

Q&A WITH STEVE MARAS



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In edition #38, PLACE made mention of property developer Steve Maras in connection to artist and curator, Matthew Stuckey (In Between: More than an afterthought). Worthy of much more than a one line reference, PLACE has come back to Steve, co-owner and Managing Director of Maras Group, to uncover a little more about why he's so interested in placemaking.

PLACE: Perhaps if you could start with where you started in the industry?

SM: I started working for a boutique real estate company called Richardson and Wrench in 1994. I went in there straight out of working for Price Waterhouse Coopers for several years. I was in insolvency and corporate reconstruction and, obviously, Price Waterhouse is a big international firm so rather than go into another big international firm in the property sector I decided I wanted something smaller. Richardson and Wrench, which was a Sydney-based outfit, had opened in Adelaide two years earlier and I decided that was a better fit for me.

At Richardson and Wrench you were evaluating properties – what are your metrics for measuring a building's value?

What makes a property more valuable in my eyes... it's a few things but it does always start with the old adage: location, location, location. Although it's more than that. Generally a combination of location, aesthetics, design and the inhabitants of a building are what I consider.

How has your industry changed in 20 years?

It's certainly become more professional but the biggest change, without a doubt, has been the changes in information technology and the changes that have influenced how we deal with property. Once upon a time we were very much locally-based. Now the world has become a small place. When I first started in 1994 there were few ways of getting interstate buyers to look at property in South Australia because the medium to get to them wasn't actually there. Now it's there and it's much easier to attract national and international buyers or tenants to our properties.

Who introduced you to the idea of placemaking?

In a funny sort of way, this company (Maras Group) has been placemaking without actually knowing that we were placemaking because the term placemaking wasn't front of mind. I guess when I went to Fremantle in 2009 for the Mainstreet Australia conference and there was a placemaker named David Engwicht there. David Engwicht is quite a unique character and he basically took us through an hour or two of placemaking, why you do it, how you transform places and just listening to this address I thought, 'gee, a lot of the things David's talking about we have been doing.' But then a lot of the things David had been talking about we hadn't been doing. So I got busy feverishly taking down notes because I felt that this was really the start of something Maras Group should be focussing on, particularly given that we're involved in a significant precinct and in order to keep a pace of things these are the sort of things we need to be looking at.



You've recently returned from Stockholm in Sweden, where you attended a world summit on the future of cities. Tell us about this experience.

The conference relates to the UN Habitat mandate to develop a world agenda for cities and the development of cities going forward into the future. Basically they want a set of guidelines so that we can start planning in advance for our cities worldwide. So what UN Habitat did was pull in two main groups, Project for Public Spaces (PPS) out of New York consisting of the father-son combination of Fred and Ethan Kent who are probably, it's fair to say, the world's practical leading authorities on placemaking. Then they brought in another group, the Ax:son Johnson Foundation is a Swedish foundation that is a subset from the Ax:son Johnson family – a very old and wealthy family out of Stockholm and the foundation basically is there to look at investing into scientific research on the one hand and also into activities and initiatives for the betterment of humanity. They came together in this tripartite partnership to host the Future of Places Forum. The purpose of all this is to develop a declaration of a new world urban agenda which, in 2016 at the UN Habitat summit this declaration will be endorsed as the framework and platform for cities and the planning and growth of these cities going into the future for the next 30 years.

Were you invited to represent Adelaide?

200 people from all across the globe were invited to come and spend three days in Stockholm to listen to speakers and engage in the discussion towards the end of the three days all geared towards setting the framework

for this declaration. I found the conference to be very, very good and it opened my eyes to things I'd never even thought about and also to the different situations of cities across the globe. Whilst all our cities are different, compared to cities from all across the globe our cities are actually very similar here in Australia. What I found from the conference was that the conference was very much about the public realm, public spaces and there wasn't that much interaction or focus on the private sector or private interests. What I found interesting about that is well, that's fine but for it to really work in terms of setting a proper agenda there needs to be private sector input and there needs to be private sector collaboration. So I jumped up on stage and talked about the private sector and developers in general. Developers were looked at with a dim view. My concept was well, there needs to be better education of developers and the private sector in general as to how to link with the public spaces and public domain so we can reach some sort of equilibrium. By shutting the private sector out or not including the private sector in the debate you're always going to be at a stalemate. Moving forward, without significant involvement of the private sector almost renders it useless. I think most people who were there on the day were actually very happy to hear that and hear that the private sector does have an interest in this and that the private sector does want to work with public interests and public space to create better cities.



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