

How good can good design be?

Last year I attended the Affirmative Architecture conference in Sydney, which provided a lot of stimulus in how our urban conditions and lifestyles can be elevated through quality, thoughtful design. This year it is in Brisbane with the vision of improved environments for users of the public domain and the occupants of buildings, and exploring how design professionals can fulfil more socially responsible roles within the community to explore ...'what contribution architects and architecture can make in the public realm and how their design strategies, skills and research might make a positive difference to everyday life.'

Design quality and improved standards are also key agendas on 3 local council design review panels of which I am a member, and it is widely agreed that in conjunction with the SEPP 65, apartment design standards have improved considerably over the past decade.

Following a comprehensive review, SEPP 65 changes are now proposed in a new *Apartment Design Guide* that includes a range of further measures such as -

- Greater flexibility in criteria and options for good design outcomes
- Inclusion of mixed use and shop top housing of 3 or more storeys
- Improved consistency of environmental and design measures
- Apartment compliance with BASIX sustainability provisions
- Variety of housing typologies, affordable housing and assessment times
- Minimum standards for apartment size and ceiling heights which, if met, will not create a basis for refusal
- New minimum car parking provisions based on proximity to public transport

The last point may be a key determinant in helping to lower the cost of residential development and assisting affordability, as car spaces can add up to \$80,000 to the cost of an apartment – and close to rail or light rail this has to be attractive to first home buyers.

Councils will also be encouraged to appoint design review panels, independent professional experts who can advise on design quality for proposed apartment developments. From 7 years of experience I believe this to be an opportunity to not only add value, but also avoid unfortunate outcomes such as some recent developments in the vicinity of Mowbray Road.

Review of the proposed SEPP 65 changes and submissions can be made by 31 October 2014 at www.planning.nsw.gov.au/proposals.

Journalist and author Elizabeth Farrelly also targets the design quality issue in her October Utzon Lecture on '*Architecture and Morality: Geometries of Virtue*', asking whether architecture actually matters and its role in shaping morality.

"We know that architecture affects our happiness and that happiness has moral import, yet we relegate the making of architecture to the development machine, as though it has no more significance in our lives than some random consumer product,"

All too often it is the bad design that gets the attention, but there is a turnaround happening – assisted by inquisitive columnists, design panels, design awards and media (and social media such as Pinterest) focusing on positive rather than negative reporting.

Relatively high urban density of good design can be achieved within 4-5 storeys at a human scale, with modulation and design details for pedestrians to enjoy the vitality of facades, active street-fronts and signs of life that don't just disappear at sunset. Such qualities are the ingredients for what the great Danish architect and walkability guru Jan Gehl regards as the keys to optimizing pedestrian experience, and improving the vitality of urban life – as is obvious from so many snaps of European holidays!

But these qualities can also be diminished by the general sameness of much of our public urban domain that has the usual franchises or chain store fronts, reliance on shopping mall type furniture or pavilions that often clog the open spaces and landscapes that attract people there in the first place. Such qualities can easily detract from local character and introduce a more privatised commercial focus – witness the recent work in Lane Cove Plaza, the scale and design of which many are yet to be convinced is appropriate.

The Lane Cove Plaza completion, together with results of the very limited Rosenthal site competition will no doubt provide plenty of fodder for the discussion mill over the next month (along with Council amalgamations), and a column topic to follow. The forum initiative has unfortunately been shelved for the present – but hopefully only a short term delay.

Jon Johannsen

15 October 2014

