"Brutalist building going cheap": On the architectural and organizational futures of the Australian "gumtree" university

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The Australian higher education system – like comparable systems (e.g., the United Kingdom) – is stratified according to architectural and landscape materialities. The elite universities are termed 'sandstone' and rely on a combination of original Gothic architecture and manicured lawns and sporting fields; while the second-tier postwar suburban campuses originated in a wave of modernist architecture and landscaping employing native vegetation. It is the latter's landscaping, as well as their location on the urban fringes of Australian cities, that gave rise to the moniker the 'gumtree' university.

The postwar suburban university was an aesthetic, spiritual, economic and social success story. It was perfectly attuned to its *zeitgeist.* These institutions attracted many first-in-the-family-to-attend-university students; were renowned for their innovative curricula; and often tended to employ teachers and scholars of some note (especially in the social sciences). The campuses were lively and activities ranged from student politics to lively seminars for postgraduates and staff. Academic staff were very connected, geographically and socially, to the 'gumtree' campus. All these campuses had a staff club that functioned as a social 'hub'; and many of the professoriate lived close to the campus.

Fast-forward to the 21st century and the 'gumtree' campus is in serious trouble. A telling sign is that building signage is often out-of-date as are the photos in the Directory of Staff, in building foyers. Academic staff no longer live in close proximity to the suburban campuses. As a consequence they use their work offices much less regularly; and most of the staff clubs have closed down. Students are also voting with their feet. Unless they live close by, these universities are often not their first choice; and, if they end up enrolling at a 'gumtree' university, they spend as little time as possible on campus. The suburban universities are no longer famous for their pedagogic innovations; and the stock of academic capital is greatly depleted especially in the fields for which these institutions were renowned. Meanwhile, investment in maintaining university infrastructure has been reallocated to service burgeoning university administrative costs, while the fiscal base of these universities has shrunk.

The 'gumtree' universities responded to this emerging crisis through a series of management and architectural strategies. Some decided they needed additional

campuses; a vain attempt to recreate their 'edge of the city' golden days by moving to the new urban fringe or to an even more remote rural locale. The July/August 2001 issue of *Architecture Australia* documented another strategy: new campus architecture designed by architectural firms specializing in the genre. One of the articles claimed: 'With always diminishing government funding, universities are engaging in fierce competition and the architectural identity of a flagship building is seen, now more than ever, as a marketing necessity and a potential student-dollar magnet'. But the reality, on the ground, has often been less glamorous than the glossy photos in the architecture magazines and the fly-through imaging that Vice-Chancellors like to see posted on university webpages. The new eye-catching buildings are often syphoned off to the recently acquired campuses or to the 'technology parks' and 'knowledge economy' hubs that some suburban universities are investing in. Paradoxically, the new architecture can make the Brutalist stuff look even more ruinous. It can further emphasize that the main suburban campus – as against the new biomedical precinct with the airy architecture - is a failed project. We can think of various campuses where this has taken place.

The end of the mass university is possibly just around the corner. What will be the spatial, architectural and organizational model that takes its place? The Australian suburban university is not the only part of the higher education system facing these challenges. But, it may very well have to innovate and/or reinvent itself, before many other universities, lest it become an outer-suburban, Brutalist version of 'Downtown Detroit'[1]. We consider the following scenarios and the type of organizational-cum-architectural strategies they may require:

>**Scenario 1**: No-one wants to teach or study any longer at these campuses. Some of the suburban universities are closed down and some move to new locations. As per the move from an industrial to postindustrial economy, new usages have to be found for vacant buildings. But whereas abandoned warehouses made for stunning apartments and edgy nighttime-economy venues, what will we do with 1970s-style Brutalist buildings some distance from the city centre? Former Communist countries provide one model: the abandoned university as a type of theme park along the lines of Memento Park in Budapest. If you choose this option, make sure your Brutalist university campus theme park/museum is listed in the *Wallpaper** guide to your city.[2]

>**Scenario 2**: There is a partial retreat from these campuses and the suburban university reinvents its role. Some of the existing buildings are re-fitted to become old age care facilities; and remaining academic staff are redeployed to teach into programs associated with the University of the Third Age. With the addition of new amenities, like swimming pools, up-to-date gyms and hotel-style accommodation, these campuses could also tap into 'niche' education tourism markets such as middle-class Chinese tourists who want to take a course in Australian Studies or Venezuelan psychotherapists who want to upgrade their knowledge of post-Lacanian theory.

>**Scenario 3**: The suburban university decides to fully embrace the patterns of living, working, and creativity, associated with the digital economy. Academics give up their offices and acknowledge that they have probably already morphed into

cottage industries capable of working from anywhere. The majority of learning is self-directed and communication technologies simulate face-to-face encounters so well that classrooms are no longer needed. When meetings or 'in situ' research require it, flexible 'third spaces' are utilized. Supervisory meetings are held in cafes; seminars and reading groups in people's homes or under-utilized church halls; and, when labs or studios are needed, a university equivalent of AirBnB or Uber is used to book such spaces.

Needless to say the end of the suburban or mass university is not the end of organizational architecture. Indeed, under Scenario 3, new platforms emerge to take over university timetabling, logistics and resource allocation. In this respect, it is interesting that, in the last few days, Uber has announced a new Headquarters building in San Francisco. The digital economy rolls on; and even it will require grounding in architectural form. However, what the buildings housing university functions will look like in the future (especially in the case of campuses from the postindustrial era of higher education), is far from clear.

New Uber Headquarters, in San Francisco, designed by Shop Architects

Source: http://www.archdaily.com/636843/shop-unveils-plans-for-new-uber-headquarters-in-san-francisco/

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[1] The 'Downtown Detroit' feel of these campuses was suggested by a former colleague of author Number 1 at a 'gumtree-Brutalist' campus.

[2] We note that a proto-type for the 'gumtree' university as architectural theme park-cum-place of 'retro' nostalgia is already in existence. A few already participate in their city's architectural 'Open Days' and proudly show-off their Brutalist built heritage. Much of the original furniture and cabinetry would also appeal greatly to 'retro' aficionados. Again, we think the people writing the *Wallpaper** guides may have positive things to say about the 'gumtree' universities. There is value to be generated from these institutional 'ruins'.