

Design in The City

Singapore - old city in foreground with new CBD in rear ground (watermark image)

Urban design in the city

There is reason for concern over the design of the city of Cairns. We need to be pro-active in envisioning 'what we want', writes BEN GUY, with a PhD in urban design.

We have seen tears this week over the loss of four trees at Ellis. Yes, traffic engineers are brutal. They are the urban designers' nemesis, but are a result of the desire for high efficiency and high safety in road environments. Sometimes less efficiency is more efficient in public space design. If we had a little Statement of Intent, or a rough masterplan for Ellis Beach, a truly a majestic location with the open-air Ellis Beach Bar, caravan park and beach front, a gateway to Cairns and the ocean drive, then things may have been different. But – the traffic engineers, who have oodles of power in the name of public safety, and indeed drive much of urban design (excuse the pun) – were not breaking any rules by their books.

There is a story given by Rob Cowan of the UK urban Design Group - a Lord who lived in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea complained of all the engineering fencing everywhere - the same stuff we get around traffic lights and pavements. When he inquired - he found that traffic engineers are enforcing self-made rules. So, the Lord, took responsibility and had them remove all the fencing and - fatalities and accidents went dramatically downward! There are good reasons for this.

Anyway, while trees are helpful, and necessary, and we look forward to the rumoured 10,000 new trees to be planted across Cairns, and tens of thousands more, good design comes from good form and space making the public Place of the city. The visions of local built form emerging, from the residential to the commercial, are worrying from an urban design viewpoint.

Lets talk commercial and civic though...

Firstly, we have set the benchmark pretty low, with the Cairns 'Gateway to the City' site, by the international airport, expressing bland commercialism in its most pure form in the Repco building. This outcome is directly supported by the CairnsPlan, a document that openly states that land-use is more important than Place, or context. Thus, where 'use' issues are complied with (eg traffic generation, commercial/

residential activities), then, supposedly, how the building contributes to that Place in which it exists is, a secondary concern. That is: townscape or streetscape matters less - despite the rhetoric.

Civic Theatre: - The significant cultural hub that could be generated by the new Civic Theatre, with two stages, restaurant and associated activities, is not a placemaking opportunity to be sneezed at. Whilst a 'landmark' building with a flashy skyline would be nice, a 'landmark' Public Place would be a hundred times better for a hundred-thousand people. A Place for people to Be. The Casino is a 'landmark' building that offers visual interest from a distant skyline view, but does nothing for the Cairns streetscape at the human grain - and we are humans. There is no animation or conviviality. The, assuredly preliminary, theatre layout provided to the press recently is ignorant of how built form and humans interact - dealt with by urban design. It is monumentalist - a series of 6 separate blobs. It offers little to Sheridan Street in relation streetscape or a social functioning city. The prominent corner is a driveway, and the foyer is set back some 50m from the footpath. All buildings have bums - ugly back ends where bins are stored and messy things are done - but in the naïve view presented, the buildings are all 'fronts' - both to the street and the theatre. The design will result in 80-90% blank wall - perfect for graffiti, exposed air conditioning, hiding spots for nefarious loiterers and general urban blandness.

Central Towers:- Regarding a design for the old Coles site. It may be sustainably argued that sleek towers are most appropriate to a tropical climate for reasons of cross-ventilation and access to light (Singapore city is given as a model Asian CBD architecture, see picture). Towers have a place, especially as 'landmarks' and gateways, but should not undermine meaningful streetscape. This is private-to-public space interaction. A sense of urbanity, safety and humanity arises when we put living action where people will sit, walk and be, on or near to the edge of the footpath. Blank walls and enormous setbacks create dead boring cities. What point having all that wonderful vitality, density and activity in the city, if we cannot interrelate when we want to? This is the foundation of the best and most beautiful cities in the world. Cities are all about 'being together', and the socio-economic opportunities that affords.

If we are to have a great Place that is Cairns, especially in and around the CBD, then we must put the streetscape experience - that dictates the daily response and experience of the urban user - as the core of our planning and design. How will this building help make a great place? - needs to be the first question asked. It still allows the same economic return for the plot - and a greater one for the city by the value-added. Many trees are a good thing, and should be promoted, but space is created by primarily by buildings, and urban place created by the interaction of humans in meaningful spaces. Put place first. Council needs either the skills or the realisation that this is important - as only they can provide leadership to the private sector - who are usually willing to comply when certainty is provided.

VIEWPOINT:

Cairns Today, Gone Tomorrow.

The idea of current developments enhancing streetscapes and utilising existing vegetation and local character, even with new buildings, seems to have all but disappeared in 21st century Cairns. Instead the 'mow down and rise-up' mentality appears to have moved in and local communities, their often historic buildings, spaces and lifestyles are being ignored.

Cairns was once just a sugar cube at the end of a highway called Bruce, but its growing mid-riff has been the product of developers and investors who jostle for position on its increasingly crowded, but now sluggishly slow, wave to wealth. Despite what many people will for, property booms come in cycles, and like bung washing machines, they tend to spin out of control for ages until they finally choke towards a self-liquidating end.

But perhaps it also has something to do with the marketing machines which offer rainforest getaways, beachfront hideaways and perfect, unique, leafy charm but actually deliver air-conditioned rectangles that overlook fluorescent lit car parks fed by the curry smells of the unit next door. And if winterless lifestyles and verandah views are the selling points, it would be nice to see buildings that actually have real verandahs and views of something other than the neighbour's noisy split-system.

This city's current ad-hoc development approach is low on originality, ambiance and fresh air and ignores modern urban design ideas that advocate engaging local communities and creating people-friendly developments. Less gates, fewer fences and more landscaped open spaces are in many cases what make people feel safe, and heaven forbid, more likely to respect the suburb they live in.

Dating back to the 1880s, Freshwater is a good example of old Cairns suburb which once supplied the bullock train drivers with market gardens and fresh water before they headed north on the Smith's track to the gold fields beyond. Freshwater today still holds much of this history, with its railway station, its old Queenslanders, and its village atmosphere. Current developments should look to support and enhance these historical roots. By using history and low-rise architecturally appropriate styles, it is possible for developments to build on the heritage values of this city's suburban communities and give locals and tourists an environment to enjoy, share and be proud of.

Molly L'Estrange.

THE FLY



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