Why can't we design our cities?

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The unconscious design of cities

Most people would be surprised to know that the quality, form and aesthetics of buildings and cities are no longer primarily determined by architects, or professionals trained in design.

This is not an exaggeration. Since the introduction of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act in 1979, the discipline of statutory planning has strongly influenced the form and character of buildings and cities in NSW. Architecture is now the physical expression of constraints determined by planning, economics, and politics.

Planning has no positive, propelling intent for the future city, yet its frameworks unconsciously shape all the critical physical and aesthetic elements of architecture. Through the vehicle of legalese, planning is unconsciously designing the city.

The sum of negativity

Planning's conception of the future is development led. It fails to recognise the primacy of urban structure, landscape systems and public space.

Statutory planning controls are structured as a charter of negatively expressed constraint on future development. Controls are primarily framed to preserve current conditions, amenity, and economic value for existing adjacent landowners. Previous formal and aesthetic decisions as represented in the surrounding urban situation are valorised, simply because they exist - existo ergo sum.

There is limited analysis or reflection on the quality or appropriateness of previous decisions or their relevance to contemporary conditions and challenges. There is only documentation of 'the context' and increasingly long lists of actions that new buildings must avoid, to prevent disruption of the status quo. New works must align themselves to the decisions of the past – irrespective of their future strategic, formal aesthetic or environmental failings.

Architecture yields

The expression of urban form as the embodiment of negative constraint goes further. To be considered satisfactory in planning terms - architecture and urban form are required to express a visual and aesthetic 'yielding' to their surroundings. This is contradictory to the primary formal and aesthetic virtues of architectural or urban design excellence, which designers might describe as the pursuit of holistic physical, spatial, material, and lyrical responses to place and culture.

In planning's terms, any architectural or urban proposal that exhibits holistic formal coherence or a broader cultural agenda is deemed suspicious. If architecture is not visibly 'yielding' or 'deferring' to existing circumstances – it will be targeted. The attacks on its integrity will be expressed in the anodyne language of planning but are explicit aesthetic and formal instructions with serious consequences for design quality. These instructions are given in the absence of an integrated understanding of the formal, aesthetic and construction consequences they set in train - and they must be obeyed if approval is sought.

The fragmentation of form

Architectural form will invariably be asked to 'step'. The act of stepping a building's form is taken as a signal or proof that architecture is deferring to existing conditions. The ziggurat form is the pinnacle of the aesthetics of planning. Each step, each deflection, each setback is a 'win' for existing conditions. The more steps, the greater the fragmentation, the less consistency, the less integrity - the better in planning's terms.

A designer is well-advised to make life simple for themselves and their client. Each act of deformation or yielding should ideally be emphasised by a shift in material and colour choices. This aesthetic strategy is now writ large across our cities. Why have one material when six will illustrate every shift, compromise and undermining of built form? Each act of surrender underscored and emblazoned in a different material. Architecture, and the formal integrity of the city, fragmented with it. If one yields early, and obsequiously enough, the approval pathway can be simplified.

When planning intervenes, formal integrity is withdrawn from the choices available to the architect – so the language of architecture must mitigate its lost formal coherence. The last levers that can be pulled are colour and if one is lucky, material. Architectural language increasingly tends toward strident homogeneity – an attempt to balance the fragmentation of form with a uniformity of expression, colour, or tone. Or hyper fragmentation - so that planning's deformations are subordinated within a more dominant and visually complex field. Architecture playing a dual role, with one eye always on damage control.

Construction compromises

Planning's priorities not only impact form - they also undermine the physical performance of buildings. Every step, every inset, every material shift multiplies the risk of waterproofing failure and structural and services inefficiencies.

Planners are not trained in construction, or the rapidly expanding range of building and compliance regimes that buildings are subject to. Yet planning sets maximum building heights without regard for the dimensions required for good construction practice. These mandatorily enforced errors result in buildings being pushed into the earth - increasing the potential for water ingress, damp, mould, and the associated health impacts on future occupants. It goes without saying that the costs associated with these higher-risk forms of construction increase exponentially. Planning unconsciously encourages poor construction.

Environmental compromises

The sustainability of buildings also yields to planning's prioritisation of past choices. Planning's dominant criterion is visual with a tendency toward the picturesque. If a suburb is made of 'brick' the thermal mass of contemporary buildings will be forced to express itself on the exterior of buildings in the least environmentally appropriate manner - for consistency. Higher performance insulated rain skins, or lightweight alternatives are frowned upon. Roof forms must deform to past mores, rather than allow contemporary forms that maximise surfaces and orientations for photovoltaic, energy production, biodiversity or efficient water collection.

The architects of mid, and high-rise apartments will be asked to explain how the material quality of their buildings 'relate' to the characteristics of neighbouring terraces and bungalows. The dis-ingenuousness of the request is rarely challenged. Why should contemporary multi storey buildings that need to deal with vastly more challenging technical requirements in terms of water, wind and environmental performance need to conform to the aesthetic and material choices of low-rise, low-tech

buildings of the past? The exercise has become a well-rehearsed pantomime and is emblematic of the unconscious processes that currently design the city.

Design first – planning second

There are better ways to plan and shape buildings and cities, but they require us to understand design as a vehicle for positive spatial action rather than a 'threat' to be filtered through planning's frameworks of constraint and deformation.

It is not sufficient to use the existing as the benchmark for the future. We need to design and build with an optimism that understands that the qualities and character of cities can always improve, and that change is not to be feared by default. The continuous and thoughtful evolution of cities, and the expression of their continuity over time, is a sign of their health and of an active and progressive civic culture.

Planning's paint- by-numbers approach to zoning, floorspace and height is an insufficient response to the physical complexity of cities. The city's existing condition is not uniform. Its future form must be nuanced and finely calibrated accordingly. In other words, it must be designed.

Responses that address contemporary social and environmental challenges must be prioritised. The qualities of the existing city should never be overlooked - but equally, must not be overstated. Clear, careful architectural and urban judgement needs to bring nuanced decision making to bear.

Precincts and blocks

The future framework of the city must be founded in a deliberately designed spatial strategy that is resolved at the scale of an urban precinct and nuanced to the scale of every block. In many instances the urban structure, of streets, blocks, lots and public spaces, needs to be amended to accommodate positive increases in density and a coordinated strategy is required to achieve this. This cannot occur if we keep designing cities one site at a time.

Reclaiming a broad understanding and appreciation of subdivision will help us to recognise and articulate differences in urban potential and the planning controls that should follow. Corners have greater urban potential due to their increased access to multiple frontages. Lots with other types of dual frontages (street and lane) have similar urban flexibility. Alternately, important heritage items, orientation, topography, or the presence of significant landscape canopy on a block may reduce a site's urban potential. A spatial approach to the planning of density will acknowledge and respond to difference, rather than espouse uniformity.

Would this create winners and losers? Perhaps - but the city is much more than a generational land bank. Our concepts of land value must become more nuanced. Land value, and more critically the broad-based land taxation regime that needs to follow it, must begin to account for differences in urban potential that are derived from physical and spatial architectural understandings.

Shaping the city through positive criteria

A design framework will allow us to address the current imbalances in our approach. Planning's systems focus on maximising good conditions for existing private development and subsequently undermine the possibilities of our collective future. Urban and architectural form should confidently frame the shared, communal, and public spaces and landscapes around it as a priority.

We can learn to architecturally re-engage with public edges. Sites with high amenity frontages, such as those surrounding parks or significant landscape corridors have a particular value in that they can share the greatest amenity amongst the greatest number of people. We should not continue to concentrate density on polluted traffic corridors or the peripheral interfaces of Local Government Area boundaries where it is politically palatable but physically indefensible. Decisions about density and form must be based in spatial rigour and positive public decision-making.

In return, buildings in these special places must cherish the city and return to it the very best architectural quality that can be delivered. These edges can become the most important spaces in the city – the threshold where the private and public spaces meet. In these instances, architecture must once again be permitted to find its formal and aesthetic voice - to be strong, confident celebratory and joyful.

Character and beauty

Architecture keenly feels the loss of its agency and is aware that planning has become exceptionally powerful. To address its powerlessness, architecture has ceded important aspects of disciplinary knowledge to planning. Architecture has made the error of assuming that concepts such as 'character' or 'beauty' will be more highly valued if they are placed within the power of a planning framework. Yet, this shift fails two fundamental tests of appropriateness. Is it appropriate for planning lawyers to ultimately define these concepts, and, are we confident that local government planners should be the people determining whether architects and designers are achieving them?

Planning lawyers and planners have important and necessary skills, but it would be a brave professional indeed who argued that making judgements about the aesthetics, character and beauty of buildings and cities are amongst them. In a culturally sophisticated city questions of character, aesthetics and beauty have no place in planning. Planning's systems are necessarily deterministic and rigid. They are framed in law, and the law seeks clarity and limits the exercising of discretion. Planning's systems are incapable of dealing with the nuance of these critical cultural concepts.

So, what are the risks of removing these concepts from planning? Bad aesthetics? Ugly buildings? Challenging architecture? The contemporary city sets a demonstrably low bar to be walked over in this regard. Yet we must also admit that design has never been a strong part of Australian culture. The growth and nurturing of a broad design culture must become a priority for all of the design professions.

Until that culture is sufficiently strong, these important concepts will continue to be perverted by the processes of planning. They should not be ceded.

Towards the conscious design of cities

The increased financialisaton and politicisation of development has led us to make decisions about the city from the mindset of risk. In this context, the limits and determinism of planning can feel like a comforting safety net. Yet the pressure of the social and environmental challenges we face is already exposing the limits of our current systems.

Planning can no longer be permitted to design the city by stealth. It needs to be positioned within a guiding design framework. Designers must be allowed to design the city and priorities need to be reordered. Every centre needs -

1. An urban design strategy that describes how the urban structure needs to evolve to support positive forms of density. This may include –

- Holistic management of increased climatic risk,
- New streets to rehabilitate block sizes for improved walkability and connectivity,
- New open spaces designed as interconnected social and landscape systems, and
- Increased landscape canopy in all streets, and open spaces.

2. An architectural strategy at the scale of each block that –

- Guides the implementation of the precinct plan,
- Distributes form and density in response to urban capability,
- Creates frameworks that allow designers to respond to evolving environmental and construction practices,
- Distributes bonuses for the achievement of improvements to the urban structure,
- Considers tradeable bonuses to reward the retention of important heritage or landscape elements,

- Frames and supports public and communal space as a formal priority, and
- Mandates consolidated areas of deep soil and urban canopy in every block.

3. A strictly limited, clear and succinct set of planning controls to ensure that architectural form is distributed in accordance with the spatial framework and is encouraged to maximise amenity and sustainability rather than meet bare minimums.

4. All questions of character, material, aesthetics and beauty placed firmly back into the hands of architects and trained design professionals.

The acceleration of the social and environmental pressures on the city mean that this is precisely the moment to re-evaluate and restate our priorities.

We can no longer afford to suppress the role of design intelligence in the systems and frameworks that guide the transformation of cities.

It is time to remove design from its planning shackles, and for it to become an equal partner in designing the diverse and positively oriented cities and housing we so urgently need.