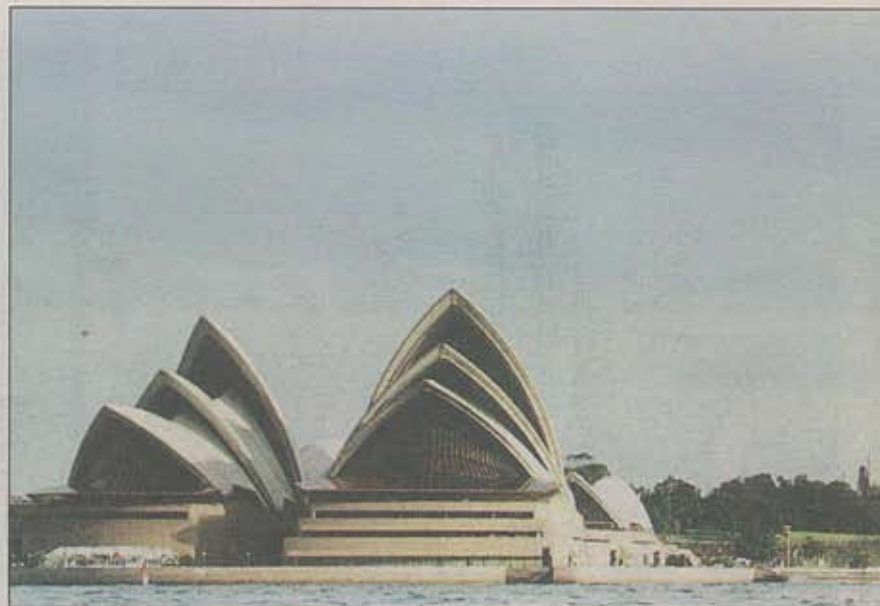


cover story | Anne Suskind



City on the rise

Visitors flock to Chicago to admire the architecture. Could the same thing happen in Sydney?

Every city is the sum of its architecture – the good, the bad and the indifferent. What matters is the ratio and whether there are oases of excellence – buildings that do what architecture at its finest ought to do: lift your spirit.

The fledgling Australian Architecture Association, set up last year with Pritzker prize-winner Glenn Murcutt as founding president, takes the view that Sydney has plenty to show off. The association has grand plans for harbour cruises, open days of glamorous homes, walking tours of important sites and a calendar of visits by leading international architects, the first being Britain's David Chipperfield.

Judging from the interest in anything to do with design in Sydney these days, there should be a keen clientele.

A vibrant community of architects and enthusiasts attend talks, slide nights and salons in venues from the small Potts Point headquarters of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects to the downtown Angel Place recital hall, where some 900, mostly black-clad, disciples packed the auditorium last year to hear the visiting Swiss architect Peter Zumthor.

The association's program, which begins next month, is modelled on one in Chicago, a city famed for its built environment, where more than 200,000 people annually go on tours organised by the Chicago Architecture Foundation.

But does Sydney have what it takes? Does our architecture shine? Chicago has been a hotbed of

architectural innovation for more than a century. Among its many gems, it boasts buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van de Rohe and Louis Sullivan. They have become part of the landscape, while Sydney has traditionally relied on its one icon, the Opera House, and its natural beauty to win admirers. Our built environment has not, until now, been a drawcard.

However, the recent addition of a few curves and stepped and angled profiles, courtesy of Renzo Piano's Aurora Place and Sir Norman Foster's soon-to-be-completed tower in Phillip Street, has seen the city skyline become more varied and much more interesting.

Topping the list of home-grown city towers that push boundaries are Harry Seidler's masterpieces, most recently the Cove Apartments at The Rocks, a structure that works well against the skyline and as public space at ground level, as does his classic from 1967, Australia Square. Then, in the CBD, there are Richard Johnson's Governor Phillip and Governor Macquarie towers. (The Governor Phillip Tower won the prestigious Sulman Award for public architecture in 1994.) And there's Ed Lippman's slick revamp of the Boy Charlton pool in the Domain. Universities are also producing works of note, which the association plans to have on the tour agenda next year.

"For the city you're born in and love, you always want the best possible," says Johnson, who was chosen by Joern Utzon to help remodel aspects of the Opera House. "Rarely does

development live up to its promise or expectations, but you'd have to be pretty mean-spirited to say the quality of living in Sydney streets, in the built form, hasn't had a dramatic improvement in the last decade.

"There's more outdoor activity, more cultural facilities. Some buildings are absolute shockers, but a number of pieces of architecture have made significant impacts and there are grand public and semi-private places contributing to the grain and texture of the city, and you don't see that in a lot of cities.

"We do have enough of quality to spark debate and start people thinking about why other buildings are not rising to the occasion. There's also some great classic early modern, for example, Liner House in Bridge Street."

While there's a lot to be proud of, there's still plenty of mediocrity – disappointing buildings that don't live up to their locations.

For starters, there's the East Circular Quay development – "the Toaster" as it became known thanks to its blocky appearance – whose imperfections we have chosen to forgive because of the elegant colonnade beneath, where Sydneysiders can do what they love most – eat and drink and people watch.

"What I find difficult is to have a neo-classical arcade that introduces the Opera House," says Lawrence Nield of Bligh Voller Nield, who designed the Tennis Centre at Sydney Olympic Park. "It probably does work in urban and people terms, and it's pretty well put together, but we have there one of the great pieces of architecture in the world and while the introduction to that doesn't have to be of equal importance, it should not have to resort to neo-classical stylism."

The refurbished Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf, no longer resonant of its maritime and social history, is described by architect Richard Lepastrier as "exclusive, not inclusive, with gin palaces moored in front of it". And the addition

Inspirational: above left, Chicago, with a music pavilion designed by Frank Gehry. Above right, for too long, the Opera House has been the only excitement on the horizon.

Photos: Peter Thompson/The New York Times, Rob Homer



Shooting up:
below, Norman
Foster's new building
on Phillip Street will be
capped by a steel
structure that will rise
80m above the roof;
Aurora Place,
designed by Renzo
Piano; Finger Wharf,
Woolloomooloo.

Photos: Dean Sewell,
Lee Besford

at its tip was described by the NSW head of RAlA, Caroline Pidcock, as "inexcusable ... a lot of people are deeply offended by that".

Other disappointments include the main Darling Harbour development and the maypole-like 32-metre-high light towers at Railway Square, a design supervised by the NSW Government Architect's office that Nield has described as "urban clutter".

Then there are the "three bears" - nameless pink office blocks opposite Central Station in Elizabeth Street. "Dreadful, one of the greatest eyesores," Pidcock says.

Talk to the architectural community and they will list countless travesties.

At a planning level, the traffic congestion is getting worse, and shopping malls, such as the Westfield at Bondi Junction, are draining the life out of the traditional main streets. Such is Sydney's history that every new development fills us with trepidation, including, for example, the looming prospect of up to 12 new towers, each the size of Australia Square, at east Darling Harbour.

In Sydney, where we really shine is in our domestic architecture - the houses and the medium-density developments. Good examples are Moore Park Gardens, designed by Allen Jack + Cottier, some of the new developments around Alexandria, and apartment blocks such as Engelen Moore's Altair Apartments in Kings Cross and Frank Stanic's Mondrian Apartments at Waterloo. Pidcock says our houses of the past 50 years are our "untapped jewels".

"Unlike Europe and other places, many architects cut their teeth by doing beautiful small domestic architecture. We've got space to build and the need for more housing. Europe does more internal fit-outs," she says.

One showcase for domestic architecture is the North Shore suburb of Castlecrag, with its cluster of houses designed by Walter Burley Griffin and

Marion Mahoney Griffin, both of whom worked in Frank Lloyd Wright's Chicago studio.

As part of the Australian Architecture Association's program, bus tours will take participants to see the work of Seidler, Alex Popov, Peter Stutchbury, Ian Moore, Durbach Block, Stanic Harding, Angelo Candalepas and Gerard Reinmuth. The architects will be present to explain their buildings, while separate tours have been scheduled to hear Murcutt talk about his Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Centre in Riversdale, and to visit Stutchbury's houses in Kangaroo Valley.

There are also tours of streetscapes. Moore, for example, will take a tour of Redfern, comparing a street where houses are homogeneous with one

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where contemporary houses have been inserted into a historic context.

The tours kick off next month with a harbour cruise narrated by Leplastrier, who is known internationally for his wonderfully crafted houses. At home, he is known for his uncompromising, principled stance, his convincing way with words and, more recently, for entering the fray to save our harbour's public spaces from development.

Leplastrier is a calculated risk for the association. He's adamant he will not be advertising Sydney, but telling it as he sees it, a tale of often lost opportunities.

"We certainly have the talent, but there's a total lack of vision at the top, politically. More often than not, that talent is not given the chance in a public realm. The younger, more radical people don't seem to have access," he says.

"Every public work should be designed through open competition with submissions of no more than two A4 sheets stating the basic idea ... and we should stick by it. If it goes to a young Turk, by all means get someone else with a track record to give them a hand."

There are, Leplastrier says, dozens of opportunities to improve Sydney. One of his passions is revitalising Macquarie Street, the threshold of almost "all our city's great institutional buildings". It could become a "powerful connector" between Hyde Park and the Sydney Opera House, a place for pedestrians and where cars only allowed to travel at 5km/h, instead of the bitumen thoroughfare it now is. He would also like to see something made of the "great horseshoe", Hospital Road.

"I am not interested in selling Sydney," he says. "I'm interested in raising issues that are confronting us. As evidenced by the plethora of mindless, exclusive housing crowding the waterfront west of the bridge; the Government has dropped the baton on the whole harbour thing."

Among the other harbour cruise guides will be Bruce Eeles, Tone Wheeler, Philip Thalys, James Weirick and Nick Hollo.

The association aims to attract international tourists but, more importantly, the tours will focus on reaching out to the Sydney public. They are not about architects talking to each other, says the association's Stella de Vulder. The aim is to create a "narrative" for the city. A widespread understanding of how the city is being made. "We want to demystify the buildings, because architecture is public art," De Vulder says.

The Australian Architecture Association's first Architecture Harbour Cruise, with Richard Leplastrier, is on March 5, 2-3.30pm, \$25. Bookings, 8297 7283, www.architecture.org.au

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