

NCA chief Malcolm Snow rethinks formula for high quality urban spaces

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National Capital Authority chief executive Malcolm Snow. *Photo: Jay Cronan*

This is Tony Trobe's second interview in a series of three with National Capital Authority chief executive Malcolm Snow.

TT: Is Canberra suffering a bitumen glut? My calculations suggest there is more than 7000 square metres of black top for each and every one of us.

MS: Canberra has the debilitating affliction known as HCDS or high car dependency syndrome. Compared to say the eastern capitals, however, there is low traffic congestion and getting around by car is relatively easy because of the generous geometry of roads designed in the 1960s when the concept of peak oil would have been laughable. The flip-side of this overzealous traffic engineering has been the detrimental impact on much of the city's public environment. There is low public appetite for rebalancing this condition because the private car option remains so attractive and because we seem sceptical about embracing higher densities, public transport and land-use diversity.

TT: What do you think of Canberra's "satellite city" concept?

MS: The polycentric Y plan adopted in the '70's remains essentially a sound strategic urban design idea except for the fact that the centres have largely failed to realise their intended potential as activity agglomerations providing self-contained places for living, working and leisure. Dominated by introverted shopping malls which act as black holes sucking public life away from the surrounding streets, they have established landscaped settings but their public space networks are disjointed, poorly maintained and lack the fine-grained place appeal to encourage people to use them.

TT: The old NCDC used to be a one-stop shop controlling Canberra's planning. What has happened since?

MS: Any objective assessment of Canberra post self-government would say

that there has been high quality land-use planning but only sporadic high quality urban design.

Pre-1989, the NCDC was widely regarded as the leading planning agency in the country. It did some innovative urban design for its time but it's a matter of conjecture as to whether those leadership traits continue to be emulated. Given its origins, visionary urban design and civic leadership must continue to be indivisible strands of the national capital's DNA.

TT: What do you see as impediments to the future prospects of Australian cities?

MS: In cities, formulaic responses unquestionably repeat what has gone before. The resolution of the "wicked problems" facing Australian cities is still being approached from too narrow perspectives and fails to understand the reality of the urban condition. Uninspiring acts and short-term thinking, especially in the regulatory planning field, can destroy the fabric and spirit of a city. Too often we see planning interventions by governments that have fallen short of the mark and people seem either reluctant or too apathetic to imagine, let alone demand, high-quality 21st century urbanism. The built-environment professions need to raise the level of consciousness about the state of our cities so in turn the community demands better outcomes from their elected representatives.

TT: What are some of the NCA's current projects?

MS: They are an eclectic mix of capital projects such as Bowen Place Crossing, of major urban design studies such as the Kings and Commonwealth Avenues Place Renewal Plan and of significant estate-management improvements such as the planting of 500 new trees. One of our non-works-related initiatives is a re-imagining of our Inform and Educate program, about how we can more powerfully tell the story of Canberra's ongoing evolution as a city in the digital age. All of these are about delivering our core functions as an agency, one that is determined to raise the profile of our national capital.