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The Northern Territory Government

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ALICE SPRINGS – URBAN DESIGN AUDIT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report represents the findings following an on the ground survey of Alice Springs Central Activity District (CAD). This survey was carried out in September 2008 by personnel from The City of Melbourne and Design Urban Pty Ltd. Photographic material gathered during the audit is hereto attached in Appendix 1. The audit was conducted using observation of activities in Alice Springs during a limited time. Despite this several key observations were made leading to key recommendations.

The Urban Design Audit was conducted using a SWOT analysis to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to the Alice Springs CAD.

Figure 1. Area for the Urban Design Audit

While adjacent areas and features were outside of the study area, there influence was nevertheless taken account of in this audit.
2.0 MAPPING ANALYSIS

Prior to the actual SWOT analysis mapping analyses were conducted to reveal urban design characteristics of the CAD.

Figure Ground Mapping

Figure 2. The “Figure Ground” diagram of Alice Springs

This diagram shows building footprints in white, and surrounding space shown in black. From this it is clear that while some buildings contribute to a strong urban form and street edge, there are many areas where streets are poorly defined by buildings. From the diagram it is also evident that the “grain” of buildings is very varied, from small scale buildings to very large “big boxes”. While Alice Springs CAD has a strong rectilinear grid of streets, the figure ground diagram reveals that this is not being reinforced by adjacent buildings. The block structure is not clear from the figure ground analysis.
Mapping Surface Car Parking

Figure 3. Surface Car Parking Map

The mapping of surface car parking indicates that an area of about 40% of the non-road area in the Alice Springs CAD is given over to car parking. Compared to similar country towns this is high.
Figure Ground and Surface Car Parking Overlay

Figure 4 below indicates a superimposition of building footprints (shown in white) on the surface car parking diagram. From this it can be seen that while some streets enjoy a high level of building to car park ratio, others are the opposite with car parking dominating the streetscape. On the diagram Todd Street Mall (shown red) enjoys a high level of definition from buildings which have been built along its edge, while Railway Parade (shown yellow) is dominated by a high proportion of surface car parking compared to buildings.

Figure 4. Superimposition of the Figure Ground and Surface parking areas.

Active Frontages

Streets were analysed in terms of their "active frontage". That is the degree to which there is a clear and active relationship between the street and adjacent buildings. Buildings which front the street and have windows and doors opening to the street
have good active frontages, while buildings which turn their backs to the street have poor active frontage. Streets were analysed and measured, with each building given a value of "good", "mediocre" or "poor" active frontage. Examples are shown below.

![Good (Green)](image1) ![Mediocre (Orange)](image2) ![Poor (Red)](image3)

Figure 5 – Active Frontage Analysis

From this analysis it is clear that parts of Todd Street Mall enjoy a high level of "good" active frontage, while other streets suffer from generally mediocre or poor frontage conditions. Poor active frontages lead to a perception of low levels of safety through low levels of surveillance of streets from adjacent buildings.
Street Trees

Street trees were mapped to determine the extent of planting. This is one indicator of quality in the streets or public realm. Planting of street trees contributes to a pedestrian friendly environment by providing weather protection and visual amenity for pedestrians.

Figure 6 – Existing Street Trees
Quality Footpath Paving

A program of paving in red brick has been commenced and is well progressed. This paving is of a higher quality than other paving in the CAD, but the extent does not cover the full CAD leading to differences between areas.

Example of quality brick paving

Figure 7 – Extent of Quality Paving
Weather Protection

The extent of weather protection provided from buildings to pedestrians on footpaths was mapped.

Figure 8 – The Extent of Weather Protection
Public Seating

The location of seating in public places was mapped.

While seating is provided it is often of poor quality and poorly maintained

Figure 9 – Extent of Public Seating
Safe Crossing Opportunities for Pedestrians and Cyclists

Places for safe and controlled crossing for pedestrians and cyclists are infrequent within the CAD, and more likely to be found on the fringe of the CAD. The use of roundabouts, while efficient and safe for motorists, provide few "down-stream" crossing opportunities for pedestrians. These are efficient traffic management devices but quite inappropriate for use in the CAD, leading to reduced crossing safety for pedestrians and cyclists.

Congestion resulting from lack of controlled crossing opportunities

Figure 10 – Safe Controlled Crossing Opportunities for Pedestrians and Cyclists
Safe, controlled crossing opportunities for pedestrians and cyclists are shown with blue dots, while uncontrolled and therefore less safe crossing places are shown with red dots.

**Quality Public Open Space**

High quality public open spaces were mapped. While relatively few were found in the CAD it is true that immediately adjacent to the CAD are very high quality public open spaces. These are shown in Figure 11 below.

![High quality Public Open Space](image)

**Figure 11 – Quality Public Open Space Mapping**
Views and Vistas

Key views and vistas to key cultural and physical landmarks were mapped.

Key views to physical and cultural landmarks

Figure 12 – Views and Vistas mapped
Clusters of Activity

From observation of building types, tenancies, signage and the activities of people moving about Alice Springs it was possible to determine that some uses tend to cluster in parts of the CAD. These clusters of activity have been mapped.

**Figure 13 – Clusters of Activity**
3.0 STRENGTHS

Streets and Streetscapes

The Alice Springs CAD has a number of Strengths which were identified. In the first instance it has a clear and coherent street network providing a high level of access for a wide cross-section of users. The interconnected network of streets provides a very good set of "bones" for the town. In addition to the street framework, many of the streetscapes are of high quality. Quality on these streets is derived from a high level of activation of building frontages, doors and windows fronting the street, good street tree planting, on-street parking, quality paving and weather protection for pedestrians. Examples of these are shown below.
**Good Street Trees**

In many areas very good street trees have been planted. These provide either iconic form or deep shading of pedestrian spaces. Examples are the following:

**Good Quality Footpaths**

As the mapping in Figure 7 above indicates, good quality paving is gradually being installed in the CAD. In addition to quality finishes, footpaths with weather protection and good quality tree planting are strengths on which to build in the CAD. Management of footpaths is essential and the introduction of an excessive amount of
A-frame advertising boards will detract from the pedestrian experience of footpaths. This needs to be closely monitored and managed.

Examples of good quality footpaths with good paving, weather protection and planting

Great views to Cultural Landmarks

Alice Springs is surrounded by many fine cultural landmarks. The MacDonald Ranges in the distance, the three hills close to town, and the Todd River are superb landmarks located close to town, giving a strong character and genus loci or sense of place. Many streets are aligned to take advantage of these views, and these need to be protected and maintained. The views to the Todd River have been spoiled by the introduction of parking between Leichhardt Terrace and the River.
Good Architectural heritage

Alice Springs enjoys a good architectural heritage. Many of the traditional buildings are made from local materials and therefore add to the strong sense of place. Future buildings should be encouraged to incorporate local materials, especially the local sandstones which are so distinctive and which give the “red centre” its character.
4.0 WEAKNESSES

Poor Relationship of Buildings to Streets

Through a combination of weak planning controls, and an over-emphasis on security barriers, buildings in the CAD often have a poor relationship to the street. This has many negative impacts, the most serious being a reduction in “passive surveillance”. It is passive surveillance which aids the perception and reality of community safety. Any reduction in animation of streets by active building frontages in effect reduces the level of safety in streets. Loading bays, side fences, high walls and other barriers, and buildings “backing onto streets” has been allowed to occur in streets and through “death by a thousand cuts” the level of activity and surveillance and therefore safety in streets is being reduced.
Poor Quality Footpaths

Many footpaths remain unfinished or difficult for pedestrians to use. Many in fact do not comply with laws pertaining to access for people with a disability. New developments have created surface parking lots and in the process torn up footpaths which have not been properly replaced. A set of standards and requirements for footpaths needs to be established so that every new development delivers an additional length of quality footpath. Over time additional quality footpaths will be delivered.
Poor Quality and Unfinished Footpaths

Unfinished Footpaths

Footpaths which lead nowhere

Unfinished Footpaths
Too Much Poor Quality Fencing

The Public Environment is lined with a lot of very poor quality fencing. The effect of this is to heighten fears about security as the clear message is, “this is a dangerous environment”. Security would be increased through better passive surveillance of streets, and building facing streets with many doors and windows opening to the street.
Predominance of Surface Car Parking

Alice Springs is at an important crossroads in its urban development. The coherence of the public realm is in danger of being lost and irreparable damage done to the quality of the townscape as a direct result of the demolition of buildings in favour of surface car parking. An audit of the amount of parking provided relative to the amount required is urgently needed to establish the reality of the parking requirement. This should be compared to the amount of commercial and retail floorspace in the CAD and the parking ratios applied in reverse to determine the level of parking required.
Alice Springs is visually dominated by surface car parking

Poor Street Tree Choices

Some trees are suited to being street trees while others are not. Unfortunately some of those planted in Alice Springs do more to deter pedestrian activity than to enhance the pedestrian experience. Performance criteria for street trees should include the following:

- Street trees to be deciduous, preferably with an early drop of leaves to facilitate solar access to homes in late autumn and winter
- Trees to be non-fruiting, but may produce flowers
- For public safety reasons species to be non-allergic, and not in the habit of dropping boughs, or producing fruit
- Trees to be "architectural" and regular in their form or habit
- Street trees to produce deep shade in summer
- Trees to have clear trunks to 2m at maturity to maintain visibility at pedestrian level
- Trees to have an urban scale, growing up to four storeys in height where appropriate.

There are many street trees in Alice Springs which meet these criteria and also contribute to the local identity and character of the town. These should be expanded in their use.

**Poor Street Furniture**

Street furniture in the Alice Springs is no longer at a standard required for a contemporary urban centre. Colours, furniture choices, materials and styles are outmoded and in poor repair. This has a detrimental impact on the general attractiveness of the CAD.

Poor quality Street Furniture reducing the experience of the Alice Springs CAD
Poor Public Amenities

There is simply not enough public seating in the Alice Springs CAD. That which does exist is often poorly maintained and in need of repair. Public toilets are generally insufficient and uninviting. The number of drinking fountains is insufficient for a town centre of this size and function. Bus shelters are generally of poor quality and often face blank walls, making this an unpleasant place to wait. This has a detrimental impact on people's willingness to support public transport.
No Active Frontages

When combined with the amount of surface car parking in the CAD, the amount of buildings which have a poor frontage or relationship to the street is of great concern. This is having a serious impact on reducing the attractiveness, activity, vibrancy and safety in the Alice Springs public realm. This problem is in danger of accelerating as many of the worst buildings in terms of providing activated frontages are some of the most recently constructed. It is clear that stronger planning controls to achieve activation of building frontages to streets are urgently needed.
5.0 OPPORTUNITIES

Environmental Leadership

Alice Springs through becoming a "Solar City" has begun a process which could place it at the forefront of sustainable development, nationally and internationally. If Alice Springs continued on this path and became "the most sustainable city in Australia" this would yield increased eco-tourism growth. In addition the reduction in scarce resource use, the reduction in oil dependence, the increase in water recycling, etc., would have many long term benefits for citizens and assist in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the associated climate change. This would mean a number of changes would be required such as a change to planning controls to achieve more environmentally benign outcomes in buildings and in the public realm.

![Image of Alice Solar City]

Environmental Leadership could produce a new aesthetic in Alice Springs' buildings

Plant Appropriate Street Trees

A program to plant a significant amount of street trees would have a dramatic impact on the streets of Alice Springs. It would also contribute to reducing temperatures in the CAD, improving the walking environment and contributing to increased pedestrian activity. If little else was done this initiative would significantly change the CAD of Alice Springs.

The program needs to be intensive and should cover the whole CAD. The most appropriate species should be selected for their shade, form and support of local bird life.
Good Street Trees planted to transform the streets from the current condition (above)

A Possible Future Street Tree Plan
Extend Weather Protection for Pedestrians

Planning controls should be revisited to ensure that weather protection is delivered through normal development approval processes. Every building should be required to front the street, have an activated front with doors and windows facing the street, and weather protection should be provided over footpaths to achieve a high level of pedestrian amenity. Design guidance should be given to ensure that elegant and appropriate solutions are delivered.
Active Frontages

The delivery of active building frontages should be achieved in all buildings. Parking should be placed to the rear of buildings which should be generally built to the front boundary with doors and windows opening directly to the street. This is the appropriate building relationship to the public street in a town centre. This is the traditional Australian country town urban pattern. This delivers active and vibrant town centres which are interesting and safe encouraging pedestrian activity and supporting tourism and local activities. The planning controls should be modified to ensure that active frontages are delivered in every instance to ensure that a safe, lively and attractive streetscape is delivered over time in the Alice Springs CAD.

Active Frontages – The Tradition in Australian Country Towns

Rationalise Parking

The continued expansion of surface car parking in Alice Springs should not only be stopped, but existing parking areas should begin to be developed with buildings to ensure that the CAD remains activated and vibrant. Opportunities for residential accommodation within the CAD should be explored. Parking will never be resolved in the CAD until a comprehensive audit of parking requirements has been completed, and parking structures are planned, funded and constructed to replace surface parking lots. This is essential infrastructure for a maturing town centre and infrastructure funding sources should be identified and application made to secure funding for this critical infrastructure.

It is essential that the Todd River parking be removed and the area returned to its natural state. The Todd River is Alice Springs’ single most important natural feature, and this needs to be valued and respected, not turned into a car parking lot.
Diagrams indicating the current parking condition (above) and a plan for rationalising parking (below) showing notional locations for multi-level parking structures (black rectangles), reclaimed Todd River environment and reduced surface parking. All parking structures should be “sleeved” with land uses which ensure active frontages are delivered.
Reclaim the Todd River

The banks of the Todd River have been lost to car parking. This is a poor use of the town’s single most important natural and cultural resource, which should be reclaimed and returned to its natural state and be a continuation of the areas north and south of the CAD.

Before

After
Bring the Todd River to Todd Street

There is one good opportunity to bring aspects of the river environment closer to the prime pedestrian space in the town centre, Todd Street Mall. This is Parsons Street to the east of Todd Street which has been truncated and become a drop off point and car park. This could be planted with trees which reflect the river environment and paved to express the colours and textures of the river environment. Trees could be planted to visually narrow this wide street, and ensure that pedestrians are shaded. The car parking area to the east of the ANZ Bank should have a building developed on the site, with a car park to the rear of the new building to retain an active frontage. The sails at the intersection of Parsons and Todd Streets fulfil an important shading role. If good shade trees were planted around the sails, these could be safely removed once their useful life had been completed and return the area to a more natural look.

Impression of Parsons Street remodelled to “bring the Todd River to Todd Mall”
Create a New Central Public Park

Between Hartley Street and Todd Street in the block bounded by Parsons Street and Gregory Terrace, is an area dominated by car parking and discontinuous pedestrian paths. In addition, buildings to the south-east of the car park present their "backs" to the public areas. Buildings to the north, including the Australia Post building present their "backs" to this open space. Despite efforts to formalise pathways through the parking areas, the space is dominated by parked and moving cars, and is pedestrian unfriendly.

This space is an opportunity to create a new gathering space for the Alice Springs community. In addition it is an opportunity to build new buildings which provide frontage, surveillance and a sense of safety to the new park. As can be seen in the diagram below, a smaller park is created to the rear of the old school with new buildings shown in light grey. The existing arcades are extended, a rear loading area is created for the existing galleries, and a new north-south arcade is suggested. A strong east-west pedestrian path linking Hartley Street and Todd Street is shown. This would be a covered walkway linking the Yeperenye Shopping Centre to the Todd Mall retail precinct. In this scenario, Adelaide House could become a cultural centre.
Formalise East-West Links through Town

There are opportunities to create new gateways into the Alice Springs CAD. These would create new thresholds which would give added character to many of the east-west streets. The crossing of Parsons Street and the Stuart Highway could announce the entrance to the CAD. Pedestrian and cycle crossing should be improved at this intersection. This would provide an opportunity for cultural and artistic expression at this point.

Wills Terrace is in need of evaluation and possible redesign. Pedestrian space along this street is inadequate as the traffic characteristics force cyclists onto narrow pedestrian paths causing conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians. There is clearly a strong desire line across Wills Terrace, and a dedicated cycle path needs to be installed. Right turn lanes into Bath and Hartley Streets are urgently needed to make traffic movement more efficient, and the instalment of traffic signals at Hartley Street should be urgently assessed to regulate traffic flow at this point.

There are opportunities to create gateways to the CAD at the intersections of Leichhardt Terrace and Gregory Terrace, as well as on Stott Terrace at Leichhardt and
Stuart Highway intersections. These are all currently dominated by car traffic, and should be redesigned to ensure safe and pleasant crossing conditions for pedestrians and cyclists.

**Improved Links to the Railway**

It may be possible to run a spur railway line adjacent to the Stuart Highway to enable the Ghan train to arrive and pull up closer to the Alice Springs CAD. Currently the point of arrival is far from the town centre.

The diagrams below show a sequence of links (including a link to the railway land to the west of the town centre), to link the key cultural features and landmarks and express the links in landscaping and other streetscape elements. In this way the legibility of the town centre and the adjacent cultural attractions can be connected and the connections made explicit. This creates an opportunity to create meaningful expressions of linkage through art, planting and interpretative messages. This in turn will increase the attraction of the town as a destination.

**Diagram**

- Diagram shows the return of the Todd River to a natural state, the planting of trees along Parsons Street and a gateway crossing created over the Stuart Highway.
- The possible introduction of a new rail station for the Ghan train and pedestrian links to town via crossings and a grade separated pedestrian bridge.
These linkages when formalised provide a framework for cultural expression. This will give additional meaning to the tree planting and streetscape works which may occur in these streets.

6.0 THREATS

Further Expansion of Surface Car Parking

If more surface car parking is created within the Alice Springs Central Activity District, the coherence of the town centre and its streetscapes is likely to be lost. At the moment the town centre is finely balanced and the amount of surface parking needs to be clawed back. Additional parking is a significant threat to the attraction, activity, vibrancy, safety and sustainability of the Alice Springs town centre. This issue needs to be addressed urgently.
Inadequate Planning Controls

The fact that poor urban design outcomes have become as prevalent in Alice Springs as they are indicates that the planning controls need to be strengthened in key areas. The most concerning aspect is the fact that “passive surveillance” of the public realm is being steadily reduced and diminished by the public and private buildings that are being constructed. This will have the effect of reducing the perception and reality of safety in the town centre which will therefore see more and more security measure constructed. The impression of Alice Springs as “an unsafe place” cannot be allowed to occur as the town centre is the “heart and soul” of the community.

Planners need stronger controls enshrined in the Planning Scheme to be able to ensure that quality in the town centre is delivered by every new development over time.

The Disconnection between the Public and Private Realms

Poor security fencing, blank walls, mirror glass, heavily tinted glass, and buildings “backing” onto streets are creating a disconnection between the public and private realms. When buildings do this they contribute little to the quality of the public realm, the street. Every building in Alice Springs should be playing its part to create a vibrant, attractive and safe public environment through active frontages, providing weather protection, having doors and windows front the street, incorporating local materials, being environmentally responsive and playing a part to make the town centre sustainable in every respect.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The Audit reveals relatively simple physical and planning control measures which when implemented would ensure increased quality in the Public Realm of Alice Springs.

Implementing these measures has the potential to improve the social, economic, cultural and environmental performance of the Alice Springs Town Centre.

February 2009