LOCAL VALUES
in a
NETWORKED
DESIGN WORLD

ADDED VALUE OF COMPUTER AIDED
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

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Binary Winds : Identity in the Digital Age

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KEYNOTE PAPER

"A city can only exist when it is inhabited in the imagination of its citizens."
Alastair Grey

When I worked with the research and development of computer-aided design for landscape architecture with Edinburgh University in the 1980s, the race was on to find meaningful software and affordable hardware (outside of Caltech) which could cope with the curved line. How we envied the architect's rectilinear form as we struggled with our rasterised grids to prepare 3D models which, through narrowed eyes, could approximate to a ground surface - albeit one de-nuded of any meaningful life form. As we laboured with our vectors, we did not realise that the shadow obscuring the sun was that of decaying modernism.

When Robert Venturi put an obtuse roof on his mother's house it marked the beginning of the end for systemisation. Venturi opened the flood gates to a deluge of codified and hollow classical symbolism and a fondness for pastel colours. Architects soon shook off these superficial emblems in a fit of deconstructivist rationalism, but planning lay moribund in the grips of modernism – the codification of uses and zones to serve the paternalist state.

As we all recognise, architecture is quick and lean in times of transition - it only takes a few architects to convince their patrons to experiment in the name of the *avant garde* for a new *ism* to be born. Planning, by its reliance on policy, state programmes and community initiatives is always lagging behind the architects - in effect if not in aspiration. In his work on the *City of the Third Modernity*, Thomas Sieverts describes the

timid depression which characterised planning circles at end of the twentieth century, still struggling to act as an instrument to deliver the aspirations of the welfare state (Sieverts' *second age of modernity*) with its goals of social security, health, full employment, education and public housing - in itself a response to the industrial revolution and the city of production (*the first age of modernity*) (Sieverts, 2001). The gloom in planning offices arose from a spreading recognition that not just planning, but the welfare state – in spite if its many successes – was in deep trouble. The digital revolution precipitated Sieverts *third age of modernity* and by the end of the twentieth century, governments and cities could no longer control their own destiny as the pace of technological change and globalisation outstripped their ability to formulate and implement plans.

In this tension-filled period of postmodern architects and late modernist planners, urbanism's pied piper emerged to ask questions about the nature of the place. Differences between the attributes of here and there have always been of great interest because it is precisely these differences that generate the movement of goods, people, and information. Urbanists wanted to explain why some cities have clear and accessible form whereas others are confused and perplexing and how sophisticated and expensive applications of modern technology can be immediately understandable on some occasions and on others totally indecipherable.

In the introduction to his anthology *The Power of Place*, James Swan infers that what we now know as "the art and science of environmental planning and architecture have been an integral part of human life since even before King Solomon's temple. Goemancy (divining the right action for each place, present and future) is a parent of the modern environmental design process. At the core of geomantic wisdom everywhere is the assertion that not all places are alike."(Swan 1993).

Swan observed that today, the fate of places is settled in lengthy hearings when proposed developments are weighed against the environmental, cultural and heritage impacts. While modern science and technology enable sophisticated analysis of all the variables involved, geomancy asserts that there is a correct action for each place. To determine the best course of action through reductionist scientific thinking by weighing the perceived costs and benefits is in direct contrast to the ancient view of examining the *spirit of the place* to determine what is best. In Swan's words, "to know the spirit of place would seemingly be essential to the art of planning, designing and building sustainable societies". In reality, the issue of how nature influences consciousness is left almost entirely to artists, poets and writers, even although statistics show that we are drawn to special places to recreate, and our unconscious voice calls us to visit special places even though we are not sure why (Swan ibid).

Against the backdrop of changing architectural styles and depression in Europe's planning departments, there emerged a growing consensus that we need to make the next few decades count in terms of increased environmental awareness or there will be serious consequences for the future of mankind. A recovery in the meaning of place has taken centre stage in contrast to the received *modern* wisdom that our livelihood and creativity has come from economics, technology and the media. The ancient awareness

of place was set aside in favour of progress, development and growth. It is not that technology is evil and anti-ecological, but that the forces which shape it are unconnected to the natural and intuitive wisdom which springs from place and nature. As cities stress more and more their unique character and qualities in an effort to become successful business and tourist centres, the issues identified by James Swan become increasingly relevant to the new city planning. Recent work by Richard Florida in the United States suggests that these are the qualities sought by today's knowledge workers or in Florida's words - *the creative class* (Florida 2002).

Whereas no modern architect or planner would contemplate rejection of all the favoured technology, techniques and professional tricks for a simple consultation with the shamans or *old ones*, there is no doubt that in recent years, architects and planners have become increasingly aware of and concerned for the importance of the *spirit of place*, the *genius loci*, and the need to incorporate this into the decision making process about design, urban intervention and the interpretation of the city for residents and visitors alike. Respect for place has become the mantra of urban design with Kevin Lynch's seminal work *The Image of the City* its fountainhead. Lynch was concerned with "the look of cities, whether this look has any importance, and whether it can be changed" (Lynch, 1960). Lynch recognised the urban landscape as something to be seen, remembered and to delight in. He recognised that giving form to the city is a special kind of design problem and he set out to describe a method to deal with visual form at the city scale and offer some principles of city design. Kevin Lynch was one of the first to realise that moving elements in the city, not just traffic, but people and their activities, are as important as the urban fabric itself.

Lynch argued that not only is the city an object which is perceived by very many people of widely differing character and class, it is also the product of many builders who are constantly modifying the city for their own reasons and therefore while it may be stable in general , it is constantly changing in detail. Only partial control can be achieved over its evolution and development - no final outcome, but a continuous succession of changes. Shaping the city for its enjoyment - urban design - is an activity quite separate from architecture and planning - learning from them but not imitating them. So here was the answer to the challenges of the knowledge economy with its rapid change and globalisation – recognise it for what it is and formulate responses based on the place and its people.

But hang on, is the knowledge society a *good thing?* No doubt about the fun to be had from micro gadgets and WAP, but are we any the better for it? In the late 1990s *WIRED* magazine commissioned a survey to establish any if correlation existed between technology and democracy. The survey was a response to an essay by Jon Katz entitled *Birth of a Digital Nation* wherein Katz speculated on the emergence of *the digital citizen* who combined the humanity of liberalism with the economic vitality of conservatism, rejecting the interventionist dogma of the left and the intolerant ideology of the right to embrace rationalism, revere civil liberties, free-market economies and espouse a moderate libertarianism as a political philosophy (Katz, 1997).
The survey confirmed Katz' thesis about the existence of *digital citizens* who were shown to be knowledgeable, tolerant, civic-minded and committed to change.

Profoundly optimistic about the future, they're convinced that technology is a force for good and that the free-market economy is a powerful engine of progress. The *digital citizen* is highly participatory and views democratic institutions very positively (Katz, 1997). The survey conducted by *WIRED* and Merrill Lynch Forum was the first to explode the myth about digital culture, revealing that the internet, far from being a breeding ground for alienation, paranoia and apathy, was actually a medium for citizens who represent the most well-informed and participatory individuals who have existed in (US) society. The survey's authors concluded that these are the most important demographic group of the era, in effect casting the knowledge revolution as progenitor of a new enlightenment – a programme of secularism, humanity, cosmpolitanism and freedom.

So the internet has usurped the adage that knowledge is power. For example, urbanists have for long used comparator projects as a means of illustrating possible means of urban transformation. This method placed considerable responsibility on the integrity of the architect to employ meaningful and relevant examples. Sadly this was not always so, generating poor results and undermining even the reputation of the profession. Until a few years ago, a citizen audience had little or no means of validating the material shown to them as part of a proposal unless they had members who had travelled as extensively as the urbanist making the presentation. Even then, it is unlikely that such lay people would have used their free time and disposable income to visit, record and photograph rundown urban areas in transformation.

But within the space of one or two years, there has been a change. Today, the urbanist had better watch out, because we may be assured that at least one of the community will have been hacking away before the next meeting and will be armed with a barrage of questions about just what our favourite project has done for its citizens. I believe that this is *a good thing*, because spurious comparators should become a thing of the past. If citizens can validate our propositions, they may be more willing to trust our conclusions. The role of expert has changed from that of knowledge to skill – and perhaps craft – in bringing about change rather than being the guardian of the need for it.

The use of technology with the transformation of place is at the forefront of our thinking. It lies at the heart of our search for identity - as my former professor of architectural history put it: the expression of identity in architecture and urbanism requires a balance between the spirit of the place – the *genius loci* with the spirit of the times – *the zeitgeist* (Walker, 1999). Identity is the talisman of *postmodernism*, even in the guise of *local-distinctiveness* which is what those who cling onto the last vestiges of modernism prefer to call it. And so we finally we face our most prescient challenge – *think global, act local*!

I'm sure that everyone participating in this conference has served their time in the search for the illusion of identity. My own experience came through research commissioned by the British Government in Scotland to try to establish criteria which, when applied to the design of buildings and landscapes, might remind the viewer that they were in Scotland as opposed to anywhere west of the Bosphorus and north of the Alps. The work resulted in a book which attempted to make explicit the principles of siting and design which

would help to give some "Scottishness" to a place (Fladmark, Mulvagh & Evans 1991). The book and a series of research reports was followed by three pieces of Government advice for architects and planners about the principles of design which should be applied to individual buildings, suburban development and town centres (Scottish Office, 1991, 1994 & 1996). Did the initiative succeed? To some extent – certainly a greater awareness was achieved about the importance of visual identity and many of the former excesses of thoughtlessness have been avoided. But in their place is a pallid and ultimately dishonest representation of the vernacular. It has taken some 10 years for confidence to recover sufficiently to encourage the pursuit of a new identity that truly attempts to rise to Walker's challenge to reconcile *genius loci* with the *zeitgeist*.

In the city, the UK search for identity and recovery of city values is championed by the architect Richard Rogers following his commission by the British Government to prepare a report of the recovery of human qualities in our towns & cities (Urban Task Force, 1999). Human qualities brought about by increased density and radical improvement to the public realm now hold sway (Simpson & Lewis, 2002). Today, architecture has broken free to rediscover the values of modern architecture – the splendidly conceived *supermodernist* proposition - and at the same time planning has embraced the constructs of *postmodern* thinking – context and identity. It was ever thus.

How does our sophisticated technology help in this dichotomy? I have already discussed the potential for a democracy dividend released by the internet. Beyond this, today's repetitive but essential tasks are enabled by lumbering and cryptic application such as CAD and GIS, whereas today's talent reveals its visions for the future in the intuitive world of *photoshop* and is viewed with some respect even by those who still prefer the analogue world of pastels and paints.

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