

# Living in the shadows

\*re  
George Clarke

**O**UR city centre is loved by the few and hated by the many. Civic values have disappeared, along with the spaces that symbolised them, to be replaced by the inherently selfish and crass symbols of commerce and big business.

That's what underpins the current push to release the contagion of outdoor advertising into an unsuspecting city centre by way of new street furniture. Almost overnight we see long-treasured civic spaces infected with this peculiarly 20th century disease.

It is depressing how far we have retreated from the City Council's extraordinary planning and urban design achievements of the early 1970s, which were recalled not long ago by NSW Government Architect Chris Johnson in his Leo Port Memorial Lecture.

Before 1970, the city had no plan worthy of the name. But in a single year, the combination of the lord mayor, Leo Port, fellow councillor Andrew Briger and planner George Clarke produced the ambitious, if not utopian, 1971 strategic plan which put Sydney on the planning map. Johnson properly alluded to this pioneering effort in his lecture. What he did not say was that in the city centre and its close environs there is precious little to be proud of in the achievements of State and city administrations over the 30 years since the Clarke plan.

So let's set the record straight. And where better to start than the Town Hall itself. The Town Hall steps are a great city-centre rendezvous. But from next year, when the Citibank Centre on the opposite corner has reached its full height, the sunny ambience of that popular meeting spot will have been largely destroyed by

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And when did the sun last penetrate the dark, blustery, polluted chasms of Bent Street, O'Connell Street, Bligh Street and Spring Street? What about Martin Place, surely our city centre's premier civic space? It has been a black armband job ever since its northern frontage was captured by the princes of the legal and banking world for a wall of prestigious high-rise eyries which have transformed what was once a handsome, congenial and humanly scaled precinct into a travesty of urban design with massive year-round overshadowing, constant pavement-level turbulence, and bland, undistinguished architecture.

Mid-town, the monorail snakes crudely through the ravaged sector between Market and

Liverpool streets, gratuitously offering its pervasive visual insults to friendly if not grand buildings such as the QVB, and brazenly punctuating the already cluttered pedestrian environment with its support pylons.

Pyrmont, born out of a dream, has become a nightmare. Darling Harbour, east and west, is slick, shiny, hard, and heartless. Walsh Bay, its heritage values compromised beyond belief by a State government-approved scheme, seems destined for the same fate. Woolloomooloo west has been transformed into a gated enclave for the rich, its potential as a splendid waterfront gathering place for ordinary people largely lost. And downtown, the Government Architect himself is wielding the scalpel as the Conservatorium precinct undergoes major surgery in the face of strong public opposition.

The infamous urban design debacle at East Circular Quay says it all. Even the much-vilified and neighbouring Cahill Expressway has never managed to generate the extraordinary level of public hatred and professional disapproval associated with the Toaster and its glitzy companions.

Future historians will have a field day telling the full story of the vandalism at East Circular Quay. They will uncover the undisciplined wheelings and dealings of the big end of town as attempts were made to salvage a botched investment. They will look incredulously at the cavalcade of leading architects, planners, lawyers, bankers and accountants whose self-interest seemingly blinded them to their duty of respect to the world-renowned Sydney Opera House and its precious civic precinct.

When, after all this, those historians decide to look at the

other side of the coin they will surely find much to interest them. If the private sector players could somehow be excused as innocent pawns in a nervous and turbulent property market, the same could hardly be said about those we empower to defend the public interest on our behalf — the apparatchiks in City Hall and Macquarie Street and, yes, even in Canberra. It will almost certainly be to the public sector that the blame for the whole wretched saga is eventually be sheeted home.

Investigation of the public sector attitudes of our time will show that even when there was time to act, there was not a single bureaucrat or minister of state across the entire length and breadth of the nation prepared to lead a rescue operation for East Circular Quay. So much for civic pride in this, the Lucky Country.

The debacle at East Circular Quay, though inexcusable, was probably inevitable. Simply put, the system which we have devised for controlling private development in this city has never delivered quality in the public domain. The Central Sydney Planning Committee, dominated by State government appointees and committed to the dubious cult of "fast-tracking", has no stomach for putting civic priorities before commercial ones: protecting bottom lines would seem to be more important than enhancing civic amenity.

Design controls which encourage big, high and bulky buildings are still in place despite some recent changes. A powerful corporate sector stands opposite a fragile and fragmented community sector. A grotesquely inadequate process for involving the public in design matters inspires cyni-



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It is a system driven by a socially threadbare paradigm which we see in a dominant form behind the mess at East Circular Quay and elsewhere. Such is the paradigm driving the recent Committee for Sydney report, Sydney 2020 — the City we Want, which pushes as the main priority the further development of the city as an "economic centre".

It is salutary to recall that 30 years after Leo Port's strategic plan, many of our favourite city spaces are those whose origins have little or nothing to do with official planning regimes, and a lot to do with grassroots pressure. The Rocks precinct was saved by civic and trade union action, as was old Woolloomooloo and a sizable chunk of Glebe. Paddington was saved by vigorous resident action. Demolition of the QVB was narrowly avoided when its council owner undertook a policy review in the face of growing public concern. Public pressure was largely responsible for saving Pyrmont Bridge.

And if civic action has helped to keep our city civilised, so too has the heritage movement — itself born out of a grassroots value system which has caused more than a little irritation to developers since it first surfaced in the late 1940s.

Let's not kid ourselves. At base, the design process in this city is driven by corporate, not civic values. Until the priorities are reversed, no amount of well-intentioned cosmetic improvement will stop further deterioration in the quality of our downtown public domain.

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Liverpool streets, gratuitously offering its pervasive visual insults to friendly if not grand buildings such as the QVB, and brazenly punctuating the already cluttered pedestrian environment with its support pylons.

Pymont, born out of a dream, has become a nightmare. Darling Harbour, east and west, is slick, shiny, hard, and heartless. Walsh Bay, its heritage values compromised beyond belief by a State government-approved scheme, seems destined for the same fate. Woolloomooloo west has been transformed into a gated enclave for the rich, its potential as a splendid waterfront gathering place for ordinary people largely lost. And downtown, the Government Architect himself is wielding the scalpel as the Conservatorium precinct undergoes major surgery in the face of strong public opposition.

The infamous urban design debacle at East Circular Quay says it all. Even the much-vilified and neighbouring Cahill Expressway has never managed to generate the extraordinary level of public hatred and professional disapproval associated with the Toaster and its glitzy companions.

Future historians will have a field day telling the full story of the vandalism at East Circular Quay. They will uncover the undisciplined wheelings and dealings of the big end of town as attempts were made to salvage a botched investment. They will look incredulously at the cavalcade of leading architects, planners, lawyers, bankers and accountants whose self-interest seemingly blinded them to their duty of respect to the world-renowned Sydney Opera House and its precious civic precinct.

When, after all this, those historians decide to look at the

other side of the coin they will surely find much to interest them. If the private sector players could somehow be excused as innocent pawns in a nervous and turbulent property market, the same could hardly be said about those we empower to defend the public interest on our behalf — the apparatchiks in City Hall and Macquarie Street and, yes, even in Canberra. It will almost certainly be to the public sector that the blame for the whole wretched saga is eventually be sheeted home.

Investigation of the public sector attitudes of our time will show that even when there was time to act, there was not a single bureaucrat or minister of state across the entire length and breadth of the nation prepared to lead a rescue operation for East Circular Quay. So much for civic pride in this, the Lucky Country.

The debacle at East Circular Quay, though inexcusable, was probably inevitable. Simply put, the system which we have devised for controlling private development in this city has never delivered quality in the public domain. The Central Sydney Planning Committee, dominated by State government appointees and committed to the dubious cult of "fast-tracking", has no stomach for putting civic priorities before commercial ones: protecting bottom lines would seem to be more important than enhancing civic amenity.

Design controls which encourage big, high and bulky buildings are still in place despite some recent changes. A powerful corporate sector stands opposite a fragile and fragmented community sector. A grotesquely inadequate process for involving the public in design matters inspires cyni-



cism, not confidence, in the whole system.

It is a system driven by a socially threadbare paradigm which we see in a dominant form behind the mess at East Circular Quay and elsewhere. Such is the paradigm driving the recent Committee for Sydney report, Sydney 2020 - the City we Want, which pushes as the main priority the further development of the city as an "economic centre".

It is salutary to recall that 30 years after Leo Port's strategic plan, many of our favourite city spaces are those whose origins have little or nothing to do with official planning regimes, and a lot to do with grassroots pressure. The Rocks precinct was saved by civic and trade union action, as was old Woolloomooloo and a sizable chunk of Glebe. Paddington was saved by vigorous resident action. Demolition of the QVB was narrowly avoided when its council owner undertook a policy review in the face of growing public concern. Public pressure was largely responsible for saving Pyrmont Bridge.

And if civic action has helped to keep our city civilised, so too has the heritage movement - itself born out of a grassroots value system which has caused more than a little irritation to developers since it first surfaced in the late 1940s.

Let's not kid ourselves. At base, the design process in this city is driven by corporate, not civic values. Until the priorities are reversed, no amount of well-intentioned cosmetic improvement will stop further deterioration in the quality of our downtown public domain.

Leo Port would turn in his grave.

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