

Australian Council for New Urbanism Congress (ACNU) Conference + Masterclass

I had the good fortune of being able to attend the ACNU Conference and Masterclass held at the University of South Australia in late April.

The New Urbanist movement evolved in the 1980's in the United States, but the term was first coined by Peter Katz in his book entitled *The New Urbanism – Towards an Architecture of Community*, published in 1994. He described that 'New' meant a 'renaissance' or rebirth of traditional urbanism (built form) to replace urban sprawl.

New urbanism has an urban design focus, promoting practices such as walkable neighbourhoods, mixed use development and transit oriented development, but it also spans other different disciplines including architecture, town planning and landscape architecture.

One of the most famous New Urbanist designed and built towns is Seaside in Florida USA. Seaside was outside any existing planning/ zoning regulations when it was founded enabling the developers to establish their own regulations, and they based these on New Urbanist principles. Seaside was also the backdrop for the Jim Carey film *The Truman Show*.

The Australian Council for New Urbanism (ACNU) is the Australian arm of the Congress for New Urbanism based in the United States, and more information on New Urbanism and the ACNU is found at: <http://acnu.org/>

The Masterclass (held on the 25th-27th April) was arranged to provide an overview of best practice New Urbanist design philosophies and techniques.

We were led by three formidable urban design experts including Paul Murrain (Masterclass leader), Wendy Morris, and Peter Richards (Masterclass Co Leaders).

The Masterclass consisted of a series lectures on the theory and principles behind New Urbanism, mixed with group work in which we applied the theories and principles to two hypothetical case study areas in Adelaide.

Each group was given separate briefs to explore different urban design objectives that were required on their site, and then were given time to develop design ideas and present them back to the other groups and to the Masterclass leaders.

This was an intense process, with team activities, design exploration, background data review and fixed deadlines to work towards over the three day program.

The design process started broadly, with the production of structure plans at 1:5000 or 1:2500 scale to set the structure or broad design parameters within which to work. This was then blown up to 1:1000 for the production of detailed master plans for the site. Sections, elevations and perspectives were also drawn to further explain the designs.

The design / critique / review process happened daily over the three days, and we had a final pin up and presentation on the last day. These final drawings were then displayed during the conference for all to see.

The Masterclass was backed up by a three day conference titled "From Plans to Places" and focussed on how to better implement built work based on new urbanist design plans and principles.

There were 6 main themes of the conference:

- What is New Urbanism
- How to deliver New Urbanism
- How to achieve more sustainable Urban Extensions (i.e. fringe growth)
- How to achieve mixed use Activity Centres
- How to achieve Urban Sustainability
- How to implement Transit Oriented Development and Corridors

These themes were explored in presentations from local and international experts through case studies from around the world (both good and bad), and through critical analysis and debate during the panel sessions after presentations.

Highlights for me were presentations from Stef Polyzoides (founder of the Congress for New Urbanism, Architect and Director of Moule Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists, USA), and Alannah MacTiernan (Member for Armadale, WA and former Minister for Planning and Infrastructure).

Stef Polyzoides spoke on the first morning of the conference about the North American experience of trying to implement New Urbanism.

He began by explaining what he thought the impediments were to the uptake of New Urbanism principles, and to the implementation of New Urbanism development. Firstly (and obviously) he proclaimed that the rule of the car still dictated the design of towns and communities, and that the lack of multi modalism (other alternative forms of transport) would sustain development reliant on the car only.

Stef also advocated for better education of students at school and at university. He believes that better education will lead to better understanding and promotion of New Urbanism.

He is frustrated that New Urbanism is still seen as an aesthetic movement and wants the economic and environmental benefits to be better considered by developers and governments.

Of particular interest were Stef's 5 principles of Sustainable Design:

1. Connectivity - minimise distance for travel (work- home)
2. Placeness - the voids between architecture need design- these are the places of urbanism
3. Compactness - measure and control in increments not as one entity
4. Diversity - allow for variation and choice, people should be able to choose how they live
5. Frugality - be efficient with materials and products, we need to do more with less.

These principles resonate well from both a design perspective, but also from a lifestyle / day to day living perspective also.

Alannah MacTiernan presented some case studies and achievements from her time as Minister for Planning and Infrastructure in Western Australia.

Western Australia has been performing well economically for a number of years now courtesy of the mining boom, and this growth has allowed the state to grow and develop faster than most other states (including SA).

The WA State Government responded to this growth by being bold with their ambitions for strategic planning, they wanted to re shape the city of Perth, make it more dynamic, diverse and sustainable. They wanted to double the size of the urban passenger rail network to get people out of cars and onto public transport, and they wanted to better engage with the

community to give people opportunity to contribute to ideas and have ownership of design outcomes.

New developments have been well publicised and include Armadale and Mandurah both well south of Perth, and inner suburban Subiaco.

Her goals in boosting the urban passenger rail network have been successful, with patronage on the Perth to Mandurah line increasing from 16 thousand to 55 thousand in six months after the infrastructure was put in place.

Interestingly, one of her biggest achievements she claims was to merge the Planning and Transport departments to facilitate better communication and efficiency between the two disciplines. This is a WA initiative, and I'm not aware of any other states that have done this.

These outcomes, Alannah explained have come about through active collaboration between government agencies, active public investment, close work with Development Authorities (of which Perth apparently has four levels) and just plain sheer persistence. In closing she used that old adage; no pain no gain.