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Ursula Chandler in her studio Ursula Chandler Architects, Melbourne
Photo: Amelia Stanwix

MARGINS · URSULA CHANDLER

Ursula Chandler

Melbourne-based architect Ursula Chandler considers architecture beyond the physicality of the built environment, blending and merging within the intersection of art and the landscape as a critical engagement with culture and the environment.

WRITTEN *by* EMMA-KATE WILSON

While studying architecture and landscape architecture at the University of Melbourne, Ursula Chandler, of the eponymous atelier, collected seeds and grew trees, which influenced how she started to think about architecture as something sitting in a specific ecology.

"I'm interested in architecture that develops a specific response to its context, which is both physical, cultural and connected to a moment in time," Chandler explains. "Although, architects can practice all over the world, to really create some level of social or civic contribution, architecture has to be grounded in a specific location."

Chandler counts her own environment in Australia as an influential source, with its 'ancient and sublime' geography. "One of my favourite books, *Oscar and Lucinda* by Peter Carey, talks of a landscape of layered stories, both European and Indigenous," Chandler notes. "The idea of our

landscape having both a physical and metaphysical presence and that there's something unknown or lost is, to me, very powerful."

Chandler also cites Rick Amor's paintings of shadows and quiet, brooding scenes amplified by architecture or topography, as a source of inspiration, as well as the photography of Rosemary Laing and her mystic, otherworldly artworks, which evoke Australian environments that are both culturally and historically evocative of place.

The intersection of art and architecture is reflected in Chandler's projects, as she muses on the mirroring focus of the pursuit of ideas and access points to critique. After setting up Ursula Chandler Architects in 2018, her first independent venture was the short-listed entry for the 2019 National Gallery of Victoria Architecture Commission competition, in collaboration with

artist Marko Radosavljevic. The project was conceived in resistance to the evolved Melbourne landscape – a dizzying skyline full of high-rises – that Chandler returned home to after living in the UK.

“Our entry was trying to create a dialogue about who the city was for, and engaging people in having autonomy over their city,” says the architect. “We spent a month refining our entry, establishing how we could build a cylindrical tower clad in air-conditioning ductwork shingles – the process was a great beginning to committing to starting the practice.”

Art also informed her last project in London with Adjaye Associates. “Working at Adjaye Associates was an incredible opportunity, and clearly much of that was working for someone like David,” Chandler reflects. “I worked in London for six years and being removed from what was familiar was invaluable in developing a deeper insight into and perception of myself and my practice.”

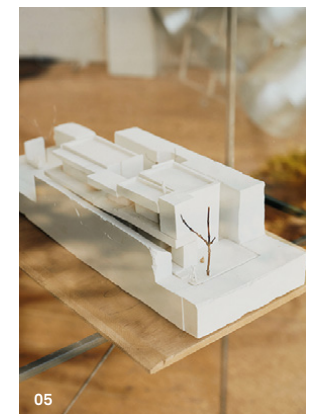
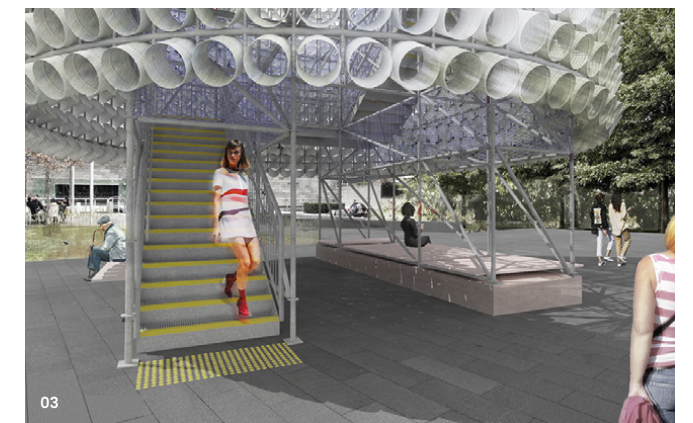
Chandler’s practice allows for space to reflect on the complexities of living, investigating the location of a site above all else. The team begins a new project with in-depth research to uncover a site’s history and geography. “This involves looking through archival material like maps and photographs and walking around the site,” explains the architect. Conversations, photographs or sketches follow, as the architect builds up an understanding of the terrain.



Here the design process unfolds, involving detailed physical and digital conditions drawings and models of the building or site, yet leaving room for ambiguity or abstraction for the client to resonate with. “We try and distil the idea of a project and then work through a series of options that we can present and review with a client,” says Chandler. “Trying to decipher something specific or integral that we can exploit, react to or correct.”

Currently, Chandler is working on two rural Victorian homesteads, expanding on the pragmatic, functional structures built by the early settlers. “One of these projects is in the Macedon Ranges on a beautiful old volcanic plain and is a property from 1840. The original house burned down, but there are a series of old outbuildings on the property dating from that period,” says Chandler. “The other is a property in Rutherglen from 1860, made from simple handmade red bricks with a large return verandah, and a beautiful almost Georgian simplicity.”

At the core of Ursula Chandler Architects is the question of possibility. What can be done to reflect on the time, place and culture of each project through the specific needs and wants of the clients? A weighty question to consider, all while furthering a deep, valuable and lasting connection to the environment. **V**
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02 NGV View Towers
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04 Studio details Ursula Chandler Architects, Melbourne
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Opposite
Studio details Ursula Chandler Architects, Melbourne
Photos: Amelia Stanwix

Courtesy Ursula Chandler Architects