



## Alex Njoo in conversation: Reno Rizzo, Inarc Architects

**I**narc Architects is one of those practices that consistently produces high quality architecture, from residential to corporate projects. The two directors, Reno Rizzo, architect and Christopher Hanson, Interior Designer, formed the practice in 1993. Rizzo graduated from Melbourne University and cut his 'architectural teeth' with Denton Corker Marshall, soon after Rizzo set up his own practice before co-founding Inarc Architects.

The spartan interior of their office is more a reflection of their recent move to the present premises, in a leafy street at the Southern edge of Melbourne CBD. Much of the work that Inarc does, consists of approximately 50 per cent new residential, 30 per cent residential development and the rest is commercial and tenancy work.

Did the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) affect the practice? "The GFC resulted in placing some projects on hold or some were cancelled. To keep the (team) morale up, we concentrated on working on feasibility studies for speculative commissions. We kept busy by pouring all our resources into them. Post GFC, the practice was eventually revived as the speculative work came to fruition. The present climate seems to be steady." Says Rizzo.

The practice is presently completing an A\$70M residential development in the Chinese resort City of Qingdao in collaboration with 3 other Australian firms and I.M. Pei of New York, consisting of two high-rise residential buildings, a hotel tower and 36 luxurious villas.. This will be the beginning of the practice's entrée into the burgeoning region of China and South East Asia.

Recent commissions also include: new 4 level office building in Prahran for Meerkin + Apel Lawyers; residential development of 14 dwellings as Social Housing for the government; bespoke single residential projects ranging from

an A\$10M Toorak residence to small holiday retreats; interior design work for corporate offices and hospitality projects.

Inarc has also received numerous awards in fields of architecture and interior design. Its work has been published widely both locally as well as internationally. Inarc's building forms are often abstract and sculptural with restrained palette of natural materials, the kind of residential architecture that could well be described as organic, sympathetic to its immediate surroundings.

As Rizzo explains, "Externally, stone has been used on our buildings' in many forms to give them identity and permanency. Whether they be the random basalt walls of the Mount Macedon country house or the more tailored gang sawn sandstone blocks of the urbane St. Kilda House, stone is used as a textural anchor to the design and planning of the projects.

A favourite stone of Inarc is Bluestone from Port Fairy region of Victoria. Dark grey in colour and volcanic in origin, this basalt features rich veins of air holes and "cats paws" which give it a rich and varied appearance. The variety of finishes range from sawn, honed and polished that result in a colour range that varies from light grey to almost black. We have used the stone as internal and external floor and wall finishes for many years. Despite the contemporary appearance of the buildings and interiors that I have just described, their planning is based on a rational modernist approach. Site planning, landscape, architecture and interiors are carefully considered from the outset."

Our conversation meandered into the realm of architects' use of colour in their buildings. Why, for instance, do architects tend to confine their colour palette to, say, black, white or grey?

"We tend to avoid fashion in that we strive for longevity in our work. Colour (in our buildings)

**East St Kilda Residence (above) Front elevation of house showing 1000mm X 500mm gang sawn Tasmanian sandstone by Henderson Marble and Granite Victoria.**

**En suite bathroom showing polished bluestone 600mm X 300mm floor tiles by Henderson Marble and Granite Victoria. Feature tiled wall in distance Bisazza 20mm X 20mm charcoal mosaic.**

is often used sparingly. For example, we'd avoid orange or bright green, the colour of the moment, as we attempt to overcome the hurdle of time and make our buildings have a much longer aesthetic life, so to speak. We tend to work in that 'muddy neutral grey' palette. To achieve a 'monolithic' appearance with clearly defined clean lines. As I have mentioned earlier this applies to our use of material, take flooring for example," continues Rizzo warming up to the subject of finishes, "in the past, timber flooring was used extensively in most of our residential projects. Nowadays, depending on the client's brief, we employ stone or ceramic tiles instead."

What of materials such as ceramic tile or glass mosaic for the interior spaces?

"Our approach to the use of ceramic and mosaic tiles is as follows. We generally use tiles in wet areas and bathrooms. We prefer to line entire floors and walls with the same tile in order to portray a continuous monolithic appearance. Thus grout joints are usually coloured to match the tile or even stack bonded to give a more ordered appearance. In the past we have used small glass mosaic tiles, 20mm by 20mm, to provide a seamless appearance for full height walls and floors. Where the client has balked at the amount of grout joints we have used a large format vitrified tile, say 800mm x 400mm, to provide a similar minimalist monolithic look. Colours are usually in the stone grey-brown palette. The basic difference between those two," says Rizzo, "is that ceramic tiles follow fashion trends, while glass mosaics portray a more timeless or classic appearance. Because of its transparency, glass mosaic requires the skills of specialist tilers in order to achieve precision joints, all corners should be mitred, particularly as most of our designs are rectilinear in configuration rather than free form. As a matter of fact, in wet areas where glass mosaic is used we line the surrounding walls with waterproofing membranes. There's no doubt of the versatility of ceramic products. Their 'maintenance free' qualities and comparative costs with other materials make them one of the architects favoured materials – where applicable of course."

What of the present market place for residential architecture where one could purchase a reasonable design house and land for under A\$500,000., does that pose some kind of a competitive threat? Rizzo admitted that some of the speculative houses are reasonably designed. They are the kind of houses that used to be architect-designed in less than a decade ago. To compare 'off the rack' type house design to a custom-designed one is like comparing apples with pears. As always, the housing market depends on affordability and the individual buyers' perception of their lifestyle, one is no less better or worse than the other.

As a graduate from the early 80s, what is his opinion of the younger generation of architects that are fresh from universities? "My observation," according to Rizzo, "is that they, the young graduates of today, have a lot less technical background. I'm just worried how far is it going to drop off altogether, the technical background that is. It may eventuate into the degradation of construction principles, knowledge of materials and technology, and professional practice. How far can it whittle away? The practice of architecture may eventually be compartmentalized in such a manner that we could be left designing building facades. And the rest will be left to other associated professionals to complete the whole building project. My concern is that the 'other associated professionals' aren't here yet."

Perhaps, I ventured, it is another form of rite of passage for the architecture tribe? Delightful as the conversation has been, it was time to leave Rizzo to return to his busy practice. And as I looked around his new work environment, I envisaged that when the filing cabinets and other paraphernalia are finally in place, the quality of design work that Inarc is known for will no doubt continue to contribute to the restoration of Melbourne to its former urban glory. **TT**

*Tile Today gratefully acknowledges the generous collaboration of Reno Rizzo, Inarc Architects. Alex Njoo is a former member of the Architects Registration Board of Victoria 2007-09.*



**Mount Macedon Residence images**  
En suite bathroom showing Roger Seller's 300mm X 100mm ceramic floor tiles.

**Internal view of basalt dry stone wall fireplace and sawn basalt hearth**

**Front façade of house showing Kyneton Basalt dry stone spine wall and recycled iron bark wall cladding**

**Stonework by WT Jones and Son Kyneton**