

Review of 'Liquid Cities' Conference

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Liquid Cities Conference. Sydney, Australia. 3- 5 October 2007.

Cities are ever-changing. They are not stagnant but rather transitional and fluid in nature, developing and moulding to the generational, cultural, social and political changes that occur within their boundaries. A city that is flexible or fluid enough to absorb the changes around it is one that grows and develops with time. Cities that are in constant transition are often the greatest cities, as they can adapt to peoples' needs and support the social changes within them. The Liquid Cities symposium (supported by the University of Western Sydney, Goethe Institut Australien, gerMANY FACES Australia and City of Sydney) explored notions of fluidity, change, development and transition within two very different cities: Berlin and Sydney.

Over three days various key note speakers from architectural, urban planning, artistic, and anthropological backgrounds explored key relationships and adjacencies between the two cities. Each presentation focused on different elements including city economies, diversity, power, globalisation, politics, citizenship and its effect on urban infrastructure. There was however an underlying question inherent in all presentations namely: what made a city great, and often what made one city 'greater' than the other.

Whilst the official title of the symposium was 'Berlin and Sydney in conversation' the mood of the symposium shifted and evolved over the three days to challenge that focus. Often Berlin and Sydney were judged against one another leading to a competitive race rather than a

‘conversation’ between the two. At other times suggestions were made as to how each city could develop by learning from the other.

Sydney and Berlin, learning from each other

Sydney’s positive features were identified and included the city’s preservation of natural habitats, Sydney’s harbour, cultural and social diversity, and the city’s capacity to evolve and support a growing multicultural community. This cultural diversity was largely attributed to the city’s geographic location which was valued for its ability to capture economic, social and political flows from other regions, mostly from Southeast-Asia.

Whilst Sydney’s positive features were identified, it was the aspects of the city that needed further development that became the focus of discussions. This included unaffordable rents, limited open urban spaces, an ageing population and a lack of cultural crossover amongst ethnic groups leading to fragmented communities. On an architectural and urban planning level Robert Whitehead described Sydney in his Liquid Cities presentation as ‘lacking vision’. Richard Goodwin further noted in his presentation on Porosity: revisioning public space in the city, that Sydney lacked freedom for creative artistic expression, partially as a result of minimal public investment in public buildings and spaces. Amrita Cheena, SBS presenter and journalist, presented a comparative analysis of the two cities in her Liquid Cities presentation, in which she suggested that Sydney was constantly trying to prove to the global community that it’s beauty was not skin-deep and that it had a weak connection with its soul, history and geography.

As the symposium progressed the importance of a city connecting with its past became a vital component in identifying whether it was a ‘great’ city or not. A city that embraces its historical roots through the preservation and promotion of historical urban spaces is one that has greater character, soul and is more honest in its representation to the global community. A

connection with history provides a framework from which both social and cultural development can occur. By denying our roots we become disconnected from where we came from, thereby making it difficult to identify where we are going in the future. Whilst Cheena merely noted a disconnect between Sydney and its history, discussions prompted by Donald McNeil's presentation entitled 'Globalisation and the Ethical Architect' explored the idea that Sydney's history itself was weaker and a lot more 'innocent and virgin' than Berlin's. This may imply that Berlin's history was richer and therefore that the cityscape which represented this history was more evocative and alive than Sydney's.

Berlin's rich political history has led to a wealth of politically motivated buildings. The city was commended for the preservation of these buildings, whether the ideologies they represented were practiced or not, and further, for the freedom that artists had in 'playing' with these political buildings through art installations. These experimental artworks often evoke powerful political and social messages thereby creating a link between past and present. Berlin has become an open visual history book, which not only represents all stages of its capitalist and socialist past but also, through its artistic experimentation, continually questions the city's political and social future. The city has become an artist's 'hub' in which alternative artistic ideas are constantly evolving. This freedom for artistic expression was one of the main elements leading to Berlin's popularity at the symposium.

It was clear as the symposium progressed that Berlin's 'list of pros' surpassed Sydney's. German based architectural journalist Ulf Meyer, described Berlin as the centre of new Europe surrounded by nine neighbours in his presentation on 'New identity or political playground?: Urban development and architecture in the New Berlin'. The city therefore becomes a 'magnet' capable of attracting different people, ideas and energies, creating an environment that is never static but rather one in constant transition. Meyer further described Berlin as a 'battleground of

ideologies' where diverse political influences has created a culture for open political expression and public debate. In contrast, it was suggested that in Sydney alternative opinions are often suppressed.

Developing Sydney into a 'greater' city

Various suggestions were explored to help shape Sydney into a greater, more 'fluid' city by using Berlin's positive features as a catalyst for change. Ideas to achieve this included discouraging uniformity and encouraging distinctiveness in design. This would be done by engaging new and different ideas and artists instead of conforming to similar global city design trends, fads and fashions. Other suggestions were legislative in nature and included breaking down structured planning and design systems (currently constrained by laws, regulations and codes) into more open, flexible systems in which 'design' had the freedom to be experimental and reach its full potential. Some proposals for city development were more people-focused and identified the need to involve residents in decision making through active participation. The translation of residents' ideas directly into the shaping of space and creation of community spaces that supported cultural development was also given importance.

The built environment directly impacts the shaping of communities and alternatively a shift in community culture impacts the urban landscape. Buildings should be reflective of the needs and culture of the people who are interacting with the space so as to nurture positive social development. It seems that the people-based suggestions raised were the most realistic and practical suggestions for the development of a city. The design of any place, whether it be a house, neighbourhood, town or city should stem from an in-depth understanding of people's social, cultural and historical experiences. The Liquid Cities symposium was fascinating because it started to explore people's experiences on all these different levels. Each individual presentation reflected a personal interpretation of an experience with

'place' - places in Berlin and places in Sydney. Berlin was evidently favoured because of the connections and relationships it has established with its historical and social collective experiences. However it was disappointing to note that even though the symposium focused on the importance of a city's history as a major influence in the shaping of the urban landscape, very little recognition was given to the Indigenous history of Sydney. Rather discussions focused on Sydney's European history. Only one speaker recognised the importance of understanding space contextually by establishing an understanding of all of Sydney's histories: Indigenous, settler and migrant.

Ultimately the Liquid Cities symposium was valuable as it identified two completely different cities with very different energies and influences and managed to bring them together through a comparative analysis. Whilst it was general enough to involve people from different backgrounds, presentations were also very personal and drew us into intimate personal experiences of a city. The success of this symposium begs that Sydneysiders draw other cities into such dialogue. Our urban landscape can only be enriched by drawing on the experience of other communities.