REIMAGINING YOUR CREEK - STATEMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT

Country

Despite colonisation, settlement, development and the seemingly endless expansion of metropolitan Melbourne, it remains an interconnected landscape.

It is still Wurundjeri Country. It has always been.

For millennia, the lands of the Birrarung (Yarra River) Valley were home to the Wurundjeri people of the Yulin Nation. Their Country extends from the bay north to the Great Dividing Range, and east and west to the Yarra and Macedon Ranges. The Birrarung Valley was traversed by many clans, benefitting from the riparian ecosystems and surrounding woodlands, travelling throughout the valley to hunt game, fish and gather plants. Importantly, the area's protected creeks and sheltered clearings provided the spaces for shared events held by the Wurundjeri people and neighbouring clans: tribal celebrations, ritual ceremonies, family events and seasonal happenings.

While the creeks in the Valley experienced periodic flooding, they were also, during drought and climatic stress, sources of food and water – humans and animals alike would gather around clearings in the forest along creeks, where vegetation continued to flourish. The Wurundjeri have been custodians of this Country for thousands of years, managing the land and its ecosystems. Both the richness of the landscape for which they cared, and this deep knowledge, endure today.

This project is founded in recovering some of this richness, and restoring some of this knowledge.

Goals

The project began with the formulation of clear strategic goals. The operational aim of continuing to meet drainage and flooding requirements was balanced with imagining five kilometres of re-naturalised creekline. Community engagement was a central aspect in developing the plans, especially in restoring and increasing the social, environmental, economic and educational value of creeklines, particularly in stressed socio-economic environments.

Challenges were outlined equally clearly. Melbourne's creeks are regular flood events posing significant environmental and safety risks. These risks have been balanced against Melbourne Water's move towards greater waterway access, driven by community well-being and amenity. Melbourne Water has traditionally maintained concrete channels as stormwater management. Addressing their new liveability objectives challenged the organisation to transform their own values to deliver projects exceeding customary practices.

Investigation & Advocacy

The project began with a self-funded research trip to investigate and document global exemplars to inform our work. Guided by these aspirations, deep analysis of each site revealed opportunities for the regeneration of lost ecologies. Environmental value studies further identified remnant grassland vegetation, with availability and suitability findings creating preliminary design structures.

To prosecute genuinely collaborative outcomes, distinct project teams were formed for each site, including local council, DELWP and water retailers, with Melbourne Water as client lead stewarding the process. REALMstudios was the design lead in developing the social, environmental and economic frameworks with communities.

Innovation & Engagement

Novel design elements and approaches were required to marry increased activity with continued safety. These include connecting community and creek with stepping-stone crossings that submerge in rainfall events, and providing informal crossing points for low water conditions. A robust material and furniture palette, flood-proof but adaptable to varying social contexts, developed into a prototypical suite of elements to encourage activity along the creeks: seats, benches, tables, platforms, bridges. Extended tables and benches facilitate the gathering of educational and social groups.

Policy also needed to evolve along with the changing uses, through the provision of new social and ecological frameworks for public space in what was previously sequestered infrastructure. Finally, the complex set of operational parameters demanded a collaborative design-led response merging many disciplines: engineering, ecology, social planning and community engagement.

Community engagement was the heart of these projects, with individuals, groups, institutions and organisations fully invested in the process, and the outcomes. Community input was critical in identifying opportunities for education, well-being and social welfare interlinked with the improved environmental results and enhanced water performance within these recovered parklands.

The Australian idea of the "park", a distinctive phenomenon as it has developed over decades, conflates many disparate things: the local community, their strong attachment to landscape, social and recreational activities, food and drink, and shared civic rituals of performances, celebrations and events. Within communities, these civic and environmental places become critical assets, dense and multi-faceted operational landscapes, capable of containing disparate multitudes of events and activities and entertaining and accommodating countless thousands. The key community challenge with the creeks was to retain the historic spirit and purpose of the landscape in and around these suburbs, while expanding, enhancing and adapting their social, cultural and commercial performance for an increasingly diverse 21st century community, in a rapidly changing world.

Sustainability & Resilience

The evolutionary development of these projects has allowed us to evaluate completed works and incorporate the lessons learnt into the ongoing projects. We have documented tangible outcomes across a range of criteria: economic, environmental and social.

The improved landscapes have elevated property values in adjacent neighbourhoods. This benefit is reinforced by concentrating capital expenditure on visible and usable assets, instead of invisible infrastructure. Access to these new assets is transforming back fences into permeable boundaries.

A rigorous position on re-use and rectification was adopted early, minimising import and export of soil and materials. Similarly, remnant ecologies have been reinforced and re-established, creating localised ecologies as the focus for each corridor. Extensive tree planting along movement routes and gathering places create microclimate modifications, provide habitat and bio-corridors and establish identifiable meeting points within the landscape.

These new parklands have become community collectors and connectors, encouraging activity and occupation through the provision of extensive social infrastructure: platforms, long tables and benches and stopping stones engaging with the creek and ecologies.

Fluidic Landscapes

From the logic of natural ecosystems, we developed these corridors to respond to changing conditions. These permeable landscapes, in which surfaces, spaces and activity all contribute to the management of movement, also introduce time: people slow down, linger and participate. Renaturalising waterways promotes a range of secondary habitats and ecologies – rehumanising them also sustains secondary locations and economies across their neighbourhoods.

These re-created landscapes accommodate emerging and rediscovered operations and ecologies – allowing again for the experience of moving purposefully within a natural landscape.