

NOT ANOTHER ORGANISATION!

Over the last 12 months or so, a small group of Melbourne people, with diverse backgrounds, have been meeting. Somewhat ad hoc organisational arrangements have not detracted from their enthusiasm and quiet determination.

Their common interest is improving the urban design of our cities and towns. Their common task: to provide a forum where urban design can come into it's own.

Definitions and Boundaries?

What is good urban design? What is urban design? There are numerous definitions being touted around town. The Urban Design Forum (UDF), as our group has styled itself, has not been overly concerned at narrowly defining its subject. It has been interested in exploring some of the diverse aspects and dimensions which combine to form our urban environments. Some tentative observations are a useful guide to the subject:

- urban design is primarily concerned with public spaces (the buildings which address the spaces are, of course, an important element);

- urban design, to be successful, must be based on the needs of the people who will use the spaces (aesthetic and functional factors are both important);

- urban design embraces both new environments and those inherited from earlier generations;

- urban design involves both larger scale elements and the details such as paving, signs, and all those other elements which together make up the urban experience.

Not another organisation!

From the outset, UDF has been determined not to set up yet another organisation. The somewhat disparate interests of the various design professions regularly include reference to urban design, but often the limitations are considerable and the resultant environments suffer.

The UDF aims to form a bridge between the various parties interested in urban design, to help improve both communication and design performance.

around Australia and around the World

Those who believe in the concept of universal consciousness may find an interesting case study in the wide spread action for better urban design across Australia and in a number of overseas countries.

Tertiary institutions in many Australian States are in the process of considering, or setting up, urban design courses. The Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the Royal Australian Planning Institute have been organising seminars. In South Australia an Urban Design Forum has recently been formed. Various State agencies and Local Councils have been taking initiatives to improve urban design in their areas.

A megatrend?

In England, the Urban Design Group has been increasing its influence over recent years and in Europe, a range of initiatives

has seen the rapid increase of pedestrianisation of inner city areas and other projects aimed at improving the urban environment.

In the USA, a range of organisations are addressing these issues, notably Projects for Public Spaces, based in New York, and Partners for Livable Places, based in Washington D.C.

In June this year, the third annual "Making Cities Livable" conference was held in Venice. In Florence, the International Centre for Urban Design studies has established a secretariat. Their challenging charter foreshadows conferences, research publications, and "Club of Rome" - style stiring!

It's an exciting development in world affairs and UDF aims to bring you news of what's happening in Australia and elsewhere.

Your forum - Be in it!

UDF is not unique. In other states of Australia, and overseas, various similar groups are emerging. The re-emerging and growing interest in how we build and manage our cities and towns represents a very exciting development.

Despite a shoe-string budget it is intended that Urban Design Forum (the publication) be produced about every three months.

If you have something to show or tell, send it to Urban Design Forum (Bill Chandler, UDF Convenor, C/o Loder & Bayly, 79 Power Street, Hawthorn. 3122).



WHAT'S OXFORD GOT... TO DO WITH MELBOURNE?

Wendy Morris, of the Townscape Advisory Service at the Ministry for Planning and Environment, has recently undertaken the urban design course at Oxford Polytechnic. She writes about her experience of coming back to Melbourne.

"Of course, Oxford is special, unique", people respond. Yes and no. Oxford has two main parts, the old Oxford - the university of soft, warm sandstone, lanes and quads; but it is also the city of the Cowley motor works (Morris Oxford etc.), with rows of spec-built terrace workers housing and plenty of twentieth century 'tack'.

Oxford works as a delightful living environment because of its scale, its diversity, its totality. I lived in East Oxford between the two centres, walking or cycling distance to all points of the city; my Macintosh dealer tucked away behind the Tesco's supermarket, five minutes walk away. Five minutes in the other direction to the untamed meadow where the River Cherwell meets the Thames, or west to the formal green of Angel Meadow stretching north from seventeenth century Magdalen Bridge. Numerous pubs just 'round the corner', each with its own character; the living rooms of the community - a community I found easy to penetrate. I felt safe in the streets, even late at night. Oxford is a city to use and enjoy, not just to tolerate.

Culture Shock

Returning to Melbourne from the lush green and sunshine of an English summer. I have experienced extreme culture shock. Melbourne looks awful, feels desolate, grey. Cars dominate. There seems no point to walking in the endless suburbia. I feel at war with myself and my city.

Returning to work at the MPE, in the bleak west end. From home, I take a new route - the train to Spencer Street to be herded like sheep through the cavernous pens of the Spencer Street underpass - feeling my individuality fast slipping away - to emerge under the grey austerity of the Board of Works building. I make a bee line across Spencer Square with its bland milkbars and strange bird cage wire-netting roof - stopping neither rain nor sun (though the Board building does that effectively!). I am surprised to see that the concrete poles have tree grates around them. (Funny to think we used to have difficulty even getting the authorities to use them around trees). Later, going home on a wet evening, sloshing through a layer of water in the Spencer Square bird cage, I wonder if the pole tree grates were meant to be drainage pits.

I walk everywhere, seeing the city I thought I knew, with new eyes, a new perspective, a mind-blowing experience - trying to understand, to explain. Very critical at first, and negative, I'm afraid.



▲ Foyer of the Rialto development, Collins Street, Melbourne

Lunch Time

Lunch times and clear winter skies. I set out to explore the west end for sandwiches and sunny sitting spots. At National Mutual plaza I find shops dropped in a moat, and a tiny shaft of sunlight on a planter at the Market Street edge. I perch for five minutes before the next high building completes the shading of the plaza for some time.

Next, I try the Rialto plaza - well, even before going away I knew we had accepted the need to build up to the street edge, but

with transparent covers? Still it leaves the corner with King Street weak - strange terraces, but at least a sunny seat (till the just announced development opposite puts a stop to that!) In the covered part, seats are a rarity, but the 'rain' comes with the howling wind blowing the fountain laterally; the trees in their elevated planters have no connection with earth or sky, and the crescent moon shape of the space reduces it to little more than a huge portico.

To 500 Collins Street: used to be a milkbar leading out onto the northern plaza, with

LETTER FROM Van Diemen's Land

Barry Shelton

You may wonder why a final year student's project which is neither brilliant nor bad is the subject of comment here. It is precisely because of its ordinariness - ordinary in that it shows an admirable urban design intention as well as a conceptual blind spot shared by many in the design professions. In other words it serves to sharpen our insight into a common condition.

The admirable intent was to develop a better contextual approach to design. The blind spot was the inability to recognise form and pattern in urban spaces and a pre-occupation with buildings as form, at the expense of spaces.

Context and form

On designing in context, the student was articulate in his condemnation of copying surrounding decorative elements and general building forms without understanding their roles in relation to the spaces before them. On spatial form and patterns, the project did emphasise the form of space and even mentioned the "reversible figure-ground" drawing to show either the spaces or buildings as the positive figure. It also advocated working from the macro scale of the city (its spatial structure) in order to arrive at micro forms (buildings). All of which makes sense in urban design terms.

But in spite of this thrust, the project included an example sketch design, the cues for which came from neighbouring buildings without much reference to the structure and character of the spaces before them.

The site in question is an extension to a street block between Hobart's historic Sullivan's Cove and grand Macquarie Street. The block is occupied by a series of Museum and Art Gallery buildings and a very ornate Customs House. They include colonial, Victorian, Edwardian and Modern structures but all sit up to the street line, or just behind a street wall and railing.

In this proposal, the student maintains the street edge building line and the existing building height. But the compositions for the street elevations proposed leave much to be desired.

The new Macquarie Street elevation takes its form from its next-to-one neighbour, replicating that building's horizontal centre section between two slightly projecting (outwards and upwards) ends of

three bays each. In other words, it is similarly symmetrical within itself, and with its two neighbours, makes a symmetrical whole to Macquarie Street along the street block.

This may be appropriate if facing a large space (a square) from which the whole could be appreciated. But it isn't. The spatial experience of Macquarie Street is simply a sequence of grand but varied street-edge buildings.

On the Davey Street frontage, the new elevation repeats the symmetry of the neighbouring Customs House. This frontage, however, faces onto one of Hobart's great open spaces, "the docks". And the Custom's House provides one of the nation's great open space backcloths which is celebrated appropriately on many travel agents' walls. The new building should therefore not attempt to replicate the Custom's House but allow it to stand, unique in its form, as the jewel at the Centre.

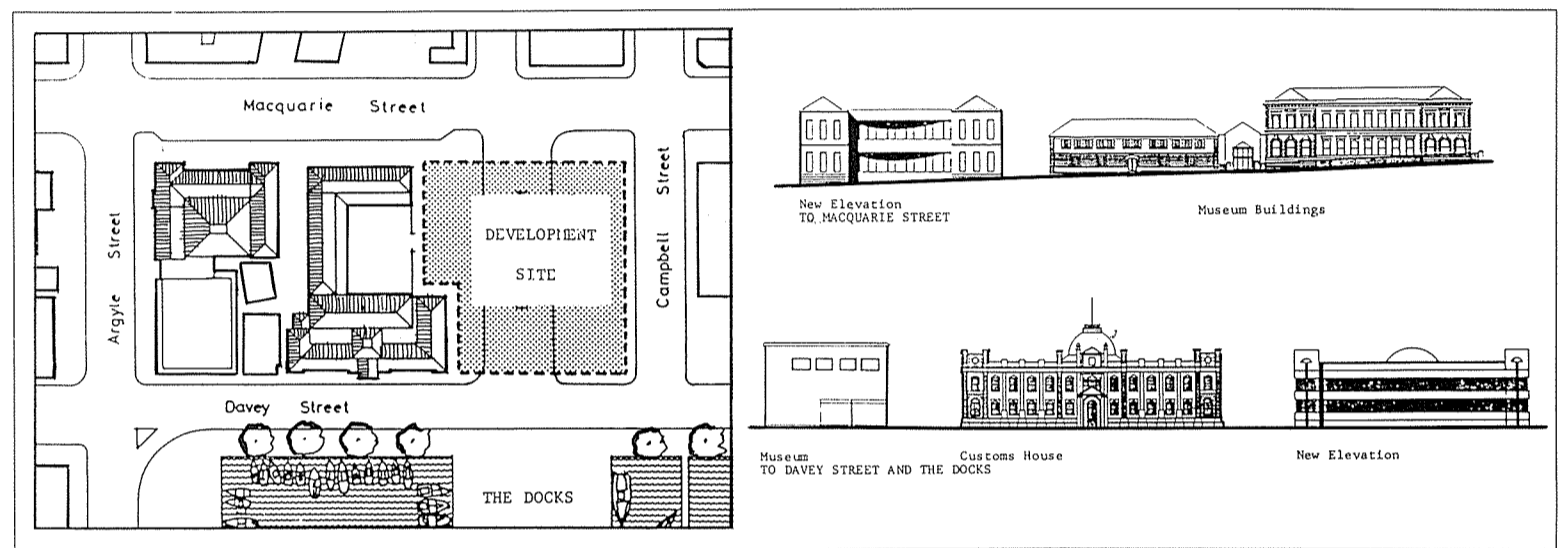
Neglect of the space

It may seem a rather innocuous

illustration to prompt a piece of public comment. But it does highlight a matter of some importance in contemporary urban design - namely the inability to set our sights on the form, and character of spaces rather than buildings. This is a legacy of the Modern era when the building was invariably the all-important object.

The illustration, although intended by its author to be otherwise, shows a design which arises from looking at buildings rather than at spaces - and from looking at the street block as the contextual object rather than at the space of the street or dock.

Barrie Shelton is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture at the Tasmanian Institute of Technology. He has written and lectured widely on Urban Design and last year (with Michael Viney) was winner of the Sullivans Cove Ideas Competition and (with Glenn Smith) was second in the Adelaide 2000 Urban Design Competition.



WHAT'S OXFORD GOT ... TO DO WITH MELBOURNE

(Cont.)

seats and tables. The milkbar is gone, now a dog leg-foyer and the plaza space fenced into two (sheep images again), one side bare and the other sprouting flimsy concrete toadstools from a soft pink floor. (Soft pink - is this the external cousin of the blue grey interiors now dominating our office environments?). I'm told the milkbar and other shops are still in 500 but I couldn't find them

I reflected alot in these first few days of my return about our failure to create good public spaces in Melbourne. An article in the Herald about building over the plazas - addressing the street - all good stuff, but I fear we may give away some of the plazas that really have the potential to work. I lament to colleagues, only to be told that Melbourne is not Europe - come down from my dreaming spires - Melbourne people don't like plazas, its not part of the culture, and so on. (Yet a quick evaluation against the ten or so basic criteria for

successful urban spaces reveals that most of ours barely meet half of these).

Why hide retail?

I reflect also on where we put our retail activity in the office sector: why is it not along the street, but almost always sunken, or elevated, or internal? Are we ashamed of messy commercialism destroying the perfection of the graph paper facades? I think of the utter boredom of my view across Collins Street from the Olderfleet - a massive wall of shadow-grey graph paper - albeit some varying grids for me to plot the progressive chart of my adaption back into the Melbourne environment. In six weeks I have not seen a human being within all that grid. (Can they see me?) Office facades don't need to look like this.

It's a challenge

Mostly I am now aware that I really understand why these and many other aspects of the city are not working very well. More than anything the course has enabled me to explain just exactly what and why our public realm is as it is. Bit by bit, I start to apply my recently acquired principles in the Melbourne context, and

am relieved to find they seem to be quite valid. So as the weeks pass, my despair, alienation and negativity slips away, with some help from yogic meditation, to reveal a world of challenge.

The good discoveries ... well, the joys of the mildness of a Melbourne winter, having discovered thermal underwear and the sheer brilliance of the wattle in the bush (yet hardly a wattle in the city centre to herald the coming of spring.)

► Human scale Streetscape in Oxford



URBAN • DESIGN

POSITIONS
V • A • C • A • N • T

The Ministry for Planning & Environment

The Ministry for Planning and Environment currently has two positions vacant for urban designers, one within the Townscape Advisory Service and the other with the Urban Design Section. In both cases the positions are for people with several years work experience, desirably related to urban design. An architectural or landscape architectural background would be an advantage.

Working in urban design within MPE offers opportunity to be involved in a wide variety of design projects, development proposal reviews, design promotion and urban improvement activities.

Further information on the positions is available from Geoff Hawkins (telephone 628 5468) or Wendy Morris (628 5161).

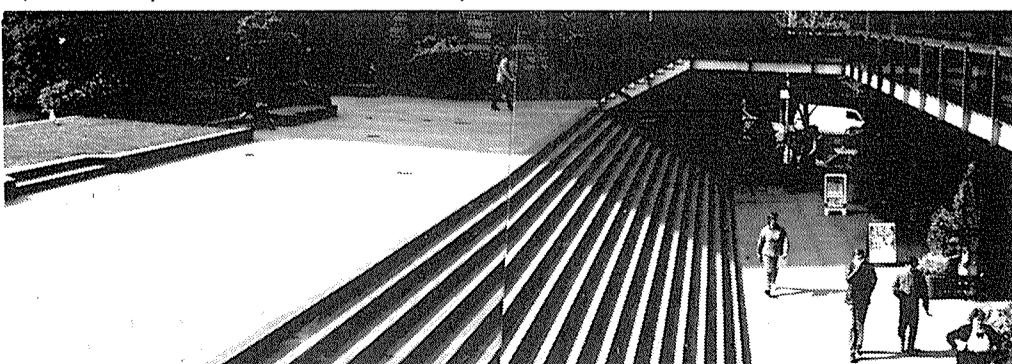
Loder & Bayly

Consultants Loder & Bayly are on the look-out for an up and coming urban designer to join their inter-disciplinary consulting practice. The person who fills this position will probably have some architectural background (and will certainly be able to draw). She or he must be able to demonstrate the experience and/or the training and the inclination to deal with urban spaces and large scale sites. She/he will understand the planning context and landscape elements of urban design.

The job would involve working in an innovative open plan practice of some 25 people, collaborating with L & B's urban designers, landscape engineers and social planners on a variety of townscape, resort development, residential and commercial projects.

For further details ring, Jan Martin on 819 1144 or write to 79 Power Street, Hawthorn.

▼ Sunken shops at the National Mutual development, Collins Street, Melbourne



GRIDS & GREENERY

The Character of Inner Melbourne

A new publication is to be released on the 29th of October by the Urban Design / Architecture Division of the City of Melbourne. The publication "Grids and Greenery - The Character of Inner Melbourne" is produced in support of the City of Melbourne Strategy Plan of 1985 and the on-going strategy plan review.

It was conceived as a result of the need to clarify and express the conceptual framework for Council policies and actions which affect the physical environment. Improvement of the physical environment has been one of the major concerns of the City over the past decade, and the promotion of this is seen as being important if the City is to ensure the retention of Melbourne's unique identity.

Relationships between elements

The structure of the document was developed in the 1985 Strategy Plan which established the basis of analysis of the physical environment as six key patterns

namely topography, waterways, streets, railways, parks and gardens, and the city centre. This structure was used to establish and illustrate important Council policies and actions.

The document seeks to support the important relationships between the various elements (for example the City Centre and its surrounding parks and gardens) and through this support reinforces the need to retain and enhance the quality of these elements.

The publication continues the City's role of providing support for private development and addresses the relationship between private development and the public, or street, spaces.

The document is available for general distribution.

For further information contact Rob Adams, Manager - Urban Design / Architecture Division, Melbourne City Council, phone 659 9800.



Rumours & Snippets

Sometimes you just can't wait for all the details. So this column will try and provide news about urban design matters, as it is happening.

Push for Joint UD Course in Melbourne

After some years of inaction and frustration, an "open letter" has been sent to both Melbourne University and RMIT in an attempt to achieve a successful course in urban design in Melbourne. The letter, signed by numerous design professionals and sent to Professor Caro (Vice Chancellor MU) and Dr. Brian Smith (Director RMIT) hopes to overcome the bureaucratic wrangles within the departments and achieve the much needed course by combining the resources of both institutions.

Meanwhile Melbourne University is proposing an "urban design focus" in the Master of Architecture and Master of Urban Planning courses, but there is considerable doubt as to whether this move can provide a satisfactory tertiary training for urban design. There is a strong concern that this small step may divert from the bigger task. At RMIT they have recently deferred making an appointment of a new Dean of the Faculty which would embrace urban

design. This has caused considerable disillusionment and disappointment to the many people involved in that process.

At Footscray Institute they are just about to appoint a new head of the Urban Studies unit. Whither urban design education in Victoria?

AC Design Board under threat?

Hot on the heels of a recent restructure, it is rumoured that the Design Board of Australia Council may, again, be under threat. The Design Board has been very active in promoting better urban design and has only recently launched a major program to support local Councils in achieving better townscape design in their urban areas. There is fear in some quarters that this program, estimated to provide nearly \$0.5 million in matching grants may be scrapped if the Design Board is combined with other AC boards. Does the Federal Government have any commitment to better urban design?

Regent Theatre/City Square

Melbourne City Council has recently called tenders for a major refurbishment and redevelopment of the Regent Theatre and City Square, in the heart of Melbourne.

After controversy and inaction over a period of 18 years, it is pleasing to see the MCC take the bull by the horns and creatively address this important area.

A successful outcome is very much needed, but does the unique and successful waterwall really have to go?

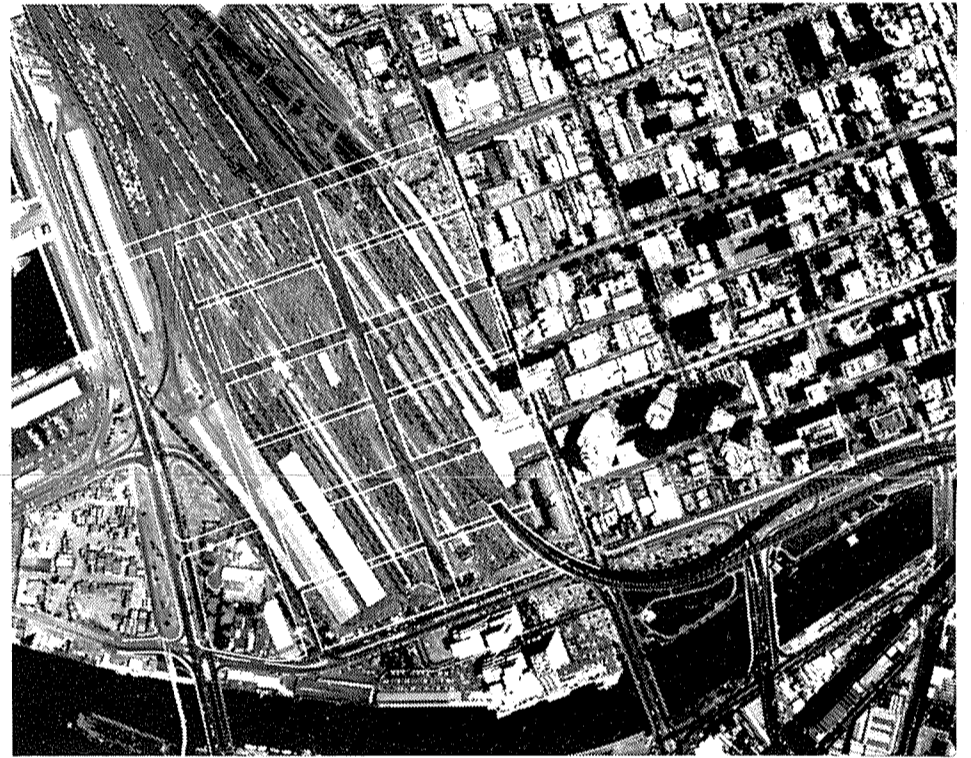
MORE GRIDS

At no cost to Government, Central Melbourne could have:

- a 20% increase in the area of the Central business District.
- An extended Underground Rail Loop.
- A new modern interstate rail/bus interchange.
- A western Bypass incorporating a freeway link to Tullamarine Airport, radically reducing the City's traffic problems.
- Better links with the western suburbs.
- New park and amenity space overlooking the Victoria Dock.

These are the conclusions of a study team headed by Baillieu Knight Frank, international real estate consultants, which put forward ideas for the vast Spencer Street Railyards which currently

▼ Extending Hoddle's grid



close off the western end of the CBD.

The plan shows the main features of the proposal, which basically consists of the extension of Robert Hoddle's 1839 City Grid westwards to Footscray Road.

A key point identified by the Study is that, because Collins, Bourke and Lonsdale Street could each be extended by two blocks, the new area would immediately become "prime" real estate, so that the proceeds of sale would more than cover the cost of the new infrastructure.

Besides Baillieu Knight Frank, Godfrey and Spowers (Architects), Cameron and Middleton (Quantity Surveyors), Neilson Associates (Planning Consultants) and Darvall McCutcheon (Solicitors) contributed to the study. Copies of the Report have been forwarded to the State Government for its consideration and Minister for Planning, Jim Kennan has already indicated some support in principal for the proposal.

Urban design issues have not been addressed in the consultants report. Neither is any reference made to the current docklands study. However, this innovative idea deserves considerable discussion. What do you think?

PROPOSAL FOR URBAN DESIGN PRACTICAL WORKSHOP IN MARCH 1988

Several educational institutions are either setting up or giving consideration to setting up urban design courses. However little opportunity exists for existing practitioners in related fields (mainly architecture, planning, landscape architecture and land development) to obtain even an introductory training in current urban design practice.

The Ministry for Planning and Environment, through the Urban Design section is exploring the idea of holding a four day practical urban design workshop/seminar next March. This workshop is likely to be run by Ivor Samuels, Principal Lecturer in Urban Design at the Joint Centre for Urban Design and Oxford Polytechnic, U.K. Ivor will be in Australia from January to March, and will be working with academic, government and private development organisations on a wide range of urban design matters.

The workshop would also involve sessions run by design practitioners and academics

in Australia. The workshop program would cover urban design principles, design and development opportunities, financial and institutional feasibility, design briefing, government activity in urban design, and practical examples.

It is intended the workshop format be developed jointly between MPE and the School of the Built Environment, at the South Australian Institute of Technology, as a similar workshop is proposed for Adelaide practitioners. As an alternative, a joint Victoria/S.A. workshop could be held at a western Victorian location (eg. Halls Gap, Portland). This has some advantage in that participants would have greater opportunity for interaction at a live-in location, as well as exchange of ideas with South Australian professionals.

You can indicate expressions of interest in the proposal and some idea of support for the joint Vic/SA, as distinct from the Victorian only, arrangement to either Wendy Morris on 628 5161 or Geoff Hawkins on 628 5468.

My first collaborative urban arts experience was many years ago, the offspring of a sixties-born idealism and the belief that there were cause and effect relationships between the quality of our environment and how we experienced it and dealt with each other.

I was then, and am now, a painter, though my preoccupation with the built/urban environment predates my paintbrush days. My first grant, after completing college was to provide me with time to research "the urban environment" and its impact on my paintings. As an artist interested in this, I am not alone. Many painters, sculptors and poets as well, are informed about the nature of the built environment. And, as many architects and urban planners are art objectliterate, so many artists are architectural space-literate. There is much common ground.

Basis for Collaboration

The content of art is drawn from the wider world and has a great deal to do with the perception of our place in it - our scale in it and its effect upon us. This of course, has a parallel with architecture and landscape architecture with, urban design and planning. What we learn from this interest has application back to the public area. This is the basis of collaboration in the urban sphere.

A conversation with landscape architect Nick Safstrom some years ago, about designed spaces and their conceptual basis, set me thinking about the philosophic notion of space and its functions in our present context and the possibility of "poetic" places, "magic" places constructed in our vertical

urbanscapes. These might be in contrast to our more conventional plazas, malls, forecourts etc. or they may be smaller adjunct spaces to these.

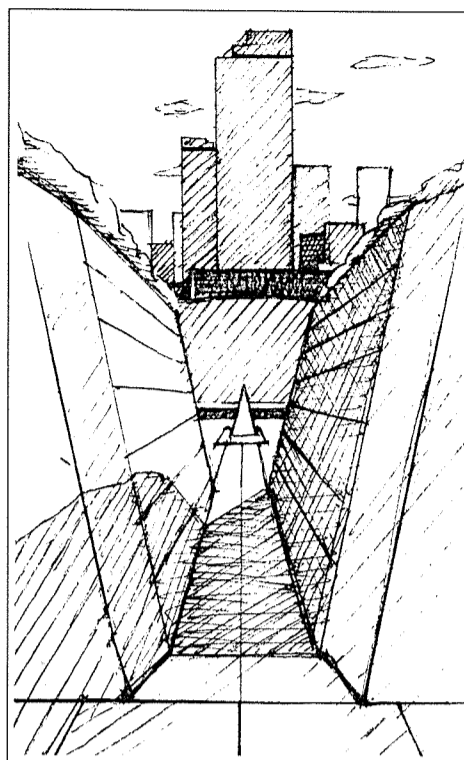
Pocket Space

At present, little real attention of this kind is given to the idea of "pockets" - small, quiet sub-spaces. Yet, virtually every building has such spaces in its interior and, increased attention is being given to streetscaping and address, to exterior adjacent planning. So too is there scope in public space. The answer is not to be found in a "sculpture, bench and bush" solution but in more considered and integrated design.

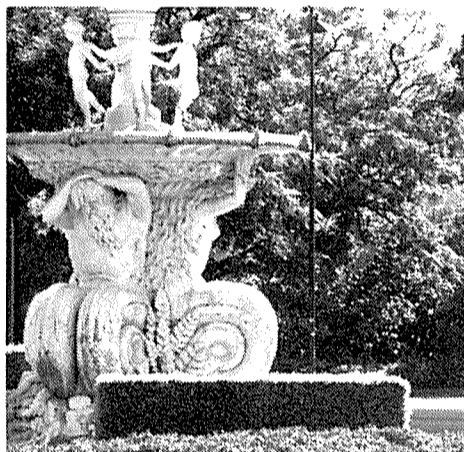
In the midst of extremely busy and pressured days, and in the midst of increasing demands on private time, there is room for a few peaceful moments in these foothills and caves of our urban alps, or in the western suburban industrial "parks" of Sydney and Melbourne.

The pace and exacting nature of urban life are well documented. It would be profitable in terms of human productivity and social interaction to re-think matters in relation to the public space we share, and re-shape design concepts and color management attitudes for the communal space of our buildings. We should look at altering our attitudes, and therefore our criteria, for shaping these spaces in our vertical urban world.

William Kelly is visual artist who has worked closely on various urban design projects and who plays a key role in the Ministry for Arts, "Arts and Public Spaces Program".



▲ Urban sketch by Kelly
▼ Hockgurtel Fountain, Carlton Gardens



Reflections Of An Urban Design Columnist

Jan Martin

The editor said keep it personal, ask some questions, and don't try to answer them. But I will respond to the first one.

Q. (me) Why is it that people are taking up urban design all of a sudden?

A. (me, alter ego) It's a badly worded question. The word may be new (rediscovered actually) but the passions are the same. People do care about their communal spaces, their public environment. Galbraith's formula; "private affluence, public squalor" does catch a strand in modern society but we don't have to like what is happening. Some of my passions are:

- making usable enjoyable human places and spaces;
- the achievement of coherence in city form, streetscape etc.,
- physical change which grows out of and is inspired by historical context, cultural resonance and local aspirations;
- good residential environments.

These were some of the motivations behind my taking on the task of compiling a monthly "urban design watch" in Victoria's RAPI Planning News.

Review of Contents

Fourteen months on, let me draw breath and see what the contents of those columns reveal. We have had, at a rough count;

- various unnamed informants and six named writers two who come from an architectural background, one from landscape, one from planning, one from journalism, and one mixed (myself). The six are split between government and private practice;
- 3 pieces on control mechanisms
- 3 pieces on philosophies, or educational approaches;
- commentaries on eight built projects (5 we liked, 2 we detested, and on 1 we went both ways;
- commentaries on some 12 proposals (3 ticks, 6 crosses, 3 each way).
- 3 approving publication reviews.

Some Questions

Looking over the back-issues to make this list the rest of my questions have emerged. Here they are, no answers this time.

1. How shall we get this greater concern for the public environment reflected in the artifacts of a society who may judge such concerns to be "un-Australian"?
2. When can new buildings be properly designed as isolated sculpture. When should they be subservient to their context, eg. the Melbourne City grid? Our current group of architects can do the first but not the second.
3. Why aren't our institutions giving us properly trained urban designers?
4. Should any one of the current candidate professions (architecture, landscape, planning, name your own) have urban design ascendancy?

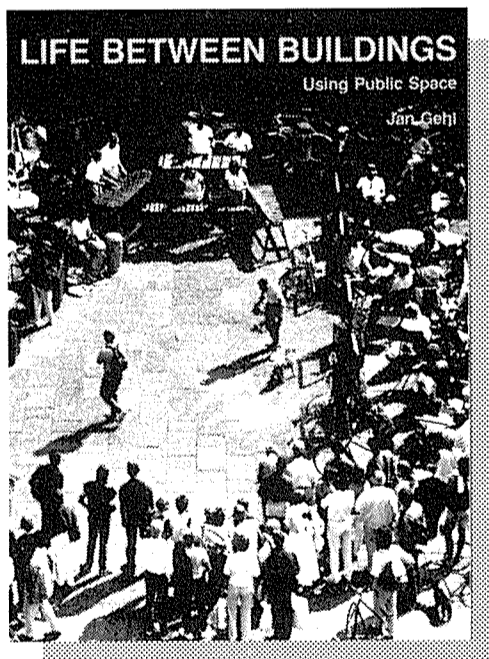
Something To Read & Look At Gordon Rushman

URBAN MOBILITY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Report of a survey carried out by the Victorian Division of A.I.U.S. Melbourne, 1986. Price \$10.00 from GPO Box 262W, Melbourne 3001. Tel. 03-419 9611.

Urban design, like any field of professional activity, needs information as its basis for action. In this study A.I.U.S. presents the result of a week's diary of movements by 175 disable people from which a quite large amount of useful information emerged. More than three quarters of respondents, for instance, still had problems with architectural barriers despite the inclusion of access provisions in building regulations. The exterior environment, not subject to regulatory control, is just as unsatisfactory where access is concerned with 79.5% of respondent reporting problems with kerbs and ramps. This bring home the need for attention to fine detail in urban design.

The illustrations are all in the form of tables. It is a useful basic reference for urban designers which goes a long way towards filling the omission of exterior design factors from Selwyn Goldsmith's *Designing for the Disabled* (RIBA Publications Ltd., London, 1986).



LIFE BETWEEN BUILDINGS - USING PUBLIC SPACE - Jan Gehl

Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1987. 202 pp. Recommended price \$49.95 paperback.

At last Jan Gehl's book, which was first published in Denmark in 1971, has appeared in English and will shortly be available in Australia. For a paperback it is expensive but it has been well worth waiting for. In this edition many of the illustrations are from his work in Australia. Urban space, as we know, is only worthwhile when it is actually used and Jan Gehl's thrust throughout the book is on how public space is used and the social interactions that occur there. It is a world apart from Ed Bacon's *Design of Cities*. The book is distinctly user friendly. Whether or not you can afford it, do read it.

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