

# SPARKS ARCHITECTS

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photography Christopher Frederick Jones, Roger D'Souza



Dan Sparks, director of Sparks Architects. Photo: Christopher Frederick Jones

From Gabriel Poole through to Lindsay Clare and Kerry Clare, the lush landscape of Queensland's Sunshine Coast has proven fertile ground for the development of a distinctly Australian strain of regional modernism. Paul Owen meets with Sparks Architects, a member of the new generation of architectural practices proudly building on this much-celebrated tradition.

Every time I visit the Sunshine Coast I am reminded how special the region really is. Driving there from Brisbane to meet up with Dan Sparks afforded yet another way of seeing it.

We traced a route through the hinterland and then down to the coast – normally you would head directly to either. This time I was able to travel through painterly/edible and rugged/salty terrains in one sequence. These landscapes are internationally coveted and uniquely Australian.

Our day was a string of journeys, which revealed the field in which Sparks Architects is so fortunate to work and prompted thoughts of how this field deserves a reciprocal architecture. What was revealed was a story of architectural lineage and custodianship of ideas – particularly with respect to the work of Dan's mentor and first employer, Gabriel Poole.

## STORY

Sparks' career began aged five, playing with toy blocks on the floor while his parents hosted a dinner party. One of their guests, Jon Voller (formerly of Bligh Voller Nield), stopped on the way to the bathroom and asserted that Dan must become an architect.

Life influencing moment: a large, hirsute man in your house – holding a glass of red wine – standing over your five-year-old self and gruffly barking career instruction.

Dan studied architecture at The University of Queensland and in second year took a life-experience elective and worked tending bars on

Moreton Island... probably undertaking coastal vernacular research.

Dan's next sojourn was to Europe after a few more years of study. He worked in London for two years and was able to tour buildings taught at the University of Queensland, coming to understand them as never before.

At the end of his stay, Dan worked in the south of France making design drawings in an 18th century stone barn to convert the same barn to a bed and breakfast. His life involved long, wine-filled lunches and daily mountain bike rides through villages and over hills. Stupidly, Dan returned to Brisbane.

The upside to his return was finishing his degree and meeting his wife Margo at architecture school.

Dan and Margo eventually designed their Mount Ninderry house together, which accommodates Sparks Architects in its cool undercroft with an aspect over native state forest.

## TPOLOGY

The buildings of Sparks Architects are generated by order and tectonics. They comply with structural grids, efficient spanning principles, standard glazing modules, appropriate sun angles and so forth.

As a maker of modernist regional Australian pavilions, Dan's rhetoric is accordingly of details, systems and climate. Aussie men (particularly regional ones) rightfully take pride in their ability to pack a car-boot or fold a tarp – equally,



01. Montville Residence. Photo: Christopher Frederick Jones

02. Montville Residence. Photo: Christopher Frederick Jones





03.  
Maleny Residence.  
*Photo:* Christopher Frederick Jones

04.  
Maleny Residence.  
*Photo:* Christopher Frederick Jones

the Australian modernist talks confidently of construction, structure and detail.

The sensitive larrikin exists prolifically in Australian architecture, though perhaps Dan, Luke and Tommy, the fellows at Sparks, are far too gentlemanly to be considered larrikins.

Still, their buildings are composed with inventiveness and know-how gained from genuine experience in the field. They are highly capable and well conceived – virtues not all makers of this typology have the skills to generate.

#### FRESH WATER AND SALT WATER

Architects like to talk about landscape – a very broad term defined in the renaissance when perspective drawing changed the way we thought of nature.

The morphological landscape of the Sunshine Coast is magical and unique – the Glasshouse Mountains are as fondly familiar as the face of someone you've always known.

Importantly, it is the diverse and beautiful vegetation (native and introduced) of the region that defines it so profoundly. A wonderful combination of salt and fresh water landscapes is present in many parts of the coast.

The architecture of the region seems to respond well to cues provided by its flora – a design skill acquired through intuition or talent, perhaps, rather than by rote.



Peregian Beach Community House, awarded Building of the Year at the 2010 AIA Sunshine Coast Regional Architecture Awards. *Photo: Roger D'Souza*

Sparks buildings are systematic, rational, sometimes irreverent and always responsive to the cultural and natural landscape.

Dan is Brisbane born and raised, but appears to be an adopted Sunny Coast resident. He is aware of the importance of the flora of his area. Sparks Architects' buildings are neither subservient to, nor denying of the local landscape.

#### LINEAGE

While Glenn Murcutt practiced in the 1970s, continuing modernist notions of Mies van de Rohe and Alvar Aalto in a regional context, Australia was finally given the modern architecture it deserved. Equally, South East Queensland was afforded an appropriate coastal and regional architecture by architects such as Gabriel Poole, Lindsay Clare, Kerry Clare and John Mainwaring. The Clares and Mainwaring both worked in Poole's office before starting their own highly influential practices.

The work of these practices and their legacy is important and revered – and the movement towards a regional modernism in Queensland architecture can be traced to Poole.

Dan worked in Poole's office for seven years before starting Sparks Architects in 2007, making his practice part of this lineage.

The Clares ordered planning and Mainwaring's expression are both evident in Sparks' buildings – along with an inventive demonstration of climatically responsive design. Sparks boldly employs internal water tanks as heat sinks, using them resourcefully to define rooms.

It is clear the work of Sparks Architects is derived from the mentorship of Poole. Sparks buildings are systematic, rational, sometimes irreverent and always responsive to the cultural and natural landscape.

#### PRACTICING IN THE FIELD

Margo Sparks grew up on a farm near Moree. When Dan started work for Poole, Margo returned home to find work on the farm. While there she undertook some private commissions for locals – one-day design services Margo called “ones-ies”. The commissions involved travelling to a property, brief-taking, sketching, designing with the client and basic documentation in a day – an architect practicing in the field.

The commissions were unglamorous, an honest service for willing patrons – true architecture. No doubt utility and resourcefulness were the currency.

Architects in the Sunshine Coast region are privileged to be practicing in a landscape where the amazing flora and topography provide currency for ideas.

Sparks Architects are young and rapidly emerging – with a valuable mentorship and genuine development of a lineage of ideas, they are making a regional architecture befitting the field. **ar**

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