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Discussion paper  
GA200+  
Symposium / Forum 01  
What is great design  
and how do we get it?



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# Can design-led approaches to city planning create opportunities to benefit the community and increase amenity?

Our role as the Office of the Government Architect is to help Government to deliver world-class design and planning in order to make people's lives better, through sustainable and inclusive growth.

As part of that role, we are drafting an inaugural NSW Policy for Architecture and Built Environment. Your participation and feedback to this series of events and discussion papers is important to informing the direction and emphasis of this draft policy.

Our effectiveness in the role of independent and expert advisor to Government relies on robust and collaborative relationships with industry and other Government agencies. To

that end, we have commissioned industry leaders and respected academics to contribute their expertise to the preparation of the event primers and discussion papers.

This discussion paper, prepared in collaboration with Stuart Harrison (architect, urban designer and strategic design advisor) summarises the first forum in our series of events, which focused on the subject of design excellence and the types of design-led planning processes and initiatives that can help to deliver good quality projects.

In 1900 only 10% of the global population lived in cities, today its five times that number. By 2050 more than 70% of people on earth will live in cities.

While Australia is already one of the most urbanised countries in the world, we won't be immune from the impacts of mass urbanization. But this is not just about building more houses in our cities; it's about obtaining equity, opportunity and sustainability right across the state. It's about understanding that, in order to achieve those things, our built environment must be well designed.

Nationally and internationally, planning policies are being re-written in response to an increasing awareness that good built environment outcomes need a more innovative and integrated approach than traditional land use and planning mechanisms can provide.

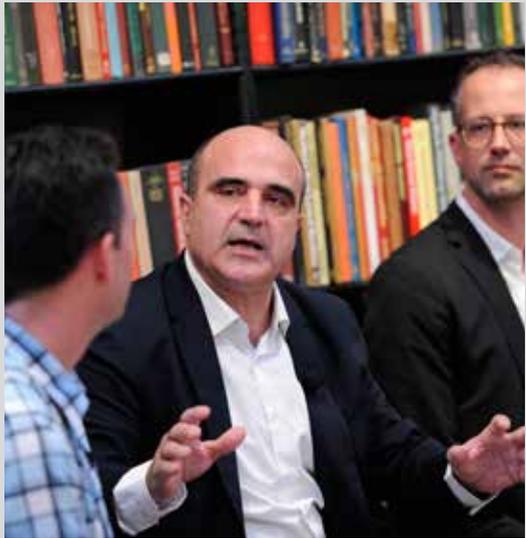
Your feedback is important - let us know what you think about design-led approaches to city planning by emailing us at:

[info@ga200plus.org](mailto:info@ga200plus.org)

# What is great design?

As a lead-in to the conversation, all participants at the forum were given a 'primer'. This document surveyed some recent trends and practices concerning design-led planning and architecture policies internationally, reflecting the wider context to the debate. The primer was compiled in collaboration with Karl Fischer (previously head of the Masters of Urban Development and Design course at UNSW) and Anita Morandini (Design Excellence Manager, City of Sydney).

Vicente Guallart (Director, Guallart Architects and previous Chief Architect, City of Barcelona) was invited to present a keynote talk sharing his experiences of design-led planning initiatives in Barcelona.



Vicente Guallart talks to Matt Davis and Jeffrey Shumaker. Image credit: Adam Hollingworth

Vicente and guest panel members then took part in a conversation prompted by the question “What is great design and how do we get it?”. They were asked to consider how design-led approaches to development can lead to opportunities that deliver benefits for the community, and how governance and procurement processes might be adjusted to help leverage those opportunities.



The primer offered a snapshot of recent trends and practices concerning design-led planning and architecture politics internationally. The policies below surveyed for the primer show that most approaches recognise that the way to achieve good design is through good process.

- 01/ Baukultur, German Government
- 02/ Danish Architectural Policy, Putting People First
- 03/ Reimagine Christchurch, Christchurch City Council
- 04/ Sustainable Sydney 2030, City of Sydney
- 05/ Survey on Architectural Policies in Europe (João Ferreira Bento on behalf of European Forum for Architectural Policies)





Barcelona aerial view  
Image credit:  
Vicente Guallart

## Forum summary

Several key themes emerged from the conversation:

### **Design quality & perceptions of subjectivity**

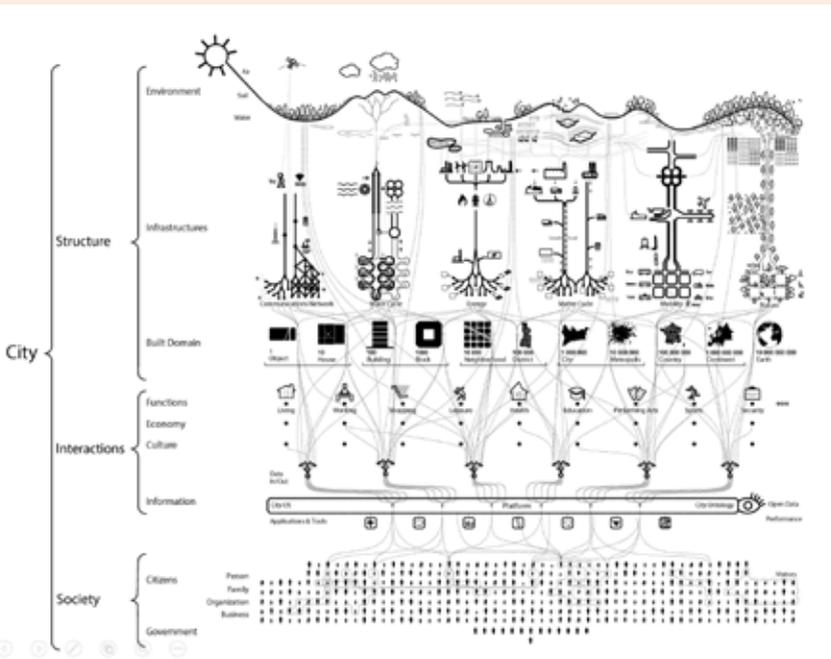
- It is important for the design community to speak to the broader community in order to make clear what is most important
- New York example: focussed on the importance of the street, particularly how to communicate why and how streets as the key public spaces of a city can be made to work better for its people

### **Mixed-use & the distributed city**

- City of New York some new residential developments that are mandated to include usable commercial space within them; going beyond simple 'active street frontages' planning requirements for retail towards a type of mixed-use urbanism
- leverages the high value of residential space in many leading cities and aims to maintain the kind of Urbanism which embodies living and working in proximity (in New York this is aimed at maintaining a distributed city rather than becoming the Centralised/de-Centralised type)

### **Design / architecture as a cultural act**

- how great cities can be made with sound, well-handled architecture (Ken Maher), and this reinforced Guallart's earlier point that good design should be seen as a universal condition not reserved for key 'icon' buildings and places (Guallart suggests the 'Guggenheim' condition in the Basque city of Bilbao, where a single project was relied upon for rejuvenation, is already an outdated model)
- design excellence processes, such as design competitions, can help to lift the quality of all buildings and spaces
- merit-based assessment of user experience, amenity, equity with 'a design eye behind it', these key aspects should not be sought from a checklist approach, needing to be integrated in a more holistic and layered way (as in the example of the City of Sydney's Sydney 2030 plan)
- also in relation to managing processes of change and the level of public debate –recent surveys by ARB NSW and UTS have shown there is a level public interest in positive change resulting from good design that could be built upon
- the growth of "user experience" and its design as a tool for engagement; this should be undertaken across scales - allowing for the public to see the logic behind options helps broadly when working to bring people along



**Infrastructure is key to re-thinking the city: lessons of the distributed city model suggest infrastructure might be seen as serving the networked urban condition rather than the connected commercial hearts of a de-centralised city.**

# Barcelona and key lessons for New South Wales

STUART HARRISON, ARCHITECT

## Barcelona

Looking at the city of Barcelona as a case study demonstrates the importance of integrated design in the planning system. Under the direction of architect Vicente Guallart the Catalan city has both kept to its long term vision and undertaken considerable change to create a vibrant people-focused city that is ready for new economics and technologies.

Vicente Guallart was city architect for Barcelona from 2011-2015, before and after which he has worked as a practicing architect. This model of bringing an experienced local architect into the city planning environment to operate at a strategic level is key in this model of design-led planning, and puts design thinking in an integrated way at the start of city-shaping decisions.

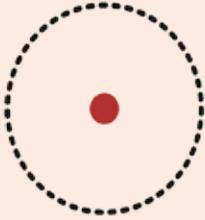
Guallart presents Barcelona as a city that is entering into its fifth stage of development, one which will take it to 2054. The city's history is key to understanding how a legacy of strategic growth has successfully shaped the city. Guallart makes strong reference to the third stage of Barcelona's life – in particular the work of

Ildefons Cerdà in 1859 to create the distinctive Barcelona grid plan (the Eixample) and, according to Guallart, inventing urbanism in the process.

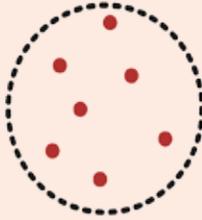
This mid-19th Century vision massively expanded the more organic, older area of the city with a chamfered block grid plan. These recognisable Barcelona blocks were progressively filled over decades in a mixed-use way, being successfully occupied with various types of use – housing, factories, Cathedrals, etc.

Grand, straight axes link the expanded city together, cutting diagonally across these new grids to give Barcelona one of its distinctive qualities. It is this expanded form of Barcelona that is key to its identity rather than its medieval heart – a reversal of the case for many other old cities.

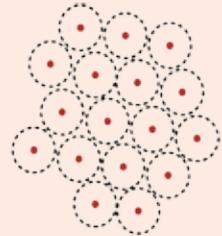
Guallart's experience in forming a vision for Barcelona has emphasised the importance of being able to make a clear concise verbal statement of what the city needs to do in order to bring people along with its implementation. Guallart also stressed the importance of city-scale drawings to develop



The Centralised City  
Moscow  
Beijing



The De-Centralised City  
Los Angeles  
Seoul



The Distributed City  
Barcelona  
New York

the vision, and pointed to Cerdà's drawing from 150 years ago as a framing document that drove the city successfully for many decades.

Illustrating that good design should be everywhere, in all projects, not just in 'icon' or 'Guggenheim' type projects, Guallart references numerous well-designed municipal projects such as local market redevelopments. These include market project such as Els Encants Vells by b720 Arquitectos, opened 2013 after an invited design competition.

Guallart discusses another key era year in Barcelona's history – the period leading up to the successful 1992 Olympic Games. This was a period of urban transformation expanding on Cerdà's key urban moves. These projects sought to reconnect the city to its post-industrial waterfront, and create the beach frontage as public space with

high amenity value.

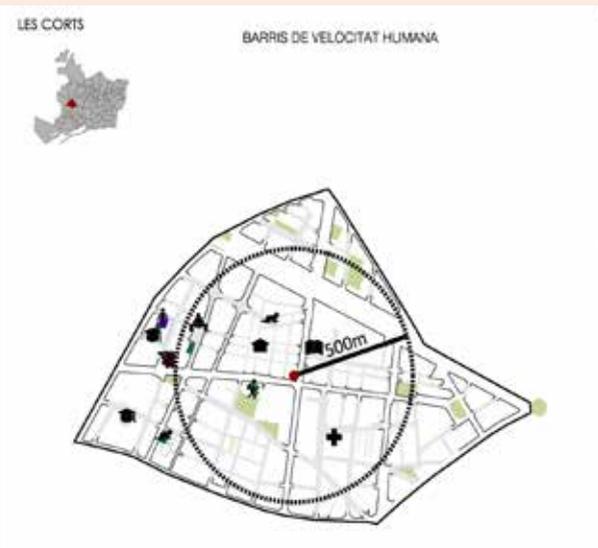
In the Barcelona tradition of city making, Guallart argues that architects, urban planners and city planners and others are not seen separately. Guallart's role in government included reorganising city government to bring together 'in one department' the organisation. He sought to map how the government works, to see its activity as part of a large ecosystem of endeavour across all scales, and this was captured in detailed but clear pictorial diagrams that make it possible to see smaller decision as part of a larger direction.

Globally, three types of city are identified by Guallart – a centralised city, a de-centralised city and a distributed city. Barcelona is a distributed city - a networked approach with multiple focal points that allow working and living in close proximity. A centralised city approach has been the traditional

model for Australian cities; a de-centralised city has multiple centres still relies on city-wide linkages, and this is the aspiration for many cities.

Barcelona's 43 markets are an example of its distributed nature, spreading the provision of facilities evenly across the metropolitan area. A 500m walking radius is used to analyse the city's distributed nature and importantly identify what public facilities are needed, to fill the holes in the distributed network and allow this model of proximity-based city to work.

At the most direct level Guallart presents Barcelona as a city that has recovered from the dominance of the individual car. This has played out in both the tight streets of the old town (now free of them) but also in reversing relatively recent road based infrastructure – the large elevated overpass at Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes, finished in 1992, was recently demolished to re-establish an on-grade public space, with public transport infrastructure passing under. Guallart states 'you build a highway and it will fill with cars' to illustrate the unintended urban consequences of major road infrastructure.



A 500m radius, relative to each metropolitan area, demonstrates Barcelona's distributed nature  
Image credit: Vicente Guallart

Since 1971 Barcelona's permanent population has slightly reduced – users of the city have grown however with a radical increase in tourists (an over 20 fold increase). Amenity for both groups is provided for with a large increase in the amount of public space, particularly urban green space. This space has been provided by both parks and the greening of streets, which have seen increased usable paved areas and with planting and street furniture, as well as extensive new separated bike paths.

Gualart also presents technology as public space – the provision of free public Wi-Fi is treated like traditional government-provided services like water or street lighting – something available all the time without privileged access restrictions such as passwords. This has led to Barcelona being regarded as one of the most 'connected' cities in the world. In the desire to make Barcelona a productive city again, Gualart states that design is fundamentally important. This has been design at both a strategic and spatial level – the design of systems as well as things, of government and of streets.

### Lessons for New South Wales

Whilst the importance of designed thinking is being established in New South Wales, the whole of government approach that Gualart promotes still needs to be developed. It's a common scenario in Australia that competing visions between government agencies tend to delay projects and to see those projects in isolated ways – i.e. from a development focus only, or from a transport focus only, or with a public realm focus only. An agreed integrated vision for the city that is clearly summarised and strategically drawn should be developed and committed to. This needs to be inherently inclusive and design-led.

People working on visioning city futures should be able to transcend traditional professional separations in order to facilitate a shared strategic vision. This may include encouraging broad strategic thinkers that can work across those divisions to be brought into leadership roles, those who recognise design is a strategic endeavour about the creation of smart processes as well as more traditional forms of design.

In particular, the integration of transport design into wider city making thinking should be developed to avoid the risk of failure in infrastructure and to maximise the effectiveness of infrastructure spending. This would avoid competing visions such as those of 'road projects' versus 'urban design projects'.

Visions for the future of a city should be seen in relation to those that have come before – historical analysis of metropolitan-wide planning of major cities can help understand the models of development and strategic thinking that have shaped the city to date. The historical development in infrastructure (services, transport and others) should be seen in relation to their impact on the city's formation to also understand how technological changes have shaped the city.

The role of technologies, those that have now emerged (such as Wi-Fi and the sharing economy) and those still emerging (such as autonomous vehicles, drones and long-life batteries) as well as those yet to be invented, should be accounted for in the expansion and redevelopment of the city. This involves propositional and innovative thinking.

The type that a city aims to become can be defined using Guallart's classifications - the centralised city, the de-centralised city or the distributed city. Sydney is currently a centralised city aiming to become a 'dual centralised' city, and the likely outcomes of this aim can be tested in relation to the other models available. Whilst Barcelona and Sydney are vastly different cities, the networked and proximity-based urbanism (the 500m walkable radius) that has been nurtured in Barcelona should be considered as a potential model particularly for those parts of Sydney that have medium and high population densities, including those undergoing urban transformation.

The clearest lesson for major cities in New South Wales may however be in the model of government and decision-making that has resulted in the highly successful transformation of Barcelona into a design-led, high amenity and future-ready city.

The example of Barcelona provides clear demonstration of the multiple benefits of a 'City Architect' model which could be applied to multiple locations in NSW. There is an

opportunity for fostering design excellence in a focused area, for example an LGA. This role would help frame government processes towards delivering better outcomes while protecting the specific qualities of each Council area. The selection of these roles should be a merit based process which the OGA could guide.

Urban transformation projects are complex and inherently multi-layered. Consequently the ability to work effectively across government agencies towards excellent outcomes is critical. In my view, the OGA should assist in re-aligning government processes to achieve better inter-agency collaboration and more successful project outcomes by embedding principles of good design.

Both Guallart's presentation and the ensuing discussion demonstrated that design-led planning initiatives are critical to delivering the kinds of outcomes we commonly aspire to. Embedding design into the planning process by way of the independent and expert voice of the Government Architect and their team is key to implementing such initiatives. In addition to which, more effective

processes at a state wide level could be enabled by the creation of a design advisory resource headed by the OGA, such as those established in South Australia and Victoria in the form of state Design Review panels.

Stuart Harrison is a registered architect in Victoria and New South Wales. He is director of Harrison and White Architects in Melbourne, a Design Review panel member in Victoria and South Australia and strategic design advisor.

# Keynote and Panel

## Keynote / Vicente Guallart

Vicente leads Guallart Architects and was the Chief Architect of Barcelona (2011-2015), a city which has undergone massive transformation over the last 30 years. He works at the confluence of architecture, nature and technologies. Vicente is interested in how design-led approaches identify opportunities for beneficial outcomes for the community assisted by new approaches to governance, procurement, design and delivery. “A good city is a place where the citizens live well. So the best measure for a good city is how the citizens live.” V Guallart 2014, archdaily.com

## Facilitator / Matt Davis

Matt is a Director of Davis + Davis Architects, an Adelaide based design practice committed to creating great places for people. As well as architecture and urban design projects, the practice provides strategic design advice to communities, organisations and governments. Matt is an advocate for the value of design in society and has held senior roles in academia and government.

## Ken Maher

Ken is a leading Australian architect, active in practice and academia. He advises governments on design, sustainability and the future of cities throughout Australia and internationally.

Ken has a strong interest in the role of design contributing to public life. Ken’s recognition as a designer is reflected in the numerous awards received for projects he has led. In 2009, he was awarded the Australian Institute of Architect’s highest accolade, the Gold Medal.

## Erin Flaherty

Erin is Executive Director at Infrastructure NSW and a guardian of the Commonwealth Future Fund. She is directly engaged in the areas of public transport, social and cultural infrastructure. She is also the NSW Government Co-ordinator for Parramatta and an Advisory Board Member for the Sydney Light Rail and the Sydney Metro project.

## Kim Crestani

Kim has over 30 years experience as an Architect and is currently the City Architect for Parramatta City Council. In July 2015 Kim was appointed to Liverpool City Council’s Design Excellence Panel.

## Jeffrey Shumaker

Jeffrey is the Chief Urban Designer and Director of Urban Design for New York City. He has worked on a number of city-wide initiatives and neighbourhood projects across New York. Jeffrey believes in the transformative role of urban design in making cities both more liveable and sustainable. He is interested in whether a

radical approach to living can provide us with a sustainable approach to densification and whether high density development can ensure equitable access to public and shared space as well as good quality housing.

# Shaping our futures since 1816

In 1816, Governor Lachlan Macquarie appointed architect, stonemason and convicted forger Francis Greenway as civil architect and assistant engineer to the colony of New South Wales.

The appointment established the role of NSW Government Architect which has endured unbroken for 200 years.

The bicentenary takes place at a time of momentous change as NSW, like the rest of Australia and indeed the world, faces the challenge of creating a sustainable future, particularly in the cities and towns where most of us work, live, learn and play. What sort of places do we want our cities and towns to be? How can we achieve that?

Recent research shows that Australians want good design and understand the consequences of a poorly designed built environment. How do we honour that ambition?

To give shape to this debate, the NSW Office of the Government Architect (NSW OGA) is launching GA200+, a program of forums, discussions and keynotes in Sydney and regional NSW for government, industry, researchers and the public about how we can collectively deliver a great built environment for the public good in the years ahead.

Strategic themes brought to light at GA200+ are highlighted in this series of discussion papers and will inform the development of a draft Policy for Architecture and Urban Design in NSW.

For further information about GA200+ please visit our website: [ga200plus.org](http://ga200plus.org)

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