Urban Design Directions For Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is an island continent with an essentially linear distribution of population. Approximately 90% of its people are located in 12 main urban centres spread along 30,000 km of coastline.

In a recently published book entitles "The Coast Dwellers" by Australian architect and writer Philip Drew (1994), Drew sees Australians as quintessential "verandah people" sitting on the edge of our continent. He feels that those who see Australians in the "Crocodile Dundee" image are missing the point; that nearly all of us live on the edge communing with the lifegiving sea rather than with the dead heart of the country. He puts forward evidence that seven out of ten Australians live in the narrow corridor of land on the eastern coast between the mountain range and the ocean, one in fifteen Australians lives within fifteen minutes drive of the beach, and most of the rest of the population live within one hour's drive of the water.

Australians are in fact on of the most urbanized peoples in the world. The cities are, on average, 200 years old. In other words they are quite new by world standards. They have all been planned initially as unicentric urban developments which are now surrounded by extensive suburbs containing low density residential areas resulting from the relatively unchecked growth of Australian cities during the 1970s and 80s. This has created inherently expensive cities with regard to infrastructure on the urban fringe which is heavily subsidized by those living in more established areas.

Central city urban growth has undergone fundamental changes since the min 1940s based on shifts in national and global economies, the buoyancy of urban land markets, and new technologies which have contributed to the evolution of high-rise steel, concrete, glass, and aluminum urban centres. Philip Cox (1995) makes the following comment" 'In the feverish rebuilding of our cities during the last 50 years and in particular the last 20, little has happened in terms of creating urban spaces reinforcing our cities through the kinds of architectural expression that would make them better. In fact, the reverse is true: ...where there was consciousness of streetscape, vista and space, landscape, and civic treatment, we now have a refusal to acknowledge the very principles which are the basic ingredients of cities.'

As with many cities world-wide, changes have taken place in the morphology and functions of the Australian city. Large areas of warehousing and docklands have become redundant as these activities have been taken over by aircraft and specialized shipping requiring new facilities which no longer can be accommodated within urban precincts.

These changes not only raise questions of reuse of the fine built heritage, but also offer exciting new opportunities to revitalize inner-city areas through their adaptation for recreational and residential developments. Other changes have included the development of huge suburban shopping plazas, suburban sprawl, and multicentric cities.

URBAN DESIGN - WHAT IS IT?

Good urban design involves two major activities, the stewardship of the urban fabric, in particular those parts of the urban environment on which the community places value, and the sensitive intervention in this environment with the development of new works.

It is concerned with structures, inter-relationships, contexts, spaces both internal and externa, objects both utilitarian and purely aesthetic (eg. artworks), with maintaining an historical perspective and above all with people and their relationship to these things, with their quality of life, and the upholding of standards, in particular design standards.

Urban design is important because cities are the greatest expression of our culture, they communicate our values and aspirations. They imbue our lives with meaning, a sense of place and character, and enable us to carry out our tasks and lead our lives in an environment which offers functional efficiency, social amenity, and delights the senses.

Urban design must also be responsive to changing values such as environmentally sustainable development and equity and access issues which will have a growing influence on the future development of cities.

Urban design is site specific, culture specific, and generally specific to regional influences.

While cities have may similar characteristics, there appear to be no universal rules applying to city planning and urban design. The diversity of the world's cities attests to this.

URBAN DESIGN - WHO DOES IT?

Urban design is at best a highly complex phenomenon and, while it affects everyone who lives in the urban condition, it is not generally within the realm of the ordinary citizen to influence its outcome. It is however strongly influenced by the interests and activities of developers both private sector and government, giving these groups a particular responsibility to the community they serve.

Essentially a professional team effort, urban design also involves much public participation. However in Australia, the two primary professions with a vital interest in urban design, architects and urban planners, have largely abrogated responsibility for urban design over the last couple of decades.

Architecture and architectural education have tended to focus more on individual building design, with a preoccupation with form giving and scant regard in many instances for context. Planning and planning education on the other hand, which in Australia originally grew out of architecture as a discipline, has now divorced itself entirely from these origins, almost completely forsaking interest in physical planning and the built environment and focussing on socioeconomic issues, public policy, and statutory planning.

This has left important areas of urban design decision-making to developers and to some extent to consultants in engineering and landscape planning.

As in many other countries both architects and planners in Australia are now moving to establish domain over this vital but neglected aspect of their respective education and professional concerns. The architecture profession in particular, is moving to embrace urban design more substantially in it curriculum.

This renewed interest has been encouraged by the Australian Government's 'Better Cities' program, which aims to inject $2.6 billion over five years into the improvement of Australian cities by reducing traffic and air pollution, clean up waterways, restoring historic buildings, preserving natural bushland, and providing safe, attractive parks and recreation spaces within easy access of houses and places of employment.

The program was initiated by Australia's Federal Government in 1991 as a partnership between State and Local governments to explore new approaches to managing urban development. One of the major aims of the program is to improve Australia's urban environments in keeping with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

THE PRIME MINISTER'S TASK FORCE

It is against this familiar background that in 1994 the Prime Minister of Australia, the Rt. Hon. Paul Keating, established the Prime Minister's Urban Design Task Force to review and recommend on urban design in Australia and to propose future directions for the development of Australia's major urban centres.

The establishment of the Task Force followed one year after the Royal Australian Institute of Architects had adopted a national policy on architecture and urban design in Australia prepared by the author, Hegvold (1993).

The Charter issued to the 11-person task force can summarized as follows:

'The Task Force should review the quality of urban design in Australia and make recommendations for improvement. It should particularly focus on ways in which the day-to-day working, residential, and recreational environment of most Australians might be enhanced by more thoughtful attention to urban design.

'Urban (or 'community') design should be understood to apply to all scales of and types of urban activity and to be concerned about the physical arrangement and functioning of urban activities, the physical appearance of the built environment and its relationship to the natural environment, the ways in which people experience it, and the social and economic factors which influence its quality.

'The Task Force should determine how improved design may enhance the quality of the built environment and provide examples of the way in which this might occur.

This was a very open-ended and extensive brief which the Task Force determined to interpret as focussing on the following three aims:
* to generate debate about the role of good urban design in providing livable, just, and sustainable places to live and work;
* to identify practical and cost-effective changes in industry, government, and education across Australia (as they relate to urban design);
* to suggest specific ways in which the National Government can act to encourage good urban design.

The report of the Task Force made a number of recommendations to the Prime Minister. The most important elements of these recommendations are summarized as follows; That:
1. The Prime Minister entrusts responsibility for implementing the recommendations of the Task Force to a specific portfolio Minister.
2. The management of National Government assets be used to influence the quality of urban design and encourage the use of building competitions for key sites and that Governments at all levels make much wider use of urban design and building competition as is the pattern in many other countries.
3. An existing body such as the National Capital Planning Authority, or a new agency, be available to give expert urban design advice for National Government programs.
4. An Australian prize in urban design be instituted to reward best achievements and to build a national body of knowledge in urban design.
5. Specific sites in central urban districts which are of national significance receive National Government sup-

port for the preparation of urban design plans.

6. The traditional providers of roads, services, housing, etc. be required to work together to achieve integrated urban design and development which can be measured in quality terms against such outcomes as 'proximity,' 'access,' or 'shelter' rather than measured in kilometers of roads or numbers of dwellings constructed and that regulating systems, codes, title systems, impact assessment, and flexibility of land use zones.

7. Education and research in urban design be strengthened for planners, architects, engineers, surveyors, etc. including the provision of appropriate mid-career courses on urban design and that the Australian Research Council's approach to 'Centres for Excellence' be extended to include urban design.

DISCUSSION

The Task Force report opens the way for the Prime Minister and the National Government to take decisive action to influence the quality of urban design in Australian cities through the development of appropriate policies, programs, and incentives.

The findings of the Task Force bear many similarities to the kinds of policies that other national governments have developed such as the policy promulgated by the Dutch Government entitles 'A Dutch Government Policy on Architecture' (1991) and also the approach of the French and German Governments in sponsoring competitions for significant government projects.

The essence of these policies has been the requirement for government to show leadership through the development and management of its own building stock, to establish policies and guidelines which encourage quality architecture, planning, and urban design, to inform the public and to provide informed clients through public education, to use qualified professionals to undertake the work of architectural design, urban design, planning, and landscape, and to properly fund the activities of public information, research urban design competition.

The proposal for an Australian policy on urban design generally covers the above criteria and goes a long way towards furthering the goals of good urban design. It possibly falls short on two points, the lack of identification of funding to carry through the program, and in not reinforcing the principle of using properly trained professionals in architectural and urban design projects, particularly those of a civic nature. This contrasts strongly with the Dutch policy, for example, which is very clear in its intention to use properly qualified professionals and in funding these professionals to carry out specific projects as exemplars in urban design.

Where most of these proposals fall short is in their lack of emphasis on quality research, particularly research related to social amenity. A key issue here is the relationship between public space and human rights. The notion of public as distinct from private space carries with it the right to use that space. Many cities including most Australian cities do not put enough emphasis on accessibility and useability of public space for amenity and public gatherings of all kinds.

In a recent conference paper in Perth, Michael Sorkin stressed the need for understanding the relationship between public space and human rights particularly in planning public areas which do not control human behaviour and which encourage gathering and social interaction in the public realm. He commented on trends in some societies to also design public space foe ease of surveillance (shades of a Blade Runner future?). He admitted that his was an aspect of urban planning which was not clear and not understood and yet one which was fundamental to the future development of urban spaces for general community use.

The encouraging thing about the Australian proposal is its focus on cross disciplinary connections which must be made in university courses between the professions of architecture, planning, landscape architecture, engineering, etc. It reinforces the team approach to urban design and the need for greater interdisciplinary research in order to better understand the urban condition of the future. In order to do this the activity must be fully interdisciplinary, drawing on professionals in the areas of political science, sociology, psychology, and other essential disciplines who can help to understand the changing nature of society and its needs for community interaction and appropriate public spaces to support this interaction.

The amenity, safety, and social impact issues of urban development and planning and the efficiency of cities in terms of access to facilities, transportation, and ecologically sustainable development are also crucial concerns.

Until the design of the public realm is undertaken with full understanding of the needs of the public instead of responding to the convenience of bureaucracy and power, urban centres, particularly in western cities, will risk further development of sterile urban areas unloved by the public and unfit for their intended public purposes.

Despite the reservations mentioned above, the renewed impetus in Australia to take seriously the *design* of its urban centres augurs will for Australian cities and their development into the 21st century and the stewardship of their cultural heritage.

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