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**ABSTRACT**

In this paper I look at the insidious conflict between individuals and society, and question whether it is possible for newly-built places to be desirable without resorting to historical models of architecture and planning.

At a time in history when the individual has never had more freedom and power, they seem less able than ever to produce a built environment that can be universally admired. The most admired examples of well-built environments were produced by economic systems or political regimes that we would find abhorrent. Poverty and/or tyranny seem to make for good building.

Along with political and economic freedom, aesthetics have been democratised. There is no longer consensus about good design. In response to this, the safe option seems to be to give up on our own time and to borrow a cacophony of styles from other places and eras.

Architects try to show the way when they produce 'try hard' one-off grand designs, but the results often go over the head of the public. Planning measures that impose rules or guidelines on development only result in a sort of enforced mediocrity.

How then should we go about making new places in a contemporary market economy? With reference to recent texts and built exemplars, I will consider what is good design and how can it be applied to contemporary place making.

**KEYWORDS:**

Places, Aesthetics, Guidelines, Freedom, Society

## **Introduction**

Until recently things had been going very well for most of us and it appears we will avoid the worst of the world economic crisis. Australians have never had this level of affluence, or had this level of mastery over their lives and destiny. We have freedom and the economic power to enjoy that freedom. It is therefore quite frustrating that this power freedom and affluence has not produced the cities we might like to live in.

The contrary seems to be the case. The most admired built places on earth were made a long time ago by poverty or tyranny; economic or socio/political regimes that we would find abhorrent. We flock to Paris or the Greek Isles to experience those places and upon returning to our cities wonder where we went wrong. It really seems that freedom and the free market may not make for the best cities. Perhaps a little bit of well thought out dictating of standards, some unilateral decision making is good for us. Maybe limiting the selection of materials or technology available for building could improve the appearance of our cities.

## **Cities**

Cities are interesting examples of individuals giving up certain things for the benefit of group living. The first cities are seen as a hallmark of the coming of civilisation and they have been with us for millennia. There must be some serious advantages to group living. Yet we have been slowly inducted into this cult of individualism and the free market. The social animal in each of us, our herd instincts, are in conflict with the temptations of individualism.

We are in conflict when we demand lower taxes at the same time as a better health care system; we are in conflict when we want quieter safer streets but we drive around the block to buy milk; and, my favourite, when we are not prepared to take the good with the bad that the markets offer; no one ever asks 'why has my house doubled in value', but if petrol goes up by five cents every shock jock and taxi driver in the country starts sprouting conspiracy theories.

When it comes to cities I don't think we can quite bring ourselves to admit that a little less freedom and a little more well-considered planning is a good thing.

## **Buildings**

I would like to give you the architect's view of a city because cities are made up of buildings and the spaces in between them. Buildings are complex assemblies of materials, technologies, functional relationships, codes and statutes. These must be compiled within a budget and to the expectations of a client who may or may not be the user of the end building. The successful management of this process is building, but it is not architecture. Architecture goes further; it tries to make sense of all this.

The goal of architecture is to give those who experience the building a sense of unity and completeness so that the whole jumble of competing matters are infused with some coherent meaning. Architecture makes sense of building.

There are many analogies for this activity. Architecture has been described as a language and, more poetically, as frozen music.

Both of these analogies allude to the idea of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. I am particularly fond of the musical analogy because of the common elements of rhythms, patterns, and structure. And like music, although personal preferences dominate our

experience, there is some consensus about good and bad.

## **Style**

When we talk about architecture, a lot of people think about style. Style in architecture is the end result not the starting point. A style is the reward for getting a number of things right; of successfully deploying available materials and labour, with the skills and technology of the time, in a way that is popularised and repeated for a period of time.

For example:

1920s New York – where new technology, and land boom and Art Deco motifs combined to give us a distinctive collection of buildings. The pink stone was local Connecticut the decoration inspired by the art work in the recently discovered tomb of Tutankhamun.

Sunshine Coast Queensland – a new generation of architects discovering new ways to use old materials; beach shack detailing comes to the main street and we discover we don't need to sheet eaves.

Styles reflect the people and the technology that create them. They are not applied after the building is made. Architecture is not icing the cake; it is the whole cake. We can learn from historical styles but they are not commodities on the shelves of an architectural supermarket.

So when you understand a style, and respect the people who developed it, you wouldn't copy it or recreate it today. That is why when we extend buildings of another era, we don't copy them. We make additions distinct from the original so the people, culture, and technologies that made the original are clearly evident, and with the thought that in time our work might be similarly respected.

## **Beauty**

Augustine and Aristotle's descriptions of form and unity and order have given way to a plethora of ideas about beauty. Contemporary buildings with unfamiliar or no decorative detail do not engage with the viewer in the same way as pre-industrial buildings. Appreciating them is a more intellectual process.

The Anglo-Swiss author and broadcaster, Alain de Button, describes the complexity of a building as being like character traits in a person. The experience of a building is to experience this character in moments of insight and in particular combinations. It's a bit like getting to know a person. Architects get to decide the character of a building.

When we admire a building we are probably not just gauping at something superficially. At some level we are engaging with it and giving meaning to it based on our experiences. Elizabeth Farrelly (architecture writer and author) has suggested that we can sense the care and energy that went into creating a building and that great buildings glow with the élan of their creators.

That is why big is not always better; why well thought out tilt slab industrial building can be better architecture than a McMansion.

Beauty in architecture has always been more than superficial. Modernity in architecture requires that we reach a deeper understanding of a building and the process and rationale that

produced it in order to appreciate it.

### **Patrons**

I want to mention the patrons of architecture. Most discussions about architecture over looks a critical fact...it relies on its patrons. A building says as much about the client as it does about the architect.

In the last few centuries the patrons of architecture have changed from royalty and the moneyed aristocracy, through the commercial classes, and to public corporations. Further to this has been the rise of the self-employed micro-entrepreneur class. Major institutions such as banks or the post service, once patrons of architecture as owner occupiers of their premises, now rent shop fronts in shopping strips. Individuals and the free market have won that one!

Even governments struggle to deliver major buildings; many are confused about the role of governments in a market economy, and fearful of public opinion.

Architecture reflects the culture that creates it. If we don't like the architecture of our cities we have to change the culture not the architecture.

### **The character of the modern city**

If we approach the task of building cities with self-knowledge, by engaging the population, and aware of history but not constrained by it, I think we have the best chance of making places that are relevant to today AND tomorrow.

Let me look at those characteristics in detail.

#### **KNOWING**

A living city has a certain self-knowledge, self-respect.

But working as I do in the design of the built environment I am surprised when confronted by the lack of understanding, engagement, or just a little reflective thought about architecture and the design of built things up to and including cities.

It occurred to me that this lack of understanding is not a problem with other aspects of the modern world. The person in the street can tell you more about the design of an ipod or a car than they can about a house. It is important to know who we are and 'live it'.

#### **ENGAGING**

There is another trait to a living city; they are engaging.

They have variety, they are diverse and inclusive of all citizens.

Living cities are not movie sets. They are a dynamic cacophony of good and bad, fun and danger, beautiful and ugly, order and chaos

They must engage all there citizens even those on the fringe. This is how new ideas can surface and cultures develop.

#### **EVOLVING**

A healthy city is evolving, of its own time, aware of history, and forward looking.

Remember that expression; I heard it to describe Argentina, 'a country with a great future behind it.' It will never do to be so enamoured of the past as to miss the present and risk the future. A good city will have buildings and places of different eras reflecting the people and the times in which they were built. Occasionally these will rub up against each other and there

maybe a clash, or perhaps it can be done with a little harmony, but something will happen at those places. Keeping examples of history is as important as allowing new buildings to be of their time.

In order to keep buildings it is important to find appropriate uses for them. It is better to have them engaged in the contemporary life of the city than locked up as museums.

## **CONCLUSION**

A living city is Knowing Engaging Evolving

We began looking at architecture and the forces that shape our buildings and therefore our cities. Architecture is a reflection of those who create it. We should be alert and even alarmed about what architecture, or any other art is telling us, about us. But if we don't like the message, it is not good enough to ban the art. We must look deeper.

The best chance a city has of being relevant in the future is to be relevant today. Not to over customise but just make things real. Today the best places from history look like they were very up to date and relevant when they were first built.

Using the materials and technology available today, and using them as best we can to make buildings and places for our needs, is the best way of increasing the relevance of these places tomorrow.

In that way our living cities of today can thrive and survive the transition to be living cities of tomorrow.

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## **REFERENCES**

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