Daniel K Brown

→ Designer - Inspirer - Thinker

by Nikki Wilson

Words, both written and spoken are delivered with careful consideration from Daniel K Brown. He seeks beauty in ideas, in design, and in life. On speaking with Brown one begins to realise his thoughts linger little on the surface of matters, and it is this level of enquiry and a healthy loathing of presumptive ways of being that have inspired his architecture, art, research, and his teaching. Although American born, 56 year old Brown has lived in Wellington for eleven years and now holds New Zealand citizenship. He considers himself local. Lucky us - we have nabbed a quite a bloke.

The road to architecture for Brown was far from the norm. Graduating from William College in Massachusetts with a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in biology, he then went on to work as a researcher in the field of electron microscopy. Brown’s undergraduate studies included papers in art history and art which had always interested him, but at the time he did not believe they were viable career paths. While working as a scientist Brown took night classes in drawing and painting and then convinced Yale University that a researcher in electron microscopy, who was also handy with a pencil and paintbrush would make a perfect architect. This got him into their progressive Master of Architecture programme. “There were students at Yale with backgrounds in architecture, poetry, art history and philosophy, and so for me, the question was what would a scientist do with architecture?”

This concept, the bringing together of 18 people from vastly different disciplines to examine architecture was made even less stable by having no in-house academics teaching. Rather Yale pulled in the heavy-weights of North American architecture in the early 1980’s. “We were taught by Philip Johnson, Peter Eisenman, Charles Moore, James Stirling and Frank Gehry” Quite a line-up.

Brown went on to work in architectural practices based in Rome, Sydney, and New York. Most recently he was Managing Director of Emilio Ambasz & Associates in New York, working on over 40 projects in both architecture and industrial design across the globe.

Having left the States during the Bush administration where a period of major conservatism left the arts lacking in support and funding, Brown furthered his studies in Thailand, India and Nepal on a number of scholarships including the prestigious Fulbright. These were formative years. Relationships and ideas were created that were the seeds of his practice method – a subtle hovering in the grey area between cultures, peoples, countries and disciplines.
Brown’s current posting is Associate Professor at Victoria University’s School of Architecture and Design in Wellington. He joined the school in 1998, and since then has won a raft of teaching awards; eleven to be exact. True to form he has established a carefully considered pedagogical philosophy and it is making an impact. He believes in rigorous creative enquiry; that design is a combination of the intellect, the visual, and the functional. Brown is a careful curator of student work, ensuring exposure beyond the bounds of the institution. He demands a personal design stance be taken through challenging what has gone before, and by encouraging students to always see themselves as “a new generation of designers.” He pushes for a creative process that very much encompasses a world view. “In the fields of architecture and design, academia’s charge is to, most importantly, challenge theoretical issues that carry relevance beyond the individual to the collective, beyond the collective to the universal.”

Call him old-fashioned, but Brown advocates the importance of maintaining innocence. He brings to teaching immense joy and enthusiasm for his field and a great respect for younger generations. This, he suggests is what makes a good teacher. “As a teacher, I can only accomplish this challenge by embracing rather than erasing the innocence of my students. Their innocence is their greatest gift, for it provides them the essential ability to dream. And it reminds me utterly that as I teach my students, so too I learn from them in return.”

Woven through all Brown’s work is his research interests in symbolism, ritual and mythlogy in contemporary and traditional architecture. “Eastern design has culturally and historically been intimately linked to the human condition, while western design with the advent of modernism a half century ago, began progressively and systematically distancing itself from such concerns. The future of design, however, lies not in western design overwhelming the east as we are currently witnessing, but rather in the west fully understanding, engaging and incorporating eastern sensitivities into its own design.” Brown’s attraction to New Zealand, aside from its beauty, was its potential as a proponent in such understandings. “New Zealand is poised on a critical threshold between east and west, perfectly positioned to lead such a movement and establish its young designers at the forefront of a new generation of design drawn from sensitive understanding of cultures beyond our own.”

Somewhat of a cultural sponge, Brown quickly became inspired by the diversity of New Zealand’s populous.
Drawing on Maori culture, he submitted a beautiful and sensitive proposal for the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. Aware of the intricacies of traditional indigenous culture in New Zealand, Brown believes in the open “witnessing of cultures.” “By this I mean not to copy, but to merge and re-interpret. It’s about being highly respectful of the generation above while being incredibly inviting to the generation below.” While his proposal was not built, the beauty of his design seems proof of Brown’s commitment to New Zealand.

Arguably one of his most influential projects while teaching has been his ambitious International Design Studio paper in India. Students from all three-dimensional design disciplines; Architecture, Interior Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Industrial Design come together for six weeks of intensive study in an environment far from standard academia. Recognising the benefits of hands-on study in a country rich in history and design culture, Victoria University immediately welcomed Brown’s proposal for this course. The first trip was in 2003, and Brown has run the programme every alternative year since.

“The course specifically explores themes of Ritual, Symbolism and Artifact as evidenced spatially and formally in the architecture, design, and architectural interiors of India. Students were challenged to discover, document and interpret these themes into contemporary and discipline-specific language.”

Brown and his entourage traveled predominantly in Northern India. Their itinerary delivered a grand feast of architectural wonders; Old Delhi, the capital of the ancient sultanate, New Delhi where the capital buildings were designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, Chandigarh the northern capital city designed by Le Corbusier, Jaipur with its ancient astrological instruments the scale of buildings, Fatehpur Sikri, a deserted ancient city still intact, Varanasi and the mighty Ganges River, Udaipur, a city of floating palaces, Ahmedabad, where many of India’s buildings by Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier are located, and of course the Taj Mahal in Agra.

Students left all that was previously experienced as study within a formal institution. Practically, the use of computers was out of the question, so the challenge was to produce a body of work based purely on hand drawings. “It was the easiest method (of communication) in a rugged third world setting such as India. Hand drawings can be underplayed in an ordinary academic structure.”
Animations of these creatures were projected onto city walls, one thousand candles were floated in a serpent-like trail down the Tiber River in Rome, and ten metre high silhouettes were created by washing away the patina on the Tiber walls and overlaying a series of ghostly She-Wolf images. All works were made more sensitive by the accompaniment of music specifically composed in the corresponding cities for these pieces.

Simply by looking at images of these works, the mood they generate is all at once haunting, overwhelming and delicate. They seem to ooze from the very walls on which they are placed, calling for an intimate knowledge of the cities involved. In all projects Brown’s team became active participants in urban fabric. By enlisting the help of organizations such as Rome’s city Volunteer Fire Department and the New York Police Department, strong connections were formed with these cities. The installations were very much an interactive process.

For the installation in the 2006 Rome Midsummer Solstice Festival Brown was able to using funding from a teaching award to include seven students in the project. Working evening to evening in a small office at the School of Architecture and design, Brown, Erika Kruger and their crew developed the She-Wolf forms. The group then moved into an apartment in Rome and get into the very entrails of this design centre, literally scrubbing clean the river walls then on occasion sleeping outdoors to protect their work. These projects call for a practical hands-on approach which is a welcome departure from academia for all involved. Simply put, it was fun.

Brown speaks with much admiration for these festivals which he sees as a welcome environment to test ideas and for designers to prove themselves. “They are ephemeral and temporal and allow for cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary productions.” For Brown these are the culmination of all his philosophies.

To date Daniel K Brown has contributed much to our cultural fabric, raising the profile of New Zealand design overseas, and conversely bringing a world view of design to New Zealand. Together with his partner of 16 years, Brown has made a home out of Wellington and an extended family out of his students and others he collaborates with. His mind constantly bubbles with ideas and this thoughtful gentleman has a number of future projects in the pipeline – an International Field Study in Nepal, and a public installation piece in Berlin are both possibilities. He is also working on a book about tectonic and visual dialogues in architecture which opens with a chapter on how to look at art. Perhaps this will offer even more of an insight into how the unique mind of Daniel K Brown views our designed world.