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INDESIGN Luminary

Architecture is more than just a practise, it's a vocation, for brothers and business partners, Corbett and Carey Lyon.

The Lyon Legacy

Words *Leanne Amodeo* Portrait Photography *Dianna Snape*

Corbett and Carey Lyon are synonymous with the very best in contemporary Australian architecture. As founding directors of Lyons, the brothers are responsible for some of the most outstanding projects throughout the country. And their distinctly bold, unconventional aesthetic is instantly recognisable across the education, commercial, civic and healthcare sectors. Millions of people have experienced their buildings and millions more will continue to do so, as Corbett and Carey's passion for the discipline they've dedicated their professional lives to doesn't appear to be waning anytime soon. They're genuinely excited by design and interested in creative ideas, and while it is all about the outcome, they're also immensely invested in the process.

How they got to where they are today is quite possibly down to DNA. Their father and grandfather were both architects and their mother was an interior designer, who taught her four children – Corbett and Carey, along with Cameron and Hamish – how to draw at a young age. All four brothers became architects, with Corbett graduating from the University of Melbourne and University of Pennsylvania, and Carey from the University of Melbourne and RMIT University. Each brother worked at their father and grandfather's practice (which became Perrott Lyon Mathieson in 1970), before Corbett founded Lyon + Lyon with Cameron, and Carey went on to work in other major practices.

Corbett was 41 and Carey 37 when they established Lyons in 1996, and were joined two years later by Cameron, who passed away in 2018. The 'brothers in business' narrative is one that often comes up in regard to Corbett and Carey joining forces, but it's not the be-all in a story that is more about the merging of two complementary talents, experiences and skill sets. As Corbett explains, "It just seemed like a natural thing to do together, because our interests are well matched in many ways. But I don't think we ever sat down and said, let's set up a business together because we're brothers."

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Of course, they have the benefit of a sibling bond and to see them engage with each other is to witness trust, a mutual respect and good-natured humour, all of which translates into their professional work. From a business point of view, they've tried to break the perception of Lyons as a family affair, with the introduction of shareholders and other directors, all of whom are an intrinsic part of the studio. These directors – Neil Appleton, Adrian Stanic and James Wilson – along with Corbett and Carey, genuinely operate as a team within a non-hierarchical consensus model. No idea is a bad idea and everyone is heard, from new graduates to senior staff, with open conversation and critique integral to the way things get done within the office.

The practice's success began early on and both Corbett and Carey recognise this as Lyons' first milestone. "We grew very quickly and consolidated into a large-scale practice able to compete and win high quality work through innovative design thinking," says Carey. "Clients really trusted us with their vision and now we're able to look back over decades of work and feel like we've made some sense of contribution to the community." The vast aggregation of projects that have furthered the culture of Australia is certainly another milestone, as is the growth of a team of exceptional individuals that currently numbers approximately 100.

Corbett and Carey also pioneered the workshop methodology in Australia, which has now been adopted by other practices. More recently, they introduced the concept of salutogenics into the Australian architecture industry through re-thinking the impact design has on wellbeing with their extraordinary work on the Queensland Children's Hospital.

All the while, they have championed collaboration and Carey, who was the national president of the Australian Institute of Architects in 2005, considers this a great achievement. "The thing I feel strongest about is this idea of building a creative practice that's not reliant on an individual genius architect sitting in a corner pulling out perfect ideas," he says. "We do bring a sense of the discursive into each project and by doing that you bring a lot of people into the conversation."

This collaborative approach goes beyond the practice and both Corbett and Carey welcome the opportunity to work together with other firms. RMIT New Academic Street is one example where they collaborated with four Melbourne-based architecture practices on a *tour de force* final instalment in the university's campus transformation. It reveals the generosity with which they approach everything they do, including their teaching commitments – Corbett is Visiting Professor in Design at University of Melbourne and Carey is Professor of Architecture at RMIT University.

Outside of architecture, the two brothers are ardent art patrons, with Carey collecting predominantly paintings and Corbett's collection of contemporary Australian art considered one of the largest in the country. He even designed his home, the Lyon Housemuseum, as a hybrid residence-art museum, so the collection is open to the public.

Certainly both Corbett and Carey enjoy engaging with other creative disciplines and seeing what can be drawn from them. "It's an example of the way we think about architecture as extending beyond traditional boundaries," reflects Corbett. "So we're interested in how other disciplines weave into the work we do."

Somewhat unsurprisingly, they both love music, with Carey having knowledge of the medium from the 18th century onwards and Corbett having a strong interest in the architecture of Bach, which he impressively plays on the pipe organ at home.

Ask Corbett and Carey if they would have done anything differently and both answer with a resounding no – except, perhaps establish Lyons a little earlier. They have received multiple awards and accolades and they still carry themselves modestly and remain quiet about their achievements, while always staying focused on doing the best for their clients and ensuring their team is looked after. They have pushed boundaries, thought creatively about what architecture can be, and tried hard to open the discipline up to a wider culture of ideas – and this will be their ultimate legacy.

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Page 72: Architecture runs in the blood – brothers Corbett (left) and Carey (right) Lyon.
Pages 74-75: RMIT New Academic Street, Melbourne, photos: Peter Bennetts.
Opposite and above: John Curtin School of Medical Research at the Australian National University, ACT, photos: John Gollings.