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BOTTOM UP, TOP TO BOTTOM. ABOUT THIRD PLACES ON THE OTHER SIDE

Case study

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Abstract

The topic of accessibility to public spaces is becoming an increasingly important element of discussion on the quality of the urban environment. The pandemic, as a significant century-scale event, has particularly strongly marked the need to improve socially shared places, also belonging to the category of public spaces or third places. In various parts of the world, attempts are made to diagnose local problems and to search for possible remedial solutions. Also in one of the remote cities of Land Down Under, in Sydney, a debate has arisen over the quality of the urban environment. The open Public Space Ideas Competition announced in May 2020 has become a platform for exchanging concepts, directing future activities, but above all, a manifestation of the residents' needs. The research and surveys launched right after the first weeks of pandemic lockdowns allowed to define the most visible problems and some sources of growing frustration. However, making changes and adjustments in the urban scale requires time and considerable expenditure. The urban context is also an area marked by the potential for conflict situations. It must meet contrasting needs. On the one hand, it allows contact with nature, and on the other, provides access to the amenities of city life. It should guarantee a safe stay in the open space, while supporting activity in a closed architectural environment. Under the desired conditions, it gives the opportunity to easily isolate yourself from the world, and at the same time does not block contact with other people. The search for balance in these opposing states is a never-ending process of shaping and modifying urban morphologies.

Keywords

public space, contest, pandemic, design, Sydney

Bottom up

2020 was certainly a different year. The way we had lived until recently and the standards we got used to have been challenged. Our physical absence has evolved into a virtual presence, being dressed does not exclude being naked at the same time, loneliness coexists with intimacy, and the state of isolation mixes with the state of being in constant communication.

In moments marked by extreme emotions, it is sometimes difficult to make an objective comment without subjective reflections. The world has done a headstand. For me, has made an uncontrolled rotation by 180 degrees, both in the metaphoric and in the literal layers. I write this text in doubly perverse circumstances. It is day, and yet it is night, December is drawing nigh but there is almost summer around.

A few months spent on the other side of the globe, in Australia, allowed me to look at the topic of urban shared spaces from a completely different perspective. Any vague notions about this continent, nurtured over years, are slowly replaced by the hyper-realistic experience in the full spectrum of all senses. Often, the confrontation of the known with the unknown becomes not only a source of cognitive dissonance but also a starting point to a reflection on the condition of the immediate environment. A contact with another culture and other strategy of creating a city provokes an involuntary and difficult to manage need to compare places: those from which one came from and those newly discovered.

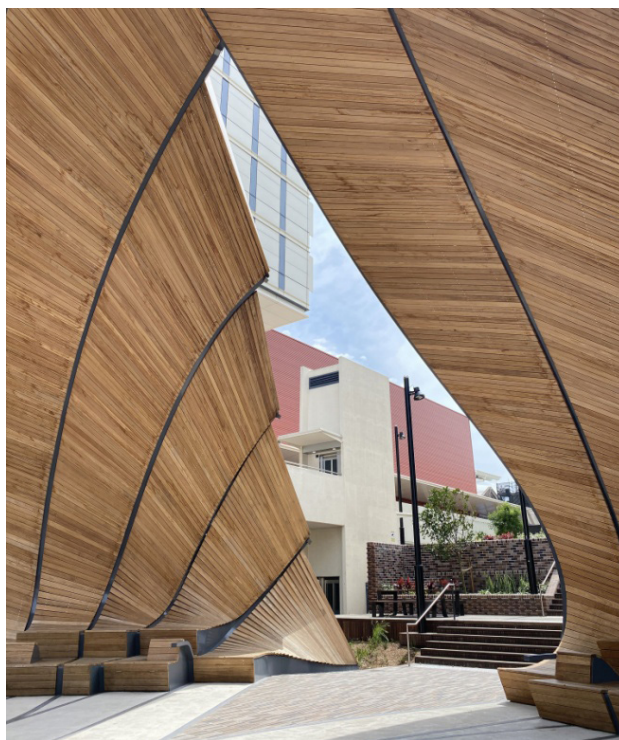


Figure 1. The Interchange Pavilion in Sydney, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

The third place as a zone zero

Public space is the subject of research in at least a few scientific fields: urban planning, architecture, sociology, environmental psychology, political science and geography. Access to, and quality of, public spaces has ceased to be merely the domain of professionals and researchers. This subject has recently engaged attention of people who, so far, had nothing to do with it.

The forced isolation in enclosed spaces has drawn our attention to what is temporarily lost. Contact with nature, sun, wind and vegetation has become a primary need. Public space has dematerialized and moved into the virtual world. Being able to interact with other people and participate in social interactions are no longer a guaranteed right of everyday life. The restrictions imposed on individual freedom and collective expression, with which public space was equated, have contributed to the collapse of socio-economic sentiments. Deprived of choice and access to places that had the power of mental regeneration, we have lost the point of reference. Restrictions on movement have condemned us to the use of only local resources and, thus, confronted us directly with the real quality of residential areas. The shortage of public spaces has manifested itself in the lack of green spaces and local commercial and service areas, with too much exposure to noise and traffic. The long-standing problem of treating common space as a no man's space, that is, a space threatened by hostile takeover, has become apparent. The new situation provoked appeals against the age-old dispute over public benches in residential estates. Who will take control of this public space: residents or hooligans, families with children or connoisseurs of alcoholic beverages? However, no one could have predicted that in this war, which we are fighting, another colonizer – the virus – would be the winner.

What is public space? As Dorota Mantey defines, morphologically, public space takes the form of a real place, socially it is an area of interaction and social relations, and functionally it is a way to distribute traffic, an area of activity, recreation, celebration, culture, trade and services.¹

Public space thus co-creates a physical area and a social zone, which is manifested by the context of its shared use and its importance. According to Jan Gehl, especially these zones between architectural objects have the power to build or destroy human bonds, and thus to influence the condition of both individuals and entire communities.²

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg used in his book, *"The Great Good Place"*, the term "third place"³ to describe the environment that separates two other basic places: first home and, second, work. The third place is a public space attended informally and voluntarily by groups of individuals. Through

1 Dorota Mantey, *Wzorzec miejskiej przestrzeni publicznej w konfrontacji z podmiejską rzeczywistością*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2019.

2 Jan Gehl, *Życie między budynkami. Użytkowanie przestrzeni publicznych*, tłum. M.A. Urbańska, Wydawnictwo RAM, 2009.

3 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, Paragon House, New York 1989.

its neutrality, the space creates situations where people can come and go at any time, feeling at ease. The presence here is usually unplanned and the length of stay is not specified. “Paradoxically, it’s the disorganization and the freedom that attract people”.⁴

Public space is an area for everyone. It remains open and accessible at any time or at fixed times. It can be located in an open space or inside a building. It is seen as a shared resource collectively used as a place for people to gather, spend time and interact freely. The rules of use are governed only by cultural patterns and by codes of social behavior.



Figure 2. The Chippendale Green in Sydney, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

A common reference for public spaces is the “scene” populated by “actors”, i.e. members of local and external communities, between whom a complex “game” of interaction is played.

As a result of the pandemic, this continuously played performance was suddenly cancelled. A blast rushed down the stage, and the actors abandoned the game venue. Public space has become one of the epicenters of threat transmission, a zone zero of pandemic earthquakes. The consequences of this unprecedented event are being discussed in almost every aspect: social, economic and financial. What will the new reality look like in a few years? Will the old concept of public spaces that we knew before 2020 return and, if so, when? We are entering completely unknown territories here, where there

4 Jarosław Jędrych, *Ray Oldenburg i jego teoria trzeciego miejsca*, „Warsztaty Bibliotekarskie”, <http://warsztatybibliotekarskie.pedagogiczna.edu.pl/nr-12015-45/ray-oldenburg-i-jego-teoria-trzeciego-miejsca/> [accessed on 5.11.2020].

are still more questions than answers. Certainly, every new situation, every trauma, like a significant change in the lifestyle, is conducive to reflection. It becomes an opportunity to redefine the familiar vision of reality and forces us to look anew at what works, disappears or what is missing.

Skyscrapers and St. Mary's Church

In this article, my attention selectively focuses on open spaces and on selected aspects of their planning, design and use on the example of the City of Sydney. A single short text cannot present comprehensively the multitude of spatial, historical, social and design contexts. This is why I am going to make a subjective selection of topics that can be an interesting thread on the way to getting to know and explore this Australian city. I allow myself to travel freely through selected spaces without offering any extensive or emphatic conclusions. These can emerge in time, as the image of the reality, as I saw it, matures and my impressions and ideas consolidate. Discovery is a process; an experiment with often unpredictable consequences.

When we take our first steps on an unknown land, naturally there is a need to compare everything we know with what is new. The original assumption about the possibility of juxtaposing differences and similarities of the two distant cities, Sydney and Kraków, turned out to be unfounded. Constructive conclusions cannot be expected when comparing public space standards for places so different in all respects.

Kraków and Sydney are two unparallel worlds where different climatic conditions determine the different lifestyles of the inhabitants. In Sydney, life is lived largely outdoors and the architectural environment blends seamlessly with its natural surroundings. Less predictable weather conditions in Kraków limit outdoor activity and encourage you to stay in more isolated areas and inside buildings.

It is impossible to find common references to the scale of the city, the available budget or the historical context. Australia is a young country. When the separation of the Academy of Fine Arts as an independent university was considered in Kraków, the first architectural objects began to be erected in Australia. The urban space of Sydney is not corseted by its historic buildings. The orientation on economic development forced the transformation of the heart of the city into a business center with the dominance of multi-story office and commercial buildings. However, like any city in the world, Sydney is also looking for its historical roots and trying to build its identity around them. In the 1970s, thanks to activists of the Green Bans groups, it was possible to save and preserve the first historical district, the Rocks, in its almost original state. Within 100 years, this neighborhood changed from the most neglected and criminal to the most sought for one. Over the initial 20 years of colonization there was a lack of specialized designers and builders. The first residents of Australia, including politicians, businessmen and designers, were convicts. This was also the case with the pioneer of the Australian

architecture, Francis Greenway. Convicted in England for falsification of documents, he became the first government's architect⁵ before his sentence ended and until 1993 his image appeared on Australia's first \$10 banknote.

The cultural and historical identity of Kraków has been formed by more than 1,000 years of constant change, the heritage of which are the present city and its unique urban morphologies. In 2005, the Kraków Market Square won the first place in the global ranking of the best urban markets and squares, published by the Project for Public Space based in the USA.⁶



Figure 3. The Paddington Reservoir Park in Sydney, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

Sydney is a city worthy of every designer's attention due to its pioneering solutions, the scale of assumptions, the organization of coastal areas and urban scenes, where social life takes place. Although the conditions are completely different from those in Poland, there are examples here that can inspire native initiatives. Public libraries and reading rooms, as well as the city's design toilets, certainly deserve attention. Interesting are examples of modern art woven into the architectural matter of the city. However, the main characters of public spaces deserve a special mention: parks and trails for recreation and contemplation of nature.

The modern Sydney boasts some of the most beautiful park facilities in the world. Noticeable attention to spaces takes the form of an almost obsession with greenery. Huge pots appear wherever you need to overcome the dominance of stone or concrete. Thanks to warm winters, subtropical moisture and full sun, the concept of urban jungle finds ideal conditions for implementation here. Parks are the

5 NSW State Library, *Francis Greenway: convict architect*, <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/francis-greenway-convict-architect> [accessed on 6.11.2020].

6 Project for Public Spaces, *The World's Best Squares (2005)*, <https://www.pps.org/article/internationalsquares> [accessed on 3.11.2020].

background for any public and private celebration. The lawn is treated not only as a visual complement to the landscape but also as a fully functional utility element of public spaces.

However, the picturesqueness of Sydney is determined above all by its natural conditions. The Parramatta River Delta and the bay divide the city into the northern and southern parts. An integral area of Sydney are the waterfront, rocky cliffs and beaches. Water seems to be the main ingredient of public spaces. All major objects and symbols of the city are located in the vicinity of the bay. The open water space, although urbanistically empty, is a living and changing scene of social life. Its presence and calm energy sooth and balance urban madness.



Figure 4. The Long Reef Headland urban promenade in Sydney, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

The city is constantly expanding to the west. The gradient of all qualitative changes in the development runs on the east-west axis, from exclusive oceanfront villas to more economical inland venues, from spectacular park facilities in the center and at the bay to concrete islands on the outskirts of the city. The area of Sydney is 35 times larger than that of Kraków but the average population density is five times smaller. Residential areas are dominated by single- and two-story single-family buildings, not by multi-story apartment buildings. As a result, the distance between houses and commercial facilities, public transport centers and parks makes the car an almost indispensable part of life.

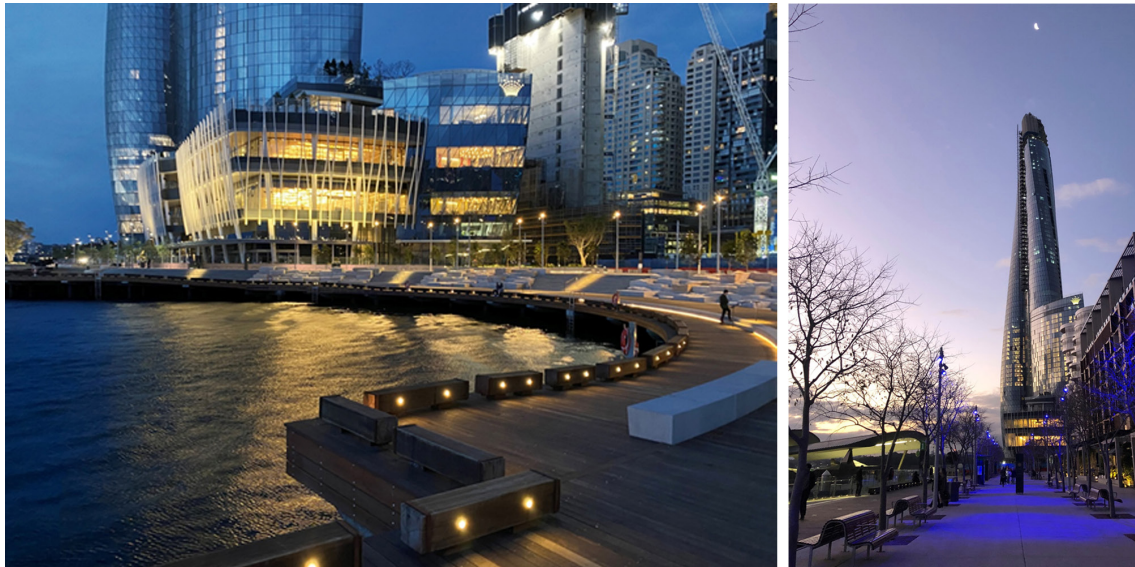


Figure 5. Barangaroo – the contact between the city center and the bay, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

Figure 6. Barangaroo – the promenade in the center of Sydney, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

Sydney is undergoing constant transformation. It is not free from classic urban conflicts. Urban development is associated with an uncontrolled increase in the number of cars adding to the chemical and noise pollution. In Sydney, cultural differences in the way cars or motorcycles are used are particularly clear. For some groups, they remain means of transport, for others they are a way of building a social hierarchy and a method of aggressively seizing shared spaces by dominating the acoustic conditions of the environment. Unequal access to green spaces, private-public conflicts, over-commercialization of public spaces are just some of the problems common to almost every agglomeration in the world.



Figure 7. The Woolwich overlook in Sydney, photo Magdalena Jurkowska.

Public space from scratch

In 2007, the City of Sydney commissioned the Gehl Design Office to develop an urban strategy to transform the city center's business district. Research, analysis and surveys have transformed the center into a more human-friendly space. One of the main streets, acting as the axis of the center, was completely excluded from car traffic. Noisy vehicles have been replaced by modern streetcars, which created space for pedestrians and for commerce including restaurants.

The new Sydney Public Space Charter, which has been in development in recent months, supports the city's initiative to improve accessibility of green spaces. The number of homes with access to a park within a 10-minute walk is assumed to grow by 10% until 2023. In 2019, a project to increase the city's tree stand was also announced, considering its positive impact on the well-being of residents, as well as the possibility of regulating temperature in the built-up area.

In May 2020, just after the first weeks of the shock resulting from the new and hitherto unknown pandemic situation, the government launched the "Streets as Shared Space" project. A series of surveys were conducted to better understand how residents use local streets during the pandemic and imposed restrictions. One of them took the form of an interactive online map for marking favorite places and areas requiring repair, as well as for suggesting improvements. The study was intended to test how new physical distancing requirements affected the use of shared spaces. They also aimed to understand the vision of residents about how the transformation of local streets can contribute to the economic potential of the neighborhoods.

The use of public space has changed markedly under the restrictions. In the first weeks of the pandemic, 85% of those surveyed admitted to using local, intra-neighborhood, parks and streets more frequently. Almost 50% of those questioned spent more time in open public spaces. 91% used these spaces for sports, probably as a result of restrictions allowing physical activity as the only form of staying in urban parks. The observation showed that the pandemic increased the demand for public spaces and caused residents to appreciate the value and quality of shared green urban areas. The most popular ones were parks.

It was considered necessary to improve safety in road traffic zones and to expand the network of bicycle paths. In order to provide better protection against the transmission of the CoViD-19, more open-air services have been planned.

The temporary or permanent closure of certain streets and lanes was one of the quickest implemented ideas. This made it possible to increase outdoor food serving areas and popularize activities in the open air.

The latest detailed report from the New South Wales Department of Planning, Industry and Environment on how public spaces are used during the pandemic was published as early as in November 2020.⁷ Local streets, quality of sidewalks and bicycle paths, the proximity of green areas and walking paths were also considered crucial.

A public consultation was also launched at the beginning of November 2020 on plans to convert parts of inner-city golf courses into public green spaces. Golf ranks among the most widely practiced sports in Australia. When the area for the Moore Park golf course was staked out in 1913, the area was mostly industrial. Currently, the field is adjacent to the revitalized housing estate with the densest housing development in the country. As the population grew, local councils began to wonder how to meet the needs of the community. As the originators point out, the re-configuring of the Moore Park golf course and halving its area in favor of a park would provide residents with better access to open spaces.⁸

7 NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, *Public Spaces. Streets as Shared Spaces. Engagement Report*, https://www.dpie.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/329903/Public-Spaces-Streets-as-Shared-Spaces-Engagement-Report.pdf [accessed on 6.11.2020].

8 City of Sydney, *Creating more public parkland by reconfiguring Moore Park Golf Course*, <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/vision-setting/creating-more-public-parkland-reconfiguring-moore-park-golf-course> [accessed on 11.11.2020].

An idea for a contest and a contest for an idea

One of the elements of the City of Sydney's development program was the Public Space Ideas Competition which was announced in May 2020. As the host of the event explains, this is an opportunity to re-imagine the urban zone, to get inspired and to raise awareness about shared spaces. The competition, through its open formula, encouraged the participation of not only designers. Ideas could be more or less realistic, local or universal and their presentation method could be unfettered by the professional language of design. The results were announced in early November 2020. Works could be submitted in five different categories: Public Facility Idea, Open Space Idea, Street and/or Plaza Idea, Temporary and/or Low-Cost Public Space Idea and Resilient Public Space Idea.



Figure 8. Contestant's work: *The Modern Carpark*, <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-winners/> [accessed on 5.11.2020]



Figure 9. Contestant's work: *Urban micro-meadows*, <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-winners/> [accessed on 5.11.2020]

The award-winning work in the first category proposed to rethink how differently existing urban infrastructure could be perceived and used. As the authors of the project wrote, there is a lack of a general concept for the existing and ageing urban and suburban car parks (Park and Ride), which gradually cease to fit into the local zoning plan. A modern car park should be considered not only as a connecting point on the route but as a potential place for social activation thanks to additional facilities such as a bike rental, automated parcel machine or an art gallery. The city's car park could also be converted into vertical gardens full of vegetation, which is now seen as the most important element of public space.

One of the works in the category of solutions for open spaces, on the example of one of the neighborhoods in the western part of the city, suggests transforming unused areas into urban micro-meadows. The concept of urban meadows has been recognized in various global agglomerations for many years. Their popularity is driven by low maintenance costs, beneficial environmental impact and the possibility of promoting native fauna and flora.



Figure 10. Contestant's work: *Sydney Quay*, <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-winners/> [accessed on 5.11.2020]



Figure 11. Contestant's work: *My Street is a Park*; <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-winners/> [accessed on 5.11.2020]

Another rewarded work in this category proposes to transform the largest transport hub, the Circular Quay, into an oasis where greenery again becomes the main feature and complements the communication functions of the waterfront, railway, streetcar and ferry.

The best design in the category of streets and squares presents an idea of adapting and modifying neighborhood streets to combine their communication function with space for recreation and play. A number of solutions to increase the tree stand, contain the traffic and limit the vehicle speed would enable creation of public spaces and micro-parks in the immediate vicinity of houses and apartments.



Figure 12. Contestant's work: *30 kph limit for non arterial roads*, <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-winners/> [accessed on 5.11.2020]



Figure 13. Contestant's work: *Unlocking South Sydney's Newest Blue-Green Grid*, <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-winners/> [accessed on 5.11.2020]

One work in the category of low-budget solutions also proposes changes in traffic, explicitly suggesting the need to limit the speed in residential areas to 30 km/h. The idea seems to be a standard

solution, present in any large or small city. The choice of the solution probably allowed the general public to pay attention to the consequences of noise and exhaust pollution and to confirm the city's plans to prioritize pedestrian traffic and public transport.

The last of the works refers to the concept of green-blue infrastructure, that is all activities related to water management and to forms of greenery. It proposes extending the existing infrastructure to include the Botany Bay, the Georges River and the adjacent areas of both unused and used greenery in the south of the city. It points to the potential of the area, which, thanks to the network of walking and cycling paths, can be combined into a long and morphologically varied urban walking and recreational route. A significant part of the land directly adjacent to the water belongs to private owners. The implementation of the idea would probably involve a conflictive process of redefining private and public properties throughout the area.

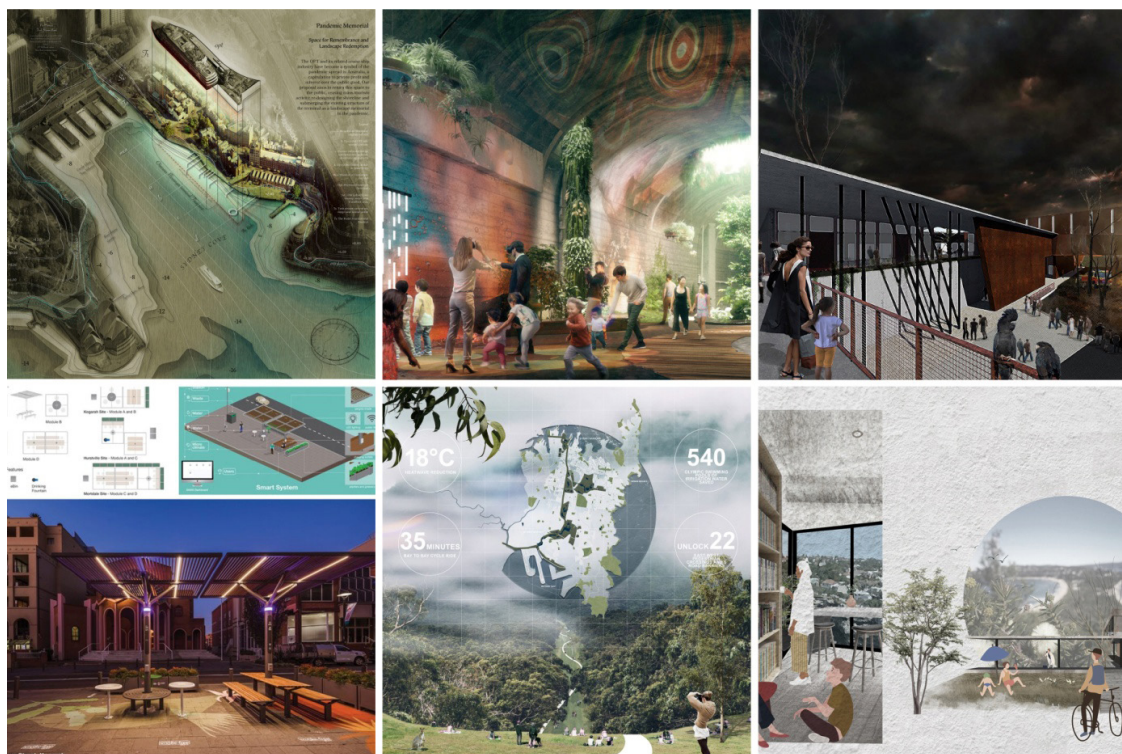


Figure 14. Selection of contestants' works: Upper row from left: *Pandemic Memorial* - David Cadena and Antoine Portier on behalf of Sadd; *Light At The End Of The Tunnel* - Collette Skinner, Amy Clark, Michael Richards, Robert Reid, Susanna Tomassen, Kate Tuff, Tiffany Supatra, Emily Cassar, Jason Pereira, Nazmul Khan, Nicholas Lucchese, Aiden Morse, David Garcia, Laurence Hardy, Sam Shepherd; *Lines of Fire* - Rachel Moody. Lower row from left: *ChillOUT Hubs: Smart Open-Air Community Spaces* - Street Furniture Australia; *OUR FOREST OF RESILIENCE* - McGregor Coxall; *Seaview* - Yixuan Zhang
<https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-entries/> [accessed on 5.11.2020].

All the submitted contest entries, descriptions and graphic materials can be viewed on the official website of the Public Space Idea Competition: <https://sydney.org.au/psic/view-entries/>.

The winning designs mostly offered concepts that could be implemented and embedded strictly in the context of the City of Sydney. The highest-rated works were not futuristic visions of the city and had little to do with ambitious concepts of architects and urban planners. They referred, in a way, to proven and existing ideas and to a set of good practices accepted in the world. Perhaps the key to the selection of works was their degree of reference to the current plans and efforts of the city itself. Certainly, the formula of the event as an open competition influenced the final selection of the winning works. This has enabled all members of the local community to be included in the debate on the quality of public spaces. Regardless of the background in the design work, everyone could speak on the most important issues, i.e. on how to build and improve the immediate environment.

Perhaps the results of the competition suggest the direction of the future transformation of the city. They point to the common good as a buffer for the development of local communities. They point to the potential of neglected or forgotten spaces. Their more informed management can provide better access to physically larger public spaces, so much desirable in the time of the forced distancing.



Figure 15. A sign encountered in Sydney

With a healthy distance

This year one sign (illustrated above) prevailed in the landscapes of parks, offices, stores and public transit stations of Sydney. The concept of social distance has taken on a new meaning. It is not only the distance between people staying in formal relationships but a measure of physical security. Perhaps the descriptions of the spatial behavior of man from “*The Hidden Dimension*” by Edward Hall⁹ have lost their relevance. The naturally maintained distances analyzed by the author have ceased to be due only to the social situation. Another factor appeared, both biological and psychological: the virus and, equally infectious, the fear of it. The both change the way we perceive and create architectural spaces and force us to redefine our sense of comfort in public spaces.

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