

RE-ACTIVATING GREAT PLACES WITH TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Intro (00:05):

You are listening to the People and Place podcast by WSP Australia over the next few weeks, we'll be talking with WSP experts, clients and leading industry figures to dive into People and Place. What does place and placemaking mean? And what are some of the challenges and opportunities we face in creating places for people to live, work, learn, play, and thrive in here's your host Hannah Bleyerveen.

Hannah (00:28):

Welcome to our final episode of season one of the People and Place podcast. Today, we talked to Andrew Cortese Managing Partner at Grimshaw Architects, Bill Price, a Transit Oriented Development Expert from WSP's London business and Ross Harvey Property and Structures Director with WSP in Australia. Our guests explore the rich history of urban development and rail across the globe and in Australia, and some of the challenges and opportunities of leveraging space in dense cities and revitalizing their potential as thriving hubs of activity. We discuss examples of successful rail and heritage overbuild projects, as well as considerations for integrating vertical and horizontal infrastructure. I might start with quite a macro question. This one's for Ross because you've worked in both the UK and Australia. Do you see many differences or similarities in the way that we think about urban renewal and infill development here in Australia compared to London?

Ross (01:26):

That's a, that's an interesting question. I do see a lot of similarities between the two there's obviously differences in regulatory frameworks, but generally the drivers of challenges on density increase because when you have a dense area such as the CBD, both here or in the UK, in London, you drive property prices in that area. And people want to come closer to that area to generate their opportunities that have a greater pricing range. And also on the fringes of these spaces are quite often more undeveloped areas that haven't got the proxy value that a reactivated space can bring in together. Along with when you move out of the absolute center of a city, you have other cultural dense spaces, which tend to be around a transportation hub, where you have a lot of flow of people and there's shopping areas and things, these sorts of things, again, draw a denser area of a denser price point that people want to try and get involved in. So there's a lots of very similar and connections between those two, but it's all driven with the flow of people through these places, these hotspots.

Hannah (02:32):

Bill, Is there anything you would add?

Bill (02:34):

I think I would say that London is a special place because of its long, long medieval history. And that has brought a kind of density and a kind of street pattern and arrangement to the center of London that doesn't quite exist in Australia. And I think that creates a different kind of density, many relatively modern cities like the Australian cities, maybe like some of the American cities,

whether there is a very tall CBD and then height drops away rapidly. And you have these long stretches of low rise suburb. That's not quite how it is in London. In sometimes in London, we talk about a polycentric city where we have these sub clusters around the edge, and I think we will see more of that, especially coming out of the circumstances that we're currently in.

Hannah (03:21):

Thanks Bill, for that perspective. Andrew, do you have anything to add from the Australian point of view?

Andrew (03:27):

Well, I think when we talk about density, we talk about that in relation to what type of city that we have. And while Sydney is an urban city, we have very low density. Generally we have a very, very significant footprint. So I think that it's quite challenging at this moment for Sydney to consider how we strategize the accommodation of population growth and the strategy for the three cities the Eastern, Central and the Western. It's interesting because some of it has a resonance with history and some of it is it responding to the opportunity or the needs of a major transport connection being the second airport. We always like to go back to the plan for Sydney that was commenced with Lachlan Macquarie, where he understood the way Sydney worked from the place of the port, the place of governance, the place where food production was settled, where agriculture occurred with farming, where the Woodlands were procured, where our energy was sourced and made.

Andrew (04:22):

And the city was seen in terms of its performances and the network of performances. And we clustered density in regard to employment, livability and transport. So the city arose very distinctly on those relationships, which arose in the last 200 years. And of course there is an Indigenous relationship to all of those places and roots as well. Again, so the comparison between the development of Sydney and the layers of its history, there is very much a similarity in that with any city, but there's also very distinct differences when we look about the immediate geography context culture and where we stand in relation to that.

Ross (04:59):

It's the edges of where we go I find really interesting. So when you have, as you said, the geography of Sydney is fascinating and beautiful, and it's where you come into the ports and the other areas where the crenulations of the edges of the landscape and people cluster around these areas, which would self-generate that density and that cultural aspect. And I find it fascinating that people do move to these sorts of spaces and bring themselves, they want to get there. They want to go to these places because of other people that are there and that there is a similarity to London around where you have the limitations of the historical parts and where you have things that are immovable, and it might be immovable from a cultural reference or from a geographical reference. And that is again, a crossing between the cities Bill referenced the plains of like an open city where it just starts to sprawl and go. And that has challenges in developing these cultural hubs because they can just expand and go off. You need the geographical, cultural or immovable objects, so that you can bump up that density of cultural reference around them, which again, are self developing. I find that really quite beautiful in city form.

Hannah (06:09):

Definitely. You talked about those immovable objects and in London, the heritage is really immovable, but in Australia, our sort of Indigenous heritage, isn't quite so tangible. And that's probably the subject of a different podcast discussion, but it makes you think, how can you regenerate the Indigenous heritage as we plan around a kind of a Eurocentric way that our cities developed? How has that change been received in the community? Cause I think one of the key differences between green field development versus this very intense brown field development is you've already got existing residents and people that are using this space day in, day out. So the densification can be quite disruptive and we know that people can be quite scared of change. So how did that process go?

Bill (06:52):

Well, this is a bit of a reference to the historic growth of railway. So in the 1850s, sixties, seventies invention of the railway and so on, really many, many of our cities were carved up by railway lines. And that also applies a little bit to Sydney, Melbourne, so on because they had the steam railway when it was created. And of course those railway tracks carve up the city and they, in many cases prevent the communication and connectivity of communities. They can be quite divisive, you know, which side of the tracks to live on. So sometimes this overbuild idea is a way of reconnecting the city to try to unify it and to try to stop that very functional piece of infrastructure being sort of impediment to community growth and expansion. And so I think that has always been one of the benefits. One of the reasons that we always said, if you could only do is over 10% of the land is because the other 90%, there was either some difficult rail constraints or the geography isn't very suitable.

Bill (07:55):

Maybe it's already on a Hill, maybe it's already in a deep cutting. Maybe there's a kind of a rail ingredients that makes it difficult. So I think in some places you can do it. So I see the overbuild thing as being one of many contributors to a city density idea. Andrew mentioned density a minute ago. I think our cities are not dense right now. They can be denser, but what we have to avoid is crowding. And I see a big distinction there between crowding and density. And of course it will be a rather good idea if we could avoid public transport, this is going to be a massive debate in the future, of course, about tickets and fares and journeys. And, but I think there's an interesting thing about density and crowding, which historically we wouldn't have drawn, but I think we definitely do as of, you know, the last three or four months,

Hannah (08:42):

Some really interesting observations. Ross, what do you think are some of the most successful attempts of rail overbuild in building better communities? And can you think of any good examples.

Ross (08:54):

I can think of one at Liverpool Street Station where they've put a giant office over the end of it that was done a number of decades ago, and that was a really successful office development and connects both Liverpool Street Station to towards Clark. And while that's a very good open space, the entire building spans over the railways coming out of Liverpool Street Station and the

underneath is basically a public realm. And so the owner of the building, which obviously still owns that forecourt or underneath the building space puts a museum and art installations there on a revolving monthly basis. So it's a really quite interesting piece as you walk through underneath this building and on top of the railway, it's essentially open space area. And then you'll find this piece of art or this museum piece where there will be boards and placards describing different art installations and things. And I think that's a really wonderful use of that space.

Hannah (09:50):

Andrew, what about you?

Andrew (09:52):

Well I can, I can talk a little bit about our intention for Martin Place, not in terms of the architecture, but in terms of how it works and the problems that it was solving. And I think this topic you raised about density versus crowding is important because the flows of people is where we get tremendous value in terms of making productive economies, but also getting really inclusive communities. What the proposition for Martin Place, which began with a strategy called oversight development and through a design process, it became integrated development. And what that meant is that we had to understand what all of the constraints and issues were that were perhaps not enabling the most optimum outcome for the city and the communities that were passing through it. And what I mean by that is that often when we design transport, we have a transport priority, which is based on the amenity of the transit customers in terms of their flows or their travel between a place of origin to destination and the convenience and amenity of that, the development then becomes related to that, but not necessarily integrated with possibilities that arise from that.

Andrew (10:59):

So with Martin place, the original reference scheme had the issue of the station located with an exit to the North and an exit to the South, which were not connected in the middle. And the priority was to bring people up from platform level to ground in the shortest possible time, over the kind of most minimal footprint. And what arose from the proposition was that between Elizabeth Street and Castlereigh Hunter, and Martin Place, you had varying widths of pedestrian pathways, noncompliant grades, traffic flows of buses, cars, and the impact of development would actually increase the crowding of the city and the congestion of the customer flows or pedestrian flows. So you've got to have to navigate how that works. And also there's a directionality of travel as well. So what Martin Place did it was that it said that the city has a public realm, which is at ground level.

Andrew (11:53):

It has a public realm at a intermediate level between ground and platform level, which connects into the vast pedestrian spaces that connect across the city at that lower ground level. And then the public realm should extend up into the, maybe the first four levels of the buildings over. And what we talked about was that not only did that have a functional benefit of distributing the flows of people across the different stratas and connecting them into the networks of circulation, to the city of the different stratas. So therefore managing those peak flows, but also then it enabled those peak flows to be animated with customer amenities, retail services, end of trip facilities,

cultural experiences. And then you say, well, if you've got all those benefits where the public realm really begins at the platform level, and you're able to have visible connection through, up to ground and up into the first four levels should not the culture of work intersect with the culture of the city at the ground plane and intersect with the transit culture that begins. We ended up getting a place of convergence, which kind of gives a city its experience. It's culture, it's excitement, it's place of where people have great opportunity for a variety of interactions, whereas a public place, which allows the intersection of the private realm with the public realm, it democratizes our cities and it makes the experience of those functional performances, personal and intimate. So the kind of the opportunity at this particular time is to see a role of development with transit nodes in terms of the overall consequences to the culture of the city and the productivity and performance of the city, not just the functional efficacy of movement.

Bill (13:39):

If I could illustrate a couple of interesting points, I'll come on to some examples of recent overbuild in a moment. But I think Hong Kong is an interesting case there because the mass transit there MTR have developed over railways for years and years now, very successfully created huge density at night and so on, but there's a huge distinction about the way they've done that in a way, what MTR did was to build a city with a hole in it, waiting for a railway. In other words, they didn't do what we have to do in London and Melbourne and Sydney. They created the place and then delivered the railway into it. And that is so much more straightforward than working around the active rail. So there are great examples in Hong Kong. And of course the high speed that they've just completed I think in Calhoun was all delivered a huge overbuild over the high speed terminal, but concurrent developments.

Ross (14:35):

So I think that's a special case. And if we look at some other examples, I think everybody knows about Hudson Yards in New York. That is a vast, they're really very, very successful new commercial district. In fact, triggered by the mayor funding the extension of the number seven tube line subway. And then everybody thinking, right, well, we've got a tube station, let's continue with the development. And I think the condition was that on the successful completion of the development. So the mayor got his money back and I think that has come to pass. I think there's another great example in Paris, Rive Gauche, on the South side of Paris, and there they've decked over about a kilometer of must be eight, ten tracks wide. And that's a real amazing piece of city reconnection. There were like a couple of bridges originally, and now there might be four bridges. And then the residential offices, tech, all near the library district, and that's an ongoing project it's probably 20 years work, which might tell you something about the kind of time periods, the vision involved in this type of development.

Hannah (15:43):

All great answers. I really enjoyed my around the world tour just then, Bill. And I'm looking forward to seeing Martin Place actually start to take shape as well, Andrew. We've been talking a lot about rail overbuild, but I also wanted to touch on build over heritage. Ross, what would you say are the key differences and similarities between rail over build and build over heritage?

Ross (16:08):

Particularly for me, whilst you need to be cognizant of all the local stakeholders, again, similar to the rail overbuild, you do need to understand that with a build over heritage there's other drivers such as actually the site constraints, it's normally a lot tighter. And so when you've got a building where you've tried to build over the top of it, the access ways needs to be thoroughly understood. And how do we get into that? Do we put an entranceway through the facade, take out the center and build up, or do we use an adjacent lot that we can then come in on. These sorts of things and these sorts of challenges are particularly critical to good design of these sorts of buildings and the enhancement of the existing structure. If you're going to be using that structure is a real challenge. Understanding actually, what is there and how do we, how do we utilize it to its full potential? If there is some residual capacity or how do we enhance it, if it's required, you know, obviously punching a new structure through the heritage building and founding a new foundation strata is always an opportunity, similar challenges, but different.

Hannah (17:13):

Glad you brought that up, Ross. The idea of a heritage complimentary development or readaptive heritage. That's more exciting to me in many ways than a rail development, because I'm not going to probably go to the train station to hang out on the weekend. Whereas some of the really cool bars and cafes and restaurants and other cultural venues that you can get in these great heritage venues are really exciting to me. Andrew, you mentioned some of the work you've been doing on Sydney Metro a bit earlier, from your perspective, what are the opportunities of integrating transport and property or the horizontal and vertical, if you like.

Andrew (17:47):

We have a proposition called one station, one school that at the heart of any transit node should be your social infrastructure. Both of them should be bound together. So schools, health, secondary, or tertiary education, they should also be programmed. And within that, you get the opportunity then to get sustainable retail amenities, you get the opportunity to get enhanced community activated public realms, a diversity of economies with those levels of amenity. Then you've got an attractiveness to then place employment. And of course, if you've got those facilities which include recreation, then you could enhance your density without the impact of separation between amenities and location of living. So if we begin to see the investment in transport infrastructure, in terms of those outcomes and how we can change the impacts on our society and our culture and our environment, we see that as the necessary obligation or imperative at this time, not something that is to be seen as secondary or subsequent to the planning of transport and the delivery or something, which we should be doing right now. And it is possible if we do those programs of integrated development.

Bill (18:53):

Yeah, Andrew, can I just add an interesting layer on top of that? I agree with everything you've said. Now, if you look at an example like me and the way I'm now thinking, so I live 10 miles Southwest of London and I would, for years, I got on a train every morning and gone to the office. Now I haven't done that for 12 or 13 weeks. I'm here in my home office and what I think it might have reinforced. What you've been saying is that if there was a place in town here, which was a little business hub, so I'm not talking about Starbucks, a place that I could bump into people just like you, Andrew, and have a sort of quasi-business network setting for maybe two or three days a week, which is maybe what I would call working from home. So I'm working, not

from my home home, but from my home place that does a few things. It takes me off public transport. It puts my money into the local economy and it reinforces the connections in my local area.

Ross (19:50):

Are thinking of a WeWork for the built environment.

Bill (19:53):

Well, yes, maybe somewhere that would attract business people that could yes, get on with work and they're on the phone and they're doing exactly what we're doing right now, but they're also bumping into each other and talking to each other about stuff. I think because of the split of the way we now perhaps expect to work, then that could be a way of reinforcing those density, retail, amenity community activities, and also supporting business, even at the level that we're at, not a local business, but a global business, but just being more comfortable in a regional polycentric sense.

Hannah (20:25):

I was going to say that what you've both been describing resonates with me really, really strongly. In some ways you've both been talking about the built environment though. And when we talk about the intersection of transit and buildings, it's actually the public realm and the spaces in between that knit those two together. And it's in those places I think that there's the greatest opportunity for that chance encounter. And those institutions that Andrew spoke about before are really important. Yes, you should build a school with a Metro, but you should build a whole place around the Metro. At school you're only going to bump into people that go to that school. Whereas in the, in between, you're getting more cross pollination of different people, different backgrounds, different experiences. And I think that there's tremendous value in that as well.

Andrew (21:06):

But I could have say that this is the real key requirement we need to program our cities, not just plan our cities. We need to curate the relationships that occur in places and not just allow them to be consequential to development. If we look at retail centers in decentralized shopping centers, they're not doing particularly well at the moment. And retail is being challenged in terms of its viability from obviously from technology, but also in terms of the model. So the reliance on residential development with retail, and occasional commercial, at the interface of the public realm is completely insufficient as a model to think about what will animate and activate our spaces. And the way that we would propose is that we need to get as many programs as possible intersecting in the spaces where people move through and the idea of placing a school with a station as one driver, you could do the same with a hospital. You could do that same with a cultural facility. You could do the same with a very specific employment facility as well. The thing about it is if we do them all together, we could then create the city and its outcomes from the different perspectives. And that's what we should be doing. So employment education, cultural facilities, environmental infrastructure, should be all designed as part of the integrated development that begins with transport. And the public realm is a space in between where all the relationships and serendipitous opportunities transact. But what you're trying to do is give the

greatest possible curation of the activities that will occur and the greatest possible benefit to our communities and neighborhoods that form around it.

Ross (22:34):

I was just kind of bounced on what Andrew and Bill were saying, which was, there's an absolutely fantastic redevelopment and next door to King's Cross station just to the North of it, which is the Argent development in that space. And their very first part was to get an anchor tenant, which was essentially St Martin's Arts college. And once they were there, they've then taken the next decade to develop offices and residential units around the space. So this space used to be warehouses and sort of light industry and drug use. And I think there was a nightclub there, and it's not sort of place that you went to much and now it's become an absolutely world class destination space.

Ross (23:12):

During the summer months, the forecourt of the central St Martins has got fountains coming out of the courtyard and you see families and little kids running through the phones and then down, just run to the side. It's open just before I left London. And the end of last year was Coal Drops, which is a Heatherwick designed structure. That was a reuse of the old coal ware stops, where they used to store it for their trains in that area. And that's now a primary destination shopping area. So people go there to get some absolutely beautiful products, but also wonderful Instagram moments because you've got this lovely synergy between new design and, um, historical renovation and rejuvenation. That for me, is like a, there's absolutely stunning reactivation of an otherwise derelict area that really does factor in and has been planned well by bringing in this wonderful anchor tenants over a school college space, and actually encapsulates this wonderful public realm with gelatos. And there's a shopping store and there's a market on Sundays. It's just a great space to be in.

Hannah (24:11):

Brilliant. My next question, what's the difference between success and failure. When you think about these transit oriented precincts and densification.

Andrew (24:22):

When we present these ideas, obviously the first consideration is that, is that going to impact on the cost of the base investment? Is that going to impact on the timeframe for the delivery of that piece of infrastructure? And do you do integrated development, which is done in concurrency with the transport, or do you do it subsequently. For us, the outcomes of success is where you can achieve all of those requirements of concurrency. You can actually decrease the cost or no greater cost to the government, hopefully with a lesser cost, but you get an immense increase in the value to the city around the neighborhood around and how you measure that value has a multiplicity of criteria. If you're increasing the amenity, you'll get the greatest impact on the end values, which can be harnessed and captured. You'll get the greatest outcomes in terms of social cohesion or social opportunity.

Andrew (25:17):

And you get the greatest impact in terms of the livability and the enjoyability of our places. That's where intelligent design comes from. We have to give ourselves the opportunity to design the outcomes, which can achieve all of those aspects and we believe it is possible, but that's what you have to institute in the aspiration and the brief of which is delivered. And I think at this time, in terms of post COVID, there's much discussion about the resetting of our economy about taking the objectives of 2030 or 2040. And why don't we see if we can do that by 2025. So rather than kind of work towards things in a progressive and incremental manner, why can't we take this opportunity now to actually put in the thinking to deliver those necessary outcomes for the environment and the social context and the economic context and bring it forward in everything that we do now. So that's what I'd say is the signs of our success as consultants, as industry designers and as members of government.

Ross (26:15):

For me, it's success on these projects really it's about understanding the stakeholder needs. What are the key drivers that are coming from the multiple different threads of people, whether it's a rail overbuild and see what the transport authority or whether it's the local school or whether or not it's the developer or the historical church or landowners around or the residential, how do we really understand those and how can we bring them into how we design our buildings and our structures. From the structural space it's a challenge because to really make these buildings work, we need to really bring forward our understanding of the construction techniques. There's no point saying, Hey, right, we'll get in there and we'll smash out the existing building and we'll throw up this other thing that's really noisy. It's got huge amounts of trucks coming in and around, and there's a primary school right next door, or it's a residential, or there's a hospital, or there's a railway space. And if you haven't understood that you can't put your crane over that railway air rights because of concern for the operational railways, you know, you're going to have real challenges on the actual delivery of these projects. You have to really get to the crux of what does each of the key stakeholders hold for their personal drivers. What do they are concerned about and really designed the building and the form of the building and the construction methods so that these are factored into the design and thoroughly understood before you get into construction so that there are no surprises for the contractor or the developer on the project. And everything is, has been thought through.

Ross (27:46):

It's very much necessary for structural engineers to have an outline concept of how is this going to be built. So that you've met that challenge during the design process so that when the contractor says, well, how are we going to approach this and said, look, this is the outline saying, can you add value by thinking of a better way of doing it? But we have got a working solution that has been factored into the time, the program, the cost, and all of the needs of their local stakeholders, so that we don't have inherent challenges that will drive increased costs or increased program or decrease in safety to get the results that would otherwise be needed.

Hannah (28:21):

Obviously COVID-19 has really changed how we live. And I'm curious about how it might change our perspectives on this conversation that we've had as well. So I'll direct this question at Andrew, do you think city renewal projects might change in the post-COVID world? And if so, how?

Andrew (28:39):

I hope it marks a difference which begins a new trajectory. I fear that within six months, if there is no significant impact, then we could return to the previous normal. But I hope not. What we're seeing is a recapturing of the understanding of the importance of local communities, the enjoyment of our personal lives in relationship to our families, our communities that we interact with and the potential to live differently and not just by the need to live differently, but by the choices that we have. So I would hope that there is a greater facilitation of diversity for different lifestyles or life choices, employment choices that we make the opportunity for that we cause we begin to reprioritize what we value. And I think just before I came into this conversation, we were talking about if we looked at our transport and said that we were going to prioritize light rail and bicycle lanes, well, how would that impact the communities and neighborhoods?

Andrew (29:32):

How would that impact the way in which our cities are made or our neighborhoods are made if we make that one priority. And after that it's public transport. And after that, it's the individual commuter. If we change those things, what does that manifest? And of course the localization of our cities in terms of the improvement or the equity of amenity and services in a decentralized or polycentric city could be a great initiative. And knowing that localization doesn't mean that we're less connected because technology has demonstrated that we can all work together from a multitude of places, whether it's in our own nation or it's in across many nations, what the COVID period has done is increased the frequency and significance of conversations and relationships.

Hannah (30:13):

Thank you to our esteemed guests for joining in for the last episode of the season, it's been super insightful to explore the opportunities to solve some of the density issues facing our cities and how rail and heritage oriented developments can revitalize existing places. We'll be taking a short break from the podcast, but while you wait for season two, you can get yourself up to date with other episodes. From our current season, you can find more information on this in our show notes. I'd like to personally thank all our listeners for tuning in for season one. It's been so much fun for me having such rich discussion with so many intelligent and empathetic place practitioners. I hope you'll enjoy listening as much as I did. Thanks.

Outro (30:51):

We hope you enjoyed this episode of people in place to hear more, find us on Spotify, Apple podcasts, and Google podcasts. You can also find us on LinkedIn and Facebook at WSP in Australia and on Instagram and Twitter at WSP Australia.