

TAKE 5 looking ahead: defining the terms of a sustainable architectural profession

edited by Paolo Tombesi, Blair Gardiner and Tony Mussen



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TAKE 5: LOOKING AHEAD:
DEFINING THE TERMS OF A SUSTAINABLE
ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION

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With apologies to Fosco, Michael and Ned

looking ahead:
defining the terms
of a sustainable
architectural profession

Sisalation Prize

This issue is the fifth in the recently established RAIA journal series, *TAKE*, which celebrates a new direction for the longstanding RAIA Sisalation Prize. Managed by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and sponsored by Fletcher Insulation, this prize has been awarded annually since 1956 and celebrated the 50th Anniversary in 2005. This is an outstanding achievement, marking a long distinguished commitment from Fletcher Insulation to the development of the architecture profession. Over the years, the prize has taken different formats: a travel scholarship, a commission to an author to write a book and, since 2001, a prize to edit the RAIA architectural journal series, *TAKE*.

While retaining its objective to develop and apply architectural knowledge in Australia, a review of the RAIA Sisalation Prize in 2001 resulted in its restructure into a journal format to attract the best applicants and result in more accessible outcomes for members of the profession. The editor, as prize winner, draws together a team of associate contributors to produce a journal volume featuring an edited collection of papers. The theme of each issue bridges academic and practice issues in architecture. The RAIA Sisalation Prize is awarded annually and seeks to further the development of architecture through both the annual publication of the guest edited journal, *TAKE*, and an annual symposium event addressing key issues of the journal publication.

The RAIA Sisalation Prize is guided by a Steering Committee including practitioners, academics and a representative of the sponsor, Fletcher Insulation. The Steering Committee is responsible for the overall management of the prize including selection of the prizewinner, selection of the journal theme, guidance to the Editor, copy editing, and management to the RAIA National Prizes and Awards Coordinator. The RAIA National Prizes and Awards Unit provides management support for the prize, including the journal publication, and the RAIA Chapter Manager in the state/territory in which the event is held manages the annual symposium. The launch of this fifth issue was held in Melbourne, in February 2007.

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All enquiries about the RAIA Sisalation Prize should be directed to:

National Prizes and Awards Coordinator
The Royal Australian Institute of Architects
PO Box 3373 Manuka ACT 2600
T: 02 6121 2000 F: 02 6121 2001 E: prizes@raia.com.au

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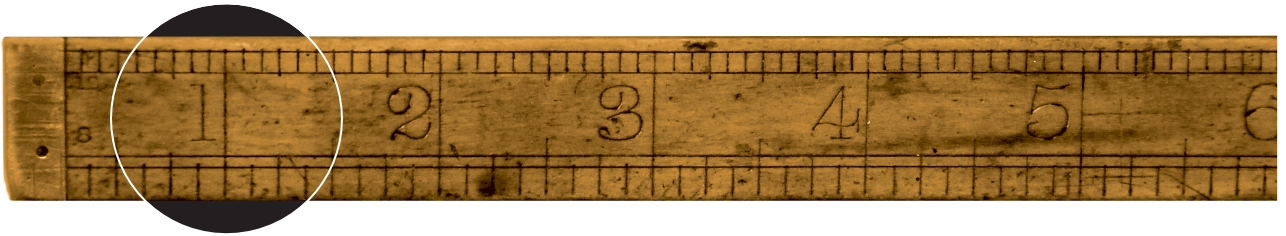
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INTRODUCTION



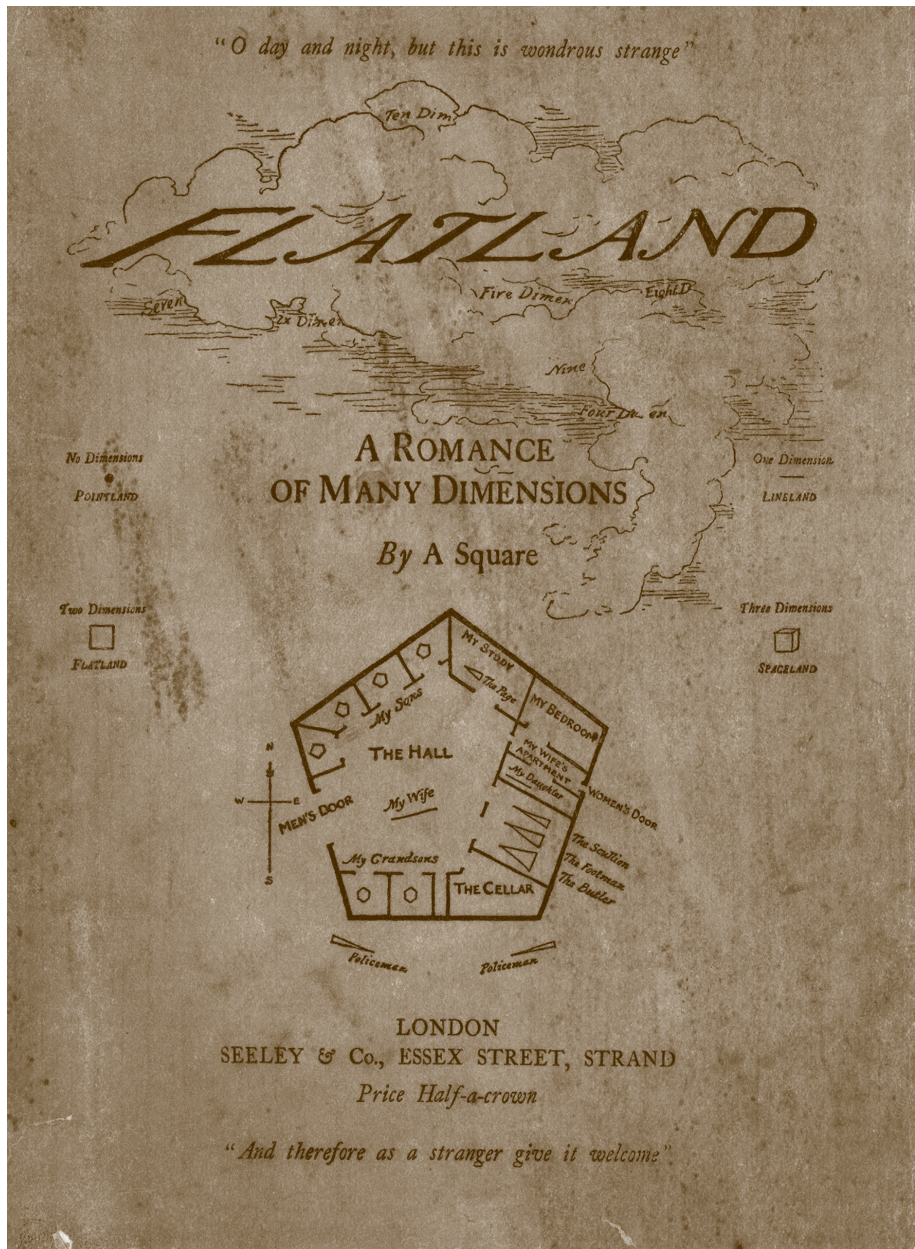
OUT OF FLATLAND

"... to shift the focus from what architecture wishes to be, or wishes to say, toward what building production represents in the economic game means that we must establish parameters of reading capable of penetrating to the heart of the role played by architecture within the capitalist system. One could object that such an economic reading of building production is other than the reading of architecture as a system of communication. But we can only reply that it will never be repeated too often that, when wishing to discover the secret of a magician's tricks, it is far better to observe him from backstage than to continue to stare at him from a seat in the orchestra."

Manfredo Tafuri, *L'architecture dans le boudoir*, pp. 287-88.¹

At the end of the 19th century, a Victorian author, Edwin Abbott, invented Flatland, an imaginary country where everyone and everything existed in a plane.² In recounting life on such a land, Abbott showed how its inhabitants could explain events only through concepts that were consistent with their perceivable reality. The possibility of a third, or any further dimension for that matter, had never occurred to them, and was actually fought in earnest, because the way this presented itself inside their world could only be grasped by means of familiar sensations that would leave the existing conceptual system unchanged. A sphere passing vertically through Flatland, for instance, would never have appeared to Flatlanders as a fully three-dimensional object, but first as a point, then a varying length line, then another point before disappearing off the plane.

Abbott's fictional world helps us come to grips with the fact that we can often fail to recognise the actual nature and extent of certain phenomena simply because we do not have an appropriate analytical framework, and can only accommodate the dimensions that fit our experiential or cultural apparatus.



Edwin Abbott, *Flatland*, Original cover, 1884; eBooks@Adelaide, 2006.

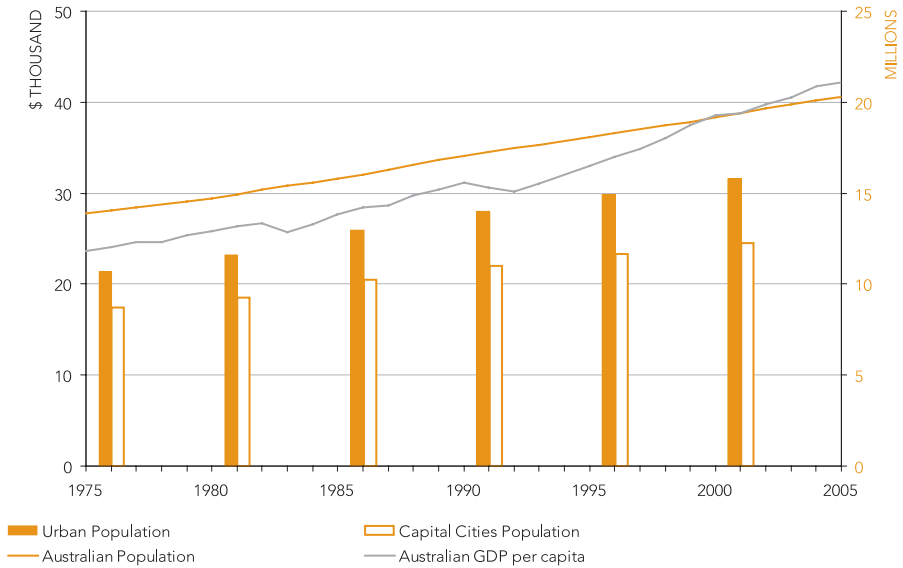
In our view, architectural practice is no exception. While the profession tends to project an image of intellectual self-sufficiency and operative independence—in part the legacy of historical and social definition processes—the implementation of building products does not rely solely on the architect's output. Architectural design is but a part of a larger ensemble of contributions and social determinations. Yet the debate on the space and the future of the architect often seems to linger on the plane defined by the architectural world, possibly discounting its intersections with other seemingly independent flatlands or, even worse, underplaying its connection with the inhabitants of other economic planets. In a demand-led and mostly project-based environment this risks creating a lack of perspective and, consequently, the inability to think strategically, both individually and as a group.

As the narrator in Abbott's book finds out, to get rid of the Flatland syndrome—that is, to be able to investigate the complexity and tackle the challenges of a spherical world, one needs to get a chance to look at the sphere. And this can only be done by stepping out of one's own Flatland.

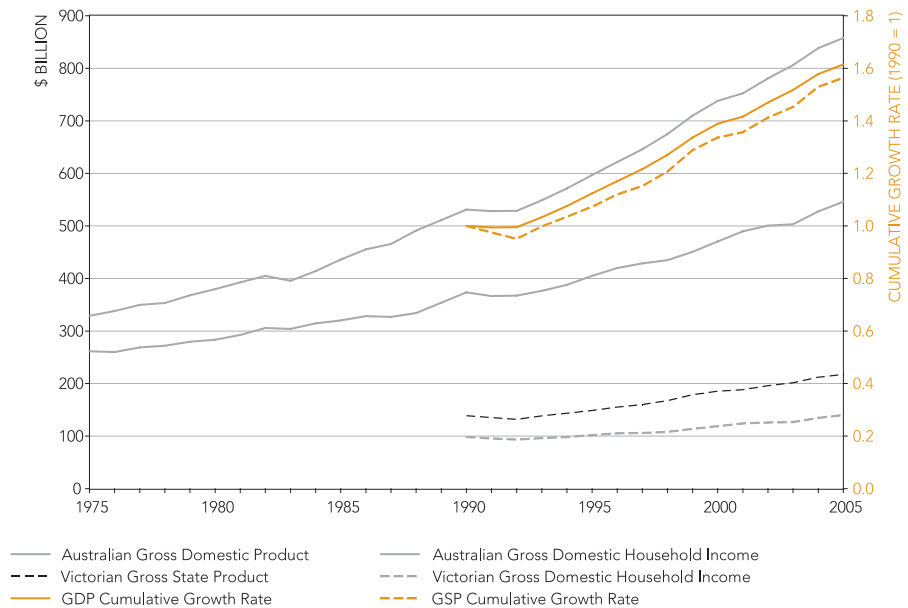
This is what we, as editors, decided to do with *TAKE 5*, the publication outcome of the fiftieth edition of the RAIA Sisalation Prize. Our collection of essays, 'Looking Ahead: Defining the terms of a sustainable architectural profession', is an attempt to examine the elements that affect the markets of the profession but are not often explicitly discussed from a disciplinary perspective: definition of future demand; appropriateness of supply; cost, value and price determinants of building products and design services. The idea behind this work is to structure a platform for active urban, industrial, and environmental discussion that could give architects and representative bodies a set of analytical tools to understand the past and negotiate the future.

The premise from which we moved is that architectural markets are unstable by definition. The supply of design services, in fact, responds not only to the fluctuations in the overall demand for building but also to the changing characteristics of such demand as determined by a plethora of other factors: government policies, economic cycles, wealth, client base and demographics, community and cultural values or predominant social priorities, and future investment strategies. While the evolution of these characteristics has historically been shown to have a great impact on the inputs and the markets of the actors involved, there is no doubt that many of the conditions underlying building development in Australia are changing: the socio-economic base of

1. URBANISATION OF AUSTRALIA



2. VICTORIA v AUSTRALIA



the country is drastically shifting, some areas are growing as a result of it while others are sluggish, many of the established centres have reached territorial capacity, land is consequently becoming available in modified patterns, capital is procured differently, and investment logics are assuming a much longer term perspective than a few years ago.

At the same time, technical tools and liability are modifying the patterns of interaction within the industry, just when availability and cost of construction labour and materials are also changing. All this could presage a push towards further vertical integration within the building industry and a further reduction of the independent architect's share of construction in specific markets; but it could also mean a renewed role for the profession. For these reasons, there seems to be a need to review the current situation, analyse the outcomes of the review, and hypothesise on how architects can best position both the profession and themselves individually for the future.

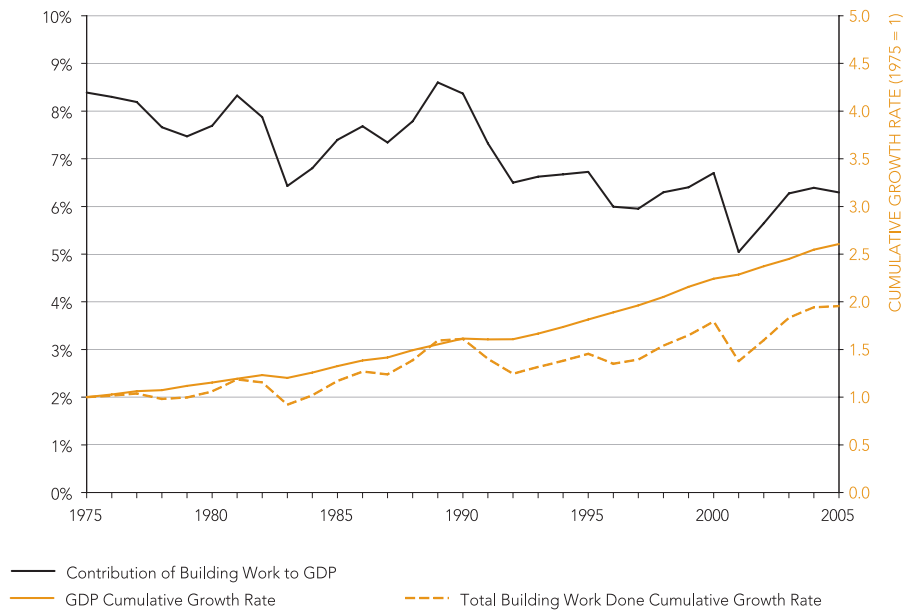
If we look back 30 years, right after the 'first' oil crisis, we realise that the development of the profession has only partially followed the curve of the economy or demographics. Between 1975 and 2005, the growth in the number of registered architects strongly outpaced the growth of Australian population. In Victoria, for example, architects doubled while state residents grew by 1.5 times. The divergence in expansion rate has produced a denser market for professional services. In the mid-1970s, an architect was supposed to serve a statistical basin of 2,300 Victorians; by 2005 this was reduced to 1,500. A smaller but possibly wealthier collective client group, one would imagine, since, within the same period, Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by 2.5 times and Gross Disposable Income (GDI) by two. Yet the theoretical subdivision of building output per architect in Victoria has merely gone from \$4.3 million to \$4.7 million, and from \$1.8 million to \$1.6 million if residential is excluded. This is due not only to a growing architectural population but also to the fact that the contribution of building activity to the GDP has substantially diminished overall. While building added 8.4 per cent to the domestic economy in 1975, this contribution had been reduced to 6.3 per cent by 2005.

The ratio 'building activity to registered architects' is an abstract parameter, of course, which can only be used at a macro level to suggest fluctuations in related areas of the economy rather than imply full access to the work carried out within them. The reality can be, and indeed is, very different, because it

3. TOTAL BUILDING OUTPUT IN AUSTRALIA AND VICTORIA



4. BUILDING OUTPUT v GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT



depends on the curve followed by particular markets within the whole building sector. The inflation-corrected value of non-residential work, for example, expanded by 50 per cent since 1975, whereas that of 'new residential' doubled. 'Alterations and additions' carried minimal weight in the 1970s but have grown by a factor of five since then, and now produce almost 10 per cent of the overall building output. This picture is made more intricate by the distinction between public and private: the value of private building work has followed quite closely the progression of GDP, a 150 per cent increase, whereas public investment decreased by approximately 20 per cent within the same time frame. Architects have had good access to some of these markets, benefiting from their growth, and relatively little access to others, particularly housing, which accounts for over 55 per cent of Australia's building value today.

These caveats bring us back to the traditional hourglass-like portrait of practice, divided between a large number of firms with less than five employees producing often bespoke but limited building value, and a much smaller percentage of larger offices engaged with upper residential, commercial and institutional work. The issues of specific concern vary greatly within this professional spectrum. Yet, if one adopts the agenda outlined earlier, the issues that emerge out of the analysis can be modulated to fit particular dimensions of practice without losing their general significance. Is the current social allocation of building design responsibilities likely to change in the future? Will new markets emerge in response to new problems? Should particular trajectories of growth, either technical or geographic, be emphasised?

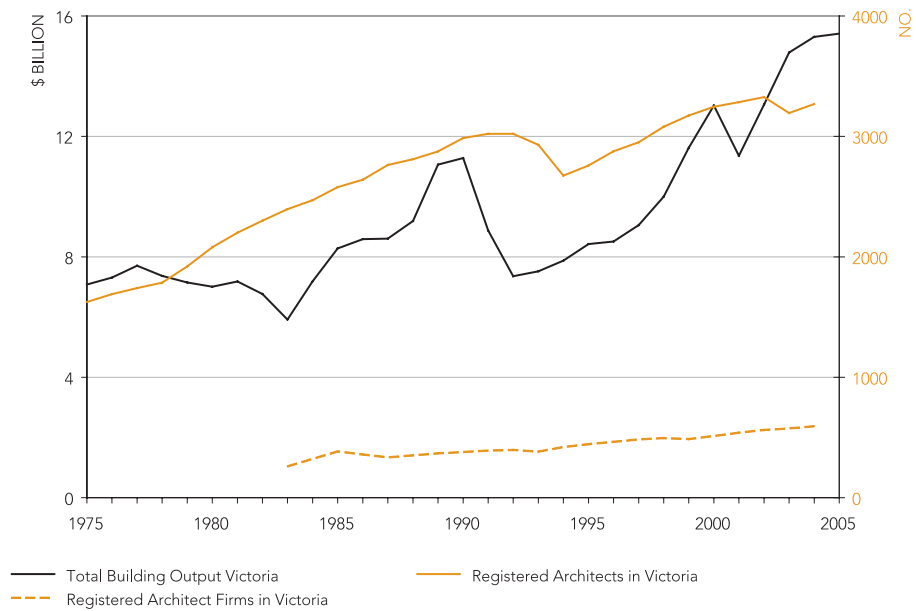
In the attempt to gain a balanced understanding of these issues, we approached them from multiple perspectives and at different levels. *TAKE 5* combines theoretical positions about architecture, analytical descriptions of the industry, and practice-based experiences. Our hope is that such combinations will help the profession not only to think, rethink or reinforce its own grounds, but also to charter and assert its wider role in Australian spatial society and on Australia's physical soil.

In keeping with our underlying agenda, several contributions have been sought from outside the traditional boundaries of the profession, to include the investment community, government bodies, industrial entrepreneurs, urban geographers, construction scholars, and social activists. Having said this, architectural practitioners are not represented as much as we would have liked

5. GROSS DISPOSABLE HOUSEHOLD INCOME v RESIDENTIAL BUILDING OUTPUT IN AUSTRALIA



6. REGISTERED ARCHITECTS v BUILDING OUTPUT IN VICTORIA



them to be. This is only in part the result of editorial choices and has much more to do with the profession's apparent difficulty to engage, systematically, with these sorts of discussions, and respond on time to our solicitations.

As it stands, *TAKE 5* mixes three types of contributions: group editorials for each section—except for section two, collective interviews with industry actors, and individual articles. Before each article, a one-page introduction is provided in order to tie its content to the larger picture being defined, and to the project behind it. For almost talismanic purposes, the volume has been organised around the number five, the number of this edition of *TAKE*. Accordingly, there are five parts.

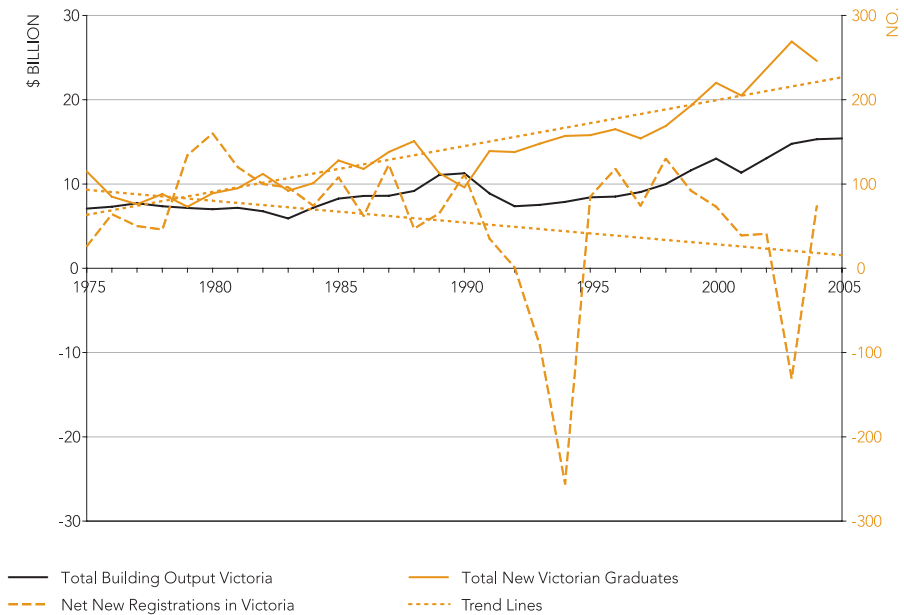
The first part is represented by this introductory text, accompanied by a set of historical data contextualising building construction and the architectural profession within the economy at large. The series has been structured in a way to clarify that, while Australia's national wealth has increased alongside urbanisation, building's contribution to the economy and architects' statistical share of output value per capita has diminished. While the second reduction can be rationalised in light of the maturation of the profession and the subsequent multiplication of its ranks, in itself a sign of success, the data still raise the question as to whether a substantial reconsideration of architects' horizons is in order, both geographically and technically, lest to create a dislocation between work expectations and work prospects in future generations.

In line with this premise, the second part provides an introspective analysis of the architectural profession, and includes a broad variety of contributions that come from, or focus on, different perspectives—from unionism to outsourcing, technology to liability, economic value to social roles. The idea behind this section is to highlight a range of issues that architects are facing today while stressing the importance of technical education, in the sense of an industrially specific but conceptually broad culture of work, open discussion and, above all, community awareness. This is to suggest that a critical challenge confronting the profession in today's Australia, and the advanced world for that matter, may not be the extent of its markets but rather the extent of architects' work recognition in society. While some of the contributions are descriptive of the problems, others delve into the environmental and economic importance of upholding design standards for the community in its various facets.

7. BUILDING OUTPUT PER REGISTERED ARCHITECT IN VICTORIA



8. NET ARBV REGISTRATIONS v NET NEW GRADUATES IN VICTORIA



The third part revolves around past, present and future demands of construction. In the attempt to identify what a building market is and how it intersects architects' activity, we combined historical industrial statistics on the production of building stock with contributions from construction promoters, decision-makers and stakeholders. In this case, the issues we were interested in teasing out concerned the impact of a changing financial and risk allocation landscape over the definition of needs, the procurement of services and the organisation of processes. Particularly, we wanted this section of *TAKE 5* to stimulate active discussion on the meanings of 'value', 'productivity' and 'performance'—highly inflated but often hollow words in the jargon of construction debate—thus helping consider their relationship to design quality and environmental assets.

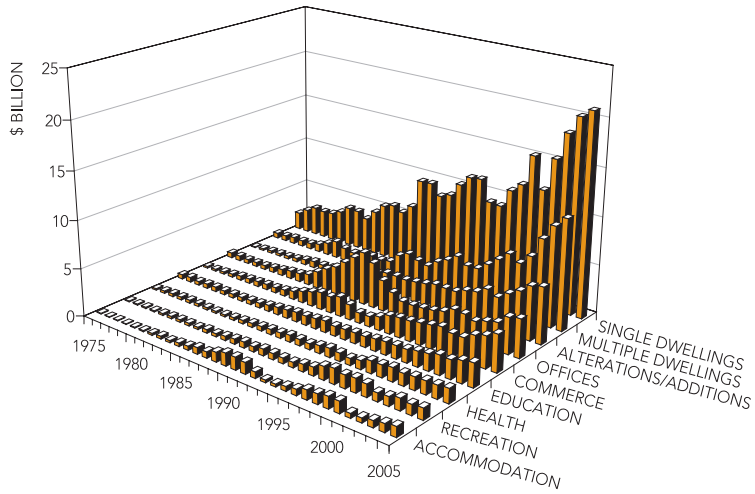
The fourth part attempts to give another relationship, that between building activity, urban growth and social geography, a policy dimension. In order to do this, it enlists the support of government architects and social scientists, and asks them to consider whether and how the challenges contained in the previous analyses can be met at a political level. This section offers the possibility to articulate the connection between architecture and planning, statutory frameworks and cultural ambitions, political strategies and professional realities. While research comes out of this discussion as a critical tool for the advancement of the profession, architects' ability to maintain a discerning position vis-à-vis official objectives and programs remains an essential requirement for their active engagement with the future of the discipline.

By building upon all the arguments raised thus far, *TAKE 5's* fifth and conclusive part outlines the points that should structure the professional agenda for a sustainable practice in architecture. In support of such points, examples of how the proper valuation or revaluation of architecture might proceed are provided, firstly by indicating the rhetoric that one should employ to convey its importance, and secondly by adopting some new strategies for competing with other goods in the marketplace and the city.

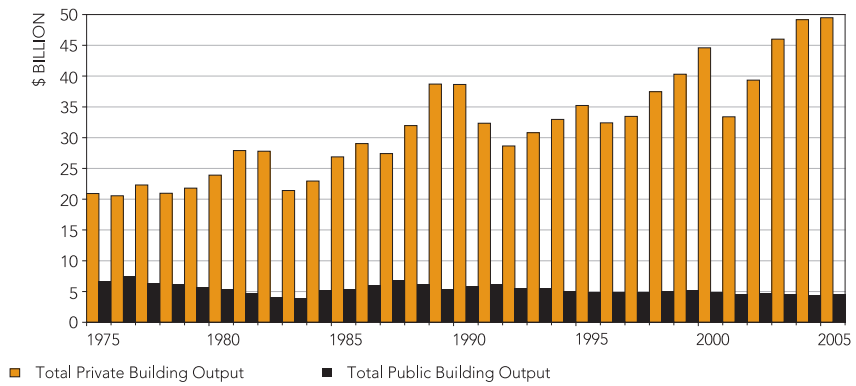
¹ Manfredo Tafuri, 'L'architecture dans le boudoir: The language of criticism and the criticism of language' (1974), in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

² Edwin Abbott, *Flatland*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983 (1st Edition, Seeley and Co, London 1884).

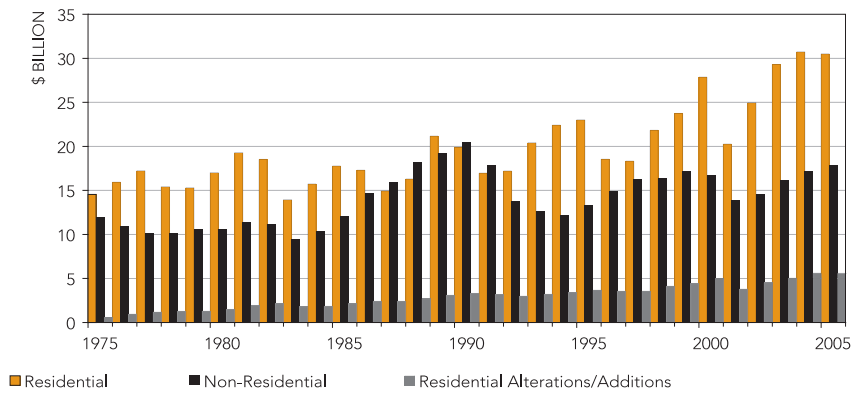
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10. BUILDING WORK DONE BY MARKET SECTOR IN AUSTRALIA



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ABS: Cat No. 5220.0 TABLE 35. Household Income Account, Victoria - Current Prices
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