# the material city

DENSITY AND DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE

EDITOR AND CURATOR
RON RINGER

# vertigo - a manifesto?

KIM CRESTANI

*Height frightens some people. Others don't bat an eyelid; it's the view to the streetscape below and the horizon they find interesting. High-rise buildings have particular meaning and relevance to our cities in terms of urban densities.*

**HISTORICAL** Until relatively recently, the typical Australian family lived in a single-storey house on a quarter-acre block, and in a suburban street. Those days, kids played in the backyard or out the front on roads that had yet to experience bumper to bumper car traffic. It was 'Fair Dinkum', as they say. Since most inner city suburbs were fully settled by the early decades of the twentieth century, the urban fringe was the only way to go. This phenomenon is surprisingly recent, and the direct consequence of immigration during the inter-war and postwar periods. All was not well, however. Writing in 1960, the Australian architect, Robin Boyd, observed that the architecture in our spreading suburbs was creating an 'Australian Ugliness'. His attack on our built environment identified three particular issues: the obsession with featurism - a fixation on parts rather than the whole; building materials and styles ill-suited to the country's landscape and climate; and the culling of trees in order to prevent leaf clogging in drains. Boyd's views would have been informed by Australia's rapid post-war growth and the need to house newcomers. He died in 1971 when our population was 10.28 million.

**CONTEMPORARY** One can only imagine what Boyd would have made of today's towns and cities struggling to cope with 24.5 million people. I think he would have immediately recognised that higher densities next to transport nodes was the most realistic, and possibly the only solution. I start from the premise that not all development is bad, and for that that matter neither is all high rise. Yes, everyone is nervous about density, but I would rather see towers in a beautiful public realm, as long as they have sensitive design in confluence with each other. Not all high rise is equal; a fair amount is ugly and devoid of charm, interest and beauty. Building heights are uniform so that we have no discernible hierarchy of building size, and an absence of trees and precincts, which are hedged by pencil thin pavements. They add nothing to the public realm. It doesn't have to be this way, but until we agree on a definition of the 'public realm' - get inventive and imaginative about how we can create public space - we'll carry on doing what we've always done.

What is encouraging is that most Councils are trying to negotiate better urban design outcomes in response to questions that affect us all: how do I want to live, work and re-create in my free time? What can I afford - and where? Since the price of a modest three-bedroom home in any of our major cities is out of reach to most of us (especially the young and those with families), high rise living, or at the very least medium-high rise, is the only way to go. The high-rise package must also include air-conditioning because it's simply unreasonable to expect people to live in 40°C heat experienced in our western suburbs during the summer months. In the power mix we need to include solar power and better energy storage.

So, I'll lay my cards on the table. The cumulative impact of all the development we're currently witnessing must be resolved. We need the open spaces, the children's childcare centres, and space for all the other uses. To me, however, if we're not putting development next to a station, then we're doing something wrong. Density belongs where we have intensive transport nodes. To densify is to simplify.

**DENSIFY, SIMPLIFY** Who are the players that decide what's built and where? They comprise Council planners, the transport people, a Department of Planning or its equivalent in each state, and of course, developers. Councils have rules, though some are outdated and certainly not up to the challenges we confront. Most are struggling to deal with a flood of DAs. The transport people are not urban planners. Most state planning departments have few resources, which encourages developers to fill the void. Their interest is in maximising return on investment, but they need certainty; before buying the land they must have a good idea of what they can do with it.

As a matter of fact, developers give and take, although that may surprise you. Some of them give back through a voluntary planning agreement, such as that permitted by Parramatta Council, whereby they're allowed to develop, say, a 15:1 ratio. I'm an advocate for working with the good guys - the good developers who want to do good development. Inevitably, horse-trading takes place between all parties, which is understandable though it takes time and huge effort. Everything gets done on the run.

**ACTIVATE** It's also about the streets - footpath widths, trees and public domain. We need to activate our streets with high density and high-rise, which can be done well. If developers obtain a few more storeys on the top of their high-rise, then we're able to capture that value and provide more amenities for everyone.

High-rise, rather than row upon row of little houses, offers more opportunities for wider footpaths and beautifully crafted streets. I would rather see 30-storey towers than hectares of little houses on little blocks. But if we're stuck in this groove, then we should be designing smaller houses with proper landscape overlap. Low-rise can also give you density, like terrace houses in L-shaped configurations, allowing us far more room to plant trees.

**MANIFESTO** All of the above is why we need master plans, and especially design competitions which encourage urban planners and architects to come up with new ideas. If we only held more of these design competitions we'd be ahead. A while back, I wrote what I call a manifesto for urban planning. We must ensure that the best buildings are built and connected to a sustainable transport solution. Transport must be the solution to underpin the advocacy of other agencies. Council that instil high-level design competition, truly independent design review panels and the correct application of SEPP 65 will produce the best results.

So, for what it's worth.....

**HOUSING IN THE VICINITY OF RAILWAY STATIONS** Within 400 metres of every existing and new station we must ensure that "under-development" (low density) does not occur, which would be very difficult to reverse. Within 800 metres of stations, we should reduce density, although it needs to be higher than the current two-storey suburban developments.

Around all existing and new stations, developers should be required to include an affordable housing ratio of at least 5%. This would go a long way to solving key worker housing. If developers knew the approval process was expedited, this would save red tape and costs.

Outside every station we should include a dedicated Public Realm space, ideally 1000m$^2$ (20m x 50m) which acts as a marker for customers to orientate themselves, as well as amplify the public setting of the station architecture. The Paddington Reservoir or Shannon Reserve are both good examples of public space.

For retail precincts, we should provide public squares and/or laneways, since different scales assist by providing "grain" and activity to the public domain.

**GOVERNANCE** It is now almost impossible to navigate government regulations and seeming impediments to good planning and design outcomes. Councils are inundated with applications, the Holy Grail of the developer being to win approval for the highest of high-rise buildings. Appeals to a higher authority invariably turn to threats. For some councils, the Land and Environment Court has become the defacto approval department, which is an admission of the failure of the approvals and planning process. The result is that we have badly constructed buildings that give good architects and developers a bad name. Whilst everyone is keen to see great urban design and public realm projects delivered, it is difficult to understand how the roles of Urban Growth and the Department of Planning are working together.

**MODAL HIERARCHY** We must privilege the pedestrian over all other modes of access, so that the transport function is not compromised. Streets should set the framework for the urban design within which architecture sits. They should be the best possible, with a "balance" between adequacy of footpath widths but not too large as to be too wide to negotiate. My view is a minimum of six metres (3m+3m). At the station, a built form interface of a maximum 6m with trees in tree guards is a good scale.

**BUILD STREETS PROPERLY** We must ensure adequate advanced tree planting to reduce heat-sink effect and satisfy the 20/20/20 Landscape Vision. This means allocating services so that streets don't need to be dug up or reconfigured. Provision for safeguarding and /or providing services must be resolved.

Ensure that along the corridor or riparian corridor that public domain, ie the street, is provided as the interface. That means no private development is allowed to back onto the corridor.

Provide public squares and or laneways that relate to retail precincts-different scales will assist with providing "grain" and activity to the public domain.

**ALLOW FLEXIBLE ZONINGS** We should use 3.3m ground floor heights and active- mixed-use zonings. All built forms should be highly flexible. Allow a variety of uses and construction methodologies (i.e. framed buildings that can be converted) that allow flexible uses. Vertical schools/community facilities / health facilities etc. should be encouraged with bonuses.

I make no apologies in taking my cue from the architect, Vishaan Chakrabati. In his book, *A Country of Cities: a manifesto for an urban America*, Chakrabati celebrates the 'Manhattanisation' of US cities as an economically rational antidote to the damaging health and environmental effects of sprawl. This, he believes, has been fuelled by federal policies that have created a country of highways, houses and hedges. Sound familiar? He contemplates a different nation, one of trains, towers and trees where a more sustainable and equitable nation can be achieved by 'removing the legal, economic, and moral imbalances that incentivise sprawl'.

By global standards Sydney is not, as some people would have us believe, a dense city. We are, however, in the process of playing catch-up after years of stasis; our densities riding in tandem with a vast transport infrastructure program that is re-aligning axes of population and settlement.