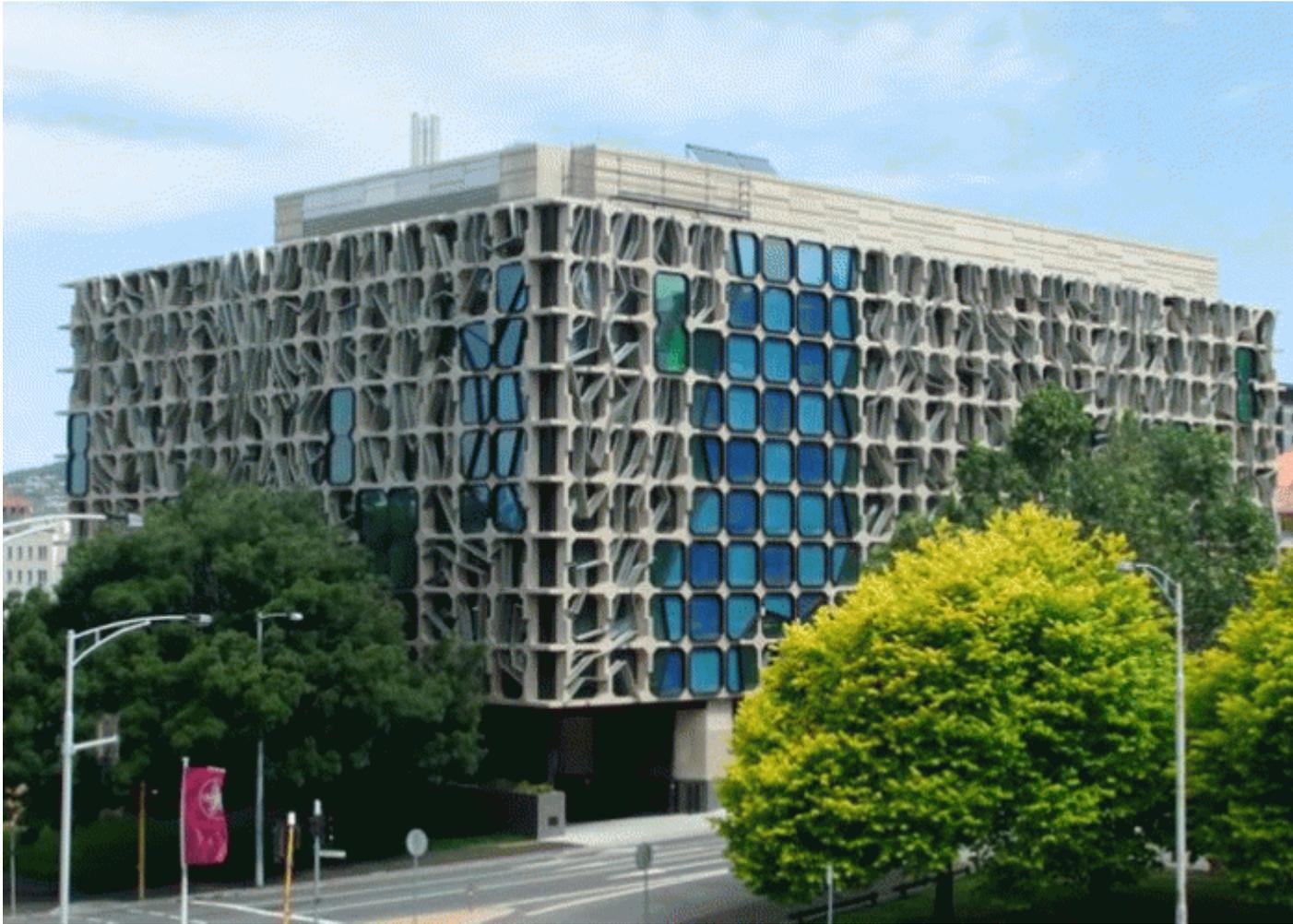


Words, Meaning and Hobart Architecture



Hopefully, readers will remember my *Tasmanian Times* article (24th Oct 2013, [Hobart Architecture and The Dilemmas of Development](#)) which discussed the UTAS Student Centre proposed for the Hobart CBD.

As intended, it generated some lively debate, including several succinct on-line comments, and, subsequently, also found a place in *The Mercury* [Sunday Soapbox, 10th Nov, 2013, under the publisher's headline: "Hobart Deserves a Grand Design"]. Leo Schofield picked up on my mention of the "design made to fit within the grain of the city" statement made by architect Scott Balmforth, and took him to task in his weekly *My Tasmania* page [The Mercury, 2nd Nov, 2013]. Leo Schofield called the statement *archispeak* and went on to say:

"...architects, like art critics, have developed unique forms of language, comprehensible only to their peers, designed to suggest profound philosophical ideas while being absolutely meaningless."

Strong stuff!

Readers and commentators obviously care enough about their city, and development projects, to take note of every word uttered, and engage in spirited debate to bring clarity, and hopefully consensus, to issues that are in fact the very building blocks of our urban history. It

is gratifying that *words* and *meaning* are seen as vitally important - we have to live with architectural follies for a long time, and, in this context, one wonders if Mr Balmforth regretted ever having mentioned “the grain of the city” on local TV. People were listening very closely.

He might have done well to allow the matter to rest, but he chose not to. In an email to Mr. Schofield, he expressed the surprise he and his colleagues felt “... *at being hung out in the manner of your article*”, and took the opportunity to explain: He confirmed that the term was indeed familiar to his peers and not altogether uncommon [to lesser mortals—*Ed.*] and went on to say:

“The grain of the city referred to is acknowledgement of the development pattern of the CBD’s blocks which have allowed a public accessibility which we have sought to preserve in the NRAS project for UTAS, and at a broader scale appreciating the role the landform has in defining built form patterns of the city which we have also sought to address.”

He finished by saying, “if you still deemed it *archispeak* I would have no issue with your opinion.”

Hmm! . . . If allowing the matter to rest might have been well advised before, there is obviously nothing to be gained by pursuing it *now*, except to say that it is hardly surprising that the published design of the Student Centre appears confused and lacking connection to the reality of its surroundings.

Nevertheless, we should be grateful to Mr Balmforth for demonstrating - beyond a shadow of doubt - that words and meaning are indeed vitally important, even if they tend to obscure rather than illuminate, and should not be taken for granted. We should all insist that the question: “What do you mean by that?” be asked - and asked again - until we are satisfied that we either understand, or, understand that we are being subjected to meaningless jargon and so should view associated plans and projects with appropriate scepticism. It is too easy to come up with some monstrous design and then bamboozle people into believing that there is an underlying logic at work - some grand expression of architectural brilliance - that could, in fact, be retro-fitted to just about any idea an architect could dream up.

A case in point is the recently completed Menzies Centre. Clearly, this topic falls into the category of flogging a dead horse, but it is instructive on a number of levels, nevertheless. First, my Tasmanian Times article provoked many conversations, and more often than not the *Menzies Centre* was brought up as an example of something incomprehensible - the words I heard most often were: “*what a mess*” which is so unfortunate for such a major addition to the City. Second, there were a (very) few positive comments, but they also are instructive.

Recently, UTAS published an insert in *The Mercury*: O2t - Open to Talent. The positive comments made to me basically reiterated what this insert described as the inspiration for the *Menzies Centre* design - specifically:

“While the striking exterior design is clearly apparent to passersby—drawing on themes from nearby mountains and waterways, but also cell structures—what some may not realize is that within this project beats a vibrant green heart.”



Photo: Tony Hagar

Conventional wisdom would say that *green* is good - *vibrant green?* - even better; and it goes without saying that the exterior design is clearly apparent. But, to make the link to “*nearby mountains, waterways and cell structures*” is problematic. First, for many Hobartians *the link* is far from being clearly apparent, as the above photo attests. Second, one wonders how these three diverse elements could all be inspiration for the same design, except to say that such a muddle of ideas more likely explains why so many people view the building as *a mess*. Third, and most important, is the link to cell structures. To understand and appreciate this link one would need to have, at the least, an advanced education; a degree in molecular biology would be better. Presumably, the *Menzies Centre* is crawling with boffins with appropriate tertiary qualifications and whose pulses quicken in recognition when they are in the vicinity of the *Railway Roundabout*. Let’s be generous and accept that there are 1,000 such boffins in Hobart. For most of the remaining 199,000 citizens, *cell structures* is a totally obscure and meaningless concept - for those who care, the building is a mess. Period.

To put this building in the middle of the city, and make the claim that it is inspired by cell structures, is really just **an intellectual conceit** - scientific snobbery at its worst. One could just as easily retrofit the idea and claim it was inspired by a loaf of bread (with a few spots of mould tossed in for good measure). It is no wonder that it’s design provoked a deluge of opposition. The place for such a building is on the UTAS campus in Sandy Bay, where it might be less out of place, not to mention better understood and appreciated.

Everyone involved in such issues—architects, clients, City Council, and citizens - have the best intentions but differing aims and agendas; or lack thereof. The solution, if there is one (and if it isn't far too late) is for the Council to decide on what kind of city - specifically, what kind of CBD - it wants. Surely, this is a prerogative for any city government, but the lack of guidance has led to a Hodge-podge of the sublime, the very ordinary and the farcical - and something virtually everyone I have spoken with describes as *ugly* - a CBD without charm, or softness, and with very little to draw to it the hundreds of thousands of tourists and cruise passengers who come here every year.

Go to: http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attractions-g255097-Activities-Hobart_Tasmania and you will see what I mean. This website lists Southern Tasmania's 65 most popular attractions. Few are in the CBD. No wonder its retailers are suffering.

The City Council likes to tout *The Gehl Architects Report*, which was dated 2010 and called for two things: first, buildings that ensure “*delight for human senses*” [good luck!] and, second, “TREES” [TREES, TREES!] Three years on and you may well ask:

Where are the trees?

The photo below shows the bottom end of Macquarie Street - an urban wasteland - that includes, on the right, the back-sides of two structures that were the subject of vociferous objection at the time of their planning—the *Grand Chancellor Hotel* in 1987 and *Federation Concert Hall* in 2000. I'm not going to start flogging another horse except to note that this stark and unattractive view is the last that most tourists departing Hobart via the airport see of the CBD. If ever there was a case for the planting of trees it is here - to soften the totally and utterly uninspiring - at the cost of a few lightly utilised parking spots.



Photo: Tony Hagar

It is interesting to note further, that in her online response to my *Dilemmas of Development* article, Jane Rankin-Reid wrote the following:

“We should be wary of professional hyperbole, particularly for its ability to snowball our capital city’s aldermen, several of whom participated in the decision to build architectural behemoths such as the *Grand Chancellor Hotel*. By way of excusing themselves for inviting this dated eyesore to be constructed, one high ranking alderman claimed to have misunderstood the colour of the bricks presented in the design.”

The photograph below is an extreme example of where this lack of leadership can take our City. One wonders what words and meanings were exchanged so as to result in this ridiculous, misbegotten monstrosity at the corner of Murray and Warwick Streets - the urban equivalent of a rusting hulk of a car on cinder blocks in an overgrown front yard, waiting only for a one-way trip to the rubbish dump. How could Hobart even contemplate such an architectural embarrassment as this?



Photo: Tony Hagar

By way of contrast, words and meaning are superfluous when considering this 10-year old home on De Witt Street, Battery Point.



Photo: Tony Hagar

Can there be any doubt that its initiators and architects had a profound respect for Battery Point? Every aspect of this elegant structure attests to an understanding and appreciation for history, tradition and simplicity.

Applause for all involved.

And let us hope that the *Hobart City Council* reaches the same understanding and appreciation.

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