

Box as 1963?
1960-63

Alternative Titles

NEW CITIES FOR AUSTRALIA
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NEW HEARTS FOR AUSTRALIA'S CITIES
NEW HEARTS FOR OUR CITIES
RENEWING OUR CITIES
REDESIGNING OUR CITY CENTRES
CITY DESIGN IN AUSTRALIA

by GEORGE CLARKE

(see also speaker's notes on CGY cards)

The first of a series of articles on urban design and city development in Australia.

Most people, I suppose, would think that Canberra is Australia's one and only major new-city project. But large pieces of the centre of Sydney have been rebuilt since 1956, and it seems that the process of upheaval and transformation could continue indefinitely. In effect, the largest new-city project in Australia is in the heart of Sydney.

Melbourne's central city rebuilding has proceeded far more slowly but may now, with a spate of railway station air-space development projects, be gaining a scale, and possibly a frenzy, to rival Sydney. Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth, and perhaps Hobart, are still to feel the full violence of basic change. They will be the new-city projects of the near future. On present indications, Perth will rise to the challenge with much more realism and imagination than the others, for reasons I will outline in another article in this series.

CANBERRA AS EXEMPLAR

Canberra is certainly new and growing fast. It now serves close to 80,000 people, less than half of whom were there in 1958. It is also, however, the result of a highly self-conscious, vigorous effort to design and develop a complete new city, integrating plans for transportation, housing, city centres and great national symbols. The planners of the National Capital Development Commission have accepted the idea that the city-region of Canberra should be designed to allow for continuous,

GC paper on possibilities of replicating Canberra as a "new city", preferably along the coast as one head in a coastal string.

indefinite growth, perhaps even beyond onemillion, or even two million inhabitants. They, therefore, do their professional but imperfectly human best to create the basis of a practical and fine environment for future generations. They are currently wrestling with the overall design and development of two city centres - the major one at Civic, and the first of the future series of sub-regional centres, which is in the new Woden district. The future of Civic, and the older areas around it, is a most difficult question at the moment, and is much discussed.

In fact, a great deal of thought, talk, argument, committee haggling, criticism and enthusiasm goes into the comprehensive research, planning, design and building of Canberra and its new city centres. But it is Australia's folly that much less thought, much less talk and much less useful criticism is given to our other much bigger new-city projects in Sydney, Melbourne and the other metropolitan cores.

REBUILDING SYDNEY

The centre of Sydney, or of Melbourne, each serves about 30 times the number of people that Canberra does. New buildings in Sydney or in Melbourne consume capital investment and running costs in even greater disproportion to Canberra. Yet that relatively small investment in Canberra is painstakingly located and designed, while in Sydney and Melbourne the chips fall largely where they may. The Sydney City Council, in particular, gives little guidance and no leadership.

New building approvals by the Sydney City Council for the heart of the city totalled £97.4 million for the period 1951-63 inclusive, and this is a very conservative valuation. It has been estimated that more than 90% of this is for new office space and that most of it is being invested in that 200 acre section of the inner city between Martin Place and Circular Quay, centred on Hunter Street. To this figure of about £100 million, we may add the Opera House and the proposed but unsettled Rocks Scheme, the costs of which are problematical, but could together add another £40 or £50 million. During 1963, 12 large new office buildings were occupied in downtown Sydney, at a total cost of £15 million. This year, the rate looks like rising to 17 buildings costing £22 million.

The City Building Surveyor, John Doran, says that for the two years 1963 and 1964, in the area between Liverpool Street and the Quay, about 30 new office blocks will be completed, conservatively estimated to cost £37 million. These buildings total 3,629,000 gross square feet of floor space, enough for about 20,000 new office workers.

The rate of rebuilding shows no obvious sign of recession, in spite of warnings of a possible over-supply of space. At present, 31 more buildings, valued at £50,647,000 are under construction. Over the next 15 months, 19 further buildings should be commenced, valued at £23 million.

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

The haphazard rebuilding of large pieces of central Sydney since 1957 represents a host of lost opportunities for city design. Hunter Street, Sydney, has been largely relined with new office blocks in the past six years. A whole block is being rebuilt, small individual site by small individual site, between Bligh, Bent and Elizabeth Street. Phillip Street has been closed and Elizabeth extended between the new Qantas and Commonwealth Centre buildings.

These two hapless structures desperately try to avoid acknowledging one another across a formless bitumen void which is to be officially named "Chifley Square". A fine fountain, to cost £30,000, is to be put into the little traffic island in "Chifley Square" in a desperate last minute attempt to make a silk purse from a sow's ear.

The new marble and glass canyon of Hunter Street is a bad imitation of medieval city development, with insurance and shipping company headquarters gaudily jostling one another, just like the proud, narrow guild houses of Antwerp, Brussels, Bruges and Ghent. But they were only one third as high, and fronted onto city squares, much wider than Hunter Street, and which didn't have to cope with motor traffic.

The unfortunate Chifley Square was conceived as a pathetic imitation of axial Baroque city planning. Neither it nor the new Hunter Street has anything but discomfort, inconvenience and pretentiousness to offer Sydney people in the second half of the twentieth century.

THE SQUARE AND THE GATE

The old way of building city centres is obsolete. The old way is to build one small office building at a time, each covering almost all of a relatively tiny lot, facing a multi-purpose channel, which tries to serve as a traffic street, pedestrian concourse and loading dock, all at the same time.

In order to provide efficiently for both pedestrians and cars, buses and trucks, and to restore some pleasure and convenience to city life, we must design and develop large pieces of a city to some co-ordinated plan and programme. One such prototype project is under construction in Sydney and another has begun in Melbourne. Both have been initiated by Mr. G.J. Dusseldorp of Lend Lease Corporation.

The "Australia Square" project in Sydney occupies 1.35 acres between George, Pitt and Bond Streets, behind buildings which front Hunter Street. Architect Harry Seidler's 560' high round tower will rise out of a series of open plazas at ground level, giving free play to pedestrians away from the hazards of motor traffic. The "Prince's Gate" is a similar, but less dramatic, scheme, to be built over the Prince's Bridge Railway Station in Melbourne.

Mr. Dusseldorp has faced many problems and obstructions in getting this new type of comprehensive development accepted. When he first bought the large Sydney site from the A.M.P. Society, he invited the remaining owners of land in the street block to co-operate with him in a comprehensive development right through to Hunter Street. They refused, and some called him 'arrogant'.

The Lord Mayor is believed to have toyed with the idea of resuming, or of threatening to resume, some or all of the remaining parcels for the twin public purposes of street widening and of comprehensive urban design. Finally, he decided that such a bending of traditional private rights could not, at that time, be publicly accepted.

THE CONGESTION RATIO

So Mr. Dusseldorp went ahead on the more restricted site, without frontage to Hunter Street, and another opportunity for city design was lost. After going through the long-winded process of getting approvals from the various authorities, which he pungently described in a short paper to the 1962 ANZAAS Congress, he is now building the scheme, backed by finance from London.

"Australia Square" has a Plot Ratio of 12 - that is, it contains 12 times as much gross floor space as there is area of site, or 715,000 square feet of floor space on 59,500 square feet of land. When complete, it could house about 3,500 office and shop employees and could attract as many more visitors each day.

Although this "congestion" ratio is lower than the figure of 15 previously allowed in Sydney, it is still one of the highest permitted in any city of the world. Even New York restricts most of the centre of Manhattan below a Plot Ratio of 10, with only relatively small areas around Wall Street and along mid town Park and Madison Avenues where a Plot Ratio of up to 15 is permitted. London, on the other hand, permits only 5 or 5.5 times as much Floor Area as Site Area.

It was protested that Sydney's Plot Ratio, applied to such a large scheme, would increase both pedestrian and vehicular congestion in the city. But it would have been quite unfair to have lowered the accepted Plot Ratio for this one comprehensive project, because the situation would have been much worse if the area had been stolidly redeveloped piecemeal. We would then have had small, separate buildings covering the whole of the site, with no opportunities for large-scale plazas, shopping malls and underground car parking and truck service.

It is reported that Lend Lease Corporation offered to construct a tunnel so that people could walk to and from Wynyard Station without crossing Hunter Street. But the Railway authorities demanded a high price from the developer for this public amenity and so, the idea was dropped.

Perhaps the congestion at ground level will get so bad that one day, the authorities will close Hunter Street or Pitt Street to motor traffic, so as to create more space for pedestrians.

CATHEDRAL OR CAVERN

The first building of the Australia Square project is now complete, facing Pitt Street. The ground floor is open through the structure. This is intended to allow free movement between Pitt Street and the future Plaza in an East-West direction.

The 20 feet high space under this building is considerably obstructed by seven huge structural columns or trestles like upturned fingers, or trees, which support the main building box above. These are presently seen to best advantage at night, when dramatically lit by well designed lighting.

The architect has said that the effect sought here was that of a "majestic space". But at this time of the year at least, the space tends to be a cold, windy cavern, with the sun excluded by the other tall buildings up and down narrow Pitt Street.

When the Plaza is opened to the back of the building, we should enjoy more interesting views through these columns, with splashes of sunlight reflected off the Plaza and the base of the tower. However, we also run the risk of having an even more efficient wind tunnel under the already built block. We should be able to judge for ourselves within two or three years, when the job should be finished.

Australia Square is the first real experiment in twentieth century urban design in this country. It is therefore important that we analyse it as thoroughly as we can, both before and after it is completed, so that we can put the experience to good use.

Mr. Seidler's design has a power and drama quite without precedent in Australia. His clients doubtless intend that the project should become one of the most prestigious business addresses in Australia, as perhaps Rockefeller Center is in New York. Such aspirations demand a grandness of scale in design. But they can also involve a sacrifice of intimacy and urbanity at ground level.

EXPOSURE OR ENCLOSURE

There are basically two techniques of urban design -- two ways of laying out a site plan of buildings and spaces.

One can focus on the building itself, as an architectural tour-de-force, setting it off in a space which surrounds and subserves it. This is what you do with a fine painting when you give it plenty of wall space to be seen against -- or with a fine jewel, when you use it as the centrepiece of a setting.

If it is a work of sculpture or architecture, it can be seen and appreciated from all sides and angles, as a three dimensional volume. Perhaps the best known example in urban design is the setting of the Baptistry, Cathedral and Tower at Pisa, three individual buildings on a wide expanse of lawn.

This happens rarely in a tightly packed city, but Mr. Seidler has here achieved it. He has focussed attention on his elegant cylinder by setting it on the "plate" of his plaza. The tower, 560' high and 135' wide, will be fully exposed.

The alternative is to focus upon the spaces between buildings, and to design these spaces as the principal elements of the scheme, using buildings to define and shape urban spaces, or the "outdoor rooms" of the city.

This is the tradition which culminated in the Piazza San Marco, in Venice. Napoleon called it "the finest drawing room in Europe". It still remains one of the most delightful places in the world to be in. This is the tradition we need to rediscover and continue -- the inter-connected network of enclosed urban spaces which are simply "good to be in", and "good to walk through".

Ultimately, people relish and remember the character and pleasantness of such networks of urban spaces in a city, far more than its architectural monuments.

This leads one to remember the old arcades of Sydney and Melbourne, and to hope that out of their gradual redevelopment we will more and better such arcades penetrating the blocks of the inner city.

Three such arcades or alleys are being redeveloped now in Sydney - Angel Place and the Prince Edward - Victoria Arcade block by the Hooker group and the Imperial Arcade by Stocks & Holdings Ltd. Their combined success or failure in design and layout will have a considerable effect on the character of Sydney's core.

Canberra

repetition of equal cells
— based on single developer
but can't handle economic
change? outlays of services

Existing cities are
overlay of structures
of different periods.

Village - Town - City - Reg City

staging
Flexibility
Growth.

crystalline
butterfly.

gradual growth
with consistent
overall character

growth then
completely
different forms

City of London - walled
Concentric spread. - outside
walls
electric train streetcar city
freeway region - satellites

plan thru events
not things.

events are stages of
accumulations of small things

Sydney breaking up +
explosion into regional
city - demands transportation
investment first?

but where is
non-organic plan?
Herbert skipped this.

Man - Environment
Interaction

Choice?
a luxury?

Social Organisation -
Environment Interaction
Govt dev vs P.E.

India
USA

Organic theory -
Herbert pattern - obstacles
microclimate - geol - topo
— economic forces of
agglomeration.

We need a theory
not of form but of
change - ^{controlling} merging
from one form to another