

A HARD WORLD FOR LITTLE THINGS

Albert Rex with Nick Atkins & The Victorian Wooden Boat Centre

When I first read about Melbourne's Greenline Project, a kilometres long landscape architect led rejuvenation of the Yarra River's North bank, my response was predictable, something along the lines of:

'Wow, this looks like bold, landscape architect led place-making at the city scale! It's great to see the role of the profession expanding.'

So it was a shock a few months later, visiting old friends who run the Victorian Wooden Boat Centre (on North Wharf, part of Greenline's Southernmost portion) to hear:

'The Greenline? That's just renders to sell apartments. We're getting kicked out soon because the developers are moving in. No landscape architects have been down here.'

To take a step back, the Victorian Wooden Boat Centre (VWBC) has been operating on and around Victoria Harbour in Docklands for nearly 40 years. The Centre provides space and support for amateur wooden boat builders while also undertaking traditional wooden boatbuilding, fit-out, and advanced manufacturing projects for an eclectic range of local clients.



Figure1: VWBC on Central Pier in the 1990s



Figure2: Specialised Skills, Specialised Jobs. Heritage Restoration for Luna Park

But the VWBC is moving in a few months to a small, commercial factory in Williamstown North. Here they will no longer have the space or pedestrian traffic to maintain the community integrated portions of their business.



Figure3: Many Projects Underway

From the Centre's point of view, they feel their ability to continue to operate on North Wharf is now untenable due to the increasingly standoffish attitude of the murky mix of public and private actors who together manage Victoria Harbour. 'They haven't told us anything' Nick, the Centre's Director, explains. 'It feels like we're viewed as a potential PR risk, not a community asset'.²



Figure4: Community Discord at North Wharf

It was Jane Jacobs who made the incisive observation that ‘a depreciated building requires less income than one which is yet to pay off its capital costs’ and that therefore ‘large swatches of construction built at one time are inherently inefficient for sheltering wide ranges of cultural, population and business diversity.’³

You might think this point would be front of mind for our city’s Place Makers given the near-infamous lack of any real organic character at New Docklands.

But homogeneity, to our city’s detriment, remains the rule here. When places along North Wharf like the VWBC become notable in their difference, the momentum of development seems to preempt any need for justification: ‘don’t worry, this one’s next’ is the cultish catch-cry that floods the zone. The simpler question: ‘What’s happening here?’ is left as good as unsaid.



Figure5: VWBC Open Day, 2023

Post-industrial Docklands used to offer a unique opportunity for small businesses, artists, and community groups to find an affordable foothold close to the city. I couldn't count the number of small creative businesses, youth programs, and community groups that found a start here.' ⁴



At the time of writing, media articles cast doubt on the reliability of funding for the Greenline Project.⁵ The same can't be said of the 'luxury' residential towers indicated on the Greenline Masterplan; a recent newspaper articles suggests these are currently being fast-tracked through Victoria's planning system.⁶ Uncertainty around the delivery of the Greenline shouldn't concern the developers however. The apartments, after all, are sold off the plan.

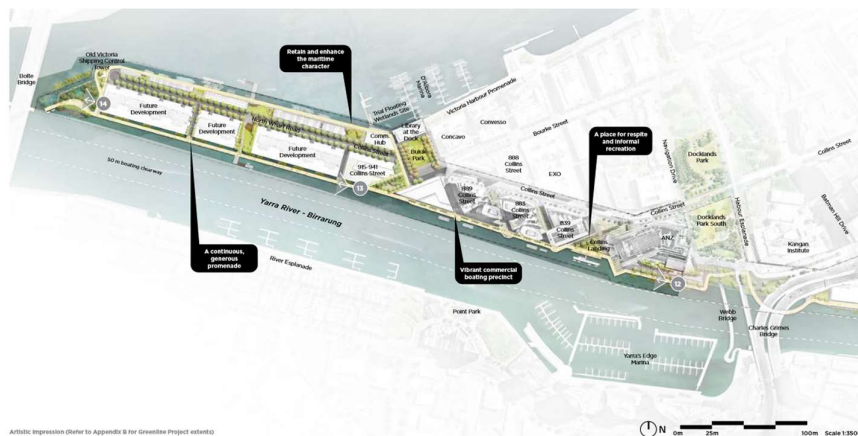


Figure7: 'Salt Water Wharf Precinct'

It's perhaps a little too easy to poke holes in a project as significant and unwieldy as The Greenline. No doubt, on balance, it does a great service to our profession. But part of the role of significant projects will always be an even-handed critique of where they fall short.

And when landscape architects do drawings that *Masterplan Away* existing communities with decades long connections to a place - no matter whether this is 'out of scope', 'not actually our responsibility', or 'not in our fee'^A – and particularly when we do this without having a single conversation with those communities we're actively exercising our agency in not drawing; when we do this we must be prepared to countenance the possibility that we might not quite be living up to the promise of the enlarged role we've sought for so long.



Figure8: A Build Nears Completion

The Centre, meanwhile, is selling off tools and equipment to neighboring community and volunteer organisations, this at a discount to slim down before the move. On a recent visit to discuss this article, Nick and I are interrupted by volunteers from the Steam Tug Wattle Restoration Project (also moving out in coming months), who count in their number some of the last living traditional boiler makers in Australia. They ask Nick what the Centre's looking to get rid of.

'This is Australia,' replies Nick, only half defeatedly, 'everything's for sale'.⁷



Figure7: Big Red in Morning Light

Sources

1. VWBC Staff Round Table, Paraphrased, July 2023.
2. Nick Atkins, VWBC Director, May 2024.
3. Jane Jacobs, *The Death & Life of Great American Cities* (91-93), 1961.
4. IBID 2.
5. Wong, L. (2024) Melbourne council to search for grants and donations to fund promised projects. ABC News, 14 May. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-14/melbourne-city-council-funding-gap-on-major-projects/103845204> [accessed 22 May, 2024]
6. Rolfe, P. (2024) Collins St towers to 'engage with the water'. *The Herald Sun*, 18 May. 2024.
7. IBID 2.

^A Paraphrased examples of the typical sentiment that in the author's experience is often expressed by landscape architects when challenged to consider potential negative consequences of their work. To happily take credit when things go right but obfuscate when they're challenged is as disappointing as it is predictable.

Image Credits

Figure1: Courtesy VWBC

Figure2: Courtesy VWBC

Figure3: Courtesy VWBC

Figure4: Author, December 2023

Figure5: Author, October 2023

Figure6: Author, May 2024

Figure7: Author, May 2024

Figure8: Aspect x TCL. 2023. *Salt Water Wharf Precinct Illustrative Masterplan*.

Available at: <https://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/greenline>. Accessed 15.05.2024

Figure9: Author, May 2024