this change is the fact that glass inflames human imagination; from the earliest times, it has always been, and continues to be, the material of the future.

From the stone age where naturally occurring obsidian was used for the sharpest spear heads, through the development of the first true glass in Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BC, to Egyptian glass for jewellery and utensils, to the Roman's primitive window glass for their villas, to the spectacular ecclesiastical narratives of gothic stained glass, and on to the float glass that dominates our contemporary architectural world, the story of glass is a continuum of inspiration.

Even today, glass is the basis of the Information Superhighway in the form of optical fibre waveguides – we wait to see what it might promise the world of tomorrow.

As it has moved from sacred to secular, from transcendent source of illumination to transparent curtain, from facilitating 'lightness of construction' to enabling a new age of 'construction with light' – contemporary glass aesthetics have become based more on spatial alchemy than defining architectural boundaries.

Just as the structural advances of the great Gothic cathedrals of history provided the impetus for the development of an architectural glass based on its role as an 'illuminator of scripture and religious power', new industrial processes of mass production brought about the inexorable rationalisation of glazing methodologies and traditions that were largely ecclesiastically based.

Limited frames of reference and the reduced potency of the church diluted the theological and theoretical base of 'stained glass' and largely removed it from both social and architectural commentary, resulting in its marginalisation.

In today's world, life and architecture are driven by radically different aesthetics, technologies, values and belief structures to those that drove design in the past. Western culture has become obsessed by new visions for architectural glass, building sleek, light-filled cathedrals consecrated to the cool metrics of commercial success.

Computing, engineering, nanotechnology and the frenzied possibilities of the digital age have given us transparent materials and 'dematerialising' structures with extraordinary properties. Availability, aesthetics and the ability to use technology to solve issues of sustainability and climate have driven experimentation and development to new levels; our massive buildings appear to be built of glass.

So where does our work fit into this reality? In many ways, this exhibition is the first step towards addressing the fact that, without some swift and intelligent intervention, our own work as artists in the architectural realm is at risk of being marginalised for similar reasons.

How has this happened? And how do we who call ourselves architectural glass artists retain relevance in a world where the only thing that is for certain is that nothing is for sure, and in which the pace of change is accelerating?

Throughout history, glass has had two forces driving it forward – Art and Science; specifically, fine art and architecture, and structural mechanics and materials science.

As far as pure 'art' is concerned, the last few decades have seen the burgeoning of the Studio Glass movement which represents an explosion of technical development and maturing of creative expression in individual arts practice. It has produced an international body of work, thought and ideas that has captured the attention, and the wallets of the art world. That it is not strictly 'architectural' should be very much beside the point for those of us who don't want to be part of a 'flat glass society' that is in denial about the impact of global movements in art glass on its own practice.

When it comes to architecture, the emphasis has rather been on 'industry' and the technical innovation required to meet the demands of contemporary thinking in the architectural and urban realms. Without question the 'art' in architectural glass has been largely overshadowed by heroic feats of structural engineering using the 'new' glasses which have been delivered to us by decades of research and development in materials science.

Could we explain our failure to engage with all this as a function of scale? Could the scaling down of kilns and furnaces, and the ready availability of fusible glasses have enabled the studio glass movement to develop a new paradigm of 'art glass' which was both affordable and accessible, whilst the scaling up of commercial architectural glass rendered traditional practice and its particular aesthetic idioms irrelevant? Perhaps, but we must not lose heart.

Nor must we lose sight of what we love about what we do. Science and mechanics may have turned architecture inside out, enabling its walls to disappear, but it has also enabled us to consider our work to be something that doesn't just end at the outside surface of a building. We need to understand space volumetrically, learning how to modify and articulate light to reveal architectural substance in new ways. To create a continuum of spatial and emotionally germane experiences that return architectural glass to a place of relevance in contemporary discourse.

As architectural glass artists we must harness the tension found between the visionary advances of contemporary architecture and the emotionally powerful possibilities that exist where art meets technology, providing visual encoded and conceptually integrated solutions that enhance both the legibility and liveability of our buildings.

Establishing a creative environment within which the artistry and integrity of the handmade is maintained, at the same time that the real benefits of digitally-based, industrial production techniques are exploited is no easy task but it can be achieved; you have one of Australia's finest examples of this in Janet Laurence's work in the foyer of the Melbourne City Council building.

Whether the final result is refined patterning, dramatic glass environment, full-on branding, subtle wayfinding or unique work of personal expression, we must be able to demonstrate that whatever we deliver will have been approached with a rigorous methodology, arts-based conceptual thinking, manufacturing expertise and management excellence to bring it to life in its architectural context.

For Glassplay, all good design has a purpose, it has very particular 'information' to convey, it uses an appropriately conceived and pitched visual language to communicate and it is a complex process of discovery, analysis, concepting, development and implementation. It is a journey from the general to the specific that encompasses every facet of the subject matter being explored.

This exhibition is certainly a demonstration of good design, creativity and expertise. We want architects, interior designers and other professionals in the creative industries to come and see what we have to offer – and to commission us to enhance their buildings in the 21st Century.

But showing something is not the same as being seen; being seen is not the same as being understood; being understood is not the same as convincing somebody. How and what we communicate to our audiences is critical to whether the members of AGDA will have a serious place in the architecture of the future, or simply be dismissed as a group whose output belongs to a bygone age.

There is no need for us to betray any of the values or enthusiasm that drove our first works in architectural glass – on the contrary, our creative output should be driven by what inflamed us in the first place.

But we need to develop a broad new visual language that embodies what we do as individuals, and as an association. A visual language that contemporary architecture is able to read, understand and, by the potency of the vision it presents, be thoroughly convinced of its validity in the contemporary world.

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