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MARGINS · KEVIN O'BRIEN

KEVIN O'BRIEN

Brisbane-based architect Kevin O'Brien draws on philosophy and contemporary art in his practice. *VAULT* talks to O'Brien about the critical differences that define architecture and art, and a methodology of connection to Country.

WRITTEN by EMMA-KATE WILSON



"The reason I think art is important, whatever form it takes, is that art philosophically allows us to think beyond the limits that we deal with daily, therefore extending our possibilities."

Kevin O'Brien follows a school of architectural thought that continually returns to the artistic and cultural heritage of the land he works on. Whether it's an educational building, a residential house, a community project or a commercial high-rise tower, O'Brien approaches all his projects in the same way.

"I have a specific way I approach [my work] from my worldview," he shares. "One side emanates from my Indigenous heritage and the other from my non-Indigenous heritage – I'm thinking through those dual lenses in a very practical and cultural way."

As a descendent of the Kaurareg and Meriam peoples of north-eastern Australia, O'Brien's connection to Country drives every project, with three guidelines as the focus. The first is around sustainability and energy efficiency, towards minimising or reversing ecological damage, such as at BVN Architects – O'Brien is a principal architect there – where they are committed to achieving and maintaining a carbon positive business.

The second is the creation of 'settings'. "You articulate space in a way that puts people in a relationship with the Country that you're trying to maintain and make better," O'Brien explains. "An example could be a bench seat that bends and frames a view of the mountain from wherever you're sitting, and that's the thing that makes you more aware of the Country that you're in or that you belong to," O'Brien continues. "You're a custodian; you're responsible for looking after it."

The third guideline is centred on the materials available for use from over 250 different Indigenous nations' land in Australia. "Everywhere you go is different. The culture has different nuances around it," O'Brien notes. "The geology is different, hydrology is different, flora and fauna are different, which means the context has determined the amazing colour or material palettes that exist from each specific place."

O'Brien's project *Blak Box* for Urban Theatre Projects is a perfect example of these synergies coming together. The box was designed to amplify sound performances within its confines, acoustically performing in a comfortable way that honours the cultural events inside. The pavilion uses recycled materials, but as the bottom of the structure is left open to the ground below there is always a connection to Country.

In his recent project for BLEACH* Festival 2021, O'Brien has been working on the lighting conditions. While beautiful, his lighting design also serves as practical devices that operate clearly within the existing electrical, structural and spatial constraints. "Everything affects everything, and you get synergy in the end," he adds.

Here lies the fundamental philosophy behind O'Brien's practice: the clear boundaries between architect and artist – an area he claims has no space for the non-binary. He believes that architects should sit behind artists and support them, without determining how they work. For O'Brien, this stems from his belief that architecture and art practice are two very different fields and must be categorised as such.

Architects have parameters they need to work within, determined by legislation and standards that hold the profession

accountable. "Architectural projects are incredibly hierarchical in an Australian context, managing risk and liability," he reflects, adding that while big architectural firms may promote collaboration, a litigating lawyer will undoubtedly find out who is responsible in the event of a breach. This ensures that the architect remains defined and bound by their governing rules.

Artists, however, work beyond a bounded realm. "The reason I think art is important, whatever form it takes, is that art philosophically allows us to think beyond the limits that we deal with daily, therefore extending our possibilities," O'Brien shares. "How we can better ourselves or how we imagine where the future can be – the absolute essence of freedom is that ability to express beyond what we can see, beyond what's in front of us."

Living in Brisbane, O'Brien has noticed a cultural awakening over the last ten years that builds upon significant political changes in Queensland since the late 1980s. Across the past decade, the rising cost of rent in Sydney and Melbourne has pushed the creatives who had left Brisbane in the 1990s to return home. This has enabled creative practice's such as O'Brien's to benefit from ongoing cultural conversations with the likes of Richard Bell and Vernon Ah Kee from the ProppaNOW collective – as well as significant local artists like Fiona Foley and Judy Watson – who inspire his contrasting practical approach.

"In the end," O'Brien concludes, "architecture's role is to serve art and to make space for art and artists to test boundaries." **V**

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Top and opposite
KEVIN O'BRIEN
Blak Box for Urban
Theatre Projects