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McMahon's Point, Sydney: a Translation of the 1956 CIAM 10 Urban Consciousness?

Sydney architects, landscape architects and planners make decisions about urban design on a daily basis, yet how much do we really know about significant influences which inform our questions about these matters? At first glance the subject of this paper might appear somewhat ambitious, notwithstanding, it seeks to discuss urban architecture by reference to a dramatically different architect-urbanist model first introduced at the 10th Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) held in Dubrovnik in 1956.

For Australia this model was particularly important because the architect Phillip Jackson, one of two delegates from Sydney who actively contributed to the CIAM 10 debate, went on to test this architect-urbanist model. Jackson's point of reference was his contribution to Harry Seidler's controversial and unrealized 1957 project for McMahon's Point in North Sydney. The architects and planners involved in the project rose to the challenge in their landmark re-development study proposal *Urban Redevelopment Concerns You!* Ultimately, the proposal failed to realize aspirations for innovative high-density urban/architecture, apart from isolated gestures such as Seidler's Blues Point Tower, which was completed in 1962. By locating the theoretical roots of the McMahon's Point in the 1956 CIAM congress, we are able to re-assess the role of the CIAM in what can be argued as an emerging discourse on the new element of *urban consciousness*, which challenged architects, landscape architects and planners to adopt urbanistic means.

Thus, we must ask: what innovative *urban consciousness* from the CIAM 10 congress can we find translated in Harry Seidler's 1957 McMahon's Point project?

Introduction

This paper traces the connection between the CIAM 10 congress held in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia (now Croatia) in 1956 and the 1957 proposal for McMahon's Point in Sydney. Arguably, CIAM represented an emerging discourse on the new element of *urban consciousness* that challenged architects, landscape architects and planners to adopt a new *Chartre de l'Habitat*.

Phillip Jackson's presence as one of the two delegates from Sydney at the CIAM 10 congress is sufficient grounds to assert that the congress influenced the thinking behind Jackson's involvement in McMahon's Point as one of the design team. The CIAM international conferences provided a strong debate for the formalization of the architectural principles of the Modern Movement. CIAM (and in particular the CIAM 10 conference) viewed architecture as instrumental in social advancement through the careful design of architectural and planning solutions. No doubt, this would have been an important learning for the Australian delegate. Paradoxically, as the place of debate of paradigms for new architectural and urban ideas, CIAM fell short of expectations and later came to symbolize the failure of the entire Modern Movement. Indeed, the effects of CIAM's legacy on urban design practice are yet to be fully examined.

Jackson co-authored a report of the CIAM 10 congress event for the journal *Architecture Australia* in 1957 with the other delegate from Sydney, architect Ian McKay. It is clear from the report that Jackson championed CIAM's attitude to architecture and the built environment, and that he was attempting to apply the concept of CIAM 10 within the Sydney context. The report concludes with this consideration:

"More recently, and of immediate interest to those of us here, is the attempt by a group of architect-planners to re-develop a decayed section of the inner city area at McMahon's Point, North Sydney. The possibilities of high density urban re-development of these blighted areas so close to the centre of the city offer a wonderful challenge, both to planner and administrator. If Sydney's great urban sprawl is to be checked, it is within these areas that immediate action must be taken."¹

By focussing on a different architect-urbanist model, and to limit low density and urban sprawl, the CIAM 10 congress prioritized alternatives for specific architecture and related planning decisions. This was a model adopted and addressed by Phillip Jackson through his contribution, which he made together with Harry Seidler and other architects, for the 1957 re-development study proposal *Urban Redevelopment Concerns You!* for McMahon's Point. This is a view shared and supported by architect Penelope Evatt-Seidler, a main contributor to the 1957 scheme.² She recently commented in a personal conversation with the author how without doubt, Seidler was the forceful and dominant figure behind the development study for McMahon's Point. Seidler's scheme threw down the gauntlet to Sydney's urban sprawl and the Australian dream of the individual house on a quarter-acre block,

1 Ian McKay and Philip Jackson, "The 10th C.I.A.M. Conference," *Architecture in Australia* 46, no. 3 (1957): 84.

2 Personal conversation with Penelope Seidler, February 2014.

his first interest demonstrated by his many successful detached-houses realized in Sydney since the beginning of his Australian career. McMahon's Point can probably be considered Seidler's first high-density urban architecture project, heralding some of the modernist ideas on architecture and *urbanistic* means formulated by the CIAM congresses.

Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM)

From its much-celebrated beginning in 1928 at La Sarraz, Switzerland, to its official ending in 1959 at Otterlo, Netherlands, CIAM represented a progressive discourse in architecture and urbanism, influencing education and practice in Europe and America.³ According to Eric Mumford, it left a legacy in the eastern hemisphere (India, China, Japan)⁴ and almost certainly sparked urban thinking in Sydney, commencing with the McMahon's Point project.

It was in 1928 that a small group of left-wing Swiss architects declared "the need for a new concept of architecture that satisfies the spiritual, intellectual and material demands of present day life."⁵ For the next three decades, and from that clear, initial vision, CIAM congresses continued to bring the objectives of architecture and town planning into perspective through an international exchange of ideas. Over time there was a steady evolution of ideas and intentions, with the focus changing from the original three categories of "dwelling, producing and relaxation (the maintenance of the species)" to the four categories of "housing, work, recreation and transportation", expressed at the CIAM 4 congress in 1933 through its theme "The Functional City". Post-war challenges produced a more structured system of principles for the *urban consciousness* of the congresses of the 1950s held in Hoddesdon, England in 1951 (CIAM 8), in Aix-en-Provence, France in 1953 (CIAM 9) and in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia in 1956 (CIAM 10).

It is quite probable that urban consciousness and the issues of the city came to the forefront in both academia and practice as early as 1943 following the publication of Josep Lluís Sert's, *Can our cities survive?: an abc of urban problems, their analysis, their solutions*. This was followed in 1951 by the theme, *The Heart of the City*, formulated by the CIAM 8. The congress publication *The Heart of the City: towards the humanization of urban life*, initiated a new approach to urban planning challenging the four categories of "The Functional City" with "The Cores within the Urban Constellation". The word *Core*, as reported in the congress publication, was selected from the *Oxford English Dictionary* defining the "central innermost part, the heart of all", defined in architecture and planning as "the element that makes a community a community and not merely an aggregate of individuals".⁶

3 Kees Somer, *The Functional City: CIAM and the Legacy of Van Eesteren* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007).

4 Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 261.

5 Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 109.

6 Josephine Tyrwhitt, Josep Lluís Sert and Ernesto Nathan Rogers, eds., *CIAM 8 The Heart of the City: towards the humanization of urban life* London: Lund Humphries, (1952), 159.

CIAM 10 expanded on the theme of *Heart of the City*, promoting an “architecture that takes the urban possibilities into consideration. It counts on the environment”.⁷ With these words, Sert (acting as secretary of the CIAM 10) openly contrasted the functionalist model of the l'Unité d'Habitation with a new urban model he was testing in the South American cities “...with high blocks alternating with lower structures and courts ... with shops and public activities to bring life into the city”.⁸ The four categories of “housing, work, recreation and transportation” of the “Functional City” were extended by more specific categories such as “house, street, district and city”; thus the focus shifted to “social interaction, community and habitat”.⁹

CIAM 10: Dubrovnik 1956

Habitat can be defined as “the locality in which an animal naturally grows and lives” and sits comfortably with the thinking of CIAM participants and also the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This definition holds a larger and deeper meaning of urbanistic fundamentals, which would altogether formulate a new concept of architectonic and urbanistic means. Consequently, it indicates a greater responsibility for the future of the city and an active role for the new figure of the architect-urbanist.¹⁰ In the Australian context, and especially Sydney, the figure of the architect-urbanist was nowhere to be found during the 1950s where the Australian dream was still the individual house. This is evident in the arguments of Australian scholars and practitioners who concentrated their debates more on the design of the individual house than that of the urban context.¹¹ If we are to understand Sydney's milieu we must grasp this point and its influence on discussions to which the Australian delegates were exposed during the 1956 CIAM conference.

The presentation of 35 analytical grids as the schematic method of analysis or “thinking tool” allowed CIAM 10 participants to compare current urban problems to their respective countries, formalizing the ambitious theme of a new Charter of Habitat.¹² This Charter led discussions that resulted in a summary which addressed a critique of the contemporary situation of the habitat and which also contained a feasibility study relating to three distinct commissions or “working parties”. Each commission comprised a number of subsections:

Commission A - *Study of the Chartre de l'Habitat* with the subsections of five to seven people. This consisted of:

“A.1 The Formulation of the Chartre; A.2 The Present situation of the Habitat: a critique;

7 Eric Mumford, *Defining Urban Design. CIAM Architects and the Formation of a Discipline, 1937-69* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 130.

8 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 128.

9 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 252.

10 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 255.

11 Harry Margalit, “Modernism Sundered: Intellectual Currents in Architecture in 1950s Sydney,” in *Architectural Theory Review* 8, no. 2 (2003): 115.

12 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 249.

A.3 To select extracts from earlier work of the CIAM with relevance to the Habitat."¹³

Commission B - *Study of the Grilles* (Grids/Schemes) - was divided into four sub-commissions, comprising 10-15 people:

"B.4 The problem of organic unity (cluster); B.5 The problem of mobility; B.6 The problem of growth and change; B.7 Urbanism as part of the Habitat."¹⁴

Lastly, Commission C - *Liaison/Public Relation* - was composed of four people who inter-related among the various commissions and reported their progress to the President.¹⁵ Australian delegates participated in the Commission B.5 on "Mobility" - physical mobility and mobility of the spirit. In their report they mentioned a certain Bill Howell as the nominal leader of the subsection, which included representatives from England, Scotland, Switzerland, France, Finland and Australia.¹⁶ Despite the good intentions proposed by the CIAM 10, and reported in the 1957 by Jackson, the *Chartre de l'Habitat* was never produced.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it set the premises for the McMahon's Point project to commence its story.

The Story Unfolds

The story of the long and rather meandering McMahon's Point affair begins in 1951 when Estelle Hillard, described as "... a remarkable woman whose great-uncle was Andrew Fisher, first Labour Prime Minister of Australia",¹⁸ fired the first shot in what turned out to be a battle that lasted 10 years. Her objective was to prevent the rezoning of McMahon's Point from a residential area to a waterfront industry and saw a committed group from the North Sydney community joining forces with an efficient and visionary group of architects and planners.

From January to December 1957 both the local communities of McMahon's Point, Lavender Bay and a group of architects and planners, worked hard to make a strong argument against the council's re-zoning of McMahon's Point to an industrial area maintaining residential and public facilities. Their efforts and passionate belief in the cause resulted in a publication in 1957: *Urban Redevelopment concerns you!*¹⁹ The redevelopment study for McMahon's Point was proposed by Harry Seidler together with Philip Jackson, Harry Howard, Lyle Dunlap, Richard Fitzhardinge, Ivan Seifert, Andrew Young, Douglas Gordon and Michael Boyle, all of whom would be involved in the publications,

13 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 247.

14 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 247.

15 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 247; and McKay and Jackson, "The 10th C.I.A.M. Conference," 82.

16 McKay and Jackson, "The 10th C.I.A.M. Conference," 83.

17 Eric Mumford, "CIAM urbanism after the Athens Charter," *Planning Perspectives*: Princeton University (2007), 412.

18 "Housewife who saved North Sydney, She changed a Government's mind after seven-year battle", *Australian Women's Weekly*, 5 November 1958.

19 Harry Seidler, et al., *Urban Redevelopment Concerns You!* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 1957).

newspaper and architectural journal articles, and in the community and council meetings following the release of the proposal to the local council.

Public debate for the re-zoning of McMahon's Point was heated and quickly came to the attention of the newspaper, *Sydney Morning Herald*, in the form of an article penned by Harry Seidler, "Ruining the Finest Harbour in the World", dated 12 January 1957. At this point we should remind ourselves that from early settlement, sawmill industries and boat builders' yards had been part of the scene along the shores of McMahon's Point. Yet, for the local community and for the architects and planners involved in the development study this was not a convincing argument for the introduction of new industries - including an extensive cement factory that would have, without any doubt, spoiled a beautiful part of Sydney Harbour. And this in particular in the late 1950s, when the substantial increase in Sydney's population was a significant factor for engaging with alternative modes of habitat. Predictably, Seidler's article mocked North Sydney Council for being short-sighted with its insistence on re-zoning McMahon's Point as an industrial area. With some artistic flair Seidler helpfully provided a scenic sketch depicting a view that stretched from McMahon's Point towards Sydney Bridge. The caption spoke for itself: "A Cement Factory Will Enjoy This View."²⁰

According to Jennifer Taylor, the large-scale proposal for the McMahon's Point development was an extensive scheme for Sydney with no other similar proposal made around the country at that time.²¹ Curiously, Taylor omits from her brief description of the proposal, the history of the 10-year battle behind the project and the risk this peninsula would have meant to Sydney Harbour, if it had been to become 'home' to a substantial group of industries, rather than being able to remain as an area that would keep its residential quality.

McMahon's Point Project

The official presentation of the plans and scale model for the proposed development sponsored by the McMahon's Point and Lavender Bay Progress Association was displayed in August 1957 in St. Francis Xavier School Hall in North Sydney. The scheme planned to re-house the current population of 3,500 with a total population increased to 15,000.

Stating that "...to house all of Sydney's population in single family houses is physically and economically impossible",²² the team proposed a mixed residential development, which would include four types of housing units:

"(1) court houses on flat ground in units of six, containing two and three bedrooms types, with enclosed courtyards for outdoor living - a thoughtful scheme for older people or larger families;

²⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 12 January 1957.

²¹ Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960* (Melbourne: Education Division Publ., 1990), 25.

²² Harry Seidler, "Experts Plan Lay-Out for McMahon's Point," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1957.

(2) six-storey walk-up maisonettes, which were designed using the natural landscape of the street contours around the foreshore area, creating a series of bridges towards the centre of the buildings thus avoiding the realization of lifts;

(3) twelve-storey maisonette apartments placed at right angles to the main road through the centre of the development, to maintain views towards the harbour from any position in the buildings - and cross ventilation;

(4) a group of twenty-two storey high tower blocks located on the highest area of the Point, to overlook all other the buildings, with terraces and views in all directions.”²³

There was a specific concern for achieving re-centralization rather than de-centralization, by building vertically, to avoid congestion and overcrowding, thus allowing more areas for green space, the separation of pedestrian from vehicular traffic.

The scheme included public facilities like shops, movie theatres, professional offices, a plaza with three floors of parking underneath, four nursery schools, primary schools, a secondary school and a sports oval, a music shell and a natural amphitheatre built within the park, a yacht club and a floating restaurant-nightclub overlooking the water and approached by a bridge. A multilevel parking station was to be built over North Sydney station with an office building rising above. Extending the project toward the territory of Lavender Bay, the project included a church and community centre hall, while on the extreme point on the south part a tourist hotel was planned to be an attraction to overseas visitors with a swimming pool, restaurant and tennis courts.

Seidler suggested: “The task must be tackled at once with a little more courage, imagination and resolution.”²⁴ Certainly, this had been the common sentiment shared by the CIAM and the visionary group of local inhabitants and architects in that particular period of 1957: a cry for urbanism versus sub-urbanism. Undoubtedly, *Urban development Concerns You!* introduced a different perspective and a more urban concern. An unambiguous image accompanying Harry Seidler’s provocative article “This or That?” published in December 1957 in *Architecture and Arts* compares two conflicting alternatives for the redevelopment of the area: a suburban sprawl versus a modernist, diversified, high density scheme.²⁵

On the theme of density, the CIAM’s participants offered their view that: “The only examples of low-density development that function well are those for high-income groups.” Additionally, the CIAM report suggests that other suburban developments prove very quickly, how inefficient they are socially, economically and geographically.²⁶ Similarly, the McMahon’s Point group vocally suggested:

23 Harry Seidler, et al., *Urban Redevelopment Concerns You!*

24 Margaret Park interviewing Harry Seidler, Courtesy: Merle Coppell Oral History Collection, North Sydney Heritage Centre, Stanton Library, North Sydney, 12 July 2000.

25 Harry Seidler, “This or That?,” in *Architecture and Arts* (December 1957): 24-27.

26 McKay, Jackson, “The 10th C.I.A.M. Conference,” 82-83.

"The continued horizontal expansion of Sydney substandard or lack of minimal services has reached alarming proportions. And shows a wrong approach to planning where the option to redevelop inner city areas with their splendid location and existing services are ready for redevelopment."²⁷

An article entitled "Redevelopment of McMahons Point" appeared in *Architecture in Australia* the following year, commenting on the "ideal conditions" of the site for "high density re-development because of the close proximity to the harbour and the city".²⁸

McMahon's Point and CIAM 10: Points of Interaction

So, what did the development study for McMahon's Point have in common with CIAM's new urban paradigm? We can find the answer to this question by examining the document trail. For example, the Development study *Urban Redevelopment concerns you!* follows the 1956 discussions addressed by the participants at the CIAM 10 congress. In Jackson's 1957 CIAM report there is strong emphasis on three main themes: People, Land and under the title "Man-made environment: The Structure of Human Agglomeration", a timing outline of the dangers of Decentralisation. Misconceptions of the advantages of low density follow, fitting the McMahon's Redevelopment study and the argument made about "Urban Sprawl" written only one year later.

The planning of McMahon's Point for these designs would address the main aims stated by the CIAM congress, in that it would deliver an architecture/urban design that would honour the rights of the individual, the family unit and the community. In following the CIAM 10 theme of 'Habitat' and its associated themes of 'the heritage of nature' and the needs of the community, the McMahon's Point scheme challenged the functionalism of the pre-war CIAM congresses and their rigid connotations. For Seidler, the most vocal of the design group according to Libby Howard, Sydney people deserved to live around the harbour and not in the urban sprawl of the "wastes of suburbia".²⁹ As Ian Hoskins points out in his volume *Sydney Harbour: a History*: "McMahon's Point was the ideal place to demonstrate the veracity of urban consolidation."³⁰

Within the CIAM 10 concept of "human association" as well as "social interaction, community and habitat", McMahon's Point arguably proposed a scheme with four diverse typologies of buildings, which offered a diverse social pattern of dwellings for a diverse social interaction responding to the sub-commission's point B4. This point stated how social interaction was to be achieved through "relating the parts of a community into a total cluster in extending and renewing the existing pattern." Other aspects of the McMahon's Scheme addressed: in point B5 the problem of mobility "resolved itself into two aspects", "physical mobility and mobility of the spirit ... to

27 Harry Seidler, et al., *Urban Redevelopment Concerns You!*

28 "Redevelopment of McMahon's Point, North Sydney", *Architecture in Australia* (February 1958): 16-17.

29 Personal conversation with Libby Howard (architect, academic and wife of Harry Howard one of the designers of the McMahon's Point redevelopment scheme), February 2014.

30 Ian Hoskins, *Sydney Harbour: A history* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009).

change and revitalize the old". Finally, point B7 Urbanism is introduced as part of the Habitat. The commission or working group reported "on the continuity of the Habitat, negotiating linkages between living tradition and the future", and for "research concerning spatial composition with the notion of continuity".³¹ Another aspect discussed was the replacement by the linear CORE elements of the "corridor street" and the "corridor space" which would engage "the free and active participation of the probate sector." The space in-between can be evaluated in terms of a designed system of relationships for the new community that experiences a complex of associations with cultural activities and other public facilities organized around the site.

Notably, the academic Marina Lathour wrote, "The notion of the in-between extended its meaning from a place within which different realities interpenetrate to any relation between man and man, man and thing."³² To some extent this statement might as well be revisited for the McMahon's Point scheme. Quoting Jacob Bakema and Alison Smithson,³³ Lathour suggests:

"... housing units like a society pattern of open human relationships could be conceived as repetitive yet no identical 'visual groups' ... the 'human settlement' in many respects dissolved the stable and hierarchical relationship between the architectural object and its surroundings into an expandable territorial fabric."³⁴

For many within the general public and the built environment profession, the 1957 McMahon's Point scheme represented the future, a point taken up in an article in *Sydney Morning Herald* titled: "This is how Sydney will look in 2007 A.D. Clean and Atomic Powered" (September 26, 1957), which presents the model of the McMahon's Point scheme. Years later the general public and the professional community viewed it through a thin veil of criticism for ignoring any historical discussion on the existing buildings, thus treating the site as *tabula rasa*. This view was not shared by the article in *Architecture in Australia* titled "Redevelopment of McMahon's Point, North Sydney". At the time it reported:

"Existing churches and school although intended to be retained, have been not shown on the plan. The harbor foreshores have been made totally accessible to the public for recreational facilities. Because of existing services, the main road pattern was retained. Certain changes were made to eliminate some awkward and dangerous road junctions and a derelict train line eliminated."³⁵

31 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 247.

32 Marina Lathour, "CIAM meetings 1947-59 and The 'Core' of the City: Transformations of an idea," in *La città nuova: proceedings of the 1999 ACSA International Conference, 29 May - 2 June 1999, Rome*, ed. Katrina Deines et al. (Washington, D.C.: ACSA Press, 1999), 406.

33 Alison Smithson, *The Emergence of Team 10 Out of CIAM* (London: Architectural Association; 1982).

34 Lathour, "CIAM meetings 1947-59," 406.

35 "Redevelopment of McMahon's Point, North Sydney", *Architecture in Australia* (February 1958): 16-17.

Ultimately, the proposal failed to realize aspirations for innovative high-density urban/architecture, apart from isolated gestures such as Seidler's Blues Point Tower, completed in 1962. An article titled "Deconstructing Harry",³⁶ based on a 1988 interview with Seidler and a number of North Sydney residents, reports how the 24-storey building, Blues Point Tower on Sydney Harbour, completed in 1961 as the Australia's tallest block of flats "... has long been his [Seidler's] most controversial building, arousing passions amongst Sydneysiders for nearly four decades." Critical sentences from the popular voice portray the Blues Point Tower as "a very brutal building that doesn't fit in with its surroundings; an experiment for somebody finding their way; very plain, a bit boring and a bit tall for the area; jail-like, all the colours are wrong and no light." To which Seidler responded showing no regret: "It's one of my best buildings. They don't know what they're talking about!"

Within the interview one of the residents of McMahon's Point suggested that the scheme if realized "... would have been a disaster. Because McMahon's Point is a fabulous place to live and the reason people love living there is the range of building types and the streetscape you get there."³⁷

In response one can only say that the intention of McMahon's Point scheme was, in fact, to propose a 'range of different building types' maintaining the same vehicular access while adding pedestrian paths and a series of cultural and social facilities for the new community. Seidler's comment at the end of the interview was:

"Now I bet you in 50 years McMahon's Point will contain the kind of density of population in tall buildings as we predicted in 1957... I think it's unfortunate that it's [Blue Point Tower] there like a shag on a rock, it's the only building of its kind in the neighbourhood and that's probably to some extent undesirable of course. But not when you think of what the intention was."³⁸

One cannot help but question if it was premature in 1957 to embrace a high-density scheme and to what extent did the administrative and political groups play a significant part in the future development of McMahon's Point?

In 2001, Seidler was interviewed by Margaret Park. Asked to reflect upon his experience with the McMahon's Point proposal, he suggested that the scheme did not succeed due to a change in Council policy as well as the short vision of building inspectors. According to Seidler, the developers' approach eventually grew in a diametrically opposite direction to that which he had imagined. Instead of his design, which would locate tall buildings along the high spine of the peninsula, with other types of buildings descending in height so that low buildings would be closer to the water, no one stopped the realization of tall buildings on the water's edge, "blatantly blocking houses and small blocks of flats."³⁹ Seidler's concern for unscrupulous planning was introduced one year earlier through the Wilkinson Lecture at the University of Sydney. His remark about the "unpleasantness

36 Transcript of Helen Dalley "Deconstructing Harry," interview with Harry Seidler in Live Chat (11 October 1998).

37 Transcript of Helen Dalley "Deconstructing Harry," interview with Harry Seidler in Live Chat (11 October 1998).

38 Dalley "Deconstructing Harry."

39 Margaret Park, ed., *Voices of a Landscape: Planning North Sydney* (North Sydney: North Sydney Council, 2001), 81.

of local government” and its short vision for the McMahon’s Point re-development ended with this comment: “The tall building is right on the waterfront, blocking everybody behind and this is a garage, multi-story garage enjoying the greatest view of the Opera House and the harbour. So much for local government planning.”⁴⁰

Ultimately, the process for the appropriate zoning of McMahon’s Point from industrial to residential took 10 years. The new paradigm for an urban architecture was supported by public and professional figures that responded to the matter and expressed their opinion in the media with animated articles and redevelopment studies. The article of 11 July 1957, “Hot debate on McMahon’s Point”, reports how the local government recommended residential zoning be allowed in the area, not industrial zoning.⁴¹ Entitled “The Development of McMahon’s Point” (1958), notes from the minutes of the Mayor, finally reveal the planning history behind the site with the changes of the zoning to residential, including high-density flat development for the area bounded by Blues Point and as far as West Crescent Street.⁴² The positive aspect was the prohibition of industrial development, whereas a mixed-use development was not introduced in which light and considerate commercial facilities would have certainly improved the quality of the habitat.

Conclusion

Overall, the McMahon’s Point Project is a remarkable Australian story, or better still a Sydney story, that deserves to be told. To this writer it is a remarkable because it is a local story involving the decision-making of local council and state government; it shows social concerns involving the local community of committed people from North Sydney working together with a group of architects (including the young Harry and Penelope Seidler) for rezoning a superb area in north Sydney from industrial to residential; and it is a cultural and historical example of how international ideas from one of the 1950s CIAM congresses have been translated and adopted by a group of local practitioners who arguably initiated theoretical thinking in urban architecture in Sydney. Probably, the most important aspect of the story is that architects and planners started to agree on the negative aspects of expanding the city. Seidler’s writings about McMahon’s Point Redevelopment Scheme seem to translate CIAM’s beliefs in centralization: “Architects, planners and sociologist are generally agreed on the fact that unchecked expansion of suburbia is evil. Providing a separate house for every family is straining community resources beyond all limits.”⁴³

We must not forget that the publication *Urban redevelopment concerns you!* stemmed from a group of creative and forward-thinking people. Philip Jackson brought his experience as the Australian

40 Harry Seidler, *Wilkinson Lecture*, University of Sydney, 6 April 2000, Seymour Centre (CDs32, 33) transcript, 13.

41 “Hot debate on McMahon’s Point,” *Local Journal Northern Suburbs Mercury*, 11 July 1957.

42 Minutes of the Mayor of the Municipalities of North Sydney, 30 October 1958, Development of McMahon’s Point. Stanton Library, North Sydney, Local History Collection.

43 Harry Seidler, Harry Seidler 1955–1963. *Houses, Buildings and Projects* (Sydney: Horwitz, 1963).

delegate to the CIAM congress sharing his passion for exploring town planning as an extension of architecture with Harry Howard, another architect involved in the McMahon's development scheme. To substantiate their interest in architecture connected to urban and planning decisions they both enrolled in a two-year postgraduate course in early 1957, named "Town and Country Planning", run by Professor Denis Winston.⁴⁴ They certainly joined Harry Seidler's critical view of Sydney planning with its "...continued horizontal expansion ... suburban subdivision ... unsystematic and un-coordinated development ..."⁴⁵ and his call for high-density living. Ultimately, McMahon's Point marked a turning point for Seidler and the other architects in the group interested to test the CIAM 10 *urban consciousness*.

From the early 1960s and throughout the 1970s in Sydney, the ambitions for urban architecture would be taken up by those such as Seidler, who would contribute and advance the figure of the architect-urbanist through specific projects such as the un-realized Sydney Cove Redevelopment - The Rocks (1962), Australia Square (1961-67) and the MLC Centre (1972-75).⁴⁶ With their impressive structural systems, urban spatial resolutions and innovative planning,⁴⁷ Seidler's urban towers demonstrate the advancement of urban architecture initiated in 1957 by the unrealised proposal for McMahon's Point. A letter of thanks from the McMahon's Point and Lavender Bay Progress Association addressed to Harry Seidler concludes this story:

"Our delight that we are now "residential" is indescribable, but all Sydney lovers, wherever they be, will join in thanking you for the great job you have done in contributing so much towards the preservation of our Harbour Foreshores."⁴⁸

Notes

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44 Barbara Louise Buchanan, "Modernism meets the Australian Bush: Harry Howard and the 'Sydney Bush School' of landscape architecture" (PhD diss., University of New South Wales), 2009.

45 Harry Seidler, *Harry Seidler 1955-1963*.

46 Gevork Hartoonian, "Harry Seidler: Revisiting Modernism," in *Fabrications* 20, no. 1 (2011): 31. Hartoonian suggests: "Having left the design of suburbia to developers, urban architecture occupied a major place in Seidler's oeuvre".

47 Philip Drew, *Two Towers, Harry Seidler: Australia Square and MLC Centre* (Sydney: Horwitz, 1980), 5.

48 Mitchell Library, MLMSS 7078, Box 7.