

# The life of the steps

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Photograph by Thang Luong

**W**AITING AT the Sydney Town Hall marble steps you find a comfortable spot to sit, resting those weary legs after scouring through another Najee clearance sale. You curse to yourself, glancing at your watch because so-and-so is late again. A group of strangers around you play the same rendezvous game; their visages feign coolness but their nervous body gestures betray eagerness to meet a friend or a lover, perhaps.

It is lunchtime when the crowd begins to swell. Looking around, you savour the newest grunge worn by beautiful young things, then your attention is arrested when a schoolgirl affects a Claudia Schiffer hand-through-tousled-hair-pose, descending the steps with all the hauteur of a catwalk temptress. An hour passes by and still no rendezvous, but sitting here and observing these public rituals, you begin to wonder what makes the Town Hall steps Sydney's premier meeting place.

Architects and urban planners are supposed to anticipate the social use of a public place and so design according to a vague notion of what 'the people' want or need. They have some preconception of what people might enjoy doing; where they might sit, how to guide the pedestrian's eye through a sensuous vista. This is all calculatingly responsible and altruistic, but these days spatial designers are subject to so many imperatives that the design of a public place invariably succumbs to the vagaries of local government decision making and commercial pressures. The result is that the public, whom these professionals are supposedly catering for, is neglected and marginalised from the design scheme. Too often the design achievement falls short of the congenial aspirations for a site. Hence the windswept concrete public spaces all around the city.

Now that Sydney has won the Olympic Games, the tourists flocking here will force many Sydneysiders to consider the quality of the spaces they use and occupy on a daily basis. They will say: 'OK, you have the Opera House, the beaches, the harbour, the foreshore, your city parks, but what about the life of the inner city? Where's the street life?'

Our reply might be a painful, 'Er, well, don't worry about downtown, it's dead.' Granted Sydney is not quite Paris, Venice or Rome, cities that look in on themselves; rather its landscape looks out to the sea—which is an important and distinctive feature of Sydney. But the city fails when it comes to physical streetscapes that burst at the seams with energy.

In the past 20 years, Sydney designers

have built some notable areas for leisure and gathering, namely Sydney Square (the site between Town Hall and St Andrews Church), Martin Place, Darling Harbour, Macquarie Street and the Circular Quay foreshore—yet none of them makes the most of their spatial potential. And like many northern American cities, Sydney suffers from a skyscraper syndrome of buildings monstrously disproportionate in scale to people on the street. Compounding this urban cancer is the fact that it's a city centre lacking a heart—a core readily pinpointed as a signpost of spatial identity. What is downtown Sydney's physical centre? If it's the Central Business District's hodge-podge design, that's the result of a planning philosophy professionals in the '90s should take as an object lesson in how not to do it.

Amid all this well-intentioned mediocrity, the Sydney Town Hall steps are an inadvertent example of communal urban design, and a model for designers to investigate. Dear old Thomas Sapsford, who designed the building, probably never imagined the stairs would become a kind of democratic symbol for city pedestrians and wandering flaneurs like me.

Only the most untravelled Sydney town planners could claim that the Sydney Town Hall precinct has the cultural energy of European squares like the Piazza San Marco, the Place des Vosges, Red Square, and St Peter's Square—all very strong in delineating precincts of political, commercial and social life. But its very name—the Town Hall—signifies centrality, cultural significance and public gathering. Over time, even the vernacular expression 'We went to town' signified that people had an acute sense of a place, that they saw the city centre as fundamentally necessary. Entertainment and shopping areas in downtown Sydney have improved somewhat over the past two decades and concentrated themselves in specific pockets of the city, and people—particularly the young—need a convenient location to meet before they undertake such activities (whether they have shopping or shoplifting in mind). The Town Hall steps have accommodated that role because no other physical space contains people so well or offers them a vantage point to look out from.

The white marble staircase is attractive to passers-by because it is set back from George Street acting as an alcove, an area of temporary respite from heavy vehicular movement. This is one key function for downtown Sydney where pedestrians wage a silent war against cars, trucks and especially taxis (the Town Hall,

of course, is one of many prominent Sydney locations which most taxi drivers seem never to have heard of). It is of some comfort to know the Sydney Planning Committee has finally begun to assess the impact of automobiles against human traffic. Plans are even under way for the Sydney trams to make a triumphant return to George Street down to Circular Quay.

Ergonomic design of stairs is crucial and the Town Hall steps conform to the optimum codes of staircase design, that is, a five-inch riser and a fourteen-inch tread. This ensures sufficient bum-room for sitting. But if the steps cater to people's derrières; what are people doing when they sit? Somehow the steps foster an unspoken dialogue between complete strangers, encouraging visual communication and interchange. Men and women constantly and surreptitiously ogle each other, perhaps wondering who so-and-so will meet. Young teenage girls check each other out in the latest pret-à-porter fashion, while young men secretly glance out of the corner of their eye (diabolically so if they're wearing sunglasses) at passing members of the opposite or same sex.

During my random monitoring period, there was a recurring phenomenon every couple of days around 12.30pm—a young man driving along George Street towards Circular Quay in a gold Bugatti. He usually succeeded in timing his run so that he would stop at the red traffic signal. Then, like a peacock, he would preen himself to the surrounding watchers, the people waiting at the steps and pedestrians. Quite blatantly he would look in our direction, then into the rear-view mirror, back to us, glide his hand through his Elvis-coiffured hair, and look around at the passing drivers to convey to all and sundry 'I'm here'. This provoked a chorus of comments from the steps like 'Check out the love-me-do, what a show off'. Once the lights turned green, he would turn up the volume and drive away with funky music blaring.

On the steps adults sometimes become as animated as children, playing out a series of hide and seek rendezvous scenarios. You see everything from harmless tricks played by giggling girls on their friends to more subtly charged, half-deliberate and half-nervous misunderstandings between lovers as to the precise spot to meet up. Sometimes it's almost like the last act of *The Marriage of Figaro*. This is all part of the drama of the steps.

I was somewhat half-hearted about conducting vox-pops—which the editor had cruelly demanded on my first assignment—after witnessing the interruptions of interviewers conducting questionnaires or bible bashers stalking their prey (not to mention the ribald answers). Young people provided my most colourful responses. Although they said they occasionally waited outside Hoyts to be 'bad' (a sign that they had jigged school), they acknowledged the grandeur of the Town Hall and said they liked to sit on the steps to 'look cool', though not necessarily 'bad'. I also asked them whether they checked out other young people, to which of course they said yes. Young males said they checked out 'who gets with who', and if the young woman's boyfriend was a 'dud' they would colourfully comment on the match, saying 'how could she go out with an ugly bastard like him'. Similarly some young teenage females interrupted my questions with comments like, 'Oh look at him, no wonder he's going out with her. Look what she's wearing, what a tart.'

If my observations so far imply notions of democracy, that is popular participation, it isn't surprising that during the Vietnam War, and in the days of post-Whitlam rage maintenance, demonstrators congregated on the steps to protest. It was the landing of the steps which was the platform for mass discord. The main problem with the city of Sydney in this regard is that public

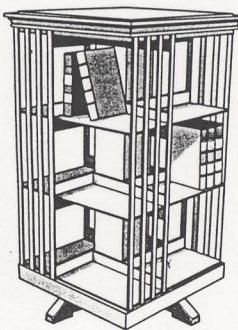
demonstrations do not have access to sites of power for adequate protest. Frank Sartor, even if he was present, isn't the most appropriate target for protest for anything much (even the city planning shambles is more the state government's fault than his). And the fact that there are only four to five metres of paving in front of NSW Parliament House allows no latitude for popular dissent there.

Nowadays demonstrators are pushed to the periphery of the city, to such areas as the Domain which doesn't contain or encourage any sense of solidarity, since it is largely a space without focal points. There is no platform (like the Town Hall steps), no sense of enclosure as opposed to the strong visual nexus of the Town Hall, the Queen Victoria Building and the Woolworths building. As history shows, most political demonstrations happen on the street—but it is the street that Sydney people are being denied proper access to.

Around 1900, George Street would have been more conducive to romantic promenading—yet even amid today's automated blight, the Town Hall steps thrive in inverse proportion to the stifling traffic around them. There are murmurings that the incoherent, ad-hoc approach to planning of recent years must be stopped and that instead we should envision a city with a dramatic and intense core. If space is intelligently given to people downtown it will be used intelligently. There are areas which favour people over cars—Pitt St Mall, the Circular Quay foreshore and the Rocks—all enlivening the city. Good public spaces have lives of their own. The plan to tear down the Cahill Expressway to open the foreshore and redevelop the square in front of Customs House at least shows that city officials are considering precincts for public spectacle and participation. If it works, it will be a visual beacon denoting a sense of entry to the city from the harbour.

But the city centre itself needs to be a hub of social frolic, a magnet, that says: this is the generator which all other spaces stem from. Perhaps the compact social life of the Town Hall steps can bring and extend some of its inherent qualities to public design in the coming years. ■

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