

A CULTURAL POLICY FOR CITIES TO IMPROVE A CITIES' CULTURE.

Tone Wheeler

Architect, Director of *environa studio*
Adjunct Professor Sustainability *UNSW*,
President Australian Architecture Association, *AAA*
A personal submission.

Australia is the most urbanised country in the world. Over 40% of the population live in just two extended cities, 70% in just ten. Each year, constructing the infrastructure, urban areas, buildings, and landscape is over 10% of the GDP (more than mining). Eight of the twenty richest people in Australia derived their wealth from property development. Following their lead, housing is seen as property investment by the world's most highly leveraged 'home' owners.

No wonder our cities are seen through the prism of the wealth of the economy, not through a wealth of culture. Government regulation (mostly State and Local Council) is aimed to prevent worst practice rather than to promote a brilliant place to live and work. It is almost entirely about quantity, little about quality. We need a cultural policy for our cities to improve the cities' culture.

The federal government has occasionally addressed this lacuna. Tom Uren with DURD (Dept of Urban and Regional Development) and Brian Howe with the community housing programs are two rare examples. Despite their status as deputy prime ministers, their impacts were limited by the ever-powerful locomotive that is city development.

Cities can be overwhelming with so many unrestrained moving parts. Motorways vs public transport; inequality and social housing; food miles and land loss; soul-less CBDs. These aspects are divvied up between authorities to corral the economic powerhouse. A dynamic and radical national vision is needed, and the quality of culture provides the prism.

Sustainable design in the built environment may be said to be based on *country*, *climate*, and *culture*. Interweaving these threads could lead to entirely different Australian cities of the future.

Architects and planners mundanely refer to *country* as site analysis, but it can be so much more. It is important to understand how Australian cities adapt to their particular location: topology, topography, landform, water. The responses in our nascent cities drove clear differences, rather than similarities, before being overrun by modernist uniformity. Artists can divine a way back.

Climate will play a huge role in determining the sustainability of our cities and buildings in the future. Returning shade to buildings and streets; orientation towards winter sun and the cooling summer breezes; localised power generation on well-oriented roofs, the flow of the water cycle. Again, artists can hold a special illuminatory role on 'back to the future'.

But it is *culture* that offers the most promise for improving the quality of our cities. We need an approach that puts the artist's creative mind into the design mix for our cities and buildings, a cultural approach to the built environment from the start of the design process, rather than as an appliqué afterwards.

Artists can help shape the visual, sonic and haptic senses of the spaces inside, instead of adding post-hoc murals or sculpture outside or in the foyers. Artists can help determine the flow of the freeways rather than adding patterns and designs to the sound walls. Artists can assist in restoring the waters of our drains turned back into streams and rivers. Artists can imagine a response to climate not wholly dependent on the scientific. What if our buildings, urban squares and landscapes were derived from the artist's mind, rather than the engineer's?

Proposal 1

The federal government should undertake to have “artists in residence cities” across all portfolios that invest in the city: housing, infrastructure, energy and so on. This will draw on the diversity of art creativity, at the beginning of projects, so artists are involved in the design of the city from the beginning of a project, rather than being invited to apply an artwork at the end.

We need a greater diversity of professionals involved in the design of the cities in a collaborative way, rather than a tokenistic ‘community consultation’. The federal government should develop consultancies for artists for their vision of the city of the future - paid support for artists to contribute their visualisation skills, materiality and understanding of humanity to the development of the culture of the city.

Proposal 2

Indigenous involvement in the design of our cities has been negligible and tokenistic at best. Now there is a possibility to create a key place for the indigenous artist (and architect); combining country, climate, and culture, as they have for thousands of years, but reinterpreting them for the 21st century. It could create an entirely different culture to our cities.

The government should encourage indigenous artists and architects to study cities and urban design so that they may contribute to the culture of the cities. It is a tragedy of lost possibility that less than 0.5% of architecture students have an indigenous background, when 3.3% of the population.

Given the indigenous understanding of culture, history, songlines, mapping country, spatial and graphic ideas it would be to our advantage to draw on that knowledge for our cities. What we need is a policy to lift the participation of indigenous artists, architects, and planners to 5 or 10% of all working professionals. Then we might have a culture of ‘Australian’ cities.