

VICTORIAN DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

Ballarat Civic Hall

July 2015

Ballarat Civic Hall

Design Review Report – 15 July 2015

We thank the City of Ballarat for the opportunity to provide an independent design review of the Ballarat Civic Hall participatory design process and options development. We acknowledge Here Studio's passion and dedication to the project and thank them for presenting a very thorough overview of the history of the site, the Ballarat context and the design options developed in partnership with the community.

First Phase

We acknowledge the highly complex nature of this project and its history, and commend the introduction of a new process of design and engagement, to facilitate a new beginning for this important central Ballarat site. We consider the participatory design process, led by Here Studio, to have been successful to date in its ability to re-engage the community, raise the community's confidence in the opportunities for the site and enable a strengthened relationship between the Council and the community.

It is evident that Council is giving the time, space and resources the community needs to begin a new process of reimagining the Civic Hall site. Importantly, Council appears to have played a listening role during this first stage of engagement. We believe Here Studio has worked productively to synthesise a diverse range of community inputs into possible 'components' that make up the site options.

We applaud the team on the work undertaken so far.

Analysis of design options

On reviewing the ten options, there are consistent elements of each that we suggest stand out as being highly important to the community. The majority of the options show the retention of the Civic Hall building in some form, the protection of the Hall's main frontage to Mair Street and the expansion of the library. An analysis of the options also indicates that the placement of building mass is more acceptable on the northern half of the site.

We propose this placement of building bulk, for example the tall (office/residential) building on Market Street in most of the options, is likely an indication of the community's desire to protect the Mair Street/Civic Hall frontage, rather than the more literal interpretation that an office block on Market Street is desired. In other words, the community seems to recognise the need for a trade-off if the Civic Hall building is to be retained.

Review of the process and possible early projects

We encourage Council and Here Studio to continually review and adapt the participatory design process to ensure it is achieving its aims. Given there are common messages already emerging from the community about the future of the site, we suggest the team step back from the process at this current stage and translate these 'themes' into one simple two-dimensional diagram with 'zones of use' and overarching principles for the site. The aim of this simple overview plan is to gain collective agreement from the community on the direction of the project at this stage, while being abstract enough to allow flexibility through the next stages of design. We highlight what we see as the risk of developing the three-dimensional options for the Civic Hall site too far through

the participatory design process as the diagrams may commit Council to a built outcome that is lacking in architectural and urban design strength, and potentially stifling innovation. This could become difficult to manage due to individual preferences and conflicting attitudes to change. There is a risk that by continuing with the current program of reducing the number of options for the site to the preferred five and then three, the outcome will be a compromised solution rather than the best possible outcome for the site and the Ballarat community.

We suggest there seems a general consensus around a number of important issues for the site, and the team could consider implementing small, early projects to demonstrate Council's commitment to the site and to garner community interest and momentum for future stages. We suggest this could include:

- Retention and celebration of the Civic Hall frontage and its unique setback from Mair Street through the introduction of a highly considered, landscaped forecourt / public plaza for the Ballarat CBD. This very simple intervention has the potential to uplift the 'postcard' view of Civic Hall and begin to change people's perceptions about the Civic Hall site and its potential. We suggest considering exemplar projects of a similar typology, such as the successful State Library of Victoria landscaped forecourt / setback from Swanston Street.
- As a 'bookend' at the opposite end of the site, we propose committing to the extension of the Ballarat Library. There is an opportunity to create a library that is more visually accessible from the CBD, contributes in a positive way to the civic nature of this site and helps restore the 'destinational' qualities of the larger Civic Hall precinct. The Doveton Street streetscape, and the protection and possible enhancement of the row of existing mature trees at the library entrance should also be considered.
- Begin investigating a new use for the Civic Hall building to seed flow on development through the site. This may include a range of options, including those that have been provided by the community, and should be balanced by an analysis of the social and cultural infrastructure needs of Ballarat and the economic viability of each solution. Again, consider exemplar projects where a building of scale has been reimaged through ambitious new uses.

We encourage the project team to allow these first interventions to be a catalyst to generate the community support for future stages across the other parts of the site, rather than the community and Council attempting to define and commit to a fully detailed vision for the site.

Way forward

We would now encourage the client and design team to undertake the following:

- Broaden the view of the community by placing this project in its context – i.e. in Ballarat's historic centre, in Ballarat's broader urban area and in the context of the city as the capital of Western Victoria. Map the variety of uses and gaps in social infrastructure, housing, commercial space, carparking, open space, development sites etc. A broader analysis of the site context will highlight the appropriateness of many of the proposed 'components' for the Civic Hall site when assessed against other important public and private projects occurring elsewhere across the city.
- The design team should undertake professional urban analysis of the site in its central Ballarat context. For example, while the community deems a building of scale on Market Street appropriate, an analysis of the streetscapes and city skyline may suggest otherwise. Strategic questions such as acceptable height limits within central Ballarat must be analysed and answered by suitably qualified professionals.

The first stage of the participatory design process has produced valuable information, which in its current form, is a collection of ideas. It is now the role of the project team to take the community sentiment, local knowledge and thoughts and overlay this with important strategic planning information, urban design analysis and architectural intent. We acknowledge Here Studio's advice that the community is a highly informed one and understands that decisions about the site's future uses, built form and landscape, cannot be made on the basis of the participatory design process outcomes alone. We therefore encourage Council to support Here Studio with the resources required to undertake the next stages of a considered design process that tests the ideas for the site, interrogates the current thinking and focuses on the production of a site masterplan and a tangible brief. We encourage Here Studio to supplement their expertise, as required, to achieve these outcomes. Both Council and Here Studio should feel confident that provocation through the architectural design process is an important and positive part of engaging with the community.

We remind the project team that there may be alternative methods of achieving the various outcomes seen as desirable by the community. For example, high-density residential living in the CBD is a worthy ambition, however could be enabled effectively through policy change or legislative mechanisms rather than seeing the development of the Civic Hall site as the most appropriate place for this purpose.

Thank you for the opportunity to review this project. We offer the opportunity for a second design review of the scheme at the next appropriate design stage.



Jill Garner
Acting Victorian Government Architect