

TRACT CONSULTANTS ARE A LANDSCAPE architecture practice, founded in 1973 as an offshoot to the highly innovative, interdisciplinary design and build company Merchant Builders, and was perhaps the first truly corporate practice of this type in Australia. Founding directors Rodney Wulff and Steve Calhoun were both instrumental in establishing the undergraduate landscape architecture course at RMIT University, and bringing out Jim Sinatra, who had taught Calhoun at the University of Iowa. Wulff remained for many years the holder of the only doctorate in landscape architecture in the country. This combination of an academic, design and professional agenda was a rich one for Tract in their early days. This founding generosity and interest in the intellectual aspects of landscape architecture continues in relation to the university in a number of ways, including informal ones, such as the regular employment of applicants who fail to get into the course at RMIT. In preparing them for re-applying, he has given a number of individuals a way into the profession that the university could not allow. Correspondingly, of perhaps the greatest significance is their role as both role models and mentors to a series of generations of young landscape architects who have then gone on to similarly lead the profession. Reading the staff

listing in the back of this monograph – the subject of this review and winner of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects Victorian Chapter Award of Excellence this year – I was struck by how many and, more particularly, who had done their apprenticeship at Tract. Stuart Pullyblank (who remains aligned with Tract in Western Australia) remembers being an exhausted student, both studying and working under Calhoun and Barry Murphy, who have all gone on to have successful large practices in their own right. Chris Kazzell of Aspect was taught in Tract's office by Pullyblank and Dance, which now fosters another RMIT generation. Academics including Grant Revell were also educated at Tract. Significant market leaders such as Dance and Murphy left to subsequently utilise their own skills in the market in competition to Tract. Theses stories are the ones that everyone really wants to hear about Tract, in a volume such as this, an exercise in distance that would have made this a much richer and more than anything, Tract are a method – and indeed Calhoun has demonstrated this method to students who adore it, removing much of the uncertainty from enigmatic design processes – that is a particular synthesis of the American site

analysis and planning process, articulated by Kevin Lynch, an influence that they acknowledge in an "influences diagram" in the volume. This quasi-scientific process involves the layering of factors in map form, from which relationships are linked as directly as possible, and then intersection points are articulated. While superficial and now nuanced, this process is tried and true in the profession, because in some form or other, it works. However, it is also potentially universalising, particularly in tandem with fickle developers and, so, for example, for me, Tract will be as much remembered for their use of ubiquitous Phoenix palms as anything else. To speak of Tract Consultants is to speak of conventional professional practice in landscape architecture in Australia. It is to speak of a respectful, competent practice with those types of values that characterise baby boomers – undoubtedly on the right (left) track, but in their own way now conservative, for landscape architecture, an orthodoxy of compromised environmentalism and social responsibility. This is its relative invisibility – the get-a-long guy for architecture, who will produce something reliable and friendly within the budget, which will then disappear seamlessly into public culture. Indeed, Tract did the landscape for the MCC.

# review.

TEXT JULIAN RAXWORTHY

## Capability Green.



Richard Weller has noted a type of humble landscape practice that is happy simply with blind, friendly use by the public – small continuons to a greater good, incrementally being made by landscape architects – presumably a counterpoint to his own meaningful and intense landscape design. As a landscape architect, I am schizophrenic when it comes to this formulation, of either believing in the 'good' project or the 'visible' project. This tension represents schizophrenic in the profession as a whole and one that characterises many of the contradictions in Tract's work, and this volume in particular. The work of Room 413 – of which Weller is a part with Vladimir Sita – is itself the subject of a monograph published by Penn Press and has been pipped at the post by Tract as the first landscape architecture practice in Australia to have a volume dedicated to their work. While the entire theoretical base of the monograph is concerned with value to community and environment, the book itself and the proposes an entirely aesthetic preoccupation: photography, the graphic component generally. These volumes, by Tract and Room 413 – soon to be followed by another long-awaited tome about the work of Bruce Mackenzie – are all effectively vanity publishing, that is, books that are in some way the work of the subjects about themselves. White Room 413 will be published by an external publisher and comprises scholarly essays together with the work, the Tract monograph is simply a substantial, though

unfortunately not detailed, practice profile. This does not mean that it is without value; in much the same way as the plethora of monographic tomes by paper architects have created a publicly visible design discourse within publishing. Designed by long-time collaborator Cary Emery (with an essay as such by him in the volume), this volume is beautifully designed, with a weird mix of white space and explosive greenness that nonetheless works. Use of devices such as essays running vertical through the volume, and cinematic though banal quotes from marketing literature running across the base of huge photographs or colour pages, seem to demonstrate that this is supposed to be a 'design' book.

Tract, however, are not the OMA, and by opting for a glossy publication rather than one that got to the grips of what the practice has done best – affect influence on the development environment and foster landscape architects – the project have had to deal with, their compromise, is demonstrated starkly. Much of the work that Tract has done, in terms of its design innovation, is repetitive and generic. All the plans look exactly the same regardless of site; with the same level of surreal whimsy and identical site response. When design is present it is with a 'Big D', with an overflowing of awkwardly composed geometry, schizophrenic in its desire to be visible, while at the same time executed with banal materiality. Of all the projects in the book, it is one that I was not

aware Tract had produced – the gibbon sound trunks in front – that has greatest resonance for me, something I had appreciated long before I knew Tract did it. Together with their award-winning project for Echo Point, their work at QUT and the sublime and surreal Cairns pool against the beach, these projects seem to show that Tract is bringing through another generation of great designers, who will no doubt have as much commercial success as has their previous.

Criticisms aside, all of Tract's work seems to demonstrate capability, and it is this that makes the document a profile of the practice. While this book demonstrates a comfortable, capable practice, it doesn't explicate the web of connections to other practitioners that have enabled Tract to have as much influence as it has had, which would have been far more subversive, moving it into a territory of stories and intrigue – let's just say it – the gossip. This means that it has missed an opportunity at articulating for itself its significance, and has rather produced something it can market with. Considering the commercial success of Tract, this may have been a canny step. The significance of Tract is both as the first capable and effective commercial practice and as an influential entity in the culture of Australian landscape architecture. To translate these attributes into a publication may have made for a more interesting and significant but less visually rich document, however, sometimes we don't like what we are good at.

