

S2 design – David Saunders

Architect **Alex Njoo** interviews David Saunders, one of a series of profiles which examine how architectural practices function, their role in the scheme of things, the projects they have completed and their thoughts, good or bad, about contemporary use of ceramic tile. Alex will occasionally review interesting publications and architectural products. Alex is a former member of the Architects Registration Board of Victoria 2007-09, and former Program Manager, Foundation Studies, Architecture, Design and Planning at RMIT.

One of the things that you'd notice when meeting David Saunders for the first time is that you'd never guess that he's an architect. At any rate, what do they look like? Are they casually dressed, yet deliberately so, all in black? But real estate agents, undertakers and lawyers dress like that too. Saunders, at first glance, looks more like an artist who paints. He's lean and wiry. A Bantam weight perhaps. In his case, it's always accompanied by a soft and friendly voice. In other words, you get what you see, an engaging person who listens to what you have to say and delivers his responses carefully without the superficiality that's often associated with some professionals. His architecture is the same. Wholly accessible and devoid of any complicated 'design metaphors' but clearly executed by someone who knows the material he's working with and how to detail them.

This is clearly demonstrated in the way his office environment has evolved. "S2 design's ability to create comfortable spaces often confuses clients when visiting our office. They believe they are in our home rather than a thriving office, I believe this is a positive reflection of our ability to create 'serene' interiors which generally don't exist within commercial spaces," Saunders says. Objet d'art that reflect his personal interest in art and architecture, as well as mementoes that document his architectural journeys are visibly displayed. Autographed sketches and images adorn the walls, from people whom he has met or have inspired or influenced him, architects such as Mario Botta, Daniel Libeskind and Harry Seidler.

In describing the interior of his office, Saunders says, "(Even) the furnishing is eclectic, yet highly selectively considered. Stylistically contrasting furniture from similar periods are strategically placed to pose visual questions about design and its place in history. I have also placed ordinary, beautiful and often ignored objects here and there with the aim to stimulate visitors' response. Often it provides a forum for subsequent discussion of what constitutes great design. I always attempt to highlight how the commonplace can be elevated to the extraordinary when viewed from within an appropriate context. Importantly the service that we provide should also be a learning experience for both my clients and S2 design." Saunders remembers the advice that one of his respected mentors, Don Gazzard, one of Australia's eminent architects gave him, that the secret of a successful architect lies in his or her ability to maintain an equitable balance between practice and life.



Saunders grew up in an architectural environment. His father, John, is an architect and so is his uncle Nic. Saunders is not related to the late David Saunders, an architect and academic who founded SAHANZ (Society of Architectural Historians, Australia & New Zealand). Although Saunders' early childhood environment might have influenced his decision to follow his father's career in architecture, it is also his interest in the relationship between people and their immediate surroundings that finally led him to choose one of life's difficult disciplines, the practice of architecture.

Saunders' insatiable curiosity and thirst for learning about the people and objects around him has led him to steer his practice to a broader design spectrum. He also dedicates much of his time to mentor young architecture students and graduates on aspects of practice and education. Saunders believes in the value of a continuing professional education, he has attended seminars both here and overseas. Apart from his architectural practice, Saunders has been known to design furniture for manufacture, lighting, graphic design and jewellery. He describes his practice as 'holistic'. "From the choosing of colours for a building to the design of the landscape which surrounds it. The combination of the existing, the site, and the new, the building, is all part of the progression of design. I avoid being slotted into a particular aspect of design. It is, after all, the sum total of many parts that makes up the whole of design."

Earlier in his career, Saunders 'flirted' with the notion that the publication of his projects would generate new work. He since found out that while some clients are proud to see their architect's work published in glossy magazines, it does not necessarily generate new work. He believes that his **S2 design** website attracts new work as it comprehensively displays the diversity of the practice.

"The process of design is both time consuming and long drawn. For example, I have been working on a multi-staged residential project that has, so far, taken nine years to complete. As the dynamics and composition of the family change, the resultant design responds accordingly. In other words, the construction of the project becomes, in many ways, like a moving feast. I have become, in effect, the

family's architectural adviser on their building needs. The story is still continuing. In a way, the practice of architecture is like telling a story. The story of an individual, or a family, a group of people, how each navigate their lives through the changing times. It's not merely an aesthetic expression. It's about people. Words alone do not an architecture make, as they say."

Like so many in his profession, Saunders laments the fact that most people don't really understand what architects do. "For example," Saunders says, "most houses in this country are built by speculative builders with little or no architectural input whatsoever, it's like buying ready made suits. Sometimes it fits well but most of the time the occupants of these houses have to make compromises. It's not a matter of the house fitting into their life-style, it's the other way around. It is also not a matter of why you don't work with an architect. It's a matter of how can you *not* work with an architect. My role as an architect doesn't finish at the completion of a project. Often the service that I provide extends to years. As in the case of the residential project that I described earlier."

After graduating from the architectural drafting course at RMIT, Saunders worked briefly with the National Trust of Victoria until he enrolled in Melbourne University's architecture program. Saunders has also worked in a practice in regional Victoria that specializes in heritage work. He attributes his deep appreciation of the preservation of heritage architecture to his being introduced to the Burra Charter. The Charter, adopted by the Australian committee of ICOMOS (International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monument and Sites (Venice 1964) in Burra, South Australia on August 19, 1979, provides guidelines for the conservation of culturally significant sites. Saunders believes, where appropriate, in the beauty of preservation rather than the replication of building styles. Generally, architects have been known to differ with local authorities on such heritage issues. Saunders says that "councils are elected bodies that are charged to manage laws regarding heritage issues. Too often the interpretation of these laws is determined by lay people's petty objections that have little to do with real heritage matters." He cited the case of his own house which has an heritage overlay. The suggested compromise to a recessed and hardly visible upper floor proposal was summarily rejected by the local council. "And yet," says Saunders, "if you stand slightly to one side at the front of the house, the top two of a five storey building on an adjoining street can be seen looming above my house. With all its well-

meaning intentions, too often bureaucracy fails as far as planning issues are concerned. Understandably, the privatization of planning permits seems inevitable if we want a more equitable platform where urban issues are better resolved."

The attention to details in Saunders work extends to careful consideration of how every material has a particular application. In the case of ceramic tiles, for instance, their durability, broad spectrum of aesthetic features and texture make them more suitable for interior work than, say, the use of stainless steel. "Although," says Saunders, "stainless steel finishes give you that shiny and glossy quality in some interiors. I'd still prefer to use ceramic tiles for their durability. Mind you, I wouldn't use mosaic tiles as splash-backs. I grew up in an architect-designed house of the 70s where wet areas had mosaic tiles on floors and walls. I remember hearing complaints how difficult it was to clean the grout off those intricate mosaic patterns. In the case of the interior design for our Southbank project, YAR, although the colour palette is limited to 2 colours, I was able to give it a subtle glow by using ceramic tiles. I think, as architects, we ought to be more adventurous when it comes to using ceramic or stone products. However, recently, I have observed that both these products have gained favour among the better practices in town for their maintenance. It is always a pleasure to read that production processes of ceramic tiles are becoming increasingly more energy and resource efficient."

S2 design has successfully weathered the recent global financial crisis because of its versatility and its non-reliance on large projects. "Large firms need large projects. My practice is flexible enough to maintain a range of projects, from small residential ones, usually with a one to two years time frame and, more recently, a large project that combines both commercial and residential on a site that has an existing building with a heritage classification." Saunders seems to delight at the challenges that this new project provides. Outside his office along St. Kilda Road, the early evening peak traffic begins to hum its way towards the South-eastern suburbs. As we bade each other goodbye, Ed, Saunders' large yet gentle Irish Wolf Hound gave me his massive paw. It's comforting to know that the bright future of architecture in this country is firmly secured in the capable hands of young practitioners like Saunders, who are often the ones that you don't read about in architectural glossies. **TT**

Tile Today acknowledges the contribution and cooperation of S2 design in the preparation of this Profile.



LEFT: Hard YAK bar in Hardware Lane, CBD Melbourne: main bar features 150 x 150mm blue glazed ceramic tile splash back and Caesarstone: Night Sky [6100] bar top. RIGHT: Bathroom features stone floor tiles and Caesarstone: Night Sky [6100] vanity top.