

# A National Urban Policy for Australia

As of June, 2024.

## Comments by Juris Greste OAM

- 1.** I commend the initiative of this policy. However, I wonder what the motivations are to have it at all. I expect one factor might be that it has become obvious that our cities and towns are not as good as we would like them to be. Thus, the national policy could marshal the forces and energies to lift standards and make improvements. Another may be that it has been considered that, for the most highly urbanised nation in the world, it is time there **was** a National Urban Policy. To that extent, having a national policy at all is better than not having one.
- 2.** The creation and management of our built environments are almost entirely in the hands of state or local governments. Apart from some coordination of the various endeavours and documents already produced by the states, there seems questionable value in having this policy. The way it reads at present, the National government is unlikely to wield any material influence on what the states or local governments do.
- 3.** If the above observation is appropriate, the national policy should primarily be designed to support each state to achieve its own respective policies, aims and objectives. I will propose how this may be done later in this submission.
- 4.** If any policy is to have real life value, it needs to have some 'teeth' of enforceable / pursuable means. There is only very general reference to funding for the states to respect and comply with the policy. There need to be more specific and objective assessments of achievement and attainment by the states to qualify for funding. Without this harder edge, this policy stands to achieve very little for those whose life is in the built environments and our urban places – for most Australians. If funding is to be used as a lever to ensure observance and compliance with the policy, the funds for the states should, at least in part, be allocated not just on intentions and wishful thinking but objectively assessable end results.
- 5.** The policy document makes reference to a number of goals for our urban places. One of those is Liveability. The factors affecting this goal are too narrow and, from a built habitat quality point of view, incomplete

and of questionable relevance, i.e., digital connectivity and infrastructure. More specificity might be regarded as being too prescriptive. However, there are well researched and supported built habitat properties which are almost of universal value and relevance and therefore merit inclusion or, at least, referred to.

**6.** There is no lack of knowledge or research findings about cities, in Australia and internationally. The big challenge is to find ways and means to apply that knowledge and wisdom – in an effective way. There are well intended recommendations in various state government documents. However, none of these have ‘teeth’. Over the years, I have been a member of various advisory panels, the objective of which has been to improve the quality of our built settings. Regrettably, at local as well as state level, the advice and recommendations were usually ignored or, at best, acknowledged but not implemented or acted upon. How can this be overcome?

**7.** Even though most Australians live in cities and towns, we as a nation do not have an urban quality culture. Reliance on private cars, detached houses, shopping centres and developer driven built environments, personal wealth building through residential real estate are all part of our culture. All of these cultural features work against the principles which have been proven to be necessary for a good, liveable city or town. A substantial cultural shift is necessary if we are to address the main goals of the policy in earnest. I submit that the document needs to acknowledge this.

**8.** We, as a nation, have a fragmented notion of city or townmaking. Currently, the matter of housing is rightly receiving much attention. However, we do not hear that addressing housing, we are also making the city or town, especially as housing takes up most of the area of our cities and towns! This highlights a narrow mindset. One challenge therefore is to convince the public to take a broader view of all the elements which collectively create the urban built setting. How can we make the urban setting.

**9.** The making and management of the built human habitat is also a major political arena. Change of culture takes at least a generation. Governments can change in much shorter time - 3 or 4 years. We need bi-partisan endorsement of an urban policy and committed to support and pursue it.

**10.** No politician will contest an election on specific urban quality issues unless there is seen to be political dividends, i.e. votes! As long as my property value keeps going up, I’m OK. The public generally is not

aware or well informed of the importance of good urban quality, notwithstanding that for most Australians, IT IS OUR HABITAT!! We pay more attention to koala and kangaroo habitats than our own. If we want better cities and towns, we need to raise the public consciousness and awareness (dare I say, educate the public!). Even one high school (geography?) lesson about what makes a good urban setting would go a long way to raise awareness. The community (voters!) need to be encouraged to understand the impact on their lives of a range of urban qualities and characteristics. However, it is, as if, you cannot miss something you never had. As an example, many of our multi-car owning households do not know that there is possibly a public transport option available for many of their frequent destinations.

**11.** We have media programs and presentation on almost every subject imaginable except urban quality – the state of our cities! Until the public ask for, **preferably demand**, better quality urban settings, we will not achieve what the National Policy is endeavouring to do. It has to be on the political agenda, preferably at local and state government level.

**12.** That this policy document is being launched, in addition to various presently available state guidelines and recommendations, clearly implies that those who currently plan / design / manage our urban settings have not measured up to the task. Why do so many policies and practice recommendations have to be published, seemingly to do the work of competent and well qualified professionals? Without appearing extreme, one could even say that they have failed their commission.

**13.** One has to question the type and quality of education our urban professionals get or options available. In 1988 the objective of the Queensland University of Technology was to establish Australia's first fully comprehensive urban design course under my leadership. At that time there were no more than 4 or 5 Australian urban design graduates with degrees obtained outside Australia. The QUT course ran for a few years but in 1997 was discontinued because the university found it was not viable, largely for lack of enrolments (interest?). It is hard to imagine how it came to be but this happened in the fastest growing state and city in Australia. Urban design, the body of knowledge and practice of creating urban settings of high quality was not valued or recognised. The status, place and regard for urban design skills and knowledge based practice has declined ever since. Various study programs have been on offer but one cannot but wonder how effective they have been, judging by the apparent need to publish various policies and guidance documents which are essentially teaching material.

**14.** We have to question the type and quality of education for making and managing the urban settings. I believe the National government must take a lead in establishing appropriate education standards. Today, universities operate in the commercial market. It is claimed that education is one of Australia's major 'exports'. If that is the case, to what extent does 'the marketplace' – local and international - influence the education product? A National Urban Policy cannot be complete without a thorough examination of this aspect – are our urban professionals educationally adequately equipped. At the moment, much of the evidence points that they are not; and if not, then WHY not? If their education is adequate and appropriate, what impediments are there to the implementation of that learning

**15.** The pattern and direction of how an urban setting might be shaped is generally considered to be the role of mainly planners. If we believe our cities and towns can and should be better, attention must also be paid to how architects are educated about urbanity. By the evidence in the architectural media, too much attention is still paid to the building as an object, free standing in space. Illustrations hardly ever include the broader context and without references to how the building serves the greater good of the urban setting and the public. From that, it is reasonable to conclude that most architects do not consider their 'piece' as merely one element of the broad urban mosaic but an object expressing the client and the architect. This must change! The potential role that architects play in the overall creation of the built setting is taken too lightly. (I believe I can speak with some credibility, having also been an architectural educator.)

**16.** The implementers and managers of the urban setting 'product' are the numerous officers and employees of local government. However, the planning and infrastructure departments are not the only groups involved. Unless the making and management of the urban setting is understood and embraced by the whole of the local government administration, it will frustrate or certainly limit the achievement of the kind of qualities that might be pursued. While it is not expected that all of the Council staff share the same level of knowledge and understanding as the primary responsible officers, for optimal success, it is vital that a particular urban quality culture is developed and shared broadly.

**17.** The National Urban Policy document clearly calls for change. Change is not easy! Changes can bring benefits but also call for various other adjustments. There is often resistance to change, especially if it impacts on economic circumstances. In the case of urban settings, development companies and other business and economic interests

usually resist the urban change that the implementation of the kind of adjustments this policy is likely to require. This is part of the challenge: how to overcome or counteract the resistance which is largely either out of ignorance or disinterest or unwillingness to support the broader public good.

**18. Areas / subjects for research.** Excellent purpose will be served if the National government initiates a number of investigations and studies. It could fund the projects or give other forms of support and encouragement. These, among others, are:

**A.** What is the public's understanding or expectations of the notion of 'Liveability', a central goal of most government publications and guideline documents generally?

**B.** There is or has been an abundance of well intending policy and guideline documents from all levels of government. However, so far, the evidence points to the difficulty and obstacles in implementing most of the worthy objectives. This calls for studies and recommendations on methods of implementation and how to find ways around the road blocks. How can we make currently available knowledge and skills be better and more effectively used?

**C.** There seems to be a considerable choice of various urban design study and degree courses on offer in Australia. It would be of great help to prospective students to make their decisions on course selection if a comparative listing were to be available. As a start, this would show the type of qualification or degree offered, length of course, a detailed outline of subject matter covered, method of study - is the study program in person or online, full time or part-time, course fees, course staffing, etc. A good deal of that information is available from the various websites. However, a single comparison document would be of great value.

**D.** An index or catalogue of the quite plentiful research projects and studies which have been completed in Australia, as Ph.D. dissertations, commissioned investigations and others. If regularly updated, this could become a single source of guidance, comparison of findings and minimise duplication.

Juris Greste, 02.07.2024.

May I add another suggestion?

A book *Urban Voices* was published in 2013.

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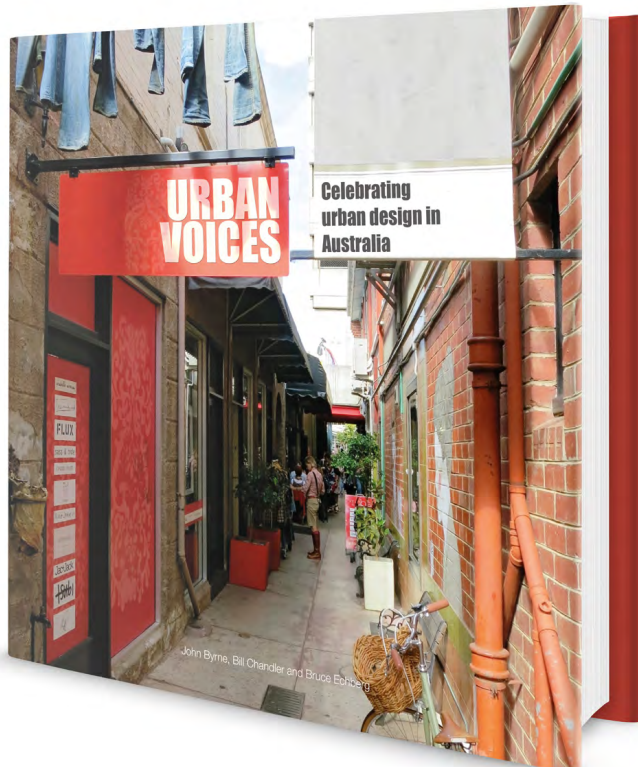
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I submit that those whose task it is to review the comments received should read or, at the very least, familiarise themselves with the content of this volume. Overall, it addresses the issues that the National Urban Policy for Australia is attempting to deal with. In particular, I contributed to this volume, on page 25, 'Why we are not where we would like to be'. I request that piece should be considered as part of my submission, as it still applies 11 years later.

Having re-read my article as well as the others, I cannot help but wonder why we are labouring again and again over yet another policy document when so much sound opinion, recommendations and ideas have already been aired, all by highly credible and experienced people. I pray that, in another ten years, there is not ANOTHER urban policy while little has changed in the meantime!!!

Juris Greste