Cultural Indicators for Activity Centres

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Abstract: *Across Australia, capital cities are developing strategies for Activity Centres where increased housing density and improved employment opportunities are supported by high quality public services and facilities. The recent Moreland Activity Centre and Housing Strategy identified the need for Activity Centres to be assessed against the Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) of economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits.*

The City of Moreland in Melbourne's north is best known for the eclectic and culturally diverse suburb of Brunswick, a well recognised base for many artists and creative practitioners. Brunswick's diversity is reflected not only in its population and cultural activity but also in its built form. Small shops and workshops currently provide multiple settings for creative practitioners to live, work, exhibit and perform. Further north beyond Brunswick, enormous contrasts unfold with cultures, identity, built form and sense of place shifting through Coburg, Pascoe Vale, Fawkner and Glenroy. In recognising the importance of cultural vitality within Activity Centres, Moreland's cross functional working group and consultant team considered the interplay between cultural factors and planning considerations – including the correlation between cultural vitality, built form and particular place conditions. Ultimately the working group found that identifying appropriate economic and environmental indicators for the MACHS was relatively straightforward, while identifying relevant cultural indicators was much more challenging within the constraints of the MACHS planning process.

This presentation will touch on some of the questions that Council staff and consultants engaged with during the development of the Moreland Activity Centre and Housing Strategy, as well as some of the subsequent exploration of opportunities for promoting cultural vitality through the integration of cultural indicators into the Municipal Strategic Statement. The presentation will include some key challenges and possible solutions for planning and enlivening Activity Centres that meet cultural as well as social, economic and environmental aims.

Keywords: cultural indicators, land use strategy, local government, activity centres.

Introduction

This article considers the potential role and nature of cultural indicators in relation to land use strategy. It looks at the interface between planning for cultural vitality and planning for housing intensification and economic vitality, especially within the context of the state mandated framework for Activity Centres.

In many circumstances the processes and priorities for identifying and planning Activity Centres focus overwhelmingly on economic and environmental values. We propose that planning for Activity Centres should also consider social and cultural vitality as a key dimension of sustainable urban places. Economic and demographic indicators are commonly used within the planning process for sustainable Activity Centres. Our question is, what kind of cultural indicators might be relevant to add to the mix?

Our interest in this question arose out of recent experiences and reflections as part of a cross functional team of consultants and Council Officers developing a major land use strategy for the City of Moreland, the Moreland Activity Centre and Housing Strategy (MACHS). Questions around the use of cultural indicators in relation to the MACHS have led to series of observations and propositions informed by our respective professional backgrounds in planning for arts and culture within a local government context, and urban planning and design. We believe that the areas of interest which have emerged through this work and further discussions have potential implications for delivering on arts and cultural objectives not only through Activity Centre planning but also through other key plans for land use.

Introducing Moreland

The City of Moreland in Melbourne's inner north stretches from the inner city neighbourhoods of Brunswick and East Brunswick out to the more suburban areas of Fawkner, Pascoe Vale and Glenroy. It has a distinctly multicultural population of both first and second generation immigrants representing all the waves of twentieth-century migration. The municipality covers a broad socio-economic spectrum, and is also undergoing rapid renewal and change including clear signs of gentrification particularly in the southern end nearer to the city.

From a culture and place perspective, Moreland is probably best known for the eclectic inner suburb of Brunswick which has become a well-recognised base for artists and creative practitioners. Brunswick's diversity is apparent not only in its population and cultural activity but also in its range of built forms. Small shops and workshops can be found amongst houses, based around narrow streets and walkable centres. As with many other inner suburbs, the tram routes help create long linear corridors of more intense activity. Up until the late 1980s, Brunswick was the centre of a clothing and footwear industry. The demise of these industries left behind many underused spaces mixed into local neighbourhoods. Together with Brunswick's dense network of pre-war pubs and narrow shops, these former industrial spaces provide opportunities for creative practitioners to live, work and exhibit.

Beyond Brunswick, Moreland's northern suburbs offer significant contrasts in terms of both built form and culture. Coburg shares many of Brunswick's qualities but it has a more distinct centre surrounded by separate residential and industrial areas.

Further out again the neighbourhoods of Pascoe Vale, Fawkner and Glenroy have a more traditional suburban character, typified by single-family

homes on larger blocks. There are smaller retail shopping centres in these more northern suburbs, but less of a mix than the shopping areas found further south. Each of Moreland's suburbs has its own type of cultural vitality, but this often appears to be at lower levels of intensity when compared to the more public expressions of culture within Brunswick and Coburg.

What are the activities in an Activity Centre?

So how does Activity Centre planning address this diversity? Firstly it is worth thinking a little more about what an Activity Centre is. State urban planning policy has attempted for a long time to shift future residential growth back into established areas within the city, based on the logic that this will limit sprawl and make better use of existing infrastructure.

In general terms, this is an important goal for improving the sustainability and liveability of our cities. In order to do this, the planning system needs to manage the process of change in existing suburbs. It needs to protect the diversity and vitality of existing neighbourhoods while also encouraging their targeted redevelopment. In established residential areas this approach has been quite contentious.

The redevelopment process involves changes to the existing community mix. Increasing the density of residential areas often involves the demolition of older established buildings whose character may be prized within local neighbourhoods and communities. The compromise solution has been to introduce more residential growth into formerly non-residential areas such as shopping strips and surrounding semi-industrial areas. These areas are known as

Activity Centres in Melbourne 2030, the metropolitan planning policy.

So then, what are the activities in an Activity Centre? We know just by walking around the centres of Brunswick, Coburg, Glenroy and other areas of Moreland, that all kinds of diverse activities take place in these areas. However for reasons to do with the initial policy aim to increase the residential population in established areas, the planning policies for these areas have had a much narrower focus. Most structure plans consider issues such as density, residential mix, changing population demographics; commercial and retail mix; employment numbers and public transport.

Clearly there is much more to these places than such narrow measures of activity. Unfortunately experiential and cultural measures of place are too often crowded out by more technical measures such as vehicle trip generation and total retail floor space. Most councils, and Moreland is certainly among them, have included cultural and social development objectives as part of their Activity Centre structure plans. However these sometimes have to compete with the technical aspects of the planning process. The project we are talking about today is a good example of this tension.

We'll now briefly describe the key processes for developing the MACHS plan, and some of the questions that arose for us along the way. The Moreland Activity Centres and Housing Strategy was developed in order to provide a guide for housing demand and growth in activity centres across Moreland. The aim of MACHS was to set up a long term plan for genuinely mixed-use neighbourhoods with a wide range of activities. The initial research phase identified a number of indicators such as housing demand and accessibility which were

then mapped across the whole municipality.

A cross functional team - consisting of representatives from across council including economic development, cultural development, community development and social policy - together with the consultants - also undertook tours of the relevant neighbourhoods. Each was ranked as 'Principal Activity Centre', 'Major Activity Centre', 'Neighbourhood Activity Centre' or 'Local Activity Centre' in descending order of size and economic importance. A series of workshops were also held with Council to help develop the policy guidelines.

We need to acknowledge up front that only a relatively limited range of indicators were used. The focus, in line with broader Activity Centre policy, was mostly on a technical assessment of housing and retail needs viewed from a market perspective. Through the rest of this paper we will reflect on why it was so difficult to capture cultural concerns within this sort of strategic planning process.

Counting Culture

The state mandated framework for Activity Centres clearly emphasises economic and environmental sustainability over social or cultural considerations. It is not surprising then that these dimensions get counted first when working out where Council should focus its resources in building up and intensifying centres for commercial, retail and housing development.

Early in the MACHS process there was a general acknowledgement amongst the cross functional team that culture does of course exist in Activity Centres and therefore in principle at least ought to be considered in planning for them. The presence and importance of cultural activity within the centres can be seen through a variety of forms and activities including council owned cultural facilities such as the town halls in Brunswick and Coburg, galleries such as the Counihan Gallery at Brunswick Town Hall and performing arts facilities including the Brunswick Mechanics Institute and in a Secondary College.

Council is also a strong supporter of cultural festivals, events and other arts programming, while also playing a wider role in supporting and promoting some of the many other community, private, and not-for-profit exhibition and performance spaces and activities across the municipality.

All of these forms of cultural activity and infrastructure can fairly easily be measured and might arguably be used to inform place based cultural indicators, but their relation to residential development is not always straightforward. Really the question that arose during the MACHS process was: What indicators could capture the interrelationship between the types of development that would take place in Activity Centre and the impact this might have on cultural vitality?

We attempted to find some pointers from the academic literature on cultural indicators but we were unable to find clear guidance that addressed these particular issues.

Within the cross functional group it was apparent that the range of very different interests, professional languages, and ways of registering what goes on in Activity Centres at times presented challenges in trying to achieve an integrated understanding and approach. In thinking about the nature of cultural activity that occurs within Activity Centres, cultural development and social policy representatives were interested not only in the more formal and organised activities such as festivals, events, public art, exhibitions and performances, but also in some of the more informal social and cultural

activities that form an important part of community life in and around Activity Centres.

Some of the members of the cross functional team noted that there were areas within some shopping centres where there were particularly rich forms of social and cultural connection – these clearly had often evolved organically over time and were often the result of the individual leaders or communities rather than as the direct result of any planned process or government intervention. For example, the Victoria Mall in Coburg is perhaps best known for two things – the overpopulation of pigeons (which is probably an indicator of too much bread being thrown about!), and the daily gathering of older men – mostly from Italian, Greek and other European migrant communities. These men gather around a popular and cheap coffee shop in Coburg and provide not only invaluable reciprocal social support to each other but also lend a strong sense of identity to the place. But these characteristics of place are not captured in the planning for Activity Centres.

Should they be? And if so, how – particularly given that the nature of these defining characteristics is often highly particular to specific places.   It is also difficult to capture the types of rough quantitative data which might be used to develop comparisons between one geographical location and another.

The questions that were posed during the MACHS planning process but which we did not in this instance have the time or resources to answer fully were:

- What contribution does culture make to a healthy and viable Activity Centre?
- How can this be measured in a way that aligns and can be integrated with the type of

empirical data that informs land use planning?
- If technical planning focusses on built form and infrastructure, what might be some of the characteristics of built form that are more or less favourable to healthy social and cultural activity?

What qualities should the indicators possess?

What the MACHS project has suggested to us is that for cultural indicators to gain traction and make a difference within Activity Centre planning, they need to have some specific characteristics. Here we will suggest four.

Firstly, the indicators should be geographically specific, but also lend themselves to covering a large territory. They need to be disaggregated to the greatest degree possible, to show not just what is happening but <u>where</u> this activity is taking place. Too many of the city ranking approaches of Richard Florida and his successors use data on the level of the city region or maybe suburb at best. The information needs instead to be at the level of the street or individual buildings. To plan for change or to protect existing conditions for cultural activity within specific areas it is important to know what is actually there.

Secondly, the indicators should consider how culture links to particular places. Some cultural activities are very hard to locate in space. Where, for instance, does the cultural activity of reading a book take place? In the living room or café where it is read? At the bookstore where it was sold? In the studio where it is written? At a writer's festival? They all share some level of attachment to reading, but not all are relevant to placemaking efforts.

An indicator that shows the number of books purchased per capita is interesting but this is linked to population, not place. An indicator that locates bookstores or writers' studios, or venues for festivals, tells you something quite specific about the neighbourhood they are in. This is more useful for planning purposes. Thirdly, the indicators should aim to address both formal and informal kinds of cultural activity. It is relatively easy to locate businesses or cultural providers that have a fixed address.

But what about the practitioners who don't have a registered business? Or the activities that aren't businesses at all? This is where, from an urban design perspective, we might look for the settings for activities, alongside indicators of the activities themselves. As a related dimension, it is important to think about the nature and levels of cultural production, participation and consumption. The indicators need to recognise both the artefacts and the people involved. If a neighbourhood is full of public art but bereft of artists actually living and working in the community, this is a concern for the cultural vitality of Activity Centres.

Finally, as others have noted before, the indicators will most likely be derived from existing datasets. This is a pragmatic recognition of the limited resources for establishing cultural indicators and also acknowledges the rich spatial datasets that most councils have in their rates database.

Potential examples

To give an example of the kind of cultural indicator we are proposing let's return for a moment to the idea of settings for cultural activity. Let's assume that some types of buildings are more amenable for use as spaces for creative production. For instance small warehouse spaces are particularly flexible because of their open plan and often also because of their cheap rent. A map indicating the location and density of these types of building could be a proxy indicator for creative opportunities.

The connection between such spaces and levels of artistic activity isn't absolute as many of these warehouses have been converted for use as dwellings or office space. However, understanding the distribution of unrenovated warehouse spaces with cheap rent can help in understanding the potential for certain sorts of cultural activity to flourish within a neighbourhood.

Let's look at the example of a vacant milk bar. The shop type wasn't designed for cultural activity but it can be reused quite successfully as an improvised gallery and workshop for a sculptor, because the large street windows provide a very visible location to exhibit work. In this example, it is the public-private interface of a building that promotes the adaptability of the building for cultural uses. Some very interesting research work is being done in this area by Kim Dovey and Stephen Wood, presented at the 2011 State of Australian Cities conference, but it is still at an early stage.

Neither of these are definitive measures of cultural vitality, but the advantage here is that these sorts of indicators speak the language that statutory planners can understand. Building form and interfaces can easily be linked to concepts such as neighbourhood character or activity centre design guidelines within technical statutory planning. They could be used to make the planning process more sensitive to existing cultural activity. At the very least, these indicators can be used to help inform a Council about the nature and extent of opportunities for certain types of artistic and cultural activities within its neighbourhoods.

Place, Politics, and Pragmatism

Currently one of the key concerns for sustainable arts practice in Moreland is the survival of 'creative spaces' in warehouses and former factories which provide affordable opportunities for artists to creatively adapt and reuse these spaces as studios, rehearsal, recording and performance spaces, particularly in industrial pockets of Brunswick. This type of use of former industrial space is not unique to Brunswick of course and similar situations exist across inner Melbourne and indeed across much of the post-industrialised world.

However, over the past decades we have also seen the loss of many of these spaces as gentrification drives the rezoning of these areas from 'industrial' to 'residential'. Many properties have already been converted into desirable and often expensive warehouse style accommodation or demolished to provide sites for larger developments.

From an arts and cultural development perspective, the creative adaptation and utilisation of such spaces by artists is a positive trend, and Moreland's Arts and Culture Strategy acknowledges the importance of maintaining affordable space for artists. The conditions under which many of these spaces remain affordable for artists, however, depends to a large degree on whether Council maintains its industrial zoning of the areas in which they are located. There are, though, certain tensions spread across a range of stakeholder interests as to whether the fluid, often quite informal and creative uses of former industrial spaces are indeed desirable. Many of these sites offer clear potential for further housing intensification and commercial development, in line with the objectives of Activity Centres.

Activities associated with the adaptive re-use and occupation of these spaces by artists sometimes also attract the ire of other residents and at times are in contravention of local laws. There have been a number of recent and widely publicised local controversies regarding the use of these buildings within Brunswick, including local media coverage about very large, illegal parties. As a way of working towards increased compliance, the Arts and Culture Unit at Moreland is about to commence working with Council's Urban Safety and Communications units to improve awareness amongst artists about the need to observe building and safety regulations.

Moreland is currently undertaking a review of its Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS), which strategically links land use to Council's economic, environmental, social and cultural objectives. Alongside the MSS, Council will also be developing a long term Community Plan. The opportunity exists to further highlight the nature, level and value of creative activity which takes place in these spaces and also to develop cultural indicators to track the numbers and location of such spaces.

Ensuring the visibility of creative uses at the highest level of Moreland's planning framework may aid arguments for maintaining a level of protection and help to keep artists at work in Moreland. But there are questions beyond this about the value and timing of highlighting, measuring, counting and promoting particular forms of culture. Within an environment of ambivalence about the safety of creative uses of space, it is imperative that we not only make culture count, but we also work with the complexity of conditions in which culture can be allowed to flourish.

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