

Melbourne streetscape: a critical review

JULIAN RAXWORTHY

THE SYSTEMATIC RENOVATION OF STREETS IN CITIES for the purposes of street-side recreation has institutionalised streetscape as a primary focus of landscape architecture. These streetscape works are tied to strategic planning contexts and documents. This article reviews the streetscape outcomes of the City of Melbourne in relation to their policy framework as a case study, and questions whether this connection is rhetorical, and consequently whether the framework guarantees a quality outcome. Finally, the article discusses whether such methods represent an attempt to defer responsibility for public vision in public space, away from municipal authorities, to private industry.

Introduction

THE SYSTEMATIC UPGRADING OF CITY STREETS and urban spaces is a phenomenon that has been occurring globally for some time, perhaps since the 'pedestrian-isation' movement of the 1970s, in the wake of Gordon Cullen's investigations into the qualities of streets in medieval cities.¹ The framework and projects discussed in this article are those in Melbourne, Australia, which have followed the model for upgrading developed in Barcelona and followed closely in Paris. This model is characterised by an avowed interest in design, and its structural relationship to an urbanistic planning framework. In the Australian context, Sydney has now undergone a similar upgrade which bears more than a superficial relationship to that of Barcelona, considering the utilisation of the Olympic event as an urban catalyst.² However the specific model adopted in Sydney directly references work undertaken by the City of Melbourne since 1985.

The Australian model differs from that of the European, despite the formal similarity of the actual project outcomes, in so far as it uses a bureaucratic series of documents to substantiate individual projects, by placing them in a planning framework. In contrast, the European model encourages individual and thereby subjective interpretations of the city in its constituent projects, which are undertaken by local designer-citizens, who are then credited. It is the Australian model, and the relationship between outcomes and planning framework that this article explores.

The necessity for critique

In order to critique the streetscape redevelopment projects undertaken in recent years by the City of Melbourne, one is confronted by what Dal Co regards as the

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Typology*

REFLECTION

complicit interdependence of the design product and the processes that went into its creation.³ It is difficult to undertake a formal critique of the City of Melbourne streetscape outcomes without understanding the structure, and representational modes of their decision-making processes. A formal critique of these projects, quite apart from their processes of creation, is vital because it is in the autonomous design project, as a place one experiences and increasingly resides within, that the ultimate ‘proof’ of the planning process is demonstrated. Critiquing is particularly necessary since this process is used to ensure a success in resulting projects. Such a critique must be an inevitable quality assurance measure, unless in fact these systems are purely modes of substantiating the systems themselves.

Local government instrumentalities have developed highly bureaucratised, elaborate and, above all, documentable design methodologies to deal effectively with the community backlash against ‘heroic planning’, by deferring individual visions to the playing out of an explicit, and ostensibly ‘objective’ process.⁴ Landscape architects have a growing role in local government in positions located somewhere between Town Planning and Architecture, because their discipline sits well with bureaucratic systems, on the one hand, and design discourse on the other. These design/planning processes establish a validation mechanism to both judge and undertake design from a position of seeming safety, which corresponds to the discursive tension in landscape architecture between subjectivity and objectivity. This tension arises from the fundamental privilege in empirical natural science

Table 1 City of Melbourne, urban design document hierarchy

Specifically		Study Focus	Generically	
M.C.C Document	Scope		Scope	M.C.C Document
"City of Melbourne Strategic Plan" 1985	City	Objectives of Melbourne as the state capital	Regional / State	
		Location of significant areas for development / improvement		
		Catalogue of types of city public space, on the base of historical survey of existing spaces	City	"Grids and Greenery" 1987
		Sociological research into existing types of public space in the city	City	"Places for People" 1994
		Standard details organised by appropriateness to type of city public space	City	"Technical Notes" 1995
"CAD Laneways Study" 1994	Precinct	Allocation of guidelines / details of appropriate treatment by locating type of precinct		
"Little Latrobe Street – DWG.95089B" 1995 (for example)	Local	Tailoring of standard details, determined by type of precinct to particular pragmatic situation		

information given in landscape architectural design methodologies.⁵ Consequently, objective design expression is one of the discursive utopias of landscape architecture, and it is this that has instituted the rise of landscape architects in councils responsible for streetscape works,⁶ which must similarly manifest this pretence towards objectiveness, due to their elected responsibility to inclusiveness.

The spatial metaphor of document hierarchy

The model for design used by the City of Melbourne could be summarised as a hierarchy of urban policy-based strategies that become more physically prescriptive as one moves through them, from the city as a whole, to the street as an individual entity. The organisation of these documents attempts to address the contradiction of how to consider both the city as a whole (in economical as well as physical terms), whilst simultaneously considering the immediate spatial experience of the user, at the level of the street.⁷ It does this by utilising a spatial metaphor that creates an interconnecting web of documents, each with its own specific scale and level of detail, that gets more and more detailed from a state to a street level, which together comprise a comprehensive and defensible over-view (Table 1).

The City of Melbourne publication, *Grids and Greenery: The Character of Inner Melbourne* (Figure 1) identified landscape types that could be seen as being characteristic of the city, such as the street, the boulevard, the park, and so on. *Places for People: Melbourne City 1994*⁸ (Figure 2) then gave these types social or occupational substance. From this research a series of standard criteria were produced allowing proposed developments to remain sympathetic to the city's existing character, most notably the *Technical Notes*⁹ (Figure 3).

Strategies of implementation, such as the *CAD Laneways Study*,¹⁰ become zoning exercises, where resemblances to the previously analysed typological fabrics are noted for subsequent strengthening or reintroduction, and then this research methodology is reversed to become a range of policies of implementation, using the appropriate standard criteria. Design becomes an act of implementing the results of an historical investigation. This suggests that the City of Melbourne subscribes to two particular understandings of type, respectively: type as intelligible historical continuity, and type as form evolved through function.¹¹

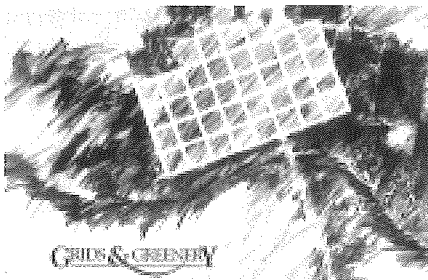


Figure 1:
Grids and Greenery – the historical



Figure 2:
Places for People – the social

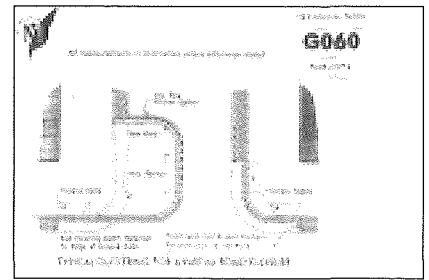


Figure 3:
Technical Notes – the technical

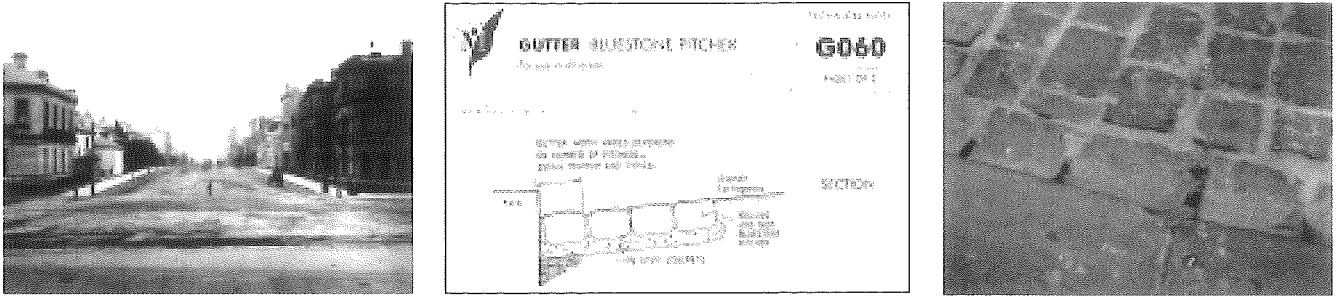


Figure 4: Historical research becomes design methodology

Proved through existence

The methodology of historical continuity reinforces then reintroduces existing, typologically well established entities, rather than speculating and proposing new types of public space (Figure 4). Inherent in this operation is the assumption that the types for reintroduction have demonstrated formal, historical, social and functional truths nested within them, effectively equating length of survival with contemporary appropriateness. In other words, the historical model is substantiated on the basis of its own existence, representing the institutionalisation of the historical backlash against functionalist planning. This model sees these associations as things that can be engaged with by using the formal manifestation of the type. This model assumes that the particular aggregation of all these things is the type, and consequently the solution to all pragmatic situations is also located in that form, suggesting that the utilisation of one of these detail elements brings with it all the other relationships inherent in the type.

In this process, the final design outcomes are already successful on the basis of the quality of their resemblance to other (presumably) functioning existing types analysed in the historical investigations. This methodology becomes a self-contained feedback loop, as issues of formal or political critique are relocated to the research into historical types, and thus the outcome changes language from one of design quality to one of historical accuracy.

The result of these investigations and implementations is a modernised, standardised treatment of rolling out various typological fabrics, particularly as modulations around standard details from the City of Melbourne's *Technical Notes*,¹² itself largely an exercise in bluestone detailing and location of slick utility objects, such as rubbish bins, lights and seats. In this model site specificity exists only as something around which the uniform fabric differentiates specific pragmatic situations such as parking and traffic flow (Figure 5).

The key to the success or failure of the typological methodology used by the City of Melbourne lies in the dynamism of the resulting design in terms of how the vocabularies and strategies employed sit within the existing street fabric of the city. That said however, a final critique or evaluation of the results of this process seems omitted from the policy framework. This is especially relevant considering that the City of Melbourne has defined for itself what constitutes appropriateness, in its research and policy frameworks.



Figure 5:
Standardised urban elements

Urban quality

In *Creating Prosperity – Victoria’s Capital City Policy*,¹³ a joint publication by the State Government of Victoria and the City of Melbourne, a logic is set out that links the successful establishment of Melbourne as the financial and cultural focal point of Victoria with the quality of its pedestrian environments. The rationale for this is that:

Competition is increasing for the modern ‘footloose’ sectors of the economy – those expanding internationally oriented activities whose decisions about where to operate are no longer constrained by traditional factors such as access to raw materials, but by high quality infrastructure (and) quality of life.¹⁴

Implicit in this quotation is the assumption that the ‘where to operate’ is not some dockland, outer suburban business park, or inner city corporate villa, but rather the interior of the city itself, within the Hoddle grid. In other words, this constitutes a relocation of what would previously have comprised ‘industry’ from the suburbs into an existing historic urban centre. This is significant because the streets’ recreational value now becomes part of an industrial resource, constituting a ‘high quality infrastructure’ to be moved through with ease, as well as a contributor to ‘quality of life’.

This attitude puts a responsibility on the street to operate in two ways that are, if not actually contradictory, then are at least practically difficult. On the one hand, that street is expected to operate efficiently as an engineered infrastructure, while on the other, as a site for safe and interesting recreation. This is a model appropriated from Europe, most clearly evidenced through comparison with Copenhagen and other northern European cities in the study *Places are for People*, by Dane Jan Gehl.¹⁵ The contradiction stems from differing demands. On the one hand, the pedestrian quality of the street as a site of occupation is peripheral to its ability to perform as an effective director or distributor of traffic, or as a means of access. On the other, when operating as a contributor to ‘quality of life’, its constitution as a recreational space is central.

In some of the more creative and interesting solutions to this contradiction, the aforementioned typological treatments maximise this conflict by hybridising traffic and urban design languages to produce elegant formal treatments that capture the changing nature of the nineteenth century city. This is undoubtedly due to the proliferation of the city’s arcades and laneways, in which practical traffic movement is difficult, thereby allowing for greater emphasis on recreational function (Figure 6).

This simultaneity could also be seen to constitute a potential identity crisis, if one did not understand how the type satisfies both requirements in its conventional mode of operation. In fact, it is the balance of ‘high quality infrastructure’ and ‘quality of life’ that constitutes the street. That is, the development of the street for the purposes of recreation is seen to be both appropriate in terms of the historical usage of the street over time, as well as seeing

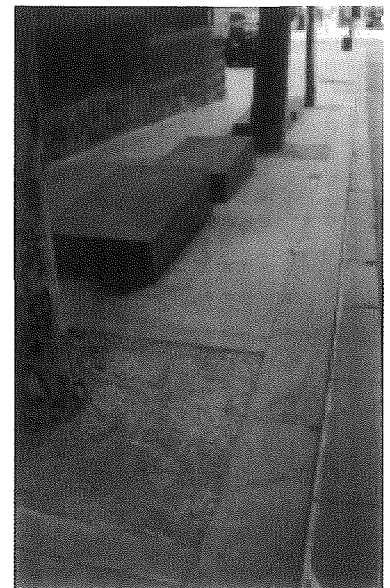


Figure 6: Urban elements attempt to hybridise infrastructure and recreation

the form of the street having evolved through the functional requirements of just such a use.

In order to ensure correct and appropriate historical lineage of street development, the relationship between the street and its recreational use is critical, in terms of the typological interest of the City of Melbourne's research. The emphasis of the streetscape works undertaken by the City of Melbourne is on maximising the recreational opportunities inherent in the street, to increase investment in the city, on the basis of the 'footloose' factors, where recreation is assumed to have a symbiotic relationship with the street's infrastructure programme.

The recreational aspects of the traditional street which are being enhanced could be characterised as those that promote a certain type of relationship between the pedestrian and vendors, which involves the pedestrian discovering the vendor as they move along the street, a linear narrative of shopping. This draws upon the caricature of the Australian town as a strip of shops along an infinite, straight road. This interpretation of the street is clearly a nineteenth century paradigm, a variation on the street as promenade. Further advancing this paradigm is the appropriation from the French of a café street culture, spilling out from adjacent street frontages, in an attempt to foster the Melbournian as Flaneur.

The café development of l'Incontro on Swanston Street represents the most valiant attempt to do the latter, through a reasonably sophisticated hybridisation of types (Figure 7). As mentioned above, this methodology represents the most exciting aspects of the typological system. Elements from one type are merged with another, at their points of similarity, and then become a new thing while still maintaining some form of continuity. Specifically, the project merges streetscape treatments with a private café and a small square incorporating seat steps to address the street, with an exaggerated, though used, chessboard, which also demarcates the café. Unfortunately, if the vendor is unsophisticated in their delivery of the programme, it defeats the potential value of the space – an example of what results from unfulfilled expectations of vendors to provide quality. This will be discussed in more detail below. The designer of this project, Ron Jones⁶, was involved in the earlier *Grids and Greenery* study that determined such types, as well as the development of the technical notes and many of the projects resulting from this system. While not formally articulated and evaluated, his work in itself represents significant research into such urban methodologies.

Whether one agrees with this interpretation of the Melbourne street or not, there are three inter-reliant programmes that must operate hierarchically for the street to function effectively: the traffic programme of the street; the pedestrian programme along the pavement adjacent to the street; and the retail programme reliant on the pedestrian moving past the shops, along the street.

The traffic programme is conventionally the most important here, at least in terms of the way it physically configures the other programmes. However, it is also significant in terms of how it provides the impetus and ambience for the other programmes, through its constant movement, the differentiation in terms of intensity, patina of models and types of vehicles. The traffic, in itself, is a



Figure 7: *Café l'Incontro*, a recent private/public project

self-regulating barometer of interest and activity in the street. The traffic and pedestrians become the background that provides the temperament of the area. It is by drawing upon this temperament that the shops are able to gain their market, which is not to say that they too do not contribute to the temperament, but rather that they are reliant upon its existence.

Above all, the impetus for this whole system is the public nature of the street. The major contributor to the ambience that makes the street economically attractive for retail is the public itself. However, the same could not necessarily be said of the retail, for although it obviously contributes to the atmosphere, it is largely the moving and interacting human presence that attracts the pedestrian. The public's interest is in the varied nature of the other pedestrians they come into contact with in the street.

The City of Melbourne's interventions into the city fabric, particularly with regard to displacement of traffic and its associated programmes and uses, must exhibit extreme care if they are to capitalise on the inherently recreational nature of the street. However, the city's reliance on detail to tie new spaces to the existing city would seem frail, as the ongoing development of Swanston Street shows. Swanston Street is the main arterial street through the city grid, with the Shrine of Remembrance at one end. A congested space, the street was converted to pedestrian use only in the early 1990s. While pedestrian usage of the street has increased, there is a sense that the street system does not quite work due to this loss of traffic energy, and consequently it was recently reopened for night time traffic.

In Swanston Street, the street type's material and detail vocabularies have been fine-tuned to be almost a parody of themselves, or rather a facade of streetness, considering the displacement of the traffic programme. While the detail may hold the type to some extent, subsequent configuration actions threaten to displace this greatly, by revealing how little understanding there is of the way a street functions, apart from simply how it looks. Fundamentally, it is a making ornamental of the programme by glamourising its language (Figure 8).

Transparent glass screens on Swanston Street and at the Queen Victoria Market are being provided to create sheltered microclimates that allow food and café vendors to use their street frontage more effectively (Figure 9). These are



Figure 8: Swanston Street collects accoutrements



Figure 9: Café screens, orienting movement onto vendor facades

micro-climatically appropriate, however, they may displace the convention of the street. People sit on the street because it is unenclosed and exposed to the vagaries of climate, and so they can participate in surrounding activity associated with its infrastructural programme. The screens privatise the street for the shops that use the screens to market themselves. The screens remove demarcation between inside and outside which is critical to why one would sit there, and they force the orientation of the street back into the building facades. This is important, because it reveals how the City of Melbourne is transferring responsibility for the street's performance back onto the street vendors. Considering this transferral, one could be justified in wondering what vision the Council has for its public spaces.

The City of Melbourne effectively defers this question by transferring specific quality onto a street's context. This is a shrewd decision in the light of the recently removed City Square, as it makes adjacent businesses accountable for the success of any street, and lets such businesses determine how a space will be occupied by users. The City Square was constructed in the early 1980s after a public competition, the winning design an early project by Denton Corker Marshall. The square was a prototype for much of the city's urban detailing, and was typologically interesting, combining the model of the European square with contemporary mall precedents from the United States. Its central area was a performance space, and over the years it was not well utilised, prompting calls for its replacement. It was recently demolished to be replaced by a hotel, with the square becoming its corporate address, clearly illustrating the central thesis of this article, of Melbourne deferring its responsibility for civic vision to adjoining business (Figure 10). Crucially, like the last city square, the new one will fail if it is not managed as an active space, especially considering its new Bocci programme. The lesson by now should be learnt that public spaces are not inherently active – they must be facilitated.

In this new model of civic transferal, building entries, facades, adjacent and spill out sidewalk uses, and signage become critical to a street's success. It is perhaps disappointing, though no doubt sadly appropriate considering the public debacle regarding the City Square, that municipal bureaucracies have consciously given away their elected responsibility of principled, expert, and utopian advocacy for public space. Their role of ensuring, proactively and positively, public spaces of open usage and high quality has been transferred to private business. The new edition of *Grids and Greenery* shows this clearly, with its emphasis on quasi-public space provided by corporate buildings, malls and plazas. That this is not public space can be clearly noted when one visits the new Crown Casino complex, where access is relatively open, but where there is literally nothing to do other than spend money.

The city for 'footloose factors' then is a surface of undifferentiated quality, ripe for businesses to colonise, implying a different model of business practice than that of building occupation. The difficulty in finding 'the right sort of tenants' for Swanston Street indicates however that this expectation of private business may not necessarily be effective, and begs the question, what is the quality of this fabric if both the context and these colonisations fail?



Figure 10: The new city square of questionable public quality

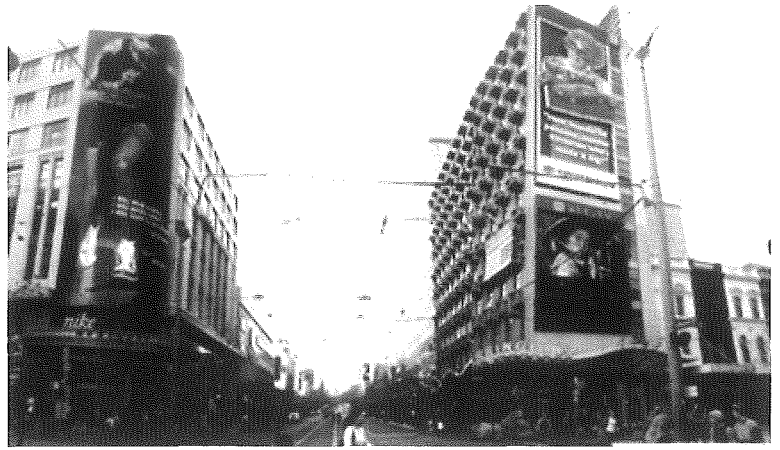


Figure 11: Civic space? corner of Swanston and Burke Streets, with advertising and video screens

Conclusion

Public space, in an institutionalised sense, is a relatively new phenomenon, and one that works in synchronicity with concurrent social and economic forces at work in our society. This makes them relatively fecund in ideological terms, particularly in times of economic rationalism. There must, at some level of government, be a principled decision in relation to the civic responsibility of these instrumentalities to provide quality open space. Currently, such provision remains in the realm of quasi-scientific health concerns, or bio-diversity arguments. That said, the outcome of these processes is actually aesthetic, formal and cultural entities, that are experienced in subjective and personal terms.

The ongoing development of streets in Western countries by local government agencies is a positive and monumental venture. This represents a conscientious and comprehensive investment in culture, of the scale of Haussman, in Paris and Sixtus V, in Rome. Nonetheless, it is almost as though the 'righteousness' of the undertaking exempts these works from scrutiny, together with a complicit profession that is still cautious about criticism. Streetscape represents a whole new realm of design consideration for landscape architects as their clients are increasingly becoming landscape architects also, allowing a level of discussion that is becoming very discipline specific.

Such ways of working should be the subject of great academic study, as new methodologies of practice develop that enrich the uniqueness of our discipline. Design methodology, as the nexus between ideas and a concrete reality, is for educators perhaps the greatest means of affecting the outcomes of our discourse. Such investigations must cross the boundary of formal and textual research pedagogics if they are to have such an effect. This is the real challenge for crossing the boundaries of theory and practice.

NOTES

¹ Raxworthy, JR (1998) Streetscape, or how to manufacture identity, *Kerb* 5 pp 48–53. In which I speculate on a possible lineage for streetscape thinking, and discuss the social constructs of mall culture.

² Lochhead, H (1999) Sydney Afresh, *Architecture Australia* Vol 88, Issue 5 pp 69–75.

³ Dal Co, F (1978) Criticism and Design, *Oppositions* 13, Summer p 3.

⁴ Burke, T (1998) Public Housing and the Community. In *New Houses for Old: Fifty Years of Public Housing in Victoria 1938–1998*, R Howe (ed) Melbourne: Ministry of Housing and Construction p 211.

⁵ Since the 1970s variations of a cumulative, though reductive, layering process has formed the basis of landscape architectural design process. This method, put forward by Ian McHarg (McHarg, IL (1969) *Design with Nature* (1st edition) New York: The Natural History Press) generates form by subtracting envelopes of measurable factors from the site boundary, suggesting a mystically implicit graphic within natural systems.

⁶ Mayne-Wilson, W (1992) Poor landscape outcomes: who is to blame?, *Landscape Australia* 3, 1992 ‘... (as more) planners recognise the value of the planning and design skills of the landscape architect, and as more landscape architects become familiar with town planning language, methodologies and control systems.’

⁷ van Schaik, L from his lecture entitled ‘Rationalism and Contextualism’. This is broadly the tension between ‘rationalism’ and ‘contextualism’.

⁸ Gehl, J and City of Melbourne (1994) *Places for People: Melbourne City 1994*, Melbourne: Strategic Urban Planning Branch, City of Melbourne.

⁹ City Projects Division, City of Melbourne (1995) *Technical Notes*, Melbourne, Urban Projects Division, City Of Melbourne.

¹⁰ Central City Planning and Design Guidelines (1993) Urban Projects Division, City Of Melbourne.

¹¹ Moneo, R (1978) On Typology, *Oppositions* 13–16 Vol 2.

¹² City Projects Division, City of Melbourne, op cit.

¹³ Latrielle, A (ed) (1994) *Creating Prosperity – Victoria’s Capital City Policy*, Melbourne: Government of Victoria and Melbourne City Council.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 2.

¹⁵ Op cit.

¹⁶ Ron Jones has recently departed the City of Melbourne to establish his own practice, Jones and Whitehead, with historian Georgina Whitehead, after more than 10 years of solid city projects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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