

Graduation address - 12 April 1986

Mr Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, graduands, friends and colleagues

Towards the end of last month I spent five days in Boston, a city that has some points of similarity with Melbourne, and is one of our four sister cities, along with Osaka in Japan, Tianjin in China and Thessaloniki in Greece. It has changed a good deal since I was there last, about 15 years ago, in some ways for the better, in some ways for the worse, and the changes led me to reflect on some of the changes in Melbourne over the years. I was shown around Boston by some of the people who had helped to make the changes for the better (or mostly for the better), from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, which has a charter similar to that of our own Faculty of Architecture & Planning at The University of Melbourne, although only at the graduate level.

Universities have a complex role in their communities: their dedication to scholarship and the advancement of knowledge and understanding properly ignores regional and national boundaries, but that does not mean that they have no domestic responsibilities - it means rather that they should serve their local community by bringing to it the advances and vision of international scholarship. Easy to say; harder to do. How have Harvard and MIT discharged their planning and design responsibilities to Boston and Massachusetts? How have The University of Melbourne and its sister institutions discharged their planning and design responsibilities to Melbourne and Victoria?

Both have done rather badly by ideal standards, but very well by comparative ones, looking at other comparable cities. That, at least, is my conclusion. But I can really only pick a little around the edges of this large question, which is one of those questions which are more important to ask than to answer. I shall begin by noting some of the points of comparison between Melbourne and Boston.

They are roughly the same size. They are both state capitals, but they also have a regional function. Boston is the major port to New England; Logan is New England's International Airport. Boston is the major service centre for New England: for retailing, for medical research and treatment, for banking and corporate affairs - in which it also has a significant national role. Melbourne is the major port for Victoria, the Riverina, South Australia and Tasmania. Tullamarine is still the major, and until a very few years ago was the only, International Airport in the south-east. The Melbourne hospitals service Tasmania in many respects (for instance the Peter McCallum for cancer treatment). Melbourne has long held a national function in banking, insurance and corporate affairs, although its dominance appears to be declining.

Both cities are substantially industrial cities. Boston has had a much longer history, but its older buildings are nearly all from the last century, and they are better preserved than in most other American cities. The earliest buildings were of wood, and nearly all of them went up in flames at one time or another, and although there is a handful of lovely buildings in brick from the eighteenth century, their number is small. So it is a Victorian city matrix with steel and glass towers sprouting from its centre, and an outer

ring of between-wars and post-World War 2 suburbia - like Melbourne, although much more compact. Both cities have suffered from the post-war move to what has been called the post-industrial society, although that is a misleading name for a process which has tended to shift the old labour intensive industries from the west to the industrialising Third World, and to locate the Sunrise High-Tech industries where the sun shines (in California, Atlanta and so on in the USA; and in Sydney rather than Melbourne in Australia). Nevertheless, Boston seems to have arrested this decline in the last few years, and is booming again as a major service centre, and perhaps Melbourne is staging a similar recovery, although the signs here are more ambiguous.

The political roles of the two cities are similarly complex. Boston had a national political significance for many years, first as the cradle of the independence movement, and with Philadelphia, as the source of the Union. It lost this role after the Civil War and the emergence of Washington as national capital. Melbourne of course was the seat of Federal Government until Canberra was established, and there has been a long (and continuing) transfer of national administrative functions from Melbourne north to the transformed sheep station, and although not much talked about, this has been a major haemorrhage of resources, skills and power from our city. Yet in both Boston and Melbourne there is a continuing national role: think of the Kennedy family in the one case, and of the state of origin of Australian Prime Ministers in the other. The Kennedys are also a reminder of the political influence of the Irish in both cities. In fact the primary ethnic mix is about the same: Anglo-Saxons, Irish and Italians. Boston has a close equivalent of Carlton and Lygon Street, undergoing a similar process of gentrification and conversion to up-market restaurants and clothing shops.

The Vietnamese are the latest wave in both cities - but Melbourne lacks

Boston's negro and Hispanic communities, and that is a significant difference.

Both cities have always been committed to education: the cheek or vision of

Melbourne in founding its first University in the paddocks on the outer edge

of the township in 1853 is breathtaking, but Boston showed a similar

presumption in founding Harvard 200 years earlier in 1636. Education and

research have become major industries in both cities, and with this, a certain

staid sobriety, at least as a popular image, although I would prefer to call

the two cities gracious and orderly. Both cities also define themselves in

part by contrast with a bigger, noisier neighbour whom they affect to look

down on as a gaudy, vulgar iniquitous Babylon. Thus I read in a recent

literary essay: Melbourne sees itself as 'progenitor of ideas and talent

which are exported to the larger city on the eastern seaboard. According to

this myth the St. Petersburg sages, warming hands before their gas fires in

dingy inner-city houses, produce the ideas and scripts which the Tinsel Town

hedonists market and sell.' (Bennett 1984 p7). This view is not universal.

When David Williamson was attacked as a deserter for travelling north, he

struck back:

'Melbourne is a much more belligerent city. Its dinner parties are

more violent. The trouble with Melbourne is that it's made up of

Scots stockbrokers and Irish publicans.' (*The Bulletin*, Nov 11

1980)

It is also instructive to recall Trollope's very different comparison of the

two cities a century earlier - he saw Sydney as a languid dowager of a city,

while Melbourne was electric with energy, a new Chicago, an image that is

marvellously explored by Graeme Davison in *The rise and fall of marvellous*

Melbourne (Melbourne University Press, 1978).

Thus the image that the citizens hold of their city may change through time. It is important for planners and designers to explore and comprehend these images because they play a part in establishing the context of planning and design at a given time. Ways in which images of the components of a city - not just of the metropolis as a whole - can be explored was demonstrated in a seminal book *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch from the Joint Center for Urban Studies, a cooperative venture of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. He used Boston as his major example.

If Kevin Lynch has changed the ways we look at cities, who is his Australian equivalent? I suppose the most influential writers about the built environment in the last 30 years have been Hugh Stretton, who focussed our attention on the distribution of goods and services, and Robin Boyd, who made people aware of the stylistic excesses - featurism - of so much Australian building. We can claim Hugh Stretton as one of our students, although he left Melbourne to take up a Rhodes scholarship at Balliol before graduating (he took three subjects in Arts Honours in 1942 and two subjects in Law in 1946. How times have changed!). I was expecting to claim Robin Boyd as 'one of ours' until I got out his student record and found to my horror that he enrolled for only two subjects with us, in the Atelier or Studio course. One, Building Equipment and Services, he passed; but he failed Architectural Design One. He learnt his architecture from the firm he worked with, Kingsley Henderson, and some evening classes at the Royal Melbourne College (RMIT). He was a part-time lecturer here though (from 1948-1956) in Design and Architectural History, followed by a year as Professor of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I don't know where he learnt to write;

that was his great skill, and he became a formidable architectural critic, one who was able to communicate with the community at large, and not just a coterie of fellow architects. That is rare.

I wonder if he would find *The Australian Ugliness* any less today than he found it in 1960? It seems to me that 'featurism' is still with us. Certainly the Boston streets, especially the suburbs, seem less cluttered and more harmonious than ours. The power lines are underground, for one thing, as they are in nearly every other country, and the street trees grow tall and shapely (there is, by the way, a crumb of good news here: last year 60% of new low voltage lines in Melbourne were put underground, where they belong). In suburban Boston, the two storey Cape Cod wooden houses, painted white, with cellar and attic, are economical of space, allowing higher density than our quarter acre block without crowding: indeed, surrounded by grass and trees, with no fences, they have a spacious quality that our often fussy gardens and over-defined boundaries fail to achieve.

But I am not about to ridicule Australian suburbia. Most Australians want their own house on their own block, and that, I think, is what most people all over the world want, given the chance. I am not ashamed of our post-war suburbs - I think they are incomparably better than most of the post-war housing on the perimeter of European cities - Paris or Rome or Budapest, for example, all dominated by unpleasant apartment blocks, many of them far worse than the Housing Commission flats that we no longer build here. Our failures are relative only.

What then is wrong? The distribution of goods and services is inequitable and in need of serious attention - although there is nothing here or in any other Australian city that matches the urban blight of North American cities. I was taken to see a Boston neighbourhood called Dudley, by some graduate students who were studying its problems and trying for solutions. It was a stupefying experience. It was just one of those gracious, tree girt suburban areas that I described earlier, on attractively rolling terrain. Fifteen years ago the first black family moved in, and the whites moved out as fast as possible, afraid that property values would fall; their actions guaranteed that they did fall. Soon houses became virtually unsaleable, and the owners 'vanished' rather than be sued for back payment of rates and taxes. These houses were then taken over by the city in lieu of rates, but the houses soon became vandalised. The city was liable for injury on their property, so they began to pull down empty houses. Then the dumping began. Old cars, trucks, mattresses, iron beds, a huge garbage dump accumulated on every empty block - all this in a suburb at least as attractive as Canterbury or Malvern.

Both cities are remarkable for their public parks and gardens. The Boston Park System - often known as the Emerald Necklace, and famous among students of design - was designed by Olmsted and Eliot, both from Harvard. It has two qualities that few cities have achieved. The first is that it is a linked system, most of it following waterways, so that one can walk or jog or cycle for miles. The second is that it is natural and simple, trees and grass, and therefore within the maintenance capabilities of the city. Our own inner parklands are some of the most beautiful and generous in the world, but because most of their development took place in late Victorian days, when, moreover, we were the richest city in the world, they are exotic and opulent,

lacking the natural qualities of the Boston system, which is more enduring. We also have had some magnificent additions to our parklands in the last ten years or so, many of them due directly to the personal interest of Dick Hamer, the Premier of the day. Few people know all these parks, and are thus unaware of just how much has been done - Brimbank on the Marybyrnong, Jells Park on Dandenong Creek, the Upper Yarra Parks, Blackburn Lake, Darebin Creek, Churchill Park, Point Cook, Werribee -- and more recently, the Merri Creek parkway, which is close to Olmsted's design philosophy. Members of our Faculty, or of the Centre for Environmental Studies, now a part of our Faculty, were involved with the establishment or design of most of these parks. So of course have been other members of The University of Melbourne. Since there are some botanists among tonight's graduands, it is fitting to note that sitting beside me on many a public or State committee set up to enhance the physical environment of this city there has been an eloquent botanist, now - like David Williamson before him - travelling north. I pay tribute to our colleague, Carrick Chambers, whom we shall all miss.

Other good things are happening in both cities, a resurgence of civic design. Central Boston has done a great job in creating pedestrian precincts, more successful than ours, and both cities are recycling and refurbishing their old buildings. The old Meat Market in both places has been given new life in much the same way. Ours (with a committee of management chaired by one of my colleagues) is a great success. The re-design of the Victoria Markets is also promising, with a new urbanity. Have you tried the new restaurant overlooking the Yarra at Flinders Street Station yet, or taken a stroll through Banana Alley? These are exciting times. Perhaps the most promising of all is the new proposal for the Jolimont Yards, on a much firmer

footing than any of the previous proposals, and therefore more likely to succeed. There goes with it a complementary proposal for Princes Plaza as a new gateway to the city. I have had the pleasure of close involvement in this project from its inception in the Gardens and Environment Committee of Victoria's 150th. Much of the urban design skill, much of the enthusiasm and nearly all the expertise in historical conservation has come from our graduates and colleagues at this University.

The new feeling for urban design - or perhaps I should say renewed, in that late Victorian Melbourne had great design qualities, which then lapsed - has a long way to go yet to make this city the fully humane place it could be, but it is certainly heading in the right direction. Regrettably, the planning system has not yet caught up with the new mood - for example, the City of Melbourne cannot refuse a permit or take a case to the Planning Appeals Tribunal on urban design criteria. Somewhat similar problems emerged in the Wade case in Parkville, of bitter memory to some valued members of our University community.

Another major concern is the extent to which Melbourne - and Boston, and most of the world's great cities - are wasteful of resources, making very heavy demands on their hinterland. We should hardly be proud that the water that comes out of our taps may have come from the Thompson River in Gippsland. The MMBW - chaired by our Vice-Principal - has had a vigorous advertising campaign to educate us in the use of water. It has been successful, in that per capita consumption last year was less than 1980, but we are still extravagant. Historically, Melbourne led the world in at least one aspect of resource conservation. Werribee farm, which still processes 70% of our sewage and most

of our industrial wastes, was established in 1888 on the recommendation of a Committee of Enquiry chaired by Professor Harry Brookes Allan M.D., B.S., the Professor of Pathology at The University of Melbourne.

Enough examples. My conclusion is obvious: the history of this city is inextricably intertwined with the history of this University (and, more recently, its sister institution). Nearly all of the architects, town planners, engineers and surveyors who have helped build and plan the city are our graduates, and more recently, most of the landscape architects and many of the environmental planners. Now you join their ranks, to help make this city and this state a better place.

As times have changed, our Faculty has changed adaptively to meet new needs, adding successively to its capabilities in architectural design, skills in town planning, building construction and management, environmental planning and landscape architecture. This is surely the right mix, although it is not one that any other comparable Faculty in Australia has achieved. We have still some way to go to achieve the full potential of this mix, but we are heading in the right direction. One major change that we are now seeing through is the restructuring of our degrees. Many of tonight's graduands have survived a five-year undergraduate degree. Those who failed to do so are of course not represented tonight. In our view it is wasteful and unwise to lock students fresh from school into a five-year program in a discipline in which they are quite untried, without any possibility of review. The new BPD gives a choice point at the end of 3 years, but it also promises another significant academic advantage, that of more fully showing a student the context of his area of professional interest, and how it fits in with related disciplines.

I want to close my remarks tonight with a few words on this subject, because it is often misunderstood. I will take the case of the student of architecture, our largest group. His (or her) professional responsibility will be to design buildings - but there is a further responsibility, to design appropriate buildings, and it is this word that expands our concern. Appropriate to their setting, which requires some knowledge of the history of architecture, of urban design, of landscape architecture, of climatic controls. Socially appropriate, which must consider client involvement, self-help, social equity, image (can prisons, courthouses, hospitals, retirement homes present a humane face? - questions to which some of my colleagues have contributed greatly). To be appropriate for the future, buildings should show environmental fit, be modest in their demands on the natural environment - consider passive solar heating, for example. As I said in March to our new students, for every building in the air there is a hole in the ground somewhere - the source of the brick clay, sand, cement and quarry stone. The architect bears responsibility for the hole as well as the building, and for the vast quantities of water used during construction, and much construction run-off, usually polluted.

This constitutes the context of architecture, and our Faculty takes it very seriously. Let us be clear that the business of the universities is education and NOT professional training. It is NOT our function to turn out fully fledged practising architects. To borrow a phrase from Daryl Jackson, we can prepare you to run out onto the field, but with no guarantee that you will kick goals. We should have trained you in basic skills and fundamental concepts, in knowing how to learn, when to call on specialised skills and how

to use them, and above all, you should have a sound understanding of the *context* of architecture (or building, planning, or landscape architecture). Properly, this should be followed by clinical experience, on-the-job professional training. Medicine has got this right, by capturing the public institutions. These are not so accessible in architecture, although both State and Federal Public Works authorities exist, and in concert with the private sector, could in theory provide similar professional training jointly with the universities. Medicine has the right model. The planning and design professions have not yet fully succeeded in emulating it, although I know that some concerned professionals would like to. Perhaps some of tonight's graduands will help take up that major challenge.

Graduation is a time of hope for the future as well as for a celebration of what you have accomplished over the last few years. I am always moved by this ceremony. Beneath our desiccated exterior we are proud of our students. We all congratulate you, share the delight of your parents and friends, and wish you all good things for the years to come. Remember that you are still part of us, and part of that continuing story of which I have given a rough sketch tonight.



John Davies

The University of Melbourne

With Compliments

see pp 5 + 6 '.

CS,

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