

DEGW 2017 SYMPOSIUM REFLECTIONS FROM THE ANTIPODES

It was 22 years ago that I first encountered DEGW. I was a young(ish) architect heading up a new Sydney office for the Brisbane-based Bligh Voller architectural practice. We were invited to submit for a new workplace project for Lend Lease.... a “flagship” for its new Lend Lease Interiors Division that would be a showpiece of “new workplace”. Jon Voller suggested we invite Frank Duffy to join our bid. I’d never heard of him. Fortunately, Sue Wittenoom, who was a young(ish) architect at Lend Lease Interiors and heading up the assessment panel, had.

22 years later I look back at that time, and that project, and wonder how my life, and possibly contemporary workplace in Australia, would have been different had Jon Voller not met Frank at a conference and Sue Wittenoom had not been on the LLI assessment panel.

We were appointed to the project. The LLI workplace was a sensation, pioneering so many radical planning concepts, none the least of which was the creation of a social hub on each floor to replace the tea room that had been traditionally squeezed into the building core. Another “first” was the concept of workplace tours to demonstrate “new workplace” – which Lend Lease conducted for well over a year after it opened.

Three years later, James Grose joined Bligh Voller (by then Bligh Voller Nield) and Rosemary Kirkby appointed DEGW and BVN to create Campus MLC in Sydney. And three years after that, Rosemary reconvened the team to create National @ Docklands in Melbourne.

It is extraordinary the impact that the combination of Kirkby, BVN and DEGW has had on contemporary workplace in Australia and New Zealand and Despina no doubt will have touched on this in her Founders Lecture. “Workplace strategy” is now considered essential by any contemporary organisation in this part of the world and the format, language and tools used to devise and implement these are all founded in DEGW methodology.

However, the essence of the DEGW approach, *design for change*, is starting to suffer in translation. Innumerable practitioners are flooding the market with workplaces featuring floor voids, open stairs, social hubs, and multiple diverse worksettings with only the most superficial understanding of the role of such elements in supporting contemporary work. In more recent times, the arrival of Veldhoen & Co in Australia with its reinvention of non-territorial working as *Activity Based Working* has profoundly impacted contemporary attitudes to workplace and “ABW” is now considered the default approach in Australia. But whilst Veldhoen promotes ABW as a cultural initiative, it has suffered the same fate. As a result, much of the opportunity to address the potential of aligning people, process and place is being lost through workplace is being lost.

There is not a day that goes by that I do not regret the passing of DEGW as I knew it...an extraordinary community of people and clients exploring innovation and change, inspired by the philosophies expounded by its founders. For me the value of that community was derived from the explorations that took place across diverse geographies and applications, with each new experience enriching those that followed. This is what I define as the “DEGW legacy”.

I believe that this legacy has the potential to be the antidote to the commoditisation of workplace that we now see. But how then, can that legacy manifest in a crowded marketplace with an “expert” on every street corner?

To my mind the initiative of the University of Reading in securing the DEGW Archive is an essential first step. It ensures that not only will DEGW and its work be preserved as an important academic reference, but it also provides a touchstone for future initiatives of what John Worthington describes as the DEGW Foundation.

I am not an academic, as you will have discerned from this narrative. I recognise the importance and value of the DEGW Archive but it is not something that I am likely to access. My interest, rather, is in the idea of John’s concept of the DEGW Foundation. For me, the Foundation has the potential to be the embodiment of the DEGW legacy going forward, translating *design for change* into contemporary applications by capturing, even sponsoring the experiences that were the core of the DEGW that I knew.

Now I have to say from the outset that *Foundation* is the wrong word. It suggests financial endowment that is unlikely. So let us continue to use it only as a working title.

I attended one of the last conference presentations that Franklin Becker made before his retirement. He talked about the difference between what he called *academic research* and *project-based research*. He acknowledged academic research as important and necessary to the evolution and extension of our knowledge but he also noted its shortcomings in actually solving problems, citing in particular the rigour, focus and time it typically requires. His theme was rather to extoll the virtue of project-based research, which he noted was focused not so much on extending a body of knowledge but rather on solving specific problems.

Now I know that I am on dangerous ground here, particularly given that this will be read within an academic environment, but my defence is that this proposition did come from an esteemed academic and my citation is that I heard it with my own ears and others around me did too.

To my mind, much of DEGW’s work was project-based research and the legacy of that work must be similarly founded. And therein lies a potential conundrum, in that the Archive and the Foundation are arguably different things. The University’s interest in the Archive is as a resource for academic research. But I believe that the potential for the Foundation lies in capturing and promoting project-based research.

SIX IDEAS

As with all things in universities, funding will be key to the ongoing management of the Archive. It should also be noted that the Archive is incomplete, extending only to 1997 when the work in Australia was just beginning and additional and ongoing resources will be required to complete it when Aecom agrees to allow this.

Similarly, the Foundation is unlikely to generate or capture project-based research without coordination and curation, which in turn will require either committed volunteers with time on their hands or funding for resources.

So whilst the Archive and the Foundation serve different purposes, they share a common need – a secretariat that can administer both.

There are a number of ways in which this could be achieved, and I believe my good friend Steve Smith will present some suggestions for this to the Symposium.

For my part, my interest lies with the Foundation and I for one would be happy to subscribe to its creation. Early initiatives required to enact this would include:

- establishment of both a charter and governance structure
- consent by the University to host the Foundation as well as the Archive, conditional on funding
- confirmation of the nature of the secretariat and resources required to sustain it
- definition of activities and services – events, library, research
- creation of an income-generation mechanism – membership, sponsorship, events
- promotion and recruitment, starting with DEGW alumni, former clients and collaborators.

The relationship of Aecom to the Foundation also requires consideration. To my mind the DEGW legacy resides primarily in individuals rather than corporate entities and the Foundation should similarly be structured. Hence whilst Aecom “owns” DEGW, the Foundation should be independent. But others may disagree.

I hope that there is interest in this proposal and look forward to discussing it further.

Chris Alcock, Sydney

PS. I would have liked to have attended the Symposium but given the distance I was not able to align other activities in the UK to justify the trip. More notice next time please!