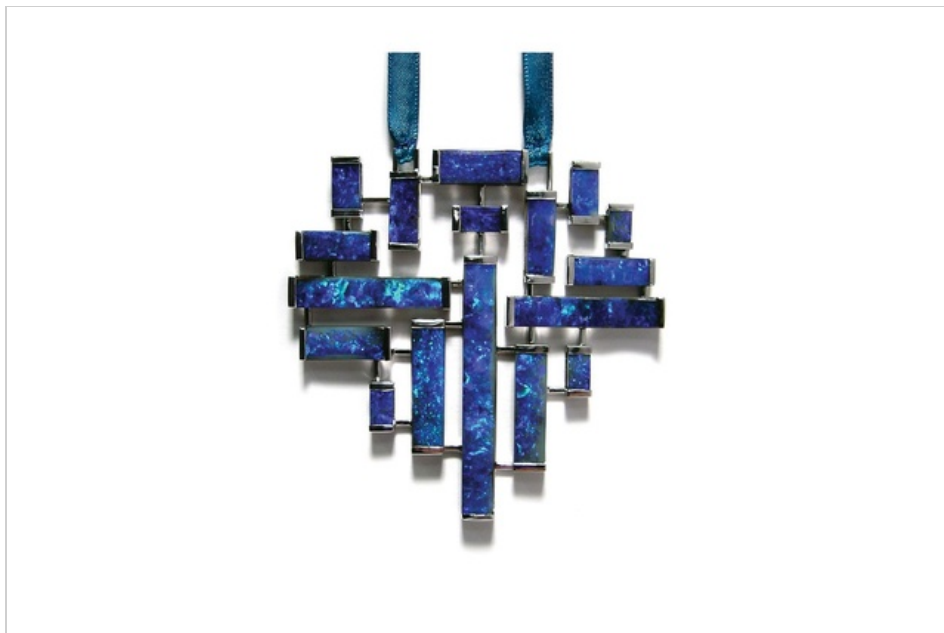


Genevieve Lilley: Crafting the idea

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Genevieve Lilley pendant: 18 carat white gold with 17 matching natural boulder opals.

A strong idea is the foundation for strong design at the largest or smallest scale, says architect and jewellery designer, Genevieve Lilley.

As an architect who also designs jewellery, I am often asked, “How can you do both, when they are such different sizes?” There are many answers and in fact the differences in scale, emotion and timing between the two trades make for a great counterpoint. The detailed intensity of jewellery, and the nimbleness with which an idea becomes a finished piece, offer great relief when you are exhausted by the building process.

The most important thing you learn from working on jewellery is that the idea must be strong and very clear. There is no space in a ring for ambiguity. Every tiny twist or junction of metal must contribute to a singular idea. You can't collect ideas or varied details in a ring.

This has been a very useful mantra to carry into architectural work. Prior to designing jewellery, nearly all of my professional experience came through working on cultural and commercial projects in my eight years with David Chipperfield in London – museums, shops, restaurants, bars, churches. When I set up my own firm in London to concentrate on very small projects, I delighted in focusing on one dominant idea, a thread that ran through every decision in a project. We do that in our office to this day.

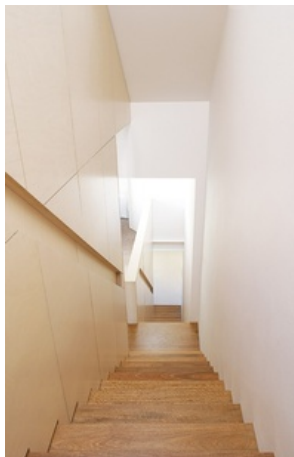
When we studied architecture in the late 1980s and early 1990s, our teachers were reacting to postmodernism, which had been poorly adapted to Australian development. As we sought to understand why exaggerated columns and pediments had been an architectural preoccupation for a decade (a decorative reaction to brutalism), our project work was preoccupied with tearing such fashion apart. Plans were fractured, pulled and distorted; schisms became obligatory features in our



Genevieve Lilley, architect and jewellery designer.

buildings. University debates revolved around the difference between deconstruction and deconstructivism. We researched Frank Gehry and Bernard Tschumi.

I was extremely fortunate to have been taught by Neil Durbach for a year. I loved his analogy that small buildings were like jewels. We made and remade small balsa models each week, working with our hands to express and test ideas in 3-D. I still make all my students work weekly with physical models – not presentation ones, but expressive ones, gestural models, small things that they collect in boxes and on windowsills. Our course was led by Swetik Korzeniewski, whose irascible contempt for architectural fashion gave us the conviction to dismiss current trends as unimportant. We studied the internal corner details of Renaissance courtyards; we spent dreamy lectures lost in the rich details of Alvar Aalto and Carlo Scarpa. We did life drawing. This gave me a profound understanding of craft and a desire to seek out the calmness of enduring architecture.



Paddington House by Genevieve Lilley Architects: stairwell in a 3.5-metre-wide house.

During a two-year postgraduate scholarship trip, I spent many months looking at, experiencing, drawing and painting the timeless buildings around Europe that we had studied in Australia. In London, we revered the mechanical purity of Richard Rogers and Norman Foster and Nicholas Grimshaw, but young architects sought out the undercurrent of monastic simplicity that was being explored in works by John Pawson and Claudio Silvestrin. Of particular interest to me was the work of the then-tiny Swiss firm Herzog and de Meuron. I loved that each project was an exploration of the possibilities of one material, often a traditional one being used in a modern way.

In our Sydney office, started in 2006, we have always consciously sought to work at different scales, from jewellery, furniture, lighting and small interiors to residential projects of various sizes. But in each project, regardless of scale, I like to have a dominant idea thread throughout the design. I feel this is particularly necessary in houses.

In the tiny house photographed here, the owner wanted to use all parts of the three-level house “as her own.” It was important to her to have long sightlines, for a sense of security and for good cross-ventilation. She needed a lot of storage to hide away a lifetime of collected objects and though her house had been dark, she was determined not to have a whole house of white cupboards.

As the budget was tight for the extent of cabinetry, and could never extend to solid timber or fancy veneers, we seized upon the chance to use a Finnish birch ply throughout. It has very fine layers of laminated ply, so the edges are quite beautiful. We limed the ply to keep it pale and to



Paddington House by Genevieve Lilley Architects: intersecting forms combine to make the kitchen.

reduce the “honey glow” birch ply acquires over time.

We used this material for all cabinetry – kitchen cupboards, bedroom wardrobes, shelves, beds for grandchildren. In the 3.5-metre-wide house, we set up a whole wall of birch ply, which concealed a study at one end, a TV/entertaining area, a bar area, a guest WC, kitchen cupboards and finally a dining room sideboard. Tucked into this wall was a small opening. When you step up into it, a top-lit stair running the full three storeys of the house is revealed. This stair is quite private and many visitors are puzzled by how to get to the upper levels of the small house.

As well as housing storage, and the stair, the ply-panelled wall has recesses for lights and, in the stair, for a handrail. This handrail became the last detail of the house, a ply pocket beside a ply stair behind a ply wall. The whole house is navigated around this one wall over three levels.

For me, this material became the homogenizing material and idea for the whole house. It allows the owner to display widely varied things over different levels, but each room feels like part of the same house. One can see from top to bottom, and end to end.

Words	Genevieve Lilley
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