

INNOVATIVE ARCHITECTURE

Building local platforms of mastery that give rise to innovative architecture

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ABSTRACT

Cities are visible traces of the lives that are lived in them. They reflect the vigour of the local culture, commercial and communal. Globalisation tends in some of its effects to dissolve the boundaries between nations and to set city regions in competition with other city regions. This means that cities compete for talent. Liveability means more than comfort; it depends on attracting creative people for the economic engine that makes for a diverse and rich city life. (Florida 2002)

In this informationist age, what looks innovative in Bilbao is immediately evident to the city government everywhere. There is a tendency to believe that this import model can be replicated. It is not evident that this is a useful strategy. Building a local culture and leveraging from that into the international innovation networks may well be a better approach to establishing a city as a credible player on the world stage.

This paper looks at the examples of Singapore (early mastery encouraged into significant innovation and then abandoned in favour of international branding, leading to an about face as the importance of a local creative culture becomes evident, perhaps too late); Barcelona (building an internationally recognised reputation for design on the pocket parks designed by locals, and then squandering this reputation by importing design from international brand names); Groningen (creating an old fashioned ‘zoo’ of exciting buildings at the expense of nurturing any local culture); and the more positive examples of Kumamoto (using the patronage of a city region and the novel ‘acupuncture’ approach to urban improvement to create opportunities for local talent) and RMIT (using patronage to establish a local culture of architecture so strong that Melbourne is now recognised in international forums as a world leader in city architecture.)

INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONALISATION AND GLOBALISATION

Internationalism and globalisation may seem to be similar processes, but the one has tended to drive to standardisation, whether through WTO or through the spreading of increasingly homogenised corporate and consumer styles. At best Internationalisation is a hygiene process in which a lowest common standard is determined and striven for in an attempt to establish civil society in the terms of a code such as the UN Human Rights Charter in every place on earth. At worst Internationalisation has an imperial flavour about it, an Americanisation or Gallicisation effect (Brie is as pervasive a commodity as Big M) – even if as one critic has pointed out, the Americanisation of the USA has been something to lament, as much as the Americanisation of anywhere else. Some analysts – possibly the optimistic ones, – see in Globalisation the seeds of a different model for civil society, one in which city regions become the building blocks rather than nation states, and in which these compete in the world through their creative differences. The pessimists (who are sometimes the same people in a different mood) see the obverse effect as a glorification of tribalism at the expense of generic rights.

IMPACTS ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF CITIES

When it comes to the shaping of our cities through architecture the effects of this debate are profound. According to one view, nineteenth century architecture flooded the world with waves of styles emanating from the metropolises of the various empires that fought to ‘civilise’ the world. Neo Palladian classicism denoted a continuity of the imperial project with the empires of ancient Greece and Rome, Gothic was used to purge any association with Napoleon’s grab for Europe, and as industrialisation took hold, encyclopaedias of architecture were ransacked for conglomerate inventions that fitted the mood of the moment as befitted the whims of ruling elites. When these tides of fashion rolled out across the globe, this was a coercive process. The Nawabs of Lucknow (Llewellyn-Jones 1985) had invented an upside down classicism for their palaces, with summer living quarters buried in basements with sleeping decks above the piano nobles that were used in transition seasons and winters. Far from recognising this subtle adjustment to the realities of their life and climes, English engineers decreed that these hybrids were proof that the culture of Lucknow was inferior to that of Europe, and the very form of these buildings was used to justify the overturning of a treaty relationship, and an assertion of direct colonial rule. Modern architecture, a rationalising off shoot of industrialisation, played a long counter establishment game,

arguably first hitting the international scene with the Crystal Palace in 1851. American aspirations to world dominance showed up in the neo classical Chicago Worlds Fair in 1881 in ways that were probably unconscious, but as explicit as could be to any historian of form. And Modernism itself was ‘turned’ from a rational process into the “International Style” by the Americans in 1923 - *The International Style* (curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, MoMA, 1932). This presaged its stripped orthogonal boxes becoming the style of international corporations in the second half of that century, so pervasively that city success was as much measured by the graph of skylines as by any other indicator.

SINGAPORE – EARLY PROMISE

Cities like Singapore that wished to be seen to be international players moved forcefully to disenfranchise a vigorous local architectural culture, busy inventing hybrid building types like Golden Mile in the 1970s, a combination of shopping parking residential and office that was very avant garde at that time, and replacing it with an internationally sourced graph paper skyline. Now, having killed off its own architectural culture, and needing in a more ‘globalised’ world to demonstrate that it is a centre of creativity, its policy makers thrash around trying to generate that culture from scratch.

BILBAO – NOT NECESSARILY AN EXEMPLAR

To many analysts the story of Bilbao is a success story for globalisation as a framework for success through celebrating difference. Unemployment is cited as dropping from 30% to 10 %, following the adornment of the city with this wonderful artefact. But we need to be cautious here. The Basques have had access to huge regional development funding, and while the Guggenheim and an underground designed by Foster Associates of London have helped to build tourism, there has been no underpinning of the local culture’s development. Better to think of the Guggenheim as a mining rig. Tourists mine what was already there – the wonderful glazed bay windows that lit the lace workers’ tasks, and a local speciality of broad beans being amongst these. The Guggenheim in fact regularly mounts blockbuster shows of American Gigantic Art that make even the Brutalist steel works of the local sculptor Chillida seem puny.

GRONINGEN – A DEAD END?

Groningen in the Netherlands has tried very bravely to become a city distinguished by its patronage of design, housing a museum of design and turning itself into a museum of design

at the same time. The museum by Bellini is a curious commentary on this ‘Venice of the North’, and many works by distinguished architects have joined it. It is however irredeemably a ‘Zoo’ for architecture in the nineteenth century sense, visited for the reason that a wide variety of works by architects from around the world can be seen in a short compass – but with no agenda for nurturing diversity through a local culture of patronage.

BARCELONA: A DECLINE?

In Barcelona the Catalans have done better, using the Olympics to generate a homegrown approach to urban regeneration that has established an entire generation of local designers as leaders on the world stage. There are many aspects of this tale that are not readily replicable, given the pent up energy released when Franco died, and the strong regional identity, and strong local professional structures. However, there is a sting in the tail here, because when this wave of urban improvements in pocket parks and repairs to institutional infrastructure was completed after the Olympics, local politicians basking in the reflected glory of this mini-renaissance reasoned that if Barcelona had done so well with local architects, how much better could it do with mega projects by internationally renowned architects, and two desperately bad mega projects followed – Richard Meier’s Museum of Art which sits like a marooned hulk on a bombsite carved out of the ancient city fabric and IM Pei’s vaguely ship-like 80,000 square meter shopping mall on the harbour mole that now blocks the view from the Ramblas to the Horizon. Adding to this, the locals have gone so far as to forget the genius of their own hard won city plan – a grid with chamfered corners that was laid across the ancient field systems and humanised by competing designs by several different architects on every block. The famous Diagonal that slices through this grid has been wonderfully extended to the seashore, but the new buildings lining it are all by the same single hand!

MELBOURNE: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE SUPPORTING CREATIVE INNOVATION

Background situation in 1986

One can see that this is an area plagued with the laws of unintended consequences. Is it possible to develop strategies that amplify a local design culture to the benefit of a city region? Over the last seventeen years the principles for such a process have emerged in Melbourne, a city region like Barcelona, but without altogether the same driving local sense of a particular culture defined by a language and a literature. It has to be acknowledged that

there have been aspects of architectural ambition embedded in Melbourne's culture from very early on, and various flowerings of that ambition as the tides of imperial fashion swept across it. Some of these tides came from the USA – there has been a long tug of war in the culture between the traditionalists who seek to compete with the culture of the founding imperial metropolis, and the modernists who looked to the USA for leadership. (A forthcoming book by Paul Fox for Melbourne University Press reveals the history of this tension.) There was a wave of innovation around the 1956 Olympics, very much Californian Case Study House inspired. But thirty years later in 1986 the city elite was still in the grip of an Internationalising ethos that had seen large tracts of inner suburb cleared to make way for High Rise Housing slabs in the 1970s. The banking and property culture was bent on demonstrating its 'world class status' through commissions such as I M Pei's Collins Place, and a little later Kurakawa's Melbourne Central. The Stock Exchange was redone on Gotham City style by architects from Los Angeles by architects whose names are not even known in that city. Needless to say none of these edifices grace the monographs brought out by their authors. Local architects recently returned from abroad completed one wonderful version of what they had learned from such masters as Mies van der Rohe (Yuncken and Friedman's BHP HQ) and then as fashions changed were left high and dry, not knowing where to turn, as they had not generated the cultural capital that gave life to these forms. There was however a vigorous local culture, and it was at work on the fringes of the city in a series of churches (Corrigan), low rise offices (Ashton & Raggatt), school alterations, clinics (McDougall), and some of it was re-inventing (Powell) what it was to eat in the city as in the mid 1980s local ordinances began to allow people to dine within view of the street and then even on the pavements. An architect from Sydney (John Devenish – see Spence) took over as Housing Commissioner and began to appoint young architects to do infill housing (Corrigan, Elliott).

Initiation of elements supporting a community of practice

At this moment I arrived in the city, determined on a model of education that involved the most ambitious of the young architects in the life of the school – in which Peter Corrigan was already ensconced. Over a short period I got to know them all, and began to take international visitors on tours of their work. It would take all of a day to do several projects scattered about north of river, another day to see several south of the river. The City Centre was interesting only because of remnants from previous eras, Collins Street lined with posts holding sepia images of the glory of marvellous Melbourne, long gone in the woeful property boom of the 1970s.

Criterion Based Selection of Architects

RMIT at this time had a huge backlog building program, and for reasons that are not relevant here – but certainly supported by the work of Winsome McCaughey on the RMIT centennial commission, a report that argued strongly for a re-engagement of the university with the city on which its 1970s buildings had turned their backs - I began to work with my university on a way of engaging this new generation of designers in that process. By the late 1980s we had achieved full approval for a criterion based selection process for appointing consultants – some years before anyone else in the region adopted the so-called Quality or Qualification Based Selection process. This policy enshrined certain principles: that the university was embedded in the city and had a history of procuring buildings that was as heterogenous as the city, and reversing the logic of the 1970s, which had pictured a string of slab blocks marching down the civic spine to the river replacing all of the nineteenth century institutions with Brasilia clones - this heterogeneity should be embraced. In effect this policy has meant that no firm of architects has been commissioned for a series of buildings. The second principle was that the university's buildings should reflect its mission to be at the forefront of technical education and research. The third was that the university should open itself up to the city and become permeable, with its spaces and laneways becoming again part of the pedestrian and cycle networks from which it had been excised. The criteria for selection were – and are - in part fixed, in part project specific. Architects submitting an expression of interest were to demonstrate their commitment to design excellence through an account of the peer review to which their work had been exposed. (Much as any research is validated by review!) They were to demonstrate through their work their ability to think laterally about complex problems. They were to demonstrate their ability to relate to a multi-layered client. And there were the usual quality requirements around financial capacity, insurance, timeliness and cost planning. Project specific requirements have included proving credentials on sustainability and design in the tropics (RMIT has a university in Vietnam). But project specific requirements are never that the architects have designed the same kind of building before. Submissions are ranked by a committee that reports to the university council, comprising members of the property services team, members of council, members of the senior executive and the Professor of Architecture (me.) Short listed architects are invited to enter a limited competition for large projects, interviewed for smaller ones.

Outcomes

The results? RMIT has brought Melbourne's own architectural culture into the centre of the city with a series of controversial but award winning buildings. Many of these are world-renowned. And they promote the university's mission. Storey Hall, for example, is acknowledged for being the first building in the world to use the new mathematics in its design, something that has become almost commonplace since – as in Federation Square. Other procuring bodies have followed RMIT's lead, notably the other universities and the State and City Governments. This has spread across Australia, ANU recently appointed a firm expressly to “do for us what architects have done for RMIT”.

Is the model replicable?

Perhaps the situation in Melbourne was uniquely poised for such a program, just waiting for the scale to be tipped? Perhaps. But the underlying principles for this program have derivations from the theories of the great educator, Alvin Boyarsky, my mentor, whose ideas also played out in a completely different arena and culture in Japan. Through the Osaka World's fair, distinguished Japanese architect Arato Izosaki became interested in Boyarsky's ideas of how to promote architectural ambition. In the Osaka Follies he curated a series of first appearances of architects nominated by Boyarsky, most of whom have become international 'stars'. (Izosaki, Price, Taki 1991) This was an event which was in the end pretty unattached to Japan, and that must have become evident to him. In parallel to the RMIT process he also added a regional dimension to Boyarsky's model of support for new designers. He was the Commissioner for a regional regeneration project in the Kumamoto prefecture of Japan, a region with over three million inhabitants suffering the effects of industrialisation and centralisation in the Japanese economy. In the first phase of this investment program the focus was on the heritage of the region, as series of wonderful bridges and temples were restored. But it was clear that tourism focused on historical monuments would not of itself rescue the region, and the concept of the Artpolis was forged. Izosaki persuaded the governor that new buildings were as important to the region's future as the old wonders. Now this could have played out as a revamp of the small city at the centre of the region, in a Bilbao way. But the Artpolis was defined as the entire region. In a process described as 'acupuncture urbanism' Kumamoto prefecture was combed through for development opportunities and sites of need. And projects such as police stations, fire stations, public lavatories, visitor information centres, observatories, ferry terminals and museums centred on continuing cultural events were identified. Many new bridges were built,

and significant housing renewals took place. In so many instances around the world this would have been the moment for Izosaki to either develop a huge office and do all the work himself, or for him to divide the spoils with a few of his peers. But he set up an arms length appointment process designed to seek out the best of the young architects working in Japan and give them in many cases their first significant commissions. Some of these have since become household names – Tyo Ito, and Kazuo Sejima. Others were young foreigners like Tom Hennessy, then based in Tokyo. These buildings are a wonderful testament to the vigour of the Japanese architectural culture. Has it worked as a regional development strategy? This is how. In the remote mountain valley regions of Kumamoto, an annual puppet show of ancient provenance has become a daily theatrical event associated with a puppet making workshop, rehearsal rooms, a school for puppetry and a shop. The design uses local timber in a novel, earthquake proof structural system, exhibiting the application of old materials in new situations. The population drift to the city has been stemmed, the young stay, there are new associated private enterprises. The school is self-sustaining. Story after story repeats this theme. The Artpolis concept is seen as an exportable idea.

Effects for Melbourne

What have been the effects for Melbourne? In 2000 Lyons Architects represented Australia at the Venice Biennale – selected through a blind nomination process run through the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, through which process Melbourne architects were the only finalists over the two years of the Seppelt Design Awards program. All of these had been through a masters program at RMIT designed to involve architects who have established a level of mastery in their work in reflecting upon the nature of that mastery, and to speculate on future practice based on their findings – through the medium of architecture itself. At Venice in 2002 – bearing in mind that this is the peak exposition for cutting-edge architecture in the world, and that Melbourne is strongly competing to represent itself as a creative city on the world stage – Melbourne-based architects were represented in every category of the international exhibition (Wood Marsh, Kovac, DCM, ARM and Lab Architecture), the only Australian city represented and the only city in the world so represented. That the Australian Pavilion itself was empty probably speaks volumes for the tensions of a federal system. And in Melbourne itself, while significant talent has been attracted to work in the city, a major block being completed near RMIT – the QV site - includes designs by alumni and firms with alumni from our invitational program in four of its five buildings, BHP Billiton's twenty storey HQ by Lyon's Architects, a forty storey apartment building by John Wardle, a hybrid

complex of retail, parking and childcare facilities by Kerstin Thompson. The other building is to a design by the unflaggingly distinguished practice of DCM. These are all in the local scene now termed ‘bankable architects’ – a significant turnaround. In its initiating patronage RMIT has been a catalyst and a player in this amplification of local mastery into a significantly active ‘community of practice’, but it has not been the only player. There are nineteen other providers of design education in the State, all making a vital contribution to a mastery platform unparalleled in Australia. And the local chapter of the RAIA has been guided towards a generous inclusivity by a string of presidents from Dimity Reed through Steve Aston to Ian McDougal and Eli Giannini. They have ensured with the assistance of councillors like Peter Elliott that the awards process is a very broadly based peer review process. This is a far cry from the exclusivity maintained in other states, who talk quality, but do not seem to seed it.

CONCLUSION

Overshadowing thwarts mastery, never more so than when a city seeks to advance itself on the world stage by importing architects for all of its significant buildings. It is thwarted by technical over-refinement, as when selection criteria – as seems common still in most appointment processes - demand prior experience in the building type being commissioned. And it is caused by forgetting or suppressing cultural capital, as when an orthodoxy is asserted that obliterates the necessary pluralities of any creative culture.

Mastery is encouraged by processes that are inclusive, involve extensive peer review, and build local cultural capital. It is said of Melbourne, as of Barcelona, that it has such a rich talent base that any project could be effected there. What could be more attractive to potential clients of such a city?

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