AN AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURAL SAGA

This draft summary clarifies a 60 year political saga in Australian architectural politics, beginning with the arrival in Sydney of Harry Seidler in 1948 and continuing via his widow Penelope and her supporters after Seidler’s death in 2006.

The angle for this version of the saga focuses on architectural politics around author Davina Jackson’s corruptly failed PhD thesis on Seidler’s main early rival in Sydney, Douglas Snelling.

An earlier version of this text has been submitted to the Victorian Ombudsman, the NSW Board of Architects, and other relevant government agencies. It also has been circulated to key leaders of Australia’s architectural culture (including Michael Bryce at the Governor General’s Office) – with no questioning of the facts or interpretations.

Three lawyers have seen this text and while one advises ‘this saga is so shocking it can never be officially admitted’, the facts have been so comprehensively recorded, circulated and witnessed, there is no realistic potential for the Seidlers, or other named protagonists, to deny their roles either.

In the age of the leak and the blog, of evidence extraction and link discovery, truths will either out or be outed, later if not sooner. This is something I would bring to the attention of every diplomat, politician and corporate leader: The future, eventually, will find you out. The future, wielding unimaginable tools of transparency, will have its way with you. In the end, you will be seen to have done that which you did.


Strengthening Snelling’s historical significance

Douglas Snelling’s place in the history of pan-Pacific mid-century modernism is more transparent now than it was when my thesis was written between 2003 and 2007.

From the late 1930s to the mid 1960s, he was the most progressive and diversified trans-disciplinary Australian (and New Zealand expatriate) ‘design-with-nature’ interpreter of Californian modernist innovations. He also was literally too cool for school – an ‘outlier’ (Malcolm Gladwell, 2008) – a different kind of thinker and doer to the academics on salaries and mainstream consultants chasing projects in Sydney during his time.
From Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra-influenced mansions to Googie-style shop fitouts, furniture with ‘California splay’ legs, tropical ‘tiki’ lifestyle displays, flashy graphics informed by Hollywood film advertising, sharp office and home unit towers, and lush, sculptured Los Angeles-style landscapes, Snelling’s early-adopting oeuvre and personal style epitomised and delivered California’s most glamorous environmental dreams to the Emerald City.

Far from being ‘doctrinaire’ by the mid 1960s (as was claimed by editors of *Modernism & Australia* – Ann Stephens, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad, Miegunyah Press, 2006), Snelling then was pioneering a new genre of pan-Pacific modernism, designing mansions and resorts, including the world’s second infinity pool (closely following John Lautner’s original). These were ‘indigenous modern’ forerunners of Kerry Hill’s internationally applauded Amanresorts of the 1990s.

Supporters of Snelling’s early rival Harry Seidler and other Sydney architects of the 1950s and 1960s have ignored, denied and suppressed his logical place in the pantheon of significant creators during those decades. During the past decade, these supporters have conspired to arrange the failing of my Snelling PhD thesis and prevent his achievements from being exhibited at Sydney’s cultural institutions.

Well before Sydney’s post-World War II modernists began their careers (Seidler arrived in Sydney in 1948 and most others began working in the 1950s), Snelling already had an Australian reputation for American-style furniture and retail interior design and a New Zealand reputation for Hollywood-informed journalism, graphics and exhibit design and marketing.

By designing and building Australia’s first post-war (early 1950s) houses in styles originated by Frank Lloyd Wright, Snelling became Sydney’s first Wrightian architect to follow Walter and Marion Griffin (who left Australia in the mid 1930s, about five years before Snelling arrived from New Zealand via Los Angeles).

Snelling soon will be recognised too as New Zealand’s most important expatriate designer/architect – perhaps usurping my uncle Gifford Jackson’s current place as the most internationally distinguished mid 20th century pioneer in NZ’s history of modern design.

(Jackson was an industrial designer and naval architect who worked across Scotland, Canada and New York, while Snelling covered many design disciplines and built a solid portfolio of architecture in Sydney and the Pacific.)

**A forerunner of 21st century GeoDesign**

Snelling’s deliveries of Wright’s concepts of organic, ‘integrated with nature’ architecture – rather than the architecture-transcends-nature ethos which Seidler and Glenn Murcutt and their followers championed in modernism’s legendary ‘Battle of the Styles’ – also places Snelling in the pantheon of pioneers of an emerging 21st century digital environmental modelling movement known as GeoDesign and NeoGeography.
The GD/NG movement is intended to apply post-Google Earth (and Google Glasses-style augmented reality) technologies to help deliver 'evidence-based environmental design' concepts that first were promoted by landscape professors Ian McHarg (University of Pennsylvania) and Carl Steinitz (Harvard Graduate School of Design).

One uncommon characteristic about Snelling's architectural and landscape design approach is that he accurately drew (or 'predictively simulated') his buildings and gardens – with axonometric (three dimensional perspective) pen sketches.

Usually he left the 2D working drawings for staff to deliver later. And although he employed expert gardening consultants, his mature landscapes were or remain remarkably faithful to the plant arrangements which he originally sketched/simulated.

**Sabotage of Snelling and his biographer**

Leaders of Australia’s three main architecture clubs – the (formerly Royal) Australian Institute of Architects, the Australian Architectural Association (established by supporters of Seidler in the early 2000s) and the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand (a coterie of academics with salaried careers and personal research turfs to protect) – have been determined not to acknowledge the historical significance of either Snelling or his (first) biographer.

As part of a systematic campaign by leaders and supporters of all three organisations to ‘drum out Davina Jackson’ and ‘don’t talk to Davina, she’s dangerous’ – or, alternatively, ‘don’t listen to Davina, she’s irrelevant’ – they prevented my pre-thesis articles on Snelling from being published in the SAHANZ and international Docomomo journals. (Docomomo then was represented in Australia by a group including Scott Robertson, son of one of the principals of the 1950s Sydney practice Robertson and Hindmarsh.)

SAHANZ’s leaders also quietly removed me from its mailing list of members, did not invite me to speak on Snelling at its conferences and gradually orchestrated the failing of my thesis via corrupt processes and illogical rationales.

This was part of a broader campaign during the trans-millennial noughties (and even before my departure as editor of *Architecture Australia* 1992-2000) to sabotage or usurp all of my proposals and projects to promote progress in Australia’s multi-disciplinary design and architecture culture.

An example in 2000 was the gazumping – by Philip Goad (a California and Australian modernism historian at the University of Melbourne) and photographer Patrick Bingham-Hall – of my contract with London publishers Thames and Hudson to produce a book on new Australian architects to represent Australia in their *Super Dutch* series. Goad and Bingham-Hall knew of this contract because they had been working regularly with me (as a contributing writer and photographer) while I was editor of *Architecture Australia*. 
Their book, *New Directions in Australian Architecture* (Pesaro, 2001) delayed my *Next Wave* book from a proposed 2001 release date to 2007. They were able to gather the support of relevant architects while I travelled across Europe and the United States to promote my earlier T&H book, *Australian Architecture Now*, and two 40UP (young architects) exhibitions in Germany that had been launched in Australia in 1999.

The catalogue for the 40UP exhibition contained essays by me as then-editor of *Architecture Australia* and Professor Leon van Schaik of RMIT as the then most influential postmodern architectural theory academic in Australia.

Another example was an attempt in 2004 by van Schaik, my then-preferred co-author on the *Next Wave* book, to persuade Thames and Hudson’s editors to replace me as the other co-author with his colleague Dr Mauro Baracco – claiming that I did not have the intellectual calibre to write the book I was proposing.

At that time, neither van Schaik nor Baracco had any experience in writing coffee table books for commercial publishers. As a writer with plenty of experience explaining Australia’s most talented designers to wide audiences, including but not limited to academics, I thought the book’s (minimal) text content needed a critical balance between serious political/cultural journalism and serious postmodern academic theory. Van Schaik wanted to use it as a vehicle to illustrate his latest concepts to interpret different practitioners in different categories of ‘mastery’ – to frame them in a three level status structure, in effect.

Several hundred Australian architects and what the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s journalism ethics expert, Quentin Dempster, has clarified as ‘their networks of influence’ were involved in discussions (gossip and mutual advancement strategy exchanges) relevant to this decade-plus saga of research sabotage and career and reputation assassination.

It wasn’t feasible to stop that momentum because I was studying within obsolete academic credentialisation systems (required to be polite), exploring new directions in Earth systems sciences, trying to help clear pathways to enable the dreams of next generations of outlier designers and support generational advances in my families. I also had to avoid conflicts with my husband Chris Johnson’s roles as a senior public servant navigating the erratic politics of successive NSW Governments.

**Explaining a black ban**

Why would all these respected professionals, scholars and their organisations repeatedly ban and scapegoat an internationally recognised writer and promoter of progressive Australian architecture and design?

The quickest answer given to me directly was from Melbourne architect John Denton in 2001: ‘You know too much’.

Another explanation is that late 20th century modernist architects have trained their thinking and egos around the treatises and fictions of modernist American writer Ayn Rand (*The Virtue of Selfishness, The Fountainhead*, etc).
Too much success, especially by women in these status pyramids dominated by men, is not to be allowed.

A related possibility is that I am married to a prominent member of a four-generation Sydney architecture dynasty – perhaps Chris Johnson or my father-in-law Peter Johnson (not only me) offended them or frustrated their aspirations. ‘Blame the wife’ is a syndrome openly discussed by many older architects in Australia.

Noting that Sydney’s architects forever churn their allegiances around the shifting pillars of the Lord Mayor, the NSW Minister for Planning and the NSW Government Architect, I assumed that they would want to ‘reboot’ their friendships following Chris’ exit as Government Architect in 2005.

However, because Chris’ planning strategies were still welcomed by leaders of the NSW Government, his continuing ‘dominance’ of urban development issues angered his successor as Government Architect, Peter Mould, who spread his negative views widely around his constituency, after instructing me never to approach him again at public functions.

Another reason is that architecture is controlled (traditionally as a generationally sequenced, parish-based system) by alpha male practitioners who form into factions (each usually supported by one or two alpha females) to protect and distinguish themselves in heated competitions for projects and recognition.

More than a few men are affronted by my ‘can-do’, ‘gung-ho’, ‘brisk, no-nonsense’, ‘live-wire’ style of ‘connecting ideas, people and opportunities’. All these terms have been used by different observers to explain my ‘energetic, passionate approach’.

All these individuals and factions in Australian architecture would like to have a resourceful communicator on their side – and their side alone, and permanently. In retrospect, it seems that when I stopped editing Architecture Australia, even those who had been pressuring for my departure became annoyed that I wasn’t focusing on their creative achievements any more.

Creative connections and creative cities depend on people who throw parties – and large, lively parties regularly were thrown at our Newtown house from 1987 to 2007. At my 50th birthday party in March 2006, warm speeches were given in support of my contributions to Australian culture by Professors Leon van Schaik and James Weirick and others. Yet they were aware of, so at least complicit with, discussions to help ‘drum out Davina’.

**Egos and emotions versus reporting ethics**

As a newspaper journalist trained in the era of Nixon and Watergate, I’ve been educated to avoid aligning with factions – at least not for too long to be incapable of independent opinions (aside from family obligations).

Some journalists and lawyers have confided that I am 'absolutely hated' by Seidler’s widow, Penelope, and her family and friends – most lately because of a short obituary I wrote on Harry for The Australian in 2006 – which the
newspaper persuaded me was necessary to provide a balance (beside a longer article by Philip Cox) to acknowledge the legendary ‘dark side’ of his public persona and professional relationships.

Ignoring many positive comments I wrote about his talents and ‘brilliant’ contributions to architecture, and misreading an explicit note clarifying that I have no knowledge of his family life, the Seidlers (in grief at that time) interpreted the entire 400 words to be outrageously wrong and insulting to Harry’s memory. Several journalists of mutual acquaintance strongly urged me not to respond to a bitter letter I received from daughter Polly Seidler because I would ‘inflame’ their feelings.

I believe my text was fair (from my knowledge), accurate and comparable with many candid, colourful obituaries regularly published in the British press – which (for obituarists) represents the Gold Standard on how permanently valuable perspectives on significant people should be written.

(Relevant here is that my obituary on Jørn Utzon, also published in The Australian, was selected for the 2009 annual Proceedings of the Australian Academy of Humanities and my earlier Australian obituary of Queensland professor Peter O’Gorman also was republished by his family in their community newsletter for Stradbroke Island. I believe that a serious writer on a historically significant person should not let a bereaved family’s personal emotions today prevent delivery of an accurate and fair summary to historians in the future.)

Hopefully my hagiography on Douglas Snelling is the first and last that I will ever write on any architect. I agreed to his family’s request to study DBS because he was dead, so he could not personally manipulate my writing to support his points of ego and could be more safely interpreted. He also was a rakishly handsome and internationally glamorous subject; obviously attractive to an ex-Vogue Living editor sharing a similar UK-ANZ family background (and then looking for international travels and frisson on the edge of menopause).

I contracted with Snelling’s eldest son, Christopher, that I would truthfully publish my research – both of us knowing that I would find warts because he was a social-climbing, money-motivated, mid-century misogynist of the style highlighted on today’s retro TV series, Mad Men).

Sydney’s post-Olympics ‘ego gridlock’

After my controversial term at Architecture Australia ended in 2000, it seemed that my sensible next direction should be either to go offshore or to research (in a library-quiet academic context) both a history of 20th century modernism and potential 21st century directions for urban planning. It seemed wise (for an editor considered far too progressive for local parish comfort) to take a break from publicly belting conservatives with my too-outré views and help to encourage, or let flow, new creative talents and conversations after the Sydney Olympics.
However, various NSW public servants and cultural luminaries involved in debates on how to deliver major urban developments for the Sydney Olympics formed what I’ve termed an ‘ego gridlock’ to control and slow down all potentials to accelerate local and international advancements of next generation talents.

From comments made to me by some people involved, a clique of architects, artists and arts patrons persuaded leaders of Sydney’s key cultural venues to abandon their initial enthusiasm to arrange exhibitions on Douglas Snelling. One example was efforts by architects Peter Tonkin and Paul Berkemeier to persuade the Museum of Sydney (ultimately successfully) that ‘there are other architects in the pantheon’ who should be exhibited before Snelling. Another example is the Rowe Street Society’s decision not to arrange a lecture about Snelling which its leaders initially were keen to organise. Perhaps it is coincidental, but the society’s architects for new premises are Richard Johnson and Howard Tanner.

Perhaps Snelling’s naysayers realise that his glamour and range of accomplishments would delight many fans of modernism who currently know only Seidler, Ken Woolley, Peter Muller, Arthur Baldwinson, Neville Gruzman and Bruce Rickard as the leading independent architects building in 1950s Sydney before Jørn Utzon. Some of those architects were more accomplished than Snelling; some were not.

**Dumping ‘dangerous’ Davina and Douglas**

As usual with other ‘dangerous’ Sydney architecture writers, the clubs have persuaded leaders of the entire Australian research system to repeatedly expel and permanently exclude me from any position of employment or status, from where I might ‘infect’ students with ‘radical’ views inconvenient to the businesses and reputations of the most influential mainstream Sydney members of the Australian Institute of Architects (the practitioners’ body).

Snelling also was excluded from Sydney academia, although he just managed to pass his registration examinations (after several years of self-study) at the University of Sydney in the early 1950s.

Who would benefit from locking him out of the universities? Perhaps Snelling himself might not have wanted to waste large amounts of time on (in his terms) low-paid tutoring and lecturing. But he was not averse to writing low-paid freelance articles from the late 1930s to the mid 1960s.

After the mid 1950s, his organic architectural approach was strongly challenged by younger architects influenced by British and Scandinavian brutalism and his last Sydney projects were completed in 1970. Just before then, he lost the support of his wealthiest client, Sir Theo Kelly, who was widely connected across the eastern suburbs and business communities. DBS began to look for offshore clients – developing resorts and houses in Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Hawaii.

Which other architects were gaining ground on Snelling during the 1960s through to his retirement in Hawaii in 1976? My background chronology of
Sydney's best projects and biographies of most leading architects operating 1945-1975 has proved illuminating.

Seidler rapidly thrust far ahead of all his rivals but Muller and Snelling were chasing him, sharing some clients on different projects, until Ken Woolley, Colin Madigan, John Allen, Russell Jack, Bill Lucas, Harold Smith, Peter Johnson, Bryce Mortlock, Bruce Rickard, Neville Gruzman, and others, began gaining momentum in the mid 1950s. During the 1960s, another new breed gathered steam – including Philip Cox, Don Gazzard, Terry Dorough, Douglas Gordon, Howard Tanner and Ian McKay.

Since the 1960s, all these architects – not Snelling – have been clustered by key commentators as a group of ‘nuts and berries’ practitioners known as The Sydney School. Snelling and Seidler both appear to have been excluded from The Architectural Society of ‘contributors to the debate’, although they must have known about it. They were older figures, perhaps seen to be blocking the ambitions of next generations.

In 1970, the same year that Snelling finished his last local projects, writer Jennifer Taylor arrived in Sydney and began working at the University of Sydney for its then Dean of Architecture, Professor Peter Johnson (my benign father-in-law 1984-2003), who also employed Peter Muller’s early 1950s intellectual companion, Adrian Snodgrass. These three scholars formed a permanent friendship, including many other architects of their generation. In 1971, Glenn Murcutt, then new to sole practice after working for Ancher Mortlock and Woolley, joined Sydney University as a tutor.

Jennifer Taylor and later historians ignored Snelling’s substantial contributions to Australian architecture during the 1950s and 1960s – yet it simply is not possible for any researcher perusing early 1950s Architecture and Arts magazines to have missed the Muller-rivaling styles and quality of Snelling’s buildings.

Obviously (in retrospect) Taylor was less than thorough in her reporting, but given her friendships while writing her influential reviews of those decades, was she deliberately blind to help solidify the historical significance of her colleague Snodgrass’ old friend Muller? Was she, as a political ingenue in town, only interested in chronicling the early careers of her new architect friends (mainly middle-aged during the 1970s)?

Why did John Entenza, the influential Los Angeles editor of Arts and Architecture, suddenly drop Snelling after meeting and liking him in 1948 and promoting two of his first (unbuilt) house designs in 1949 and 1950? (Entenza continued to publish Seidler projects through the 1950s.)

It is common practice for architects to belittle each other’s works when talking to influential editors and writers – and for inexperienced scribes to take advice from the profession’s most respected practitioners. Entenza is not alive to comment.
Another idea: Los Angeles/Hollywood is a town/industry eternally dominated by Jews – and in the late 1940s and early 1950s, many Jewish émigrés from Nazi Europe were collaborating globally to help mend their (latest) diaspora.

Around the time when this thesis was examined, Taylor was living on Stradbroke Island, off the Gold Coast; communing with a cluster of architects and architectural writers who have been involved in various pieces of the anti-Davina gossip campaign. She was particularly close to Professor Brit Andresen, mentor of one of the thesis examiners, Andrew Leach; both then employed at the University of Queensland.

Taylor and Andresen also socialised regularly on Stradbroke with Andresen’s former teacher at the Architectural Association in London, Professor John Frazer, and with former University of Melbourne Professor Haig Beck (also a former AA student and staff member, and editor, with his partner Jackie Cooper, of the international architectural journal *UME*; launched with support from the University of Melbourne).

For several years before the Snelling thesis was failed, Frazer led a strong anti-Davina thrust, with RMIT-based Professor Mark Burry, on behalf of their employers at the Queensland University of Technology. Beck and Cooper had been angry when I was appointed editor of *Architecture Australia* in the early 1990s, after they had earlier failed to win that role.

Also strongly involved in the anti-Davina campaign at the time this thesis was examined was the University of Melbourne’s Dean of Architecture, Building and Planning (formerly Dean of Architecture at the University of Sydney), Professor Tom Kvan. He was complaining to his colleagues around the world about my attempts to catalyse (as we had agreed at a lunch and meetings which he had hosted) what we then called a digital cities research network and what is now becoming the United Nations’ Framework Convention on Climate Change’s new ‘global technology network’ for ‘research’ and ‘systematic Earth observation’ to ‘accelerate climate change solutions’.

**Other expulsions**

There are more than a few precedents for ‘dangerous’ people to be systematically ejected from mainstream Australian architecture groups: notably Utzon’s biographer Philip Drew and other writers for newspapers and magazines.

Philip Cox has been blamed by his Brisbane partner, Michael Rayner, and former UNSW staff members Michael Tawa and Linda Gregoriou for organising their expulsions from Sydney architectural circles; because they were either criticising him or (in Rayner’s case) claiming personal credit for designing particular buildings while on staff at the firm Cox founded.

Shortly after my exit from UNSW, I rang Cox to say I was leaving and he said ‘this would be best to resolve the impasse’. Interesting: I had then recently resolved another 20-year impasse that he and John Andrews had created between architects and arts mavens leading the Australia Council: a gender and funding competitiveness piece that persistently stopped OzCo support for
architecture exhibitions at Venice Biennales. The mavens found the blokes far too dominating for comfort.

And let’s not forget Utzon. Ironically Snelling wrote a bitter ‘letter to the editor’, found with papers at his neighbours and clients Abe and Olga Assef, and included in my thesis, to tear down the Great Dane’s credibility at a time (1966) when, frankly, both Utzon and Snelling were being ‘drummed out’ of Sydney’s commercial architecture conversations. This cathartic epistle was not published at that time.

**Contributions by leaders of Arup engineers**

Utzon’s exit from the Sydney Opera House could not have happened without the knowledge of key colleagues on the project, including ambitious engineers at Arup’s Sydney office. Thirty years later, their younger colleagues, notably Richard Hough and Tristram Carfrae, drove key aspects of the campaign to sabotage the projects and career of Utzon’s obituarist Jackson. As Carfrae noted to me during the mid 2000s, when the company was promoting its ‘design’ of the Opera House: ‘We’re always interested in what’s in it for Arup’. Arup’s latest advertising campaign states: ‘design is at the heart of everything we do’.

From 2005 to 2007, Hough shared with Jackson the first two years of a five-year NewSouth Global professorship in multidisciplinary design. But instead of collaborating on our mutually declared goal to develop ‘a national and global digital cities research network’, he worked with various leaders of Arup’s client architecture firms – who then were adjunct professors at UNSW – to exclude me from teaching architecture students there, then to have me sacked in 2007, despite (or perhaps because of) my exemplary performance records across all criteria of review.

Relevant UNSW professors of architecture during those two years included Ken Maher (Hassell), Philip Cox (Cox Architects), Richard Johnson (Johnson Pilton Walker), Lawrence Nield (Bligh Voller Nield), Glenn Murcutt, Angelo Candelapas and then NSW RAIA president, Caroline Pidcock. Staff professors during that time included Harry Margalit, Xing Ruan, John Mitchell and James (Jim) Plume.

Senior staff and associates were able to convince the then-Dean of the Faculty of the Built Environment, economic planning professor Peter Murphy, to threaten me three times with expulsion for unspecified reasons, finally succeeding in 2007. Active on his Dean’s Advisory Board at the time was Cox’s close friend, Carfrae – who I had recommended for that role to help activate the proposed digital cities global network.

**Attacks on ‘dangerous’ architecture are often followed by emulation**

From attending many architecture conferences, seminars, lectures and social functions since the mid 1980s, it’s clear that leaders of mainstream practices in Sydney simply will not allow students to emulate the styles of international or interstate architects that they do not consider ‘appropriate’.
This hegemony over education, enabled by the ‘accreditation’ of university architecture programs by whoever currently controls the AIA, results in a multi-generational stream of mutually informed experts on (in NSW currently, Louis Kahn, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Jørn Utzon, Norman Foster, Renzo Piano and some younger others).

As ‘radical’ Los Angeles architect Frank Gehry noted after recently winning a commission to build the UTS Faculty of Business, it took a remarkably long time for him to win a Sydney project after his popular lecture at UTS in 1983. Other great international architects who belatedly won commissions in Sydney include Jean Nouvel and Renzo Piano – long after their key projects had been copied by local practitioners.

During the last 20 years, most Sydney architects agreed with each other to systematically attack the ‘ugly’ styling of Melbourne’s Storey Hall (1992-1993) and Federation Square (1999-2002). But the vibes of outraged negativity always seem to ease over a decade or two, until one or more Sydney practitioners decides that it is finally safe to deliver a diluted, belated interpretation of the despicable original.

Compare, for instance, Draw’s 2011 UTS Great Hall interior with the auditorium of RMIT’s Storey Hall, and the Cox Architects building on its 2011 corporate Christmas card with the Federation Square façade that Philip Cox strenuously attacked in newspapers when Federation Square first was published.

The massive opprobrium – and banning of Fed Square architects LAB from winning Australian projects since 2000 – probably contributed to LAB principal Peter Davidson’s massive brain stroke several years ago, and the consequent dissolution of his partnership with Don Bates (which was successful in China and the Middle East).

Not only nobbling this thesis on Snelling and my 2005-2007 professorial role promoting multi-disciplinary design across three faculties at the University of New South Wales, leaders of the clubs also opposed my campaigns to solve the 20-year cultural impasse preventing Australian architecture exhibitions from appearing at Venice Architecture Biennales.

Victory in the Venice battle (that I led) was claimed by Penelope Seidler and her acolytes, including council planner Bridget Smyth and society artist Janet Laurence – although the most effective contributions were made by arts patron Ann Lewis, editor Andrew Mackenzie, Melbourne lawyer Mark Henry, Ambassador to Italy Peter Woolcott and former Sydney Lord Mayor Lucy Turnbull (who served as Australia’s honorary Commissioner for the Venice exhibitions in 2006 and 2008).

Since 2005, the architecture clubs and their allies also have been blocking and usurping my publicly funded proposals for new Australian research organisations to focus on digital simulation and space science solutions for the climate change challenges of cities. Why are these proposals so unpopular? Most modernist architects see themselves as designers who create and supervise their designs with pencils – they do not want to be
dominated by the post-Google Earth technological context of ‘systematic Earth observation’.

**Key points on the Snelling thesis timeline**

My Snelling thesis was the subject of a scholarship kindly awarded by RMIT University’s former Head of School, Professor Harriet Edquist, to start in 2003 (after my applications to all three Sydney architecture schools had been declined).

After my engagement with RMIT, several other Sydney historians decided to also study there, including Michael Bogle (whose straight history PhD thesis on another 1950s Sydney architect, Arthur Baldwinson, was passed without any demands for theoretical additions) and Noni Boyd (whose straight history thesis on early 20th century NSW Government Architect Walter Liberty Vernon also went through without a major theoretical revamp).

In February 2005, at the University of Melbourne’s architecture school library, I was charged approximately $250 to obtain a librarian-edited photocopy of Professor Goad’s highly regarded 1992 thesis *The Modern House in Melbourne 1945-1975*. The photocopy was missing its final three chapters – including its Conclusions and an Envoie called ‘The Architect and the Ideology of the Dream’. Why such a high access fee should be required by a university and why these chapters were not publicly available, more than a decade after they had been successfully examined, was not lucidly explained by the librarians or Goad.

Later in 2005, after I had become UNSW’s New SouthGlobal Associate Professor of Multi Disciplinary Design, I attended a meeting at the University of Melbourne with Professor Edquist to discuss my idea for us all to collaborate to produce an ‘online dictionary of Australian architects’ – similar to the online dictionary of Australian artists which recently had won generous funding from the Australian Research Council.

This concept was rejected (with remarkable hostility) by Goad’s colleagues Drs Julie Willis and Hannah Lewi as being contrary to the University of Melbourne’s then-new project to produce a printed encyclopedia of Australian architecture with Cambridge University Press. At this stage, I had prepared brief biographies and a 1945-1975 chronology of projects by more than 100 Sydney architects. Funding for publication of this research had been declined by the NSW Heritage Council after talks with leaders of the NSW RAIA.

Progress on my thesis research and writing was six times approved by RMIT panels of assessors, including Dr Lewi, until 2007.

In 2007 the final thesis was submitted to supervisors Edquist and (by then retired) Professor Doug Evans, who both approved it for external examination. On reading the thesis in detail, Edquist suddenly expressed grave concerns about Snelling’s personal character and behaviour and indicated that she now thought he was not worthy of a PhD thesis.

Promoted in this book was Terroir, a firm led by three ambitious Tasmanians – Gerard Reinmuth, Richard Blythe and Scott Balmforth – who also were pursuing postgraduate ‘by project’ degrees at RMIT while I was studying Snelling. At several of their review presentations, they demonstrated how closely they collaborated, across different cities, by email and online document sharing.

In 2007, Blythe replaced Edquist as Head of RMIT’s School of Architecture and Design – and that (from my email records) is when supervision of the Snelling thesis began to go more blatantly awry.

Blythe chairs the Australian Institute of Architects’ national education committee and is a prominent member and former president of SAHANZ. His Sydney-based business partner, Reinmuth, an adjunct professor at UTS, was then on the Board of the Australian Architecture Association (set up by supporters of Harry Seidler and his younger friend, Glenn Murcutt). He also was involved in a decision by the SAHANZ member Professor Desley Luscombe, Dean of the UTS Faculty of Design Architecture and Building, to drop my husband Chris from his adjunct professor role there, and to exclude me from an independently suggested adjunct role there.

Terroir’s principals then were being strongly influenced and mentored by a post-modern philosopher, Professor Andrew Benjamin, who was then the Associate Dean of UTS DAB and who wrote the firm’s first monograph (*Cosmopolitan Ground*, Sydney: UTS DAB Documents, 2007). In 2007, my earlier empathy with Benjamin (when he worked at the University of Sydney, then UTS) was kaput. He refused to speak to me after I won the UNSW professorial role starting mid 2005.

**Skewing the examination and appeal processes**

It appears that after Blythe’s arrival as head of school at RMIT, Edquist and her colleagues on the School of Architecture and Design’s research committee selected two post modern theorists (versed in sophisticated European cultural philosophies) to examine this straight historical record of a mid-century modern multi-disciplinary designer/architect from an English working class background.

Why? I suspect to help Blythe demonstrate his new-found professional superiority to academics on the mainland as a Benjamin and van-Schaik-annointed theory scholar. Blythe was not conscious that my earlier M.Arch thesis at UNSW (@home: Another Revolution in Architecture’s Theories of the House) already had been passed as an examination of classical and postmodern architectural theories.

Publication of the @home thesis has been delayed 15 years because until the late 2000s, Sydney architects were adamant that ‘digital’ architecture was ‘mad’, ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’.
Of course all practices were keeping up to date with computer-aided design software on the latest model desktops – but their principals didn’t want to employ university graduates versed in what they were dismissing as ‘blobs’. They insisted on staff who could design and document ‘boxes’.

Although some professors at RMIT (Mark Burry in the case of his PhD student James Gardiner, for instance) allow postgraduates to know who their external examiners are (thus allowing candidates to flatteringly cite their examiners’ relevant works), this privilege is not common among thesis supervisors and was not granted by Edquist.

The first examiner, Professor Peter McNeil (then working in Scandinavia so not fresh on Australian architectural politics), passed the thesis with minor amendments. The other two examiners failed the thesis mainly on grounds that it was not a good example of scholarly writing and failed to ‘frame’ Snelling in a theoretical context.

One examiner wrote anonymously with a strong focus on esoteric theories which gained momentum largely after Snelling’s death in 1985. This second examiner has since been identified as Catherine McCarthy of Victoria University, Wellington, who currently is NZ president of Docomomo. The third examiner was Dr Andrew Leach, another theory-oriented scholar, who was then working at the University of Queensland with his mentor, Professor Brit Andresen.

PhD envies

After hearing of my scholarship in 2003, recently bereaved Professor Andresen told me that she did not approve of me attempting a PhD because in her view PhDs should only be awarded to ‘career academics’. Other SAHANZ members since have confirmed that they agree with this perspective – which is not communicated to the armies of foreign language students who cruise through PhDs at Australian universities. At that time, aged around 45, I was hoping to become a ‘career academic’ through to retirement.

Andresen and many other older academic architects did not gain PhDs and most practicing architects (often teaching as adjunct professors) are too busy to produce substantial, scholarly documents researched and written entirely on their own. Many practitioners have expressed occasional envy of ‘academics who get PhDs from studying the sex life of the flea’ (quoting Philip Cox, winner of a University of Sydney honorary doctorate of science, speaking at a 2011 event at the University of Sydney).

Even more irritating to PhD-envy practising architects must be students who are able to earn PhDs by writing about the work of architects who themselves are not awarded PhDs for their (far more substantial and concrete) achievements. The point to be made here is that theses are documents, not buildings, and academic research is a different professional discipline from architecture.

During the re-examination process, Edquist refused to approve re-examination of the thesis, on the grounds that the theory requirements had
not been addressed. She recommended wrapping most of the original history research into the Appendix and starting an entirely new theoretical thesis.

Edquist’s own PhD thesis, on Harold Desbrowe-Annear, was a straight history report – as were the modernist architecture theses of Goad, Conrad Hamann and Harry Zvi Margalit.

After I claimed to Professor Blythe and his since-dismissed colleague Dr Sue-Anne Ware (a friend of van Schaik’s), that the fail recommendations were ‘a hatchet job’, he agreed to look into the matter and concluded promptly that the two fail recommendations were wrongly based. In a letter supporting my 2010 appeal, he stated:

‘All three examiners … noted the worth and originality of the historical research conducted by the candidate. However the two examiners who requested re-examination required that the candidate undertake additional original and independent theoretical research, without giving consideration to the originality and independence of thought exhibited by the historical research and thereby demonstrating significant contradictions in their assessment.’

RMIT’s guidelines for examiners of theses state that they must demonstrate:

— a significant and or original contribution to knowledge of fact and/OR theory,
— independent and critical thought, and
— the capacity to work independently of supervision.

Included in my appeal statement was a note that I had formally complained to Professor Blythe in 2009 about a statement blurted to me by Janet Laurence (another RMIT PhD student, who did not finish her thesis), that ‘we can have your thesis failed’. (It is never clarified, to targets of cultural conspiracies, who ‘we’ are … the targets seem to be supposed to know.)

During 2009, Laurence (partner of current Australian Institute of Architects national president Brian Zulaikha) also was complaining to NSW government cultural leaders, fellow artists and leading arts patrons about the ‘lack of quality’ of another of my projects, the wildly popular Smart Light Sydney/Vivid festival (which has evolved to become the second largest light art festival in the world).

After much local naysaying and jockeying for curatorial and production control of future light art festivals, Smart Light’s creator, talented young light art engineer Mary Anne Kyriakou, was forced to move our ecologically ethical festivals to Singapore and beyond. (I am Mary-Anne’s partner in the Smart Light companies). Sydney’s male-dominated light engineering industry has seized on her achievements without any acknowledgement of them – accidentally disconnecting Sydney from our international Smart Light Cities movement.

Also included with my appeal request were two 1996 letters from Mensa, the international club for people deemed to be in the world’s top two percent for
intelligence. After I took several supervised tests, they tactfully advised that I was not eligible to join Mensa but had scored in the top 3-4 percent.

The RMIT Snelling appeal was unanimously upheld but the appeal process was cancelled after meetings between RMIT’s Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), Professor Daine Alcorn, the Deans of all three RMIT portfolios and leaders of RMIT’s School of Graduate Research, including its Acting Dean, Professor John Reece.

Not obviously involved, but almost certainly briefed, was RMIT’s Vice Chancellor, Professor Margaret Gardiner, who is married to the University of Melbourne’s Vice Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis.

RMIT’s Chancellery has confirmed in writing that at no stage of the examination or appeal process was the thesis itself re-read – thus ignoring a directive from its appeals committee that the School of Graduate Research should ‘gauge the thesis on the strength of detail in the examiners’ reports and confirm or vary the classification.’ Blythe had recommended to the appeal committee that two new external examiners should be asked to re-review the thesis.

The university’s final decision was to summarise and support the examiners’ most damning conclusions. Despite Blythe’s belated efforts to rescue the failure, apparently there is an unwritten understanding in the academic system that no university will ever formally reject an external examiner’s report. On consulting the RMIT Student Union, as suggested in one of the university’s letters, I learned:

—‘this sort of thing happens fairly regularly, actually’,
—‘your case clearly caused a crisis of governance for the university’, and
—‘there’s not much you can do now but move on’.

Although RMIT advises failed degree candidates that they can complain further to the Victorian Ombudsman, State Ombudsmen do not have powers to reprimand errant institutions. They can only negotiate and the university has repeatedly written that its failure decision is final. For the public record however, a copy of this summary will be submitted to the Victorian Ombudsman and the Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC).

In early 2011, the then Commonwealth Minister of Industry Innovation Science and Research, Mr Kim Carr, set up ARIC to examine breaches of the Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research. After I submitted a complaint alleging numerous breaches of the code, the committee replied that it does not want to examine complaints about failed theses. In the new era following Julian Assange’s wikileaks, it seems there is a vacuum that could be filled by a website potentially named myfailedthesis.com.

Normally if a thesis is failed, it is not accepted for cataloguing at any university library. And no reputable university in the world will knowingly reprocess a thesis failed elsewhere.
Those factors effectively allow anyone to ‘find’ the discarded document and exploit the original research to write a new document. Fortunately, the examined version of my Snelling thesis has been included in the Douglas Snelling archive at the State Library of New South Wales and eminent Californian modernist historians at UCLA have looked through it, as has a senior curator with the National Library of New Zealand.

**Next options to promote Snelling’s significance**

Where to from here for Douglas Snelling’s place in history? Summaries of him now are included in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Volume 18, Australian National University) and the *Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

An architectural history student at the University of Melbourne has set up a Douglas Snelling stub on wikipedia, using some material which I donated to Sydney Powerhouse Museum scholar Ann Stephens for her *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967* (co-editors Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad, Miegunyah Press, 2006).

Perhaps this stub is a belated beginning to the ‘online dictionary of Australian architects’ which the University of Melbourne’s historians rejected back in 2005? Certainly it credits Stephens and her co-authors as the primary sources for material which I located and which already had been presented in formal academic reviews of my thesis.)

While Sydney’s cultural institutions are unwilling to initiate an exhibition on Snelling, Australian academic publishers are unable to financially justify printing of a Snelling book – although the thesis has been deemed acceptable for publication by editors at the University of Melbourne Press’ Miegunyah imprint, UNSW Press and Thames & Hudson. These publishers have expressed relief that it is not written in a ‘pretentious’, theoretical style.

Since 2007, the international books industry has evolved into a new era of electronic publishing for convenient reading of ePUBs on tablets. This makes it feasible for theses to be published on Amazon and the iBookstore. Enhanced by the ‘rearranging’ talents of designers Christie Hunt and Simeon King at Anagram Studio, Sydney, Douglas Snelling’s pan-Pacific significance can be interpreted by anyone interested, anywhere in the world.

Also since 2007, the Californian modernism movement has begun to be celebrated at the new Palm Springs Modernism Festival each February. Like the Venice Architecture Biennale for contemporary exhibitions, this is the logical destination for international scholars and dilettantes of west coast US innovations during exactly Snelling’s period of the 1930s to the 1960s.

According to Brisbane photographer Chris Osborne, editor of the new magazine *Australian Modernism*, the Palm Springs festival organisers want to welcome displays of modernist creativity in Australia and other parts of the world.

Because Snelling is the mid-century Australian modernist who twice worked as a designer in Los Angeles in the late 1930s and late 1940s – and his
architectural approach was strongly influenced by Wright’s Prairie houses and Richard Neutra’s Kaufmann House at Palm Springs – it will not be credible for Australia to exhibit any survey of its mid-century modern buildings without including significant recognition of Douglas Snelling’s pan-Pacific contributions.

And although former AAA Board member Gerard Reinmuth has assured me that AAA has ‘never discussed’ Douglas Snelling at any of its meetings, future AAA leaders will need to be seen to organise occasional bus tours around surviving Snelling buildings, and the tour guide will need to be familiar with this thesis. A question for Reinmuth is ‘why hasn’t AAA discussed Douglas Snelling if its remit is to promote modern architecture?’

**Uppity women writers**

Intriguingly, Reinmuth was among several of AAA’s practising architect board members who resigned promptly after the election of design magazine editor Kate St James as its president in 2011.

There’s something about these uppity female multi-disciplinary design journalists that a certain breed of architects just cannot stand. Is it because these ‘passionate’ girls (a code word often used among men) assess talent and achievements more independently, inclusively and rationally than happens via the committee-supervised, politically motivated status and spoils allocation system that goes on in the boys’ clubs?

Professors Blythe and Reinmuth (and others) are on the record advising me, at the end of my repeatedly thwarted PhD process, that I am ‘mad’, ‘bizarre’, a ‘conspiracy theorist’ and ‘need to see a psychiatrist’.

Indeed. The anti-Davina campaign reached such a crescendo of irrationality and negativity from 2006 to 2009, I realised that I must stop relating to most mainstream Australian architects and academics. In short: don’t talk to the ‘don’t talk to Davina’ campaign participants.

This strategy, combined with frequent foreign travels to connect with many of the world’s top space scientists, science research leaders and innovative light artists, certainly has improved my mental focus and enjoyment of life.

However now I’m being told by knowledgeable intermediaries that I (aged 56 and with four books under way and various exciting and ambitious international projects on the bubble) ‘must retire and do dinner parties with your old friends’.

Hmmm.

—Davina Jackson

Sydney, April 2012