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Brian Steendijk

To call Brian Steendijk versatile seems like an understatement for someone with a reputation both in Australia and abroad as a wide-ranging, highly innovative and imaginative designer. Jan Howlin discovered just how versatile he is.

Text
Jan Howlin
Photography
Anthony Browell (portraits)
Christopher Fredrick Jones





01

As a designer, Brian Steendyk admires and pursues simplicity. In his six-year-old Brisbane-based practice, simply called Steendyk, he brings together a variety of design fields more often practised as distinct disciplines. The studio produces architecture and urban design along with landscape, interior, furniture and product design, and treats it all holistically, as simply a way to create meaningful and connected environments. For Steendyk "design isn't disciplinary, it's a mentality. It's a process you develop and a passion you have, that looks at problems with different eyes, sees things in a different way". Those different eyes clearly do make a difference, as the upwards trajectory of his career demonstrates.

Swift success

At 38, Steendyk has already made a significant impression on the Australian design scene. Four of the practice's residential projects have garnered RAIA awards or commendations and other industry awards. He has won numerous product design awards for his 'Cero' chair, 'Drift' bath and 'Wave' clothes hanger, and his work has been exhibited in Milan, Tokyo, Berlin and Chicago as well as Australian capital cities. A major arterial road in Brisbane, the Inner City Bypass – on which he worked as project architect and urban designer – has also been highly acclaimed and awarded.

On other fronts he has been guest lecturing and adjudicating at Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology; he has been included on various design judging panels; invited as guest speaker at many design conferences and exhibitions and his work has been included in a myriad of publications. Having already garnered such considerable recognition, the future for Steendyk seems set to unfold into expanding influence and unlimited possibility – and that couldn't happen to a more committed and talented designer – or to a nicer guy. He is intense, persuasive, ambitious and determined, but also quick to crack a self-deprecating quip when the thought strikes.

Passion for design

The measure of his success, not just with project outcomes, but even in attracting clients to his practice in the early stages, Steendyk puts down to his sheer enthusiasm for design. He believes people deal with their professional lives in one of two ways. Some, like lawyers and bankers, he suggests, come home and leave their professional lives at the door. The other way "is to embrace your profession fully and for it to be indelibly part of everything you do in your life. There are two schools of thought on this," he says, "but I love what I do so much that I couldn't leave it at the door. I live and breathe architecture. I love design. I can't help myself tinkering with ideas and designs," he says, happily accepting that he has no off-switch.

Education

Steendyk's innate aptitude for design – "a three-dimensional cognitive way of seeing things" – was recognised through his schooling. He completed an architecture degree at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) with Honours and topped his year, winning the Queensland Institute of Architects Medallion and a Rotary Ambassadorial Travelling Scholarship.

At once the world opened up. Having chosen to study for a Master of Architecture at Illinois Institute of Technology, (IIT) Chicago, "because, architecturally, it was a bit of a fulcrum" for the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, Steendyk first spent three months travelling in Europe, experiencing its architecture first-hand. Studying at IIT he became further steeped in the history of modernism, immersing himself in the life and work of architects from Gropius "to Corb to Kahn to Mies. For a year I read everything I could get my hands on," he says.

Inspiration and influences

Invigorated by the intensity of this further education, Steendyk followed it with a stint at UN Studio in

- 01 'Play' by Steendyk
- 02 'Palm Springs' collection
- Photo: Anthony Rowland
- 03 Steendyk's Spring collection
- Photo: Anthony Rowland

Amsterdam, and another in Singapore working on the Singapore Expo exhibition centre, before returning to Brisbane in 1996, grateful for his experiences overseas. "It was the opportunity to open my eyes and to breathe in the design world as a more mature adult," he says. He also developed a fascination for travel. "A lot of travelling, for me, is like a sensory overload, it is an adrenaline rush. You're looking and everything's new – it's like being a child again – it's fantastic." Along with the early modernists he has also been attracted to an eclectic selection of more contemporary architects: he mentions Glenn Murcutt (much admired), Herzog & de Meuron ("do some really interesting things, intriguing and very inventive"), Rick Joy ("does some beautiful simple stuff in the Arizona Desert") and Kerry Hill ("beautiful simple lines and an eye for detail").

Steendijk

Back in Australia, Steendijk worked for the Cox Group International for six years, finally participating in the much acclaimed Inner City Bypass in Brisbane, a major arterial road circumventing the CBD. The project has been roundly praised and much awarded, and Steendijk is proud of his contribution to its resolution. By 2002, however, he was feeling that the role of design architect in a large office was denying him the comprehensive professional experience required to be "a complete architect".

"You need to know what a line on paper means when it's being built, to understand the nuances of the construction process," he says. Also in 2002, Steendijk designed his 'Cero' (zero in Spanish) chair for an exhibition – a beautifully simple transverse cylinder with a scoop out of the top for the seat. Keen to pursue furniture and other product design further, he says, "I decided it was time to make my own opportunities. So I set up my own practice and I haven't looked back."

Steendijk, which generally employs three or four others – architects or specialist designers – is unusual in Australia for the breadth of work it produces. "A diverse practice is more in the European mould," he says, citing a plethora of famous architects who are also product designers. "Arne Jacobsen basically designed everything, so did Aalto, the building and everything that went into it," says Steendijk, who likes to do much the same. At the heart of it the practice, though, is architecture.

Philosophy and style

Along with the modernist simplicity that underpins the Steendijk design style, the practice draws together various strongly held beliefs and binds them into a holistic approach with the refreshingly idealistic objective of enhancing lived experience, bringing joy to lives and improving environments. While the acclaimed Canoe Beach Residence offers extensive evidence of Steendijk's sensibility and skill, it is in his own Spring Hill home and studio that his ideas are best expressed. Starting with an 1875 timber worker's cottage on a small site on the fringe of Brisbane's CBD, he set out to test the architectural ideas he had been taught by living with the results. He also wanted "to show what was possible on a fairly modest budget".

Preserving existing fabric

As a first principle, Steendijk believes that architecture should not take a domineering stance where existing conditions prevail, but rather that "we should do what we can to improve what's there". In order to retain the integrity of the existing cottage and its historic environment, he raised it half a storey and inserted a new ground floor into the sloping site below. At the junction of old and new he inserted a thin horizontal glass band so that when the building is illuminated at night the old worker's cottage floats lightly on its new base.



Environmental sustainability

Steendyk also believes architecture has to be responsible and sustainable and that reducing energy consumption over the lifecycle of a building is fundamental to the design process. At Spring Hill he has incorporated all the usual ESD principles and more: "We don't need a heater in winter," he says, and even in the Brisbane summer airflow maintains a comfortable temperature without air-conditioning. He has included a 14,000 litre underground water-tank and used materials such as self-oxidising steel and coloured concrete, which need no maintenance. Even the timbers used to form the concrete were re-used as wall-covering elsewhere.

Sequence of spaces

The quality of space is another central element for Steendyk: proportions are important, he says, as is the sequence of spaces. "You don't need big spaces – it's not about the volume of space you can contain – it's about the extension of space into other areas." He is critical of a general preoccupation with the built form and the frequent neglect of the surrounding negative spaces. To make best use of all the spaces on his sites, Steendyk designs the landscapes as well so that external spaces often become outdoor rooms.

Simplicity and sensitivity

Steendyk's work is sometimes seen as stemming from an Asian sensibility. "Of course, Japanese architecture is beautiful, and that's what I would study and take cues from, but simplicity of form is what I'm striving for," he says. Nonetheless, it is his deep and distinctive colour palette that often surprises people. "I use darker colours [because] with the harsh Queensland sun you often need to reduce the glare by absorbing it with the colour of the walls."

Again the Spring Hill home and studio illustrates his point. His overriding objective, he says, is to create "a feeling – that immediately when you walk into a space you feel a level of comfort or ease. When I get an architectural commission, my hope is that **people's lives will be changed forever because of the house they live in.**" He mentions simple pleasures like enjoying the way the sun comes in, or the feeling of freedom as spaces open up to the landscape.

Furniture and products

Following the success of his 'Cero' chair which, in 2003, won the first Australian Design Award for furniture, and a Design Institute of Australia Award, Steendyk produced the practical and playful 'Subcero', for children, which has proven equally popular. Although designed to satisfy the same environmental, functional and aesthetic concerns as the architecture, many Steendyk products express an emotive sculptural quality that is distinctly curvaceous – sensuous forms such as the 'Drift' bath and the 'Wave' series are streamlined for pleasure of use and practicality. With an extensive selection of furniture, lighting and textiles now on its books, the studio currently has a new furniture range, including 'Play', being produced by Schiavello in Australia, and a range of outdoor furniture, produced by Italian manufacturer, Serralunga, which was launched at the 2008 Milan Furniture Fair.

Design in Australia

Despite its difficulties and the limitations of the manufacturing base, Steendyk is optimistic about the future of design in Australia. "I reckon we have a fantastic stable of designers here, world class," he says. He is also positive about the potential for designers in Australia. "I love Australia. I also think having a great climate makes you psychologically

more open, and without the burden of [European] tradition our mentality is more free-thinking. You make your own opportunities. You can pretty much do anything here if you put your mind to it and if you find the right people – you're only as good as the people you surround yourself with."

Un-Australian attitude

Steendyk ascribes his success so far to the passion he has for his profession, to his determination and a perfectionist streak. Even at school, he says, "I felt it wasn't quite good enough to do X, you had to achieve X plus. To a lesser or greater degree I guess that still pervades everything I pretty much try and do." He acknowledges that, in this respect, he's basically un-Australian. "There's a propensity in Australian society for mediocrity – the she'll be right mate, attitude. I know it's not the ocker way, but I feel I should make the most of the skills I have," he says. "You just do the best you can do."

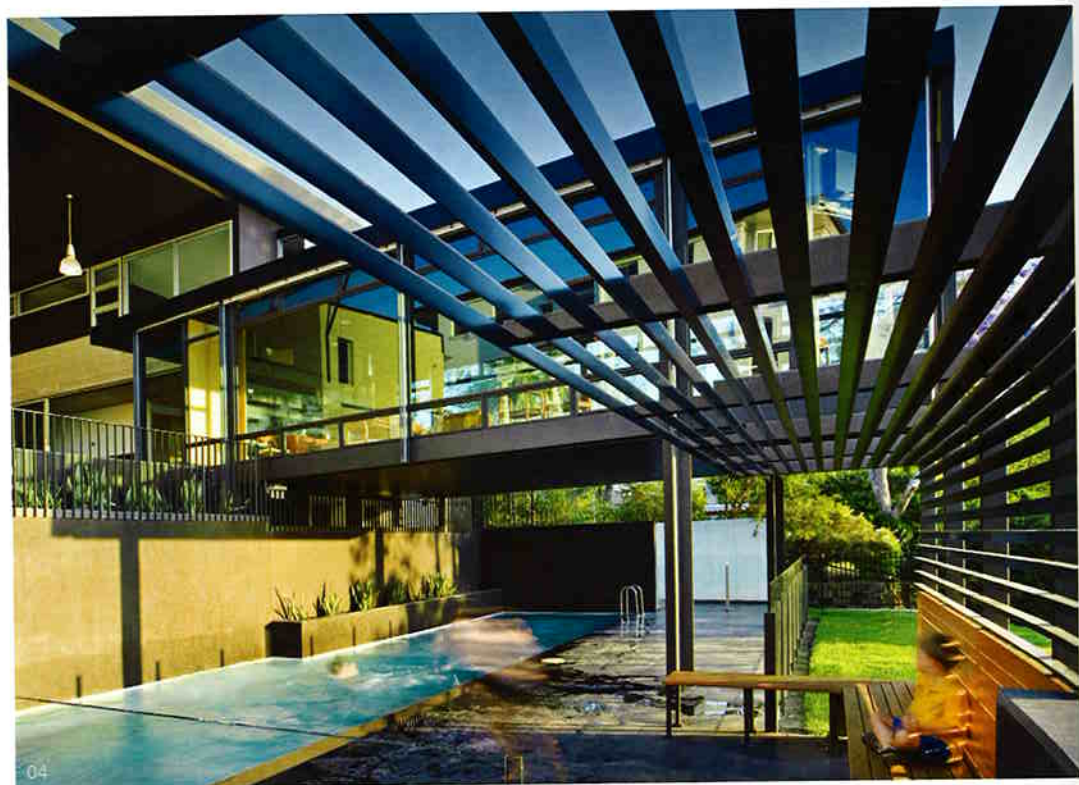
"I'm very critical of myself because I want to do something that's significant and important. What that influence will turn out to be in the long run, time will tell, but it would be nice to have an influence on society in a positive manner," Steendyk says. "Turning the ordinary into the extraordinary is really what it should be about. If you can take something that's so simple and turn it into something that's beautiful, that's the art of it."

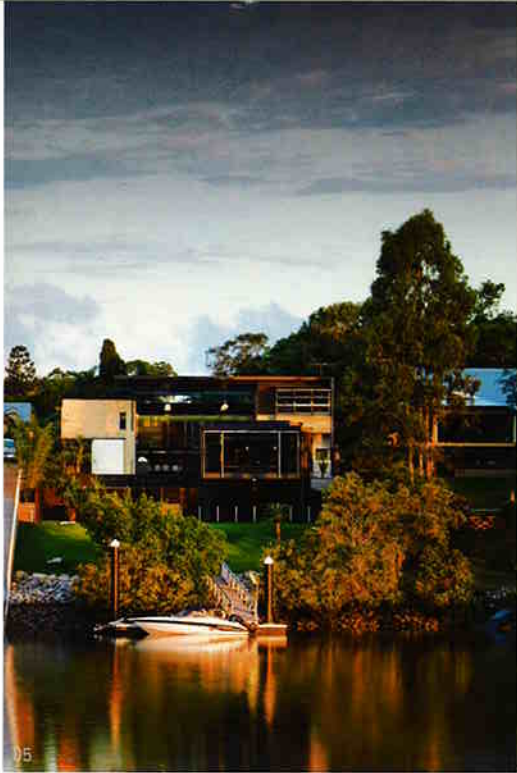
Steendyk
(61 7) 3839 0400, steendyk.com

'Play' is available at Schiavello
(61 3) 9330 8888, schiavello.com

'Cero' is available at Space Furniture
(61 7) 3253 6000, spacefurniture.com.au

The practice draws together various strongly held beliefs and binds them into a holistic approach





04-05 Canoe Beach house
Photo: Christopher
Frederick Jones
06 Steendyk's Spring
Hill home and studio
Photo: Anthony
Browell
07 'Drift' bath
08 'Cero' stool and table
for Serralunga



08

- 1970** Born and raised in Brisbane
- 1990** Bachelor of Applied Science, QUT, Brisbane
- 1993** Bachelor of Architecture, QUT, Brisbane, University Honours and QIA Medallion
- 1994-06** Studied Master of Architecture, Illinois Institute of Architecture, Chicago, USA, with assistance from Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship
- 1996** Worked for UN Studio, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, before returning to Australia
- 1997-02** Design architect with The Cox Group, Brisbane
- 1997** Worked for Cox Group, Singapore, on winning international competition to design Singapore Expo
- 2001** RAI A Commendation (Cox Rayner), Riparian House, St Lucia, Brisbane
- 2002** Project architect and urban designer for Inner City Bypass, Brisbane
- 2002** Established multi-disciplinary practice, Steendyk, in Brisbane
- 2003** 'Cero' Chair received Australian Design Award for furniture, was displayed at Milan Furniture Fair. Inner City Bypass, Brisbane received an Australian Construction Achievement Award, Public Domain Award and Australian Institute of Landscape Architects Award
- 2004** RAI A commendation for Hamilton Residence, Brisbane. 'Wave' Collection launched at Milan Furniture Fair. 'Cero' Chair included in Powerhouse Museum Sydney's permanent collection. Awards judge, Australian Design Awards.
- 2005** Australia Council Arts grant: three-month studio residency in Milan.
- 2007** RAI A Commendation for Bowman Residence, Brisbane. Included in Queensland Government initiative, *Design Five*
- 2008** RAI A Regional Commendation and State Residential Architecture Award for Canoe Beach Residence, Brisbane. Australian Steel Institute, Architectural Steel Design Award - Housing & Small Commercial category, Awards Judge, Australian International Design Awards