

# LIVING IN THE NORTH

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## LIVING IN THE NORTH

In this seminar our sponsors have defined north Australia as that large area of land to the north of the Tropic of Capricorn; that is, something like half of the whole country.

The main thrust of my talk this afternoon deals with settlement problems in this region, which is uncomfortably hot for the best part of the year. Here 30°C temperatures are exceeded on more than twenty-five days in a year.

If we use this criterion, which incidentally is also used by architects and air-conditioning engineers, then nearly three-quarters of the country is hot and uncomfortable, both on its humid coastal strip and in the dry inland desert.

So, as far as I am concerned, I don't mind if the north Australia Council decides to bend the Tropic of Capricorn southward to add bits of southern states as well.

Not many years ago, tourists could buy souvenir maps of Australia which showed exaggerated boundaries of the states they happened to be in. No doubt these were done for a few laughs and perhaps reflected our sense of isolation at a time when we were not as mobile as we are now.

But here at least we have a scientific basis for our claim.

My talk this afternoon is mainly about people. It is the people who are the main resource of a developing region such as north Australia. Also, it is the people who are ultimately meant to benefit from whatever we do. Thus one of our main tasks is to develop this region in a way which will attract large numbers of people to come here to live and work.

For years most Australians have shied away from the north of Australia. They have preferred to live on the south-eastern coastal fringe of this continent where the climate is cooler and where the rainfall is reliable. This settlement pattern has also been influenced by the location of our harbours, the exit points for our primary products.

The gold discoveries of the 1850s boosted our population. This growth, in turn, extended the development of export of agriculture. Our urban services became concentrated around the town life of the maritime capitals.

As for north Australia, it has largely stayed empty. There have been very few jobs available there, unpleasant climate, and difficulties generated by long distances to travel and a sense of isolation.

So for many years the region saw very little growth, except for a few single-industry towns (mainly mining) and small commercial and administrative settlements whose livelihood depended upon the other activities around them. We all owe a great debt to the first pioneers who bravely established a frontier-type economy in which fortunes fluctuated and where progress was irregular. During those early days most Australians had some strange prejudices about hot climates.

Browsing through some old papers the other day, I came across a 1925 publication of the Commonwealth Health Department. The writer was then an up and coming medico named Raphael Cilento who is not unknown to most of you here.

Sir Raphael, who always had a good turn of phrase wrote then - and I quote:

*To the great majority the word 'tropical' conjures up visions of sweltering mangrove flats, the haunts of the crocodile; of rank and steaming forests that exhale the musky odour of decaying vegetation and conceal within their leafy depths 'miasmatic' swamps; of deadly snakes and of the sulking savage with his poisoned spear.*

I believe Raphael Cilento, Grenfell Price and others did much to dispel the notion that people of European origin were simply incapable of surviving the harsh environment of the tropics. Many third and fourth generation north Australians will tell you that they were right.

Our pastoral communities had no major early problems in adjusting to the tropics. The difficulties only started to crop up during the late 1950s and 60s when mining development took off in a big way in this region. This industry is largely mechanized today and is essentially

capital- rather than labour-intensive. But there has been a great demand for highly skilled workers who must be enticed away from the big smoke to come to remote localities. This situation has posed a great challenge to mining companies. They must provide first class living conditions in new towns where workers can bring their families with them, and establish some measure of stability.

So, during the 1960s, we saw some very good and innovative plans for new towns, and designs for houses specially air-conditioned as an additional bait to attract people. Some earlier buildings were lightweight and prefabricated. Designers took their cue from our timber and tin tradition which had some merit but also many disadvantages.

Timber and tin buildings were light and could be carted off easily to remote sites. They could be quickly assembled and moved around again, if necessary. They were a perfect answer to the needs of the early mining settlements which were pretty temporary and didn't encourage people to put down permanent roots there. These simple buildings grew out of a standard miner's tent which led to first a single, and then a two-roomed, cottage. By the 1900s, Australians had learnt to build large mansions with four to six rooms back to back lined by a corridor and surrounded by a generous verandah all around.

I believe these lightweight structures are an important part of our north Australian heritage. This tradition has started to inspire a number of talented young architects to use our traditional timber and tin buildings vigorously. They have proved effective in our warm and humid coastal climates. Their generous roof sits there like a digger's hat and their wide verandahs provide shelter from the sun but allow cool breezes to blow across unhindered.

Unfortunately, these houses are not so effective in hot dry inland climates. There the sun is very hot and winds are hot, dusty and dry. Also our early towns in inland north Australia were far too spread out. Today rows upon rows of small uninsulated houses virtually sit in a dust bowl on plots of land which are far too big. Main roads were wide, and usually unsealed; they became a constant source of the dust and sand which plague our desert communities in the outback.

So there was little we could learn from these old towns. Recently, a



number of talented architects have looked to middle eastern and north African towns for inspiration. They have a similar climate to our own.

But, in a world where labour is cheap, builders prefer mud houses with thick walls which keep cool for the best part of the hot days in summer, and yet are sungly warm during cold winter nights. Buildings are piled together in a compact mass, not unlike the local cacti where cells are close to each other. The buildings thus not only insulate each other but also reduce the total exposure of surface area of the town to the sun. In Australia, perhaps the best example of this compact planning can be seen at Shay Gap. Here buildings not only shade one another, but also minimise the cost of services.

All the houses are air-conditioned at Shay Gap. And the community facilities, such as shops, cafes, clubs and schools are close at hand. In spite of all these luxurious facilities, people don't seem to be very happy living there. Their main complaint is that they resent having to live under each other's skin - as it were.

Housewives would prefer to drive or walk their kids to the local school, as this would give them something to do. In fact, they would do anything to break the monotony of being cooped up all day in an air-conditioned box. People also associate lightweight prefabricated buildings with temporariness and never really feel secure enough to identify with their town.

In my own opinion, the mining town of Nhulunbuy offers a much better solution, both in planning as well as in management. This town looks and feels permanent. Its buildings are solid and have been designed to last at least fifty years, in line with the area's mineral potential. If we assume the future growth of other industries, this town could easily have an indefinite life span.

Our economists and political gurus tell us that, in the foreseeable future, our mining industry in Australia is not likely to grow as spectacularly as it has done during the last couple of decades. They may be right. One industry which has a great potential for expansion is tourism. But before I discuss this, I would like to offer a brief comment on our multiracial communities.

North Australia has a number of settlements which offer unique examples of racial diversity which gives them an exotic flavour not found elsewhere in Australia. Thursday Island is a fascinating mixture of Japanese, Australians, Aborigines, Papuans and other nationalities, descendants of sailors who happened to pass through the place over the years. Broome, a pearling town, has a similar mix and a miniature Chinatown as well.

Then there are towns, such as Darwin and Cairns, where in the pubs, shops, the schools and the streets, faces of Asia and Europe make up the local communities. All these settlements offer us a glimpse of things to come and they clearly remind us how close we are to Asia and the Pacific Islands. They are also good examples of settlements which, like Hawaii, for instance, exhibit the racial harmony and the absence of conflict which fails to make headlines in our newspapers. I believe these settlements are a pointer to our long term future in what could and perhaps should happen in this part of the world.

However, a problem which does hit the media fairly frequently is the troubled relationship between our Aboriginal communities and people of European origin. The most dramatic example of this conflict can perhaps be found in the area of mining activities, particularly those which happen to be close to Aboriginal reserves.

Mining settlements, particularly in their initial stages, largely attract a skilled European workforce where there are more men than women. So the risk of prostitution and other socially undesirable short and long term activities and consequences is pretty high. A good way to avoid this particular problem is not to site the new towns too close to the reserves and sacred areas where Aboriginal people gather and to let the miners commute to the mine sites from the existing towns. The idea is not new. In fact, it has been successfully tried in north-western Ontario in Canada. In a recent paper Newton and Brealy of CSIRO's Remote Communities Unit have made a forceful case for doing something very similar in Australia. They have suggested that in some of the older established mining centres, miners already travel long distances to work because mines in their own districts have closed down. There are examples of commuters who travel from Cessnock, Maitland and Kurri Kurri to Newcastle in New South Wales and from

Kalgoorlie to Kambalda in Western Australia.

Small isolated mining towns have many drawbacks. There are limited shopping facilities; the company breathes down your neck all the time; there are few avenues for entertainment and social contacts are limited because everyone works for the same boss. Educational and health facilities are generally poor and there are few jobs for school leavers and for women.

In an established town, infrastructure is already there. Larger populations have greater educational, health and shopping facilities. There is a broader economic base for a variety of jobs.

In areas where there are no existing towns, there are two possible options:

- one: If the mine site is not too far from the coast, then most people will prefer the new town near the beach with its usual advantages.
- two: In places where resources are at some distance from the coast, you could assess the future resource potential of the region, avoid tramping over Aboriginal sacred sites and identify sites for towns which can serve two or more mine sites.

CSIRO studies go further into these issues and have actually analysed possible growth areas where these strategies can be effectively applied in north Australia.

As for Aboriginal housing, over the last fifteen to twenty years many people have conducted research into this problem. Much of it concerns shelter for tribal communities. As I see this issue, in Australia mining companies and even some government agencies go to great lengths to offer their workforce good quality two to three bedroom houses, fully air-conditioned and furnished with all the mod cons. This is necessary if they are to attract people to remote areas and therefore reduce the high rate of turnover. Aboriginal people do not normally form an important part of this workforce because most of them do not have the necessary specialist skills to go into what is now basically a capital-intensive industry.

If we started a concerted training programme for Aboriginal people who could then acquire the necessary skills to participate in these



enterprises effectively, then there is no reason why they should not be provided with the same good quality houses as those given to Europeans. As I see them, they are part of the town structure and have therefore the same rights to accommodation, facilities and services as others. A training programme at least offers a choice to Aboriginal people to go into the workforce if they so desire. Aboriginal people have been successfully employed as operators of plants and equipment. And, of course, there are always possibilities for jobs in support services in shops, hospitals and in laundering, gardening, carpentry and labouring work. Housing for these people is best scattered all over the place in a salt and pepper manner, as they not only accept but perhaps demand the same rights and privileges as others.

There may be Aboriginal communities who may find such integration unacceptable, if not oppressive. They may still have strong ties with tribal culture and may wish to preserve their own identity and therefore find it more comforting to live among their own people. In such cases, we may have to consider housing them in special enclaves and decide whether these enclaves should be within the new town or at some distance from it. All these decisions are critical and our intentions could be misinterpreted. I think the most important thing is to ensure proper consultation and clearly to determine what the Aboriginal communities themselves prefer. Those of us who are responsible for design of houses for Aboriginal people may have to decide how far they can go to "sell" the European style accommodation to those who are not yet ready for it.

Research so far suggests that Aboriginal peoples' priorities and perceptions of housing are quite different from those of the Europeans. They have a very close physical and spiritual association with their environment and therefore show a very flexible and adaptable response to it. So they don't give the same importance to houses as Europeans because they tend to see their four walls as barriers between themselves and nature around them.

An important design problem is posed by the close kinship which Aboriginal families have with one another. It means the houses designed for a statistically typical European family of four may not be large



enough to house Aboriginal families who may have to accept a sudden influx of friends and relatives. This phenomenon is no different from many other traditional families in Asia and the Pacific where most houses, including those in urban areas, have many secondary semi-sheltered spaces such as verandahs and courtyards which provide extra shelter for families whose numbers may vary in size from four or five to as many as twelve or more.

I would now like to make a final comment about our tourist industry which seems to have a bright future in this part of the world. There are a lot of things going for it. We have the climate, the scenery, high incomes, mobility, early retirement plans and more and more leisure time at our disposal. It seems we are now ready for a major thrust in developing our tourist industries which should help to diversify our future growth in this region.

No doubt, most of you are quite aware of why tourism is so important to us. First, it is labour intensive. Therefore, it creates jobs, particularly in the hotel and accommodation sectors. Second, it provides purchasing power. Every tourist dollar, rupee or yen stimulates further local spending. I am told that this multiplier is more than three times the original amount spent. And, of course, it helps to generate the demand for infrastructure of roads, resorts and facilities of a region. It is this last item which concerns me and about which I would like to make some brief comments.

It is obvious that we will have to construct many new buildings to meet the demands of our expanding tourist industry. I believe, while we are doing this, we should also seriously consider recycling some of our older buildings which have been built by our forefathers with a great deal of love and care. These buildings often have charm and they give a special character to our towns and cities. This kind of thing has already been done very successfully and effectively in Europe and Asia where ancient castles and palaces have been refurbished for tourists.

In north Australia, there are many outback and coastal towns which have important buildings which are either unused or under-used and many of them are slowly deteriorating beyond redemption. I am sure our visitors from other parts of the world would welcome the chance to stay a night or two in any one of the refurbished hotels with their vast verandahs

and attractive cast-iron balconies. They would rather stay in a typical timber and tin homestead, surrounded by a well-tended garden with its lush tropical growth, than in a nondescript and somewhat sterile hotel or motel room which is probably no different from a room in any other part of the world.

What we really want to do is to give our visitors an Australian experience. These older buildings offer us a unique opportunity to exploit our existing resources to generate this experience. It is my belief that this special Australian experience is the key to use to attract international tourists to this country.

North Australia is a unique region with a colourful environment where nature is bountiful, strong and dominates everything. We have our reef islands and long stretches of unspoilt sandy beaches and rocky inland desert country. These are things which you don't find easily these days in a world which is becoming more and more over-crowded. They add up to an experience which is special to this region.

It is not the kind of experience offered by some of our growing southern resorts such as the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast, which are essentially no different from those available in Miami, Hawaii or any one of the hundreds of resort areas on the Mediterranean or North African belt.

However, it is not my intention to underestimate the value of the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast in the Australian economy. Whatever the present situation may be, as a long term strategy we may have to accept that such developments will essentially cater to our internal tourist industry which constitutes a major slice of our tourist market. Perhaps these resorts may supply permanent and semi-permanent accommodation and recreational facilities for our increasingly aging population.

What we need is a careful survey of this region to identify the large stretches of land and coastal areas which are, in fact, unique, lasting qualities which have significant north Australian characteristics. Now is the time to set space standards, which means establishing the ecological capacity of a given area and the nature of activities which take place within it. It means carefully setting the limits to which

you could exploit the area and the extent to which you could restore it. It is important to do this kind of exercise before plans are drawn up for building, rather than afterwards, when it is often too late to do anything about it. Once our tourist resources are destroyed, the tourist value of the area will also decline.

All we have to do is, as someone once said, to treat our environment as not something we have inherited from our forefathers - but as something we have borrowed from our children.

Guidelines which clearly set out the ultimate limits of ecological capacity of tourist resort areas could be extremely useful to our developers and entrepreneurs, but I am generally against setting up the kind of bureaucratic controls which stifle initiative rather than encourage it - controls which result in dull architecture.

When it comes to buildings, local authorities should set their sights a little higher, rather than slavishly following rules and regulations which could strangle imagination and excitement. It should be possible to waive rules occasionally in the interests of good architecture. Whatever we do, let us not settle for the second best. In this competitive world, let us aim for the highest possible standards of design and construction supported by sympathetic landscape without intruding too much into our natural environment.

As a general rule, architecture has to relate to nature. If nature is weak, then architecture should be strong, as in the Gold Coast, or if nature is strong and overwhelming, then architecture should be weak and subservient to its environment.

I believe it is this second option which is ideally suited to the tourist development in north Australia.