

Beyond the Burbs? : An Urban Design Essay

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ORIGINAL ABSTRACT: *Australia and New Zealand are both highly urbanised, yet are also strongly founded on their rural roots and extensive rural locations. Enhancing this rurality at a holistic level, rather than abandoning it to the haphazard pressures of sprawling developments, is increasingly raising new challenges for urban designers. This presentation sets out a response to this challenge in the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, Western Australia, where leading New Zealand urban design studio Common Ground has worked with the Shire to create a 'Rural Hamlet Design Handbook'. Published in March 2009 for community consultation, the Handbook has tested the boundary between what can be imagined and what can be achieved to take the potential of new settlements in the Shire to a new level. In ways that could be seen as a distant reverberation of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City Movement, the approach taken by Common Ground resourcefully pulls together detailed parameters, rather than prescriptions, to help put in place a new tradition for viable and sustainable ruralism. Expert practitioner James Lunday will outline the benefits of breaking away from the outdated models of cookie-cutter lifestyle subdivisions in favour of moving towards developing small, spatially sensitive townscapes which can provide a truer model of living "with the land". Through his experience in both Australia and New Zealand James will articulate the common values and common denominators needed for this "shift in thinking", drawing connections to the scaleable lessons to be learnt and applied for tomorrow's villages (rural and urban).*

INTRODUCTION

By accent I am – through and through – a Glaswegian, and as Scottish as an Alasdair Gray novel. I also consider Australia home and am an Australian citizen after having spent most of the 1980s living and working in urban design in Victoria and Melbourne.

I'm excited by the latent and emerging opportunities for groundbreaking urban design and not just in our part of the world. More than ever I believe this is a time, indeed **THE TIME**, when the world needs what we urban designers have to offer – as is so apparent from this Conference. And more than ever I believe the onus is on us to practice what we preach. We can't just talk the talk, we need to talk the walk, and walk the talk.

To paraphrase Queensland's poet laureate Les Murray (originally on the topic of fatherhood): Becoming an *urban designer* that is no achievement. Being one is/ though.

UTOPIAN INSPIRATION

As alluded to in the abstract to my presentation, I am happy to consider myself as a descendant to, and erstwhile disciple, of the utopian thinking of the kind formulated by Ebenezer Howard - to my mind the pre-modern father of both urban and (if it exists) rural design for our built environments. Knowingly and unknowingly, Howard also stood on the shoulders of those before him and alongside his contemporaries such as Ruskin and Morris. (Researching this paper for instance, I was reminded that as early as 1493 Leonardo da Vinci had set out plans for Milan that involved creating 10 new towns in a manner not unlike the approach now happening in 21st century Shanghai).

This remarkable Londoner earned his living as a Hansard reporter, and when he wasn't advocating for his Garden Cities vision, was also an avant-garde composer and enthusiastic devotee of Esperanto, often using this 'invented' language to give speeches! Speeches with titles like 'The Ideal City Made Practicable, A Lecture Illustrated with Lantern Slides'. His recognition is well deserved given his tireless devotion to seeing his ideal 'cities' turned to reality before his eyes (albeit falling prey to undercapitalization and the paramount will of the architects).

Howard's one book, *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, more famously reprinted in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, contains an indelible vision of variegated towns free of slums and enjoying the benefits of both town (such as opportunity, amusement and high wages) and country (such as beauty, fresh air and low rents). He illustrated the idea with his famous Three Magnets diagram which addressed the question 'Where will the people go?', the choices being 'Town', 'Country' or 'Town-Country' - the Three Magnets. It called for the creation of new suburban towns of limited size, planned in advance, and surrounded by a permanent belt of agricultural land.

Howard's utopian vision has eluded us, and the 20th century instead entrenched and put in place a skewed ideal we sometimes call the 'burbs', typified by Pete Seeger's song 'Little Boxes' – a ditty that has resurfaced as a TV theme song and that has probably survived as long as it has due to the ring of truth it has as a piece of critique or commentary of the often vacuous settings for our way of living.

As urban designers we ourselves are often too prone to being seen as just commentators and critics. I prefer to work in the realm of being an agent of change, an agent of delivery. I believe both that we shape our environments and they in turn shape us and that it's my job to close the gap between what can be imagined and what can be achieved.

BLUE SKIES IN NEW ZEALAND

Not long after Common Ground became fully active in New Zealand one of our first projects was a blue sky project called *Pegasus Bay – Sustainable Town* in the Canterbury region of the South Island of New Zealand, circa 1998.

We didn't use the term Masterplan back then; instead we produced what we termed a Sustainable Development Manual for the Pegasus Bay project, for which our research featured Howard as one of our inspirational reference points, along with such influential 20th Century figures as far-sighted urban planning theorist Patrick Geddes, and contemporary sustainability experts such as Professor Peter Newman (encouragingly a current member of the Australian Infrastructure Council). Our work at the time certainly drew together the first principles of Common Ground in a way that has consistently informed our practice over the years since.

Eleven years ago we were already doing our best to promote ideas like eco-urbanism and clustering, and the reclaiming of streets "for people", and to spell out the harmfully wasteful nature of the traditional suburban pattern in New Zealand. We also explored precedents, both colonial and post-colonial, government and private. And we also included an appendix that emphasized the relevance of ethical values fundamental to indigenous Maori – from the creation myth of Ranginui (skyfather) and Papatuanuku (earth mother), to cultural norms and duties of stewardship, hospitality, authority, belonging and spiritual grounding.

Fast forwarding to 2009, the multi-national team at Common Ground is usefully (and youthfully) engaged across as many aspects of urban design and masterplanning as you would expect a multi-disciplined 21st Century team to be. The development of new towns or settlements are certainly one of those aspects, with planning completed or in process at numerous locations throughout the beautiful fabric of rural New Zealand: Waimauku Estate, Mapara Valley, Lake Ohakuri, Ahuareka Estate. A consistent set of common values and common denominators has held this growing body of work together, through both breadth and depth, encompassing infrastructure, economic value, landscape analysis and detailed land use planning.

PUTTING RURAL HAMLETS ON THE MAP

It was our comprehensive and sophisticated planning for Waimauku Estate that – via the Internet initially – caught the attention of Geoff Broad at the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, Western Australia, leading to the publication, then public release in March 2009 of the Rural Hamlets Design Handbook that I'm talking about at some length at this Conference.

This 218-page publication was really a labour of love, resourcefully structured to drill down to as many detailed parameters and checklists as practicable without actually becoming prescriptive. It is a document that was put out for public comment and that Common Ground is more than happy to see shared freely, far and wide.

The hope remains that with ongoing work it can be adopted as a guiding policy for future urban design investigations for Development Investment Areas (DIAs) within Settlement Strategies in the Shire. To do so it will, inevitably it seems, need to stretch the tolerance of developers to having their conventional development models tried and tested against a viable alternative. An alternative, we would argue, that offers more longer-term economic vitality and social worth, and that fully deserves to be backed in the public interest.

A guiding principle we applied to our work behind the Rural Hamlets Design Handbook is Contextual Design. A careful analysis of land, economy, ecology, society, identity and connections. The outcome from this approach is a carefully orchestrated development capable of achieving a balance between creating a real sense of place, defined by its edges and resulting in a sustainable urban form within a rural environment. If realized, a combination of town, country and nature; real place and real country.

It is our belief that every new project can contribute to a new and more sustainable approach, maximizing the integration of social, economic, cultural and environmental capital, and consequently raising the standards of design and development experienced by the diverse communities within which they are located.

Smart urban design thinking is based on building communities. Our ethos – supported by evidence - is that land use, economy and culture should drive infrastructure investment – not the other way around. Thinking in reverse (and not thinking primarily in terms of tarmac and roading) results in creating not only great urban areas but thriving communities and economies, unlocking and unblocking latent mixed-use development potential.

In my foreword to the Rural Hamlets Design Handbook I stated the intention that the guidelines show a new, sustainable way of growing a community. A community consisting of compact, well designed, traditional villages and hamlets, well connected to each other and the very land that sustains the people living there. At its core the concept is driven by setting these ‘new communities’ in a mixture of common productive land and a restored ecosystem.

It’s not Town versus Country, and not just Town and Country – better still it’s an “and, and” proposition: Town and Country and Nature: People. Agriculture. Ecosystem. Simplistically a third for living, a third for sustenance and a third for nature.

Our Rural Hamlets Design Handbook is about helping to guide bespoke site-specific and spatially rich responses that could give rise to their own tradition, down to considerations of details as explicit as external fences and walls, building typologies and architectural detail. These aren’t templates writ large to be slavishly copied or falsely showcased. Rather they are some parameters to work within and a set of outlines.

Preserving rural character, safety, convenience, accessibility are all still there from our work in the 90s; augmented by differently expressed aims: of achieving low impact living from zero to ninety (age, not car speed!), of making food miles irrelevant through the presence of ‘providore’ industries and markets, of identifying what makes each newly situated settlement genuinely and profoundly different, of establishing community focus through giving each authentic neighbourhood the space to breathe and walk.

The landscape respected, the village re-branded, a 'new town' set apart by what pulls it together. Perhaps a little like Thomas Shapcott's ode to The City of Home (from the *Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse*, 1996):

The City of Home is reached only in dreams
it has a town centre, a river with curved bridges

There are no walls, no toll gates, no ribbon developments
full of hoardings, carpet Emporia or used car allotments.

The City of Home has retained only stone monuments and spires
and the shady maze of the Municipal Gardens

Like all great cities, the City of Home reaches back
into all the generations, all the inheritances

RESISTING THE COOKIE-CUTTER PATH

As observed by my colleague at Common Ground, Shannon O'Shea, the fallback scenario otherwise is to continue down a cookie-cutter path, with the staging of new developments seeing new residences being sold off picture-perfect brochures but becoming within a couple of years isolated and disjointed because the jigsaw is simply that, a puzzle being left to fall randomly into place.

A significant part of the work at Common Ground over the last 12 years – but by no means all – has been concentrated on how to arrive at new responses to this relatively new problem; a problem that has been left to lurk, so to speak, in the background of urban design.

Just as shopping malls are antithetical to vibrant urban design, lifestyle blocks typically represent the low density suburbanisation of our most productive rural landscapes and are a poor substitute for the alternative presented by rural hamlets. Put bluntly the suburbanization of our most productive rural landscapes is I believe one of the current crimes against our environment and a poor substitute for town.

Lifestyle blocks occur under the radar. They are symptomatic of sprawl and disaggregation of land but to a large degree they're out of sight, out of mind. They are a creeping cancerous growth on the landscape. Most lifestyle blocks are ad hoc plots with no storyline. They are a testament to the republic of the BANANA - Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone. As big 'little boxes', in belittled paddocks they say look at my patch, not look at this quilt. Too often they objectify the rural rather than trigger ways to experience it. And - as articulated by David Byrne of Talking Heads in the song Blind - their leave-behind is most likely to be "no sense of harmony, no sense of time".

Speaking at the New Zealand Centre for Environmental Law Conference earlier this year, Peter Fuller, a New Zealand lawyer (who also holds an unusual bevy of qualifications in Planning, Environmental Management and Horticultural Science)

identified a paradox in the way that peripheral development (his preferred term to urban sprawl) or 'rural spill-over' is both off the radar of most people, but equally – when prompted in surveys – a major concern. Fuller suggests that, in the absence of a common understanding of terms like peripheral growth or intensification or outliers, a perverse bias in favour of the status quo prevails by default. Which in the case of the rural, is a persistence with the creeping disaggregation referred to above.

In his paper, Peter Fuller chose to highlight the vision demonstrated by Common Ground's planning work for the Waimauku Estate as a case in point of "innovation and opportunities for people to live and work and play in more sustainable forms of development" being frustrated by arguably anti-growth planning restrictions. He cited our work for embodying principles of 'slow urbanism' and 'new ruralism', noting that, amongst other features, a local market would be a key focal point for this compact village community – providing a bridge between sustainable use of the land and new urbanism.

Peter made a strong call for such innovative projects to be tested on their merits over conventional typologies. He also posited a cogent and compelling line of inquiry into how representative those who participate in planning processes truly are of society as a whole. A topic not to be ignored lightly. As stated by US President Barack Obama in his inaugural address the surest route for our common good is not congruent with favouring only the prosperous; only those in possession of "property rights", over those without.

OUR SHARED RURALITY AND NATIONAL MYTHS

On the face of it New Zealand and Australia are the two most ideally placed countries in the world for a transformational resituating of the place of the rural. Our country backyards are plentiful enough to push back against the worst examples and lingering liabilities of mono-centric urbanization and senseless urban drift. A new ruralism could be practiced that would not be a 'retreat' or an artificial divorcing from the 'urban'.

I have often wondered what the barriers are to this shift in thinking given that rurality has always been evident in the literature of both countries and in debates of identity.

Our shared rurality is in the language we speak. Australia has its outback and backblocks, and if you go too far into inner New Zealand you end up in the wop-wops. Sidney J. Baker is amongst the best of the crop of people to record the variants of the English language and English speech used 'down under', producing book after book of the slang and peculiar idiom on both sides of ditch.

Likewise the 1998 book *Australian Identities* talks about the way that urban Australians invented the Bush with a capital 'B', a glorified view of the country encapsulated by Henry Lawson and other writers on the *Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* school firmly attached national identity to the 'men on the land', the pastoralists and drovers who 'settled' Australia.

Lest we forget Australia and New Zealand are settler societies. As borderless frontier countries our frontiers are entirely internal. There is an indication in this that we have fallen prey to the tyranny of both external and internal distance, and a reluctance of sorts to make nowhere somewhere and an antipathy to anything beyond the burbs. (This has a degree of resonance throughout the Western world; for instance virtuoso French writer and concerted city-phile Georges Perec once wrote that “The country is a foreign land. It shouldn't be, yet it is. It might not have been so, but it has been so and will be so from now on. It's far too late to change anything”).

In his book *Theatre Country, Essays on Landscape and Whenua*, New Zealand essayist Geoff Park calls the cities in which the great majority of New Zealanders and Australians live, “sudden cities”. They bear the marks of their spontaneous, rushed beginnings. There is more than a whiff of it still, he notes, in any austral city's authoritative, harbour-edge, rectilinear geometry, and beyond, in its quarter-acre suburban sprawl.

Park writes acutely that New Zealand's cities, like Australia's, have a common peculiarity, a certain sameness about them – despite their easy parochial differences – a sameness that the ground they occupy certainly did not have in pre-European times. Park observes that even Sydney and Auckland, “despite their sprawling immensities, still bear the marks of their spontaneous, rushed beginnings and the instantaneous overwhelming of what was there before”, something that can be described as the eradication of the distinctive and the making of the standardized.

Coastal to a fault, he writes, it's as if the settlers were wary or even fearful of venturing much beyond the beachheads of their first arrival. Park goes so far as to describe this pattern as a historical march away from nature. As if to say: If you go down to the Bush today, You'd better not go alone – It's lovely down in the Bush today, but safer to stay at home. Park calls it a curiosity of both countries that so few of their people chose to drift further inland.

If New Zealand was indeed a site where the best elements of British society might be cultivated into an ideal nation, as was imagined early in its colonisation, the quintessence of the idea was in the grand metropolitan plans and urban grids drawn up in England that the land purchasers and surveyors carried ashore.

In 1854, one Robert Pemberton – from the safe distance of the Northern Hemisphere – did proclaim a different type of master design for towns in the new colony of New Zealand that was a curious precursor in some ways to the circular thinking of Ebenezer Howard. In this proclamation Pemberton urged that the colonists make up their minds to abandon the system of the old countries in everything relating to the bad formation of towns. “All must be public property and belong conjointly to the Happy Colonists”.

The first town, to be called Queen Victoria Town, was to have the form of belts or rings and the roads to be wide, spacious and planted with ornamental trees. Around the town every kind of grain was to be grown, and beautiful orchards to be planted.

Donald Horne in his iconic book *The Lucky Country* aptly awarded the title of “The first suburban nation” to Australia, adding that this fact was highly inconvenient to national myth-making associated, by turns, with either a taciturn or humorous rural character – the latter firmly planted in New Zealand by way of John Clarke’s inimitable Fred Dagg.

New Zealand doesn’t have a comparable book to *The Lucky Country* (with the possible exception of Austin Mitchell’s *The Half Gallon Quarter Acre Pavlova Paradise* or Gordon McLauchlan’s *The Passionless People*). Horne’s book was, as he himself described in the introduction to the fifth edition, a community phenomenon, expressing as it did when it was first published in 1964, many things that Horne says “were already in the minds, one way or another, of tens of thousands of Australians – but that scarcely anyone was talking about, at least not all at once”. These were years when ‘Jobs and Growth’ could be said to be part of a divine order and when professing a conscience seemed radical.

Horne’s consistent rallying call is one worth heeding, namely that there are times when the only pragmatic course is to be visionary. In his re-introduction Horne bemoans the long misuse of the phrase ‘the lucky country’ as if it were praise for Australia rather than a warning, noting that when the book first came out people had no doubt the phrase was ironic.

It is in the almost obligatory chapter titled ‘What Is An Australian?’ that Horne writes of Australia as a nation of city and suburb dwellers. He sympathises with European migrants to Australia who felt deprived and as if they were living in a void because the suburbs had no organic relationship to the city.

In the remainder of the chapter the characteristic that Horne identifies most with Australians is that they are, on the one hand, world class detectors of bullshit and, on the other, that they were wont to exhibit a tendency to wait for something new to be demonstrated as being possible – usually in a more “innovatory” overseas country – before it would be tried ‘at home’.

Horne suggested there was some deep-seated difficulty that kept Australians from imagining the new for themselves, made worse by a distrust of turning to the expertise already extant in the Australian community.

Through what Horne hints at as an over-optimistic and over-materialistic attitude that was averse to risk, the worst result was that too many people specialized in pretending to be stupid or became what he terms racketeers of the mediocre.

In holding the then masters of Australia to some form of account, Horne posited that the “deverness, conceptualization and procedural skills” that go into running things in innovating counties was treated as ‘mere theory’ by them. It was as if, he wrote, “the masters of Australia have inherited a civilization whose rules they do not understand”.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE URBAN AND RURAL

As mentioned at the outset, by background I am a city-dwelling Glaswegian. Then again I am also an Australian citizen and a New Zealander. I spent a decade-defining 1980s in Australia's southernmost city state, Melbourne, and since 1990 I have called Devonport in Auckland, my home town/ city.

Melbourne and Auckland. Two antipodean cities that, by latitude, are just one degree distant. But by attitude and longitude are totally removed from one another.

I have no doubt which city provided me with one of my most coveted moments in landscape and urban design, when under Southern skies on the 9th and 10th of February 1985 myself and partner in design Sonja Peter, implemented a project known as the 'Swanston Street Party' to mark Victoria's 150TH Anniversary celebrations.

Overnight we laid 19,000 square metres of grass and turf, built five stages, planted 300 mature trees in massive planter boxes and put in thousands of flowers. A street that had, a mere 24 hours before, been carrying 50,000 cars an hour, as well as trams and trucks, was well and truly 'greened'.

By the end of the weekend a million Melburnians – be they visitors, workers or residents – had experienced what was in reality a symbolic two-day-long reclaiming of the city's inner spaces for and by the people – surely the ultimate political purpose of any living and thriving society built on that wonderful Greek premise, the polis.

This gelled 100% with my commitment to being a designer able to be an agent of change in order to lift expectations of our urban future and a catalyst for delivering new experiences; a provocateur for hitching politics to social change, and social change to policy, and policy to environmental change.

This was a time when I would have applied the term environmental design to what I was doing moreso than the term urban design. It was work that was embedded in the creating of a landscape framework, with definite elements of a design manifesto – much of which has held its own and, dare I say it, is as applicable and relevant today as if it had been written yesterday – complete with design objectives and societal goals.

None of this was abstract theory and all of it was done with relative speed. Our work involved setting up units with names like the Revitalisation Unit, with a focus on Melbourne, and the Townscape Advisory Service, with a focus on towns like Mildura. In one version of our 'manifesto', titled *Food For Thought*, we expressed a longing for magnetically unique spaces connected by a living web of green and creation of an urban riverside. Rather than a Masterplan it favoured an implosion of revitalising Projects including a proposal to breathe life into Melbourne's western precinct. Ideals that have been turned into reality, as aired at this Conference.

Although I am strongly an urbanist, I acknowledge that cities are not panaceas. For one thing they produce and induce concentrations of excessive waste and operate at a level of over-consumption not found in out-of-city towns. It is no surprise that a cliché of science fiction is the fact-based Domsday scenario of uninhabitable remnant cities.

Nor are cities an automatic guarantee or sole progenitor of what Le Corbusier called “joyous interpretations of habitation”. (It was Le Corbusier who, at the time of his proposed architectural razing of Paris, famously said ‘We must eliminate the suburbs’. More than that, he planned to abolish the city street, regarding streets as an obsolete notion. Instead up to 50 percent of urban land would be ample green space, devoted to parks).

Growing up in Glasgow I know all about urban blight. That fact was a key reason I turned from a doubtfully brilliant career in architecture to the greenfields of urban design - from a keen desire not to heap more blight on the world.

By the same token I have always had concerns for our rural estate and as long ago as the 1970s I must have also had a sense of the risk of rural blight. Indeed the subject of my dissertation for my BA Honours degree in Town and Country Planning, gained in Glasgow, was *Scotland's Idle Acres*, a consideration of both the marginality and viability of rural communities.

At a time of industrial contraction and economic non-growth I presented a case for looking inward to employ local resources to reclaim large areas of peatland in ways that could sustain a balanced, thriving population in the remote regions of Scotland.

Similarly it is all but impossible to be unaware that by land area New Zealand remains a highly un-settled country. Approximately 2% is in urban use compared to 15% in the United Kingdom. Speaking more specifically of the Auckland Region approximately 11% is urbanized. People living ‘beyond the burbs’ make up less than 3% of the regional population. Many districts are a complex mix of urban, rural and coastal settlements in need of careful and thorough planning.

Our relationship with our respective national lands and the cities and towns of the public realm is still on a deep learning curve. Many people are intrigued if not transfixed by the idea of a ‘sustainable’ relationship with the land, but remain as yet unaware of all the actions that might require of us – most importantly perhaps, actions related to food and food security.

We can be sure that pursuing sustainability won’t mean we’ll re-instate Paradise (aka Godzone, aka 100% Pure) any time soon, but it does mean of necessity building more eco-aware and eco-positive societies.

In this light the early 21st century seems a more than opportune time to re-visit the value in venturing back out into the not-so-remote backblocks and wop-wops. Put simply I believe that in doing so there is a better response to our peri-urban town and country environment than a proliferation of so-called lifestyle blocks.

‘CHANGING THE SHAPE OF THE BUCKET’

As a graduate of Oxford Brookes it's not surprising that one of my 'default settings' in the enterprise of urban design is still set to the language of the seminal *Responsive Environments* (1985).

However this is hardly the language to fuel a utopian view of urban design. Like Lewis Mumford in the 1920s – an ardent carrier of the garden city flame - I would like to look back on the first garden cities as drops in the bucket. As Mumford put it “the aim of a garden-city movement must be to change the shape of the bucket itself; that is to say, the frame of our civilization”.

To become as optimistic as Mumford about the framework for urban design, I see the need to move beyond the key words of *Responsive Environments* to embrace a wider vocabulary; to contrast then with now, and that with this:

THEN	NOW
Permeability	Context
Variety	Balance
Legibility	Connectedness
Robustness	Sustenance
Visual Appropriateness	Vitality
Richness	Community
Personalisation	Diversity
	Beauty
	Identity
	Legacy

Now we are all Place Makers, or Place Markers, or even Place Marketers. Of course *Responsive Environments* was really most focused on the urban, the city and perhaps the towns, but not the combination of town and country or the relationship between a city and the landscape beyond. Pursuing sustainability doesn't mean we'll find Paradise any time soon but it does mean building more eco-aware and eco-positive societies. Looking back on how well the *Responsive Environments* approach has weathered the years the key issue that has been signposted now concerns the creation and showcasing of places where human systems are interwoven with non-human ones in mutually supportive relationships.

This topic of a changing landscape of language is a topic that Common Ground is passionate about. Within our own public brandscape and the ideas and principles we apply to urban design, we have recognized the need for a more accessible language. Urban design is too important to be accused as it often is, or to stumble at the gates as it goes into combat, over the use of too much urban design “speak”.

For me personally this means talking more about legacy, and more about beauty. More about context, and more about balance. And in the end – just as part of my design DNA is embedded in Melbourne – it is all about legacy.

THE HAPPINESS OF URBAN DESIGN?

Three years ago, popular philosophy author Alain de Botton published *The Happiness of Architecture* in which he suggests that the belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places – and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.

He quotes Simone Weil's insight that the urge to be attached to places, to have profound ties with them, is one of the needs of the human soul, probably the hardest to define, but the most important, if least recognized. An arch enemy of place it seems, is subjugation by sameness. Un-designed sameness strips us of a sense of place, limits our ability to differentiate one place from another and diminishes any intuition we might otherwise exercise in determining the uniqueness of a particular place. In other words, too much sameness is bound to put us on the road from happiness to misery.

The exhortation at the end of de Botton's book is that "we owe it to the fields" that the built environment not be inferior to the land it is built upon, and that the designs we have on the land and that go on to cover the land should "stand as promises of the highest and most intelligent kinds of happiness".

Beauty is well defined in *The Happiness of Architecture* as the child of the coherent relationship between parts, in "the relationship between a building and its context, geographical and chronological" – a particular domain and meeting point of good urban design.

As highlighted by de Botton we shouldn't forget the positive role that limitations on resources once played in creating strong local design identities. Within a certain radius, houses would uniformly be constructed of a particular native material, which would cede its ubiquity to another on the opposite side of a river or a mountain range. An ordinary Kentish house could thus be distinguished at a glance from a Cornish one and in most areas houses continued to be built as they had always been built, using whatever was around.

Indeed it was not until after 1833 when John Loudon's *The Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture* was published that self-builders were presented with plans that enabled them to construct house styles from any part of the world, an initiative which de Botton claims rapidly wiped out regional types of architecture.

Instead the mark of an adequately contextual building now is that it "serves as a repository for a workable ideal" beyond itself. Successful design is now often seen straddling eras and countries, holding on to its precedents and regions while drawing on the modern and the universal, often with the effect that true homage is barely discernible as such. Something for us all to aspire to.

According to de Botton, society is not demanding enough of its architects, and I would add, urban designers. This is because too many people make too many illogical assumptions.

Too many people presume, he writes, that human-made “beauty has been preordained to exist in certain parts of the world but not in others; that urban masterpieces are the work of people fundamentally different from, and greater than, ourselves”. There is also a false presumption, that many of us would be familiar with, that superior design must somehow cost inordinately more than the uglier design which typically takes its place.

I believe it is part of our role as declared urban designers to challenge these presumptions and, in everything we do, to step up to being prime movers in the practice of our profession.

We know how to draw and think, and we also know how to cajole, charm, gently bully, and play long, patient, careful games with our clients and with our politicians.

It follows that all of us have it in us to move ‘beyond the burbs of complacency’ about the world changing power of urban design to lead the way to a better future for tomorrow’s cities and towns!

Be brave - Kia kaha!

“It was decided to abolish the love of nature, at any rate among the lower classes; to abolish the love of nature, but not the tendency to consume transport. For of course it was essential that they should keep on going to the country, even though they hated it. The problem was to find an economically sounder reason for consuming transport than a mere affection for primroses and landscapes”.

Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World

The best view of all / is where the land meets the sky

The Joyful Kilmarnock Blues/ The Proclaimers

ENDS

BEYOND THE BURBS

– ‘FROM THE MEAN STREETS TO THE GREEN STREETS’

- *Transcript of a talk delivered by James Lunday to the 2nd International Urban Design Conference, 2nd to 4th September 2009 – hosted by the Gold Coast City Council, Queensland, Australia. James is Founder and Principal of Common Ground Studio (see also the Bio Note at the end of this paper).*

As an urban design company we work right across the board; we’re involved, for instance, in transit oriented developments (TODs), infrastructure and road design, but there’s a particular piece of intellectual property – or ideas and principles – that we’ve started to play with and develop and that I’m here to talk about.

Although I’m very much an urbanist, my interest in rural areas goes right back to my original degree. I did my thesis on Scotland’s ‘idle acres’, areas out in the Highlands that had been cleared through the Highland clearances, and had communities that had crumbled.

I grew up on what are sometimes called the mean streets of Glasgow, so this interest in rural was an interesting thing for me to be involved with given I hadn’t seen a blade of grass until I got out of Glasgow. The Glasgow I grew up in was one where the clearing of slums had begun, and they moved people out to the suburbs – still in apartments, in high-rises and 5-6 story apartments – but with no community facilities. We had a population of 50,000 in the area I grew up in, with three shops and no school – I got bussed to a school.

It’s not a surprise Glasgow began to develop a really bad reputation, with unemployment of 25% when I left university. I’d always wanted to be an architect, but growing up like that in Glasgow I was determined that we should never again inflict communities with that kind of social experiment of clearing the cities and building places on the outside. Now Glasgow is in a constant state of regeneration, and my early career was based not so much on urban design as urban regeneration.

On the way I’ve collected different qualifications as my career changed to do different things. Urban design is a great catch-all – urban design really is a team sport not an individual sport. Architecture can be an individual sport but urban design can never be an individual sport, which is why we call our office a studio because it really is. We have people from all different disciplines and they work on the projects together, no skill being less than the other skills.

I think that this conference got off to a rocky start for me personally. It lacked a kind of way finding method. I heard that there was a great solution for Australia and the population; that you could actually just stop migrants, that’ll stop the problem won’t it? – as challenged by me on the first day, I don’t think so.

Instead we should be tackling the core heart of the problem, namely that our eco-footprint is too large, so it was good today that more time was given to talking about eco-footprints.

As an urban designer I have to believe, and I do believe, that we have the ability to create great communities, to come up with new ideas and new concepts, to re-use our existing infrastructure and cities like we heard today and re-invent the way that we live.

There are plenty of people who have been talking about that, so what I'm talking about today is what's happening in our peri-urban areas where what's happening is a disgrace.

Lifestyle blocks, or 'Lack-of-lifestyle blocks' as they really should be called; no communities, large houses, on segments of land, taking away and disaggregating land ownership so that they then become non-productive, not ever reaching densities that can sustain communities or infrastructure of any sophisticated level, and eventually being split up into smaller and smaller lifestyle blocks, as people find that coming back from work after being stuck in traffic at 8 o'clock at night, there's a sheep stuck in the ditch, a fence that's fallen over, it's no lifestyle.

Inside everybody we all want our year in Provence, don't we, we all want to restore an old farm house and plant a vineyard. I do so long as I've got a farm manager to do all the work, and I'll concentrate on drinking the wine.

Banks Peninsula (near Christchurch in New Zealand) is an absolutely gorgeous place and I can see why people want to go and live in it and get one of these areas. We did a study that actually showed that the turnover in the lifestyle blocks (in this area) was three years. So you had an unstable local population, as well as all the other issues. People usually move out (to the blocks), because they've had kids, and the isolation on the persons left at home on the lifestyle block is intense. The divorce rate was twice the rate of any other area.

So there's a whole host of reasons why as an urban designer I think of them as an inappropriate method (of land use and settlement).

How do we shift ourselves and our thinking? Writers in both Australia and New Zealand have written on similar themes about our rural identities. We, and I say we because I've been an Australian citizen and I've been in Australasia for three decades (as you can tell from my accent) have persisted with this idea about man alone, the lucky country, that we're a rural people. No we're not. We hate the bush, we chop it down, we clear it – we're scared of it. When I was lecturing I would refer to the movie *The Castle* as a perfect example of people who were absolutely happy in their isolated suburban, semi-detached little 'rural' idyll, ironically situated next to an airport.

I don't think that we just took on board American suburbia, we created our own form of suburbia, our own little isolated areas. What it is, it's a fundamental part of the psyche, the ability to be away from your neighbour, the fear of hearing someone in the apartment above you, the fear of having people close by.

So where did I go, when I was looking at this lifestyle thing, for some inspiration? Well I kind of went back to Ebenezer Howard, and Patrick Geddes. Ebenezer Howard has been misunderstood – he didn't create suburbia, that was Parks and Unwin, they did suburbia. In the early 1900s Howard was a (turn of the century) utopian who wanted to build towns that were free from pollution, that had high quality housing and had an area of land around them that could sustain them.

He was actually advocating a bio-system that was self-sustaining. It was separate from existing cities, but it had public transport at the heart of it.

Now he never got to develop his city, but he got to see the development of Letchworth 'garden city'. And when you walk around it, it feels like any other village in England, except they still own several thousand acres around them. It's still a private town, and they, the town, own all the commercial land. It's a living example – and I went over there to look at it – of how you can develop different management models – same product, lovely streets and lovely houses, it does all of the responsive environment things, mixed use and the whole thing, but does what Ian Bentley (of Oxford Brookes University) now calls 'sexy sustainability'. It's a good place to be in, and it's on the train line to London.

So, we've been playing around with these ideas, and people have asked how did this lead to you publishing a *Rural Hamlets Design Handbook* for Margaret River (Western Australia).

Here was a council that was actually thinking the same things as we were. How did they find us, it wasn't word of mouth it was 'word of web' – they came across one of our projects on the web and Geoff Broad who's the planner at the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River contacted us. He actually sent us an e-mail, we started a dialogue and then we were engaged to do this work which goes into quite a lot of detail on typologies and land and the use of land.

The core issue is that when land gets chopped up, you start off with a piece of land and you move it to suburbia – or I should say exurbia – of one hectare or two hectare lots. Then there were some advances towards clusters and clustering, but still without the density to sustain community.

It hasn't got enough community to give anonymity, so a lot of these clusters have broken down as communities start warring with each other, because they're too close, over management.

What we've been saying is, why can't we go back to an approach that builds villages or hamlets. It is an approach that only uses a very small percentage of the land, in fact one that we're working on New Zealand at the moment for a developer and a building company, we're only using 15 percent of the 100 hectares for 400 houses. It's actually got enough grunt behind it to sustain a small centre.

So that was the thesis that we were working on. Margaret River had already produced a structure plan, we weren't a part of that – this was their innovation, where they said we don't want our towns to end up just sprawling and sprawling, over farm land and being chewed up by endless suburbia.

So they said they wanted a green belt around the town – I don't think they articulated it this way, so I'm just paraphrasing – where you can build hamlets or you can have rural residential, but not suburbia. In our diagram if you develop hamlets you have the ability to have a dedicated zone that can actually be serviced by public transport. We also believed that you don't just drop these places down anywhere because you're going to have community issues if you do that.

I think the community and the councillors were grappling with the idea but what does it feel like, what is a hamlet?

So we were engaged to create a pattern book for how you would develop a hamlet or a village. I'm not going to go through all of this as I have a full written paper and we can also supply electronic copies of the actual work, but fundamentally we created a situation where 30% of the site – the other thing being that big chunks of this land are in single ownership, being farms – went for buildings. And of course within that 30% there are things like parks and domains and green streets of shared zones. All the parking goes from courtyards behind, so the car is a very non-dominant factor in the village, which also has a square and a market. Forty percent of the land goes for production - whether that's grapes, whether that's nuts, whether that's fruit and vegetables, it's for production. In the guidelines whoever's doing the development has to have a land management plan and have tested the soil and related work. And then you have 40% going back to nature. So in simple terms you could say it works out as a third, a third, a third.

Now, how would it look like? Well Australia's been building (urban) villages for a long time. Think Paddington or all around the inner city of Melbourne, Fremantle and other parts of Perth. The examples exist (including areas built just before the influence of the car took over).

Common Ground's work on the Masterplan for Waimauku Estate (north of Auckland) also shows our approach in action, using only 5 percent of 410 hectares for the built form but creates a community of 2,500 people. We have built an architectural language for there that is based on context and using material from the place. It starts to create density in a rural area but on the rail line to Auckland, and with (potential for) a light rail system of its own.

We also happen to be doing work in Kuwait, using environmentally and contextually responsive architecture to create a campus for government – using the climactic and cultural response they've used for hundreds of years. Not like Dubai where glass is being used as a main material.

Lastly, I want to finish with this point. We all know the basic principles: connectivity, permeability, the whole mantra (of urban design).

All that means nothing unless you add beauty, art and passion into urban design. They're the three most important principles, and they all support an outcome of legacy.

If we can't leave a legacy why are we being urban designers? Why are we even here, why don't we just become accountants and bankers? I've got no time for people in the profession who don't try to push the boundaries. There is no place for anyone who doesn't have the guts to tackle urban design with passion.

Legacy should play an over-riding, overarching role for urban designers. It's very difficult to leave a legacy, and it's very difficult to create beauty. Yet we've been doing it for hundreds of years.

BIO NOTE

James Lunday started Common Ground in 1992 to lead the creation of Pegasus Bay in North Canterbury. Since this foundation project, Common Ground Studio has been involved in a number of prominent urban development and regeneration projects throughout New Zealand. In addition to this, James has also continued to work in a variety of urban design, planning and community development projects in England, Scotland, Holland, Australia, South Africa, the USA and the Pacific Islands. Central to the success of CG Studio has been the ethos and guidance of James as principal. His focus on the relationship between landscape structure, economic objectives and design parameters has been a key component to project successes.

James' early career in the United Kingdom included working as a manager in the Regeneration Unit for the Civic Trust in the United Kingdom. After moving to Australia, James held senior positions within the Victoria State Government including a leading role on the project team that embarked on the Southbank regeneration in Melbourne City, as well as numerous other economic/ infrastructure/ design led initiatives throughout Victoria. James was invited to the University of Auckland in 1990 to develop the urban design and economic sustainability components for the Planning, Architecture and Property Faculty. During this period he also held the role of Director of the Auckland Heritage Trust, undertaking private/public regeneration projects throughout the greater Auckland Region, including helping in the formation of the Main Street Program and Enterprise Otara.

The fundamental ethos that James espouses of sustainable urban design, cultural community development, landscape planning, heritage issues and participatory processes being key to successful development, remains central even in changing political and economic landscapes.

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