

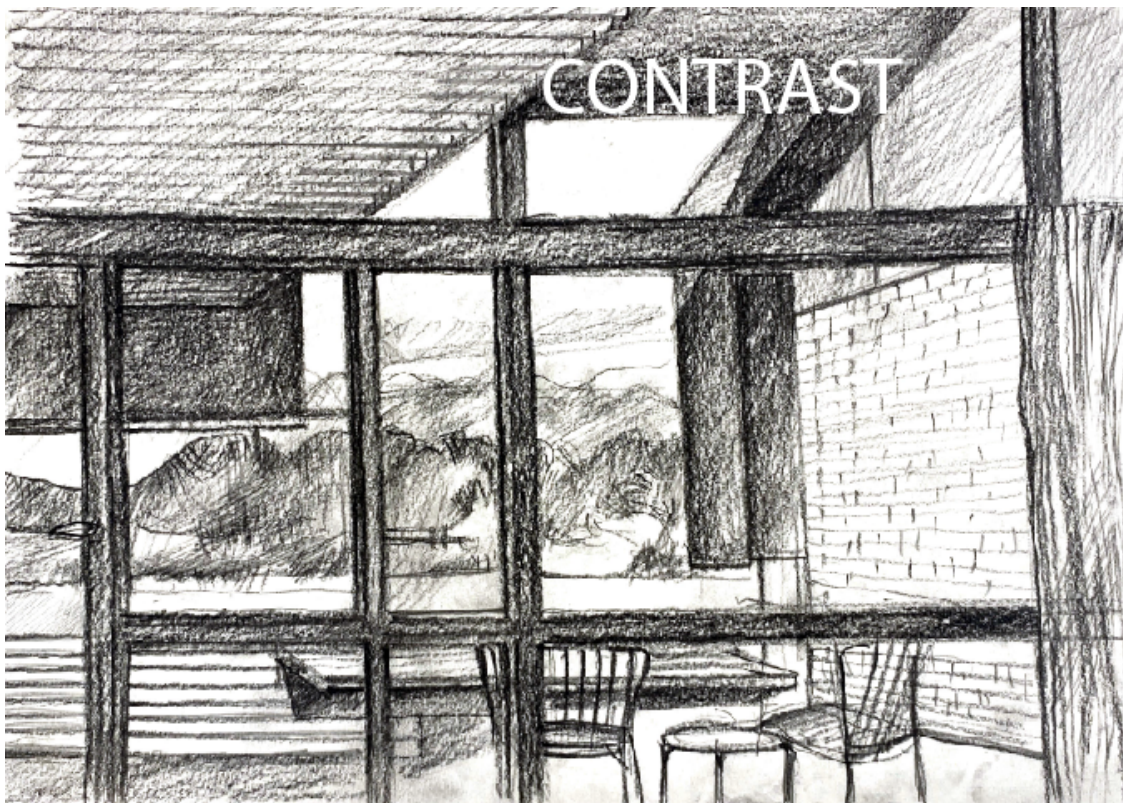
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ARCHITECTURAL OBSERVATIONS

A Recent Trip to BRAE

Early Australian farm buildings, are generally modest scale, simple structures, built with locally available materials, in a recognisable vernacular style. As more accommodation was needed, wings were added, mostly horizontally, creating an organic complexity. The relationship to the land and to available resources is obvious and the whole looks and feels authentic and satisfying. Few contemporary buildings seem to achieve this degree of authenticity.



BRAE is a farm stay restaurant in south west Victoria, just outside the settlement of Birregurra. It consists of an original additive building that houses the kitchen, smokehouse and a restaurant that has, over recent years, been included as one of the best 50 restaurants in the world. The main buildings are a good example of vernacular buildings built over time, using the locally available materials. The walls are timber framed, clad externally in horizontal weatherboards with simple pitched roofs, covered in corrugated iron. The building is finely proportioned and double hung windows are used repeatedly. As fire would have been a concern, the kitchen is the only part of the structure built in locally baked bricks. The buildings are well integrated into the landscape and any planting is functional.



Internally the walls are plastered and the timber floors of the various spaces are stained for uniformity. The modern interventions into the restaurant are limited to lantern like structures, that help define the areas for diners. It is serene, with timber tables that perfectly enhance the purpose made ceramic dishes that showcase the carefully curated dishes. The setting is akin to a Japanese Omakase meal, or to the Noma restaurant in Copenhagen. After the 3-hour meal, a walk around the vegetable gardens that are the source of most of the dishes, confirmed the chef's commitment to authenticity. The vegetable gardens are a serious sustainable working project, complete with a dam and lakes.



It is customary, all over the world, to complete this type of immersive dining experience by providing overnight accommodation. A respected firm of Melbourne architects designed a new building containing the 6 suites to provide this. Externally the form is a simple linear structure with a gabled roof. But this is where the simplicity ends. This form is manipulated so that while the roof is a large-scale corrugated iron clad gable roof, its simple form is obfuscated by interrupting the eaves line. The eaves, apparently respond to the function of the spaces and the view, but are further enlivened by flat metal panels, skylights and solar panels. The external walls are a combination of local brick, timber and metal cladding without any obvious logic to the location of the various materials. There is a pergola over the entry and a covered terrace with seating. Another terrace faces the view of mowed paddocks on the other façade. The view itself here is view defined by the eaves and materials.



Internally the spaces are generous, a kitchen, luxurious bathroom, with shower as well as a bath with a rural vista through a large window. Urban materials used include ribbed glass and steel framed windows. The floor is black slate, and black is the colour of the cathedral ceiling over the main living/sleeping space. A lower ceiling over the kitchen and bathroom, is also black with timber battens.



The black framed steel windows need electrically operated blinds and coloured glass for privacy. The walls are lined in plywood and local brick with even a bagged wall covered in graffiti. The spaces are constantly stimulating. The landscaping, on the other hand, is sensitive, shielding the carpark and service areas, and uses native plants, mirroring the original gardens.



I couldn't help contrasting this cacophony to my visit to the serene buildings in Naoshima, Japan designed by Tadao Ando. These buildings serve a similar purpose but fit seamlessly into the landscape and their simple plain interiors soothe the guest. Bræ, on the other hand, feels as if the designers didn't trust themselves to let the building respond to the landscape, instead deciding to visually entertain with the complexity of their design. I wonder if this overstimulation is a result of the habits and needs of a generation used to constant electronic and visual stimulation.



These brief observations are not intended to be a criticism. They are a commentary about the influence of the technical and visual information revolution on three dimensional environments. This resulting need for visual stimulation also derives from virtual environments, that attract large crowds, and are a similar manifestation. The meeting of these needs in architectural designs dematerializes the form and structure of the actual buildings.

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