An excerpt featuring the graduates and academics of the Faculty of Architecture, Design & Planning.
Whether it’s feeding the homeless, raising funds or simply offering a shoulder to cry on, these men and women truly make a difference.

"Faculty of Architecture, Design & Planning - Senior Lecturer"
Col James, architect

According to Col James, persistence has been his greatest strength. “Persistence with the Block and persistence with the Redfern mob, who I’ve got great respect for.”

In the early ’70s, James was an architect on the board of South Sydney Community Aid when Aboriginal elder Shirley Smith asked him to assist in the battle to acquire land in Redfern by drawing up plans for low-cost housing. He advised the Whitlam government on the acquisition of a dozen houses that would come to be known as “the Block” – effectively our first urban land rights claim. He has continued to play a key role, helping student planners develop social policies to rid the Block of drugs and crime.

James’s work on the Block has always been pro bono. It’s impossible, he says, to add up the hours he has put in every week for 30 years. And although he’s now 71, the architect isn’t interested in retiring. He still lectures at the University of Sydney and is heavily involved in community issues. Each semester, he conducts student tours of the Block to connect the two communities. “I live locally and I’ve got this notion of country and people. In the last 200 years we’ve really done some damage.”

As well as converting abandoned buildings into homes for squatters, he is working with Aboriginal Housing Company CEO Mick Mundine on plans for a $40 million redevelopment of the Block. “He’s been around forever and he’s still there doing good things,” says panellist Marcelle Hoff. “He’s made a long-term commitment, whereas other people tend to drift in and out.”

But the new plans have brought him into conflict with Sydney’s “minister for everything”, Frank Sartor. James and the community want planning approval for 62 houses – the number of Aboriginal families in the Gadigal clan. Sartor is refusing to budge from 42, at the same time pushing through plans to gentrify Redfern with new apartments for 4000 people. “The fact that I was there at the beginning means it’s not the sort of thing you can ever walk away from,” says James. “There’s nothing like a good fight to keep your spirits up.”
We can thank these innovators for better buildings, more open space and diverse foreshores.

The original 12-storey building sits on its sandstone base (the famous Pyrmont “yellow block” sandstone from which so much of 19th-century Sydney was built), reflecting the rugged topography of the peninsula and making most of the local apartment buildings look like blocks of Lego.

“Having to deal head-on with developers and builders for the Point has given Angelo the sort of experience it usually takes architects another 15 or 20 years to acquire,” says panellist Stella de Vulder.

Since winning the award, Candalepas, now 40, has helped create a uniquely “Sydney” architectural language, although the influences he cites range from Danish designer Joern Utzon to Finnish architect Alvar Aalto.

He uses what he calls “primary materials” from the earth, such as stone and timber, so that his apartment buildings escape the monotonous sameness of concrete. “As Sydney becomes more urbanised and more people are living in apartments,” he says, “they need to represent more of a home to people than little boxes.”

At Pindari in Wentworth Street, Randwick, he used sandstone and timber to create 66 apartments that, according to de Vulder, “just don’t look like apartments”.

But Candalepas – who once toyed with the idea of being a composer – doesn’t limit himself to apartment buildings. His delicate “light-box” of an office suite on top of the Laiki Bank building in Castlereagh Street floods an otherwise dark space with daylight. And his own house in Glebe, nicknamed “the messy house”, brings the living areas back to the street front, as the architect likes the idea of “people on the front porch”, in touch with the street, rather than tucked away at the back.

Although we can no longer have the fine hand-carved joinery of the Victorian era, he says, “there should be a balance between the handmade and the manufactured. I’m not interested in materials that are so manufactured you can’t see the earth in them.”
Angelo Candalepas at his Point Apartments in Pymont.
Elizabeth Farrelly, author and commentator

In the small world of Sydney design and development, it’s not hard to make enemies, especially if you’re as forthright as Elizabeth Farrelly, who dishes it out every week in her column for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Angry emails – and even threats of legal action – arrive regularly.

But she has also won plenty of fans for her refreshingly honest views on design, architecture and the way we live. “Elizabeth is either loved or loathed,” says panellist Stella de Vulder, “according to who she’s piqued at the moment.”

In the 1990s, for example, when she argued against demolition of the Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf and for buildings at East Circular Quay, she took very unpopular stands. But according to de Vulder, “Elizabeth is someone with a very keen intelligence and a very deep training in architecture. Her writing has changed my mind on a number of issues, particularly in keeping the Finger Wharf.”

Farrelly defines beauty in architecture as something harmonious and “underpinned with some sense of meaning that can move people”. That, she says, is what makes the difference between architecture and mere building.

Born in New Zealand, the 50-year-old writer initially studied medicine in Dunedin, later switching to philosophy, classical studies, maths and English literature and then architecture. In 1997, she gained a PhD in architecture.

From 1982 to 1985, she practised architecture in Auckland and London but the limitations of professional practice saw her switch to criticism. She became assistant editor of the prestigious London-based *The Architectural Review* and then, from the late ’80s, a writer for the *Herald*.

As an independent alderman for Sydney City Council, she was manager of Special Projects in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics. If decision makers don’t always take her advice, they read her columns with some trepidation. She brushes aside political obfuscation and gets to the nub of the problem.

Sixty-four per cent of Australians live in cities but, says Farrelly, we have only the flimsiest idea of an urban culture – something to do, perhaps, with our great pioneer myths of the bush. Cities and their culture, on the other hand, generally get a bad press – when they get any press at all.

Not only has Farrelly written about cities and their culture, she has done it powerfully, earning the Pascall Prize for Critical Writing in 2001 and the Paris-based CICA award for international criticism in 1992.

Farrelly has no plans to stop criticising Sydney when she needs to – and will continue to offer praise when the city gets it right. But she remains concerned that development in Sydney is still “so meagre” – a fault she lays at democracy’s door, since great architecture requires “really strong, independent patronage, which democracy cannot supply”.

“Elizabeth is either loved or loathed, according to who she’s piqued at the moment.”

Panellist Stella de Vulder on Elizabeth Farrelly, left, at The Rocks.
Richard Leplastrier and Rod Simpson, architects

One hundred years from now, when Sydney counts its blessings, chief among them will be a series of waterfront sites that provide bush and open space, maritime activity, cafes and places for meeting on the foreshores at North Head, Woolwich and Cockatoo Island.

These redundant defence sites, originally slated for housing development, were preserved after a mighty public struggle. But should they just be open space or should they have other uses, too? What buildings should be preserved? And, importantly, how should these sites work for Sydney?

These were the questions faced by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, set up by the Federal Government in 2001 to bring these sealed-off areas back into public use. Many people have contributed to the series of special places now emerging, including the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust’s chairman, Kevin McCann, and deputy executive director, Nick Hollo.

But influencing all of this have been two people with a special understanding of Sydney Harbour – Rick Leplastrier and Rod Simpson. For almost 20 years, Leplastrier, 68, and Simpson, 51, have espoused a vision of Sydney as a port city, defined by topography and water.

As these sites were vacated by industry, Leplastrier and Simpson envisaged them as the centres of a series of small “port towns”, connected by ferries and offering work places, accommodation and cafes – in Leplastrier’s words, “16 or 20 diverse quay-sides up and down the harbour”.

The opportunity to realise some of their ideas came when the Federal Government vested the redundant defence sites in the Harbour Trust. Working alongside Nick Hollo, Leplastrier and Simpson began to implement their vision on the publicly owned trust sites at Middle Head, North Head, Cockatoo Island and Woolwich Dock.

Traditionally, the Sydney solution to such sites has been to provide a 20-metre setback, allowing “access” to the harbour front, backed by block after block of mediocre medium-density housing, as on the old Balmain Power Station site. As Simpson asks, “have you ever seen anyone using that ‘public’ space?”

They proposed to keep any existing buildings that could be used for boat-building, cafes, workshops, a writer’s centre, accommodation or commercial offices, bringing a diversity of life to these sites while preserving waterfront access.

So it’s thanks to them that Chowder Bay at Middle Head is now alive with people enjoying lunch in the cafe housed in an old defence barracks, watching the boat-builder at work in his waterfront shed or taking the foreshore walk.

Already Cockatoo Island has hosted concerts as well as regular tours of its industrial buildings. Woolwich Dock is again being used as a boat dock.

The architects’ vision of how these sites could be preserved and used is ensuring that scale, dramatic identity and a gritty texture – which would otherwise be lost under a blur of apartment buildings – remains a feature of Sydney Harbour.
"I don’t want to be characterised as a ‘green architect’. I want to be a good architect."

Frank Stanisic at the Presidio building in Newtown.

Frank Stanisic, director, Stanisic Associates
Frank Stanisic describes his apartment buildings as “unplugged environments”, all naturally ventilated and brimming with sunlight. But the 54-year-old also describes himself as “a green heretic”. He’s conscious of the basic need for sustainability but “I don’t want to be characterised as a ‘green architect’. I want to be a good architect.”

Fortunately for us, green can be good and Stanisic has played a significant role in the shift from crude brick box to the climate-responsive and liveable spaces Sydneysiders expect in their apartment buildings.

In 1990, he transformed the Crown Street Hospital into a series of street-edge apartments around a beautifully landscaped central garden, showing how the most unpromising urban environment could be reinvented for sophisticated urban living.

Since then, Stanisic has made something of a specialty of designing beautiful apartments on difficult sites. At Newtown, for example, he was responsible for the Presidio building, squeezed behind King Street almost on top of the railway.

His Domain apartments in Marrickville won the 2001 Premier’s Award, his Mondrian apartments (with Nick Turner) in Waterloo won the prestigious RAIA Wilkinson Award in 2003 and, in 2006, he took out the RAIA Special Jury Award for Spectrum at Green Square and Zone at Wolli Creek.

“Because of the work of people like Frank,” says Stella de Vulder, “the developers have had to raise their standards – and that benefits all of us.”