



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP

**LAUNCH OF *THREE HOUSES - GLENN MURCUTT* BY E.M. FARRELLY
SYDNEY 3 NOVEMBER 1993**

I am delighted to be here today to launch this fascinating book by Elizabeth Farrelly on the work of Glenn Murcutt.

My delight is all the greater because the launch is taking place here at Tusculum, which some of you may be aware is one of my favourite buildings in Sydney.

You may also be aware that its architect, John Verge, is in my view one of the great Australian architects. As is Glenn Murcutt, of course.

There is a happy convergence between the work of the two, and indeed with the launch of the book today. For among his many outstanding commissions, Glenn was responsible for the completion of the one remaining fragment of the John Verge villa "Engehurst" in Ormond Street, Paddington.

And, as his biographer says, Glenn's solution to completing the fragment later served as the model for the Ball-Fastaway house, one of the three which are the subject of the present volume.

The timing of this book is very appropriate. It comes when Australians are concerned as never before about the role of planning and development in this country. A role on which Glenn Murcutt has always been most forthright.

I was interested to discover from this book that a perception of Glenn Murcutt as a peculiarly Australian romantic in his approach to building design has earned him headlines such as "The Outback Warrior" in the overseas press.

As another Australian with romantic inclinations who also on occasion attracts the talents of foreign headline writers, I can sympathise with him about the infinite capacity of such people to be spectacularly wrong - of their ability to go for the superficial rather than the reasoned analysis.

Such an approach to her subject matter would be unimaginable in Elizabeth Farrelly's case, and we are all the richer for it.

While this work will undoubtedly be a major contributor to a debate of continuing importance for architects, Elizabeth has also provided the rest of us with a volume which presents serious issues in a way which neither patronises or mystifies the lay reader.

And that is particularly important. For the issues which the architecture of Glenn Murcutt throws up are ones that are ultimately the concern of all Australians.

The houses which are the subject matter of this book, the three iconic houses, as Elizabeth describes them, are for many Australians, quintessentially Australian houses.

They are houses which make a statement about the sort of country we live in. To use Glenn's own words, houses which are his response to the genius of the place - to a land of incredible strength combined with unimaginable delicacy.

These three houses encourage us to think about where we have come from and about where we are going. They challenge us to contemplate the possibility of an architecture, and, in wider terms, an approach to urban design, in which aesthetic and functional considerations live in harmony.

More and more Australians are coming to realise the importance of urban design to the attainment of the quality of life to which we aspire.

We are, I believe, coming to understand that what makes Australia such a privileged place to live is in danger of being lost through poor planning - through the imposition of an alien schema, as Glenn Murcutt describes it.

And his remedy is spot on - "The land appeals for care and we need to become friends with the landscape and not be threatened by it."

I might add that we need to temper our approach to the development of our landscape with an eye to the long term future, rather than exploit it as an easy source of immediate profit. In terms of development, greed is never good.

This prescription is as applicable to the city fringe as it is to the city centre; as relevant to the planning of development along our coastline as it is to the preservation of our inland waterways.

Development is not just a problem for the city or the bush, depending on where you live. It's a matter for consideration wherever it occurs in Australia.

Recognising the dimensions of the issue sometimes appears to be the furthest thing from the minds of those who should most be aware of it - our planners and developers. And even when they see a problem, at times we justifiably despair that they will ever come close to finding an appropriate solution.

It is no secret that developers and planners are Glenn Murcutt's least favourite people. Local authorities, he says, are "so often stupid, absolutely stupid and unreasonable.

Our building regulations inventorise mediocrity and our councils administer and police such conservatism."

To quote Elizabeth, "he laments the wholesale slaughter of our city by developers, but sees this process as complete, describing Sydney city centre as a gaggle of rubbish ... junk and rubbish." He sees the countryside in terms of the "destruction of the flora and the displacement of the fauna ... with the blessing, if not active collusion of our subdivision regulations."

This is a deeply pessimistic picture. But one hard not to share at times.

While Glenn has generally chosen to respond to this situation by withdrawal from working in the city and by refusal to participate in the design of large scale works (although I'm delighted that this did not prevent him from working to redesign the Customs House) this is not an option which I believe is available to the Commonwealth Government.

On the contrary, I believe it is imperative that we become a lot more involved in these issues, which have hitherto been the almost exclusive preserve of the other levels of Government.

This is why I am announcing today that I have established a Task Force on Urban Design.

In reviewing the quality of urban design in Australia, the Task Force will focus on ways in which the day to day working, residential and recreational environment of most Australians might be enhanced by more thoughtful attention to design.

It's not just a matter of building new and impressive structures to amaze and delight us, although there will be a place for that where and when appropriate. Who, for example, could now imagine Sydney without the Opera House, whose anniversary we are currently celebrating?

And it's certainly not a matter of confecting facades, as Glenn describes it.

Nor is it just a matter of preserving our built heritage - buildings such as Tusculum - important though that is.

Rather it's a matter of focussing on the total picture. Of looking at towns, suburbs, regions even, and determining how they might work better, while at the same time preserving those unique characteristics with which their communities identify.

It's about developing on the community scale what for Glenn Murcutt has always been crucial in his design of houses - a sense of place.

It's about better relating where people work to where they live. It's about getting the children to schools which they look forward to going to. It's about being able to go to the shops without having a car or waiting for hours for public transport which may or may not arrive. It's about having the right housing mix for the location, and proper

health and recreational facilities. And allowing our elderly citizens to enjoy their retirement.

It's about making better use of existing infrastructure, rather than a process of endless urban sprawl.

We will probably see the usual knee jerk reaction to this task force.

Don't be surprised if you hear talk about a new DURD. It will be a typical example of the use of misinformation by those who benefit from the status quo - those who feel that their immediate interests are threatened

And don't be surprised if you hear us accused of making people conform to a boring bureaucratic standard.

Nothing of course is further from our minds.

What we want to do is to put a bit of poetry into the souls of our town clerks and shire engineers - to get our planners and architects to come up with ideas with a sense of the miraculous, to focus on the wider questions of urban form rather than restricting themselves to narrow interpretation of land use regulations.

Nor are we looking for a stultifying conformity of planning correctness. As Elizabeth points out in her book, for Glenn Murcutt there is no contradiction between disparateness and harmony in his approach to designing houses - "harmony is about disparate sounds which when put together make a pleasing whole ... not monotony, not sameness."

But there is a different point, not sameness or monotony - but uniformity.

I have long held the view that grandeur of form most commonly or obviously emerges from uniformity - perhaps a variegated uniformity - but a consistency.

It seems that these days this is the one thing we are supposed to most forthrightly eschew. Any sense of this other meaning of sameness, a sameness which involves variations on a theme.

These days the inculcation is that individuality is everything - that no whim or fancy should be subjugated to a common purpose or even the greater glory of a greater whole.

The grandeur which emerges from a mountain view is generally a commentary on its uniformity or scale. As is say a coastal view - with the juxtaposition of the sea with its consistent mass meshing with the uniformity of the beach or even a forest.

The same is true of architecture whether it is the massing on the canals of St Petersburg, or the variegated uniformity of Bath or the disparate harmonics of the piazzas of Venice, or the egg carton classicism of the Greek Islands or even Paddo and Carlton.

In each case the architect's whims and fancies have been played out like the shadows on a mountain rather than the re-definition of an excavation.

Architects too can profit spiritually in signing up to schemes greater than most are individually capable of devising.

Working within an environment should be regarded as the done thing more often than not.

The Task Force, I am pleased to say, is composed of people with a bit of magic in their makeup, and I thank them for donating their time to this task. They are all busy professionals in their varied fields. What brings them together is their common interest in seeing us do things better, and their conviction that we ought to be able to do so through a process of education rather than by spending money.

I want in particular to thank the Convenor of the Task Force, John Mant, who is unstinting in his service.

The Task Force should have a report ready for us early in the New Year, and both Brian Howe, who has a crucial role in this matter, and I look forward to receiving it.

In 1962, just after Glenn Murcutt graduated, one of the doyens of Australian architecture, Robin Boyd, wrote that, in relation to architecture, the Australian public "appears ready to encourage new ideas for the first time ... In short, Australian building may have grown up."

Since then, Glenn Murcutt has done Australia proud. His many awards both domestically and internationally attest to his success. It is crucial that we learn from him.

That is why the book which is being launched today is so important.

Especially when it is written by a person who is such an eminent architectural commentator, and an elected public official with such a strong commitment to the betterment of our built environment.

Especially when it is written with such insight and clarity.

It gives me much pleasure to welcome the publication of Three Houses - Glenn Murcutt by Elizabeth Farrelly. I urge you all to read it.

Thank you.