

WHAT'S NOT THERE

Look about you. What do you see? People, places, possessions. Physical things, all items through which daily life occurs and is expressed. We are constantly surrounded by so much that frequently we do not even see what is there, nor do we even think about it. What is, just is, and what is important to some is of little interest to others. When it comes, however, to making a choice between alternatives, it is time to stop for a moment, time to think of what you don't see – what, in fact, is not there. It is possible to be well informed about what you can see, but have you thought about what might be hidden or disguised, or, in fact, just not there? How important is this and does it really matter? Look, for instance, at property, at travel and at information.

Property is a good place to start because everyone knows about property, or at least thinks that they do. Visit a display village with its neat paths, rolls of turf and professionally decorated interiors. See how spaces flow from lounge to dining room, from kitchen to terrace. Open space, lots of open space. Feels good. This style of construction relies on exterior load bearing walls and occasional internal pillars for roof support. Open spaces flow to staircases. Think about hot summer days and cold winter nights. Large homes on small blocks often block ventilating breezes, and the easy answer is airconditioning. Pleasant as this is, it will become an increasingly expensive solution with a foreseeable rise in the cost of electricity. Look again at this open planned house - is there any way spaces can be isolated for heating and cooling?

Walk through this house looking for what's not there. Of course there is no mess – no children's toys, no newspapers lying around. No-one lives there. But just imagine you lived there. Start in the upstairs ensuite. Where would you put your toothbrush, your makeup. Is there sufficient light? How many towels can you hang? Into the bedroom – check for cupboard space. The walk-in robe looks good empty, but think of it full. Are the hanging rails accessible if you are less than tall? If so, where do the shoes go? Double hanging is good for separates, but doesn't allow space for shoes underneath. Shoe storage is, for many people, a major problem. To-day bedrooms are generally adequately sized, but in the 1970s many bedrooms for children had two narrow single beds and perhaps a small dressing table. This looked good on quick inspection, but where was the desk and chair and storage for books? Imagine this room with all the

paraphernalia of a teenager - a guitar in the corner, posters on the walls, let alone sporting gear to be stored.

Having inspected the bedrooms upstairs, come down the stairs. How many to a flight? How high the riser? How wide the tread? Stairs can be easy or tiring. Steep flights save precious space, but are tiring to live with. Think about the family that will live here. If it is a young family, then stairs may be no problem. But what if Gran and Pa come to visit, perhaps to babysit. Can they manage the stairs? Alternatively, if you make up a bed in the study, is there a full bathroom downstairs? This will be needed too when someone breaks a leg or is otherwise immobilised.

Into the kitchen – how stunning this looks. Not a mark on the sink, nor a stain on the stove. This would have to be a dream come true. Open the cupboards and note the adjustable shelves. So far so good. Do you serve dinner on those large white plates so popular to-day? Often they are wider than the depth of high cupboards. Can you reach safely into those cupboards. Can you store trays? What about tall bottles of fruit juice and spaghetti? Are the shelves in the pantry strong enough to carry substantial weight? Can you see into the back of the pantry? Is there sufficient storage for kitchen appliances or will they live on the bench? Is there room in the kitchen for more than one worker? What about kitchen waste? Is there a bin for general rubbish and another for compost or recycling? Think about all the items and equipment in your kitchen and imagine them here.

Where does the family eat breakfast? Can someone in the kitchen talk to someone not in the kitchen? Can you see a TV from the kitchen? Supervise children from the kitchen?

This display home will certainly have a family area with a lounge, TV and coffee table. Imagine four or five people here. Are they all comfortably seated? Can they all see the TV? Is there multi-media storage? Storage for books and CDs? Would a family computer be used here so that parents could be aware of children's computer use? For a young family, is there room for children to play and store toys?

This family room is now the heart of the house and will probably have lots of glass opening to a terrace or outside. Is there adequate privacy? Does it flow well to the outside?

These are all tangible problems – problems that can be measured and resolved on paper. What about those that are less tangible but nevertheless vitally important? What is the aspect? How and where does the sun come into the house in summer and in winter? Whether there is a view created by elevation or one by a garden, views do not impact comfort as does aspect. In an ideal world, a home would be oriented 10 degrees east of north with eaves designed to admit sun deep into the home on winter mornings and exclude it early in summer when the sun is so much higher in the sky. Consider which rooms would suffer the heat of burning summer sun and which rooms would be buffered from this heat.

Another intangible is sound, or noise. This, and heat, may be relieved by proper insulation in both walls and ceiling. Put this on your ‘what’s not there’ list and check the grading.

Having tired of the display village, find a home that declares ‘open for inspection’ and park outside. Walk down the drive – how beautiful are the overhanging trees. No leaves on the drive – how big a job is that? The gardens beside seem freshly planted – will these survive? What was there before? This home has been lived in, and answers may be easier to observe. Where do the mower and garden tools live? How big is the broom cupboard? Is the hot water system adequate? Keep looking for furniture that isn’t there – perhaps a buffet or sideboard in the dining room, chairs in the family room, desks in bedroom,

In the context of property, *what is not there* is frequently negative. There are other circumstances where *what is not there* is an absolute positive. Think of the ideal traveller – the one who travels with only two pairs of shoes, with clothes that mix and match to cover many occasions. No heavy suitcases to struggle with at airports, no charge for excess luggage. No time wasted in deciding to wear this or that. With extreme discipline a minimum wardrobe is achievable and rewarding in that the traveller may be flexible and able to move easily to take advantage of the opportunities that inevitably arise.

Australia to-day is full of grey nomads on the move. This substantial group shows how it is possible to live comfortably for long periods with just a minimum of possessions. It is possible to be weighed down and possessed by possessions. In leaving them behind, one is much lighter and travels more easily. Other aspects of life become more important –

relationships and experiences can be more enjoyable when not burdened with excess 'things'. Hoarders cannot see this. For them, many memories are intrinsically entwined with 'things', and they fear, perhaps, loss of those memories if they part with their 'things'. Frequently the space occupied by these possessions is worth more than their market value, but then how does one measure *personal* value?

What is not there is very important when it comes to information. At times there is so much information overload that it is difficult to stop and ask *what is not there*. It could be that the bias of a committee is such that it does not look for an alternative view. The anti-climate-change brigade claims that grants are readily available to those looking to show evidence of climate change, and that this has created bias towards that view. It could be that commercial advantage is behind the promotion of alternative health products. Stop to ask what are the base assumptions for the evidence offered. Remember always that flawed assumptions destroy credibility.

In relation to property there is much information publicly available and purchasers frequently rely on agents and solicitors to make enquiries and searches for them. When specific searches are not made and assumptions made in lieu, then major problems may arise. One such case is the proposed by-pass of Kenmore, for which a land corridor was resumed nearly 40 years ago. Those who now claim to be injuriously affected as a result of purchasing property in that area should look to *what is not there* – which is either advice from the real estate agent who is required to disclose known information, or insufficient searches by a solicitor. Claiming ignorance, or following local lore that it would never happen, is a very weak argument when information is in the public arena.

What is not there is also apparent in information in travel brochures. Comparing features of competing tours can be quite difficult. How long does the tour spend at featured places? Is it a drive-past observation or is it a detailed tour? Is the tour leader the guide, or are specialist guides used? How far out of town is the accommodation? How many meals are included? Are travellers left to find dinner in remote locations with little choice? What is included and what is extra? How does climate affect comfort at the time chosen for a holiday? Try comparing travel insurance policies. How much is 'enough' cover? Is the excess reasonable or is it excess? Answering some of these questions has made very successful businesses for travel guides such as Lonely Planet.

In everyday life political spin can disguise *what is not there*. Look at the law and note how different are styles of legislation. Taxation law, for instance, is black letter law with all the details spelt out. People go to great lengths to distinguish a problem from the situation set out by the law. By contrast, consumer protection is warm and fuzzy with general principles enunciated. Companies may not engage in deceptive and misleading practices. Here the problem is to fit the law to the circumstances. Talk back radio frequently reveals flaws in proposed legislation as individuals apply new rules to personal situations. Think of the intense debate that preceded the introduction of GST, and the current problems with changing tax rules on fringe benefits.

When we came to Brisbane in 1965, what was not here for us was friends and family and the consequent level of support. Whilst starting as a negative, this drove us to make new friendships and networks to fill the void. These led to a greater involvement in our community and expansion of our horizons. The transfer had taken away our support system and ultimately made us stronger.

In choosing a home, we certainly looked for what was not there, but were naturally constrained by our limited budget to choose what we saw as the 'best fit' from the alternatives on offer. We didn't have an ensuite, a walk in robe or a family room. The absence of these did not make us either more or less happy – at that time we were scarcely aware that they even existed. Over time we observed and learned what was important to us, and expressed that through the three homes that we built and others that we bought.

On the information front, it is hard now to imagine life without the internet. It is necessary to qualify the source before accepting the information, but just the existence of the internet invites the asking of questions. The trick is, of course, to ask the right question. If you don't ask the right question, you'll not get the right answer is a favourite saying in our home. In searching the internet, pay attention to the website address. A web address with g.o.v. (gov) shows that it is a government department and should be credible. Likewise with uni in the address. Addresses with com and net belong to the commercial world, and should be recognised as such.

Having looked so hard for what is not there, the next question is – does it really matter? For some things yes, for others maybe. Each of us has slightly different values and what is important to one is immaterial to another. In some items, such as stairs, good design leads to safety, and there should be no compromise in this area. Decisions have to be made. Sometimes this is exciting, but it can also be scary. Many decisions in life are a compromise, and always there is the opportunity cost of an alternate choice. What should be understood is how to seek out and recognise values that meet our needs. There is information, gut feeling and then ... what's not there!

This dilemma was expressed by Donald Rumsfeld in this way:

There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know.

Perhaps he should just have said - be aware of WHAT'S NOT THERE.