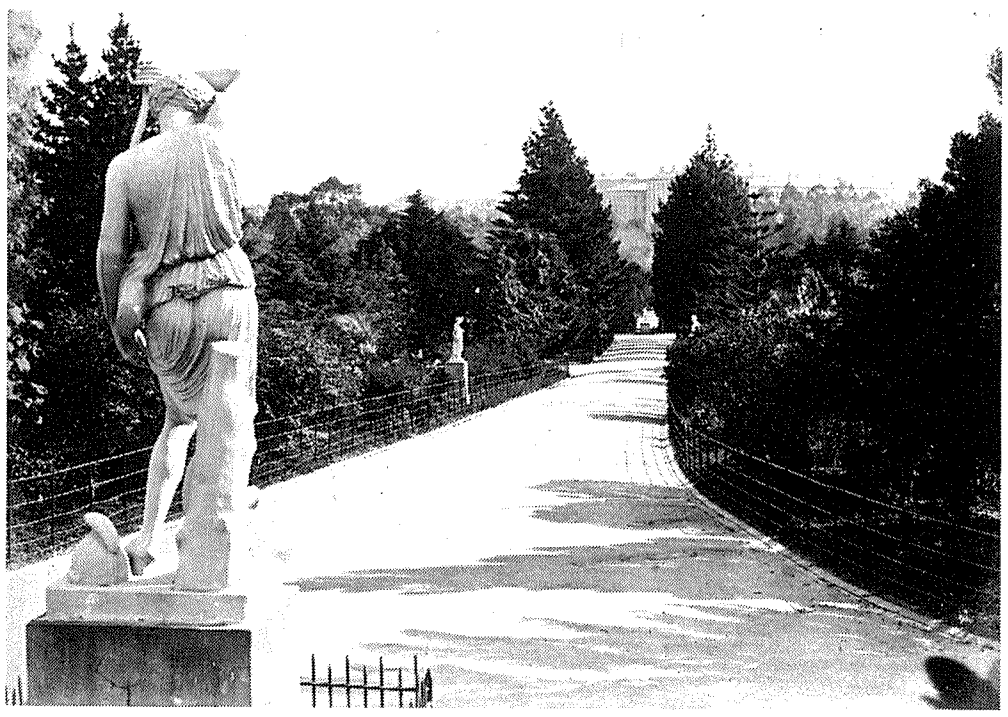
URBAN DESIGN Forum
No. 9 December 1989



Top: Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens c. 1870 -- conifers and statues like an Italian Renaissance garden.

Middle: The Fitzroy Gardens today -- the change of scene results from more than growth of the trees; the conifers have been replaced by elms, fences and ornaments removed, and pavements changed. Piecemeal alterations have made a complete change in the character of the landscape.

Below: The Eight Hours Day monument -- a minor road closure between the monument and Emily McPherson College (behind camera) has transformed a traffic island into a useful open space attached to the crowded RMIT campus. This is one of several similar opportunities identified for the Victoria and Spring Street edges of the Melbourne CAD in the "City Edges" study (MCC Urban Design, 1986).

urban design by increment

master plans in the city

Few 'urban design' projects in Melbourne make sweeping changes. New city squares and riverbank promenades are the sauce, not the meat of urban design. While large blocks of the city are quickly emptied then refilled with grandly boring office towers, most work in the public realm proceeds bit by bit with minor projects to maintain, repair and adapt the streets and other public spaces.

Most of these works seem insignificant on their own, but they can accumulate to have remarkable impacts. The Fitzroy Gardens were laid out last century and are supposedly little changed since that time, but a glance at two photographs, one from 1870 the other modern, shows how drastic the change has been. Paving, fences, statues and plantings have gradually been altered to give the Gardens a completely different character. Similar changes occur in streets, with trees, furniture, lighting, medians, closures and widened traffic lanes.

The greatest potential for improving the amenity of the city lies in coordination and direction of these minor works. The greatest potential for loss lies in their neglect. 'Master plans' can be useful to give direction to these incremental changes, in addition to identifying where major capital works are required. These may be for gardens, institutions, or other public spaces such as the streetscapes of neighbourhood areas or precincts of the city centre. Whatever the area, the plans need to be specific enough to recognise the organisation, use and character of places but general enough to allow for long term development.

In the past few years it has become increasingly common for local councils to prepare master plans for their parks and gardens. In part this has been prompted by recognition of the unguided change that does occur, combined with concern for conservation of historic places. Therefore much of this work has been within the context of conservation studies, urban character studies, and the like. However plans also result from the desire to improve things -- although most of Parkville is an urban conservation area, the recent program of median construction and tree plantings has resulted in a dramatic change in the character of its 'historic' streetscapes.

The difficulty of master plans for urban areas is to understand and work within the constraints of the existing environment. Anyone who has renovated a house knows how much simpler it is to build a new one. Urban public spaces are worse. Even a plan for street tree plantings is unexpectedly complex: underground and above-ground services are to be avoided, parking problems dealt with, soils and watering systems considered, and potential damages to pavements from roots prevented, while still providing a (not too) shady tree-lined street.

The challenge is to use the constraints and character of the existing landscape as the basis for a design.

It often seems easier to add new features or transfer a pattern from another site. In fact it is usually difficult to make an existing place fit transplanted patterns. Street trees again are an example of this problem of imposed patterns; as Sitte pointed out in his 1900 essay "Greenery within the city," planting symmetrical rows of canopy trees in city streets and expecting to get formal garden-like avenues betrays a poor appreciation of the real characteristics and problems of the situation. In old gardens, slight changes of ground level may be impossible to change without damage to trees and may therefore spoil a design idea which would be easy enough to grade into a 'new' site. 'Minor' details and subtle characteristics can ruin a design concept which isn't developed from the site.

The key aspect of a master plan is to identify the existing structure or character of the place which will provide a framework for other elements to evolve. In some places, as with the Royal Park master plan (Jones and Stafford, 1985) the structure of the plan must rely on the most basic and abstract qualities of the site, such as land form, the remnant indigenous vegetation and pastoral open spaces. In others, like the Carlton Gardens, there is a developed design structure, based on the organisation of paths, buildings and major plantings.

In the Carlton Gardens this structure has been compromised by separation of the Exhibition Buildings from the gardens and degradation of the area around the buildings. Reinstatement of this structure is therefore a major thrust of the draft master plan (MCC Urban Design, 1988). And yet changes can also make important contributions to the character of places. The 19th-C. formal structure of the Victoria Gardens, Prahran, was later deliberately combined with development of a 'park' character in the plantings; the master plan for these gardens (Whitehead, 1989) respects this combination as the basis for its proposals.

In any case, recognising and interpreting the essence of the place is essential to give the plan direction. Plans which only propose specific detailed works quickly become obsolete with completion of those works or a change in the demands which prompted them. Specific projects are often the motive for preparing a master plan, as with redevelopment of the Fawkner Park community centre or the Fitzroy Gardens kiosk. A master plan must explain how these projects fit into the general scheme of the place, but unless it provides a framework for future proposals too, it will fail to provide the long term guidance which is the real value of such plans.

This flexibility of a master plan also allows for development of coherent but rich urban environments. A master plan is not a blueprint. It pushes in the right direction but does not dictate all details and so allows for contributions by many people over time. Architects who wish to dictate every detail, and whose designs are so refined (sterile) that any change or addition is disruptive, ignore the accumulated richness of the most admired places in Europe and the diverse roles of public places in cities.

To understand quite detailed problems and characteristics of places, yet from this detail to be able to extract or abstract the place's essence, is the basis of a master plan which can give a viable long term framework for development. Such a plan can be a tool for achieving significant improvements in the urban environment. And it does not require visionary abilities, special powers to over-ride the system, or extraordinary wealth to build grand new schemes -- only the sensitivity to work with existing places, and a good deal of patience.

Ron Jones
senior landscape architect
Urban Design/Architecture Div. MCC

LONDON DOCKLANDS SCHEME:

AN 'IRREDEEMABLE FAILURE'

By Christopher Warman, Property Correspondent.

Reprinted from "The Times" (UK) Monday October 30 1989.

The world's biggest urban property development at Docklands, east London, has turned into an irredeemable failure, according to a top British planner.

Mr Chris Shepley, president of the Royal Town Planning Institute, has told the Docklands Forum Transport Conference that everything has happened in the wrong order, with land use and transport not being co-ordinated. " We shall desperately regret this neglect of strategic planning, " he said.

In an interview with The Times , Mr Shepley said that the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) now realised the mistakes of the past, but "the damage has already been done, particularly to the Isle of Dogs". His criticism comes at a time when the transport problems of Docklands are under increasing criticism.

Mr Shepley, city planning officer for Plymouth, said that the Government is responsible for what happened. "The LDDC did what it was supposed to do, to get the maximum happening in the smallest amount of time. It succeeded in that impressively, but failed to take into account the impact on local people and on transportation."

Mr Sheply said there had been a failure to understand the scale of the task facing the developers, and a serious lack of preparation. The Docklands developers, like their 1960's counterparts were too dismissive of opposition.

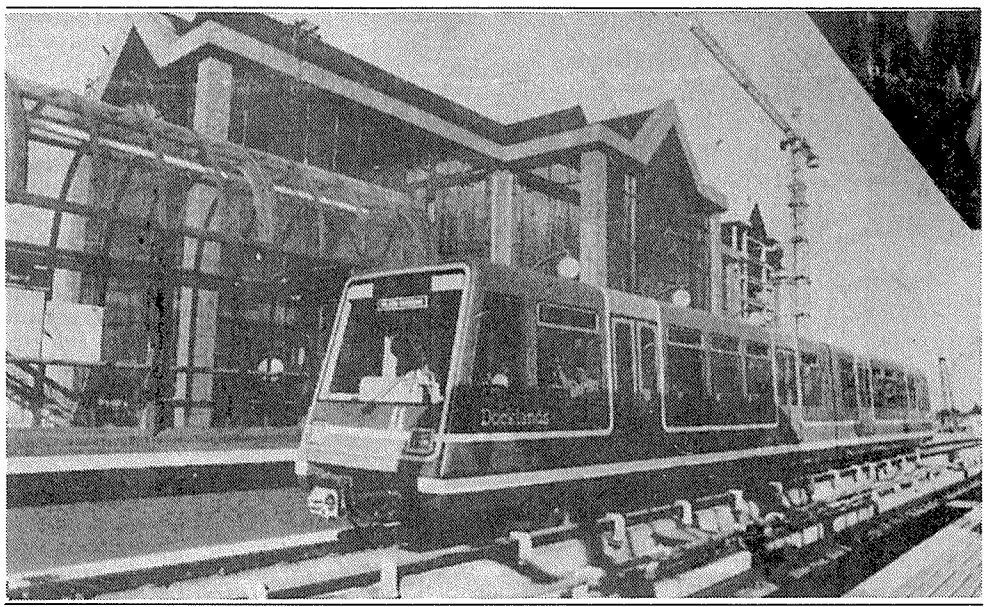
"There were those in the 1960's who opposed urban motorways and tower blocks. They were portrayed as cranks; as standing in the way of progress. There were definite parallels with the LDDC in these attitudes and many of those in the 1980's who had questioned the the Docklands explosion had also been portrayed as backward-looking."

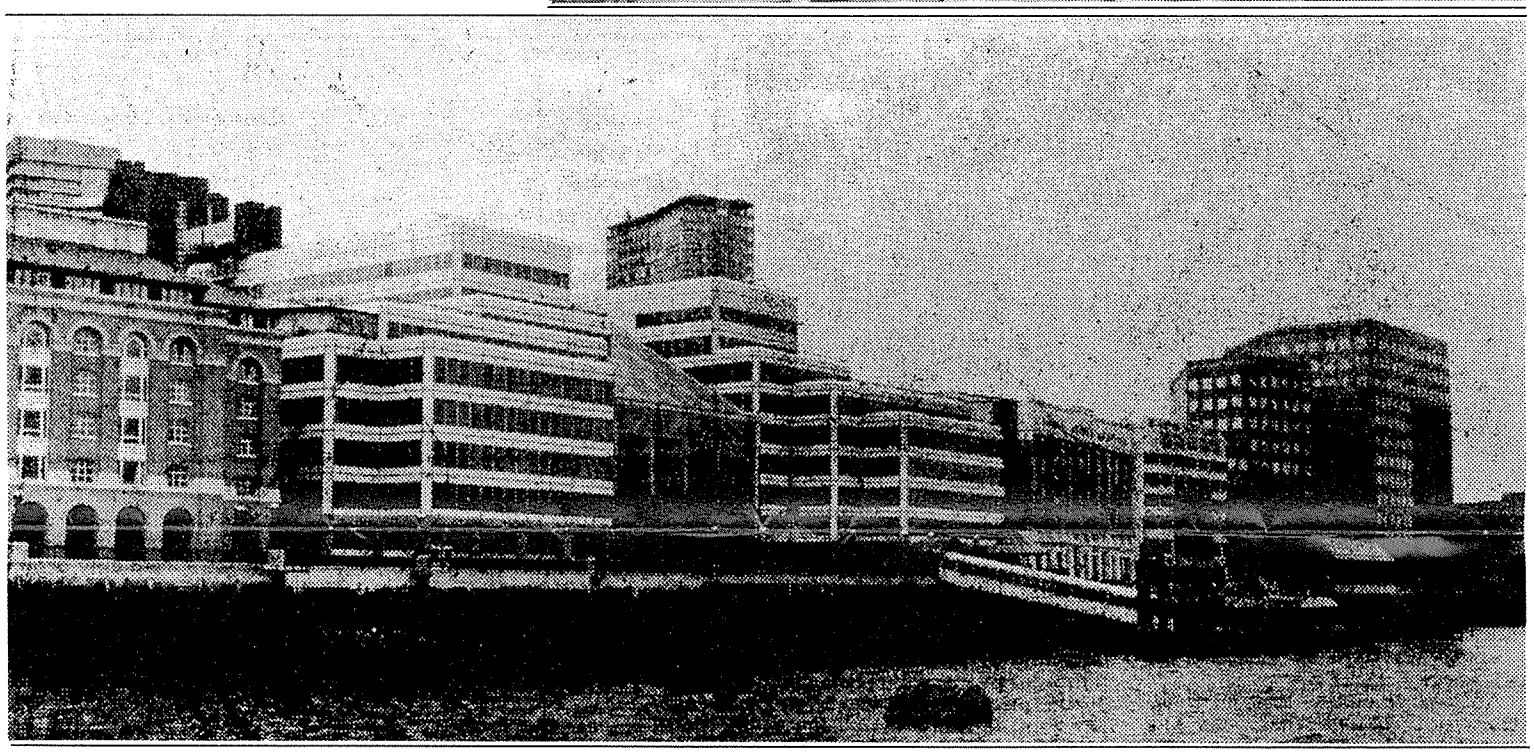
He emphasised co-ordination in land use and transport, a fundamental principle of planning since the 1960s. If a large centre of employment was created, it needed a good road and public transport links. They should be built first, or contemporaneously, not as an afterthought.
Also, employment should, so far as possible, be created to serve people living near by, rather than bringing employees a great distance. "Pretty well all these rules have been broken in Docklands," Mr Shepley said.

He believed, however, that the LDDC realised this and was now concerned to put right the mistakes that had been made, "not just in transport, but in housing, community facilities, and urban design".

It was a "sad story", he said. "But it is important that we learn the lessons from these mistakes. The LDDC is doing so in the redevelopment of the Royal Docks, making sure that the infrastructure comes first and talking to people.

▼ Docklands Light Railway, tagged the toy town line.





▲ A jumble of modern buildings

Letters :

VALE - THE CITY SQUARE

"The Livable City" (UDF September 1989), a perceptive and interesting report by Jan Martin, has inspired me to write and try to relate the spirit of the attractive Venetian "campo" (open air community meeting place) to the present Melbourne City Council's retrogressive proposal and unvisionary concepts of Melbourne's City Square, involving total demolition of the present Square and its natural features etc, particularly the elevated background Walkway. Providing the popular "short-cut" from Collins Street to Flinders Lane .

Why this horrific demolition of what was effectively designed to be, and has been for more than ten years, the vibrant heart of the City, freely available as a meeting place for citizens and visitors, young and old, a place for passive recreation, for rest and relaxation, perhaps for sympathetic viewing of Swanston Street's passing parade of humanity. It is for the redevelopment of the city square as a commercial venture (in which nothing is free) comprising a complex of underground mini-cinemas below a four storey shopping complex adjoining the old Regent Theatre, occupying a third of the are of the present Square and encroaching on the present impressive vista of the imposing triple-spired St. Paul's Cathedral and Chapter House.

However well designed may be the facades of this new commercial building on The Square, it will be an intrusion on an already inadequate area for the fullest use expected of a City Square, reducing the open air area physically and visually to the scale and proportions of a cricket pitch, an unworthy civic feature of Victoria's capital and the acknowledged financial centre of Australia.

It is reasonable to think would any other important city in the world with a central City Square, Plaza or Piazza, bounded by its town Hall and an impressive cathedral, allow its city fathers/mothers to proceed with such an act of civic vandalism?

In his official approval of the Melbourne City Council's proposal, in particular the location of the underground mini-cinemas and a new building on the square, the Minister for Planning and Environment, Mr Roper, has ignored the opposition to these two items as expressed in the majority decision of his appointed panel of experts (a civil engineer Chairman and two architect members) and in the case of the new building on the square the unanimous opposition of both the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Victoria Chapter) and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects; also a petition of protest against the demolition of the water wall and trees with the signatures of more than 2000 citizens of Melbourne and Victoria.

E. Keith Mackay
OBE, LFRAIA, FRIBA
Past president RAIA, RAPS, T& CPA Vic.

ENVIRONMENT DESIGNERS IN CHARGE OF SCHOOLS

(Previously known as Architects in Schools)

Architects in Schools (AIS) was one of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Vic Chapter) education programmes, funded by the ministry of education since 1979.

From 1990 the program will be known by the new name and run in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (Vic Chapter), the Institution of Engineers Australia (Vic Div.) and the Royal Australian Planning Institute (Vic Division).

The aims and objectives of the programme are to bring about an awareness and understanding of the built environment, by providing a resource for students and teachers to use the environment as a vehicle for understanding and teaching traditional academic subjects within the curriculum. To encourage among students positive attitudes, worthwhile self image, confidence, initiative and a sense of belonging to a school. To help students and teachers analyse their surroundings, showing them that built structures result from a series of decisions taken by a range of people, and thus illustrating how they can be a part of the process, and where possible, to involve the students and teachers in projects with a tangible end product.

People interested in becoming a "Resident" in 1990 (no later than Feb. 1st) for this exciting programme, should contact:

Desley Lamb
Victorian Co-ordinator,
Environment Designers in Schools,
8 Robinson Road,
Hawthorn, 3122.
Tel. (03) 818 1775

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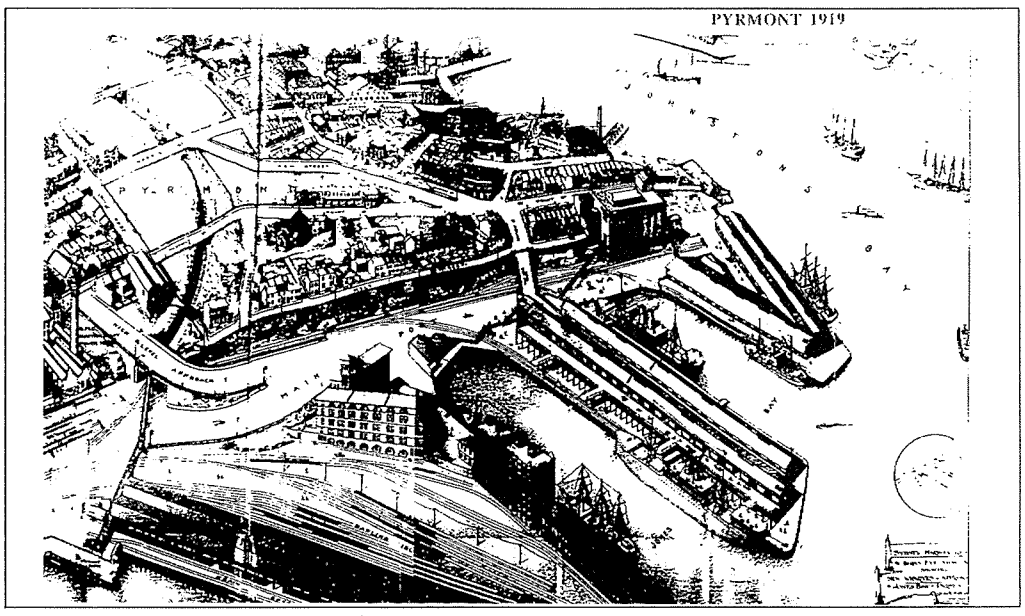
SYDNEY'S

URBAN DESIGN FORUM - REPORT



The Faculty of Architecture at Sydney University staged an "URBAN DESIGN FORUM" from 31st July through to 16th September, with a galaxy of overseas guests including professors Peter Rowe (Harvard), Ann Whiston Spirn (Penn), Henry Sanoff (North Carolina), John De Monchaux (MIT), and the Lend Lease Visiting Professor of Urban Design, Professor Fritz Stuber.

The forum commenced with a four day course on Urban Design essentially for non designers. Registrants were treated to a feast of lectures from overseas lecturers as well as local practitioners such as Ted Mack, Daryl Conybeare and David Chesterman.

Practitioners and students participated in a two day workshop which looked at the Future Prospects of the Ultimo - Pyrmont area. The centre-piece of this workshop was an exhibition of work completed by urban design students in Sydney's new master's course.

During the evenings there was a series of public lectures - five all told, plus the Great Urban Design Debate presided over by John De Monchaux.

While it is somewhat invidious to report on one speaker, since all delivered thought-provoking work, Peter Rowe who had not been back to Australia in 17 years seemed to stimulate most. He treated us to a splendidly illustrated overview of modern spatial developments in US cities, especially those which challenged traditional practices and concepts. He convincingly sketched in their geographic evolution since the 1920's and showed how their development had conformed to cultural mores and in so doing had evolved some new building typologies.

This analysis enabled him to suggest some design strategies including the continuous use and rehabilitation of buildings; seeking fine-grained mixed-use of buildings and spaces; multiple use of space; making connections between buildings to provide additions to the public realm; the creation of new building types; and the re-examination of the interface between the public and private realms. This was real mind stretching stuff, and his selection of images to support his ideas bordered on the poetic.

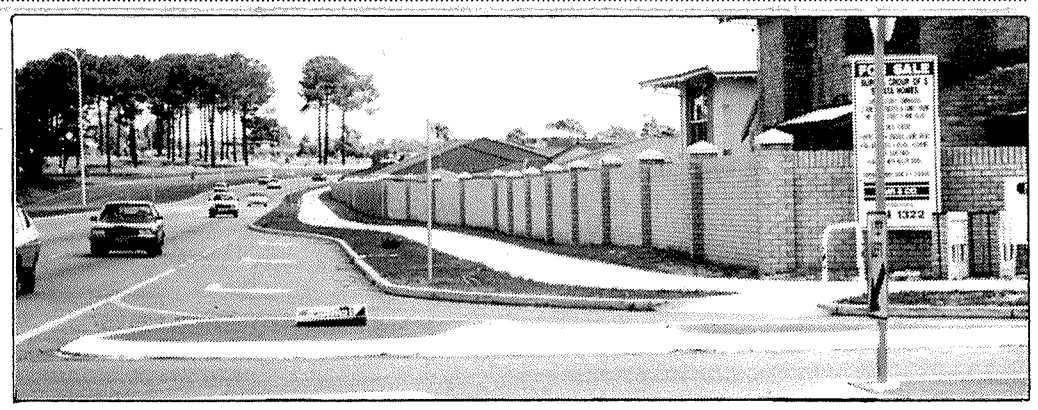
The Great Urban Design Debate, held in the University's Maclaurin Hall, turned out more than 300 people, to listen to two teams of six a side, debate the theme of De Monchaux's paper - "Cities should be messy". Sydney's Lord Mayor, Jeremy Bingham led the Government side, while local state MP Clover Moore led the Opposition. While there was some evidence that debating skills needed some honing, the opportunity to watch public figures making a case for or against urban design precepts was interesting in the extreme.

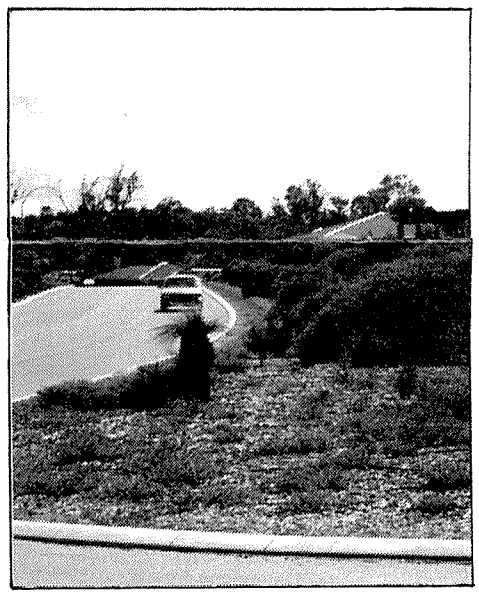
All told, the Forum seems to have been more than successful. If I am left with an impression, it is this. Despite the tremendous advance in communication technology which enable ideas to be broadcast quickly around the world, it is still the "real-time hard-copy" presence of reflective practitioners and academics who can reinterpret convincingly the real world that has the most impact. In our key Australian cities which are both geographically and socially dispersed and dis-aggregated we need to focus on urban spaces which facilitate and maximise face to face human contact.

By Jim Conner

INTEGRATION OF ROAD DESIGN IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

An edited paper presented at AIUS seminar in Perth on "Integrating Land Use and Regional Transport".





The building of cities has been one of mankind's greatest achievements, compareable with the invention of language. As an artifact, and at its best, the city can be seen as the cumulative result of man's creative genius and as the crucible of civilisation itself.

The form of any city is the result of a multiplicity of decisions made by a changing interplay of interests. At times these influences have combined to produce cities of noble form - Florence, Rome, Paris, for example - to which we can still aspire. Even in the modern city, nothing is built without it having been consciously designed for better or for worse - the roads, streets, bridges, buildings, structures and spaces which together make up the three dimensional fabric of the city. We can still aspire to integrate these elements within a grand vision for our cities; and it is not beyond our ingenuity to achieve it. But it must be a vision based on underlying human values, unity and scale.

Beyond Buildings

As Bacon points out in "The Design of Cities", we must begin to think beyond the design of individual buildings, structures and circulation systems. In his phrase, we must aim for integration at the level of "simultaneous scales of movement". In the modern city, design solutions must be considered in relation to:

a) the vast scale and wide spread of setlement;
b) the speed and volume of vehicular movement; and
c) the fragmentation of administration - both vertically, as between different political levels, and horizontally, as between different functional areas.

In contrast to the different human or pedestrian scale of older cities, todays city spaces tend to be dictated by the needs of the motor car. Our terminology reflects this; for example we use words such as "Freeway", "Arterial", Sub-Arterial", "Distributor", "Collector" to describe our roads; while words such as 'Boulevard" or "Avenue" have been condemed to history. Why should this be so?

Even more importantly, we must have a clear vision, in a three dimensional and operational sense, of how we can re-integrate modern movement systems and the spaces they demand, with the human scale and values of the past. The aim of city design must be to achieve a harmonious environment, infusing the spaces through which each individual moves as he passes through the system - from home, to work place, to recreation - by whatever mode of travel and at whatever speed from pedestrian to freeway.

As important as any other consideration, is the appearance, from the movement system, of what occurs along either side of it (and visa versa) and the interface between the movement system and the land uses it passes and/or gives frontage to. Unfortunately, the tendancy today is to divorce the road system from the land alongside, at all levels of scale. While it may be appropriate for high-speed intra-urban roads be to seperated visually and functionally from surrounding land uses, it is not necessarily so for lower speed/ shorter distance roads.

Navigation and Safety

The practice of seperation can now be found in new residential subdivision designs accross the country, down to the level of "local distributor" streets, and to an absurd degree. Entire suburbs have become impossible to navigate, while those streets with no housing access (possibly planted out and beautifully landscaped) become inhuman in scale, seperated by walls and fences, and encourage higher traffic speeds. Is the result any "safer" than what went before? It is certainly less "human" in scale and appearance - and even in logical movement.
n a similar vein, roads which have in the past attracted commercial uses - a quite natural occurance - are being designated as "ribbon development", modern planning tends towards consolidating these uses in "modes" and limiting traffic access. While this approach, in some cases may be appropriate, as a whole we have ignored an alternative and more human philosphy espoused for example by Buchanan more than twenty years ago (South East Hampshire Study etc.). He maintained that while some major roads must be dealt with as through routes, other parallel routes could be legitimately regarded as slower, higher volume systems offering plenty of direct frontage access.

Obviously each case, in any given urban system must be dealt with on its merits. The main point, however, is that urban design, at a regional scale, can and should be dealing with what might be termed "urban environmental quality" or "human scale" issues - and not be left to fill in the gaps after traffic flows, design speeds, sight distances and superelevations have been considered, important though these may be.

Ralph Stanton
Urban Design Consultant

THROWING THE BABY OUT WITH THE WATER

By Jan Martin

(on a balanced approach to permeable residential design.)

Oh Wendy Morris you've done it again! Your Melbourne-is-built-of-"grey-graph-paper" (UDF 1) kept the letters going for months. This time though, in Curbing the cul de sac (UDF 7) you have gone too far.

Oxford Polytechnic's Paul Murrain led a residential design workshop in Melbourne this July. Reporting it, Wendy tells us how the "cul de sac road hierarchy was challenged". It is (paraphrasing) too isolationist and impermeable. We argued to return to the "choice-laden grid".

I hasten to agree that some recent subdivisional ideas are excessively introverted. But lest the reaction become a backlash, the cure worse than the disease, let me put a moderating view.

First, some common ground:

1. Permeability is a good thing. The question is how much of it and when.

2. It is possible to create layouts that bury people in endless ends. The "terminal tree" (illustration) is simplistic and isolating. But there are alternatives other than the grid.

Now, gloves off. The "Morris - Murrain Model" is subversive on at least 5 counts:

1. Morris -Murrain dismiss the new theories as being achieved " under the guise of traffic management". As one who has been able to work closely with traffic planners all my professional life, and having seen many projects where residents have clearly articulated their views, I say traffic management is no guise, it is crucial. People and cars are a tricky mix. Residents know this. They ask us for layouts which, by their very nature, inhibit vehicle speeds and volumes. Grids tend not to.

2. People fear streets. They tell us they value streets where stranger-drivers are instantly identifiable. Or in the jargon, they want defensible spaces. A degree of vehicle impermeability may be worthwhile to achieve this goal.

3. Morris-Murrain seems to equate permeability with vehicle permeability. Of course we do not want to return to Radburn- style total separation of car and pedestrian. But surely sometimes the pedestrian can go straight(eg. linked court heads) while the driver goes round a bit?

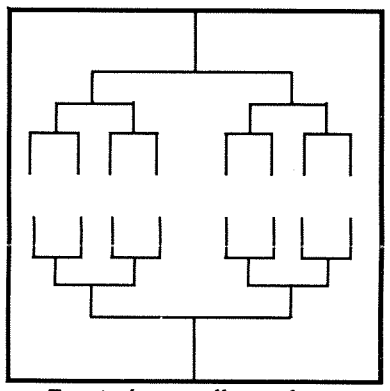
4. Current practice, says Murrain, would mean Melbourne would become a series of "defendable encampments". Depending on the scale we are talking about is that so bad? Urban fabric perhaps needs some differentiation and sense of local ownership. Conversely might the choice laden-grid be just a bit anonymously non-territorial?

5. Last and worst, the claims made in the article on behalf of that "section of our community least able to express their needs" are only assertions. None of us actually know how (or even whether) different layouts affect social behaviour and human happiness. We ought to, and a major survey might find out, but right now we don't.

My own guess, having pondered about traffic safety - and about permeability before I learned to call it that - is that the answer lies in the middle; a connective but somewhat indirect residential street system which is also, but not exclusively, a more direct pedestrian/ cycle network.

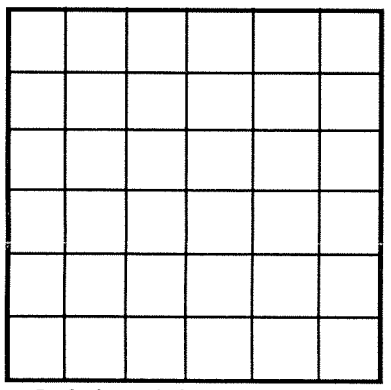
Incidentally, I suspect that Paul Murrain himself, with whom I have discussed these issues and who - like me - had to grapple with some of the excesses of modern hierarchical street design at Milton Keynes, would agree with much of what I have said here.

A CURRENT EXTREME



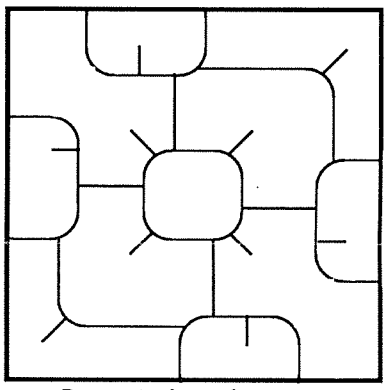
▲ Terminal tree, endless ends.

THE MORRIS/MURRAIN EXTREME



▲ Grid: choice laden or anonymous,

OR LOTS OF MIDDLE WAYS

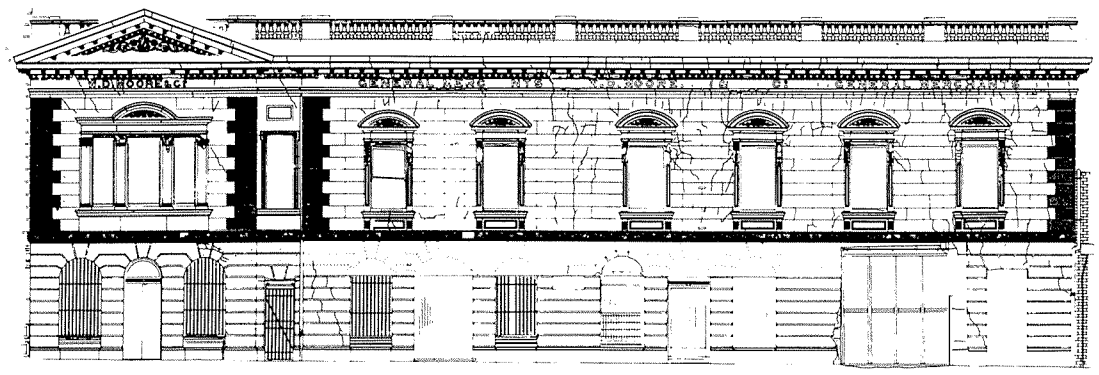


▲ Connective but indirect.

BOOK REVIEW

By Jeremy Dawkins

The Moores Buildings, Fremantle: History, Evolution, Conservation by Jack Kent, Agnieshka Kiera & Jeremy Dawkins



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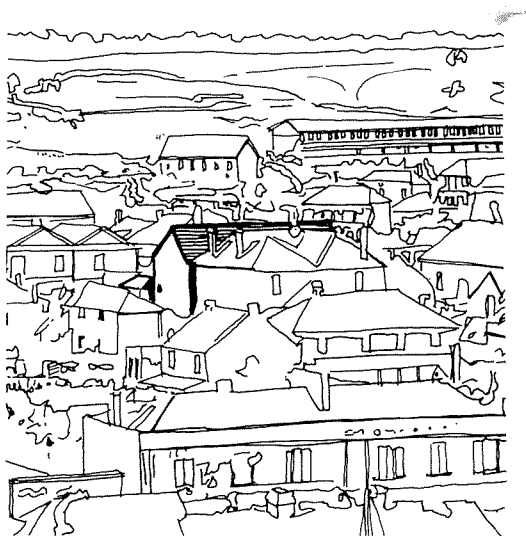
The conservation of the Moores Buildings - a neglected and unimposing site, but arguably among the richest in Western Australia in terms of historical evidence - was one of the many positive by-products of the Americas Cup.

Those of us involved in the project were determined that we would do more than simply save this fascinating complex of buildings. A major aim was to document both the findings of the research and the way we went about the task.

The fact is there are very few published models for a project of this type. I looked for them before we began, and found none which documented in detail the physical research on a building, and the specific work that was then carried out as part of a conservation plan.

Many have done this kind of work, and no doubt have done it better, without being in a position to publish the findings or the technique. The book fills a gap in current literature.

We believe that the approach documented here can be reproduced at all levels, even in small projects where there is little time for research and investigation.



Juris Greste's

URBAN DESIGN X COMMANDMENTS

Urban design by numbers? It's quite as easy as that. However, as I see the role of U.D.F. also as one of (further?) education, I offer my "Ten Commandments" for urban designers. With some humility they were handed down to graduate diploma students of planning at Q.U.T. recently.

I. Remember that cities are for people. They are all the people that use the city - not just local councils, developers, financiers and traffic engineers. The domain of people in the city is the ground. Notwithstanding the fact that some people drive through the city, the final and critical experience still is at walking pace at ground level.

II. Neglect the third dimension at your peril. Cities are three dimensional - as the rest of the world. Land use maps and traffic plans are two dimensional and do not consider space with all its highly compelling qualities. Concern yourself with the voids, and the solids will come out alright as a consequence.

III. The form of the city is the shape of its public spaces - streets, squares, arcades, parks. Urban design can be said to be making, management and maintenance of high quality public space.

IV. Pay attention to the edges. Space has all the complexities of emotion but in making good public spaces, more depends on the nature and quality of this space than other factors put together.

V. Do not base all your decisions around the car. The quality of the city will not be judged on how well it accommodates its vehicles, but how much it cares for its people. Cars must learn to share the urban world more equitably with other considerations.

VI. Be aware that development is the currency of modern day politicians. Do not be blinded by large project costs and their job creation potential. What is food for developers and politicians is not necessarily food for the city or town after the poly or the developers have gone. The developer gets his money back in a few years but the community has to live with the legacy for much longer.

VII. High rise buildings are not inevitable. There are many large, modern, progressive cities which have made the conscious and deliberate choice not to have high buildings for the sake of urban quality. You will not be left behind the 21st century without the worlds tallest building.

VIII. Every part counts! Every decision matters! No matter how small is the part of the built environment, it has a role on shaping the end result because it all adds up.

IX. The whole is more important than any one part. Even though attention must be paid to the smallest part, its urban value and importance depends upon the extent to which it contributes to making the whole better than the sum of its parts.

X. Smaller is better than bigger. Given a choice, make it smaller rather than bigger and then make it smaller again. The rules of economies of large scale tend not to apply to people and therefor not for cities.