

IMPRESSIONISTIC OBSERVATIONS OF POST CONSTRUCTION OCCUPANCY OF AN ENHANCED PUBLIC SPACE AUBURN TOWN CENTRE UPGRADE

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Abstract

Designing for people is an essential consideration in any public domain. Ensuring that the design suits both the people and the place itself is fundamental to good design. Major streetscape redevelopment projects are ultimately about the people who we hope will benefit from the improvements.

The Auburn Town Centre redevelopment was an enormous undertaking – the largest such project ever undertaken by Auburn City Council. It was expensive. A measure of success is not just the images we see in architectural magazines, but more about the community's reaction, adaptability, resilience, connectivity and engagement.

How are we to know if the new public space is being enjoyed and appreciated or detested and idle? The answer is – a post construction occupancy assessment. There are various stages where this approach may be applied at varying analytical levels. The observational approach is a valid preliminary appraisal.

In this discussion, I challenge myself as the Civil Engineer on the project to undertake observational assessments of the Auburn Town Centre Upgrade – post construction. This discussion paper presents my findings, and suggests that an Engineer's role should continue well into the operational phase of the project. Only this way, can the true objectives of the project be evaluated.

Key Words

Auburn, Auburn Town Centre, Auburn Town Centre Upgrade, ATCU, post construction occupancy assessment, impressionistic observations, major streetscape upgrade, restoration, subjective, recovery.

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Introduction

Through the first half of the twentieth century Auburn was central to the white working class fibro-belt of suburban Sydney. Like so much of Australia, Auburn changed dramatically under the influence of post-war immigration. Beginning primarily with people from Europe, Auburn has since absorbed people from Asia, the Middle East and Africa who have combined to make the place an incredibly diverse cultural melting pot. Auburn is now one of the main Islamic centres of Australia focused on the great Gallipoli Mosque.

In 2009, Auburn City Council committed to the upgrade of the Auburn Town Centre. The upgrade followed the development of a comprehensive public domain plan based on sound urban design values. The design was the culmination of community engagement, traffic, pedestrian activity and strategic planning studies. Together, the proposals aimed at making the Town Centre a “social hub” and an attractive place to shop, to dine and to do business.

The Auburn Town Centre has recently undergone a substantial facelift that has been planned for a number of years. In an address at the official opening ceremony, Auburn City

Council's General Manager; Mr Mark Brisby, said that "...the completion of the Town Centre Upgrade is a triumph for both Council and the Auburn community. The upgrade has given the Auburn community a new sense of civic pride that will last for many years to come." (Brisby. M, 2014, Auburn).

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Setting the Scene

The Master Plan

"In 2009, Council committed to the upgrade of the Auburn Town Centre and this became the largest such project ever undertaken by the Council. It covers 5 streets, over an area of 1.3 hectares and included the installation of over 90 new trees, wider footpaths, new footpath paving and road surfaces, new street lighting using multifunction poles, 2 play areas for children, and extensive new public seating."

[Video Continues] – Transcript

Sketches and Documentation

"COMPLETE's work began with a creative process of sketch visualisation of different options for the centre. This was followed by extensive detailed design development and documentation."

[Video Continues] – Transcript

Fly-Through & Drive-Through

"COMPLETE Urban won the job to design and document the \$7.0M upgrade of the Auburn Town Centre. Our team of Landscape Architects, Urban Designers and Engineers began the process of developing a vision for the centre and putting forward these concepts to the Client: Auburn City Council – for feedback and further development. The plans included a radical rearrangement of traffic, including a one-way circulation component and the making of a new road connection which would change the connectivity of the centre dramatically.

All of these changes were fundamentally about improving and increasing the footpath areas to which were then added – shade trees, gardens, seating, public art, lighting and even children's play areas. Together the proposals aimed at making the Auburn Town Centre a "social hub" and an attractive place to shop, to dine and to do business."

[Video Continues] – Transcript

"That was a virtual fly-through that we prepared to get our ideas across to the Client at the early stages. Hang on tight now for a drive-through of the built reality. With a little imagination, we hope that you will see that vision and result are not dissimilar!"

[Video Stops] [PowerPoint Slides Start]

Success or Failure

The success (or failure) of a project can be measured not only by the common key indicators; time and budget – but also the community's adaptability and resilience, connectivity and engagement of the space; post construction.

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Adaptability and Resilience

Two significant elements can make centres such as the Auburn Town Centre adaptable and resilient. They are 'street level activity' and 'diverse businesses and services' that can be adjusted to new roles. Retail centres are the best – and are often the only opportunity to create a "vibrant" Town Centre. Despite this, Town Centres remain very important. As some forms of retail have declined, others, like personal services and cafes have grown. People still need to buy many goods and services in person, and it still makes sense for them to be located in one place. New uses for Town Centres have also emerged, such as 'hubs' for working remotely. Town Centres also serve as important points of interaction, helping to meet the fundamental human need for social connection. These shifts are not the first major changes that retailing has gone through, and we can expect more in the future. Town Centres will be better able to

respond to these changes if they have diverse businesses and buildings and are well integrated with their local area and neighbouring streets.

Auburn Town Centre achieves this in every sense of the word – characterised by an upsurge in street level retail, the restaurants are full, the pedestrian areas are active, clean and safe, and there is an enhanced space for worship and prayer. The retail activity in the Town Centre reflects the local culture and ethnic mix, and is characterised by convenience shopping, lower prices, and a pronounced level of customer service. The upgrade has created a distinct and interesting atmosphere that many people are thoroughly enjoying.

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Connectivity

Connectivity – being able to get around – is vital to modern living. More than ever before, people want to be able to reach a wide range of goods, services, jobs and opportunities. When people choose a home, 5 of their top 10 priorities are directly related to connectivity, according to research commissioned by the Grattan Institute (Weidmann and Kelly, 2011) (Kelly and Breadon, 2012). People want to be near family and friends, local shops, a shopping centre and a public transport stop, and they want freedom from traffic congestion – don't we all!. Connectivity shapes adaptability – by being well connected to a broad range of opportunities enables people to adjust to change. For example, as the economy and employment prospects change, a worker who can reach a variety of jobs is in a far stronger position than one who cannot.

Connectivity is created by many factors, including road networks, bus routes and their timetables, train and taxi services, topography, and the location of retail and public services. This makes it hard to quantify. Observed measures, within the upgraded Auburn Town Centre, focus on the proximity to public transport stops – rather than how long people have to spend to get where they need to go, including by car. The Town Centre was well connected prior to the

upgrade, due to the close proximity of Auburn Rail Station. Connectivity to this major public transport node was improved by the provision of widened and accessible footpaths to carry large pedestrian volumes, and a widened and signalised pedestrian crossing adjacent to the rail station.

Through-traffic routes on surrounding major roads were transformed to form a “ring road” bypass around the Town Centre. Heavy traffic was further discouraged within the Town Centre streets via lower speed limits, high pedestrian activity areas – to encourage pedestrian priority – a one way circulation component, and the introduction of traffic signals. All of these traffic related improvements have significantly increased the connectivity for the centre.

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Engagement

The public domain is fundamentally a place for people to engage – whether that is in a social sense or for business. The most successful places for people tend to have certain qualities in common; they have an identity, they are safe and pleasant, they are easy to move around – especially on foot, and visitors feel comfortable and welcome. In the case of the Auburn Town Centre; the biggest component of public space is the streets.

The best streets are those which accommodate pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers. Streets are the stage where the drama and social exchange of public life unfolds each and every day. Town Centre streets should also be places of celebration and cultural inclusion. This is particularly fundamental to the community life experienced in the Auburn Town Centre – because of its fusion of cultures.

Auburn has the highest proportion of overseas born residents of any Local Government Area in Australia. The people of Auburn are from very diverse ethnic, cultural, and language groups, and social origins. The majority are from Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Approximately 66% of Auburn's

population speak a language other than English.

Engagement of a public space can be measured by observation and inspection. It is by no means an analytical or systematic approach – it is purely personal; and left up to the interpretation of the viewer. All indications suggest that the enhanced Auburn Town Centre streetscape is one which is being enjoyed by children – particularly in their new play areas. The centre is one which is being enjoyed by the elderly – with widened and accessible footpaths and new or extended places to dine. The regular middle-aged person is enjoying the fresh and clean environment, with many places to sit, to park the car, to congregate, and to do business. Cultural groups are redefining their gathering points. Foodies are converging on the centre from afar to experience what is said to be the finest multicultural dining that Sydney has to offer.

It is through these key observational indicators (and many more) that demonstrates that the new space is reengaged and active. A primary objective is met.

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Face Our Fears

Ultimately we – as Consulting (or Local Government) Engineers, Project Managers, Landscape Architects and Urban Designers – ought to feel proud of the public space that we have created. Notwithstanding, your sense of self-righteousness is important for fulfilment and approval for application into your next project – and the project after that.

Intuitively, I believe, it is increasingly apparent that a Consulting Engineer's role on a project may fundamentally differ to that of a Local Government Engineer. By this – a Consulting Engineer typically works on many projects for a short period of time, compared to that of the Local Government Engineer who typically works on fewer projects for a longer period of time.

The Local Government Engineer may arrive at the office every morning by driving or

walking through the project site – they will be quite aware of how the construction is progressing, or if there has been a negative community reaction – or acclaim. This will apply generally for the life of the project. Similarly, in the first 12 months of the operational phase, for example, the Local Government Engineer may observe an enriched or deteriorating sense of community, they may witness new businesses opening or closing their doors, they may see existing businesses upgrading their facades, or they may receive applications for new alfresco dining leases passing over their desks. All of these are examples of how a Local Government Engineer can remain associated with post construction occupancy of a project.

The Consulting Engineer is commonly disconnected from all of this – they are probably too busy designing their next project. Post construction occupancy assessment, by subjective observation, is a valid way to assess the success or failure of a project.

How can this be done?

Visit the site 3 months after final completion – 6, 9 or 12 months post-handover, sense the vibe, talk to the business proprietors, record their critiques whether it be positive or negative, have a coffee or a sandwich at the new café – people watch. You will soon sense an atmosphere of acceptance, refusal – or perhaps confusion as people get used to their new environment. Observational assessments will provide legitimate findings. However, additional analytical approaches could be undertaken which record the facts and figures.

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Business as Usual

Construction activity in the public domain will inevitably cause disturbances to local residents and businesses. Minimising disruption during construction of public improvements generally requires three separate efforts – planning the construction process in phases for minimum impact, individual efforts by business proprietors, and

promotional activities to let the public know that the centre is still open for business.

Although there will always be negative inputs, it is important to involve the community as much as possible in the planning process for construction of the improvements. For the Auburn Town Centre Upgrade project, daily face-to-face contact with business proprietors and local residents ensured that all affected by the construction were well informed of the extent and expected timing for the completion of each stage.

Asking for the community's input will not only give them a greater understanding of the unavoidable short-term disruptions; they may also have ideas that will contribute to more a sensitive construction plan. Maintaining community exposure is imperative.

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Conclusion

We cannot predict exactly how communities will change in the future but we can say with a high level of confidence that they will change. If today's Town Centres are to be tomorrow's Town Centres too – then they must be flexible enough to change with the people who live and work in them.

Renewal is essential to a vibrant community; ageing public streets being renovated, new types of shops and enterprises superseding declining businesses, and one generation of residents giving way to the next. If societies are not flexible then renewal cannot happen.

The objectives of a streetscape restoration are the creation of a public space which is; inclusive and adaptable, resilient, connected and engaged. It is through periodic post construction occupancy assessment that the success of such a project is actually realised. The Engineer's role in evaluating the outcome of their design is not always literature – it is personal and tangible – it is the view of the man on the street.

The Auburn Town Centre was fully reopened for business in June 2014. The best summation of this major undertaking comes from the man at the coal face, Auburn City

Council's Project Manager, Matthew Gapps – quoted as follows –

“The entire project was delivered within budget and on time despite the numerous challenges that were presented. The place certainly feels different now. It feels more inviting, cleaner, greener and open. There is quite a buzz of new activity around the place. Already there are many shop fronts upgrading their facades, new cafes moving into the street and Council has had a significant increase in the number of requests for alfresco dining.” (Gapps. M, 2014, Auburn)

When asked whether the project had any political ramifications, Matthew responded – “Overall the project seems to be well received politically. I think this is due to a number of reasons:

- a) The Auburn Town Centre was in great need of this upgrade;
- b) The construction of the project progressed without incident;
- c) The project was delivered on time; and
- d) The project was delivered within budget.” (Gapps. M, 2014, Auburn)

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Author Biography – Ian Grieves



Ian Grieves is a Senior Civil Engineer with 12 years' experience in Civil and Stormwater Design. His interests are primarily related to Water Sensitive Urban Design, medium to large scale Infrastructure Engineering, Hydraulics & Hydrology, Flood Modelling, Town Centre Design, Road Design, Cycleway Design and Land Development.

Having received the Senior Graphics Award and Information Technology Award with the highest aggregate marks in his final year of high school, his ambitions were clear. Ian was awarded a Residential Scholarship from *then* Queensland Premier Anna Bligh in the field of Information Technology (Programming). Ian would eventually pursue his aspiration of being a Civil Engineer working within the Public Domain.

In 2003, Ian commenced his 4-year Civil Engineering Cadetship with *Leddy Sergiacomi & Associates Pty Ltd* in Bundaberg, Queensland. Ian completed part-time Engineering studies in Toowoomba at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Ian's role with Leddy Sergiacomi was predominantly focused on the design and documentation of residential and rural subdivisions, as well as structural drafting. Soon after graduating from USQ, Ian moved south to the Gold Coast where he secured a Senior Civil Design role with *Hyder Consulting Pty Ltd*. In this role, Ian was exposed to major Public Works Engineering, Marina Design and large scale Land Development. In this role, Ian led a small team of Design Engineers.

Ian ventured into contract work early in 2009 for a period of two years. During this time, Ian was contracted to various project-based assignments for the Gold Coast firm: *Ocean Park Consulting Pty Ltd*. Ian was largely responsible for the conceptual and preliminary design development of a significant 3000+ lot residential subdivision in Worongary. Ian spread his wings; seconded to the firm: *Integrated Event Delivery Management (iEDM)* as a Senior Civil Designer. Ian's role with iEDM involved the design and documentation of civil and event management works related to race circuit, barrier and grandstand design layouts for V8 Supercars Australia. Specifically, Ian was involved in the civil design of the Townsville 400 race circuit, the Macintosh Island reconfiguration design for the Gold Coast 600, and the grandstand layouts and merchandise stores for the Sydney 500.

In February 2011, Ian joined *COMPLETE Urban Pty Ltd* as a Senior Civil Engineer. Over the past 4.5 years, Ian has worked meticulously in combination with various QLD and NSW Council's in the design and documentation of road design, kerb and gutter, cycleway, bus stop, car parking, stormwater drainage, park, foreshore and community building projects. Ian is the Quality Officer and Management System Coordinator of COMPLETE Urban for Australia.

Ian is highly motivated and proficient in the use of 12d Model, AutoCAD, Vehicle Tracking, MapInfo, CIRCLY, HecRAS and TUFLOW. Ian is the principle mentor to his junior Civil Engineering staff and provides a broad knowledge base to the undergraduate staff in COMPLETE's Student Development Program.

Ian's leading ambition is to gain international recognition in Civil Engineering design. Ian wishes to pursue his Registered and Chartered Status on the Board of Professional Engineers.

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