

An interview with: Tim Horton

by Idil Gaziulusoy

Tim Horton is the Registrar of Architects Registration Board, New South Wales. He is an award winning architect, was the founding CEO of the Committee for Adelaide and held positions as state President and National Director of the Australian Institute of Architects, and advised the Australian Government as a member of the editorial board for the Australian Urban Design Protocol and the Built Environment Industry Innovation Council. Tim has also held board positions on the Australian Urban Research Infrastructure Network, the Australian Design Alliance, the CRC for Low Carbon Living and South Australia's leading craft and design body, the Jam Factory.

Tim Horton was interviewed as part of the "Visions & Pathways 2040" project, about the future of Australian cities.

Tim, how does your work relate to the future of Australian cities?

Tim Horton (TH): I am the registrar of the New South Wales Architects Registration Board whose job is to protect and inform the consumer of architectural services and to promote architecture in the community. So, the question for me is, what is architecture today, how might it be changing or the circumstances be changing and what would we need to do in terms of policy and regulation to anticipate that future, given that policy generally travels slower than change. So, the policy makers need to think doubly quick because the process design is so sluggish that if you're not thinking ten years ahead you're probably ten years behind.

So, the work you do is about developing policy foresight. As you know in our project we're focusing on futures of Australian cities in 2040. Now I'd like you to imagine that we are in 2040 and we're living in a radically low carbon and resilient city. What does it look and feel like?

TH: I think it looks and feels very much the same and I think that's the very interesting thing about foresight as opposed to futurism if you know what I mean, that I think



the interesting thing is the familiarity and yet there're subtle differences between now and then. I define the difference in two ways. One, I would call informed culture, and the other, I would describe as intelligent systems. But, the city becomes even more unequal for many and access to services and infrastructure probably becomes more difficult, so the future is not necessarily ideal. Part of that is, I guess, the call to action to ensure that the decisions we made back in 2010 to '15 to '20 put in mind fairness and equity into the system. Because, in 2040 chances are parts of the city are doing very well, parts of the city are self-reliant, increasingly having shifted to distributed or autonomous systems that allow them to regulate their own consumption and supply of things like food but also energy and so forth and water. And the risk is that 2040 has these almost breakaway communities that have shaken loose of the old and aging central infrastructure that we can no longer afford to upgrade. So, it's effectively been a process of transitioning out of central to these autonomous types of systems. It's now easy to treat our own water and our waste and that's able to be recycled into our urban agriculture et cetera, but not everywhere. So, the biggest problem if you like in 2040 is the idea that the desirable aspects of it are not distributed evenly.

So, you can see a low carbon future, but you cannot really see it to be I think just for everyone, am I understanding you correctly?

TH: Yes, we need to be mindful of that 2040 is not an end point, but it's only a step in that evolution. So, I do think in 2040 there is a low carbon reality, but I think it's evident in a fully developed form in smaller pockets and the question becomes how do you operationalise it more broadly, even in 2040.

I see. If we forget about the constraints that are locked into the current systems what would be your most optimistic vision of a low carbon resilient future city in Australia?

TH: The communities are characterised by the preference to opt for the autonomous solution and so that there is a reliance on people's own decision making on the things that they do, the actions they take related to a direct benefit that they get and they can get by the direct supply linked to their own consumption. This is where we get into informed culture. In 2040, the neat thing is that we're now able to better model what you'd call the downstream consequences of the options we face. But, based on the idea of the consumption that we are responsible for, we have confidence that we can make up for in production if that makes sense. So, we're better connected to the idea of supply and demand, because we're more in control of our own supply and demand. So, this is more a conceptual approach as opposed to hardware or technology driven in the first instance. The intelligent systems put a little bit of that into a physical and probably not a surprising, context, where some of the systems and technologies we've been able to develop better connect humanity again to the natural systems around them. So, we can build in ecological responses to a lot of our buildings and urban systems. There is a more intuitive and automated ability for buildings to self-shade. The buildings adjust to the environment around them in a dynamic sense. At a more macro level, we do have the ability to spatially model in a way that integrates natural and built systems. What I mean by that, that we understand the linkage between soil moisture and water runoff with local food production and pollination, the cycle of pollination that leads to production for example. Which, might then relate to cropping rates, so that we understand that in relation to the micro weather forecasting, and so on.

So, what about the barriers between where we are now and the vision of 2040 that you just depicted? What is in the way, what's stopping us?

TH: I think the importance is on having models to give confidence for that change to occur. So, the barrier at the moment is the absence of those models that convince us that movement is possible and plausible. This is evident in everything from the way we frame our planning and our legislation that is essentially non-spatial and rejects the idea of models and options. I think one of the barriers is that we are dealing with essentially spatial issues without spatial tools and the value of those spatial models is not understood. The typologies and the scenarios and the options and the alternatives we're not presented with options and we are rapidly decoupling law and legislation from practice and everyday life. So, the traditional pathway of decision making is becoming removed from the decisions that people are making for themselves. I think start-up culture is, in an anthropological sense, effectively an expression that traditional institutions are effectively dying or dead or irrelevant and that we are finding people interested in creating and making outside of the traditional institutions, including, I've got to say, universities.

So, you say our institutions are failing us and start-up culture is in fact a proof of this?

TH: Yes, and I think the institutions that are failing us at the moment include government. It's relevant to itself but not connected with the emergent movements that are occurring in society and business and the way people are interacting. The speed with which they're doing so and what technology makes possible in terms of speed and rapid prototyping and development and access to funding and so forth, effectively the movement of disintermediation, which removes the middle man from the equation, is proving that government is the middle man. Government is a victim of disintermediation as people seek those relationships and transactions in a more direct sense. I think government will rapidly evolve to a different thing between now and 2040, possibly with a heap of disruption along the way.

You also mentioned universities as among the institutions failing us.

TH: Yes, the slow cycle of research is problematic. The barrier is at the moment that the research that provides us the evidence for informed decision making is not currently

dovetailing with the speed and means of production available to people in their daily life. The evidence that we should be reaching for, which we can say is rooted in the universities tuition is not accessible to us, we're opting to work around it; we're opting to bypass that. We increasingly source the information from other means, such as crowdsourcing and citizen science, things that are more rapid, less deep. So, to cut short, I think at the moment the barriers are established systems.

If these are the barriers, what about the opportunities that are emerging at the moment or the changes that you observe in the current systems that might assist us to move towards the optimistic vision of a low carbon resilient future?

TH: The optimism is more in the models I see overseas than here in Australia. I look to the trusted intermediaries, having just talked about disintermediation. People are choosing who their intermediaries will be. The idea of being a trusted source, but a trusted source that is in itself entrepreneurial and so is asking people to join it in its own entrepreneurial journey. As an example, I would point to NESTA who is a very interesting model lodged close to and with all the agency it needs into government to influence policy and drive policy, to lead policy without it being a lobby group. NESTA is a really interesting model for a type of civil society voice that has its means; that is not driven by an ideological platform in the same way that a lobby group is, that's evidence based without it being esoteric. It's accessible without being populist and it has what is most important of any of these factors, it has some really good people who are able to act as these boundary spanners connecting the various worlds. So, I think there is optimism in those newer types of civically engaged entrepreneurial third parties. There's not too many I think in that field.

What would it take in Australia to establish such an intermediary that would be an active agent and drive innovation at institutional level?

TH: Firstly, unsurprisingly it's the ability for the cross-disciplinary and the cross-sectoral, but more than that it is an ability to step away from statutory as the only tool in the box. My experience is that the agents like NESTA and others don't exist because they have statutory authority. They exist because they have an ability to engage dynamically, that they are able to act as a hub for many to come together and for new thinking to

be connected with new models. So, what would it take? It would take an audacious new platform, not organisation, a new platform loosely shepherded by those with no authority but all imprimatur; the imprimatur of authority as opposed to statutory authority and that's a very important difference. Why? Statutory authority allows you to make decisions around public administration based on a predetermined criteria, which in its own way stifles innovation because the criteria has predetermined an assumption. So, if we adopt the view that change is inspired and not imposed then you need another type of authority than statutory. The other thing I guess that platform needs is a link, a dynamic link between research and evidence to spatially driven model making and that it needs to be embedded in a continually engaged kind of model with the community. That is facilitated by empathic experts or experts driven with a certain level of empathy for the ability and synthesis to be able to bring engagement together with that model generation and a feedback loop back into engagement in order to build within the support for change as somebody said.

Well, that was very enlightening Tim, thank you so much for your time.

TH: Pleasure.

