

Brilliant by design



Elvio Brianese and Peta Heffernan at Liminal Studio in West Hobart.
Picture: EDDIE SAFARIK

Peta Heffernan and Elvio Brianese often get asked why they do not move their global design firm to Sydney or Melbourne or overseas. They politely explain that they choose to stay in Tasmania because it is in their creative DNA

WORDS AMANDA DUCKER

At any given moment, you may find Peta Heffernan and Elvio Brianese poring over fitout plans for the \$96 million performing arts development in Hobart that will be known as The Hedberg. Or thinking about ways to make a 14-year-old girl feel comfortable and welcome at a community centre. Or counting the accolades for their design of Freycinet Lodge's seductive new Coastal Pavilions.

All are projects by Liminal Studio, the design firm the couple — in creative practice and life — leads from a versatile studio in West Hobart. Both are architects, but architecture is just one element of the studio's remarkably diverse output in recent years.

With a team of about a dozen creatives and office staff — 70 per cent of them women and many hailing from other lands — Liminal Studio designs everything from homes and holiday accommodation to stage sets for contemporary dance, household objects and major buildings such as the Hedberg.

The Liminal team does not conjure all this on its own, though. Much as Heffernan and Brianese are immersed in Tasmanian life, an integral part of their modus operandi is reaching out, often across the world, to engage the right partners for their multifarious projects.

"We just love exchanging with other interesting, creative people," says Heffernan. "We think 'they look interesting, let's go and work with them'. I think we've got pretty good at picking people we are going to get on with. [Our approach is] all about bottling the essence of those wonderful exchanges ... Many times we have been at a dinner or function and said to people 'we need to work together' and we all go away tick, tick, ticking."

She describes Tasmania as a creative honeypot. "We believe in this island and we think the potential of this island is wonderful. It's the ease with which you rub shoulders with different types of people here that really inspires us. We are not trying to catch up to Melbourne or Sydney. Our connection is with the rest of the world, and we also bring people from all over the world to the island for that exchange. That kind of diversity is important for our island."

Brianese says international colleagues are often curious about why they choose to work from Hobart. "We always encounter intrigue overseas," says Brianese. "People always ask why we are in Tasmania."

Part of his stock answer involves flipping a map of the world upside down so Tasmania is at the top. "The old psyche was that if you intended to work globally, you needed to have offices all

over the world. Our view was 'hang on, the only people who talk about Tasmania being an island off an island at the end of the world are people from the big island or a generation of Tasmanians with a chip on their shoulder."

"Our view was that we see ourselves as world leaders, hence that [upside down map] image."

It's not just about the creative buzz of collaboration, though, forming strategic partnerships is smart business for the tight Tassie outfit, too.

While it is the better resourced partner in many wholly local projects, bigger projects require the resources of larger firms. "We want to stay this size — it's hard to get bigger than that in Tasmania — but that doesn't mean we can't do big projects," says Heffernan.

The Hedberg is going to be a game-changer for Tasmania's creative industries — and it is a big deal, too, for Liminal Studio, which is leading the bold expansion of the Theatre Royal precinct. Before it successfully pitched to become Principal Consultant for the development in 2013, it was already "dating" a leading Singapore architecture firm in the hope they could segue into a seamless design team for the project. Partnering

TASSIEARCHITECTS



Clockwise from top: Liminal Architecture's design for The Hedberg, the \$96 million performing arts hub under way in Hobart (artist's impression); Liminal's design of the Coastal Pavilions at Freycinet Lodge on Tasmania's East Coast; and its dance set for *Dust*, recently performed in Hobart and heading to Paris.

with WOHA enabled Liminal Studio to take on the major job, managing a project on a scale it would not attempt to tackle on its own. The design teams were joined by leading specialist engineering firm Arup, which provides acoustics and theatre consultancy services.

The six-level Hedberg project now being built around Hobart's historic Theatre Royal in Campbell St is perhaps the most ambitious arts projects ever undertaken in the state. Much rests on its success, including Hobart's profile as an international city of the arts and a global leader in creative industries education.

A joint University of Tasmania and federal and state governments' development, the physical manifestation now taking shape in the CBD is a bold interpretation of old and new. And the beloved Theatre Royal, the oldest operating theatre in the country, is to remain. It will get patron facilities and backstage revamps, but that is just a small part of the epic work happening now. The new build includes art performance spaces, a custom-built home for the Conservatorium of Music and a new education and research hub for Tasmania's creative industries. A glass feature will connect the new area with the Theatre Royal, whose cramped foyer will also be heritage-restored.

While this project edges towards completion, Liminal is

working on a completely different project over in South Hobart. Its key design collaborator for a new history and interpretation centre at the Cascades Female Factory rivulet site is Oslo architecture firm Snohetta. Their concept for a design that responds to the history of the site and its repressive horrors as a women convicts' prison won an international design competition and is now being detailed for a development application. A key activation zone is the "empathetheatre", an amphitheatre designed to evoke empathy and a sense of hope, in which forums and performances will be held.

"We write a narrative for every project and that constantly gets tested as we design a project," says Brianese. "We are doing this project because we believe these Female Factory voices are important to be heard."

Two other thoughtful imprints of Liminal Studio can be found in Bridgewater and Geeveston, where it has designed two of the state's 12 Child and Family Centres. Conceived and hailed for their holistic approach to family care by combining numerous services under one roof, the centres also call for deeply empathic design responses.

"The community is very much part of the design process in these centres," says Heffernan. Each centre provides a range of

different services under one roof. In the case of Bridgewater, that includes a State Library branch and Service Tasmania shop-front as well as a range of services for infants from birth to five years and their families.

"In many ways, these buildings replace the dance hall or the church," says Brianese. The emphasis is on creating friendly spaces where people feel welcome and safe. "If you are 14 and pregnant, you don't want a sign that says 'come here if you are 14 and pregnant.' These buildings invite you in for multiple functions and people don't know why you are there."

A few weeks ago, an award-winning Liminal dance theatre set graced the Hobart stage during performances of Dance north's *Dust* over the Ten Days on the Island arts festival. The same set has just been shortlisted for the Australian Interior Design Awards – the only Tasmanian practice honoured – and will be reprised at the Theatre National de Chaillot in Paris next year.

Up on the East Coast, its design of Freycinet Lodge's coveted Coastal Pavilions has been shortlisted for the same prestigious awards, this time in the Hospitality Design section. This follows the recent announcement the *Dust* and Pavilions designs won the 2018 Architecture MasterPrize categories for Hospitality and small Architecture. "It's like the academy awards of architecture," says Elvio of the international awards.

This year, the studio is launching Liminal Objects with a coffee table that incorporates a dodder vine basket by indigenous artist Vicki West.

It's been an exciting ride for Heffernan and Brianese, who founded their firm in 2011. By then they were two years into their relationship, but the couple were friends for decades before that, both studying at the University of Tasmania.

"Looking back, that's when we knew there was a creative dynamic between us, but at the time I didn't recognise it," says Peta. "It's only later in life you realise how few people are really on the same page and you spark off each other."

Both were bubbling along separately in Hobart, having spent years elsewhere. After a long stint in Melbourne, Heffernan returned to the state in 2004 for the chance to work with her late father, prominent architect Ray Heffernan. Brianese, meanwhile, was diving his time between Australia and Italy, deepening his connection with his European heritage (with a continuing association today through regular visits and his role as Tasmania's Italian Honorary Consul).

One day, the pair realised their synergic possibilities. "We thought there has to be something more than just doing buildings," says Heffernan. "We thought let's work together and get things in motion."

They live south of Hobart in a classic 1950s house, a retro delight from which they are always looking out towards the threshold of the next creative opportunity, wherever in the world it may lie: on top of the world in Tassie or far across the seas. ●