

Wish upon stars for stellar public spaces



Phillip O'Neill

LAST week I was in Seattle, in the US. I saw a building, the Seattle Public Library, which didn't just shout "Look at me!" but also begged that I come inside.

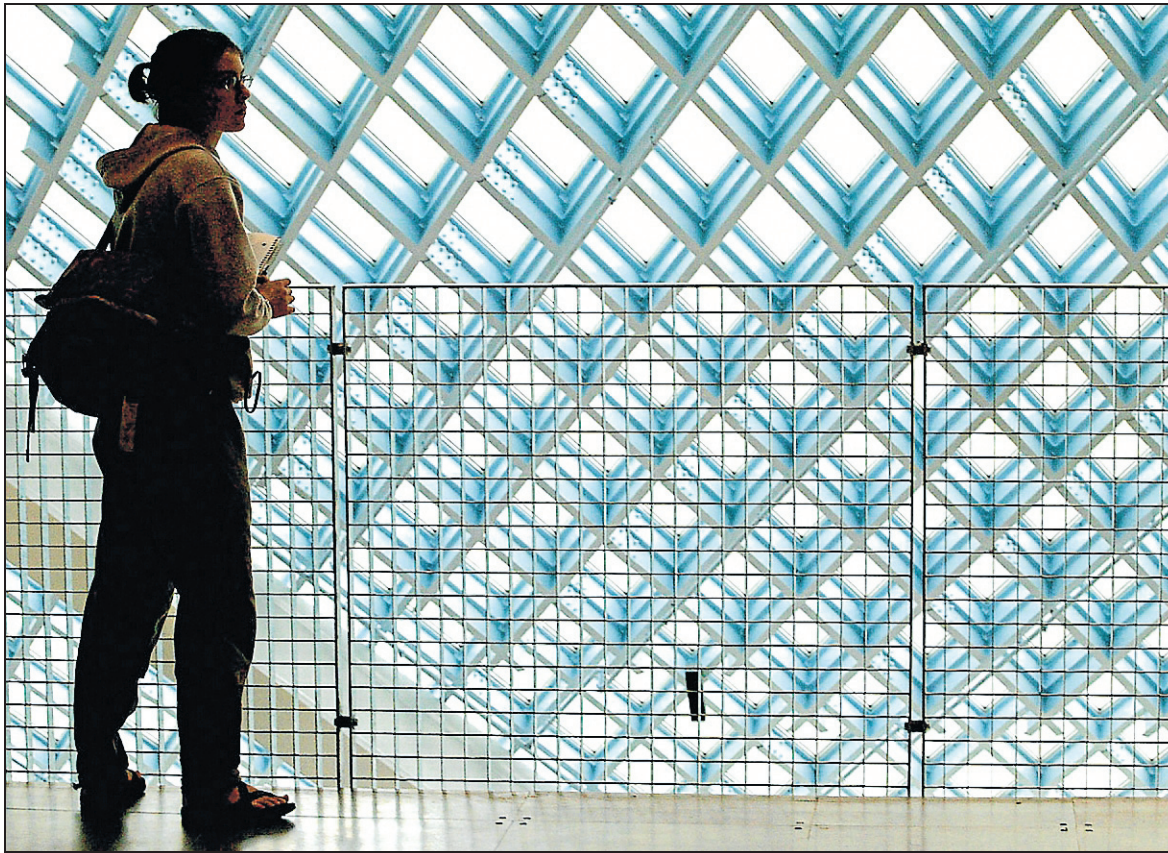
But first I wanted to take time to walk around it and stare at its diamond-grid walls of glass. These walls bind together the building's five stacked concrete plates, which are by no means vertically neat. They are more like a child's stack of play blocks. The result is that the walls reflect and steer light and images at unusual angles. Along one wall you see the blue light off Seattle's Puget Sound. An overhang shows springtime cherry blossoms from above. An entrance ramp reflects an angry black cloud mass.

The good thing is a public library is a public library. Like a park is a park.

You know you can step in, look around, stop, get comfortable and read. So I did. And what a surprise. Magically, the plates break into 10 light-filled floors, with spectacular views of the city and the water in all directions.

The library opened in 2004. It is such a clever building. A book about the history of libraries tells me that people started to read books around 1150 and maps from around 1250. Newspapers and magazines came along in the mid-1600s then photos in the 1800s. Which is pretty much all there was in a library until very recently, apart from a few libraries that stocked the occasional video and record. But from the mid-1990s, with the arrival of the internet and digitisation, printed stuff ceased to dominate our lives.

And this is the marvellous thing about the Seattle library. Inside I saw hundreds of desks and tables filled with busy people tapping away online, many with a pile of books easily accessible from the vertical spiral of bookshelves holding over a million books that climbs from floor to floor. Others sat in quiet reading spaces with a book or a newspaper or a magazine. A homeless-looking guy lazed across his swag down a carpeted aisle



WATCH THIS SPACE: Newcastle needs new, creative public buildings like the Seattle Public Library, above.

between the map cabinets, reading a book, undistracted by the view but enjoying the sunshine on his neck.

Downstairs a purpose-built children's library was similarly busy and purposeful. And nearby I noticed a 275-seat auditorium, which must be a prized community asset.

The good citizens of Seattle voted in 1998 to spend \$200 million to replace their old library, one of those variety store-looking jobs. They agreed to up their property taxes to pay the bill. And, impressed by his fellow citizens' initiative and goodwill, Bill Gates – he from Microsoft – threw in an extra \$10 million.

Then, boldly, Seattle issued a worldwide invitation for architects to come and show what they could do. A shortlist included celebrity British architect Lord Sir Norman Foster. But the selection committee was enchanted by a Dutchman, the lanky Rem Koolhaas, "hip and

playful", said the *Seattle Times*, a man who enchanted the locals with his ability to capture ideas with nothing more than a pencil, paper, scissors and glue, and not a PowerPoint presentation in sight.

The library opened in May 2004. Its librarian Deborah Jacobs said this to a local reporter: "When you have a building that is so hot, and it's a library, that's pretty cool. You can have museums that are great looking, and office buildings. But this is the people's public library, with water views and city views. It's a library. It's not an expensive condo. It's a library."

I guess Deborah was excited on opening day?

It's a shame we don't recognise the feeling. When was a significant new public building last opened in Newcastle or the Hunter? Apart from a footy stand?

Can anyone point to a new museum, or library, or gallery that can boast being generously spent

on, inspirationally designed, unapologetically public, inviting of all and sundry, and without a fee? When is the last time we made a bold commitment to civilised life by erecting a building that says, "Look at me. I am here. I am public?"

Something that challenges us to life outside of the television and the shopping mall?

Wouldn't it be exciting to have a new public building in downtown Newcastle, the capital of the Hunter? Wouldn't it be inspiring if Newcastle's next big step was a public building, a tribute to gutsy planners and politicians and bold designers, a symbol that civic life is more important than the profits of property developers and national brand retailers?

Professor Phillip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

Children pawns in adults' cruel agendas

We need to offer greater protection to our minors, writes Paul O'Rourke.

AUSTRALIAN children are not doing so well. You need only turn on the television, listen to the radio or grab a newspaper on any day to become aware of another sickening act of violence and injustice, usually perpetrated by adults, against the most defenceless in society: our precious children.

Young children who have been starved to death, thrown from bridges, tossed into suburban dams in suitcases, driven into waterways to drown in an act of revenge by one parent against another, been beaten, burned with cigarettes, or sexually abused.

In March, police broke what is believed to be the world's biggest

child pornography ring, resulting in hundreds of arrests worldwide, including 31 Australians.

As a society we are increasingly hypocritical and contradictory in our attitudes to children. Our supposed love for children has become largely conditional. We marvel at life-saving surgery almost routinely performed on babies in the womb and celebrate our ability to keep premature newborns alive, yet allow and equally defend our right to abort children from conception to full term.

We rightly bring in tough standards for vehicle child restraints and devise strict child protection policies that keep our precious children safe from predators, yet we treat our children like miniature adults by allowing shops to sell child-sized padded bras and clothing bearing sexual slogans that objectify the smallest

Australians. We permit the sex trade to place pornographic magazines alongside children's reading in service stations then argue endlessly about adult rights and the censorship implications of internet filtering to keep children from moral danger.

We demand the right to play R18+ video games in which women and children are raped and slaughtered and kid ourselves that such games will not end up in the hands of teens.

Money and reproductive technology are enabling anyone who wants a baby to manufacture one, often leaving children without any link to their biological parents. Children have become pawns, the spoils of adult agendas that are often not in a child's best interests.

Yet the number of Australian children in out-of-home care has doubled since 1999 to more than 34,000 and the number of reported

cases of child abuse hit a record 339,454 incidents in 2008-09, of which 54,621 cases were proven. The number of reports of abuse has more than tripled in a decade.

While the vilest forms of abuse regularly make front-page news, very little is written about the causes and, more importantly, the solutions. Children have a serious image problem and are in need of modern marketing savvy and courageous advocacy to change attitudes and restore them to their rightful place in Australian society: at the centre of family life and culture where they are wanted, valued and nurtured.

Paul O'Rourke is on the board of C3 Church Victory at Charlestown and is a former CEO of Compassion Australia. Article submitted by the Churches Media Association.



In the zone

READERS linked the cabbies' call for a taxi zone in Honeysuckle to wider issues of planning, public transport and law enforcement.

Just another bad planning issue in Newcastle's biggest planning mistake.

– be serious

Gee, a taxi driver whingeing about parking, what a joke. From what I've seen, they are the biggest breakers of the law in history. Stopping anywhere, double parking, all to get their pick-ups.

– Tom

How disgraceful from the police. Shouldn't they be out there looking to stop real crime? They do the same by parking near schools waiting to nab kids driving to school whose P plates have fallen off and taxi drivers for stopping in no-stopping zones while dropping off disabled students because there is nowhere else to park.

– Me

Luckily the area is serviced by a heavy rail line, so people will be able to use trains instead. Especially at night – trains are a lot more practical, convenient and can take you to several other locations in Newcastle.

– fnord

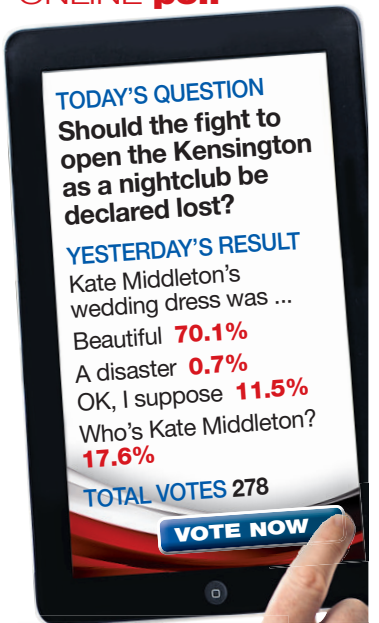
There was a taxi rank but it was removed after complaints from residents? Didn't these residents think there would be any noise when they moved to live in this location? Would they like everything shut down or just the things they don't use? If people choose to live in the city, then put up with the noise that goes with it.

– chameleon

Gobsmacking really! The biggest complaint of a night out in Newcastle is the difficulty of finding a cab home. But rather than make it easier for revellers who want to do the right thing, and not drive, it seems authorities are making it more difficult. How many of the private cars illegally parked in the taxi zone are later driven by idiots over the limit?

– Colt

ONLINE poll



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