

# (RE) MAKING SYDNEY:

## IMAGE, FORM & CRISIS OF VISION

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Last year, in conversation, the principal of one of South America's most innovative architectural practices handed Sydney a verdict, which we believe that for its own sake the city must try to come to terms with. What started as a fairly innocuous discussion over dinner resulted in a vision of clarity only possible through the objective eyes of a visitor. When asked what he thought of Sydney, he remarked, "I don't trust it."

The notion that one couldn't trust a city was compelling. In 15 short minutes, he had managed to dismantle Sydney's approach to making itself. It wasn't until months later with the release of the Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy, a City of Sydney initiative, that his observation took on something altogether more formative. In essence, he had asked whether we were engaged in making the city or simply an image of the city we hoped to be?

Coco Chanel once remarked that one should look for the woman in the dress: "If there's no woman then there's no dress." Chanel's maxim is based on the overarching principle that, in order for fabric to be transformed into dress, it requires the catalytic presence of a woman. This principle sits at the heart of making the city—that is, in order for space to become place the catalytic presence of the city is required. >>

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Throughout history, the economies of a particular place in time have been driven by different cultural values relevant to that context. These values have determined the form of the city and, with it, a projection of the cultural values underpinning that economy. This sets up a specific cause-and-effect relationship between the bricks and mortar and the systems that breathe life into them. Thus, cities such as Copenhagen, New York, London or Barcelona are not the pure result of some overarching design criteria guaranteed to produce good urban spaces. And how *can* they be? They are all exceptional cities, yet fundamentally different in their arrangement and distribution of buildings, streets and spaces. They are all maps of the specific economy present in each place and, therefore, manifest the cultural and social structures and preferences indicative of each.

>> Sydney's deterministic approach to 'making itself' is dangerously simplistic, whereby the city's bricks and mortar often pass for the city itself. As a consequence, we're simply making an *image* of the city we would like to be, rather than the city itself.

So what is 'the city' and how do we make it?

To answer this question it should be understood that two competing concepts of the city are at play here. First, is the commonly held view that the city is defined by its physical presence: for example, its buildings, open spaces, transport networks. Consequently, urban renewal projects typically confuse visions of new buildings and spaces as visions of a new urban condition.

The alternative is a concept of the city that defines it as the systems necessary to organise society and ensure we have the capacity to (re)produce and project ourselves. That is to say, the city is fundamentally an economy.

The problem faced by many cities around the world, including Sydney, is that they are seduced by images of the city, forgetting that in the race to produce these images, the city's form is simply the evidence of our existence, an expression of the economy. The issue is exacerbated when visions and aspirations of a desired status and reputation result in the cosmetic treatment of the city rather than any substantive intervention that builds the city's capacity to validate its form.

For example, one cannot simply adopt the mannerisms and attire associated with being a physician and immediately assume the

capacity to be one. Similarly, a city cannot simply adopt a certain form and miraculously become the city that this form suggests.

The confusion between these two states is compounded by the fact that 'architecture' and 'design' have become interchangeable. We argue that architecture determines the reason for a building's existence, its capacity to nurture and produce society. Design, on the other hand, is used to project this capacity via the building. Good design may therefore result in compelling buildings, but design cannot build capacity.

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>> The City of Sydney's Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy was a much awaited strategy which should have been the document through which we understood how to build the capacity of Sydney over the next two decades.

The 10 themes, or 'strategic directions' sound great—we all like a city that is sustainable, global and connected. However, the agendas emanating from these themes exist in isolation of one another and therefore lose the potential for any collective consequence.

The result is a document concerned with designing the city—its image—rather than empowering it to exist.

So, while it is rich on images of happy people on bicycles, it falls short of anything we may call a productive strategy. The city is redesigned rather than empowered to produce and re-produce itself.

The task of empowering the city requires a serious analysis of the many varied and yet interdependent economies that comprise 'Glocal'<sup>1</sup> Sydney. This is a different project to the one the City of Sydney has championed, as it is fundamentally based on understanding the impediments to building capacity in the city to exist in a highly competitive world and therefore the capacity of its people to make their place.

Having established the limitations and strengths of myriad economies, we can begin to innovate the systems of production, distribution and consumption that

define them. We can temper them with new and emerging social and environmental agendas and we can introduce new ideas concerning governance and inclusion, such as corporate social responsibility.

This project will then ensure that the economies that define Sydney are grounded in our unique proposition and thereby exploit the increasing importance of cultural capital. Yet, by failing to understand the specific area of an economy we wish to innovate with social, environmental, or political interventions, our efforts to be more 'sustainable' or 'connected' will simply exist as stand-alone concepts with individual value rather than as complementary ideas aimed at adding value.

Much of the confusion surrounding the role of design has its origins in what is arguably the dominant subject of economic globalisation today. It seems that the global economy is increasingly grounded in the cultural experience and therefore the capitalisation of culture. Everything we now produce is done so with a view to exploiting the image of a culture rather than the actual culture itself.

Consequently, design has become the subject of its own economy. The current emphasis of strategic plans on designing cities, rather than empowering them, stems from the fact that the design economy >>

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>> revolves entirely around the capitalisation of the experience of a designed object. Whether it's Green Square, the Sydney Olympic site, Redfern-Waterloo, or any one of Danish architect Jan Gehl's visions for the city, Sydney consistently manages to elevate 'visions' of the user's experience and 'interphase' with its form above the fundamental reason for the city's existence.

Mature cities—such as Barcelona, with its Metropolitan Strategic Plan of Barcelona and London, via The London Plan—demonstrate that the consumptive experience of the city is a consequence and not a driver of a city's capacity to produce its own *place*. These strategies identify key economies and the capacity-building measures required to improve them. These measures typically focus on education and building skills, community empowerment, inward investment, fiscal innovation, and support and networking.

The big mistake, therefore, in Sustainable Sydney 2030 is the assumption that the core value resides in the designed object—the buildings, spaces and infrastructure rendered so effortlessly across the pages of the document. Yet, the true value of the city resides in its capacity to make or create its buildings, public spaces, clothing and events. The Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision simply delivers design images of creative capacity rather than the productive strategies that may enable creative capacity to emerge.

Whether we have taller or shorter buildings, more or less of them, or roads with slightly different proportions, it does not matter unless Sydney as an economy has been determined and articulated. This means we have to move beyond an approach that relies on the illusionary qualities of design.

We have severed the traditional connection between the making of the city and the myriad local social practices which secrete space every day. The vacuum in which the built environment professions exist is further compounded by an agenda that manages the making of the city as if it were a property portfolio.

The generational outlawing of sophisticated and strategic city authorship is evident in the continuing rise of the black-letter law of planning regulations and the codification of images of place embodied in design guidelines. The replacement of a spatial intelligence, with planning regulations and property transactions, has impacted the built environment professions which have

had to professionalise alternate bodies of knowledge to negotiate the multitude of regulations that confront them.

Sustainable Sydney 2030 heralds a worrying decline in the democratic making of the city and, therefore, a worrying decline in production of the unique proposition so crucial to our competitiveness and survival in a global economy. The city must develop its own intelligence if it is to guarantee a substantive base to its existence. Images alone will not change anything.

This city, like any city, is its society—not its bricks and mortar.

If we fail to build capacity for the city to make and re-make itself, we fail to underscore the fundamental reason for its existence.

A vision for the city needs a far stronger rationale about its contribution to itself as an economy, if it is to project an image of a real city. If the notion of the city is continually reduced to debates concerning the qualities of the object, we will simply end up with macabre monuments to a failing vision. **M**

<sup>1</sup> Swyngedouw, E and Kaika, M (2003) 'Glocal: Urban Modernities: Exploring the Cracks in the Mirror', *City*, 7(1), pp. 5-21