State Government architects — what do they actually do?

Australian Capital Territory
Alastair Swan,
ACT Government Architect

The ACT Government Architect's position is part-time, one day per week and, for the first two years, is sponsored by the University of Canberra as part of its contribution to the centenary of Canberra in 2013.

In the new ACT Government structure, the Government Architect sits within the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate (ESDD), and reports to the Minister for ESDD through its Director General. Immediate administrative support is provided by the Urban Design Policy Group within the Directorate. Given that this is a new position, with limited time involvement, the approach has been to focus on some particular areas of design concern:

- providing specific project design advice to Directorates, architecture, urban design and engineering
- providing design direction for the development of the Centre City
- providing design and development coordination between Directorates.

New policy proposals

While immediate issues of design quality are being addressed, there is clearly a need for a broader strategic framework, one that the Government Directorates can work. The following proposals are being put to Government Directorates in order to clarify the concept of design awareness within Government.

Design Review Panel

It is proposed to create a 'whole-of-government Design Review Panel' that will review all significant new architecture, urban design and engineering projects proposed by the ACT Government. In this way guidance can be given to the Design Council at a very early stage on design processes that will achieve excellence of design outcomes. This process will fit within a 'Gateway project approval process' that has been developed by ACT Treasury for the financial approval of new projects.

City Centre design and land use directions

Whilst there is substantial coordination of work-in-progress in the City Centre, there is little coordination between the dozen or so Government land holders (and therefore developers) in the City, nor is there any clear vision for how the Government wishes to see that development occur over the next 20 or 30 years.

It is proposed to engage consultants in early 2012 to collate existing planning documents for different parts of the City Centre, and provide a forward vision and land development strategy that can inform Directorates and the private sector on the most effective way of designing the centre to achieve a high quality urban design outcome.

When this is completed, it will be used as vehicle for engaging the local development community in discussions about achieving design excellence in the City Centre. The Design Council held a workshop on the re-design of City Walk that was convened earlier this year.

Procurement of high quality design

In the Government's procurement procedures for architecture and design, the focus has been on the attainment of high quality design outcomes. The Majura Parkway project may be a first in this regard.

Queensland
Malcolm Middleton,
Queensland State Government Architect

The office is a small state-wide body located within the structure of the Department of Public Works, and reports to the Deputy Director-General (Building Services and Works). The Queensland Government Architect chairs the Board for Urban Places, a ministerial advisory body that provides advice and support for high quality urban design for major infrastructure and urban planning projects. Support to the Board is provided by five committees and bodies, Department of Planning and Local Government.

The Queensland Government Architect also sits on the Site Development Council — an independent strategic advisory board that informs the Queensland Government Queensland Design Strategy which is administered by Arts Queensland. The key duties and responsibilities of the office include:

- providing project specific and general advice to the Queensland Government on built environment, urban design and heritage issues
- providing leadership and promoting community awareness in built environment issues and facilitating linkages between community expectations and built environment policy initiatives
- supporting and encouraging high standard, innovative design for Government works and assisting in implementing Government policy in relation to public art in buildings

- supporting and encouraging engagement with Queensland Architects, including regional Architects and the development of regional design
- maintaining effective relationships with architectural design schools in Queensland and be involved in their future

- working closely with relevant areas of the Department of Public Works, other Government Agencies and, where appropriate, other levels of Government in pursuit of better built environment outcomes

- representing government on key architectural planning and urban design projects and bodies

Recently the office has conducted the briefing, call for submissions and assessment protocols for an International Design Competition to tender for the renewal and redesign of 500 ferries for the Brisbane River ferry service in the 2011 floods. This work has been transformed to the Brisbane City Council for implementation phase.

The office has also take carriage of the Brisbane Open House initiative over the last two years and has established the event as an important awareness program for the built environment. It is proposed to take this initiative to a number of the regions in 2012.

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New South Wales
Peter Mould,
NSW Government Architect

In NSW, the advice of the Government Architect is structured through four statutory roles (eg Heritage Council, Board of Architects) and a range of non-statutory roles (currently 130, this varies with need and includes Central Sydney Planning Committee, Sydney Opera House Heritage Council, Sydney Olympic Park Design Review Panel), and their various subcommittees.

Recently, as Government Architect I established an Eminent Architects Panel for the Sydney Opera House to provide overarching design advice for future works on the site. This is of particular importance as the Opera House now has World Heritage listing and a continued and consistent input is required to protect its design integrity.

The Government Architect and senior members of the Architecture Office (GAO) give advice through advisory panels or by invitation to local panels on community review and expert opinion. This is sought by NSW Ministers, State Government Agencies and local Government. GAO is a multidisciplinary office, we are supported by expert advice available within the Government Architects Office (specialist advice for example on costing, environmental engineering services, heritage, and roads) and in addition the wider Architectural community.

We have developed considerable expertise on the conservation and maintenance of Sydney sandstone through the Minister's Centenary Stonework Program.

Full commercial principles

The office operates on full commercial principles and although, like any State Government, it is unfunded by Government and like all commercial offices is funded by the projects we undertake. Through commercial work, the office keeps the advice up-to-date and keeps staff apprised of trends in technical, regulatory and market conditions. The projects within the operations of the Government Architect's Office thus inform the additional work the office does and the doing and advising roles reinforce each other and provide government with continuity and corporate memory related to its built assets.

We are able to work with all layers of Government on a range of strategic projects.

Our work with City of Sydney, for example, has allowed us to develop urban design options to help frame the planning controls. On specific city sites we developed options to inform the planning controls with the aim of generating a better built form and better public domain. The planning controls were duly adjusted and demonstrated a process that was more design-led than the current paradigm of planning-led design.

Architecture could and should be given a more prominent role in planning and therefore within Government. We are currently discussing in conjunction with the new NSW Government how the strong advocacy role of the architecture office can be applied to the public sector, and roles of procurement. Currently this role is limited to specific issues on specific projects, and Government procurement is too often silent on design or quality issues.

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South Australia
Ben Hewett,
SA State Government Architect

In 2000, the Government undertook the first recorded instance of government to report and formed the Integrated Design Commission SA (IDC SA).

Within the Commission, there is a collaborative leadership role of the Commission Chair for Integrated Design, Government Architect and Executive Director. The role of Chair is held by Ben Hewett and represents the inaugural role of South Australian Government Architect in January 2011.

The role of the Government Architect is to provide independent advice and guidance relating to delivery of projects under the Government's Built Environment Policy, the role of the Government Architect is also Executive Director of the Commission, and Commission Chair. He is in an advisory role to the Premier, managing budgets, resources, projects and staff, and reporting to the Chief Executive of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. This relationship to the central agency of Government is important, allowing a cross-departmental approach to the provision of advice, review and direction.

The IDC SA model is unique in Australia. The Commission takes direct responsibility with broad remit of design leadership in the State — effectively the 'designed environment'.

The Government Architect is key to the 'built environment' — an overlap in the two roles, but where there is significant need in an environment of such complexity. The Executive Director provides leadership in the Commission's relationships to the public sector and has significant experience in its processes and procedures.

An explicit expectation is the role of the Government Architect to make awareness of the value of good design based research in broad based education and evidence, as well as the value of design being delivered through quality planning and integrated processes. One way in which this will be seen is through the Adelaide Design Review program, which commenced in November 2011.

Review program based on CABE model

The Design Review Program is based on the UK's Design Council CABE model and has been formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding between the two agencies. As part of the agreement, the Commission is drawing on the expertise of Design Council CABE with an upped expansion of a range of design capability and design intelligence.

CABE is an independent design advisory organisation that provides independent advice to the London borough councils on design, urban design, heritage and sustainability.

The government of South Australia, through the State Government Architect, will be provided with independent advice on design, urban design, heritage and sustainability.
Tasmania
Peter Poulas, Tasmanian State Architect
This position has a number of roles: advocate for quality design and sustainable built outcomes across the State; strategic and independent advice to Government on matters relating to planning, urban design, architecture and heritage; collaborative working relationships with State agencies and stakeholder groups to develop a shared vision of the built environment; and developing best practice guidelines to create better and more sustainable urban environments and buildings.

The role of the Tasmanian State Architect is to bring together government, the building industry, and the community in a shared vision of the built environment. It ensures government buildings exemplify best practice and are leadership in design and sustainability. New collaborative methods of design showcase the best outcomes of design and industry integration.

Western Australia
Steve Woodland, WA State Government Architect
The role of the Government Architect in Western Australia is to provide leadership and strategic advice to Government to improve the design of public buildings and spaces and enhance the quality of the built environment. The Government Architect (GA) has a whole-of-government focus and, when requested, can provide advice to the highest levels of Government.

The Office of the Government Architect (OGA) is supported through the State Department of Finance’s Building Management and Works unit, and the GA reports to both the Minister for Finance and the Premier as required.

The work of the Office spans projects, policy and design advocacy and in the last two years the staff has worked concerted on the development of a built environment policy for Western Australia and a series of ‘design standards’ for key public works projects.

The “Better Places and Spaces” policy is the intended subject of a Cabinet Submission in the early New Year, and the highest level of endorsement is being sought for the initiative. As part of the implementation strategy for the policy, the design standards provide objective, performance-based guidance as to the quality of design required for public high schools, courthouses and hospitals. Design review by the OGA is a key element of the strategy to encourage better design outcomes.

The OGA is Steve Woodland (GA), Melissa Payne, Caroline Hickey, Carmel Van Ruth, Patrick Ford and Jarrod Matherway.
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Victoria
In Victoria, the Government Architect leads a small office affiliated with the Victorian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet. The Office of the Victorian Government Architect (OVGA) provides a high-level and whole-of-government perspective on all matters relating to the quality of the built environment throughout the State.

The OVGA has no specific statutory responsibilities in relation to either the planning system or procurement processes for State-funded buildings and infrastructure, but seeks to provide leadership in both these spheres and helps to facilitate better design outcomes. This includes providing coordinated access to strategic design advice across government, offering complementary design advice to government agencies responsible for delivering public infrastructure, and advocating ways to achieve quality design and better design outcomes in the built environment across Victoria.

The remit of the OVGA includes both an advisory and an advocacy dimension. The OVGA provides strategic advice to Government and offers a critical understanding about architecture and urban design to ministers and their departments, enabling the Victorian Government to be a better informed client. The OVGA leads and supports the consideration of built environment design in the development of government policies and participate on key project committees to pursue design quality outcomes for government buildings and infrastructure and public places. In addition, the OVGA promotes awareness of the benefits of good design to the private sector and in the wider community.

To assist with its advisory role, the OVGA has recently established a Victorian Design Review Panel (VDRP). Modelled on the design review function of CABE in the UK, the VDRP will provide independent advice to government and statutory decision makers across Victoria about the design of significant government projects. The panel will comprise a pool of specialists from the disciplines of urban design, architecture, landscape architecture and planning who will be called upon to participate in regular design review sessions.

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Density: it’s more than just a number
Christopher Boyko and Rachel Cooper
Carefully considering density and its impacts is fundamental to getting urban design and development projects right. Christopher Boyko and Rachel Cooper (Lancaster University, 2014) have been undertaking research into density. During a recent decision-making survey completed by an international sample of say urban design, planning and building professionals and academics across the world for a majority of the respondents, the density of the respondent’s workplace (described as density of green spaces and of populations) and of populations were the most common kinds of density considered when evaluating urban design and development decisions.

This makes sense, given that decision-makers want to know this information when evaluating urban design and development projects, and statistics are often available to make calculations about the number of people and people in area. However, respondents said they also considered the density of the natural environment (e.g. density of green spaces) and of mobile forms (e.g. the density of buses and cars) when making decisions, which suggests that the things we do not build and

that are not stationary inadvertently affect how designers create city spaces and, of course, have the potential to shape our lifestyle and wellbeing.

A second key survey finding is that density needs to be discussed by the right people at the right time using the right tools. Although respondents felt that a whole raft of people, including developers, local authority planners, urban designers, architects, private sector planners, Central government and Councillors on planning committees made the most density-related decisions, they believed that only four of these groups—local authority planners, urban designers, architects and Councillors on planning committees—should be making those decisions.

Timeliness of decisions

As for when density decisions are made within the urban design and development process, another disparity emerged: while respondents thought that they mostly made density decisions early on – at the conceptual design and development stage – they believed that other people made most of their decisions at the detailed design stage.

Finally, respondents mentioned a variety of decision-making tools to help make decisions about density on urban design and development projects. These included more formal resources, such as planning policies, guidelines and standards (both governmental and non-governmental), and more social resources, such as past experiences, visits to other developments, advice from colleagues, having knowledge of the local context, being able to look globally at best practice and considering wider transportation and community issues.

So what does this mean for urban designers? When considering density in the creation of spaces and places, think about much more than just the number of dwellings and people in an area. For example, the density of trees, bus stops and corner shops selling alcohol and cigarettes will also contribute to the look and feel of a space. Furthermore, try and get the key decision-makers who matter around the table early enough to discuss the impact of different densities on urban design and development project, and underscore the importance of both "hard" (eg numerical density standards) and "soft" (relating to colleagues) tools in making informed decisions.

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