

HUMAN CAPITAL

‘the most valuable capital today is **human capital**’ –

Hon Malcolm Turnbull PM, 20-9-2015

Just over a year ago I started this column to share concerns about Lane Cove and the urban environment of Sydney. How gratifying it is to now see a potential catalyst for action in so many of these areas appear almost out of the blue.

The Liberal leadership coup shows how change can trigger refocus, and it is encouraging to see that cities and the built environment should benefit from the appointment of Jamie Briggs MP to the new Liberal front bench – one with hopefully more vision and courage than the past couple of years have offered.

How great to hear new PM Malcolm Turnbull speak of our cities as economic assets, and of the prospect of all levels of government working together to enable our urban centres to grow in more efficient and sustainable ways while addressing some of their critical shortcomings.

Perhaps some exemplars of such critical calls to action might help....

Back in 2013 the Foresight project on Future of Cities of the UK Government Office of Science highlighted the key challenges and opportunities facing their cities out to 2065, aiming to improve the long term outlook for urban centres via short term action at all levels of government.

Seeking to visualise the potential of future cities via the realms of popular culture and media, the Foresight project looked at how cities might relate to both specific and more general issues around technological implications for infrastructure, mobility, sustainability, built form, density and scale.

The Future of Cities programme was a critical analysis of the potential for urban life – and the relationship of people with their built environment, implicit in societal and global ambitions for ecological and social sustainability, as well as the economic and political aspects of urban life.

“I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.” – Juhani Pallasmaa (2005: p.40)

For too long traditional models of governance and institutions based on centralised thinking have been limiting the tools and tactics now possible for urban change in this digital age, moving from big and central to small and local. Harnessing collaborative energy and the collective power of many small ideas and actions is the credo of ‘making Massive Small change’ that has grown out of the Foresight project.

The Massive Small Compendium (<http://www.massivesmall.com/>) proposes new methods of working with complexity in planning, designing and delivering urban change via a framework for research and development of open, responsive and collaborative alternatives. With ideas, tools and tactics to impact all parts of our urbanising world, this initiative aims **‘to create a planning, design and delivery system that works for all’**, creating new directions for affordable housing and urban precincts that can support all forms of life, work and play.

On the local scene back in 2008, Marcus Westbury, on return to hometown of Newcastle, found a desolate place with over 150 empty buildings. Through his Renew Newcastle initiative, Lonely Planet named that city one of the Top Ten cities to visit in the world just 3 years later.

His recently released book *Creating Cities* (<http://www.creatingcities.net/>) is about how a failed idea to start a bar morphed into a scheme that was a key to transforming Newcastle, which subsequently spawned over two hundred other creative and community projects around Australia, generating an alternative model for struggling urban centres worldwide.

Westbury posits that so many urban centres waste their most obvious potential **‘the talent, imagination, and passion of the people that live there’**. In this globalised age, local creativity has access to such a vast pool of possibilities, information and skills, and these were the ingredients for the Renew Australia program that turns small scale failures in Newcastle into a broad series of lessons and “why-to” strategy that can be applied in cities and towns around the world. **‘Creating Cities is an inspiring must read for creative people, civic and business leaders, town planners, citizens and anyone who cares about the communities that they live in.’**

The appointment of Jamie Briggs to Minister for Cities and the Built Environment was welcomed by GBCA’s chief executive officer, Romilly Madew who said...

“This appointment recognises not only the importance of our cities as the engine room of the nation’s productivity and prosperity, but also the central role the built environment plays in tackling many of Australia’s greatest challenges,”

If this new Federal portfolio can support collaboration across all levels of government, it may help better address the spectrum of urban challenges such as climate change, population growth, ageing demographics, congestion, housing affordability, liveability and social inclusion. More efficient, sustainable and liveable cities utilising our latent **human capital** can also raise prospects for national productivity, and trigger better living standards for more than 80 per cent of Australians now living in our urban areas.

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