

*The Centrality of Public Consciousness
to Improvements in Planning, Architecture and Design*
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When your conference organisers discussed with me the topic of my address today, they accepted my suggestion that it should be around 'the centrality of public consciousness in the improvement in planning, architecture and design'.

I proposed this for the reason that the only true arbiter of the value of architecture, design and the built environment is the community itself.

These questions can never be left solely to the professions, architectural panels or municipal planners.

Though much of what is to be built will be expressly decided by the professions, panels of the sort and by planners etc, they will be informed by the prevailing ambience of opinion and culture and by the aspirations of the community they serve.

No renowned period of architecture or indeed, cities generally regarded as attractive, ever came to pass without the desire of the respective communities to lift themselves up to something better. And architecture, providing that base requirement of shelter, has often been the modality which has given expression to these new epochs.

The Renaissance, with all that it brought forth in architecture, did not occur simply because a clutch of architects gathered to themselves a new regard for Roman and ancient Greek architectural forms. Rather, the inquiry and social flowering which occurred after the long middle ages, gave those architects the authority and the encouragement to create a new classical language in celebration of that renaissance.

In other words, it was the aspiration of those peoples who were reaching for something better.

Of course, in those days, the materials for building were either stone or brick. And because of structural limitations and the inability to scale, buildings were necessarily of human scale. A walk through Jerusalem is an instant reminder of that. The uniformity of scale and materials made the composition of the whole so much more satisfying and purposeful.

The other powerful factor in the design of cities and their central places was that all of them before the mid twentieth century, were conceived in aristocratic structures where the guardian or patron had absolute or near on absolute power to shape and enforce a planning regime.

In our democracies of today, that patronage and centrality of power does not exist.

So what does exist?

What exists is an unquenched desire for better urban spaces and higher forms of accommodation set against the backdrop of a risible disdain for current architectural expression.

People kind of know that modern technology and finances are powering quickly and beyond the commensurate development of our aesthetic ethic and sense of communal space.

Our social organisation is not keeping up with the leaps and bounds in technology and development.

More than architecture itself or what passes for planning these days, the key requirement for civility in the urban space is the high mindedness of a community wanting to confirm itself.

Before the steel frame building and fungible capital markets, it was not possible for individual developers save for very rich families and mutual funds, to build large buildings of scale, particularly for on-sale to myriad private parties.

But in this day and age, virtually any developer with an adoptable proposal, will find funding for it, while the same developer will be able to erect a concrete floor plate in any building in less than a week. This is a formula for scale undreamt of and more often than not, scale motivated by profit more than by design. Indeed, scale jauntily leapfrogging the planning processes which were formerly managed by a mandated civic authority, aided and abetted by the gradualism of yesterday's method and money.

Modernism, the architectural modality which has facilitated virtually all post war development, has perpetually celebrated its founding notion of function over form, with function increasingly genuflecting to material use as technology constantly improves the smorgasbord of building products to choose from. Half a century on, it is materials which deign form, all happening so quickly so as to give design an uncomfortable back seat in an otherwise indifferent process.

Modernism, unlike all architecture before it, or even the contemporary arts, draws its locomotion from the self satisfied and arrogant belief that all that has gone before it is irrelevant. Nothing the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Etruscans, Romans or Myans ever did can be relevant to it. Even the later plasticity of art nouveau or the geometry of deco holds no interest to it. Even great modernists like Lloyd Wright and Lutyens are held in suspicion by it.

Modern music like modern painting is often and can still be informed by the past, but not architectural modernism. It has in its miraculous kit bag, the 'cut off point', which says that fundamentally, everything before the second half of the twentieth century is foreign to it and irrelevant to it.

The oversimplified blandness and ordinariness of the products of modernism lack those architectural exclamation points which please the eye and nourish the brain. The code marks of resolution of something thoughtfully complete.

Many great facades owe their harmony to mathematics, whereas the typical modern infill building owes its stultifying understatement to graph paper.

Design does nourish the soul. Our brains are built to comprehend shape and form and are pleased by harmony. The eye sees everything. When we walk into a room, we know instantly whether we are pleased by the ambience, even though we cannot instantly articulate why this is the case.

Similarly, in the built environment, especially in the urban landscape, we know in a heartbeat whether a new construction is a net addition or subtraction from our own interpretive world.

The old cityscapes have mostly felt good for us because of their human scale, their material use, their architectural exclamation marks and their places for people. We regard them as soul-ful, not soul-less, though modernism makes a virtue of punctuating them with its own creations which it calls juxtapositioning.

Modernism gave us its masterpieces with their articulated spaces and volumes; it is not as if the models have not existed but most of the rest of us are obliged to live with the dumbed down representations of what they are and what might have been.

Modernism's great failure is not so much its replicated ordinariness, but its failure to reassess itself. As material use and form have evolved so neatly in parallel with its history, it has gathered them within its deadening ideology employing them as agents in its quest for economic, functional and aesthetic approval.

Modernism largely refuses to learn from its own mistakes, generally perpetuating its veneer thin thoughtlessness. This is now annealed in the universities, the very places which should be questioning it.

Is modernism ideologically capable of harmony? Personally, I doubt it.

Harmony is that snapshot of the eye which provides warmth to our inner selves, making us part of a more welcoming whole.

Of course, we can not wipe out everything to give modernism carte blanche to prove the point. For our built environment past gives us our link with history. It tells us who we are and of the societies we have been, the challenge is to adapt these old familiar places without deadening them down with unsympathetic juxtapositioning.

But to say that is not to lay at the feet of modernism blame for what Elizabeth Farrelly calls the 'gingerbread house'. Those shocking pastiche creations familiarly known as McMansions; Australia's answer to housing choice.

I would be surprised if five per cent of these structures were architect designed. They have become an eczema on the Australian landscape without being able to give their occupants any real sense of place or much joy at being in them.

Which brings me to the much dreaded word – planning.

Planners, these days, are the *betes noir* of the development industry. In bygone days, they were the hope of the side; the people who provided an orderly framework for the orderly development of the places in which we live.

These days, public service is deprecated. Everything is about private initiative and private reward and anything that stands in its way, however reasonably and honourably, is disparaged.

People in municipal planning departments, on their relatively low salaries, are looked down upon by the billionaires and hundred millionaires like nuisances that have to be swatted in the interests of ongoing prosperity and profit.

But in the face of the technology and the massively fungible financial markets, what else can there be if the public domain is to have rendered to it anything like that which it is entitled to have. And that is, an uplifting place in which the average citizen may play out their life as contractors in a wider social contract which is about things other than simply being fodder to the machine of uninhibited profit.

The problem I see is that the underlying social ethic has so faded as to be of no practical backstop for a planner who is prepared to say no.

Which gets me back to the point at the beginning of this talk, which is, unless the social aspiration is sufficiently virile there is no other imperative which can guarantee ongoing quality.

Throw that in with justiciable appeals to a land and environment court and the pathway to better public outcomes becomes even more compromised.

Here, I believe, is a wider role for government. Governments have the land ownership and the resources to move priorities about. Rather than simply by the approval process of municipal planning, governments as the principal land managers can set up new frameworks which meet community aspirations within which the private sector may operate. Frameworks which put a premium on design and hence, give the architects a chance to show their form.

Years ago, as Prime Minister, I tried to do this with the Better Cities Program, which was essentially about seed funding, or in fact more than seed funding, particularly in brownfields localities which were capable of regeneration.

This city, for instance, currently has the vast East Darling Harbour project on its hands. This is about the reservation of 50% of the site to the public domain where the other half is divided between high rise commercial and high quality residential.

The quality of that development is going to be decided more by the government than by the developers and the architects.

In a project like this, excellence should be uppermost and design should come at a high premium, giving the city an important net addition to the common stock of its

assets. What is true for Darling Harbour can be as true for myriad town centres and related places across the suburbs of Australia.

Planning is mostly about compliance with local environment plans and satisfying local community opinion. But it can be about something much greater if governments have the imagination to do things which are thoughtful and longer term.

This is, as always, about leadership. And what is leadership about? Always those same two qualities – imagination and courage. The capacity to imagine something bigger and better and the courage to push it through.

The Australian landscape will not be dramatically improved by the adversarial operation of the municipal planning system vis a vis the development interest. We have had that model for two hundred years and we know that it has not done us all that much good. But with an informed community and conscientious governments, it is possible to give structure and focus to important precincts which then allow the private sector to grow and enhance.

Whichever way you cut the argument, we will not make real progress until that higher aspiration seeps from the pores of the skin of the community, empowering those interested in design, while instructing those merely out for a profit, that they too must comply with a higher ideal.