PIA Victoria President
Laura Murray RPIA

This column comes as my last as I stand down from my three-year journey as PIA Victoria President and pass over the baton. I have thoroughly enjoyed representing the greater membership on behalf of the State for the past three years and am incredibly humbled and grateful that a Scottish planner from Cumbernauld was welcomed so openly and warmly and re-elected to undertake this important role.

I would like to provide a synopsis of what have been the key highlights and achievements for me and PIA during my term and there have been many. Most importantly, I am proud that PIA Victoria has been given the opportunity to advocate for good planning outcomes through a number of media platforms, raising the profile of PIA across the State. PIA Victoria provided commentary on many relevant articles and news stories through The Age, Domain, The Australian, The Leader, The New Daily, and Channel 9 News, among others.

Through these opportunities I have been able to advocate on behalf of the membership on a number of critical issues affecting the future of our State including: population growth and projections; urban sprawl; the future built form of Melbourne’s CBD; the future of Federation Square; and significant State infrastructure projects including the West Gate Tunnel and the Suburban Rail Loop, to name but a few.

To top it off, I will never forget debating the need for a denser Melbourne on 3AW with Neil Mitchell, where his response to my view that we should be encouraging smaller housing typologies and more medium density development was “where would my dog go?”

Momentum through collaboration

I am delighted to see the increased momentum we have been able to gain through collaborating with other institutes, including the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) and Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA), through our events and submissions, enabling us to provide a stronger voice on issues affecting our built environment. In addition, I am pleased that our feedback is valued and that we have been invited as an industry stakeholder to participate on a number of State Policy reform matters including: SMART Planning; Reformed Residential Zones; Better Apartment Guidelines; Residential Aged Care; Fisherman’s Bend; and Better Regulation and Red Tape, to name a few.

I have had the privilege of representing PIA at Planning Panels (such as Amendment C270; West Gate Tunnel and North East Link) and also being involved in the preparation of PIA Victoria’s 2018 State Election Statement, which PIA advocated for when we met with all political parties, and continue to build on this as the basis for our ongoing Policy and Advocacy agenda.

I am excited to see that the PIA PLANET training courses and program has grown year on year and, with this success, PIA VIC has been able to commit to providing an even bigger training facility with new technology at Level 3, 124 Exhibition Street. Our outreach to the regions has increased through the online streaming of courses and events, which we intend to continue to monitor. PIA Victoria has now also successfully delivered three State Symposiums, each one covering a different, and ever-relevant theme, and involved a growing number of attendees year on year.

Attending and presenting at various conferences across the State has also been another highlight for me. This not only allowed me to increase my confidence in presentation skills, and grow as a professional but also, and more importantly, increased the profile of the Institute through a variety of channels enabling PIA to reach audiences and channel partners beyond just planners, ensuring our policy and advocacy agenda was clearly heard. I particularly enjoyed meeting many of you and your colleagues at the Rural Councils Victoria Rural Summit last year, and also challenging “Grand Designs” TV Host and architect Peter Maddison, when I joined Peter and representatives of RACV on a panel discussion to debate Melbourne’s ‘Missing Middle’ as part of Melbourne Knowledge Week.

National Settlement Strategy is important

At a national level, I have thoroughly enjoyed attending PIA National Congress with each location providing a different perspective on the opportunities and challenges being faced in each State as we continue to grow as a nation, thinking about how some key lessons learnt could apply to Victoria, and then being invited to our Nation’s capital for the launch of PIA’s Tipping Point initiative to encourage a national debate regarding the development of a National Settlement Strategy. The requirement for a Commonwealth response to a coordinated approach to planning has never been so important. I was pleased to represent PIA at a recent Melbourne City Deals Stakeholder Roundtable chaired by the Hon. Alan Tudge MP, Minister for Population, Cities, and Urban Infrastructure, where discussion focussed around Melbourne’s South East and North West regions. The focus of this roundtable was on what the priority areas of investment should be in each of these regions. As mentioned in my last month’s article, City Deals offer a significant opportunity for all three levels of government, working with the private sector and the community, to develop a shared long-term vision, and commit to action to better manage population growth, accelerate job creation, boost investment and ensure our cities are even better places to live and work. At least this is a step in the right direction to enable a more coherent approach to national investment and planning of our cities, precincts and regions.

Furthermore, I was honoured to be invited to attend the ABD Dean’s Lecture Series presentation and dinner at Vice-Chancellor’s House, University of Melbourne and, shortly after, I was privileged to present the Occasional Address at the University of Melbourne Confering of Degrees Ceremony at the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, reflecting on my career journey from graduation in Glasgow to the challenges I foresee for new graduates today. It was quite exciting to be able to once again be dressed in gown and hood and doff my bonnet to the Presiding Chancellor. It was even more exciting to be a part of such an important ceremony for some 750 students receiving undergraduate, graduate or doctoral degrees that day. It is also an honour being invited to speak on behalf of PIA to prospective students at RMIT Orientation week each year. It is encouraging to see such a talented pool of professionals complete their studies and enter the workforce and recognise the importance of membership to the PIA professional body.
Finally, I would like to thank the past and present PIA VIC committee for their ongoing support and hard work during my time as President. I would also like to thank the Planning News Editors Bill Chandler OAM RPIA (Life Fellow), Catherine McNaughton MPIA, and Nicole Vickridge RPIA for ensuring my column meets the word count each month and, in all seriousness, for all your effort in sourcing articles and producing this fantastic informative monthly magazine. And thanks to all PIA Victoria staff—Executive Officer, Carmel McCormack: Events Coordinator, Diego Pappalardo; Events Assistant Lydia Lovelock, and Communications Coordinator, Darcy McLoughlin for all your effort in sourcing articles and producing this fantastic informative monthly magazine.

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What does Esme Johnston’s story teach us?

Leah Mosel MPIA

The demolition of journalist, radio announcer and script writer Esme Johnston’s self-designed and built home in Brighton has recently gained a lot media attention. It has highlighted the broader issue of recognition of women’s historical achievements and stories within the built environment.

Built in the late 1920s, Esme designed, project-managed and assisted in the building of her distinctive home in Middle Brighton. This was a time when women were virtually unseen in the built environment professions. Esme forged a path away from the prevailing gendered norms of the time, not only teaching herself architectural design and building skills and applying these, but also sourcing recycled materials for use in the house.

The Age article reports advice from Heritage Victoria, that the house is not an “exceptional” example of Tudor-revival style worthy of heritage protection on aesthetic or architectural grounds. And while the Planning Department and heritage planning experts have formed the view that the house is not worthy of State heritage protection on these grounds, it may yet receive local heritage protection if Council successfully pursues this. Despite all this, the house is undoubtedly a remarkable part of our shared social history and, in particular, of women’s history.

This begs the broader question: if the architectural significance of this building is insufficient to warrant heritage protections, how do we formally recognise and memorialise the remarkable story of this woman, and indeed other prominent historic women? The loss of the building fabric would arguably represent a loss of a significant part of the story of this woman and her pioneering efforts. While social or cultural grounds are legitimate criteria for heritage significance, some involved in the heritage planning system believe that the system often privileges physical measures such as aesthetic and architectural measures above social and cultural historic significance meaning that our social history and stories, such as those of Esme, are not always well protected.

So, if Esme’s efforts are not to be preserved in a physical sense, then her achievements will become relegated to photos and words on a page. Some might say then that her achievements become buried, less visible. It is this point that the Age article really seeks to make, that is, heritage controls aside, women’s historical achievements and efforts are often not memorialised, or acknowledged in a physical sense and given due recognition in the public domain.

From statues to memorials to street names and park names, women are significantly under-represented in the physical fabric and visual identity of the city. While The Age article acknowledges this significant under-representation, this is not exclusive to Melbourne or indeed Australian cities. Even in a city as progressive as New York, there are only five statues built in honour of trailblazing women, with significant conscious efforts underway to redress this visibility ‘gap’ of women’s achievements in the public domain.

With growing awareness of this gender ‘gap’ in the public domain, some Councils have adopted policies aimed at addressing the bias in their street and public space naming policies. For example, the City of Melbourne encourages names that act as a reminder of local history, culture and citizens with a specific emphasis on Aboriginal naming and women in history. However, recognition through naming of public space and streets is only part of the solution.

We also need to ensure we raise the physical visibility of women’s achievement in the public realm, thus elevating these stories within public consciousness. To this end, the creation of a bronze statue of Tayla Harris, athlete and Carlton AFLW player depicting Harris kicking a goal during a match against the Western Bulldogs, is welcome. The 3.3m statue of the now-famous photo of Harris and her kick highlights her supreme athleticism and football ability. While yet to have a permanent home, the statue will be temporarily housed at Federation Square, receiving high visibility and, hopefully, promoting conversations about women in football and female professional athletes.

While we as planners and built environment professionals cannot redress the historic issues that have resulted in the under-representation of women in the physical fabric of the city, it is incumbent on us to be aware of this and seek to find opportunities within our work to acknowledge and ‘make visible’ the stories of the many remarkable local women of our city.

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