

ARCHITECTONICS / PROFILE

Architecture for Life



Text

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For Sydney-based Other Architects directors David Neustein and Grace Mortlock, every project offers the chance for deeper thinking, exploring angles away from the default. They apply this everywhere, from residential homes and apartment blocks to cemeteries, gardens and art installations. 'We put a lot of thought into what we do,' says Neustein. 'Our value is the time and energy we spend thinking, so we take any project or problem and apply our way of thinking to it.'

One of the dilemmas Other Architects faces, as does the industry as a whole, is that the construction of the built environment is ultimately an unsustainable industry. But there's one direction in which they feel positive change is taking hold: natural burial projects, with carbon-negative, energy- and matter-positive burial processes that better the environment rather than depleting resources and burdening ecosystems.

Their work with cemeteries has given the architects an awareness of how matter is transformed over hundreds of years, which now informs all the studio's projects. 'We have all these different timelines up in the office,' says Mortlock. 'Cemeteries work on a 100- to 150-year timeframe; an exhibition might be three months. Having different timescales spurs us to test ideas.'

Partners in life and architecture, Neustein and Mortlock first worked together for the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial on a project that examined common Australian suburban housing. 'We presented an idea about repurposing suburban McMansions, and it was well received by the architects and critics in attendance,' Neustein says. It was then they realised that they had a different perspective to share, which encouraged them to keep going and dive into developing their practice.

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Led by directors David Neustein and Grace Mortlock, Other Architects stands apart from traditional practices thanks to its investigative approach the team defines as 'documented thinking'

Image by Clinton Weaver

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For its Highlands House project in the Southern Highlands, the firm renovated a dilapidated cottage while preserving its original garden, adjoining studio and courtyard, taking a subtle and respectful approach that preserved the topography and site's sense of place

Image by Clinton Weaver

Take the studio's Highlands House project as an example. Perched on a hill in the Southern Highlands, the property overlooks the landscape with ocean views in the distance. The clients had met with multiple architects who wanted to demolish the existing home and build up high to capture the views. Neustein and Mortlock saw value in keeping the original home and preserving the garden, a perspective the clients appreciated. 'We advocated for occupying the footprint of the existing home and preserving important visual and spatial relationships with the artist's studio, courtyard, garden and landform,' says Neustein.

The house's green colour is emblematic of their 'other' way of thinking, going against the grain of popular architectural theories. 'The house had to match up with an existing mud-brick studio on the site with vines growing all over,' explains Mortlock; Neustein adds that they 'used structurally insulated panels, a sandwich of chipboard and insulation giving an efficient thermal envelope.' Colour, he says, was a way of celebrating the fact that there had to be a thinly applied waterproofing layer on top of the structural material.

Working from their Potts Point studio, the duo is joined by architects Lindsay Mulligan and Isaac Harrisson. The four share a passion for critical thinking, teaching and writing about architecture, with lengthy discussions informing every project.

Fundamentally, Other Architects believes architecture is about creating spaces that are part of the everyday experience. 'We avoid making things that are dramatic, monumental or iconic, because those spaces only become a story about themselves,' Neustein says. 'Everyday life, in all its messiness, is so much more enjoyable and interesting than that.'





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Sitting peacefully within an established garden, Highlands House has a soft and inviting design with subtly integrated environmental performance components
Images by Clinton Weaver

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Driven by the idea that architecture is about creating spaces that are part of the everyday experience, Other Architects takes a highly analytical approach to its projects, from Sydney barbershop Jack Rabbit Slims (top) to cemetery concept The Eternal Forest (bottom), which was exhibited at Île-de-France's 2nd Biennale of Architecture and Landscape in 2022
Images by Hamish McIntosh

