ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND HOUSE DESIGN IN AUSTRALIA: 
images from theory and practice

Helen Bennetts

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Abstract

This thesis proposes that there are fundamental and inadequately recognised differences between architectural practice and the basis of much design advice about environmental issues in house design. These differences have implications for the consideration of environmental issues in house design in Australia. These ideas are explored by examining the images, or subjective knowledge, that a group of architects used to describe houses that they had designed and comparing them with the images embodied in three key sources of design advice about environmental issues and house design.

The importance of images for conceptualising ‘the environment’ is identified and the role of images in the design process is described. Two broad categories of images are identified as important for the consideration of the environmental aspects of house design: images of what is known or believed to be true (‘what is’) and images of ‘what should be’. These categories are used to analyse images from the sources of design advice and from the transcripts of interviews held with ten architects.

Significant differences between these images are identified. The architects’ images are largely based on experience and are vivid and value-laden. They are also broad, encompassing concerns to do with built-form, people and environment. Environmental issues are identified as important for affective, emotional and symbolic reasons as well as for the ‘meaning’ they provide for design. By comparison, the images embodied in the design advice are largely derived from scientific techniques and reflect a narrow range of concerns. They are dominated by a ‘global’ view of the environment that is considered largely in terms of problems and in particular the relationship between built-form and energy use. There are scant images of people. While playing an important role in the architects’ understanding of environmental issues it is revealed that these images can be misleading or unhelpful during design.

This thesis concludes by discussing the implications of these differences for understanding how environmental issues are currently addressed in house design in Australia. Three issues that emerged from the study are highlighted: the importance for both theory and practice of the framing of environmental issues, the influence of the status quo on the practice of house design, and the role and limitations of existing design advice in informing the consideration of environmental issues in house design.