Occasional Address

Thursday October 30, 2014

Hon. Assoc. Prof. John Toon
Themes of Urban Practice and Research
Visions for the Trust’s contribution
Occasional Address

Chancellor, fellow academics, scholars, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I especially want to acknowledge Mr Warren Halloran who is with us today. In many ways it is he that should be on this rostrum rather than I. His generous donation enabled the Henry Halloran Trust to be established in this University. The Trust is already bearing fruit, over the last two weeks the University has held a highly successful Festival of Urbanism. There were several keynote events attracting upwards of 200 people with speakers from the United States, Europe, East Asia as well as Australia.

This Festival would not have been possible without the support of the Henry Halloran Trust. There is much more to come. This brings me to the theme I have chosen for today – urbanism. Obviously it relates to cities. Cities are multi-dimensional phenomena crossing many disciplines.

So what do we mean by city?

There are cities that we visit for a range of reasons – Venice because of its unique interface between buildings and water; Florence for its wonderful collection of sculpture, paintings and architecture; Rome for its archaeological sites and some fine public places; Macchu Picchu because it is there. There are many others. Each represents a time in history when they were a centre of political power – often invoking a ‘god’ or a ‘king’ or both to reinforce that power.

Power meant imposing a belief system, having control of repositories of knowledge and wealth, having control of the means of production and the allocation of land and standing within a population. In return ‘power’ offered protection and the right to a regulated life-style.

City and power were synonymous.
City and state were synonymous.

We visit these historic cities to enable us to better understand our past – how did civilisation as we know it come to be. Ultimately we visit them to better understand ourselves. The places we visit are part of our fund of knowledge, part of our knowledge of our own awareness of being.

Today we visit New York, London, Shanghai, Tokyo and Silicon Valley (is it a city) because these places represent a contemporary understanding of power. By power we mean wealth and knowledge, and opportunity to access these resources. When considering contemporary urbanism there are a number of critical issues or themes that warrant serious investigation.

Although time does not allow me to elaborate on these themes I raise them here because they are central to the unfolding concept of urbanism and to the structure of settlement.
The first theme is: The Fund of Knowledge

Knowledge is power.
More accurately knowing how to use knowledge is power.

From what we know Man has been on earth for some 200,000 years. The first known settlements date from about 12,000 years ago. What those settlements reveal is evidence of simple technologies; for example, mud-bricks for buildings and stores of improved varieties of seeds sufficient to sustain a society, a group of people who collectively benefit by working together. The implications of these finds is that knowledge of how to adapt the environment to provide better shelter and higher yielding crops was being accumulated. That knowledge conferred power on its owners – the power to increase their potential to survive in an uncertain and sometimes hostile environment, and to accumulate resources to enable human time to be allocated to do other things.

The fund of knowledge has continued to grow exponentially. More and more specialised repositories have been developed to accommodate the increasing quantity of increasingly specialised knowledge.

By the end of the 19th century, the great cities of the world were host to huge repositories of knowledge – libraries, museums, art galleries, botanic gardens, zoos, herbariums – often housed in magnificent buildings like the Bibliothèque Nationalé in Paris, the British Museum in London, The Uffizi in Florence, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the War Memorial in Canberra.

About 20 years ago everything changed. What happened?
The fund of human knowledge went ‘on-line’. Knowledge is now ubiquitous. What is the significance of this? First and foremost we do not have to travel to seek knowledge and information. Now we can ‘google it’ or put it on our kindles and have access to it in our own home. The city-or at least one important part of it – has come into our living room, in fact into our pockets.

The key question is: What will this mean for the city of the future?

The second theme is: Specialisation

Specialisation is the corollary to the fund of knowledge. The person who improved the seeds found in pre-historic settlements had to specialise in seeds in order to know how to improve the strain. He was able to specialise because the society to which he belonged produced a surplus, thus creating free time for other activities. He was a specialist just as much as those who are concerned with genetically engineered crops today.

Specialisation is evident in every field of endeavour. Not a day goes by without some advance occurring in each area of knowledge. As the fund of knowledge expands, the level of specialisation expands exponentially. Communities of specialists, networks if you like, are linked by the internet. These ‘global’ communities exist in cyber-space; they are rarely place based although from time to time they will meet.

New materials, new techniques, new knowledge and new understandings occur in every field. The demands of each area of specialisation commands an increasingly high proportion of human time, reducing the time available for communal activity.
In every field of endeavour, practitioners keep up with advances in knowledge through seminars and conferences and journals. Practitioners are the generalists of society. Generalist’s synthesise masses of data to establish context and apply knowledge generated by specialists to solving problems. Consider the role of your GP.

Practice informs research, often promoting greater specialisation and research informs practice.

*Key questions are:* *What is the effect of specialisation on the individual? What are its effects on social structure? What are its effects on families? And what are its effects on the structure of society, and on the structure of settlements?*

**The third theme is: Communication.**

Communication is the glue that holds society together. Communication is the vital link between the fund of knowledge and specialisation. They feed on each other through channels of communication.

Historically, knowledge was transferred through face to face contact. We sat on our parents lap, we sat at our teacher’s feet. In some cases we learnt ‘hands on’.

As the fund of knowledge increased, so did the repositories of that knowledge become more complex. Cities emerged as citadels of knowledge. Access to the citadels, to knowledge, was restricted; the citadels themselves became more elaborate. Social stratification evolved to reinforce power. Cities were structured to reflect social stratification. Access to power was controlled.

*The Forbidden City with its layers of accessibility is an excellent example.*

Until comparatively recently the transmission of knowledge relied solely upon verbal communication. It still does for the formative years of education but now, increasingly, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, teaching focuses on how to find and use knowledge, knowledge that is now so readily accessible. The avalanche of MOOC’s (Massive Open On-line Courses) from 2012 onwards suggests this mode of teaching will become a significant component of mainstream education modes. Significantly it severs the link between the act of learning and the place of learning. It will inevitably have an impact on many of our institutions, not least this university.

Access to knowledge has been the central force in causing a concentration of activities in cities – banks clustered around the post office and the telegraph office, to get the latest news on world markets, Martin Place is a good example. Stockbrokers clustered around the stock exchange to affect their trades, solicitors clustered around the courts – hoping to pick up a brief.

But these linkages no longer have relevance. Recently a NSW Minister expressed disappointment that the Sydney Stock Exchange is not going to take up space at Barrangaroo. The Ministers’ thinking is totally out of date. It was based on an obsolete concept. Now it does not matter where the Stock Exchange is located nor does it matter where stockbrokers are located. Each of us can now be our own stockbroker – and we can be located anywhere to effect a transaction.
The functional need for centrality has ceased to exist for most activities we associate with city centres – or ‘central business districts’ as we now conceptualise them.

Now communication is point to point – it is not place related. It is not only the phone that is mobile – it is the activity that is communicated.

It is easy to be complacent about the rate of change; about its effects on institutions and about its effect on the spatial structure of settlements.

We cling to the institutions we have grown up with. We cling to the conventional view of a city as a place with a dense core – the central business district – and a loose periphery. Many of us persist in promoting this concept of a city – mayors and agents highlighting the virtues – the most liveable, the most imageable, the most of everything or anything, the best coffee – and make ever more frenetic statements to maintain their status when, in fact, the form is already obsolete.

A key question that now arises is: What, if any, are the structuring constraints on the spatial organisation of activities by emerging communication technologies?

Supplementary questions are: What is the best model of communicating the fund of knowledge from one generation to the next? What are the social implications of alternative models? What kind of institutional structure is implied in alternative models?

What, if any, are the locational imperatives of all activities that are shaped by communication?

There is so much fundamental research into urban structure that needs to be undertaken right now to ensure that investments in infrastructure have relevance for at least the term of their economic life.

What now is the purpose of a central business district?

The fourth theme is: Ecosystems.

The concept of plant earth started to gain popular acceptance around 1970. The first full picture of earth viewed from space was taken on 7 December 1972. This was a truly transformative event. Prior to that our concept of earth was portrayed in Mercator’s and other projections common in all atlases. The significance of the image from space was that it emphasised the fact that earth is a closed system; a closed ecosystem.

All human activity, even the planting of seeds 12000 years ago affects the ecosystems of planet earth. For many millennia, humans have adapted the earth’s ecosystems to suite various needs on the assumption that earth is resilient and can readily adapt to change. Thus the old ‘civilised’ world, the world that has been occupied by man for millennia, has been worked and reworked many times over. In that process ecosystems will have been re-arranged. Species will have been wiped out and untold structural changes will have occurred. A good example is the Tigrı-Euphrates river system which was once the food bowl and the cradle of civilisation; it is now virtually a dustbowl brought about by human (mainly political) activity. In contrast, the new world, the re-colonised world, that is the America’s, Africa, Australia and elsewhere, has been less intensively worked allowing significant parts of the ecosystem to
be retained, initially because they were not needed and more recently because they have been protected by legislation.

To date the legislative approach has been largely defensive with high hurdles and a considerable amount of trial and error. Ecologists have made the running largely based on concerns for ecosystems that are fragile, species that are rare or threatened.

One of the key questions is: how tolerant of human activities are all ecosystems? There is an urgent need for more cross-disciplinary scientific studies between those concerned with the productivity of human activities and those concerned with the conservation of ecosystems and associated species and what might alternative technologies with respect to both conservation and human activity system contribute to new syntheses?

The recent attempt to re-balance conservation and human activity (farming) in the Murray Darling basin provides an indication of how intractable such issues can be.

The fifth theme is: Emancipation.

Emancipation led to the dispersal of power and the elevation of individual rights above those of the State – if that is actually possible. We call our current concept of an emancipated society a ‘democracy’. Emancipation has conferred many freedoms in society, not least for women and children, but it has not yet led to an equitable society.

Emancipation was a necessary adjunct to specialisation. It liberated the individual from feudal and canonical law. It allowed divergent thinking and innovation to surface. It enabled the dismantling of the layers of social stratification that arose with the concentration of power. It enabled people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to come together on equal terms. It facilitated freedom of movement and freedom of choice of location for all manner of human endeavour.

The history of urban planning includes many examples of concepts of ideal societies, some of which were expressed as settlements. These ‘ideal’ communities were conceptualised in response to particular perceived social issues embodied in the society of their time.

Whether or not the western concept of democracy prevails, a concept that is substantially enshrined in the UN Charter of Human Rights, it seems likely that individual freedoms, once won, will not be easily foregone. Nevertheless the focus of democracy, expressed as governance, rarely achieves its promise.

An ongoing issue for contemporary western democracies like Australia is how to devise a system of governance that is democratic and sufficiently place-based to give citizens control of their environment. There is a serious misfit between the governance of cities and public finance, between governance and place.

Key questions are: is it necessary for a democratic society to be rooted in a place which is an electoral unit? And if so, how would a democratic society best be structured? What does a democratic settlement look like? Does its governance reflect its physical form?
Another question is: how can we make our settlements more fair? Is it possible to achieve spatial equity? What are the best methods of achieving greater spatial equity – a more equitable access to public goods?

One key question is: why is a nominally democratic society unable to devise an urban structure that produces housing that is affordable to all?

It is time to seriously interrogate the governance structures of our society to ensure the hard-won benefits of emancipation can be enjoyed by all of society.

**My sixth theme is: Mobility.**

Man’s limited ability to move over earth’s surface has been an impediment to human development for centuries. Progressively the ability to move materials and people over the earth’s surface has increased. The expansion of individual mobility has substantially enhanced emancipation – inviting us to become global citizens.

The mechanisation of transport has been the principal reason why constrained movement has been overcome. An increasing percentage of the world’s population are now able to traverse all of planet earth.

In pre-history the unfolding settlement of planet earth – fanning out from the rift valleys of East Africa – occurred over many millennia. They may have used rivers for transport but essentially these early migrations were by foot. Settlements, such as they were, were shaped by the limits of access by foot.

The first cities, wherever they were, required some mode of transport to carry produce and material to sustain an urban population. Boats and beasts of burden were essential to sustaining early settlements. Paved roads were built to improve the efficiency of movement – for example, the movement of Roman legions throughout the Roman Empire to maintain control, or the use of horse-drawn wheeled carts to carry supplies to sustain quite modest sized towns.

Transport enabled the nexus between place of work and place of abode to be severed. In modern cities the severance became commonplace with the advent of trains and what in the United States are called ‘streetcar suburbs’. We call it suburbanisation. Transport enabled the population to adopt criteria for the location of their preferred living abode that were shaped by other considerations than their place of work. Consider, for instance, the choices people make for holidays; holidays which invariably rely upon global transport systems.

Colin Clark, a distinguished statistician wrote a prescient article in 1958 called ‘Transport – maker and breaker of cities’. The title says it all. In essence Clark’s thesis is that the infrastructure required to sustain a modern cities’ transport systems destroys the city it is intended to service.

There are few more contentious issues than transportation, particularly personal transportation which at present is mainly embodied in the car. Both the vehicle and its source of energy are subject to criticism – particularly by those who favour mass transit.

Despite the criticism I am strongly inclined to the view that the freedom and individual choice achieved through personal mobility will not be lightly foregone. One approach might be to devise individual transport capsules that can be combined in a range of combinations for multi-person trips.

We need to re-conceptualise the form of personal transportation and we certainly need to ask why so many people find it necessary to travel to the same
point at the same time. Why is mass transit necessary – what are the benefits of accumulating such large populations in such small areas? These are very fertile fields for research.

Freight movement on ‘shared’ roads is also subject to criticism, although more muted. Transport raises many questions relating to both mode and movement.

Key questions are:
Is there justification in curtailing individual mobility?
Can settlement structures be devised that promote or curtail individual mobility?
What effect is specialisation having on the demand for movement?
To what extent is the substitution of internet communication for transport taking place?
And, who should decide what are the best choices for investment in transport infrastructure?

The seventh theme is: Community.

What do we mean by community? Does living close together make us into a community? Do people living in a high rise block of units form a community? Do people living in a street form a community? Do people working in a university form a community?

The fundamental question is how place based is society? And how important is place to the achievement of a social equilibrium?

In fact, we all belong to multiple communities which exist, usually, in separate domains. There are belief communities, workplace communities, family communities, school-based communities, sports communities, theatre communities, keep-fit communities, bird watching communities, surfing communities. Each of us is likely to participate in several communities, each with their separate realms, some of which will be associated with place but mostly being non-place. The realms will only overlap at the individual or possibly small group level.

Much of planning rhetoric is based on promoting the notion of community and on achieving a level of community participation to achieve some form of legitimacy for planning policies. The popular emphasis on place-making is essentially a surrogate for community building.

One of the key questions is: what is meant by community? And how strongly does the individual relate to their locality and their community; and perhaps, can a community be designed? And...

What level and type of congregation is desired by individuals? And for what purposes? And

Can urban space be designed to respond to different types of congregation? What are the design criteria?
The eighth theme is: demographics.

We are all familiar with the trajectory of growth predicted for the world population from current 7 billion to about 9 billion in 2075, probably rising to 11-12 billion by 2100. These forecasts are constantly being revised. Two factors dominate the debate – will longevity continue to rise and will reproduction rates continue to fall?

Can such a population be sustained? Is there sufficient land?

The quantum of traditional agricultural land is declining, partly through desertification which has been progressing for many centuries, not least in Australia, and partly due to take-up of land for other purposes, including settlement. The intensity of use of land, and hence its productivity, is not fixed. Nevertheless, competition for land between competing uses is likely to become more acute. Which areas are most likely to see significant population growth?

In my opinion there is likely to be an overall shift to those areas that are climatically comfortable and environmentally attractive. This shift is likely to be slow but inexorable. A primary future consideration will be retaining/conserving areas of the earth’s surface to maintain the cosmic stability and liveability of our planet.

Associated questions relate to the productivity of agricultural land; the utility of urban land; the allocation of land for all manner of purposes; the means of husbanding natural resources including biodiversity; and weaving these questions into a democratic system of governance. How best should society determine the allocation of land for particular purposes?

My ninth theme is: Synthesis.

In this all too brief overview I have outlined at least some of the different ways in which settlements may be conceptualised and some of the key issues that warrant attention. In my view such conceptualisations are essential if we are to explore the potential range of future settlements. These are philosophical issues – issues that need examination with all the intellectual power we can muster.

The themes that I have chosen are interwoven and overlap. Each of our lives is a synthesis of our being in a context.

I have suggested that we can expect to see, in favoured regions, swathes of urbanisation of 10, 20, 50 even 100 million populations. These favoured regions, and I think that the east coast of Australia is likely to be one of them, will have to be supplied with potable water, energy, foodstuffs, building materials and so on. They will have to be sustainable.

These urbanised regions may be conceptualised as zones of consumption. They are likely to be linked to zones of production by critical supply networks. We already see evidence of this in the supply of food, energy and water to major urbanised regions. Think of the container ships sailing into Botany Bay everyday – think of the oil tankers that bring petrol from overseas. These are big supply chains. They criss-cross the earth in ways that are only partially understood.

There is likely to be greater emphasis on the adoption of alternative technologies to sustain settlements. What role these technologies will play is far from clear but their application is likely to be far less concentrating than the big infrastructure systems that dominate our current form of urban settlement.
In the final analysis, cities change and adapt relatively slowly. But it would be very unwise to be complacent about the changes that are imminent if not already upon us – and we need to be confident that the public goods we invest in, the infrastructure, is good for the long haul – at least for the next 50 years.

The intellectual challenge is to devise and test theoretical models of settlements that embody and embellish the themes that I have all too sketchily outlined here. For those scholars here today this is your challenge. I think it an exciting one.

Critically urban issues require a level of synthesis that can only be satisfied by a cross-disciplinary approach. It requires people skilled in governance, in public-finance, in law, particularly property law, in the production of food and all manner of consumer goods, in sociology, in urban economics, in communication and transportation, in both social and physical infrastructure services, in the resolution of land use conflicts and in urban design.

Drawing these disciplines together is a necessary step to making sense of our urban settlements. It defines the scope of urbanism.

That is the vision I have for the Henry Halloran Trust. I look forward to the Trust making increasingly significant contributions to our knowledge of urbanism and ultimately our knowledge of ourselves.

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John Toon

*Thursday 30th October, 2014*