Places for People 2004—Melbourne, Australia

Gehl Architects and the City of Melbourne

Above: Melbourne from the air.

There was a time when the images of "urbanism" and "Australia" met only in postcards of the Sydney skyline. City plans from Australia that interpreted international trends may have appeared in books published north of the equator—from Charles Compton Reade's Garden City plan for Colonel Light Gardens to Walter Burley Griffin's expansive City Beautiful plan for Canberra. But for years a distinctly Australian urbanism was left largely to the imagination.

Places for People 2004 is proof of how times have changed. Produced by Gehl Architects for the City of Melbourne (the capital of the southeastern state of Victoria), it documents a decade's worth of publicly encouraged urban change based on the desires of the government and on recommendations made by Gehl in 1994. It is a testament to how good research can inform high-quality urban design, and how both research and design can act in tandem as part of a continuous, on-going process of urban change.

Melbourne, 1994 and 2004

Places for People 2004 begins with a quote from a 1978 newspaper article that laments how Melbourne's city center had become "empty" and "useless"—an evaluation that might have fit many American cities of the time. During the 1980s the city government realized the importance of saving this urban core. In 1993 Copenhagen architect Jan Gehl was invited to Melbourne to do that for which he had become very well known in Europe: studying public space and public life within the built realm and utilizing gathered data for proactive urban change.

The result of these efforts was Places for People: Melbourne City 1994. This report provided in-depth documentation of the character of Melbourne's streets, paths, parks, and other public spaces. It also made a series of recommendations for improving the city's pedestrian network, linking the city core to the adjacent Yarra River, and activating streets, arcades and alleyways.

Places for People 2004 provides a ten-year follow-up and reassessment of these efforts. It documents physical and demographic changes since 1994; presents the results

of public-life research conducted in the same locations and with the same methodologies as in 1994; and recommends future structural and policy changes. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to create spaces that are inviting, comfortable, accessible, equitable, safe, secure and meaningful.

It is rare that a consultant is allowed the chance to revisit earlier work so assiduously. The 1994 report set ten-year targets for attracting people to the city, and established benchmarks against which to measure progress. The jury praised Gehl and Associates for their analysis of earlier recommendations and for their honest commentary on which did and did not predict success. This is a much-needed form of analysis, they noted, in a field prone to changing theory and untested claims.

The jury also praised the City of Melbourne for not only maintaining a sustained commitment to rekindling public life, but for thoroughly utilizing the 1994 recommendations in programs to regulate the built environment, encourage new investment, and develop the public realm. Urban character often takes many years to change, and the fruits of this commitment are now finally becoming evident. The city's tangible, on-the-ground transformation was praised by several jury members who had been there a decade ago and again recently.

Renaissance of Public Life

Since the 1994 report, numerous changes have occurred in central Melbourne. While the 1994 Places for People began on a somber note, Places for People 2004 presents an optimistic picture, showing how positive, designed change has been reshaping the heart of a metropolitan area that now covers more than 3,400 square miles and is home to 3.6 million residents.[1]

One of Gehl's credos is that people like to go where other people are. Today the city center is increasingly becoming a place full of people. The number of downtown residential dwellings increased from 736 in 1992 to 9,900 in 2002. More importantly, these new residences are not concentrated in a few developments, but distributed throughout the central area. Additionally, the number of college students (a demographic now coveted in downtown development schemes in the United States) either living in or attending academic institutions in the central city has increased by 64 percent since 1993.

The public spaces in the city center have improved as well. The length of the network of lanes, arcades and alleys has increased from 300 meters (984 feet) to 3.4 kilometers (2.1 miles), and the quality of the urban environment along this network has improved markedly as well. Streets

have been physically enhanced with materials such as local "bluestone" paving and with street furniture regulated by new public codes. They have also been planted with numerous new trees, enlivened with public art (introduced as part of a city art strategy), and activated with both new commercial establishments and newly opened facades retrofitted as part of an "active edges" policy.

Melbourne's Yarra River, which runs through downtown, now has new promenades. Parks throughout the city are being reconsidered as part of a network of open spaces. And, not incidentally, visitors and residents have many more places to go, including museums and galleries, an aquarium, a library, and a casino.

The list of successes goes on, from additional benches to new tramways, pedestrian-friendly lunchtime street closures to full new public squares.

Data and Recommendations

The basis of the 2004 report is a location-specific comparison of the presence of people in the city center. The effort incorporates a great diversity of locations, from streets to bridges to pedestrian malls. This provides a fascinating, and useful, comparison between public life in 1994 and today.

Overall, since 1993, weekday pedestrian traffic in the city center has increased 39 percent during the day, and 98 percent during the evening. Some locations such as Swanston Street now host more pedestrians per day than Regent Street in London. So-called "stationary activities," such as standing, sitting, and utilizing cafes, have increased considerably as well.

Such data shape a new set of recommendations that in some cases highlight weaknesses in the 1994 report, and in others respond to new challenges. The report points out that, since 1994, not all locations have seen an increase in pedestrian traffic; not all portions of downtown have experienced an equally impressive amount of revitalization; and not all of the development that has occurred may be considered beneficial.

With these concerns in mind, Places for People 2004 recommends expanding certain programs, such as the integration of the pedestrian network, lunchtime street closures, and provision of new benches. It also recommends more focused initiatives such as providing links to public transportation, upgrading cityscapes along major thoroughfares and retail corridors, linking the Yarra River and Docklands to the rest of the city, controlling commercial advertising, and increasing the regulation of building height and form.

Rhetoric into Method

Of course, there are areas where a strategy like that of Places for People 2004 is open to criticism. Its recommendations are focused almost exclusively on urban uses associated with consumption and recreation, as opposed to production. Issues of affordability and gentrification, now discussed as a matter of course in American redevelopment documents, play no significant role in it. And issues of sustainability, while mentioned, are not fleshed out with much substance. But what is important is that Gehl and his team utilized their considerable research skills and experience to help a community move from where it was to where it wanted to be, and in the process created a method for others to follow.

Based on a rhetorical expression, "places for people," they took a proclaimed problem, applied both theory and public opinion as to what an ideal solution might be, then used on-going, place-specific research to shape the transformation of a real world place toward that ideal.

In the literature of design, "the people" often appear as little more than a rhetorical device—an ethereal, fictive force, ready to support the efforts of the heroic designer fighting the enemy of the day. Places for People 2004 takes this chimera and grants it meaning and substance.

Australian Urbanism

It is an unfortunate and unfair fact that for much of the twentieth century the native urban visions of Commonwealth nations such as New Zealand, Canada and Australia were framed by the two foreign, yet highly exportable concepts of urbanism found in Europe and the United States. Places for People 2004 is evidence of a different future.
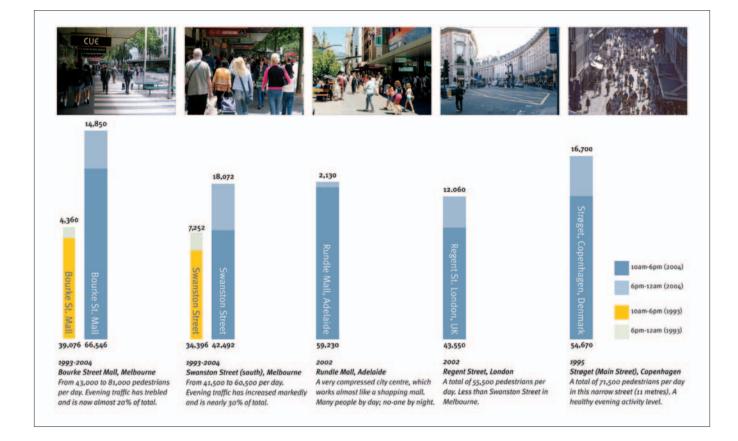
Urban design publications produced by New Zealand's Ministry for the Environment have been appearing in classrooms in the United States, making the streets of Wellington as representative of that country as its otherworldly natural landscapes.[2] In Canada, attention is

Above: The project has included a major effort to add trees to downtown streets.
Opposite: The work documented a remarkable increase in public life between 1993 and 2004, as measured in pedestrians per day.

Sample Juror Comments—Places for People, Melbourne 2004

Kelbaugh: In some ways this is the most typical example of an EDRA/*Places* prize winner. But in some ways it's a duplication of work done in Copenhagen.
Ahrentzen: I use the Copenhagen work in my class, and in some ways this is just as thorough. It's an excellent piece of work. It's very rich in detail and uses very simple graphics to make striking representations of some dramatic things that are happening.

McNally: I would feel great if it were submitted by the city. I would like to acknowledge that.
Kelbaugh: What Melbourne is doing is remarkable, especially what they did over the railroad tracks. Its very ambitious.
Jones: In terms of the long-term evolution of a really wonderful place that meets all the public-realm, pedestrian criteria, it's outstanding. The tools have been

tested and applied, and Melbourne is on the march.
Ahrentzen: That's an interesting way to look at it—in the long run. The Copenhagen work was more about tools, but this is more about how to use those tools to influence policy. It's a lifelong work of keen observation and then really dissecting particular places.
Jones: I think he ought to be given an award for convincing the power structure of Melbourne.

14,850

4,360

Bourke St. Mall

Bourke St. Mall

39,076 66,546

1993-2004
Bourke Street Mall, Melbourne
*From 43,000 to 81,000 pedestrians
per day. Evening traffic has trebled
and is now almost 20% of total.*

18,072

7,252

Swanston Street

Swanston Street

34,396 42,492

1993-2004
Swanston Street (south), Melbourne
*From 41,500 to 60,500 per day.
Evening traffic has increased markedly
and is nearly 30% of total.*

2,130

Rundle Mall, Adelaide

59,230

2002
Rundle Mall, Adelaide
*A very compressed city centre, which
works almost like a shopping mall.
Many people by day; no-one by night.*

12,060

Regent St. London, UK

43,550

2002
Regent Street, London
*A total of 55,500 pedestrians per
day. Less than Swanston Street in
Melbourne.*

16,700

Strøget, Copenhagen, Denmark

54,670

1995
Strøget (Main Street), Copenhagen
*A total of 71,500 pedestrians per day
in this narrow street (11 metres). A
healthy evening activity level.*

- 10am-6pm (2004)
- 6pm-12am (2004)
- 10am-6pm (1993)
- 6pm-12am (1993)

moving beyond the gleaming skyline of Toronto and the preserved Old World streetscapes of Montreal to new definitions of North American urbanism being formulated in Vancouver and the creative planning experiments emerging in far-northern locations such as Iqaluit.[3] In Australia, cities such as Brisbane and Perth are asserting their place in the international scene and re-creating an international image that no longer frames the entire nation as the duality of Sydney-Outback. But it is Melbourne that has truly taken the prize of late, literally and figuratively.

Places for People, 2004 has been lauded in both the mainstream Australian press as well as specialty publications such as *Urban Design Forum* and *Property Victoria*. It has won the Australia Award for Urban Design from the Urban

Melbourne was derelict for years and years. It was the pits.

Kelbaugh: I was there about ten years ago, and they have done a lot of stuff he was talking about.

Jones: Which is totally remarkable given the way our political/municipal structure has changed and flip-flopped.

Hull: They needed money to do that, didn't they?

McNally: And commitment and political will.

Ahrentzen: They hired the right person.

Jones: And that right person somehow sold the power structure on the simple notion that cities are for people. So all these things that they measure and have done are people based, pedestrian based.

McNally: I would say that we are adding to our list of awards criteria: research that impels change, impels the power structure to do something.

Hull: If you are successful in one place, that does not stop you from using the same methodology in another.

Kelbaugh: We could make it clear we are not awarding this for its template or its tools. It's for the successful application with great outcomes for a particular city.

Design Chapter of the Planning Institute of Australia and the Award for Excellence for Research and Communication in Landscape Architecture from the Victoria chapter of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects.

According to Gehl: "When cities in good old Europe can do it, and when major cities in Australia can do it, then any city anywhere, of any size should be able to succeed with a people-oriented strategy."

Urbanism may mean something different on the banks of the Yarra than it does along the Hudson or around the North Sea. But the success of Melbourne not only proves Gehl correct, it speaks to a future when those of us in the rest of the world may someday be importing expertise from Melbourne just as we once imported it from Copenhagen.

— Jason Alexander Hayter

All images courtesy of Gehl Architects.

Notes

1. "Melbourne—A Snapshot," City of Melbourne website: http://www.melbourne. vic.gov.au

2. See, for example, Ministry for the Environment (New Zealand), "The Value of Urban Design: The Economic, Environmental and Social Benefits of Urban Design" (Wellington, NZ: Ministry for the Environment, 2005).

3. See, for example, Elizabeth MacDonald, "Street-Facing Dwelling Units and Livability: The Impacts of Emerging Building Types in Vancouver's New High-Density Residential Neighborhoods," In *Journal of Urban Design*, Volume 10, No. 1 (February, 2005), pp. 13-38; and Jason Hayter, "Iqaluit Core Area and Capital District Redevelopment Plan—Nunavut, Canada," *Places*, Volume 17, Number 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 18-23.

Above: Among the project's goals have been 24-hour attractions, improved streets, a citywide arts program, new squares, promenades and parks, and more places to sit and pause.