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Comments on Disconsolate streets

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Kerry Byrnes of Humpty Doo, NT

Wed 07 Feb 07 at 11:37am

Nicolas Rothwell's article 'The Rape of Darwin' has huge resonance for me. As the co-owner of a nursery in Darwin I have long been appaled by the stupidity of governments of both parties who have steadily been cutting down more trees than in planting them. Our nursery, and others used to sell lots of trees to government for public landscaping. Not any more. The total lack of any landscaping to give the city more comfort and amenity from shady trees and enhancing a steadily depleted landscape is just plain stupid planning and an example of Government inaction. There has been more emphasis on being cringing propitiators to the developers and at any cost. The destruction of the character and soul of Darwin and the rapidity at which it is happening is obscene. The mission seems to be to lay more bloody concrete from one edge of a boundary to another and at the same time testing the limits of how high they might be able to erect ugly vertical bombproof vaults. And to hell with the landscape and the residents.

MEChalmers of Honiara

Wed 07 Feb 07 at 02:12pm

As a long term Darwinite (currently offshore) I read this article with a mix of parochial excitement (Darwin in the paper!) and sadness. I fear the rot set in a long long time ago. I'm just thankful I had the opportunity to live/ stay/ hang out in many of the old Darwin elevated's that survived the bombing and Tracey but are now long gone. Should have stacked the DCA with troppo architects. Thanks for the article.

David Carment of Mosman and Darwin

Wed 07 Feb 07 at 02:16pm

Nicolas Rothwell's excellent article is disturbing. I really wish that he was wrong as I expected the present Northern Territory government to be much more committed that it has been so far to the protection of Darwin's cultural heritage. Many of the significant places discussed in my 1996 book Looking at Darwin's Past, to which Rothwell refers, have disappeared since its publication and I am now pessimistic about the future of some of the others. New and stronger heritage legislation, first promised by Labor when it came to office, has still not been enacted. It is urgent that it is.

Matthew Coffey of Darwin

Wed 07 Feb 07 at 09:59pm

Dear Nicolas, as a born & bred Darwin boy reading your article I am amazed that

you could sum up the disaster of development so well and so eloquently. A paradise lost maybe, but I think with a bit of ingenuity in some spaces can still be used too create at least a metaphor of our past, as a long term Darwinite from family since 1942 we always live in hope.

Cheers Matt...

Margaret Clinch of Darwin

Thu 08 Feb 07 at 03:58am

8.2.2007

Nicolas Rothwell's wideranging and perceptive article on poor planning and architecture in Darwin will, I hope, be a wake-up call to those who should know better than to go ahead with development at all costs, and without consulting the community. The Commonwealth Government left us with a city that was green and tropical. Paul Everingham encouraged people to stay through home ownership. Marshall Perron foistered our green open spaces, Shane Stone saved what was left of the Esplanade Escarpment, and Tim Baldwin protected the Mindil Beach foreshore for the people.

The last five years have been particularly disastrous for development, with the persistent and insidious white-anting of the Planning Act and Planning Scheme. Potentates, mandarins, landlords and developers; and the imbalances of Development Consent Authority(DCA) decision making, can all share the blame. With Minister Burns' recent ripping away of the land use objectives, loss of local character, in areas such as established suburbs, civic precincts and public parklands, will accelerate further. In new suburbs standard lot sizes for tropical family living are reduced to 600 square metres, instead of 800 square metres. Darwin City Council last year came close to approving a motel on public golf course land.

From 2007 onwards, a vague 'Chief Minister's Vision' becomes the basis for in and near city planning. In new areas, developers are often issued with Specific Use scope statements, which can result in maximum residential turnoff, with minimum facilities provided. A new Capital City Charter, developed so far with no community input, will support CBD commerce with yet more unit residents.

The foreshore at Little Mindil is under contract for sale. Near Darwin catchments and waterways are still vulnerable. Now there are threats of new industrial development polluting Darwin Harbour. Darwin despairs over its heritage places, in spite of vocal bi-partisan support by parliamentarians. Public transport lacks planning, with a potential light rail corridor currently being lost to a developer. Greenhouse is uncodified, and even surge zones vague.

Nicolas Rothwell has commented that there is little public talk about planning. My own experience as Convener of PPlan: the Planning Action Network for almost ten years is different. The public is very concerned about poor planning for tropical living, too many tall buildings in the wrong places, protecting the environment, conserving parklands, foreshores, and harbour, having public facilities, and having efficient transport. They talk to PPlan about these all the time, and we have forums. The Government simply has not responded to recommendations.

Public petitions on planning, with thousands of signatures have been presented to the NT Parliament, usually to be ignored by government. Sadly we sometimes find public servants, and/or their spouses, saying they 'cannot sign' because of possible job ramifications. The public cannot take seriously commenting on the new planning documents, such as the current 'Vision', which, unlike earlier documents, lacks real structure or basis. Displays have not been manned by planners. People no longer believe the 'consultation' is genuine, and so do not waste their time. ABC Radio talkback opportunities seem sadly reduced since the ALP came to government. Recently, in responding to a call for comment on the 'Singapore' plan, I was told to restrict my comments to 'trees and vegetation'. The NT News has sometimes reported poorly on our organisation, never having really investigated its purpose with us. PPlan is an apolitical voluntary residents' group, seeking a better living environment. It works for balance in planning, leading to sustainable environmental, social, cultural, and economic outcomes.

Our organisation has had successes, although the welter of ongoing issues rarely gives us time to enjoy them. Nevertheless, generally directions are cumulatively very disappointing for the community.

PPlan is neither Left or Green, nor CLP or Australian Democrat. It was however surprised when the ALP, which had been supportive in Opposition of community planning issues, seemed when it gained power, to sideline the community totally, in favour of business. Even now the community is not treated as an equal stakeholder in planning.

PPlan's prime recommendation of government is that the community be consulted with and listened to in planning matters. The public will speak when the opportunity is given. New Planning Minister Delia Lawrie may provide that opportunity.

Margaret Clinch

Convener

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Bill Wilson of Darwin

Thu 08 Feb 07 at 11:23am

Nicolas Rothwell's excellent article draws attention to the fact there is no coherent plan for the development of Darwin, something that is urgently needed if any semblance of a tropical city is to exist in two years time. One impact not mentioned in the building site he describes, is the fact work goes on day and night, depriving those of us who live in the city of decent sleep.

Of more concern is the attention he draws to the urgent need for decent heritage protection legislation. Perhaps that might help to restore some balance between development and retention of significant reminders of the past.

Come on Darwin, let's repel the developers and find a real balance between

progress and our heritage so our city continues to be one we can love and enjoy and one in which we find reminders of our history

Ray Swann of Alawa, Darwin

Thu 08 Feb 07 at 01:26pm

Nicolas Rothwell appears to have fallen into that well worn trap of sniping at everything that is new. It is an easy ploy. Simply ride the ridges; make disparaging comments about a range of developments that have replaced the past and one stands a reasonable chance of getting 50% acceptance from the readership because it all plucks at their nostalgia strings.

I have lived in the fair city of Darwin now for 25 years and so I have been here long enough to see the almost utter hopelessness that pervades the community from planning decisions emanating from an administration located 4,000 kms away in Canberra. This compared to the post self government outcomes from a local administration where the politicians and the public sector actually had to live with the results of their decisions.

Darwin is indeed a much better place to live now than it has ever been in the past. We all warm to nostalgia. We are drawn to things old be they cars, buildings or just bric a brac. That is not a case for constructing the same architecture over and over again. It is also not a case for eschewing modern developments in design and utility. Mr Burnett's ideas about airflow, fans and louvres no doubt work well when one can build on an elevated site subject to some air movement. Darwin did not need developers to build high rise to block out sea breezes. The terrain is generally flat and most times louvres and fans are not enough especially when air-conditioning is a viable option.

Darwin is indeed a tourist centre. But it is not selling nostalgia to the tourists. It does not and cannot project an image of a sleepy coastal village in tropical Australia. Darwin is foremost a capital city. It is the seat of government. It is the place where local and international investors interact with the government to bring major nation building projects to reality. These projects are important. They will provide the where with all for the development of the Northern Territory and within that, the improvement of its social infrastructure. We are a community of 206,000 people. We cannot, at this stage of our development, afford the sort of thinking that produces the Rothwell article. Even as a mature community it is doubtful that we would want Darwin to stagnate, to be musty and to project "sweet decay".

The muses of Mr Rothwell's old-timer at the Railway Social Club are at best nonsensical. The Darwin that existed in 1942 did not survive the Japanese bombing. It had to be rebuilt by those dreadful developers. Again in 1974 Darwin did not survive cyclone Tracy. Tracy destroyed Darwin and again it was rebuilt. Darwin is not having its heart torn out. It is having it replaced in part. Darwin like any other city will continue to be rebuilt whether it be as a result of natural disaster, war or just plain old growth. And within that continuing process Mr Rothwell can be assured that we will continue to develop that unique character that is a Darwinite.

Neil Dibbs of Marlow Lagoon

Thu 08 Feb 07 at 05:45pm

Redolent of the Gold Coast? Or Southport? You are being too extravagantly sun-kissed and cheerful, Nicholas. In an article some time ago at another place, I likened Synergy (in particular) to East Berlin, circa 1976. A sinister place, indeed, is Synergy. Amazingly, people live there.

Jack Horgan of Larrakeyah NT

Thu 08 Feb 07 at 11:16pm

Thank you Nicolas, for demonstrating so clearly the degradation of our tropical capital - the "develop at all cost" mantra the current government is actively pursuing borders on the Gold Coast white-shoe brigade's idiocy and greed.

No, we can't live in the past and nor do we have to. But neither do we have to live in and look out at ever-higher apartment blocks that are about as tropical as the average Tasmanian dog kennel.

Stealthy changing of zoning from medium-low density to high density is the berley that attracts the developer sharks as they swallow the little fish, paying absurd amounts for beautiful old-style Darwin homes purely to knock them down and erect blocks of shabby flats. Why? Because they're allowed to.

Darwinian indeed - the survival of the fittest. And the worst....

Tom Cowen of Darwin

Fri 09 Feb 07 at 12:02pm

When I found out that I would be moving to Darwin from a hotter wetter third world climate three years ago I looked forward with excited expectation of living in a first world city on the edge of the Australian continent that would beam towards Asia like a lighthouse of modern energy efficient sustainable architecture suited to the tropics. How miserably dissappointed I was! Instead we see architecture that walls and glasses out the tropics so that even in the best parts of the year high energy consumption to maintain the building's climate is required. This comes from a narrow vision of economic progress that sees growth in bricks and mortar as a good thing without ensuring overriding considerations of sustainability for the built environment are included in the building design. Well with global warming, climate change and increasing costs of energy the ongling costs will be considerable. Intelligent design? We wish.

The buildings we see now going up in Darwin could be anywhere in the world and I really wish they were anywhere else but here. You know there are buildings in Zimbabwe that have been designed on the same principles that large termite mounds utilise to keep the internal environment very pleasant with an absolute minimal input of external energy. Zimbabwe is a third world country. And here we are in one of the richest countries on the planet and we cannot get basic principles of design like this incorporated into our buildings. It is just shameful.

Liam Maher of Ludmilla

Fri 09 Feb 07 at 12:34pm

Well done Nicolas, but don't be too concerned the Martin Government are holding a conference on the future development of Darwin in the coming months. It could well be perceived as sarcastic to say it is too little too late. Without doubt it will make everybody feel warm and fuzzy, it evidently won't turn back the tide though will it.

Where may I ask was this sincere concern for public opinion when the decision to proceed with the preferred tenderer for the wharf development? Why wasn't the Darwin public provided with the opportunity to view the scale models all the consortiums had produced? Was Clare concerned that the public would have preferred a tropical development instead of the Gold Coast development underway? Clare you should consider providing Paul Tyrell with a one way train ticket out as an immediate good ye present. A bus ticket would perhaps be more appropriate. Nicolas, those aliens may very well have Clare at a Gold Coast location. Do you think they'll release her before the next election? I hope Clare realises that the Tiger Airways CEO won't be visiting the ballot boxes when they next demand our attention, ex-true believers will be though.

Concerned Interloper of Darwin

Mon 12 Feb 07 at 09:03pm

Nicholas

Thank you for this piece. As a "newcomer" to Darwin (six years) who feels I can not comment with any verity or integrity on what I have seen pass, I feel that Darwin Town has disappeared before my eyes in such a short time.

Your comments regarding DCM, Tyrrel, the Defence of Darwin Museum proposal and other matters reflect my concerns, which I know have fallen on deaf ears.

I will be castigated for suggesting such, but I strongly suggest to you, you discuss your concerns with the people that matter, that seem to be outside your radar and the Clare Martin Government's decision making process, such as the Director, Museum and Art Gallery of the NT and the EX-Chair, Heritage Advisory Council. These are the attempts of a left-wing intellegentsia, who wants to ensure the balance of heritage and historical discource are recognised and engaged with, regardless of the outcome.

Anonymous supporter of Old Darwin Town and its heritage

Lyle Hebb of Darwin

Mon 12 Feb 07 at 09:04pm

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Anonymous supporter of Old Darwin Town and its heritage

Phil Harris of Troppo Architects, Adelaide

Wed 14 Feb 07 at 08:51am

Onyer Nic. After WWGeorge or the next Tracy, maybe we'll get another chance.

Serah McMahon of spearwood W.A.

Tue 20 Feb 07 at 10:51am

It has been 25 years since I visited Darwin, staying with my brother in an interesting dwelling, shuttered, shaded by those scented, top end trees, and fanned by wobbly ceiling fans. I, being substantially pregnant at the time, found an excursion through the Darwin streets to be a delight. The unshy Darwinians would give me and my billowing cheesecloth every kind attention and through the folk I met most casually I experienced some exciting adventures. There seemed to be a rascally genuineness. Prim and proper did not exist. Even the Dr I visited for pre natal checkups whisked through that business to get on to the real stuff , where to see what and how to get there and what to take and what to watch out for and ...see these rock samples ? etc etc...

In reading Nicolas Rothwell's article, I remembered that "musty sweetness" the heavy air and the romance that surrounded me and my budding child. The loveliness of the town at the time. If an environment is tamed and tidied, straightened, concreted and confined... what does it do to its population?

Confused of Winnellie

Fri 02 Mar 07 at 09:21am

Whilst I accept that the "Old Darwin" was a great place and that some of the recent high rises are an eyesore - (drive up Bishop Street and have a look at the latest blue and white monster) - there are a number of other issues seperate from high rises effecting our fair city;

1. Visitors to the City enter through the "car yard graveyard" that is Cavenagh Street - a most unwelcome sight and one that must raise questions in Tourists minds - hardly a tropical streetscape.
2. Those tourists who pay big dollars for a trip of a lifetime on the Ghan are dumped unceremoniously in a barren industrial estate and must wonder whether they are in a Capital City or a third world country.

3. Those people who are being enticed to buy multi million dollar units in the new waterfront development run the risk of being covered in paint and grit from the nearby shipyards on a windy day as they sit on their balconies. This heavy industrial area has to go - it's an eyesore and an environmental time bomb.

4. We are pushing more and more people out to Palmerston and beyond yet no-one had the foresight to make Tiger Brennan a dual lane road - imagine the traffic when 50,000 people live in Palmerston!!!

High rises - yes there's too many but are they the biggest issue affecting Darwin????

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Story Tools