

## **Practising architecture in Global Sydney: Re-theorising the Architecture of the Global City**

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**Abstract:** Architecture is located at the confluence of international capital flows, urban hierarchies and national discourse, constructed according to the globally oriented agendas of local bureaucrats, against measures of 'the global', including design excellence, competitive processes, and international expertise. Under such perceived conditions of globalisation, academics and policy makers alike have often been preoccupied with defining norms to frame how we understand architectural forms in global cities. As a consequence of reductive understandings, any substantial acknowledgement of the complex relations and interdependencies that shape the process of constructing global architecture is typically negated. Understandably, some researchers have cautioned against accepting and deploying rationalised views of globalness, arguing that urban researchers need to adopt innovative approaches to understand the complexity of the city and its forms (McCann et al., 2013).

Assemblage thinking offers a tool to explore the complexity of the city by attending to the intricacies of the practices of planners, as they are embedded in and influenced by variegated historical, social and material contexts. To be sure, urban research needs to take notice of what urban actors 'do' as they engage in global city-building, as much of what takes place in everyday practice is as yet un-theorised (Healey, 2012). Informed by my research on the practices of how city builders materialise architecture in Global Sydney, this paper thus argues that deploying assemblage thinking – with the analytical attention that it is able to afford to practices – is able to challenge the hegemonic claims of orthodox approaches to understanding architecture in the global city. More broadly, I argue that adopting assemblage thinking can disrupt the ontologies that have shaped urban research on architecture by opening up a geographic dialogue that is able to acknowledge the hybridity of the process of how globalness is constituted, in practice.

### **Introduction**

In 2015 in response to the release of the PricewaterhouseCoopers Cities of Opportunity Index, Sydney's Urban Taskforce commissioned a project for architects to envisage Sydney's skyline into the future. Declaring that "Sydney needs to think big to remain Australia's global city", the report noted that "Melbourne, Brisbane and even Parramatta have taller buildings than Sydney planned as they lift their global standing" (Urban Taskforce 2014; np). In spite of maintaining a strong position on the Cities of Opportunity Index, along with a number of other global city indexes<sup>1</sup>, according to the CEO of the Urban Taskforce, Chris Johnson:

Sydney needs to take a strong pro-growth position as recent data from a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers indicated that Sydney's annual economic growth over the last 10 years was half that of Melbourne and Brisbane. (Urban Taskforce Australia, 2014; np)

The Report went on to emphasise the relationship between architecture and a strong urban economy, and encourage Sydney to embrace such thinking:

Sydney siders [need] to think big for Sydney's future so that we keep ahead of Melbourne and Brisbane as they push forward. Even more important is that Sydney is positioned in the Asia Pacific region as one of the leading cities along with Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. (Urban Taskforce Australia, 2014; np)

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<sup>1</sup> As at August 2015 Sydney is ranked 9<sup>th</sup> on PricewaterhouseCoopers' Cities of Opportunity Index, 2<sup>nd</sup> on Rider Levett Bucknall's Crane Index, 7<sup>th</sup> on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index, and 14<sup>th</sup> on AT Kearney's Top Global Cities Index

Positioning architecture according to Sydney's ranking against proximate – and 'categorically' un-global – Australian cities such as Melbourne and Brisbane, along with the well-rehearsed international examples of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, such reports evidence the belief that strong architecture underpins strong economic activity.

Evidencing the extensive discourse that surrounds the 'role' of architecture in contemporary urban economies, this report exposes how debates over architecture exceed their functional or technical parameters. More than a *container* for the flows of capital, resources and workers that underpin the global economy, architecture is a *symbol* of global prosperity (González, 2011, Sklair, 2012). No less evident are the effects of this discourse than in Sydney, where architectural forms have become embedded in imaginaries routinely echoed by the Prime Minister of Australia, the Premier of NSW, and the Lord Mayor of Sydney, that like other top global cities, architecture in Sydney needs to be used to 'build the future', and to be ever higher, more iconic, and more innovative (Lehmann, 2015, Moore, 2014, Turnbull, 2015).

This paper argues that architecture has been framed as a resource of the global city. Engaging ideas from governmentality and assemblage, this paper explores the connections between the global city, design excellence, and architecture in order to explore how design excellence was delivered in architectural planning as a way for Sydney to achieve a 'global status'. I follow Healy (2012) in emphasising the need to better understand how architecture is embedded and implemented in practice (see also, Ong and Collier, 2006, Prince, 2014) to explore how the concept of the global city has underpinned a discourse that has problematised architecture as an object of governing Global Sydney, in the process positioning design excellence as one solution. The paper contributes to research that explores the way in which understandings of practice lead to understanding how 'global forms' are socially practised (Ong and Collier, 2005; Prince 2014) and how the global is 'made up' and 'through' the urban (McCann and Ward, 2010).

### **Problematising architecture in the global city**

Underpinned by notions of inter-city competitiveness and omni-present and continuous urban rankings, the need to achieve the apex of global urban indexes is ever paramount in directing city planning. As cities race to the top, constructing the glorious architectural edifices that stand symbolically to a city's global stature has been accompanied by the rise in a global market of 'off-the-shelf' solutions of one-size-fits-all buildings, models, and expert knowledges. Such transnationally 'circulating norms' (Grubbauer, 2015) define our ideas of 'the global', zipping around the world with ease. Yet, wary of considering aspects of such norms as a rationalised planning ethos, research has emphasised the contingent terrain in which planning imaginaries are framed and planning practices are based (Hillier and Metzger, 2015). Conceptualising the process of constructing architecture (which may take a decade or more from feasibility until well after the building opens) to just one reductive circulating paradigm – of the visionary architect, the end-product, or the viral image – is a dangerous position to take, suppressing any variegation in the constitution of 'the global'.

In response, post-structural researchers have argued with increasing intensity that the notion of one developmental trajectory towards a Westernised model of urban development has enacted received paradigmatic examples of 'the global' into academia that fail to acknowledge the plethora of lived experiences of 'the global' (McCann et al., 2013, Robinson, 2011). With the increasing recognition of influence of human practice in planning (Healey, 2012, Hillier and Metzger, 2015), along with the 'uneven' and contingent territorialisation of transnational norms (Grubbauer, 2015, McCann and Ward, 2010), urban researchers have moved away from deploying any predictive theory or standard units of analysis of macroeconomic processes, and towards investigating instead how 'the global' is 'made up' (McCann and Ward, 2010).

This paper is informed by the academic shift from 'global' to 'globalising' cities, a body of literature across urban studies which approaches 'the global' as an emergent property present in all cities, rather than as a categorical attribute. With ideas of 'being global' having become a marker across heterogeneous and often contradictory social, political and economic contexts, Roy and Ong (2011) deploy Simone's (2001)

notion of 'worlding' to interrogate the array of problem-solving and *spatialising practices* that are in play occurring across multiple – and categorically un-global – cities such as Mumbai and Vancouver. Such projects spatialise global aspirations in the 'art of being global' (Ong, 2011). Informed by the challenge of how to approach such diverse notions of 'being global, the notion of worlding jostles against the dualistic separation of scales that has defined much thinking on cities – whereby 'the local' is seen to be subservient to the extant force of 'the global'. Instead, through worlding practices, the global comes into contact with place-specific path-dependent histories, contexts, and possibilities (Roy and Ong, 2011) and is 'territorialised' (McCann and Ward, 2010), in place. With 'the global' no longer considered a fixed, nor stable category, this conceptualisation of the global sees it as practiced and performed, in place, and highlights the importance of context-rich research.

At the centre of this paper is the notion of how architecture has been 'problematized' as a resource to 'world' a city. 'Problematization' can elucidate how urban objects come to be defined within particular schemes of thought (Larner, 2011) and, subsequently, what solutions are positioned as appropriate. Framed by this perspective, I argue that the global is territorialised in Sydney by problematising architecture as a resource in the project of constituting a global city. Based on research which uses a case study of architectural forms in Sydney, Australia, and drawing on interviews with government and professionals, I reveal a global imaginary that deploys architecture and design excellence as one solution to planning the global city, repositioning statutory instruments and bodies to achieve design excellence. In doing so, the paper illustrates how architecture serves as one territorialisation of the global in Sydney.

### **Approaching the global architectural assemblage**

'Assemblage' has been used in urban scholarship to 'connote the indeterminacy, emergence, processuality, and the sociomateriality of phenomena' (McFarlane 2011a, see also (Acuto and Curtis, 2013, Fariás and Bender, 2009). Redefining the social world as heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011), assemblage is thus a cogent framework to understandings of the global that emphasise its heterogeneous and socially practiced nature, and offers a way to engage with the world that is deliberately open to the unity, the parts involved and the relations between them. Neither actors nor relations between them are assumed *a priori*. This, I argue, builds a conception of architecture as constituted through a range of practices and relations between the actors involved – such planners from state and local government bodies, along with architects, engineers, developers, and so on.

Following others (see for example, Allen and Cochrane, 2007b, Anderson and McFarlane, 2011, Fariás and Bender, 2009), I argue that assemblage is an analytic that gives purchase as a descriptor to illuminate the *work* involved in assembling socio-material phenomena. As Peck (2001) notes, the *work* of assembling is work that is *always* directed and constrained by path-dependent agendas and legacies. Having been deployed to understand how urban forms come to be as 'politically meaningful' (Allen and Cochrane 2007), as a worlding practice, the assembling of a particular architectural policy in place is immersed in a politics that involves locally-embedded interests and conditions as much as it is constituted through references to parts of elsewhere. To speak of an architectural assemblage then, is to emphasise the critical importance of politics. An attentiveness to the practices of how architecture is assembled within a specific terrain of action and debate – can serve to bring into sheer relief how architecture is assembled through with *certain* and purposive social practices. Finally, while conceiving of architecture as an assemblage of socio-material actors envisages it as a gathering of heterogeneous elements, nevertheless, assemblage is an approach that is able to acknowledge the significant influence of socio-economic processes that shape how architecture is constituted. Assemblage thinking is able to keep such processes in focus by recognising that assemblages are "structured, hierarchised, and narrativised through profoundly unequal relations of power, resourcing and knowledge" (McFarlane, 2011b; p.665).

### **Assembling global architecture in Sydney**

To understand the process of territorialising the global through architecture in Sydney, it is first necessary to understand how architecture has been problematised. From the early 1990s, the imperative towards creating 'Global Sydney' was promoted across public and private sectors, with growing political consensus cohering at multiple tiers of government. Accompanied by a shift in planning from the national to the urban scale associated with the post-managerial transition, this imperative was buttressed by cross-cutting urban changes affecting the urban economy including intensified inter-urban competition, declining levels of productivity, addressing the challenge of a decaying urban infrastructure, and ensuring the provision of office space to house the firms that would integrate Australia into the global economy (McGuirk 2004; Searle, 1995). Extensive research has considered how planning in Sydney at all tiers of government has been motivated by the ambition to secure and maintain a global city status, focusing, for example, on global economic integration, industrial restructuring, corporate headquartering, and international migration (Hu et al., 2013, McGuirk, 2004, Punter, 2005, Searle, 1995, McNeill et al., 2005). As a longstanding presupposition of planning and policy, positioning Sydney as Australia's *only* global city (McGuirk, 2004), continues to be mobilised as a tool to plan Sydney.

Parallel to these changes to the urban economy that were shifting the positionality of Sydney, the concept of 'design excellence' was gaining presence on the national political agenda. To this end, in 1994 Prime Minister Paul Keating commissioned an *Urban Design Task Force* (UDTF) charged with 'overhauling the built environment of Australian cities' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994). With the subsequent White Paper produced by the UDTF stating that the quality of a city's architecture is "a decisive factor in attracting and accommodating investment and economic activity" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994; p.8), they emphasised that:

Global and national competition among cities is on the rise... In the drive for greater comparative advantage more and more cities embrace bold urban design programs, recognising that the design expression of their ambition and prestige, their beauty and vitality can be critical to the location choices made by quality businesses and industries. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994; p.8)

By underscoring the central role of design in planning for international competitiveness and associated business confidence, Keating's Task Force had reframed the possibilities for the future development of the built environment in Australian cities. Assemblage thinking tells us the importance of how particular orderings of relations are stabilised and scripted within particular socio-economic contexts, in turn shaping possible *future* trajectories (Li, 2007). To be sure, by asserting that Australia needed a global city to house its global connections, as former Prime Minister Paul Keating noted, excellent design' was a 'critical' lynchpin to achieve this goal.

Sydney's experimentation with architecture as a critical component to materialise its global city aspirations then, began against this federal ideological backdrop where design excellence had been fashioned as a technique of governance to direct architecture towards specific types of thought and action. To be sure, in programmes of governance, problems are "questioned, analysed, classified and regulated" at "specific times and under specific circumstances" (Deacon, 2000; p.127). However, the New South Wales government so far 'failed to provide a planning blueprint for a Global Sydney' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) and in well-documented circumstances until this time, the 'design' of architecture in Sydney – or lack there-of – had, for the most part, been left to a 'laissez faire' approach (2005, Punter, 2007). It was in this context that the notion that that architecture may hold significance beyond the development or construction professions helped to disrupt the category of 'architecture' as it was then understood. As one interviewee noted, this sentiment had called into question the 'prevailing economic orthodoxy of planning' in Sydney that had 'failed to prevent the cataclysmic state' of the city's architecture.

Despite the ostensible bleakness of such a situation, then-Lord Mayor Frank Sartor's response was measured. As he stated, in grappling with how best to approach ensuring design excellence, the 'challenge' for a global Sydney was to navigate the pathway toward 'architectural quality' (ABC Radio National, 2001). To this end, in the mid-1990s Mayor Sartor pursued United States architect Richard Stern to 'assess' the state of the city's architecture, which Stern stated as 'mediocre' and generally not passing muster for the city's global city ambitions. In 1996 a tower (now known as Aurora Place) was

approved to replace the State Office Block by 'internationally renowned architect Renzo Piano'. At the time, Sartor emphasised that forging global connections was important as "[w]e want excellence in this city ... [and] he will be a useful benchmark for our local architects", going on to stress that to 'take ourselves seriously' as a global city means 'attracting and making use of the best international designers and thinkers' (Susskind, 1996). As one planner explained,

What these international experts were saying, was that, in these globally significant cities, it was not enough to allow the development profession to moderate quality. It really needed strong vision and guidance and they needed that because it wasn't just a question of the buildings anymore, it clearly became an issue that has far reaching consequences, how we see ourselves, how the country sees us, how the world perceives what we are doing. (Interview, city planner)

By drawing architecture in relation to global expertise, in this way, mobilising certain knowledges helped to stabilise decisions around how architectural planning should proceed. As a result, developers, architects and other bodies looking to build in Sydney were being made aware of a narrative that was being assembled by Sartor and 'these experts' that architecture should buttress their global city ambitions.

Mobilising design excellence and international expertise to improve the quality of architecture in Sydney has coincided with the increasingly accepted notion that the urban is critical to the integration of any city into the international arena, and the currency of the category of design excellence was linked to the political ambitions to globalise Sydney. To this end, proponents for Global Sydney have embedded ideological agendas onto planning for architecture via a select set of 'truth claims' (Beauregard, 2002), namely, that architecture is a specific, political-economic 'problem' which can be addressed through design excellence. In this way, governing architecture has occurred through assembling particular associations that have worked to create the logic of one particular mode of architectural development over and above other modes, and through design excellence architecture had become reified as a political-economic *resource* of Global Sydney. Yet, assembling a programmatic concern to design excellence only accounts in part for the crafting of architecture a resource of the global city. The next section unpacks how this resource was instrumentalised.

### ***Instrumentalising design excellence***

Insofar as political-economic ambitions have assembled particular understandings of architecture to position it as a resource by which to materialise a global city status, this has, in turn, shaped how design excellence has been instrumentalised as a 'solution'. As Li (2007) notes, aspirational governance gains purchase according to how it is 'translated' into technical instruments, which make an abstract concept 'knowable' and 'doable'. In this way, assembling architecture as a critical resource to govern Global Sydney has been based in part on instrumentalising the achievement of the otherwise 'abstract' concept of design excellence.

Following the slow but steady movement over the 1990s towards aligning architectural design with broader urban political projects, led by such figures as Sartor and Keating, along with the then-Premier of New South Wales Bob Carr, the Sydney Local Environment Plan 1996 (LEP 1996) and Central Sydney Development Control Plan 1996 (DCP 1996) installed design excellence as a requirement for architectural development. Through these planning instruments, the regulation of architecture in Sydney was reshaped through the commitment to achieve 'design excellence'. However, these changes were deemed insufficient to *achieve* design excellence. As Sartor noted:

In the mid-1990s after the City had a new LEP, a new heritage LEP and a new DCP, we realised that these controls were unlikely to promote world-class and innovative architecture nor even good urban design outcomes. (Sartor 2009:np)

Following initial experimentation with the ineffective new regulatory requirements in the 1996 LEP and DCP, under Sartor's leadership, in 1999 the City of Sydney instituted the 'design excellence programme' and an attendant 'competitive design process'. Under the competitive design process major developments in the City of Sydney – with a height of more than 55 metres, or a floor space of over 1500

square metres – are flagged at Stage 1 Development Application as needing to undertake an open, or invited, competition. Competition entries are then assessed by an ‘expert jury’ prior to the successful competitor submitting a Stage 2 Development Application (City of Sydney, 2010).

While the design jury – through the development application process – is promoted as an objective mechanism by which to “ensur[e] design excellence is a matter for consideration in the assessment of development applications as soon as practicable” (Central Sydney Planning Committee, 2009; np), the critical place of social practices in shaping this technique of governance cannot be denied. The individuals who comprise the ‘expert’ jury are selected by the developer and consent authority, drawing into the assessment process varying and diverse fields of practitioner and personal knowledge. Furthermore, as the competition jury for each project is always assembled through diverse alignments of individuals, and in varying times and places depending on the choices made by the developer and the consent authority, the jury is persistently assembled anew with each architectural project. Indeed, a core concern of assemblage thinking lies in attending to the *on-going* labours that underpin the forging of connections between disparate entities and actors of governance (Li, 2007).

Such on-going labours have also involved a continuous process of evolving statutory conditions for architecture. Since the design excellence programme began formally in 2000, requirements for design excellence have been embedded in a suite of changes to planning instruments and policies, including the 2005 Sydney Local Environment Plan, with current regulatory requirements set out across the *Sydney Design Excellence Development Control Plan 2010*, the *Sydney Local Environment Plan 2012*, the *Sydney Development Control Plan 2012*, the *City of Sydney Competitive Design Policy 2013*, and the *City of Sydney Memorandum of Understanding* with the thirteen major developers identified as having significant operations in the city (City of Sydney, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, Moore, 2014). Through these instruments, design excellence is ‘codified into checklists and protocols’ (Swyngedouw, 2011), achieved as they are through the social practices of developers, architects, financiers, jurors, and so on. Thus acting as mechanisms to ensure design excellence is ‘made known’, and achievable, in other words, they have ‘rendered design excellence technical’.

A certain aspirational mode of governing Global Sydney, then, has been stabilised by drawing together the resources to exemplify certain pathways to achieve design excellence for architecture. To talk of assembling architecture in Global Sydney, attention to the ways in which such ‘everyday practices’ are assembled within and through ‘shifts in political economy’ (Li, 2007) gives purchase to understanding how these interventions have territorialised a *selective* engagement with global processes and discourses, without recourse to extant explanations. Through selective renderings of policy and expertise, the aspiration to pursue and maintain a global city status has been skillfully woven into the programmatic instruments that govern design excellence. In this way, this process reveals how the assembling of particular actors and practices are territorialised in the on-going labours of enrolling architecture into an ambitious vision for Global Sydney. It is through the practices of those who install, evaluate and measure design excellence – along with the policies, instruments, knowledges and other technologies that support the process – in part, Global Sydney has been territorialised through architecture.

## **Conclusion: Assembling the global**

Assemblage is able to advance the conceptual framework of urban studies by necessitating an analytical focus on the practices – the *work* – involved in how enacting architecture as a project of worlding is *crafted* by politicians, planners, experts, organisations, media, institutions, and so on, under particular socially-constructed configurations of what ‘is’ global. In being able to emphasise the significance of the practices of individuals who actively assemble architecture, assemblage is an analytical tool that is able to investigate how the practices of worlding – here, by claiming particular relations with ‘the global’ – entail a *selective* engagement with relational networks that stretch through and across cities, in order to learn, share, and materialise the knowledge to construct architecture. For her part, Jacobs (2006) reminds us of the importance of paying attention to the ‘things’ that comprise buildings; both ‘big’ and ‘small’. It is through micro-scale attention to the small things such as policies and regulations and the practices of the actors that bring them into being that constitute how ‘big things’ like architecture, and the global city, are

socially constructed. In this way, governing Global Sydney has been assembled through particular associations that have worked to create the logic of that particular mode of architectural development over and above other modes. Equally important then, is the acknowledgement of what gets 'filtered out' (Moore, 2013; Prince, 2014) in the process of stabilising certain aspects of 'the global' for architecture. In moving beyond totalising narratives of architecture, for example as a product of contemporary capitalist urbanisation, theorising the practices of the governance of architecture in the global city can bring into relief the how the global is actively cultivated in geographical sites and moments.

Take, for example, a type of architecture frequently associated with the global city – a skyscraper. In a continuously changing ranking, as I write this paper, there are more than 76,000<sup>2</sup> skyscrapers in just 100 cities. While skyscrapers are located in more than 5,000 cities<sup>3</sup>, of the world's tallest 50 buildings, half are located in Asia. With their presumed ability to attract and retain mobile global talent – along with the associated images of starchitects, marketing, photos, visionary mayors, and the international ranking organisations that underscore their construction – the race to construct each ever-taller skyscraper speaks to a vision of a modern global city. Yet, beginning from such a categorical conceptualisation of the global would neglect 'the skyscraper' as a worlding achievement underpinned by socially constructed configurations of what is 'global', territorialised through assembling uneven origins, agendas, and outcomes. To this end, a critical attention to the process of assembling architecture as a project of worlding can overcome the reductive analytical dichotomies – for example, global/local, relational/territorial, fixity/mobility – that have dominated much urban research to date on architecture and the global city, in both academia (see for example, Ong and Collier, 2005; McNeill 2009; Sklair, 2012; Yaneva, 2009) and in grey planning literature (for example, reports and rankings by the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, Knight Frank, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Rider Levitt Bucknall).

Insofar as global paradigms circulate, in the process gaining universal purchase through positing self-referential norms (Ong and Collier 2005; Prince, 2014; Yaneva 2009), urban studies risks adhering to a conceptual divide between 'the global', or 'otherwise'. Assemblage is a conceptual tool that can overcome such generalisability. To this end, aligning architecture – underpinned as it may be by the 'big' aspirational practices of the constructing the global – with the micro-scale things that constitute it in practice (Jacobs 2006) that are drawn into focus by assemblage, provides a useful starting point for a critical analysis of the global. As Steger and McNevin (2010; p.230) remind us:

enquiry into the shifting grounds of contemporary ideologies requires close attention to the socio-spatial relations in and through which such ideational constellations assume concrete forms. At the most basic level, this starting point allows us to acknowledge the diversity of ideological production, application, and contestation in specific urban places and across different geographical scales. Such heterogeneity counters reductionist presentations of globalisation as a homogenising process of 'McWorldisation' or 'Americanisation'. Moreover, it helps us to reconsider how spaces usually cast as 'local' connect in geographically challenging ways with what we imagine to be 'global'.

Assemblage thinking, with its focus directed to the practices that comprise the territorialisation of the visions that drive how a city is constituted as a globalising milieu emphasises the *socially practised* and *actively cultivated* character of the global, and the practices of imagination through which cities and their forms come to be positioned – or indeed, position themselves – within rationalising cartographies of globalness.

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, only 106 of the tall buildings in the world are located in Sydney, Australia

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.emporis.com/>

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