

STEPHEN McMAHON

ANSWERING THE CALL OF THE BEAN

Using urban design to foster creativity in new suburbs

Creativity and the suburbs

There are a number of consultants extolling the virtues of creativity and the presence of the creative class as the panacea for the woes of urban areas and the way forward to achieving glowing, prosperous and almost utopian, urban environments.

Charles Landry (1995), in the UK, takes the high road. He talks of the need to promote new forms of business, governance and partnerships, and provide greater access to the arts and technology, as the means to identify creative solutions to contemporary urban issues.

Richard Florida (2002), on other side of the Atlantic, takes a much more sublime and arguably populist approach. He talks of successful urban economies being driven by indices (concentrations) of youthful gays, bohemians (artistic people) and other 'hip' groups residing in inner city precincts.

South Terrace Fremantle – Why should we be tourists to experience café culture?



Assuming that one accepts their philosophies (and there are critics, particularly of Florida's work, which is more tangible and therefore more open to scrutiny), how can, and should, these approaches be applied in the suburban context?

In 1970 Hugh Stretton noted that, "you don't have to be a mindless conformist to choose suburban life. Most of the best poets and painters and investors and protestors choose it too" (1970: 20).

In my experience few poets and painters reside in suburbia. They choose, instead, the inner city or bush or coastal retreats (before they, too, become spoiled by population growth and popularity) as a place to reside. They tend to echo criticisms that suburbs foster conformity and conservatism, hardly offering the environment to nurture new ideas and innovation.

Should therefore planners and urban designers accept that suburbs have no role in fostering creativity? Should we accept that they are dull dormitory areas, abandoning them to the less creative classes in the community, promoting, by default, a form of class segmentation?

Another Hugh, Hugh Mackay (1993: 284), notes more recently that, "McDonalds may have established itself in the Australian market as a place which would allow us to eat and run; increasingly McDonalds is being used as a place where families can stop and talk to each other. ... we buy more than a hamburger: we buy a hamburger *plus time*. ... As Australians begin to discover the pleasure of eating out, so they begin to recognise the social opportunities which this creates".

This bodes well for fostering creativity in suburbia. Mackay emphasises that

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suburbs should not be devoid of opportunities for social contact and discourse. Importantly the majority of Australians still choose to settle in suburbia and over two thirds of the population of our cities will continue to reside by choice in suburbia. There is no Australian city that is not planning new suburbs on its fringe.

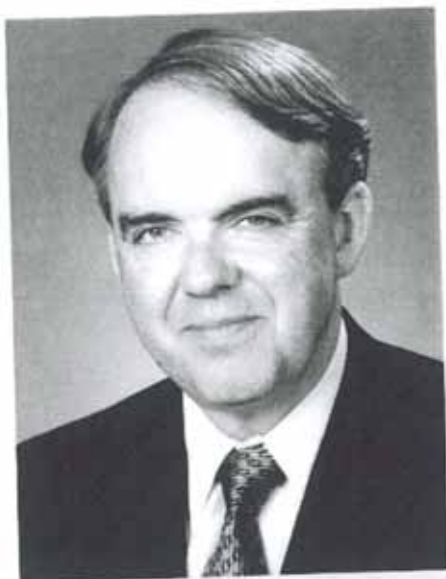
In the land of McMansions and McCafés, the challenge confronting planners and urban designers is to facilitate, rather than to ignore, the potential role for new suburbs to foster creativity. Planners and urban designers should be actively nurturing an environment that attracts creative people.

Urban design, therefore, has a mandate to recognise the presence of the creative class and to modify traditional planning techniques to accommodate it. Opportunities to establish an urban environment that allows people to be expressive, rather than conformist, are vital.

The coffee cantata

One of the simplest opportunities to facilitate creativity in the suburbs lies in the availability of 1,3,7 – trimethylxanthine, commonly known as caffeine.

As the story goes, in about 850 CE an Ethiopian goat herder noticed that when his goats ate the red berries of a local shrub they tended to become friskier.



“WHAT IS A CREATIVE CITY?”

A creative city, among other things, celebrates artistic talent which can entertain and engage audiences. The arts can inspire us to excel while also allowing us to relax.

The arts can also help to build communities and social cohesion.

We value the arts and culture, and are committed to supporting our creators and our institutions in the pursuit of artistic and cultural success.

Responsive Government can help support the energies and artistic talents of its people.

In last year's election policy *Strengthening Australian Arts*, we restated our commitment to generating an environment in which the arts and culture can thrive. The Government is providing record levels of investment to achieve this – about \$517 million in 2004-05.

With Government funding, we help support individuals and arts institutions. We support key training institutions like the Australian Ballet School and the Australian Youth Orchestra, as well as key activities and national touring programs like *Playing Australia* and *Festivals Australia*.

Australians who wish to pursue success in the arts are given every opportunity to fulfill their talents.

This is one of the ways that the Australian Government is helping to build creative cities.

SENATOR THE HON ROD KEMP
MINISTER FOR THE ARTS AND SPORT

More reliable histories describe the role of 17th century London coffeehouses as the engine rooms of English supremacy in the global economy, exploration, innovation and invention at the time. They were forums for meeting, exchanging ideas and gathering news, becoming known as 'penny universities' on account of the learning that could be undertaken there.

They became entrenched in the economic, social, cultural, commercial and political fabric of the City. Famously, Edward Lloyd's coffeehouse eventually became Lloyd's of London, the world's most well-known insurance company.

The physiological effects of caffeine are comprehensively and controversially documented. It is generally agreed that



James Street Markets, Brisbane – Coffee... A great opportunity to watch the world go by



Coffee in the suburbs – Being expressive with espresso



Alfresco beer – It's not the death of beer yet, but the experience is the same.

