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UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF THE CITY CORE

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My task today is to help you begin to think about planning for central city redevelopment. I want you to put first things first, to put survey before plan, to realise that before we can effectively change the urban world, we must first understand how it really works. I must try to shock you into a realisation that our city councils and planning authorities lack intimate and accurate knowledge of the dynamics of our own Australian city cores and the inner areas which surround or frame them. When we set out to plan, to guide, to control, to change the complex micro-geography and economic patterns of any city centre, we must do so in a proper spirit of care, responsibility and humility.

When I was younger, I was certain that I knew a great deal about the city core, and how to mould it. Experience in a number of cities has taught me how little I really knew. A continuous process of re-survey and re-search of our constantly changing cities is the only proper basis on which we can build understanding, set goals, and guide change. We in Australia have long years of intensive work ahead of us, because collectively we have not yet launched this process of continuous survey and research. Our authorities have, therefore, no clear and early understanding of subtle shifts in the economic patterns of our metropolitan regions and the central business districts which serve them. Consequently, our authorities are constantly unable to act until a series of subtle changes have grown into a major disaster, such as a brutish traffic problem, a slum belt, or a failed commercial district.

In recent years, Sydney and Melbourne people have been somewhat frenetically trying to respond to these kinds of urban disasters. They have produced a relatively large number of exciting proposals for large, comprehensive redevelopment schemes. Such proposals are usually accompanied by highly dramatic architectural perspectives, showing

enormous square footages of mostly unrentable space, entirely unsupported by any development research or feasibility study. Such kite-flying proposals and perspectives are usually launched through press publicity, before the many public authorities and private interests directly affected by them, have been properly consulted. Such schemes become 9 day wonders and are soon forgotten.

Political decision makers, finance institutions and the public generally have become surfeited with these perspectives, and are taking less and less notice of them. This, at a time when the need for hard and close work to implement large-scale environmental design is becoming more and more urgent.

Carelessly sketched, unresearched, and prematurely launched proposals do more harm than good.

A few Australian authorities have recently begun to commission basic data collection and planning for our central business districts, but the overall situation remains appalling.

Ignorance at the simplest level

Let us consider our ignorance at its simplest level. Accurate maps showing streets and buildings, the position of public utilities, contours and other basic, physical things, simply don't exist for vast stretches of our inner metropolitan areas. Most of those maps which do exist are either wildly approximate or wildly out of date. When my own team was commissioned to carry out comprehensive research and planning for two large scale redevelopment areas in Sydney - one for land owned by a major city hospital, another for land owned by the Church of England - our first task was to commission aerial and ground surveyors to make accurate maps. Several official maps which did exist, and which appeared at first sight to be reasonable, disagreed with each other in major matters!

Ignorance of complexities

In the more complex fields of data relating to land-use, floor spaces

devoted to different uses and the dynamics of employment and transport shifts, the available and trustworthy data is even more scarce. Data available even in unpublished form is sketchy, fragmentary, approximate, and definitions of data categories are normally vague. This adds to the already appalling ignorance and confusion. Sydney authorities, for example, don't know whether employment in the Sydney C.B.D. is growing or falling.

The superficial opinion would be that C.B.D. employment must be growing fast, because so many new office blocks have recently been built and occupied. But much of this new space simply rehouses existing C.B.D. workers at lower floor-space densities. Just how much, no one fully knows, although the best informed people are those developers and consultants who have carried out their own office space and usage surveys. But these surveys are mostly confidential, are not carried out continuously, and are rarely, if ever, comparable to one another. To achieve comparability, the Australian Planning Institute has advocated the adoption of an Australian standard land use coding system, to be used by all authorities and consultants in all States.

In 1965, the N.S.W. State Planning Authority did carry out a Journey to Work survey for metropolitan Sydney, based on a sample extracted from the 1961 Census returns. This yielded an approximation of the total number of jobs on June 30, 1961, within a number of zones within the City of Sydney. Our authorities do not possess any other truly comparable, reliable employment data for a consistently defined Sydney Central Business District. We have only one, blurred snapshot, but no moving film of how the employment pattern is growing, falling or changing in character from block to block, uptown to downtown, from year to year.

In Melbourne, available data on the city core is slightly better. Mr. J.L.G. Williams of the Melbourne City Council's Town Planner's Office was able, in 1962, to carry out quite detailed land and floor space use studies and employment surveys for the central city area. He was also able to compare his results with a similar survey in 1951, by the

Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works. The Melbourne City Council is to be congratulated for its sponsorship and publication of Mr. William's work. It is to be hoped that the same survey will be repeated regularly, so that the changing patterns of land use and employment in the Melbourne city core can continue to be watched, and the knowledge widely used.

One striking, if grossly simple, fact which emerged from the successive surveys, was that employment in the Flinders, Spencer, Latrobe and Spring Streets rectangle actually decreased by 5% between 1951 and 1962. Employment in the seven block heart of the C.B.D. remained stable, but employment in the surrounding blocks declined significantly. Other, more complex and subtle analyses can and have been compiled from the 1951 and 1962 Melbourne central area data collections.

City Councils need Assistance

Despite some good work being done under difficulties by some individual officers, our capital city councils have been slow to face up to their urgent responsibilities in city development research and planning.

Their planning or development arms have been mere sub sections of other Departments, staffed only by one or two men transferred from the fields of surveying or engineering. Such men have been frustrated and often demoralised because the need for research and planning in the city core has been ignored by their city leadership. In short, they and their work have been both unloved and disregarded.

There has been abysmally little money spent on research and planning for our city cores. There have been abysmally few core studies commissioned by city councils. Thus our councillors, aldermen, state government officials and ministers are struggling in the dark when they try to act on C.B.D. problems.

We in Australia have done relatively well in metropolitan region planning. It is time we turned our attention to the central city cores, to understand their shifting natures so we can guide and protect them.

There is one bright gleam of hope on the western horizon. The Perth City Council is the first capital city council in Australia to appoint a City Planning Officer as the head of an independent Department at a salary commensurate with the responsibilities and expectations of highly skilled professionals. This Council has had the courage to choose a man of the bold character and outstanding experience of Paul Ritter. Perth City Council is also recruiting an able team of a dozen or so professionals to assist him.

Hobart City Council also shows signs of activity in central city planning. Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide yet have far to go. But Brisbane City Council sits firmly at the bottom end of the scale.

The Brisbane City Council's New Town Plan Section has now, I am told, been allowed to wither away to almost nothing. It is, I am told, now only a minor sub section of the administrative branch, unloved and uninspired. Only two loyal officers remain. There is no effective arm of government whose job it is to watch over, to study comprehensively, and to report on the fortunes of Brisbane's central business district.

While no one cares for the comprehensive view of the urban fabric, millions of pounds are being spent on the Emperor's new clothes of so-called "comprehensive" traffic studies. Little is spent on the essential companion land-use studies. Further hundreds of thousands are spent in city cores on the palliatives of traffic lights and restrictive markings. The more basic problems of urban design and redevelopment are left to the vapourings of newspaper publicists.

Understanding the Nature of the Core - the State of the Art

The history of Central Business District Studies is a comparatively recent one. Most of them date only from the nineteen fifties, although valuable pioneering work was done by Haig in 1927,¹ Alderson and Sessions² and Mitchell and Rapkin³ in the early 'fifties, by Murphy, Vance and Epstein (1954)⁴, John Rannells (1956)⁵ and Horwood and Boyce (1959)⁶. These men were mostly academic economic

geographers, although some were in private practice as economic consultants, and some were connected with City Planning Commissions.

The City of Philadelphia Planning Commission sponsored and encouraged a number of the most important studies. Thus it can now be seen that the subsequent striking success of urban renewal in that city rested on a substantial intellectual foundation. It is important to note that Edmund Bacon became Executive Director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission in 1949, and the political reformers came to power in 1952. Here indeed was an example of the spontaneous intellectual and operational combustion which our Australian cities today so sorely need.

What were the insights of these early studies? Haig postulated that land uses tend to allocate themselves according to their rent-paying abilities. Alderson and Sessions drew up a sensitive array of land use categories according to their tendency to cluster together in a city. Mitchell and Rapkin were the first to show that traffic generation is a function of land use. Rannells brought previous work together, and showed us the C. B. D. land use pattern as a system of economic activities. Murphy and Vance experimented with mathematical techniques for accurately delimiting the boundaries of the C. B. D., and with Epstein, they studied the internal economic geography of the C. B. D. Horwood and Boyce gave us the concept of the C. B. D. core and the frame area around it. Davies in South Africa extended our understanding of these concepts. Then, in 1959, Peter Scott⁷ applied some of these insights and techniques to Australian Central Business Districts, in a pioneering paper which is too little known by either city aldermen or planners.

In 1961, the National Capital Development Commission employed Ivan Boileau⁸ as a consultant to compare available statistics on land use and employment in the C. B. D's of Brisbane, Hobart, Perth and Adelaide, in order to assist in estimating future needs in Canberra's Civic Centre. This was an attempt to draw analogies between the square footage of, say, retail space in existing cities with the possible future square footages in Canberra. It was severely hampered by lack of detailed and comparable data from the existing cities.

The Cumberland County Council in 1962 set out to obtain finely detailed land and floor use statistics in the central business districts of Parramatta, Bankstown and Bondi Junction, three of Sydney's major sub regional centres. The Council commissioned URBSEARCH, The Urban Research and Planning Centre Pty. Ltd., to devise a coding system and to measure all business establishments in Parramatta. This work has been reported by George Smith and Henry Wardlaw in the Australian Planning Institute Journal⁹.

In 1964, the Melbourne City Development Association commissioned a firm of consultants to study trends in metropolitan and central city space demand. The results of the study by R. T. M. Whipple¹⁰ were later published by the Association.

Mr. Whipple applied a large number of statistical and economic indicators to the incipient suburbanisation of retailing, industry and wholesaling in Melbourne Region. He concluded that Melbourne's suburbanisation of retailing was only then beginning, but that Melbourne's C.B.D. would follow Sydney in the decline of its major retailing function. City core retailing would be increasingly dependent on C.B.D. employees and residents. He predicted that retail land use and space in the Melbourne C.B.D. would shrink in area and in sales volume. After a most comprehensive series of analyses of available statistics he advised the City Development Association that "We cannot expect our city cores to resist the consequences of dynamic growth - the central area must modify itself to meet its changing role in modern urban organisation. Only by study, research and informed planning action, will we be equal to the challenge of change".

From Mono to Poly Nucleation

In March, 1965, in an address¹¹ to the Australian Architectural Convention in Melbourne, I essayed some notes on the historical evolution of the Sydney C.B.D. I illustrated briefly the origin of central place functions on the west bank of Sydney Cove beside the Tank Stream, and their growth and shift southwards from 1788 to 1932, by which time they stretched as far as Grace Brothers, Broadway, to the entrance of the University of Sydney.

Sydney was a mono-nucleated metropolis from 1788 to the middle nineteen fifties. The suburbanisation of both retailing and industry, assisted by planning policy, has since transformed Sydney into a poly-nucleated metropolis, so that many functions have moved from the regional core to sub-regional centres like Parramatta, Bankstown and Bondi Junction. This means that we are now faced with surplus land and buildings in the old C.B.D., which after 170 years of southward growth and shift, is now shrinking in size and returning northward towards its point of origin at Sydney Cove.

While Sydney remained mono-nucleated, its single C.B.D. could only grow southward away from the Harbour. But the build-up of main roads, tramways and railways during the 19th Century also pulled the most highly accessible core of the C.B.D. in a southward direction. This transportation system culminated with the opening of the Central Railway Terminal in 1906. The return northwards was made possible by the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Wynyard Station in 1932, and the opening of the Circular Quay Railway Station in 1956.

Sydney's metropolitan structure is the oldest, most complex or mature, of Australian capitals. Its broken topography has forced it into a number of articulated districts, which have in recent years outstripped efforts to maintain their accessibility to the old metropolitan C.B.D. All of these special characteristics should be studied before one predicts that other Australian cities, like Brisbane or Perth, will inevitably repeat Sydney's evolution closely and precisely.

Nevertheless, suburban retailing bedazzles otherwise hard headed businessmen as well as the general public. Convenience shopping has already shifted to the suburbs in Melbourne, and is shifting in Perth and Brisbane. Soon Melbourne's comparison shopping will follow. Canberra is being planned on a poly-nucleated system, with office employment as well as retailing decentralised, and all this planned for populations of only 250 to 500 thousand! Can Adelaide, Hobart and the rest be far behind?

A Concluding Exhortation

There are world wide trends towards the articulation of metropolitan regions into regional clusters of suburban cities. There are, more relevantly, Australia-wide trends for C.B.D.'s to shrink in area, to lose retail trade, wholesaling and some secondary and tertiary industries. There is even reason to suspect that the total numbers of jobs in the C.B.D.'s of Melbourne and Sydney, if not steady, are actually declining.

Thus it becomes most essential for each City Council to understand the true nature of its city core. This demands the expenditure of some funds on investigations and studies of each particular city core as a complex system of economic activities, firms and establishments, and land uses, all continuously interacting with one another, and continuously responsive to locational pressures generated by the changing patterns of the metropolis as a whole. These investigations have been neglected, and the nature of the city core has been ignored in Sydney for the last twenty years. Consequently, the decline of the southern two thirds of the Sydney C.B.D. has caught some retailers, most planners and all authorities, completely by surprise.

Perhaps the lesson had to be learnt first in Sydney. But now, let other City Councils profit by Sydney's experience. Let them now commission studies to reveal the true natures of their city cores. Let them then plan intelligently and appropriately.

Money has been available for "transportation studies", but one suspects the land use predictions which are incorporated in these studies. For example, the highly coloured "Summary Report" of the Brisbane Transportation Study, on page 26, confidently asserts that "A 35% increase in the number of available jobs in the central City is projected for 1981". Who projected this? on what basis? It may be a wise projection, but we are given no evidence in its favour. Unless and until the full study is available for checking, the simple statement cannot be accepted.

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