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Conversations: The future precinct

Slattery Forum Paper: 02

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The future precinct

‘We each bring different understandings. Some people may say the precinct is the point where some architects meet their existentialist limits. But it is unanimous that a precinct has to be made together, built together – it has to be collaboratively developed.’

Andrew Mackenzie, Director, URO Publications and City Lab

Government decision makers, tertiary executives and global architecture firm directors came together recently to share their insight on the increasing importance of precincts in shaping the story of our cities and people.

Hosted by Slattery, the forum included an eloquent address by Dr Robert Nelson, leading cultural commentator and art critic for The Age as the key note. Andrew Mackenzie, Director of URO Publications and Founding Director of City Lab guided the discussion that followed by panellists, Ingrid Bakker, Principal and Board Director, HASSELL, Naomi Barun, Manager, Campus Design and Planning for The University of Melbourne, Jocelyn Chiew, Manager, Campus Design, Quality and Planning at Monash University, Leanne Hodyl, Managing Director, Hodyl + Co and Ian McDougall, Founding Director, ARM Architecture.

Current precincts the panellists are working on include Fishermans Bend, Melbourne Arts Precinct Transformation, Monash University Masterplan delivery, The University of Melbourne’s Student Precinct, Home of the Arts (HOTA, Gold Coast), Adelaide’s Riverbank precinct and Central Geelong amongst other urban projects, providing rich material for this dynamic discussion.

What goes into a precinct?

If done well, new precincts encapsulate the latest social and sustainable thinking and draw on the best collaborative strategies to enhance city liveability and the future for the next generations.

There are different ways of thinking of a precinct depending on who you are. Kicking off the panel discussion, Andrew Mackenzie suggested, ‘We each bring different understandings. Some people may say the precinct is the point where some architects meet their existentialist limits. But it is unanimous that a precinct has to be made together, built together – it has to be collaboratively developed.’

Considerable complexity lies within the multiple overlays of a precinct including planning and zoning and other government or development considerations. For The University of Melbourne, well underway on the development of a new Student Precinct, a \$229 million hub at the corner of Swanston and Grattan streets, Naomi Barun has had to contend with the planning and program for the new Metro Tunnel and Parkville station being built under Grattan Street, connecting the university and the adjacent major health precinct to public transport. Melbourne Connect, a major new science, technology and industry hub with adjacent student accommodation and a new home for Science Gallery Melbourne is taking shape opposite. The refurbishment of the Ian Potter Museum to accommodate a new entry and education centre is also taking place concurrently. There are various tensions between different stakeholder and user groups to be considered and resolved that can impact the spatial design of a precinct and its development.



The University of Melbourne's New Student Precinct

The University of Melbourne's New Student Precinct will transform the student experience at the Parkville campus. Designed by the Lyons Architecture-led consortium, the project involves the redevelopment and/or refurbishment of nine buildings over a city block and will deliver 37,050m² of new or refurbished internal and external building and landscape space. Over 12,000 students have been engaged in development workshops and other forms of consultation and testing which will deliver a consolidated base for all student related services and amenities and will include collaborative meeting spaces, study spaces, food and beverage offerings.

The New Student Precinct also includes the Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development, Murrup Barak, a signature project embracing Indigenous culture and supporting Indigenous development for both Indigenous and non-indigenous communities, part of the University's reconciliation action plan. A wide range of co-curricular activities, wellbeing programs and cultural activations will have a new home at the Parkville campus, with the Precinct also housing a purpose-built Arts and Culture Building and a new amphitheatre, enabling it to be part of the cultural spine of Melbourne along Swanston Street, adjacent to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the new Science Gallery Melbourne, the Grimwade Centre for the Cultural Materials Conservation, the State Library of Victoria through to the Arts Precinct and the University's own Victorian College of the Arts.

Slattery was appointed to assist the University to complete a feasibility cost plan and has since been engaged to deliver cost management services for the full design and construction works.



New Student Precinct, The University of Melbourne, designed by Lyons Architecture-led consortium

Good vs bad precincts

McDougall suggests that there are good and bad precincts and as designers of precincts, architects are constantly trying to find the strategies and elements that will work, to identify the tool kit.

'A good precinct is about a complex integration of uses for users.' This may include programming and temporary installations that reveal new perspectives of a precinct rather than only considering bricks and mortar projects to revive a

“Complicated things— histories, ecosystems and relationships are needed; not just working on the built stuff but also the grain of human occupation. Things must come into play that often lie outside the “theme” of a precinct.’

Ian McDougall

public domain. He also noted the idea for—and progressive development of—Melbourne's arts precinct, remarkable in its longevity, initiated in 1943 when NGV was first proposed and finally opening in 1962 with the later performing arts venues in its vicinity following: Hamer Hall- 1982, State Theatre- 1984, Malthouse- 1986, Australian Ballet Centre- 1988, ACCA- 2002, Melbourne Recital Centre and MTC's Southbank Theatre which both opened in 2009. The current transformation project for the precinct reimagines it and the city fabric by creating a new civic spine, improving connection between each facility including two new ones to be designed and constructed in the next five years.

'Clearly, simple branding IDs is not it. And a giant sculptural stairway isn't it

either. Complicated things—histories, ecosystems and relationships are needed; not just working on the built stuff but also the grain of human occupation. Things must come into play that often lie outside the “theme” of a precinct.'

'A good precinct might have a more complex integration of uses, movements and opportunities than we think. For the designer, we need to consider what can we do to sustain an authenticity to a community, or generate cultural complexity in the face of simplistic branding.'

Jocelyn Chiew painted a similar picture in her comparison of Monash University Clayton campus, as it was in 2010, and as it sits today, at the heart of a National Employment and Innovation Cluster in Melbourne's expanding South East region. In 2019, the campus is a vibrant space, 'Thrumming with activity; programmed and curated by day and often busy into the night and on weekends.'

'Vehicles have been relegated to the campus perimeter and in their place, are new pedestrian walks, landscapes and architectures, offering choice of amenity and occupation. Modernist icons – including the Ming Wing and Alexander Theatre – have been updated, to engage more meaningfully with contemporary learning styles and the legacy of surrounding nationally significant landscapes.

Buildings are no longer mono-faculty but multi, and contribute to the goal of net zero carbon emissions from our Australian campuses by 2030. At the Campus Centre, an undercover, open air edge enables students, staff and visitors to congregate in all types of weather; to study, socialise, collaborate, do business and innovate. The food is on par with the best in the region; and users are proud to invite others onto campus to share these experiences.'

In Chiew's understanding, the university is a peak incubator of knowledge and innovation and its campus is a growing precinct that is welcoming, inclusive and dynamic. It influences the city around it, facilitating partnerships with industry and business with far-reaching benefits and possibilities. For her, the question is what can happen, 'At the merger of campus and cluster; what better futures will our new precinct grow into?'

Melbourne Arts Precinct Transformation

The Melbourne Arts Precinct Transformation project is a game-changing programme of works that will see the delivery of a new icon for Melbourne – National Gallery of Victoria Contemporary, a new performing arts facility at 1 City Road to house the Australian Performing Arts Museum and Australian Music Vault, and an elevated pedestrian park creating a new civic spine to St Kilda Road, Flinders Street Station and beyond. The 18,000m² park connects the new facilities with the Australian Ballet Centre, the Arts Centre Melbourne, NGV International, and directly across Southbank Boulevard, Buxton Contemporary and the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne Recital Centre, MTC Southbank Theatre, ABC Melbourne and MSO building, and up Sturt Street to the new Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, Australian Centre of Contemporary Art and the Malthouse Theatre; linking in all around 40 galleries and arts organisations that are located in Southbank. The commitment to this transformation cements Victoria's reputation as a global creative and cultural destination, and will play a leading role in the growth of cultural tourism in the state.

ARM Architecture with Taylor Cullity Lethlean were commissioned to provide masterplanning for the precinct. Ian McDougall, panellist and Founding Director of ARM Architecture has a long relationship with the precinct, designing MTC Southbank Theatre, the Melbourne Recital Centre and Hamer Hall's redevelopment. Slattery has been appointed by Development Victoria to provide Quantity Surveying services to progress the project's detailed planning and the new park and public space, which has been awarded to architecture studio Hassell and NY-based design firm Solid Objects Idenburg Liu to design jointly; so far the only project and design team announced.



Over-use of the word 'precinct'?

'Good precinct design prioritises the experience of the people working and living there, considers the specific qualities of the place and harnesses the opportunity to create a precinct that is greater than the sum of its parts', Leanne Hodyl commented and flagged, 'We also need to call out the over-use of the word precinct. It's bandied around and is a word of the moment.' Hodyl emphasised the need to clearly define what actually makes a precinct and ask, 'What do we love about them?'

Ingrid Bakker from HASSELL reiterated this, 'We think about how people use, enjoy, understand, value places ... we want to create great urban experiences. Regardless of scale, type, location ... our thinking is guided by consistent principles and consistent design process. We always place public experiences and public outcomes first.'

She noted that precincts grow around public spaces, public transport projects, public connectivity and public buildings, bringing back heritage buildings through reusing, giving new life and purpose. 'We look at how we can unlock commercial, creative, cultural and design value.'

Often people think that commercial and community values are in conflict but we think they can be brought together.'

Ingrid Bakker

'Often people think that commercial and community values are in conflict but we think they can be brought together... we're thinking about a 100-year building and legacy; the impact of our decisions. We are thinking about the kind of designs and materials that are resilient... to storm and flood events, to earthquakes, to major social issues like homelessness and economic inequality.'

'Designing for precincts means we need to think about long and short term, big and small scale, temporary and permanent... all at the same time.'

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The precinct exists in 'that' space in between

In considering how language itself has contributed to our common understanding of what a precinct is, key note speaker, Dr Robert Nelson drew attention to the way we 'read' a precinct—a winsome space in so far as it carries a metaphor, they become evocative and suggestive because there is something in the space that we read or recognise.

Our intrinsic understanding is very much shaped by history and culture, regardless of where we are from, to perceive the precinct as a defined zone. Its etymology derives from Latin words for before (prae) and girded (cinctum) – praecinctum in Medieval Latin; setting us up to perceive the belt, the girdle, the zone that lies around an area.

It is therefore automatically and simultaneously a contestable space. Exclusive zoning, i.e. for purely residential or commercial purposes only means that one loses benefits i.e. of co-habitation and interchange. We don't populate the streets in the same way in a commercial district compared to a residential area. Within a precinct, there is a vivacity of exchange and a distinct energy shaped by its purpose.

While we are in an inclusive era at present, we will disallow. Nelson noted, 'If we owned the Acropolis, we would have some shame in admitting an Apple store on the sacred mount...'

Precincts become 'sacralized' spaces; an idea that is equally applied to the physical body. But it becomes paradoxical in the context of architecture, in that 'what' you experience is 'something' about public space that is personal to you.

'That inalienable privacy that is somehow preserved in public space, that's what a precinct can do.'

Precincts encourage delusion – they are built around a fantasy. 'The Louvre courtyard: Who doesn't take on that spirit of French nobility, even though we are who we are. The same fantasies overwhelm everyone else—you imagine yourself incredibly hip.' said Nelson.

Equally, your presence has to be special in a precinct, akin to the landmark, which mimics the body in form (foundation/feet; roof/head).

The precinct subsumes the landmark or any number of landmarks within it by providing a continuity that makes sense and links them.

The precinct exists in 'that' space in between.



The people behind the story

Mackenzie picked up on the idea of creating places that people love and can get behind, and asked the panel to talk to projects where the people who will use or inhabit them are held in front of the story the whole way through.

At HASSELL, each project has a clear concept to create focus which provides, Bakker noted, 'story-telling from the very beginning, a narrative that runs all the way through.' Regardless of where a project ends up meandering to, this enables the 'buy-in' by stakeholders and can be repeatedly referred back to.

Speaking to Fishermans Bend, Leanne Hodyl highlighted the contentiousness that is associated with precinct development, whereby Australia's largest urban renewal project was zoned first, before any formal and visionary planning had been completed. Success could only be achieved by undoing the initial decisions that had become the barriers to delivering good planning. A strong vision coupled with leadership and most importantly courage was what has brought the project back on track, towards one of the most exciting mixes of industry, technology and education in one area, that will power future economic, social and community outcomes.

McDougall noted the complexity of finding intrigue amongst the widest group of people who will visit, work or live in a precinct. 'There are difficulties in designing something that everyone will love.' Citing the example of Federation Square, he noted 'the contesting of design when it's put forward as well as the ownership of land, which brings up reconciliation. People can be offended by a place that they then grow to love.'



Fishermans Bend

Covering 480 hectares, Fishermans Bend is Australia's largest urban renewal project that will indelibly shape the Melbourne landscape by 2050. Fishermans Bend is planned to be a global benchmark in smart, sustainable development with liveable vibrant neighbourhoods, collocated with education, health, commercial and enterprise options, enabling 80,000 jobs and homes for 80,000 people.

A strategic framework supported by new planning controls guides its implementation and is the result of extensive public consultation and input. Key catalyst projects are underway including Australia's centre of innovation in design and manufacturing, which includes The University of Melbourne, a world leading water recycling plant, planning public transport connections and a new secondary school.

Collaborative partnerships between all levels of government, landowners, businesses, the development sector and service providers are integral to the success of this new neighbourhood, composed of multiple precincts within.

Panellist, Leanne Hodyl, Managing Director of Hodyl & Co was commissioned to develop the urban design strategy for Fishermans Bend, including the design objectives for each precinct and neighbourhood.

Slattery has been involved in Development Victoria's redevelopment of the old General Motors Holden (GMH) site, a 37.5 ha site situated within the Fishermans Bend Employment Precinct, providing cost planning for new site wide infrastructure, transport connections and landscaping. We have also provided cost management services for an incoming tenant to be housed in the existing GMH industrial buildings.

A question of scale and structured thought

Surveying students, their experience at a university is shaped by the immediate program, lecturers, fellow students and their connection with the campus as a place. The campus needs to be more than buildings and that requires further investment in soft infrastructure to create a formative environment that people want to spend time within.

Noted Barun, 'We have the carriage of that dialogue and how to keep that dialogue alive. We have 60,000 students and 7,000 staff members – each spend different lengths of time, and will have a relationship with The University of Melbourne ongoing. The connection is not transitory. How do we create civic minded graduates and teach them to be engaged in the larger dialogue of a society. University environments constantly change dependent on other factors, new students, new migrants. It's the small town versus scale; we think of it as a community, to take along on the journey.'

Chiew added, 'In a university environment, it's important to provide those opportunities to contextualise, and foster the in-between interactions, not just learning from educators, but also peer-to-peer and others in the global landscape. The informal interaction is important as people learn and innovate through cross-disciplinary problem solving and campus buildings and environments are becoming increasingly didactic – true living labs.'

To manage scale, it's about being creative with mechanisms and having the right frame-works for decision making; understanding where you sit in the vision of all the partners and stakeholders. Chiew noted, 'Our campus masterplans provide a long-term vision and framework for the physical development of each Monash campus. Being illustrated documents, they also provide useful tools for meaningful engagement with stakeholders, enabling us to communicate our priorities and the research and thinking that has informed them.

They allow us to be strategic in our discussions – when advocating for large-scale investment in things like public transport, when siting new buildings or redeveloping existing – and allowing for temporary activations and chance encounters. What works in two years, may not work in ten years. The university campus is evolving all the time and we need to ensure the environments that we design and deliver are flexible, adaptable, nurturing and robust.'

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Jocelyn Chiew

Monash University: South East Precinct Works

Slattery has a long history of working with Monash University. Over the past five years we have had the opportunity to make a significant contribution to its founding campus at Clayton with projects including the forthcoming Technology Education (TEd) building, Forum landscaping project, Sir Louis Matheson Library refurbishment, Law Moot Court, Monash Club, Chancellery Building refurbishment, Alexander Theatre redevelopment including the new 130-seat Sound Gallery and 220-seat Jazz Club, and the Learning and Teaching Building. We have also worked on key sustainability initiatives including the current Monash Microgrid, part of its Net Zero Initiative to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030, which sees an onsite micro-grid built on the Clayton campus. This allows the campus to control when and how to use its energy, creating versatility to receive and store energy. It will help stabilise the wider Melbourne grid and will benefit the wider community during extreme weather events.

We have seen the precinct evolve, laying the ground work for the campus to become a central component in the Monash National Employment and Innovation Cluster, a dynamic world leading hub of enterprise, research and innovation that will take shape over the next decade. The success of the future campus 'will be built on vibrant learning and research neighbourhoods with distinct identities, integrated with iconic campus landscapes and linked to surrounding communities'. In 2014, the Clayton Campus was recognised as part of the Monash National Employment and Innovation Cluster, Melbourne's largest concentration of jobs outside the CBD, with the designation influencing and impacting planning frameworks and maximising opportunities for partnerships and collaborations with surrounding health, imaging, science and innovation industries and businesses, and creating long-term sustainable benefits for the wider community. (From Monash's Clayton Campus Masterplan 2017-2030).

Chancellery Building, Monash University,
designed by ARM Architecture



Messiness and evolution

Mackenzie noted there is a messiness in the non-linear way a precinct traditionally evolves.

Hodyl commented that 'A precinct needs to have a point of distinction from other places and diversity inside it. It can be messy inside to allow for unexpected possibilities.'

Bakker reprised this, that precincts need a strong vision and guiding principles to prevent complete chaos from ensuing and exert control over the process. 'You need a clear journey—a starting point and a clear vision.'

However some precincts are derived from the ground up versus those that are planned. Planning can be limiting, particularly in places that have their own internal logic, i.e. Chinatown but there are those that require intervention. Messiness therefore can be good and planned precincts sometimes bad.

Our panellists agreed that having structure in place gives distinction—something has to be embedded in the design; one has to have great ideas in place in the first instance.

“A precinct needs to have a point of distinction from other places and diversity inside it. It can be messy inside to allow for unexpected possibilities.”

Leanne Hodyl

The authentic precinct

'Are architects and planners alchemists? What are the top two to three ingredients for success?' posed Mackenzie.

'Authenticity,' noted Bakker. 'People can see right through a design if not authentic. Acknowledge the context and its heritage from an indigenous perspective, the historical—its previous use. Form from that place that comes from the past must inform the future. People will be drawn or react to that.'

'Know when not to do too much. If anything, support the soft infrastructure—the community networks to allow new spaces and relationships to emerge,' commented Hodyl, noting the fascinating ideas coming out of community consultation for new use of industrial estates in North Melbourne.

Chiew highlighted the need for definition and good word and graphics-based documentation, 'Have a written vision that people can look at. You can't get people to lobby and take a project on board unless the vision is captured. Definitions and champions are important. We need champions at all levels to maintain the vision.'

Emphatically, McDougall said, 'Finding the authentic is painful. You cannot mask greed. You need social contract and agreement. Social media is defining and you need to take that into account.' He noted a student project that drew on Google mapping of the ten most liveable cities to create the perfect city design, highlighting the immediacy of the world now and how digital and social media serves it up fast without the lived/physical experience of it. Or the ability of the public to comment or organise when they don't like something – Hudson Yards (NYC) a case-in-point.

'Moments of beauty that allow people to connect to place and give them a way through' added Bakker.

McDougall responded, 'You can always come back to the notion of gardening, nurture and response.'

“Finding the authentic is painful. You cannot mask greed. You need social contract and agreement.”

Ian McDougall



Sustainability – are we doing enough?

A question from the floor queried sustainability and the climate emergency. Are we doing enough?

There was consensus that good urban design is embracing sustainable principles and that the technology is all there however government policy needs more work with mandated action required, for instance, considering waste management and recyclables.

Citing the new Optus Stadium in Perth, Bakker noted the site was a reclaimed wasteland and a golf course, which now has had thousands of trees planted and the riverfront rejuvenated to be a place where people can go and enjoy nature. HASSELL see their contribution as improving both climate and space.

Barun pointed out the need for community and social sustainability within the mix, highlighting the huge international student cohort who live in precincts around universities, 'We have not just a climate emergency but also social emergencies—students are isolated and need community sustainability. Universities need to plan for this.'

Hodyl added, 'A combination of public and private leadership and investment are necessary to improve the long-term viability and social sustainability of a precinct.'

The tension between those who pay, those who build, those who use...

Once completed, precincts take on a life of their own. In order to avoid 'diluting' the precinct, its guardians need to have clarity of the precinct's intention and what can be achieved. There has to be consistency between the vision and what's subsequently non-negotiable or negotiable.

'I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member!' – Groucho Marx, 1949, was quoted from the floor.

Humans have strong desire to be part of something but not forced into it. One of the interesting aspects that arise post build is the tensions, liminality and outcomes 'that sprout from the edge'; who belongs and who doesn't. Our panellists agreed this goes to the heart of urban design, how you make a place that people like to go to.

McDougall commented on the attraction of the city CBD, the feeling of danger and grittiness that is essentially about how we live in cities, and 'the off chance you will meet a stranger you like... We go to the city for the unknown, the unexpected and the dangerous.' The city, as a precinct, shapes our sense of safety and security as well as behaviour.

'It's about what they can create together. What is important is that it belongs to a community that takes ownership' added Hodyl.

Bakker gave the example of Adelaide University's student hub which, similar to the New Student Precinct at The University of Melbourne, invited the student community to be co-creators, part of developing the conceptual drivers for its transformation via social media. 'We got so much buy-in and ownership from the community. It is owned and managed by the students... they own and manage the activities that take place.'

'If you give people permission to be involved, they do, or observe and contribute later. Engagement can go on for ever,' she reflected, which dovetails neatly back to Dr Nelson's point of the highly personal and private experience that is somehow preserved in public space.

Love for a precinct and the complexity of feelings evolve. Daily experience changes our perspective of a place, its vision. It has to have liveability and cultivate life within it. An intentionality of invitation.

Our panel, at the end, was unanimous. Remarkable places have a strong, authentic story to tell.

A warm thank you to Dr Robert Nelson (key note), Andrew Mackenzie (facilitator), and our panellists, Ingrid Bakker, Naomi Barun, Jocelyn Chiew, Leanne Hodyl and Ian McDougall for their contribution to the panel and this paper.

About Slattery

Slattery is a project and development advisory firm specialising in quantity surveying, cost management and early phase project advisory, with an outstanding history now spanning over 40 years. We are passionate about the built environment, and commit specialised teams to appraise and support our clients to deliver remarkable, iconic buildings and community infrastructure across the country. We work hand-in-hand with governments, institutions and organisations as well as planners, developers, architects and design teams on a broad range of property and construction projects. Using our knowledge of design, procurement and construction challenges and opportunities, we are passionate about assisting our clients to achieve successful outcomes.

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