A Village For Walking Into The Future

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Abstract

The City of Monash is located in the eastern suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne and has a population of 170,000. The population is ageing and is ethnically diverse. Monash is one of the most multi-cultural municipalities in Melbourne with a diverse demographic. The community is generally conservative and this is reflected in the city administration. It has three (3) major activity centres located within its municipal boundaries, one of which is the subject of this paper.

This paper focuses on the synergies between the conference themes of "Sustaining Safe Walking" and "Safe, Healthy, Attractive and Accessible Environments Are a Community right". It provides a brief over view of the studies, community consultation, planning and design work that has been undertaken, as well as the interventions that have been commenced or implemented, including construction of a new democratic space, the 'Agora', in the heart of the town centre. Planning and design of new shared public space and 'naked streets', as well as enhanced active transport infrastructure that is well connected and integrated into the existing urban fabric, public transport infrastructure and proposed new developments will also be presented.

While the city has not yet adopted a sustainable community plan and does not have a formal walking policy, a considerable amount of work has been undertaken to make the City of Monash a walkable urban environment. It is also proposed to implement the Walk 21 "Make Walking Count". Rehabilitation of public space focuses on making public environments comfortable, convivial, attractive and safe for pedestrians. New pedestrian and shared path infrastructure is being used to connect neighbourhoods and communities, as well as connecting them to activity centres and community facilities.

Walking is recognized as one of the essential human behavior change elements for achieving a safer, liveable and more sustainable urban-suburban environment. Opportunities to reclaim, rehabilitate and rejuvenate public space are seen as both economically and ecologically important. This position is related to other Council initiatives such as its participation in the Cities for Climate Protection Program and its innovative Community Health Plan. The city council is currently preparing a sustainability plan with community involvement.

This paper presents a vision for sustainable rehabilitation and rejuvenation of the Oakleigh Activity Centre. Learning the lessons from Oakleigh's history has been key element in the planning and design process. Reinterpreting the characteristics of a country town is the key to re-imaging Oakleigh as a liveable, walkable, vibrant, low carbon village of the future. Beginning in 2002 the municipal government has engaged the local community and traders to develop a plan that will guide the rejuvenation process. The plan also builds on a number of studies and research aimed at giving Oakleigh Village a sustainable and marketable environmental, economic and social edge.

The main conclusions and observations contained in this paper are as follows:

1. Developing programmes to reclaim and rehabilitate the public domain are essential for a healthy, sustainable community. High quality, high amenity public spaces are a pre-requisite for walkable urban places and liveable streets. Local Government, in partnership with other government agencies and developers, are the key agents of change and leadership.
2. Healthy human beings are social animals. A liveable urban environment requires safe and attractive public places for informal and formal meeting and gathering, as well as cultural exchange and social interaction. Local Government is in the best position to forge partnerships with community stakeholders to influence sustainable behavior change at the community level.
3. Good planning and design, based on behavioural psychology and environmental design, greatly enhances the quality of public space for human activities, as well as walking safely. Long-term community sustainability is directly related to the pedestrian's access to socially equitable, attractive and secure public space and community infrastructure.
4. Investment in high quality public space by local government will tend to attract "appropriate" investment from the private sector and local businesses / shop keepers. In turn, this enhances the quality of street life and the health of the local economy.
5. Setting ambitious, yet achievable, goals combined with vision and the courage to consider unorthodox innovative ideas are important. But political will to support and resource initiatives is paramount.

Biography

Charles Nilsen is the city architect at the City of Monash, where he leads a team of planning and design professionals who are engaged in rehabilitating and enhancing public places and have delivered a number of award winning infrastructure projects aimed at making the City of Monash a liveable city with active transport opportunities. He has over 30 years experience in planning and design of cities. He is also co-convenor of the Monash Sustainable Futures Forum and is passionate about developing sustainable cities and communities.

Introduction and Background

A significant amount of planning and design has been undertaken to rehabilitate and rejuvenate the existing Oakleigh Activity Centre so that it can be positioned as an ecologically sustainable, liveable, vibrant and resilient urban village of the future. The paper also presents the plan for the rehabilitation of Oakleigh Village, as well as the outcomes achieved to date and the target goals yet to be achieved.

The Oakleigh Shopping Centre is classified as a major activity centre in metropolitan Melbourne. It is located in the middle SE suburbs 15 kms from the Melborne CAD.

The suburb of Oakleigh is demographically and ethnically diverse with a significant Southern European / Mediterranean population. It has the largest concentration of Greek speakers in Melbourne. It is generally not affluent, but Oakleigh is experiencing some gentrification with younger families moving into the area. The population is aging, but at a slightly slower rate than the average for Melbourne.

Oakleigh experienced a significant influx of Southern European migrants after World War 2, as well as some East European immigrants. More recent residents originate from Asia and Africa, particularly the Horn of Africa. However, it is Greeks who are prominent in local business and politics.

The Vision: Eco-polis

Borrowing from the Greek words “Ecology” and “Polis”, a vision to guide the rejuvenation and sustainable development of the Oakleigh Village Activity Centre has been developed. Building on its positive attributes, addressing its short-comings through innovation, and engaging with the community and other stakeholders the Oakleigh Village will become:

- an ecologically sustainable urban place of the 21st century; water sensitive and low carbon,
- economically resilient,
- a connected community that is cosmopolitan, culturally expressive and socially vibrant
- a human scale built environment with green, attractive streetscapes, respectful of its’ social, cultural and built heritage.

The process of community engagement has already commenced in order to develop and modify the vision so that it reflects the values and aspirations of the citizens. It is critical that the vision is shared and not imposed.

Brief History

The Oakleigh Township was first established as a staging post, 1.0km from the present position, on the route between the colonial city of Melbourne and the rural town of Dandenong and further to the region of Gippsland.

In the 1880's the town centre relocated to the present activity centre location following the construction of the railway from Melbourne to Dandenong, 30 kms from Melbourne. Oakleigh became a major rail junction and goods depot, with light industry developing around the town. It remained outside the Melbourne metropolitan boundary until after the First World War when it was situated on the rural fringe. Gradually the town was enveloped by development associated with the expansion of Melbourne. However, Oakleigh still bears some of the hallmarks of a country town and this gives it the physical character and feel of a village.

Figure 1. Oakleigh Circa 1900

Figure 2 Oakleigh Post 1930

The original commercial and retail area was concentrated at the west end of the new town. However, between the wars a strip shopping centre developed in Atherton Road on the north edge of the town. At the same time land was excised from the Oakleigh Cemetery crown lease to build Municipal offices, a council chamber, infant welfare centre and Post Office.

By the 1960's all of the dwellings in the town centre had been replaced or adapted for commercial use and shop-top living had all but ceased. Combined with the opening of the Chadstone [regional] Shopping Mall in the mid 60's, Oakleigh began to decline. The Chadstone Centre is only 1.5km away and Oakleigh remained in Chadstone's shadow until recently.

In the mid 70's the Council embarked on a bold move to try and re-invigorate the town with a pedestrian mall. Construction was completed by 1982. However, this strategy didn't succeed as the land uses didn't change or generate any street life. In effect the Council was attempting to compete with the Chadstone Regional Shopping Mall without addressing land uses and the essential elements of regeneration. At this point Council had not engaged in any substantive community consultation. Instead the problem was compounded by Council acquiring and assembling residential properties to create car parks.

The Planning And Design Process

Urban Design Framework

The project team has endeavoured to learn some lessons from the history of Oakleigh. In 2002 Council undertook an Urban Design Framework with funding support from the state government. This

study generated research and data, including statistics that demonstrated that more than 25% of visitors walk to the Oakleigh Centre, despite some adjacent residential neighbourhoods not being well connected to the township with shared pathways. As the Walkability Report (Tolley R, 2006) commented “Once people are in a car they have the ability to choose to go to another centre. So they have to be given an attractive alternative..”

Community Engagement

Community and stakeholder reference groups were established, which commenced the conversation with the community, traders and public transport stakeholders about Oakleigh’s future. Current engagement is centred on communicating the vision and developing a consensus around the aspirations of the local community for the future of Oakleigh and what they value about the place.

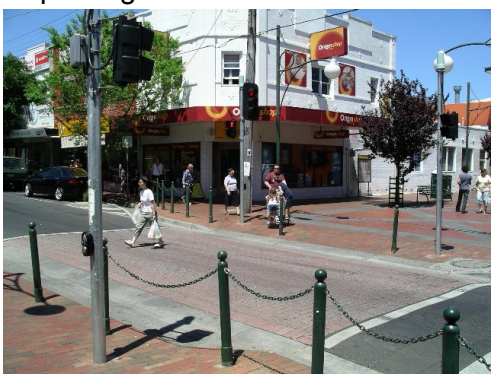
Development Guidelines

The Urban Design Framework was followed by the preparation of urban design and development guidelines to inform new medium density infill and shop top development, as well as car parking and planning standards that would facilitate appropriate private investment and development. Every street and property in the centre was surveyed, and land ownership was researched to identify potential consolidation of properties, as well as determining the capacity for on-site parking. Development opportunities have been presented graphically with potential streetscape elevations for each street. These have been used to advise property owners, as well as negotiate appropriate development outcomes with developers and consultants.

Walkability and Access

A walkability and access audit was undertaken by the international consultant, Rodney Tolley, to identify barriers to walking and active transport within 1km of the centre, including way-finding. This identified numerous opportunities for interventions to address:

- providing shared pathways and cycling infrastructure.
- removing barriers that impede access and improving access for all levels of ability.
- upgrading connectivity of pathways to the centre and integrating with public transport.
- development of an integrated pedestrian network with a way-finding system, seating, lighting and public art.
- creating convivial “community encounter zones”.
- creating opportunities for and celebrating street life.
- creating “shared” or “naked” streets, increasing footpath widths, slowing traffic and removing kerb side parking.




Figures 3 & 4, Existing Barriers to Mobility

Some of the key observations of the Tolley report (Tolley R, 2006) include:

- "Though it is undervalued the pedestrian dollar is already important ..... and it will become more so."
- "There are virtually no bicycle facilities, ……. the female, child or elderly cyclist is a rarity."
- "Getting to the Centre ……. involves negotiating ….. fast-moving, traffic on busy, intimidating and noisy roads."
- "…… there is little in the way of seats, toilets or art."
- "There is little celebration of street life through events or outdoor markets and virtually nowhere to play or to linger."
- "Signs and way-finding aids are absent, so that visitors must display considerable determination in order to find their way."


Figures 5 & 6, Intimidating Public Spaces

Public Space Rehabilitation Plan

The negatives identified have been treated as opportunities for intervention and rehabilitation. A public space rehabilitation master plan has been developed by the Urban Design + Architecture department to prioritise interventions and provide cost estimates to the Advisory Committee and Council. The plan gives primacy to pedestrians and is based on strategic, sequential logic rather than political imperatives. Based on the observations of Gehl and Gemzoe (2006) the plan increases the area of public space devoted to pedestrian activity.

Structure Plan

A structure plan has been developed to facilitate appropriate human scaled medium density mixed use development. Publicly owned car park sites are to be developed with "active" street fronts to increase street level activity and surveillance in accordance with crime prevention through environmental design [CPTED] principles. Innovations include allowing developers to transfer existing on site commercial car spaces to new above ground residential development and contribute through a payment in lieu scheme to the construction of multi-level parking on the periphery of the centre.

Partnerships and Support

A community advisory and consultative panel has been established to continue engagement with community and stakeholders, as well as advising Council. This group includes ward councillors, the local state member of parliament, traders, community interest groups and community representatives. State government planning and transport agencies, as well as other potential support agencies, have

also been engaged. This process has generated active support partnerships and funding from agencies such as Melbourne Water, the Department of Planning and Community Development, the Victorian Multicultural Commission and potentially the Deptartment of Transport and the Powerline Undergrounding Committee.

There are, however, other agencies, and departments within agencies that resist change or still have to be convinced of the merits of some proposed interventions.

Impediments to Innovation

In the state of Victoria the design of all roads is controlled by VicRoads, which is the state road authority. VicRoads will not permit the creation of “shared” or “naked” streets where traffic volumes exceed 100 vehicles per hour or 1,000 vehicles per day. The VicRoads standard speed limit for a shared street is 10 kph. These standards are not in accordance with international best practice.

Interventions To Date

Council has already commenced or undertaken a number of discreet projects aimed at rehabilitating the public domain of Oakleigh Village and creating convivial, comfortable, conspicuous, convenient and connected public spaces.

Figure 7, Station Street Before

Figure 8, Station Street After

Reconstruction of Station Street

Though this was not the highest priority for the Public Space Enhancement Plan, Station Street has been reconstructed without kerbs and with broader footpaths to create a pedestrian friendly and accessible street that connects the rail station-transport modal interchange precinct with the civic and recreation precinct. The decision to upgrade this street was driven by civil engineering considerations.

Water Sensitive Design

With support from Melbourne Water, innovative water sensitive urban design [WSUD] initiatives have been introduced as precedents for further water sensitive design and development in the Oakleigh Village. Some of these are illustrated in figure 9.

Figure 9, Water Sensitive Design Initiatives Already Implemented

Pedestrian Way Finding

A pedestrian and shared path way-finding system is being developed to identify facilities and destinations within 800m of the centre. The signage system is based on international symbols and provides distances in metres to destinations. The system includes maps tailored to the particular location and orientation of the reader, similar to the City of Bristol system. These maps identify destinations and places of interest within 800m of the Village centre. This will be further developed to include the future multi-level carparks on the periphery of the centre, as all visitors become pedestrians regardless of the mode of transport used. The location of multi-level carparks on the periphery is strategically important as this will allow the removal of kerb-side car spaces and increase footfall in streets and public spaces; increasing surveillance, opportunities for social interaction and economic turnover.

Proposed Works

Based on planning and design studies undertaken a number of capital projects are being developed or implemented. Whether or not all of the proposed rejuvenation and enhancement works are implemented is dependent on further funding from external agencies.

Active Transport Infrastructure

New bicycle and shared path ways are being developed to connect the Oakleigh Village to surrounding residential neighbourhoods and recreation facilities. This will facilitate walking, cycling and other forms of active transport to deliver a number of benefits to the community including:

- A reduction in short car trips with a consequential reduction in green house gas [GHG] emissions and a lower carbon footprint.
- Improvement in community health.
- Increased surveillance of public spaces leading to greater community security.
- An increase in economic turnover within the village.

In some instances the new cycle and walking routes will be enhanced with landscape, canopy shade trees, lighting and public art, providing users with the benefits of nature (Wilson E.O.,1984).

Figure 11, Planned New Cycle and Walking Routes

Community and Democratic Space

Figure 12, Proposed Agora pavilion

Figure 13, New Town Square

In collaboration with external consultants and in-house colleagues the City of Monash Urban Design + Architecture department has planned or commenced construction of new accessible, democratic community spaces including:

- A new town square to connect the station and modal transport interchange with surrounding upgraded “shared” streets and cycle paths.
- The “Agora” community square.
- An upgraded Pedestrian Street [Eaton Street Mall]
- New “Community Encounter Zones” at the intersections of the pedestrian street and the proposed “shared” streets.

Power Line Undergrounding

To achieve the desired high quality, sustainable outcomes for pedestrian friendly streets it is considered necessary to underground the current overhead power and telecommunications services. Council would be unable to justify meeting the entire cost of this infrastructure and has submitted a funding application to the state Power Line Undergrounding Committee.

Eaton Street Mall Rejuvenation

With state government funding support, Council proposes to enhance and transform the existing Eaton Mall into a high quality pedestrian street and cultural precinct. Rejuvenation of this public space will make it accessible and attractive, stimulate trading and economic development, facilitate cultural expression and development of social capital. High quality energy efficient lighting, It will also incorporate water sensitive design techniques to sustain the new landscape and tree plantings, as well as sustainable design to optimise life cycle costs, minimise embodied energy in new construction and energy consumption in street lighting. The proposed landscape design facilitates bio-diversity and mitigation of the “urban heat island effect”. Deciduous trees and vines provide summer shade and allow winter sun to penetrate.

Community Encounter Zones

According to Gehl and Gemzoe (2000) governments and communities can re-claim public space to re-established a balance between the traditional uses of the city as meeting place, marketplace and

traffic space. It is proposed to utilise shared street space at the intersections of the enhanced pedestrian street and the cross streets to create new community encounter zones providing places for meeting and “hanging out”. These spaces will include way-finding information, public art and high quality lighting. The environmental design approach will remove traffic lights and infrastructure that currently inhibits pedestrian movement, while calming traffic to move slowly.

Planning And Design Precedents

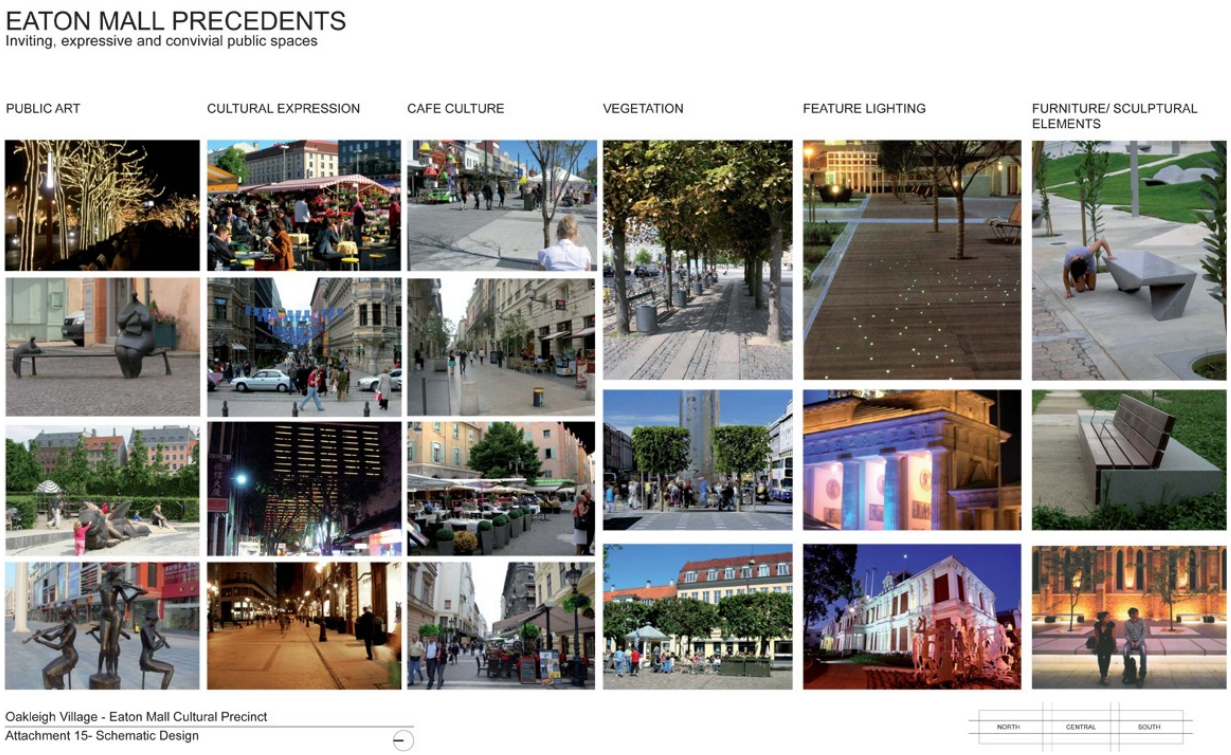


Figure 14, Relevant Precedents

To illustrate the vision and supporting design principles the design team has drawn on numerous Australian and European examples of successful, innovative public domain rejuvenation and rehabilitation. Pictorial examples of the precedents selected to explain the thematic elements of the cultural precinct and pedestrian street enhancement to the community are shown if figure 14 above.

Conclusions

1. Based on research and case studies “Walkability” is a key indicator of liveability and the quality of public space. Pedestrian friendly places also increase economic turnover [Wright L, 2005.] and well connected, convivial public places increase activity and security.
2. Effective community engagement identifies qualities and strengths that differentiate the place from others and develops resilience and social capital.
3. Set ambitious outcome goals and “best practice” planning and design standards. Undertake a risk analysis. If the bar is not set high enough the risk is that too little will be achieved.

4. Developing programmes to reclaim and rehabilitate the public domain are essential for a resilient local economy and healthy, sustainable community with liveable, walkable streets. Local Government, in partnership with other levels of government, stakeholder agencies and developers are the key agents of change and leadership.
5. Healthy human beings are social animals. A liveable urban environment requires safe and attractive public places for informal and formal meeting and gathering, as well as cultural exchange and social interaction. Local Government is in the best position to forge partnerships with community stakeholders to influence sustainable behavior change at the community level.
6. Good planning and design, based on human behavior [psychology] and environmental design, greatly enhances the quality of public space for human activities. Long-term community sustainability is directly related to the pedestrian's access to socially equitable, attractive and secure public space and community infrastructure.
7. Investment in high quality public space by local government will tend to attract "appropriate" investment from the private sector and local businesses. In turn, this enhances the quality of street life and the health of the local economy.
8. Vision and the courage to consider unorthodox innovative ideas are important. But political will to support and resource initiatives is paramount.
9. Professional collaboration and partnerships are the most productive. Develop and utilize in-house [local government] resources and select consultants to compliment the in-house skills. Encourage iconoclasts in the planning and design team.

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