


amazing! read again 29.12.2004!  
wonderful! so percipient, clear! 

1965

The Fourteenth Australian Architectural Convention, Melbourne, 1965.

## THE AUSTRALIAN CITY - PAST AND FUTURE

A paper by George Clarke, Architect and City Planner.

Tuesday, March 30, 1965.

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I propose to define as "past" everything that has happened right up to this minute, and as "future" what happens from this moment onwards. The accelerating pace of change has destroyed the usefulness of our concept of the "present" in city development.

The pace of change is such that, unless we are decimated by war, plague or famine, we should be called upon to build as much in the next 35 years as we have already in our cities, towns and villages. We in Australia are being called upon to provide for a doubling of the population by the year 2000, and as calculated by Sir Alan Westerman, a rise of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  times in our material standard of living.

Therefore, I suggest, we must re-examine current practices in city development and search for radical, new concepts and techniques. Time is not on our side.

I have long felt that in the second half of the twentieth century, we can best raise our real standard of living by improving the quality of life, particularly in our everyday urban environment. Yet our leaders continue to focus their attention merely on the quantitative rates of production.

Lewis Mumford has, of course, said it all before, many times. In the final page of his book, "The City in History", he has written:

"The (urban) innovations that beckon urgently are not in the extension and perfection of physical equipment . . . . significant improvements will come only through applying art and thought to the city's central human concerns, with a fresh dedication to the cosmic and ecological processes that enfold all being. We must restore to the city the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations that have long been neglected or suppressed. For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men."

How are Australian cities fulfilling this purpose? Let us be honest: they are not.

The quality of life in our cities and suburbs is, in many quite physical ways, degenerating as our material wealth increases.

In our larger city centres, pleasantness, cleanliness and the human scale have suffered in the streets. The skyline reflects only a simple-minded pursuit of apparent height, apparent power, and real money. The rush from one air-conditioned box to another has become, all too often, a necessary evil.

These remarks are particularly directed towards the Northern half of the Sydney City Centre, where the cream of the architectural profession has been hard at work for the past ten years.

I am aware of much that is happening or not happening in the centres of our other capital cities. But my aim today is to disturb complacency, and I can most effectively do this by concentrating your attention on one tiny section of urban Australia. While you study the following series of 17 illustrations, I would like you to reflect upon the processes of urban change; and afterwards to direct your thoughts to how we can best guide these processes in the future to raise the quality of life.

Illustration 1. Surveyor Meehan's Plan of Sydney, as it was in October, 1807.

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In these early plans of our cities, notice how enduring are the lines of paths and spaces scratched out by the first developers. They become hallowed by property rights and by habit, and are extremely difficult to alter.

Complex urban dynamics, however, cause the precise functions of the paths and spaces to be in constant evolution. This is a little understood aspect of the past and future of our cities, and I will try to illustrate a few examples of the changing functions and forms of the Sydney city core.

Here on the Western side of Sydney Cove, beside the Tank Stream, the Sydney Central Business District began. Over the next 144 years, to the opening of Wynyard Station and the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932, the Central Business District gradually moved Southwards in the direction of Central Railway Station, which was opened in 1906.

Subsequently, the C.B.D. has returned Northwards towards Sydney Cove. It has also been contracted in area by the decline since 1950 of retailing and warehousing as central city functions.

The Southern end of the city is now in a serious state of blight and decay, and provides both a challenge and an opportunity for comprehensive research, planning and design for renewal. Let us hope that this challenge will not be ignored, as it has been at the Northern end of the city.

Illustration 2. Cooke's aerial perspective of Sydney in 1874.

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This coloured engraving shows that the port, warehouse and government precincts have pushed the C.B.D. as far South as King Street and Market Street, along the line of George Street.

It also shows Sydney's first courageous and massive redevelopment project, covering the area between Hunter Street and Circular Quay. This was completed in the years following 1840. Pitt Street was extended to the new Quay front, and the Tank Stream was piped and buried.

A horse tramway between Circular Quay and Redfern was opened in 1861 along the new Pitt Street, which then began to replace George Street as the main commercial line of life.

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The inner ring of terrace house suburbs was perhaps half complete. The failed diggers, as well as the successful ones, were returning from the goldfields and the failed selectors from the bush. Both Sydney and Melbourne were poised for the spectacular booms and busts of the 'eighties and 'nineties, and for the processes of industrialisation and suburbanisation that would make and remake their central city cores.

The new Cathedral and Town Hall, together with the adjacent Markets, were now at the focus of the three main land routes to and from the suburbs - the Parramatta Road, the Pyrmont Bridge (opened in 1860) and New South Head Road. Old South Head Road fed into Liverpool Street, helping to extend the Southward movements of central place functions.

Steam trams came in 1861, and electric ones in 1893. This was the beginning of the great tramway, railway and ferry boat era. The trams and ferries radiated from Circular Quay and the railway from Redfern.

Thus began the radiating lineal form of the single centred

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Illustration 5. Late 19th century Sydney skyline from Victoria Street, King's Cross, looking down the Butler Stairs across Woolloomooloo.

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The pluralist society was on its way. The cathedrals of commerce would soon equal the old symbols in height and level out the skyline.

Illustration 6. View of Sydney Cove and the city skyline from the Harbour Bridge Pylon, 1952.

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Here is Sydney Cove, still in 1952 with its load bearing masonry warehouses, with the city core rising behind Bridge Street to heights between 80 and 100 feet.

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The new boom has begun. The post war crises have been overcome, affluence has arrived, after twenty five years of hardship.

Even as late as 1957, we could have and should have initiated an intelligent programme of urban research, planning, design and administration for the rebuilding of Sydney's city core.

We had European, British and American precedents to guide us. We had their record of success and failure to learn from. We could have done better than we in fact have. The rebuilding of the Northern half of central Sydney over the past eight years has been a shameful mess. The city has been disgracefully dehumanised.

Let us review the situation as it was before the boom got fully under way. The County Planning Scheme had indicated the future pattern of suburban growth, the future importance of the suburban District Commercial Centres and of the suburban industrial areas.

The upsurge of suburban shopping centres, and the inevitable decline of retailing in the C.B.D. was obvious to any student of urban affairs. The main lines of the future expressway system had been laid down by the D.M.R. and the inner city expressway ring was agreed by the authorities.

Within that ring, positive three dimensional planning could have been at least attempted. But those most responsible were not capable of action.

Government and business leaders were perhaps overwhelmed by the accelerating pace of change, managerial talent, city administrative talent and skilled city planners were in extraordinarily short supply. But even if the personnel had been as available as they are today, nothing would have been done. Unfortunately it seems that private energies and public attention were focussed upon the exhilarating comedies of company promotions rather than on the lasting social significance of city development.

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The N.S.W. Government called for tenders for the sale or lease of the Rocks Area, on a prospectus which was as unresearched and ambiguous as any such document could ever be. Nine highly qualified teams of planners, engineers and architects wasted 18 months in tortured secrecy from each other, trying to decipher what they were supposed to be doing. Such scarce resources of skilled manpower could have been far more usefully employed working out guideline plans for nine separate redevelopment areas. Let us hope that the competition system is never so abused again.

Meanwhile, private developers of all shapes and sizes were making other plans of all sizes and shapes. Those organisations which sponsored urban and regional research and acted on research advice, prospered. In nearly every case, these private organisations and developers knew more about city and suburban trends than did government bodies and planning authorities. Those developers who made no attempt to carry out, or act on the basis of, such research, have already gone bankrupt or have lost many millions. The history of commercial land and building development and of retailing over the past eight years is almost as simple as that.

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are still supreme. Neither the Harbour Bridge nor the electric city railway are yet open to Wynyard. Yet one authority complained in 1931 that public transport in Sydney was "over-provided".

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Office workers have largely displaced the sailors and stevedores of earlier days. The flood of pedestrians moving South contains less retail salespeople than it did in more recent times. Trams have yielded to ungainly and evil smelling diesel 'buses. The railway displaces the ferries in importance.

Yet the changes have been dehumanising and humiliating to the people of the city. The clash between North-South pedestrian movements and East West vehicle movements is pathetic to watch. The Harbourside has been blocked off by the insensitively designed railway and the carelessly cluttered ferry wharves.

Plot Ratios of 10 and over are creating walls of building along the property lines. The area contains an exaggerated excess of street and lane space, and only pockets of pedestrian space.

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This proposal was motivated by genuine concern over the de-humanising trends in city life, and also by anxiety over the Sydney City Council's lack of action in the field of urban design and renewal.

By 1960, it was obvious that the precinct was ripe for early redevelopment, yet to that time, only one major new building, the AMP, was committed in an otherwise decayed area.

A voluntary association of people formed a special committee to try to stimulate thought and action in co-ordinated renewal.

Unfortunately, the Committee's efforts were too little and too late.

In March, 1962, the Minister instructed the City Council to prepare such an overall scheme, but nothing positive has yet emerged.

Meanwhile, key points of the area have been straddled with new buildings. The proposals were based on two vital principles:-

- (a) the need for the rearrangement of an obsolete street system so as to provide a series of pedestrian plazas backed by three new 'bus terminals.
- (b) the need for the amalgamation of sites into blocks for comprehensive design and development.

The three spaces were (i) a tree filled "Place", in the French manner, in front of the otherwise unsoftened AMP building; (ii) a formal square in front of the old Customs House, and (iii) a largely enclosed commercial and entertainment Plaza at the Western end of the Quayfront..

The proposal urged the setting up of new development corporations by groups of owners pooling their separate land parcels. This sort of modification of the traditional property rights must come if our cities are to be recivilised.

It is no longer in the public interest that in areas such as this, individual development should be allowed on anything smaller than a street block.

Illustration 16. Chifley Square, Sydney, 1965.

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Notwithstanding all the failures of the last ten years, one massive redevelopment project has been implemented in Sydney. And it has

been implemented jointly by the Commonwealth, State and Local Governments. This is the area now called Chifley Square.

Here is a massive rearrangement of a traditional street pattern, carried out by the City Council, approved by the State Government. Here are two buildings by Qantas, one by the Federal Government and one by the State. Around them are half a dozen by private enterprise. The whole block of Bligh, Bent, Elizabeth and Hunter Streets has been rebuilt but for one building.

This shows that development at this scale is quite practical and can be done. It also shows that city form and urban life can be destroyed in the process. Chifley Square and the block behind it are unmitigated disasters.

However, Federal, State & Local Government have another chance in Sydney to learn from their combined mistakes. The proposals for joint Commonwealth-States Law Courts at Queen's Square, the closing of King Street and the creation of a civic square relating Greenway's St. James' Church to his Hyde Park Barracks, promise to be one of the best urban design efforts yet seen in Australia.

Illustration 17. Pearl Assurance Plaza, Hunter Street, Sydney, March 1965.

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This is one of the latest examples of best current practice in the design and massing of Australian city office towers. The Plot Ratio here is wildly excessive at around 14, but a tentative effort has been made in the creation of a little pedestrian space.

But such tentative gestures, in a dismal canyon like Hunter Street, are no longer of any significance. The level of noise, fumes and dirt are not significantly lower on that little platform than they are at the footpath.

The street system remains medieval in concept, and the building is still a small one on a tiny site.

In conclusion, I would like to leave with you, a warning:

Enthusiasm is not enough.

A full range of research, design and political skills is needed to understand and successfully guide urban change. The public is surfeited with dramatic but meaningless perspectives. Less showmanship and more dedicated hard work is called for.

Urban form and urban life can now only be as good as the research, the policies and the planning - the thought and the art - which determine them.

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Therefore, I suggest, we must re-examine current practices in city development and search for radical, new concepts and techniques.

Time is not on our side. *Location + Economic Feasibility Studies.*

→ *Westerman - Urban Research Real Estate Research*

I have long felt that in the second half of the twentieth century, we can best raise our real standard of living by improving the quality of life, particularly in our everyday urban environment. Yet our leaders continue to focus their attention merely on the quantitative rates of production.

*Social science research needed to determine quality.*

Lewis Mumford has, of course, said it all before, many times. In the final page of his book, "The City in History", he has written:

"The (urban) innovations that beckon urgently are not in the extension and perfection of physical equipment .... significant improvements will come only through applying art and thought to the city's central human concerns, ~~with a fresh dedication to the cosmic and ecological processes that enfold all being. We must restore to the city the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations that have long been neglected or suppressed~~ For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men."

How are Australian cities fulfilling this purpose? Let us be honest: they are not.

*Neither idealism nor practicality are to be found.*

The quality of life in our cities and suburbs is, in many quite physical ways, degenerating as our material wealth increases.

In our larger city centres, pleasantness, cleanliness and the human scale have suffered in the streets. The skyline reflects only a simple-minded pursuit of apparent height, apparent power, and real money. The rush from one air-conditioned box to another has become, all too often, a necessary evil.

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*£100s of millions over-invited.*

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Westerman - Here is <sup>one</sup> answer to his query on our low productivity. - Why did we get irresponsible splurge? lack of National leadership - lack of National goals & plans. - National tone set by our leaders. lack of research at National level.

My own experience as consultant has been often to examine & research what a client wants to do - to recommend & open it - then watch him pick -

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Notwithstanding all the failures of the last ten years, one massive redevelopment project has been implemented in Sydney. And it has

been implemented jointly by the Commonwealth, State and Local Governments. This is the area now called Chifley Square.

Here is a massive rearrangement of a traditional street pattern, carried out by the City Council, approved by the State Government. Here are two buildings by Qantas, one by the Federal Government and one by the State. Around them are half a dozen by private enterprise. The whole block of Bligh, Bent, Elizabeth and Hunter Streets has been rebuilt but for one building.

This shows that development at this scale is quite practical and can be done. It also shows that city form and urban life can be destroyed in the process. Chifley Square and the block behind it are unmitigated disasters.

However, Federal, State & Local Government have another chance in Sydney to learn from their combined mistakes. The proposals for joint Commonwealth-States Law Courts at Queen's Square, the closing of King Street and the creation of a civic square relating Greenway's St. James' Church to his Hyde Park Barracks, promise to be one of the best urban design efforts yet seen in Australia.

Illustration 17. Pearl Assurance Plaza, Hunter Street, Sydney, March 1965.

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This is one of the latest examples of best current practice in the design and massing of Australian city office towers. The Plot Ratio here is wildly excessive at around 14, but a tentative effort has been made in the creation of a little pedestrian space.

But such tentative gestures, in a dismal canyon like Hunter Street, are no longer of any significance. The level of noise, fumes and dirt are not significantly lower on that little platform than they are at the footpath.

The street system remains medieval in concept, and the building is still a small one on a tiny site.

In conclusion, I would like to leave with you, a warning:

Enthusiasm is not enough.

A full range of research, design and political skills is needed to understand and successfully guide urban change. The public is surfeited with dramatic but meaningless perspectives. Less show-

manship and more dedicated hard work is called for.

\* Responsibility of leadership - Stevenson

Urban form and urban life can now only be as good as the research, the policies and the planning - the thought and the art - which determine them.

\* The leader is the prime consultant  
 + should pay all sub. fees  
 - ~~no~~ no responsibility without risk.  
 Willingness to take risks needed.



Overall city plan  
city planning dept  
Philadelphia Providence.  
<sup>research</sup>  
& main lines established.

Then Areas for Comp Redev.  
Rehab.  
Comp. design  
are designated.

Then valuation of separate  
parcels.

Semi Govt Corp.