Personal details

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Leigh is the principal of Leigh Woolley Architect and Urban Design Consultant and provides design and consultancy services to private clients and all levels of government, within architecture and associated design disciplines, particularly urban design. He established his practice in 1987, having previously worked in the public and private sectors in architecture and urban design in Tasmania, SE Asia and the UK. He also worked for a time with the Architectural Press in London as an architectural journalist.

He is the recipient of numerous professional design awards across these disciplines. His architecture has been published nationally and internationally and has been described as: ‘a story of a triumph of a meticulous practice that has worked from the Tasmanian condition’. A recent citation described him as ‘without question the leading expert in urban design in the state of Tasmania’. He practices from Hobart.

Fellowship details

Topic:

To analyze (port) cities with strong topographies and consider how their natural settings have influenced urban design policy, settlement character and the resulting urban form. (Consider locations with characteristics relevant to Tasmanian urban settings, especially Hobart) Cities visited: Wellington, San Francisco (Berkley), Seattle, Vancouver, Halifax, Bergen, Oslo.

Background:

Tasmania’s future will be sustained in large part through our ability to develop our settlements in response to the character and sense of the setting. Appropriate design principles and policies are needed to address development within our ‘dwelling regions’, to underpin local and regional identity, tourism and a sense of public well-being. The unique character of individual urban settings, although popularly appreciated, are seldom interpreted in the way cities are planned and designed. The interplay between an enduring landscape, and a city's evolving urban form, should provide the precondition to its future urban scale and form.

Historically Tasmanian urban growth has however been ill-coordinated, without guiding intentions influencing urban design across development scales, from region to neighbourhood. By considering a number of diverse (port) cities where topography is pronounced, (and researching how planning and urban design has informed built outcomes in each location), case studies appropriate to Tasmanian settlement can be considered.

The intention is to identify how these particular environmental settings underpin and inform settlement growth, and can be used to guide a vision for future urban form.
Approach:

The landscape setting and built form response within each city is to be analyzed. Interviews will be held with key personnel in public planning and design agencies, leading academics and private practitioners in architecture and urban design. Base topographic data is to be sourced for each city and used in support of a photographic, written and drawn analysis of key spatial relationships. From the interviews, the principal strategic urban design policies will be identified and analyzed. Comparison between individual cities will be made, and implications for Tasmanian settlements determined.

Fellowship conclusion:

Those cities that deal with their regional settings through comprehensive planning and urban development goals, are able to manage their urban form in an integrated way. They embrace their ‘city image’ as a three dimensional idea, supported by strong municipal planning underpinned by urban design policy.

These cities have co-ordinated their efforts across design scales developing urban design frameworks to co-ordinate public and private investment. The implications of defining an urban growth perimeter for example, is necessarily to concentrate the centre, thus reducing the city’s ecological footprint.

Implications for Tasmanian cities, particularly Hobart

**Strengthen our ‘natural’ advantage** – especially from within our cities
Complacency towards our natural assets ([setting / scale/ history/ accessibility](#)) will (potentially) be our undoing unless co-ordinated through settlement policy.

**Recognise that good design (across scales) adds value**
Especially where the city remains accessible, pedestrian friendly and socially diverse.

**Capitalise on (our) uniqueness** – as a quieter, greener more reflective place.
The ‘edge’ condition has important urban advantages – we can appreciate the margins of settlement, we can also ‘see’ where we have been.

**Enhance identity through development**
Keeping that which is irreplaceable is as much a measure of human achievement as building the new. Identify those qualities and spatial characteristics inherent to urban culture in this place.

**Ensure the city (of Hobart) remains a unique place rather than a ubiquitous one.**
Without a strong design framework guiding development of the city and its region, this character, which is essential to our identity and well being, is at risk.
Media release
October 20 2000

Urban Nature and City Design

Architect Leigh Woolley, a 1999 Churchill Fellow, has recently returned from an overseas study tour assessing design principles of urban settings of relevance to Tasmania, especially Hobart. He visited cities in New Zealand, the USA, Canada and Norway.

Mr Woolley feels the resource which will continue to be valued in the future, is not just the pristine wild landscapes (important as they are) but safe, humane, well designed and well managed cities, particularly those which respect their relationship with their larger landscape setting. He is now more convinced that Tasmanian urban settings, Hobart in particular, not only have few parallels elsewhere in terms of the quality of its setting, but that the natural advantages of our location is undervalued.

Locations with strong topographies can more readily combine the ‘contemporary’ with the ‘timeless’ by recognizing the design of the city as part of a larger cultural landscape experience. The relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ is an urban issue in many places, guiding the development of some cities. Oslo, the capital of Norway (pop. 500,000) for example has limited outward expansion of its city region in order to maintain its adjacent vegetated hills. Their decision is based not just on the desire to develop a sustainable city, but because the experience of the setting was recognized by the community as fundamental to the appreciation of their place. Their desire to maintain a ‘blue/ green’ city, (the blue of the fiord and the green of the hills) is testament to the form and character that the city authorities are seeking to retain through design.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, the shape of the CBD is being assessed in terms of how views over and through it are managed to ensure a connection to the harbor and the striking mountains of the Pacific Ranges beyond. Halifax in Nova Scotia on the Canadian Atlantic coast is beginning to remove overhead walkways and alter buildings, which have failed to take account of the city’s hillside harbor setting.

Bergen in Norway and Glasgow in Scotland are re-engaging public appreciation of their urban form and design culture through a series of year-long exhibitions, events and projects. In Glasgow the 1999 UK City of Architecture and Design the activities have been a catalyst providing not only a range of interactive exhibitions and publications but demonstration projects of new buildings, revamped public spaces and medium density urban housing.

Bilbao in northern Spain is literally reinventing itself as a centre of design and culture through a series of high profile public works. As part of an audacious program of urban design activity they are designed to reinforce the city as both a destination and cultural centre of the Basque region. With a population of barely a million, and arguably the least glamorous of the Spanish regional capitals, has not deterred public and private sectors of the region planning no less than eight major urban design projects to transform the city in order to make it a centre for European trade, tourism and culture.

In Tasmania we have a natural advantage in terms of the quality of our natural urban settings, but the lack of a strong design framework for development of the city region is a significant issue, which as a community we are still to address, Mr. Woolley suggests.
Fellowship Outcomes

Since 2000 Leigh has continued to consolidate the findings of his Fellowship through professional practice and research. In turn this has assisted a number of public policy outcomes underpinned by urban design consultancies, conference papers, expert evidence, articles and his practice analysis. He continues to contribute to and organize public and professional seminars and conferences on the place of settlement and design in Tasmania.

Although consulting beyond Tasmania, his focus remains the Hobart dwelling region, where he continues to pursue his findings and research through a range of architectural commissions and urban design consultancies. Those strongly related to his fellowship include: City of Hobart Urban Design Principles Project (parts 1 + 2), Experiencing Sullivans Cove – morphology, views and cultural significance, Planning Hobart’s Natural Urban Envelope, Kangaroo Bay Urban Design study, Urban Design Principles: UTAS urban sites, Hobart Civic Square Masterplan.

He has also been a representative on a number of professional review panels including the Built Environment Committee of the University of Tasmania (2004 – 2015) and the Sullivans Cove Design Panel (2006 – 2012). Currently he is the Urban Design Advisor to the Macquarie Point Development Authority (since 2014). He has appeared as an expert witness before VCAT (Victoria) and RMPAT (Tasmania) planning courts of appeal, and has been a panel member on RPDC Projects of State Significance assessments. Since 2008 he has been an Adjunct Professor of Architecture and Design (UTAS).

He was an invited participant from 2001 in a national Masters of Architecture program at RMIT leading to an exhibition and publication of his work in 2004: ‘Articulating the Edge: Spatial Prospecting to Build Topography.’

In 2002 he was an invited speaker at the UIA 2002 XXI World Congress of Architecture in Berlin. His paper: ‘Negotiating margins, Reclaiming Peripheries: The ‘wilderness’ imperative in Architecture and Urban Design’ has since been published by Birkhauser.

In 2002 the national ward winning publication: ‘Architecture from the Edge – the twentieth century in Tasmania’ with Churchill Fellow Barry McNeill, was published.

Following the presentation of a paper at the ICOMOS National Conference: ‘Challenge and Change in Ports and their cities’. (November 2006) his paper ‘Harbouring Design – Reclaiming margins in port cities’ was published in Historic Environment Vol. 22 No. 2 July 2009

His paper ‘Sheltering Human Presence – revealing place through urban design practice’, was a keynote address at an International Urban Design Conference: ‘Designing Place’. University of Nottingham, UK in April 2012.

His article: ‘Placing Tasmania: natural ground for urban design’ was published in the national award winning compendium on urban design: ‘Urban Voices’ Celebrating urban design in Australia, 2013

In 2012 he was included in the Australian Encyclopaedia of Architecture (Cambridge University Press). He has been the recipient of more than 20 professional awards in architecture, planning and urban design.

The theme of his Churchill Fellowship continues to underpin his contribution to urban design policy and research in Tasmania.  

(September 3 2015)