

# VICTORIAN DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

Ballarat Civic Hall

January 2016

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## Design Review Report – 20 January 2016

We thank the City of Ballarat for the opportunity to provide an independent design review of the Ballarat Civic Hall community participatory design process, options development and Stage 1 proposal. We thank Here Studio for their comprehensive presentation and their deep commitment to the project. We also thank the representatives of the City Council and Regional Development Victoria (RDV) for their participation in the review process.

### Participatory design process and work to date

We acknowledge the tense context in which this project was initiated and commend Here Studio on the success of the participatory design process in giving a voice to community expectations and desires for the site. We also commend Council's role in funding and supporting this work. We understand that relations between the Council and the community are now much improved, and that this has been reinforced by the recent Council action to withdraw the demolition application for the site.

This improved relationship means that the project is now well placed to proceed with goodwill on all sides. We recommend that Council and Here Studio carefully consider the next steps to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the participatory process and from available funds, and to enable a timely move to the next stage.

We note both Council and RDV's desire to have a concrete project outcome, that is highly useable as the first stage of the redevelopment. We agree that this is vital, both in terms of responsible use of Council funds and as a demonstration project that will form an important catalyst for later stages. This will be fundamental for securing ongoing community support along with the investment required to realise subsequent stages.

A coherent, concise set of principles driving the development of the site, a clear masterplan and a successful and meaningful first stage are all important factors in delivering value for the community and in de-risking the project to provide an attractive setting for potential future investors.

### Process Stages

In the project's current form the participatory design process, masterplanning and briefing/design of Stage 1 are all blurring together. We believe this is compromising the project moving forward and strongly recommend separating the project into clearly defined, coherent stages.

We recommend it is now essential to develop one vision for the whole site, to bring the current phase of the participatory design process to a close. This 'vision' will be a strategic balancing act between economic possibilities, community aspirations for the hall, Council commitments and the broader urban development potential of central Ballarat. We believe the work done to date provides a strong and informed foundation to commence this necessary next step.

The participatory process has been remarkable for bringing the community together and eliciting a wide range of ideas. However we reiterate the comments made in the report prepared following the July 2015 design review that:

"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.”

During the previous VDRP session, Council and Here Studio were encouraged to continually review and adapt the participatory design process to ensure it is achieving its aims. We believe that, with the community now on board and highly engaged, it is time to move confidently to the next stages. Professional expertise in terms of urban design, masterplanning, economic analysis, briefing and design should now come to the fore. This will help ensure an excellent outcome for the community and for Council, and build on the community engagement thus far. Driven by professional knowledge and input, these next stages should reframe the ongoing community consultation and communication process to ensure that the goodwill developed does not dissipate, and that knowledge developed through prior engagement remains active in the project.

### *Community participation*

The work undertaken by Here Studio to collect and synthesize community views and expectations is comprehensive and detailed. It has generated a wealth of material, but key messages are difficult to comprehend and fully digest in a timely manner. It is recommended that this material be used to develop a set of clear and coherent principles to guide future stages of the project.

### *Principles and masterplan*

The principles derived from the participatory design process should be simple and robust. They should be documented in words and diagrams, and presented in a concise, digestible format, with a clear structure. These principles should be used to assess options and inform a masterplan for the site.

The masterplan should clearly embed the principles, align with Council’s strategic objectives for the city and be developed relative to the wider urban context of Ballarat. It should establish the role of the site in relation to the city – is this to be the new “civic heart” of the city? If so, what are the ingredients required? For example, cross-site links should be considered in terms of where they come from and lead to, and how this works in relation to the larger context of the city.

The masterplan should be understood to be a living document, which embodies the principles and strategic objectives while also leaving room for change in relation to the particulars of programming. It should not define building form. We reinforce the comments made by panel in the first review of the project:

“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.”

The masterplan should clarify core programming needs, informed by both community needs and economic analysis, including modeling and a robust business case. For example, if the library needs to expand, this should be identified as a key component. Likewise, if the flytower is to be reused, the rationale behind the change of use needs to be clearly tested and defined.

We also question the viability of some aspects of the five options presented – for example, there are doubts about the success of a ribbon library, and the role of residential use on the site is unclear. We reiterate the comment made in the previous VDRP report that “there may be alternative methods of achieving some of the 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.”

### *Stage 1*

We see a need to isolate and frame Stage 1 as a ‘real project’. The Stage 1 project is fundamental to setting the direction for the site, to ensuring the ongoing support of the community and building investor confidence. This is vital to realising a long-term future for the site. Stage 1 should be the first step in implementing the masterplan and expressing the vision for the site, with an outcome that has an immediate symbolic impact and provides practical facilities for the community. We encourage Council to demonstrate its commitment to the site by clearly defining Stage 1, through identifying a local project need (eg. new library?) and developing a brief, client, budget and timeframe for the project.

It is understood that community voices have clearly stated a commitment to the ongoing use of the hall, and a desire for it to continue to be available for public use. Stage 1 must respond to this, at the same time addressing Council’s desire for a highly useable and functional product, that meets particular needs within the community. Stage 1 needs to be a very careful and deliberate design proposition that redefines people’s experience of the site and excites them in terms of the public realm.

Presently there is some confusion about the brief and programming for Stage 1. The Here Studio shortlisted proposals extend to ‘soft’ landscape works to Doveton Street, the development of a civic plaza adjacent to Mair Street and the relocation of the carpark to Armstrong Street, the refurbishment of the front main hall and closing the flytower. As an alternative proposition, Council has indicated an interest in decanting the existing library to the refurbished hall, and exploring the idea of a contemporary library as a meeting place and important community centre.

We note that these are two quite different propositions. Converting the hall to be part of a re-vised library would need to be properly briefed, with consideration of the particular operational, spatial and relationship requirements of all spaces. Further comment on each of these options is made below.

### **Library adaptive reuse**

Using the hall to accommodate part of the library has the great advantage of bringing it back into immediate ongoing, and potentially ‘appropriate’, community use. However, based on advice in review, we understand that the building in its current state can only accommodate half the library space required, and we note that the scale and volume of the hall would lend itself to particular activities associated with a library, while being unsuitable for others. This reinforces the need for the project to be carefully briefed as part of a larger development strategy. The stated community desire for ongoing use of the hall as an ‘event space’ would also need to be considered in any adaptive reuse brief.

### **Here Studio proposal**

The development of a multi-purpose event space maintains flexibility and offers community access, but may not deliver the ‘product’ the Council is looking for in the same way that the library could. This proposal includes substantial landscaping works, and the development of a large area of hard landscaping, including a large area of civic plaza. Further understanding of how this relates to broader urban plans for the city is required to assess this in a wider context. What is the scale of public space, and the variety of experiences this provides? Does the ‘soft’ landscape to Doveton Street work from the experience of the street?

We suggest exploring inexpensive and high impact methods of signalling change and altering perceptions, such as lighting, which could be particularly effective on the flytower.

We reiterate the need to clarify the principles to guide the development of the whole site. Combined with Council's strategic urban commitments, these should inform the masterplan. We encourage Council and Here Studio to identify a realistic occupation or 'project' for the Civic Hall, which will result in it being actively used by the community, and to develop the brief for this first stage. We encourage Here Studio to supplement their expertise, as required, to achieve these outcomes.

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



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