THE COMPACT CITY: Urban Design and Architecture
P J Keating
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This address articulates many of Paul Keating's long-held views about cities, architecture and design. It lays out how and why he developed certain rules or protocols about city development and how such thoughts might apply, with particular reference to Sydney. Paul Keating's continuing interest in Sydney Harbour is also evident, including the mammoth Barangaroo development of which he is progenitor.

My parents were raised and grew up in the inner suburbs of Sydney. Every Sunday late afternoon and evening my family drove from Bankstown, where we lived, to my father's family house in Annandale. And I will always remember, during the summer twilight, the many young people congregating along the footpaths, while in the street the sodality of their parents was apparent.

We would drive away from that density and those points of congregation back to the suburban grid of fibro-built Bankstown with its quarter-acres blocks, unmade roads and footpaths. Bankstown had a sense of community about it but it lacked that tightness and compactness which the community of Annandale possessed.

Those streets of inner city semi-detached houses lacked the backyard and side driveways and, more often than not, the Hills hoists of their suburban peers, but what they lacked in space and idle amenity, they made up for in community and proximity to the things of interest: in the main, the city.

As we drove home I was always aware of the stark change as we crossed from the older, more architecturally uniform, denser places to the more uneven, spread landscape of the western suburbs.

I did not quite understand it at the time, but I was in the process of developing my own ideas about how a city should be. And whichever way I looked at it, I always came to the same conclusion: that the best, most interesting city was the compact one. That the suburban sprawl atomised and derogated from that intensity, an intensity which made the organism of the city both enjoyable and sustainable.

All the great cities have compactness and a geometry that facilitates the movement of people through them. And generally a geometry that has arisen over time through habit and convenience.

When, as Treasurer in the mid-1990s, I made some remarks on radio about the nature of the cities and the lack of housing choice, including the primacy of the Hills hoist, I suffered brickbats for months. Indeed, before the deregulation of saving and

trading banks, which I presided over, including the deregulation of housing financing, it was virtually impossible for any private developer to build attached housing or apartment block-type development. They simply could not marshal the required levels of debt and individual buyers could never be sure that finance was available to settle a contract. There was no off-the-plan buying. Those days, the days of the so-called free-enterprise banks, were the days of credit rationing. Credit rationing achieved through Commonwealth regulation.

So the suburban sprawl with its quarter-acre block was not only the creation of urban planning, or the lack of it, it was also a product of the then financial system.

Today we can do more, our financial leverage has been vastly improved and in terms of planning, we know better. Or I hope we know better. But the truth is, our cities are not working well. And they are not growing well.

That said, the future will be more about redressing failures than it will be about moving forward with some notion of a blank slate.

Our transport arteries will have to work and if they do not, we will have to invest in them. Our densities will have to increase but they will have to increase with built forms that garner popular acceptance by enriching the landscapes people live in and traverse daily. And places where public spaces are good, where people go and will want to go. Places where communities can prosper, where people share a common ambience and when issues arise, some common cause.

It seems to me that improving densities has to be the main way we accommodate larger populations in our cities and especially here in Sydney.

Melbourne and Adelaide have a flat canvas to work on, with very particular grid structures of long streets availing both cities of future development and redevelopment options. Sydney is completely different; the harbour bifurcates the city, leaving it much more compromised in development. This is also true but less true of Brisbane and Perth.

But let me say that generally, we are not doing higher density well. In Sydney, for instance, there are many examples of good medium-density redevelopment but there are hundreds of shockers. And it is not that we have not done it well in the past. In the last half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth we did it exceedingly well.

If you take areas like Potts Point and Kings Cross, you find the highest densities in Australia but densities accomplished in a very pleasing way. Five to seven storeys, similar heights and scale, uniform setbacks off roadways, often similar materials, like the use of liver brick in the 1920s and 1930s. These characteristics make aesthetic sense and people will pay to live in them.

The great architect Leon Battista Alberti said ‘potential for awareness of harmony and beauty is innate in the mind’. He said ‘with beauty it is not opinion which matters but rather a kind of reason which centres on divine gifts which the human intellect enjoys’. I have always believed that. That’s why people know that when they walk

into a well-formed street or precinct or indeed, an attractive room, something in their DNA is telling them this is harmonious and harmonious with them. It makes sense to the intellectual goings-on in their mind, even if they have no formal training or formalised appreciation of what their eye should and should not like.

For instance, the Potts Point apartments stand mostly as individual but related sentinel blocks; slightly detached from each other but with resolution over the façades. The older apartment buildings, the ones that people like, have an 'all façade' fenestration which the eye can make sense of. The façades do not present as a grid of verandas and sliding glass doors with no overarching composition. People are more interested in the aesthetic composition of the façade than they are in the mostly unused, quasi-amenity of a veranda that offers some free floor space by virtue of a gaping concession in the planning system. And those verandas inevitably give rise to those charmless ice tray façades. All cubes and no composition.

And a lot of this failure is not public policy, though, of course, some of it is. It arises, more often than not, from an absence of civic conscientiousness on the part of developers and their architects. Or, if not that, a kind of urban incoherence.

This kind of development not only dumbs down those in the community interested in buying the product, it cuts right across the idea of the city as a composite project. The notion that our pride and pleasure can be best found in the composition of the whole rather than in the quest for the singular.

The great cities and more particularly the attractive, compact ones have always been a composition of the whole that has taken precedence over the particular. Paris and New York are perhaps the obvious examples where common setbacks and the common use of materials have been the key variables in their success.

In putting architectural ideas together in my own head, now for over 50 years, I have come up with what I believe is a rule and a truth. And it is that 'variety is the antithesis of grandeur'. The buildings of the great Paris boulevards are each different to the other but they obey common rules as to materials and form such that they present a variegated uniformity which invests those boulevards with grandeur. And by grandeur, I mean a larger, simple massed greatness. A whole greater than the sum of the parts.

These days of course, we live in the age of the steel-frame building. Buildings are, more often than not, not clad in stone. We celebrate the new material use—glass and steel, concrete and natural stones—and we know we can do wonderful things with these materials. And there are many truly great modern buildings, especially commercial ones. But inevitably they are greater when they relate one to another in civic compositions, ones by which the human eye can detect a rhythm and pattern.

We cannot continue to do higher density the way we are doing it. This will produce more and more resistance even though the policy of doing it is utterly rational. The resistance comes from the truly gormless nature of much that is being produced. Our community is walking around with that DNA Alberti spoke of; they do not need

instruction in architecture or design to know what is mediocre or bad. But they are depressed by what they see and are forced to inhabit and they resent it.

Which brings me back to Sydney in the main, a subject I was asked to expressly address in this talk.

Let me approach it this way. All the great cities have clear definition at their core and the communities of those cities have done all in their power to maintain the clarity of that definition. Whether we are speaking of New York or Paris or Copenhagen, their municipal governments and their people have kept faith with the central motif of their place.

In Sydney's case, the defining and central motif is its harbour, but the harbour is an abstract work of headlands and inlets providing definition to a larger water body. It seems to me that at all costs, we should brook as little derogation from that conception as is possible. This is not to be judgemental as to what has taken place to date; it is all about attaching a premium to the natural defining characteristics, especially and particularly the public places. The places that belong to us all.

You see a city which has good public places and good public spaces and you see a city with a soul and a sense of itself. As the architect Richard Rogers said last Friday in the Sydney Morning Herald, 'cities are the grandest physical expressions of our humanity and are at the heart of our culture'.

Our city on the water does not come from a built form as did, say, Venice, which is entirely built. Nor does it come from a great and single river like the Neva through St Petersburg, with its complementary geometry of man-made canals. Ours, rather, comes from a truly ancient gift which only nature could divine. We would be recreant in our civic obligations not to do all in our power to keep as much of its natural form as we could, or if not all that, to make certain that the lost bits of the jigsaw are returned or mostly returned to their rightful place. Like the stone in the pond, we should follow the ripples out such that the rings of development relate to one another, taking their strength, reason and inspiration from the natural fantasy at their epicentre.

Of course, some distance from the harbour, that imperative wanes. As we get further away, the character of the harbour and its impact on its surroundings weakens. But generally the topography remains synonymous with the drama at the foreshore and it is not till we approach the reaches of the western and southern suburbs that that relevance peters out.

But of course, along the coast, the idea of Sydney as a water place remains: along the beaches and book-ended by those powerful marks: the Hawkesbury River and Port Hacking.

But unique as it is, the harbour has no one aesthetic authority. The harbour foreshore has been beaten up by government authorities and by various municipal councils. Some councils understand it well, others seemingly couldn't care less. For instance, Manly Council gave us all those indifferent apartments blocks perched either side of the Manly wharf, as it gave us that most horrible strip of harbourside

residential development along that escarpment at Seaforth immediately to the west of the Spit Bridge.

Canada Bay Council had the opportunity to sympathetically plan the post-industrial period of the inner Parramatta River and made a botch of it. Or, let me say, it and departments of the state government made a botch of it.

There is a reasonable case to be made that the actual perimeter of the harbour should be deemed an area of state significance to be administered by a single authority. The rolling membership of councils and the confused municipal-planning processes can never and will never do the harbour justice. Accordingly, our great inheritance, the great natural gift, is either defaced or expunged by studied indifference, benign contempt or incompetence.

What has saved Sydney Harbour for most of its history has been the lack of development monies. Most developments were limited to single dwellings or modest apartment buildings, yet no such sensitive and vulnerable place can survive the onslaught of an open financial system where anything that is bankable is fundable. Places like the harbour can only be protected by standards and by regulation because the market will abuse it for all it is worth. This leaves its protection to under-resourced, single-action community groups who, in the collective, must fail.

As in all things, what is needed here is leadership and as we know, there are only ever two ingredients in that: imagination and courage. And, mostly imagination. Because it is imagination that sketches the wider perspective, providing patterns and frameworks to encompass myriad elements that would otherwise remain unwoven.

Some of you might know that I have had a long interest in cities and civic projects. I was the first among those who, for over seven years, wrote the design requirements for the new and permanent federal Parliament House and I had a hand in selecting the design of Aldo Giurgola. At an earlier time I had joined Tom Uren, then minister for urban and regional development in saving the Glebe Estate from mortal damage.

In government myself, I funded the Better Cities program and took a particular interest in specific projects. The redevelopment of East Perth from a collection of warehouses and smash-repair yards to one of that city's most desirable residential precincts. The redevelopment of the railway yards in Launceston; the establishment of light rail in Sydney out through Glebe and, more famously, buying down seven storeys off East Circular Quay, while building beneath it a colonnade reminiscent of the Rue du Rivoli in Paris, a space which is now enjoyed in a unique Sydney way. And of course, more recently, helping to save Ballast Point here in Sydney from inappropriate development. But even more immediately, throwing thunderbolts at the Huns and Visigoths who would have preferred to concrete in East Darling Harbour, robbing us of that last great piece of Sydney's western waterside perimeter. But I should also say that, at the same East Darling Harbour, now Barangaroo, I am supporting a grand-scale development which represents a paradigm change in the way our CBDs normally approach the water.

So I maintain what, for me, has been a long interest in these matters.

Indeed, I came to the conclusion years ago that many of the larger-scale development and infrastructure projects could only be suitably executed with the interest and assistance of the Commonwealth government. Notwithstanding good intentions on the part of the state governments, their relative financial incapacity limits the kind of progress they should make.

When I became Treasurer in 1983, most of the key economic variables were on the Cabinet table: the exchange rate, interest rates, wages, tariffs and of course, the Budget. The reforms of the 1980s and 1990s put most of these variables into the market and removed some altogether, like tariffs. Broadly, only the Budget remains for the Commonwealth to fashion.

In the economy of today, what happens in the states and in the cities is now, in reform terms, more important than that which happens routinely at Commonwealth level: health, education, transport, infrastructure; those things which go to the efficiency and productivity of the non-traded side of the economy. Hence, the Prime Minister's current quest to reform the national state health systems.

But what is true of health and education is just as true of urban development, transport and infrastructure and here there are great lags; here we have lost much time. I think I can say that without the Commonwealth's ambitious and direct involvement we will not see the reforms that have to be made.

In this city, the primary building of the radial suburban railway system occurred now, just on a hundred years ago. When we were dirt poor we did so much more. In the century since, we have seen but incremental additions to the rail system.

Here in Sydney, with our demonstrated inability to bring the housing stock into better balance with demand, the real price of housing is rising such that our children cannot afford to house themselves. Whichever way you cut housing affordability, it is now beyond the reach of almost all, other than relatively high-income earners. But, more than that, the city is growing towards the mountains, displacing more and more open space. The answer, I believe, is better and more acceptable higher densities in the inner Sydney basin, with a valve to Newcastle, the Hunter and the North Coast. This can only be put in place with a very fast train.

Fast-train proposals die on the drawing board in sparsely settled countries. This is why a fast train from Sydney to Melbourne or Sydney to Brisbane runs foul of the marginal cost of a wet-leased aircraft seat. Incremental air-seat capacity is massively cheaper than the sunk cost of a train seat. But this is not true over shorter distances where wide-bodied aircraft cannot be an alternative. This is the case with Newcastle, where wide-bodied aircraft travel into Sydney is not an option.

In terms of key infrastructure in this city, there remains the need for a second and complementary airport to Kingsford Smith. There is only one possible site and that is Badgerys Creek. As Treasurer, I bought the Badgerys Creek land with the then transport minister Peter Morris in 1986 to give the city that reserve option. That was just on 25 years ago. Longer-term thinking like this should be rewarded with the kind of development I had Laurie Brereton legislate, as federal minister for transport, in 1995.

The Howard government revoked the Badgerys Creek appropriations in its first budget and did nothing over twelve years to reinstate them.

And now, the Rudd government has announced that it intends, with the state of New South Wales, to cancel the option and sell off the land. This is a diabolical decision which will cap Sydney's future air-traffic growth and, with it, Sydney's progress as an international place. This is a decision that has to be reversed. And quickly.

Sydney is getting away from us, Melbourne less so. Brisbane's whole-of-city administration is improving its relative development. And we could probably be more sanguine about Adelaide and Perth. From here on out, there can only be one approach that can make a real difference and that is Commonwealth–State cooperation, but it has to happen earnestly and quickly.