

A wild ride for planning theory

WHERE the South Eastern Freeway takes over from Batman Avenue, send it underground. Put it through a tunnel and on top, beside the Yarra, build a Eurasian city, a mixed-up, hybrid mongrel city. Put in long-houses, shophouses, silo flats, pagodas and jetties. Make it sensual, fun, provocative but above all unkempt, vital and messy. Perfection is death.

Well, here's a switch from planning conformity. The anti-plan. Learning from Bawomatalao, as the architects David Beynon and Jane McDougall explain their entry in Companion City, the International Urban Design Competition.

This is a contest to set you thinking. Architects from all around Australia, from Singapore, the United States and Italy, responded to the challenge to take an urban hectare and redesign a companion. A hectare may seem a lot of real estate to you and me but, in terms of defining the city of the future, not a lot of room in which to express an architectural philosophy.

There is a reason for this. Dr Leon van Schaik, dean of environmental design and construction, RMIT, made the rules. He believes the planning debate and whole basis for development now rests on abstract analysis. In focusing on a small space, he wanted to avoid the great visionary concept so beloved of planners and get back to earth by looking at the physical consequences. Much lateral thinking was the outcome.

Some 50 of the 70 entries are on display at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra, until next Thursday night when a public forum will be held. The exhibition is expected to travel to other Australian cities and possibly to the United States.

Many designs reflect a concern with the planning failures we see in most big cities. For instance, what to do with the wasteland beneath freeway overpasses. This is the theme of several contestants, including the winner of the \$4500 first prize, Brian Schutz, of Philadelphia. His plan was an attempt "to illustrate that society's food today becomes its left-overs tomorrow". The left-over space of a freeway junction is engulfed in development comprising a TV station, a parking garage, recycling centre and homeless housing.

Take another world-wide post-war phenomenon, high-rise public housing. Why do these towers look so bleak and forbidding? The very utopianism that placed them in



MARVELLOUS MELBOURNE

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middle of parklands is one reason. They are isolated and alien to their surroundings.

I like Melbourne architect Perry Lethlean's high-rise solution and hope somebody gives serious consideration to his proposal for the Atherton Housing Commission estate, Fitzroy. Lethlean seeks to "redress the erasure of urban memory" implicit in such towers, especially the rejection of the street as an organising device and public place.

He inserts three-storey buildings to abut each of the four towers, providing not only shops and housing but street frontages. The newly-formed streets bisect the estate and the park centre becomes an urban square. The towers remain as focal points but are no longer isolated. Existing flats are amalgamated and enlarged and space beneath the towers provides new recreational uses. The scale and diversity of the Fitzroy fabric is restored.

Inner urban housing — or the lack of it — is another widely felt concern. One contestant wants apartments in the City Square and another apartments only permitted in city buildings above a declared height limit.

Although our sprawling quarter-acre housing may be the despair of the authorities, Professor Allan Rodger of Melbourne University and Roger Fay, a Deakin lecturer, find a way to turn it to advantage. In their Sustainable Suburbia they take 12 adjoining sites of two and three-bedroom homes and turn them into a kind of communal unit for both housing and production.

It is quite a seductive concept, 'The Good Life' plot on a larger scale, Nimbin in the suburbs. Some houses are converted to office or community use and householders can sell off back yards for dual occupancy or community purposes. Fences may be removed. An internal, mixed-use site accommodates workshops for self-help in construction, house maintenance, repairs and income-producing work. Knowledge and training is promoted.



A better bridge for Lonsdale Street.

Nature strips are planted with productive fruit and nut trees. Gardens, including vertical gardens, produce food, with surplus for barter. Fowls, rabbits, goats and pigs have a place and aquaculture provides for fish and ducks. Human waste is dry-composted. Solar energy is used, roof run-off water stored and kitchen, bathroom and laundry water redirected to gardens.

Melbourne's ugly office towers and the process of speculative city development have exercised competitors' minds.

Somebody has a dig at the ANZ tower behind the Gothic bank by elevating its proposed post-modernist gables on poles. They look like big dovecots.

Water provides much inspiration. Tim Greer turns Market Street, Sydney, into a canal, from the harbor to St Mary's Cathedral. John Hockings wins an honorable mention for his appealing use of space lost to Brisbane's Riverside Expressway site. His companion city becomes a series of piers perched over the freeway extending into the river as a refuge for the young, the impoverished, students, artists, writers and artisans. The concept echoes Brisbane's stilt housing and the water dwellings of Asian cities.

Ashton Raggatt McDougall take the mickey out of the Lonsdale Street pedestrian bridge. Their entry offers three options as the suitable bridge structure — the lurid gateway to Luna Park, the Ponti Vecchio or the horse sculpture in the National Gallery moat.

More fun comes from Ken Kennedy with a series of structures to accommodate the legends of Sydney. There is the Gap-jumper's hut, complete with ladder that slides out to provide for easy jumping or in the case of a change of mind an escape to land. A

bridgeworker's shed on the summit of the arch of the harbor bridge serves workers engaged in the never-ending painting job. It is windowless to provide constant darkness for rest. Beach joggers' change pavilions are rentable structures introduced after the total ban on swimming introduced in 1993 because of pollution.

Finally there is the architect's hut found scattered throughout the suburbs. A large sliding panel

affords the occupant maximum viewing outwards but creates the dilemma of maximum exposure from critical eyes hence is rarely found more than slightly open. A skylight provides moving patterns by day and allows star-gazing by night. The huts are in a permanent state of near-completion due to the fluctuations of current architectural ideology, budgetary constraints and the nature of the occupants.