



The Changing Design Canvas of our Cities

Damon La'Rance

Project Manager, City Projects
City of Sydney

Ian Dryden

Industrial Designer
Design and Culture, Urban Design
City of Melbourne

Introduction

In a joint effort, representatives from the City of Sydney and Melbourne City Council propose to present a brief snapshot of the past, present and future design challenges with a focus on the public realm.

The review of the design approach by these two Cities will highlight opportunities to compare lessons learned and possibilities realised with the effluxion of Time. It will explore each City's own interpretation of design and the mentoring strength this has on each of the two Councils.

This paper is a unique opportunity to portray the ramifications Time has had on the design canvas within the Local Government public realm and the direction of Landscape Architecture in Australia's two largest cities.

This paper was prepared for the International Federation of Landscape Architects—Eastern Region Conference 2006 and addresses the Conference's sub-theme of Designing with Time.

The Sydney Chapter

The City of Sydney is a cosmopolitan, vibrant and dynamic global village that meets the needs of our local communities, while enhancing Sydney's position in the international economy. (City of Sydney, *City of Sydney Annual Report 2004/05*, City of Sydney 2006, p 2)

Why this paper? Why read it?

At a glance this paper will appear as purely a reflection on the City's urban landscape through a particular passage of Time. However, this paper goes beyond the simple recording of history and looks to capture the reasons behind the evolution of the City's public domain and how it may transform in the future.

This paper will inform and hopefully guide public sector Landscape Architects through the challenges and effects of an ever-changing political and social environment.

Further, Landscape Architects who work in the private sector will gain an insightful look at the extremely contestable nature of public space and the need to look beyond the immediacy of a project to focus on maintainability, longevity and relevance.

In short, good design is only the first, and often easiest, step to reach when a Landscape Architect steps into the public realm.

The Past

This first segment reflects on past key impetuses such as major political agendas, the growth of Sydney, significant events and expenditure history which have catalytically shaped the understanding, ethos and treatment of Sydney's urban domain and the role of the Landscape Architects.

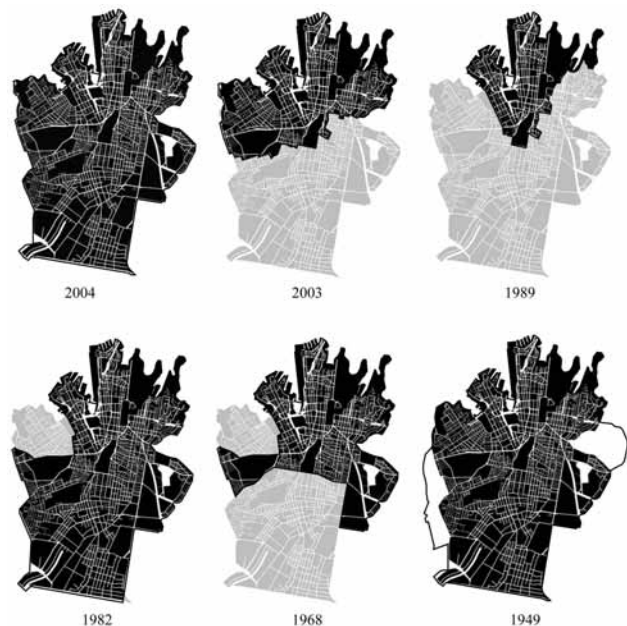
Illustrative maps indicating the City's past boundary changes

The Politics

Since its inception in 1842, the City of Sydney has experienced a tumultuous existence as a local government entity, having had its boundaries change six times. The two most recent occurred in the last three years with the "annexing" of the Kings Cross and Woolloomooloo precincts in 2003, and the amalgamation of South Sydney Council with the City of Sydney in 2004.

All of these changes have occurred as a result of manipulation by the incumbent State Governments to gain political control and power. Hilary Golder best described these crises as exposing the "basic tensions between the central government and the local authority responsible for the political, economic and cultural capital of New South Wales"¹. Inevitably, these tensions produced polarised views about how the City should be run. When, as a last resort, the central government could by no other way resolve this impasse, they simply removed the Council.

This "uneasy and unequal relationship between Macquarie Street and the Town Hall"² has



formed the foundation of decision making behind the development of the City and its open spaces. In one crisis that led to the sacking of Council in 1987, the City's public domain, specifically Darling Harbour and the route of the monorail, literally became the battleground of political agendas and highlighted the ever growing contestable nature of Sydney's streets, squares and open spaces. Sydney's public realm has been made through political will and shaped by politics.³

The People

The increase in ownership and awareness of the City's open spaces has directly coincided with Sydney's population growth patterns. From its origins as a convict settlement, the City has grown into "the commercial, financial and cultural heart of Australia and an active player in the global economy"⁴, boasting a population of 156,000, a work force of 355,000, and receiving 400,000 daily visitors a year⁵.

In the last twelve years, the City's general demographic has been dramatically transformed. The State Government's policy of tourist and business growth during the 1980s coupled with Council's 'Living City' initiative of the 1990s saw a residential revitalisation of a magnitude, at the time, unseen anywhere else in an Australian local government area and in many North American cities⁷.

The resulting social mix, half of which is comprised of young adults aged between 20 and 40 years, has increased by 40% since 1996 and is predicted to increase by another 20% by 2009. Over a quarter of city residents are currently attending an educational institution, while 33% of the City's workforce is in a professional occupation⁸.

Put simply, the City's gentrification has led to a greater number of constituents who are more educated, have a higher economic status, are more informed and are willing to be engaged in the political process. The City's constituents



Zoning Plans of the City, 1959 and 2005 respectively⁶

value their public domain, have the time to experience it and long for a greener, cleaner, sustainable city.

The Events

The appreciation the City's residents have of their surrounding landscape has, to a major extent, been influenced by the many celebrative events Sydney has hosted, including Australia's bicentennial celebrations in 1988, the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2000, and the Centenary of Federation in 2001.

These events provided the impetus to revitalise the City's landscape. In the lead up to each of these events, specific areas of the City, such as the Sydney's streets and squares, were subject to significant overhauls. During the festivities, they became the new rooms and stages for spontaneous public participation. Today, these continue to showcase the City's way of life.

In what could only be described as a social rebirth, the City hosted the 2000 Olympics Games. In the build up to hosting this massive global event, Sydney became the focal point of a multi-million dollar Federal, State and Local Government-funded built environment make over. It was as a result of the euphoria surrounding the Olympics and the ensuing festivities, a great number of which showcased Sydney's public spaces, that people were reintroduced to its public realm and given every reason to be proud of and value its architecture, streets, squares, parks and natural harbour.

The Expenditure

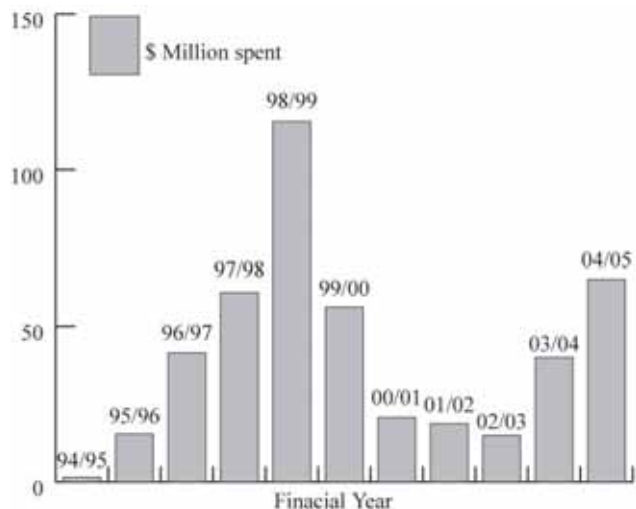
Coinciding with these significant celebrative events and the community's growing appreciation of its public domain has been Town Hall's commitment in respect of capital expenditure. A review of the City's corporate reports since 1994 reveals an annual projected expenditure of \$1.029 million⁹. This increased to \$115 million in the year 2000¹⁰.

This phenomenal increase in capital

expenditure for the City's open spaces can be attributed to growing need to improve the City's amenities and, as the late Greg Maddock, General Manager of the City of Sydney in 1997 noted, "the 2000 Olympic Games provides us with a specific date to realise our vision, and it is now our task to work together to achieve this goal"¹¹. It was because of this that Council instigated a five year plan for City improvements totalling more than \$100 million¹².

The ability of Council to fund such capital expenditure may be attributed to a decade of buoyant economic conditions, resulting in a high level of developer contributions, and the Council's recording of 13 consecutive surpluses, allowing it to achieve debt-free status by 2003¹³.

The resonating effect of this expenditure was to create a realisation as to what was able to be achieved in the public domain through significant funding. It has also raised the level of acceptance by both the community and politicians of the inherent value of investing in the public domain.



A record of the city's expenditure since 1994 ¹⁴

The Landscape Architects

In the midst of this unprecedented development and opportunity has been the rise of the importance of the Landscape Architect. The Landscape Architecture profession has experienced varying levels of representation within Council. Its public service representative's responsibilities have ranged from the traditional parks maintenance position to today's position of design and project management of the City's entire public realm.

While traditionally Local Government public works have been 'ruled' by planners and engineers, Council's Landscape Architects have, over the last 10 years, gained significant influence in the decision making processes which have dictated the City's form.

This increase in numbers and authority has resulted from the steady progression of Landscape Architects into key managerial positions and the acknowledgement of their holistic ability to read the multitude of constraints and opportunities that are a part of building in the public realm. The ability of Landscape Architects to speak in the language of planning, architecture, environmental sciences and engineering has made them very effective project managers¹⁵.

This acknowledgement of the abilities of Landscape Architecture is reflected in the increasing number of Landscape Architects employed by Council in the last 10 years. In 1997, the City had three Landscape Architects, a number which clearly indicated the profession's peripheral status in the public sector. In 2006 however, recognition of the profession's essential role is reflected in the employment of over 15 Landscape Architects, who represent the profession in a number of departments including Strategic Planning, Public Domain, Asset Management, Design and Project Management.

This influence has had a natural roll-on effect on the private industry through the increase

in appointments of Landscape Architect firms as head consultants. In their own way, the City's Landscape Architects have raised their profession to a more important and influential position in the creation of the built environment.

The Present

This second segment focuses on the current design direction, philosophy and immediate pressures Sydney is facing in the design of its streets and parks through a review of feature projects.

A political calm and new agenda

After the last four years of political volatility caused by two boundary changes, the Council election in March 2004, and internal restructuring resulting in the appointment of a the previous Chief Executive Officer, Sydney City Council is experiencing a renaissance in relative stability and direction. This stability has generated a new, focused response to Sydney's public domain with an unprecedented capital works program and budget.

Sustaining this present political calm between the State and Local governments is a tangible common vision for the development of the City. The present peace generated from this common vision is holding despite the simmering tensions over various divisive public domain issues such as the Cross City Tunnel, the expansion of the light rail system within the CBD and the development of East Darling Harbour.

The most recent boundary change, the forced amalgamation of South Sydney Council and parts of Leichhardt Municipal Council with the City of Sydney in 2004, has created a logical shift in political agenda for the development of the City. In addition to the consolidation of the City's property portfolio to a healthy \$3.3 billion (the expenditure ramifications will be discussed later in this paper), Council has had

to address the new size and form of its local government area, a structure not seen since 1989.

The previous Living City strategy, which best addressed the past shape of the City of Sydney, has evolved into Council's current vision of a City of Villages. This commitment aims to generate a more equitable capital expenditure on core streets and open spaces across the Local Government Area. Council is also responding to the strategic need to address the new area as a whole entity by developing, in consultation with the community, a series of Local Action Plans¹⁶.

Power to the people

Today's Council Landscape Architect is very conscious of the diverse aesthetic criteria which must be satisfied, the repercussions on civic life produced by their projects, and the greater control the public have over these projects¹⁷. This contestable nature of open space has brought into being an emphasis on proactive community consultation and a sympathetic view of user needs, which is now recognised as an essential requirement to the successful completion of works in the City's public realm.

Through more quality design, Council has increased community ownership of its open spaces and in doing so, has set the challenge to meet future expectations. What used to be incidental breaks in the built environment and quaint, meaningless patches of green have now become treasured park 'rooms' requiring carefully thought out surfaces and finishes that meet a social need and make contextual sense with nearby like spaces.

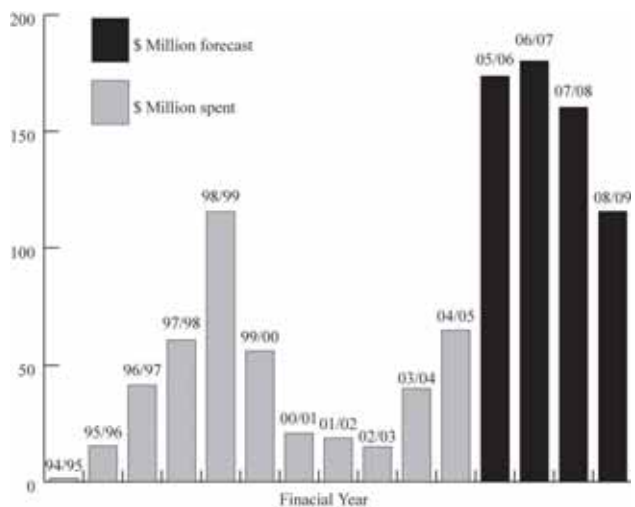
A great example of this mushrooming community ownership is the recent return of questionnaires for Sydney Park, a major metropolitan green space on the City's fringe. Compared to a paltry number (less than 50) of responses to the Park's 2003 Amended Plan of Management, in 2005, Council received

over 1000 replies to the Detailed Master Plan from the community. This is now a common occurrence, resulting from Council's increased design activity and the natural development of its landscape over time.

Show me the money

Underpinning this design activity is Council's current capital works program, a standout four year expenditure plan with a collective forecast total of \$630 million. This extraordinary amount has been made possible because of the City's continued history of strong financial performance¹⁸.

This capital works program is a clear indication that the City, in its current configuration, has for the first time reached a strong, sustainable and enviable position where Council has the funds to meet its constituent's expectations for quality open space and has the ability to revitalise its 'villages' through the make-over of key main streets and parks.



A record of the city's expenditure since 1994 (forecast to 2009) ¹⁹

Meeting this commitment

Meeting this challenge and “commitment to improve the availability and quality of public spaces across the expanded LGA”²⁰ is Council’s City Projects team. This team is made up of surveyors, public domain personnel, project managers and architects and includes the aforementioned fifteen plus Landscape Architects whose main goal is the management of the design and, in the role of project managers, the construction of over 100 projects.

The environment within which the City Projects team operates is that of a corporatised public entity where the department embraces private sector operating principles to meet its tight deadlines, all the while remaining accountable to the political and community forces that are associated with Local Government. It is this hybrid, private-versus-public paradox of agendas that generates a project atmosphere where the ‘goal posts’ are constantly being moved. This challenge inevitably arises from dealing with a multitude of stakeholders and produces a responsibility which lies with the Landscape Architect to resist a ‘design by committee’ result without alienating a significant number of constituents.

The Future

There are a number of poignant questions to be asked about how the City’s colourful past and vibrant present will be reflected in its ambitious future.

The contentious nature of the City’s politics and ongoing differences between Town Hall and the State Government will play a part in its outlook. An election is less than two years away and if the past represents a good measure of how major political issues are resolved, anything can happen in the future.

In many ways, Council is already responding to the City’s anticipated population growth through the proposed development of

numerous future ‘blue sky’²¹ projects. These large scale visionary projects, such as Green Square, represent an urban renewal response to the need for quality, resilient and usable open public spaces.

Council’s expenditure program of over \$100 million each year for the next four years will represent a significant challenge. A major increase in resources to meet this project load is needed to effectively navigating the development of key projects through the bureaucratic processes of Local Government. In addition, a consultative balance will need to be achieved by Council in order for the detail of these projects to be realised in a timely manner.

To meet its current workload, City Projects currently operates under a policy of ‘farming out’ the majority of its projects to external consultants. This is in itself a successful policy and is effectively supporting Landscape Architects in the private sector with a significant amount of quality work.

Given the present number of Landscape Architects now working for the Council, it makes interesting thinking as to what would happen if an in-house design policy was implemented. In its current fiscal state and with the type of exciting projects on offer, the City could quite possibly attract a significantly-sized dream design team. However, this is a debate for another time, place and conference.

In order to produce open spaces that will be successful both now and in the future, today’s Landscape Architects must have an appreciation of the history and the continuously changing nature of the public realm’s opportunities and constraints over Time. All projects within the public realm should be developed to acknowledge this responsibility through attention to detail and durable quality of the design and materials. Importantly, local government Landscape

Architects must know when to respond contextually by utilising a simplistic (as opposed to bold) approach.

A Comparative Glance

At present, Sydney is considered the financial capital of Australia while Melbourne is acknowledged as the cultural capital. How do both of these cities shape up in the design stakes?

According to an article by prominent Sydney Morning Herald columnist Leo Schofield, Melbourne “in terms of physical appearance, is light years ahead, cleaner, better organised and run”²². He goes to say that Melbourne has succeeded “with an abundance of trees and well maintained parks and gardens which are valued by government and citizenry alike.”²³ This is a view which may be quickly extolled by Melbourne’s design professionals and reluctantly acknowledged by Sydney. Whatever the opinion one may have on this issue, it should be informed by the fact that there are three fundamental differences separating these two successful cities and their resulting forms.

The first lies with the historical inception of each city: “If Sydney was ever to become a fine city, this idea was not uppermost in the minds of its first unwilling residents”.²⁴ Sydney grew up in “times of barracks and hanging triangles, not grand visions. There were no city squares or fine fountains. No generously laid out marketplaces or boulevards.”²⁵

Although Governor Macquarie brought much needed practicality with the town planning controls that formed what is still Sydney’s central grid of streets²⁶, the City’s shape and layout has repeatedly challenged numerous planning initiatives, including the possibility of the currently-proposed light rail system. Unlike Sydney, Melbourne was born as a free settlement and has prospered from its original planned vision of spacious streets, squares and parks.

Secondly, although still rich in historical architecture, Sydney’s past furious development activity has seen the loss of numerous key buildings and lanes, such as the Australia Hotel and Rowe Street, during boom periods. Melbourne City, on the other hand, has remained relatively intact and has rediscovered much of its lost heritage, such as its now popular side street lanes.

Thirdly, Sydney’s hedonistic approach to life and abundance of surrounding natural beauty has led to a more practical and less adventurous approach to design. While considered the party capital of Australia and willing to make a statement with a bang, the City has rarely seen the need to embrace courageous design initiatives such as the Opera House. Melbourne, because of locality and lack of natural ambient splendour (like Sydney’s magnificent harbour) has relied more on a detailed design approach, creating a City that is in itself the bold focal point of attraction.

This next segment, the Melbourne Chapter, will reveal the building blocks and the devil behind the detail which have made Melbourne the successful City it is today.

Damon La’Rance

Project Manager, City Projects
City of Sydney

The Melbourne Chapter

A study of Melbourne. It is a planned city, with The Hoddle Grid in the centre. Melbourne has the Yarra running through, connecting the suburbs. It is surrounded by green open spaces.

What makes a city? Streets make up the largest area of any city. Therefore they need to be valued and treated with care. What makes good streets? Our forefathers understood good streets, wide footpaths, Pedestrian friendly lanes, active frontages, good access, clear views, gathering spaces and good amenity (image shown in slides).

In the mid eighties the Melbourne had lost its way. The city was a nine to five experience and businesses were starting to leave the city. Satellite shopping centres (Chadstone, Shopping Town etc) in suburban areas had started to make an impact on retailing the city centre. Councillors of day, decided that drastic action was required and the city needed become competitive with other capital cities around the world. This has been achieved in Melbourne through Landscape Architecture and applying a simple strategy. Streets have been widened for pedestrian movement and lanes have been redeveloped and sustained.

My focus is what some may consider minor details of landscape Architecture create the intensity of the whole. The streets have been furnished with a consistent range of details, bins, seats, fountains and paving. A series of vending facilities have been added to high pedestrian areas, providing colour, life, surveillance and activity. Conveniences, lighting, have been applied to enhance activity, within the city.

Finding a strategy to keep good active frontages in Melbourne was a challenge for the Urban Design team in the early years. Many of the new contemporary buildings had eradicated the first floor active front and provided the street with a blank façade with a security desk

in a vast marble decorated space. Council put forward the idea that a contemporary building could be constructed behind an historic façade which provided a street with good activity. This was applied to the Telstra building in the early 90's. After this project it became standard practice for developers in Melbourne.

Capital cities need to be competitive with other capital cities. Melbourne had fallen behind in the early eighties and the city was seen as a nine to five experience. Melbourne needed to work towards being a twenty four hour city. Residential was seen as a simple way of achieving this objective. Council consulted with the public through a questionnaire. Seventy people replied that they would consider living in the city. The postcode 3000 was developed and trialed. Council found a building at 1 Exhibition Street, in receivership under Macquarie Bank to trial the concept of residential in the city. It has been an outstanding success and there are 10,000 residents living in Melbourne today.

After the residents moved into Melbourne, it became clear that street lighting was an issue. The street lighting was designed for cars, not people, yellow in color. The pedestrians thought the city was spooky at night. We discovered that people through their eyes perceived colors differently at night. There is a color shift from yellows and oranges during the day to blues and purples at night. The central city has been upgraded to white light with full cut off fittings reducing sky glow by 30 percent throughout the city. This has made the city active colorful and safe during the evening. There has been a 15% percent energy saving by utilizing contemporary lighting technology.

In many cases local government sees urban design and Landscape design as an expensive complex issue. Consistency, quality and standardization require a change in mind set. What we have found in Melbourne that once the decision is made to approach a city by a consistent, qualitative strategy. Instantly there

is a city pride. The political support to continue on becomes easier and the private domain becomes interested in the city and explores opportunities for investment in the city.

These are simple interventions that local governments are involved in everyday. The only difference is that there is a lack of consistency and therefore a lack of quality and often there is no strategy that is approved by the politicians. Therefore local government spending becomes inconsistent with implementation of a wide variety of details that cannot be maintained, rather than an exercise of consistently fixing one street at a time, through incremental change.

Ian Dryden

Industrial Designer

Design and Culture, Urban Design

City of Melbourne. °

Endnotes

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- 2 Ibid. H Golder, p vii.
- 3 R Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Harvel, 1987
- 4 City of Sydney, *The City Annual Report 2002/2003*, City of Sydney 2003, p 2.
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- 7 City of Sydney, *City of Sydney Yearbook 1999*, Council of the City of Sydney 2000, p 18–19.
- 8 City of Sydney, *City of Sydney Corporate Plan 2006–2009*, City of Sydney 2006, p 13–14.
- 9 Sydney City Council, *Sydney City Council Management Plan 1994–1997*, Sydney City Council 1994, p 81.
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- 11 Ibid, *Corporate Plan 1997–2000*, p 3.
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- 16 Op. cit. *Annual report 2004/05*, p 4.
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- 21 “Blue sky” is defined in *Looking Forward—Open Space, Public Domain and Community Facilities*, City Development, City of Sydney (internal report) 2004, to mean ‘future, unrealised’
- 22 Leo Schofield, *Urban Brawls*, At Large Leo Schofield, Bulletin with Newsweek, 14/3/2006, p. 54
- 23 Ibid, *Urban Brawls*, Bulletin with Newsweek, 14/3/2006, p. 54
- 24 Op cit. *City of Sydney Yearbook 1999*, p 10.
- 25 Ibid, *City of Sydney Yearbook 1999*, p 10.
- 26 R Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Harvel, 1987, p 296.