

Depicting the New City: The Iconography of a Town Center

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THE SHOPPING CENTER AS TOWN CENTER

This paper examines the shopping center as town center phenomenon, and explores the iconography of one such center. Shopping centers are often portrayed as the new social spaces of the contemporary, decentralized city (Lefebvre, 1974; Gottdiener, 1985, 1995; Shields, 1992). The forces of late capitalism have produced a new type of abstract social space that is a product of capitalism and the world of commodities and the exchange of goods. This form of abstract social space is most clearly demonstrated in the shopping center or mall. The shopping center's role as a social space is seen as problematic by some critics, as it is not considered, in their traditional terms, to be a truly public space due to the patterns of development and ownership that give it form (Sibley, 1988; Morse, 1991; Goss, 1993). Despite the misgivings regarding its qualifications as a social space, the shopping center, and the people who develop and design them, increasingly aspire to capture for these places a position of social centrality and significance. Their reasons for doing so vary. To view it in a positive light, it can be seen as a mark of the public responsiveness of the designers and the management, carrying on from pioneer designers such as Victor Gruen. He believed that shopping centers could "restore the lost sense of commitment and belonging; we can counteract the phenomenon of alienation, isolation and loneliness and achieve a sense of identity" (1973, p.11). In a more cynical light, it has been suggested that the civic aspirations of the shopping center stem from a profound sense of guilt regarding the unbridled conspicuous consumption that drives the typical center. In order to mitigate this guilt, there is designed into the center "the means for a fantasized dissociation from the act of shopping" (Goss, 1993, p.19). Equally cynically, this approach can be seen as a series of maneuvers aimed at winning concessions from local authorities and increasing retail traffic by manipulating local customer loyalty.

Whatever the motivation behind them, the aspirations toward social centrality tend to result in a design approach that is strongly dependent on the replication of an iconography based on traditional notions of social centrality and urban gathering. Harvey (1989) suggests that it may be possible to create a spurious sense of togetherness and participation in urban life in spaces such as these through the manipulation of certain iconographies. The orchestrated production of an urban image can, in some cases, fill the civic void that tends to dominate the contemporary decentralized city. This paper examines in detail the iconography of a particular center intent on becoming "a new town center, a new community hub" (Robina Town Center, 1996).



Fig. 1. The Robina Town Center, Gold Coast, Australia.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: THE ROBINA TOWN CENTER

Stage 1 of the new Robina Town Center was opened in April 1996.

It is located in the hinterland of the popular tourist strip of the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia. Since 1981, a variety of housing types have been developed in the Robina area accommodating approximately 17,000 people, and a miscellany of retail, commercial, recreational and other support facilities have scattered themselves around the Robina locale. The new town center was designed to consolidate these facilities into one central location, and to become not just "a center" on the Gold Coast, but rather, "the center" of the region. The new town center aspires to supply for Robina's residents and visitors both an urban experience and a sense of community (Cameron Chisholm & Nicol, 1993).

The major element in the town center is the retail component, with a total lettable area of approximately 100,000 sqm over the three stages of the project. In addition to the retail uses, a number of community facilities have been incorporated in the first stage, including a library, public halls and meeting rooms, a Christian Outreach center, banks and medical centers. The Center presents itself as being "much more than a shopping center, it is a new town, a new community hub" (Robina Town Center, 1996). With such

stated objectives, the Robina Town Center is a good example of the "shopping center as town center" phenomenon.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

In the interviews that led to the appointment of the two architectural consultants for the town center, an approach that embraced "breaking the formula" of the regional shopping center was emphasized. Rather than playing on their expertise and experience in building large "formula" centers, both the Jerde Partnership, an American architectural practice and retail consultant, and Cameron Chisholm & Nicol, an Australian architectural firm, made very similar, but separate presentations that focused on how to create a new city center, calling on images of successful and memorable city centers from around the world. Both asked the rhetorical question, "What makes a community?." The European market town was thought to have some answers to this question and was, coincidentally, referenced as a successful exemplar in presentations by both the Jerde Partnership and Cameron Chisholm & Nicol. The range and variety of community spaces, the restricted streets, the sense of the architecture having been built up over time, the diversity and lack of consistency in built form and character were all seen as important ingredients in the success of the European market town. From the start, there appeared to be a consensus as to the types of memorable spaces and places to which the new Robina Town Center would aspire.

The idea of basing the design of a retail center on the principles of a town is in no way unique to Robina. Rather, it can be seen to be typical of a particular retail design formula. Rowe (1991), in his analysis of the evolution of shopping complexes, describes common styling phases that are identifiable within shopping environments. From a history-based villagelike aesthetic with the constant metaphor of the traditional European market town, through to the technical, cool, clean and white machine aesthetic of the downtown mall, to a postmodern mix of both, there is a range of garbs that dress-up the contemporary retail space. Gottdiener (1995), in his analysis of the semiotics of the mall, identifies overarching motifs that echo Rowe's styling phases. These range from "Ye Olde Kitsch" to "High-Tech Urban." In his socio-semiotic analysis of the sign systems of the mall, he suggests that these styling choices are simply variants of a form of nostalgia for the urban socio-spatial experience of the past. The mall space, whether it be of the village style or the slick white style, attempts to create a density of both use and population that alludes to the urban public space of agglomeration found in the traditional city center. The experience of density sought in the mall is in distinct contrast with the design patterns of the present-day deconcentrated environment referred to in Gottdiener's (1985) words as the "polynucleated, sprawling metropolitan region" (p.198). Thus the vicarious experience sought in the mall is one that refers to city environments of the past, and generally harks after an experience largely denied the public by the environment beyond the mall.

The olde town motif comes in for special consideration in Gottdiener's (1995) semiotic analysis of the mall (Gottdiener, 1995). Based on a nostalgic view akin to the Main Street experience of Disneyland, this motif is particularly ironic in Gottdiener's view as it lionizes the socio-spatial form of the traditional street that contemporary patterns of development, including the mall, have long since helped to destroy. They are, in fact, "simulations after the destruction of their own referents" (Gottdiener, 1995, p.88). The referent in this case is the mythic small-town, pre-automobile Main Street where one walked from store to store to be greeted by mom and pop proprietors who knew your name and your regular order (Langman, 1992). The sign function of the city is recycled in these spaces through the incorporation of such timeless and hopelessly Eurocentric images as the town square, the clock tower and the town well. Nostalgic memories of neighborhood and community and the atten-

dant intimate environments of quaint wood and stucco structures are evoked in stark contrast to the impersonal and sprawling real world in which the simulation is located. Contextual contrast is high. It is, in Gottdiener's view, the strength of this contrast between the contained fantasy and the surrounding reality that gives the shopping mall its potency in semiotic terms.

Thus the Robina Town Center can be seen to exemplify a popular and well-worn approach to the creation of retail space. It contains its own share of fantasy references. Central to the creation of this fantasy was the designers' desire to create an environment that appeared as if it had grown over time, rather than a place that was created as a green-field development. It was the intention of the design team to create a series of places that appeared to have resulted from an accretive process, similar to the manner in which historical villages were established over time. The European city was one of the major images called into play (Cameron, Chisholm & Nicol). The edge of the newly created lake that formed the focus of the town center was to be styled as a working village waterfront, based on a Mediterranean exemplar. Heavy rock walling was to form the base of the waterfront wall in order to give the impression that the harbor had grown out of the earth in a similar fashion to many of the European cities. Radiating out from this central space was a series of zones with different characters and atmospheres. Building forms, construction details, colors, textures, paving patterns, signage and street furniture were to vary as one moved through the site. This variety was aimed at creating the sense that it had all happened over time, imbuing the center with a sense of history and a patina of age.

Thus, it was a highly Euro-urbanist approach adopted by the design team. This term is drawn from the work of Brill (1989). The Euro-urbanist sees the historic urban centers, town squares and market places of Europe as the best and clearest exemplars of how public spaces should function. When conceiving of a public space, the Euro-urbanist designer calls upon a romanticized composite set of images of public life drawn from many different times and places. There is a little of the Parisian boulevard and the Mediterranean fishing village, a flavor of the Piazza di San Marco and Milan's Galleria, mixed in with the hurly-burly of the bustling urban street scene taken from a "timeless anywhere" (Brill, 1989, p.9). All of this is packaged in a picturesque and squalor-free setting, in the belief that if the physical form is recreated, the public life of the past, imagined to be more robust and satisfying than our own, will automatically follow. He suggests that there exists a nostalgia and longing for an idealized set of images for the physical stages where public life is meant to be played out. These images, more often than not, privilege a "generic European" aesthetic over any other.

There are a range of iconographic strategies used in creating the vicarious experiences contained within the typical shopping center. These strategies are categorized by Sternberg (1996) under the three headings of staged authenticity, simulation and pastiche. The iconographic strategy of pastiche is clearly at work at the Robina Town Center. Sternberg suggests that pastiche is leading edge iconography as it is able to powerfully combine both of the other strategies of simulation and staged authenticity. The pastiche of the retail landscape mixes and juxtaposes disparate themes and motifs, which may be simulated, or authentic, or some combination of these. The incongruent mix is meant to stimulate, divert, entertain and entice the shopper, and because of its multivalent nature, the resultant pastiche can simultaneously appeal to an audience that varies by ethnicity, age, economic status and interest. The multi-thematic compositions that result are enjoyed by a consumer audience that has long been exposed to such "labyrinthine cultural settings" (p.157) through popular entertainment, television, the cinema and earlier generation retail environments. The melange of effective symbols, motifs, themes and images can be shaped into appealing combinations aimed at enticing and engaging the buying public. In some cases these combinations are based on systematic research aimed at discovering the wants of the target population. More often than not,

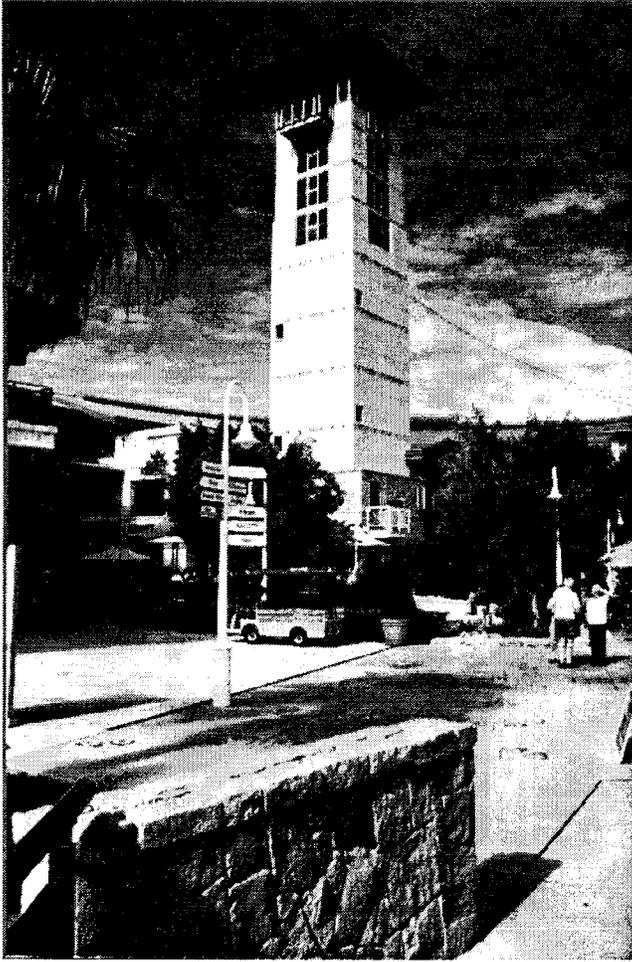


Fig. 2. The clock tower, or campanile, within the town square.

however, the iconographic choices made by designers are based on presumptions as to what the public desires, and the recycling of images which have gained popular currency by being seen to “work” at other centers. The verity of such presumptions is very rarely questioned or tested.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC RESULTS

The following analysis of the iconography of the Robina Town Center aims to identify the visual images thought by the designers to be essential in the making of a new town center. The iconography of the center can be explored at a variety of scales, ranging from the images that support the broad conceptual intentions, to the individual design of the buildings and spaces. This analysis will focus on one particular area of the town center, the central public space of the town square.

The town square of the Robina Town Center is conceived of as both the operational heart, and the symbolic heart of the center. The town square, and the dominating structure of the clock tower/campanile, fit well within the shopping center typology identified by both Rowe (1991) and Gottdiener (1995) that draws its references from the traditional European market town and the central open public spaces of such towns. In the case of Robina, the architectural detail of the space avoids the sentimental excesses of a very literal “Ye Olde Kitsch” interpretation (Gottdiener 1995, p. 88). The detailed design of the space is neither overly “themed” nor greatly “Disneyfied”, but, rather, approaches the interpretation of the traditional town square in a politely postmodern manner. This approach

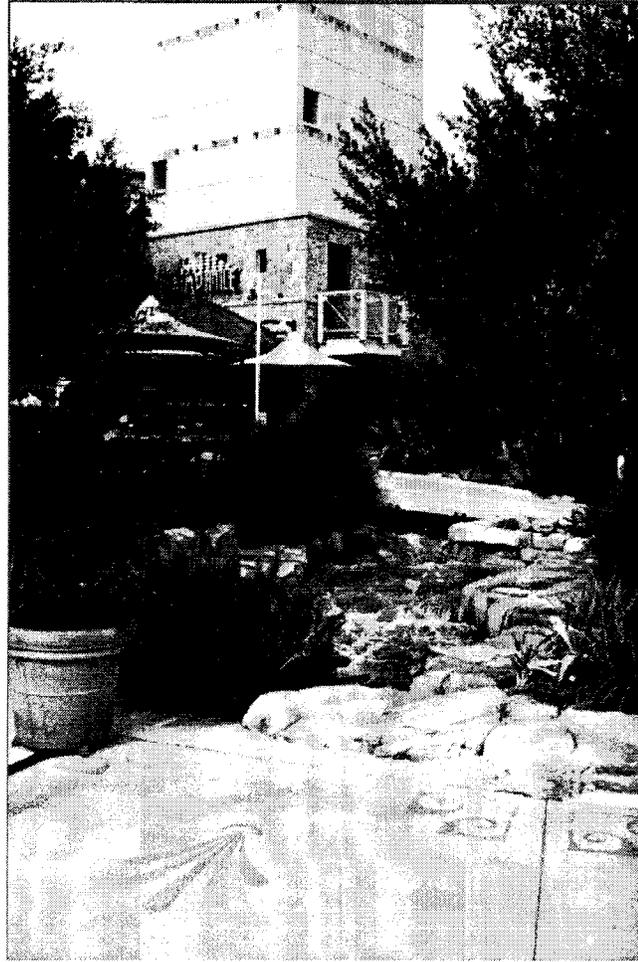


Fig. 3. The creek bed water feature at the base of the clock tower/campanile.

is evident in the building forms and materials that can be seen from within the square.

The most dominating feature within the town square is the clock tower. The tower is a remarkably popular icon in retail environments. It is thought to make reference to traditional urban public space through its association with the historic civic institutions of the town hall, the post office and the railway station. According to the Robina designers, the clock tower within the town square enhances sight lines and establishes a central landmark. It orientates and draws visitors through the center and, along with the other towers within the center, creates “a unique skyline; a singular village identity” (Cameron Chisholm & Nicol, 1993, p. 1).

The clock tower is a somewhat ironic choice of image for the typical shopping center as time, along with daylight and weather, has long been excluded from centers in an effort to create an environment sealed from the exigencies of daily life. But its power as a postmodern icon of “civicness” and social centrality tends to override these concerns. And it is possible, of course, with a little artistic license, to remove the constant reminder of the passage of time from a clock tower. This has been achieved with the Robina tower as it does not, in fact, have a clock face, either analogue or digital, apparent. Perhaps then the tower is merely a look-out tower, despite the fact that one cannot access the upper levels of the structure in order to look out? But the tower is, indeed, a clock tower, and a campanile, no less. It marks the hours with a pre-recorded cacophony of chimes, regionally appropriate kookaburra and Australian native birdcalls, whirling wind and swirling water sounds. Thus it neatly combines references to both the natural and the civic order



Fig. 4. The tiled mosaic feature within the town square, and the colonnaded shopfronts that ring the town square.

within one rather dominating and paradoxical edifice. Its Euro-urbanist references are also apparent as the structure lends its name to the eponymously titled Café Campanile located at the base of the tower.

The water feature at the base of the tower is another element that combines references to both the natural and the civic. The water feature is part of the designers' imagined narrative that conceives of the center as evolving as a village over time (Cameron, Chisholm & Nicol, 1993).

The source of all water in the project was at the origin of the "town" settlement at the campanile tower. The tower was built over natural rock at a high point, with water flowing from fissures in the rock in the manner of a mountain stream at its origin. (p. 56).

Thus, the water feature at the base of the tower marks the origins of the imagined town, and references the location of town wells traditionally located in the market square. The naturalistic creek bed that leads from this central point plays on references to nature, a popular device in the iconography of shopping centers. The creek reappears as a rough hewn gorge as it makes its watery way to the shopping level below the town square, and onwards to its final destination, the lake beyond.

Other natural elements within the town square include the stand of palm trees to the western side of the campanile. These trees were considered conceptually to be a part of the "analogy to a highland source" (Cameron Chisholm & Nicol, 1993, p. 59). Despite the fact that they are planted in a regular geometric pattern, they were conceived of as a "remnant" of the previous natural environment that existed before the town center became established. Palm trees tend to evoke thoughts of the exotic and the tropical, and in that sense, they manage to make reference to both the local, Gold Coast spirit, and at the same time, a spirit of "elsewhere" (Goss 1993).

Another "remnant" piece within the town square is the tiled mosaic feature inset within the paving. This feature approaches the status of a piece of art, and its iconographic function is to raise the civic tone of the town square. The design of the mosaic, with its watery theme and naturalistic references, supports the idea that the town square is some sort of point of origin and beginning from which the town has grown. As a piece of visual art, the mosaic's sense of quality and status is certainly highlighted by the two dimensional pattern that has been stenciled onto the ground around the mosaic area. This pattern was added subsequent to the center being opened, in an attempt to create a busier, more "visually interesting" ground plane. In conversation with representatives from the Jerde Partnership, it has been noted that such attempts to "busy the place up" have done little to promote the quality of the place and its townlike

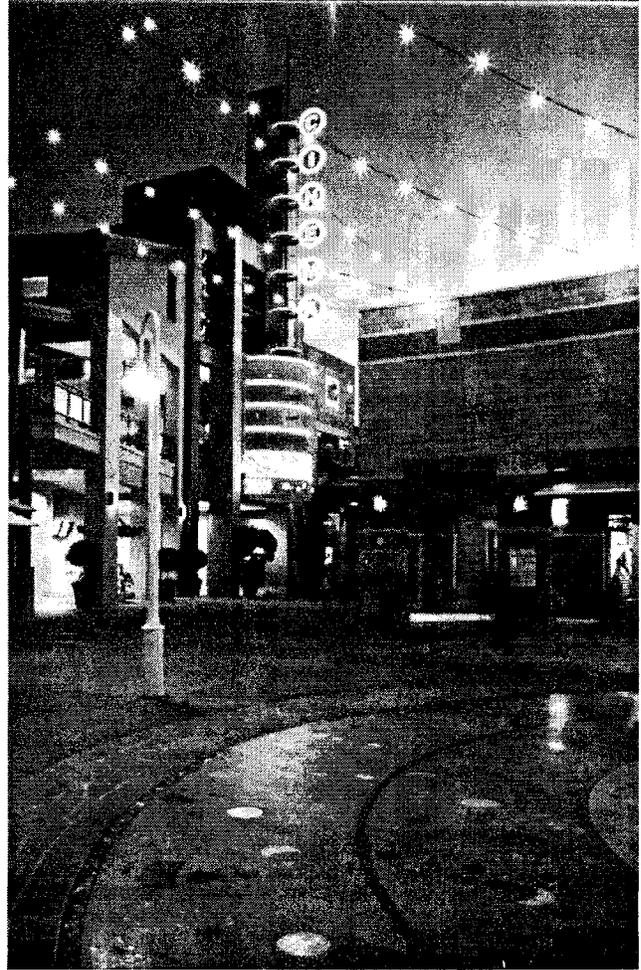


Fig. 5. The carnival lights form a canopy over the town square and set off the surrounding civic iconography.

atmosphere. Such piecemeal "improvements" are thought by the designers to detract from the spirit of the place and hurt its civic aspirations.

The colonnaded shopfronts that ring the town square extend the civic iconography by alluding to the urban arcades of an old town center. The sandstone colored banded blockwork walls, punctuated with stonework feature courses, lend a substantial presence to the square, and are in contrast to the lightweight shopfronts of the typical shopping center arcade. Another feature of these blockwork walls is that most postmodern of elements, the keystone, which appears to have floated away from its usual structural position over an opening to come to rest along the top of the parapet wall.

Iconography that speaks of the liminal space of the fairground and the carnival (Zukin 1991) is also to be found within the town square. The strings of colored lights hung from the top of the tower create a fairground atmosphere. The relocatable retail barrows, first made popular in festival marketplace developments and now present in most retail centers, similarly add to the carnival character. The presence of buskers and entertainers continue the fairground theme, as does the miniature "Thomas the Tank Engine" train ride that carries excited children around the town square and along the open streets that stretch out from this central space. These elements are in no way unique to the Robina Town Center and can easily be identified in most retail centers. Yet their presence is noteworthy as they contribute strongly to the overall character of the center.



Fig. 6. The campanile in Siena, Italy, and Robina's own campanile.

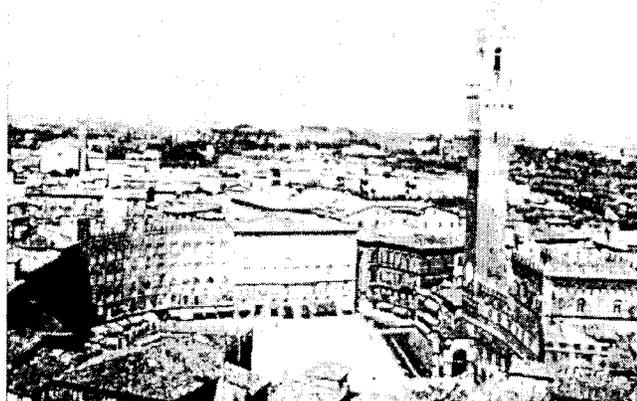


Fig. 7. A town well at Robina and San Gimignano, Italy.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the Robina Town Center presented here highlights the shopping center as town center phenomenon. Iconographically the center is seen to be strongly influenced by a Euro-urbanist agenda, as illustrated somewhat facetiously by Figures 6 to 8. A Euro-urbanist influence is, however, in no way unique to Robina, as references to the European market place and the traditional main street are almost prototypical in retail design (Rowe, 1991; Goss, 1993; Gottdiener, 1995). Therefore this study of Robina is considered representative of a particular approach to the creation of new town and retail centers. The iconographic strategy of pastiche is clearly at work within the areas of the town center examined. A set of idealized images with a strong sense of nostalgia for the urban socio-spatial experience of the past is identifiable.

The fact that the images adopt a generic European flavor despite their antipodean location appears to be of little import when the iconographic strategy of pastiche is at play. The pastiche of Robina, is, in fact, not simply an isolated exercise in Euro-references. Rather, the center is based on an international retail formula, employing iconic images long recognized as prototypical by the critics. This results in the propagation of comparable centers from the west coast of America to the east coast of Australia. The implications of this strategy are worthy of further research. If the blank canvas of a new city center is to be filled with iconic images from other times and other places,

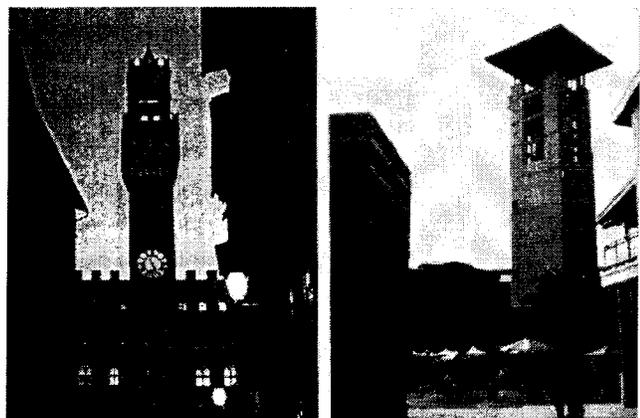


Fig. 8. Another Italian reference, comparing the Robina and Siena campos.

where does that leave the expression of regional variation and local place? Do the people who use these new town centers recognize and respond to the images? Is their use of the center, or their sense of attachment to the center, effected by the iconography? In order to answer these questions, the popular iconographies of new centers must be recognized, identified, and understood. This study of Robina contributes to that recognition, identification and understanding.

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