

Opening Speech

Victorian Government Architect from the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet.
It's a real pleasure to be opening this conference.

When I stopped to think about it, EARTH and I go back a fair way.

The beach and the childhood sandpit are common to many of us – but, I remember that one of the first exercises we were given as tyro architecture students, was to construct a wall panel in pise.

Our first year broke up into groups of six, collected river mud, and rammed our wall panel, with shuttering that clearly couldn't contain the strength of our blows.

We were required to monitor our pise panels over an extended period and we were all surprised at how well they stood up.

This modest exercise kick-started a long-term interest in the potential of earth walls. My interest was design-based – how were panels constructed, how did they join, what were the key dimensional constraints, and all the other governing factors - and what form of discipline might this impose on the design?

This interest in imposed design discipline was also sparked in my first year as an architecture student, when I studied the traditional Japanese house and its form of construction – carpentry, but highly disciplined in terms of dimensions and joints.

I saw stabilised rammed earth as having a similar potential to the traditional Japanese house in terms of developing a kind of type, a distinctive DESIGN type which would evolve from the use of this particular form of construction – and, when teaching at the University of WA, set several student projects that pursued this possibility.

And, some years ago, when an opportunity arose to design and build a holiday house, I opted for rammed earth.

Slides show:

Site – burnt out – protection paramount.

Views and sun – stretching structural capacity – 6M spans..

The house was designed around a Spartan courtyard, external windows with rolladoors – security when not in use and modest protection from radiant heat of a fire, rammed earth; simple skillion roofs with gutters on the courtyard perimeter.

And, importantly, the rammed earth walls, their texture and colour, are a delight to live with. The effects of light playing on the earthen walls are beautiful.

I wish you all well with the conference and with spreading the word about the use of earth.

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