ACTIVITY CENTRE
INSIGHTS
KEEP YOUR STRATEGY OFF THE SHELF
89% of all Australians live in urban areas.

Activity centres are not just the intense centres of our most significant urban areas; they come in many forms including ports, airports, universities, hospitals and any other concentration of activity that requires a multi-functional heart to meet the needs of the local community. All of these ‘centres’ share one element in common – they are highly contested places subject to many competing demands. As a result they require diligent and carefully gauged planning to maximise their performance in terms of community values, place capital and economic function.
Today master plans are more than just beautiful drawings, they are sophisticated city-making tools that shape the future success of our urban centres. Preparing master plans requires time, foresight and long-term commitment to ensure they are widely supported and practical to implement. To be effective, a master plan must not sit on a shelf gathering dust but needs to inform every subsequent investment decision, big or small.

For a master plan to be successful it must perform a number of functions. Firstly it must communicate a simple, unifying message that provides a clear and practical path to implementation. As a marketing tool the role of the master plan is to communicate a common vision, build visibility, generate interest and garner public support. Another key success of a master plan is the ease with which it is able to be implemented. In this context, the capability of the the plan to attract funding, identify priority projects and inform council expenditure budgets is essential. This in turn has the potential to attract private sector investment and development. Finally, master plans must be flexible, providing clear guidance on priorities whilst maintaining the ability to respond to changing market conditions.

The realisation of outcomes identified in a master plan has the ability to successfully ignite a centre, initiating a period of investment and change and unlocking latent value of an area.
“Master plans and strategies for activity centres are changing. They are no longer just beautiful plans and images illustrating the future of centres. Master plans are decision-making tools. Frameworks to identify projects, inform budgets, attract investment and guide decisions for city-making.”

James Tuma, National Director Design, Urbis

10 insights

01 / be clear

02 / play to your strengths

03 / retail, retail, retail

04 / beauty matters

05 / development drives change

06 / engage don’t consult

07 / be focused

08 / act early

09 / own it

10 / succeed in every way possible
be clear
THINK BIG BUT CONVEY A SINGULAR VISION

Urbis led the preparation of the 2013 Brisbane City Centre Master Plan and its simple vision ‘OPEN BRISBANE’. Another terrific example of the effectiveness of a singular idea is the long-standing ‘City in a Garden’ vision for Singapore. First instigated in 1960 this simple overlay, when applied to almost every development, infrastructure, public realm, environmental management and investment decision, has had a prevailing and unifying impact.

A singular vision is a powerful vision. We have noted that the renewal, development and master planning strategies for activity centres that have the most traction are those with the most clarity of purpose. They are underpinned by a singular idea that permeates the master plan from vision through to strategies, implementation plan and projects. Lengthy, complex visions that are not directly relevant to the outcomes that are desired, stumble at the first hurdle. A vision must have meaning for everyone who reads it and, ideally, will be a reference point for every single and subsequent city-making decision.

Linked to this theme of clarity is the idea that everything that is important in a plan should be able to be communicated in one page, preferably in a simple diagram. That is not to say that strategies are not well thought out or explained in depth elsewhere. Rather to say that if you can’t explain the key concepts in terms that anyone on the street can understand, it is likely too complicated to be delivered anyway.

Key Learnings
- A singular, simple vision as the reference point for every single subsequent city-making decision.
- Everything important in a master plan should be able to be communicated on one page, preferably in a simple diagram.

“A clear vision leads to clear decisions, and clear decisions result in projects with impact.”
Peter Hyland, Regional Director, Urbis

In every sense, we are an OPEN city.

Our city centre is OPEN for business.
We OPEN the doors to every enterprise, big and small, and encourage new ideas to GROW AND PROSPER.

Our buildings UNFOLD on to the streets and OPEN AIR events IGNITE our city, day and night.

Our river and OUTDOOR SPACES provide BREATHING SPACE and embrace our wonderful climate.

Our city centre is OPEN to all people, from Brisbane, Australia and abroad.

Brisbane City Centre Master Plan vision by Urbis Image Source: Urbis

“A clear vision leads to clear decisions, and clear decisions result in projects with impact.”
Peter Hyland, Regional Director, Urbis
There is a school of management thought that extols the idea that the most successful and influential individuals are those that overplay their inherent strengths rather than focus on addressing any weaknesses. The same is true of centres. Those centres that focus all of their effort and capital on repairing the perceived gaps in their offering, at the expense of truly leveraging what they are already good at, often fail to achieve any real and sustainable change. This is not to say that gaps in essential services are not to be filled, but rather to say that celebrating and investing in the areas where there is already strength pays higher dividends.

In many ways centres are now in a highly competitive setting. They are competing for skills, ideas, people, capital and growth. The best way to ‘out compete your competitor’ is not to try to better what they are already doing, but rather to develop an entirely new market in which you are the sole participant. This is not about trying to transplant ideas from elsewhere. Rather, this is about transforming under-appreciated parts of our cities into significant assets, a process which requires imagination, ambition and foresight. Think outside the box, be imaginative and look for the potential in everything.

Key Learnings

- Invest in and leverage your strengths.
- Transforming under-appreciated parts of our cities into significant assets needs imagination, ambition and foresight.

Examples of places that have transformed under-appreciated parts of their cities into significant assets abound the world over. Some that spring to mind are Hay-on-Wye in England and its book festival which singularly underpins the identity and the economy of the town, Melbourne’s laneways, Townsville’s Strand, Boston’s working waterfronts, Toowoomba’s gardens, Amsterdam’s canal’s and Brisbane’s subtropical latitude.
For a range of reasons, including the historic planning of our cities and the nature of consumption in our society, retail remains, without question, the single best method to sustainably activate a place. That is not to say that events, community festivals, live performance, and other initiatives are not significant - they surely are. It’s simply a matter of return on investment for effort.

Good quality retail provides activity, offers employment, captures local spend, becomes a social hub and most importantly, drives the life of the public realm – every single day. Retail comes in many forms too: city centre malls, high street retail, department stores, laneways and suburban shopping malls are all essential and viable retail investments.

This means that rather than roll out a single retail model across all activity centres we need to consider what works for a particular centre and respond accordingly. Essential to the success of retail in our centres is the role of planning in facilitating, rather than compromising, the continued growth and evolution of the retail offer.

In our experience, retail is often the first new use to move into an area after investment. Of course this has to do with the planning certainty that these processes are able to give to investors. However, we think it is also to do with the flexible nature of retail to adapt to existing buildings or slot into new precincts and the fact that it tends (sometimes) to be a less capital intensive land use during the development phase. For what ever reason, every great activity centre has great retail.
Brisbane City Centre’s Edward Street has recently benefited from significant private sector investment to establish itself as the ‘luxury brands’ retail precinct. Knowing that beautiful, attractive places are good for business, Brisbane City Council has now identified streetscape upgrades to Edward Street as a priority project for investment in the new 2013 City Centre Master Plan. These planned works will leverage and support the private sector investment.

“Whether ‘by design’ or coincidence our experience has universally been that the first development that has come after a master planning or development strategy exercise for an activity centre has been underpinned by retail – every time.”

Natalie Hoitz, Director Design, Urbis

Key Learnings

• Retail remains the single best method to activate a place.
• The flexible nature of retail allows it to adapt to existing buildings or slot into new precincts.
• Clustering of retail provides activation, cross expenditure benefits and destination appeal.

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Within the current low growth environment facing Australian retail property, the diversion of trade to online channels and overseas and other factors impacting the levels of capital investment, it has never been more important to create places of high amenity that attract people and offer a truly unique consumer experience. This is key for the viability and vibrancy of all centres, and will be a key differentiator that defines competitive advantage in the years ahead.

Ian Shimmin, Director, Retail, Urbis

Key Learnings

- Improvement to the public realm drives value uplift and attracts investment.
- Our streets and public space create the ever-important first impression of our centres.

Great streets and spaces are the backbone of successful centres. They are the stage set for local urban life, encouraging social interaction, shaping cultural identity and fostering exchange. Too often, the instrumental role of public amenity in attracting economic investment and driving value is underestimated.

Physical interventions that enhance the urban environment and make them more attractive for users – particularly pedestrians – produce measurable benefits to the local economy by attracting more people to the area. A good physical environment is a strong contributor towards, and can act as a catalyst for, a strong economic environment.

There is often a need for the public sector to deliver this amenity. And, as one of the largest ongoing investments that a government will make, it is essential that public realm investment delivers a ‘place-making dividend’ attracting people to visit more often, stay longer and in doing so contribute economically to the centre.

In addition to providing a new public space for events and festivals, the $10 million investment in Brisbane’s China Town Mall paved the way for a concentration of new investment in restaurants and retail along the mall. In New York, the removal of traffic and creation of new public space in Times Square in 2009 has resulted in rent for street level stores doubling. It was recently named one of the top ten retail locations in the world.
Urbis worked with State Government and Ipswich City Council to develop a comprehensive master plan and delivery strategy that has resulted in the first major commercial development in the Ipswich CBD in over 20 years.

Cities are dynamic places, always changing, growing and evolving. The core purpose of a master plan for an activity centre is to facilitate and guide that change. Centres that do not evolve, die.

It is ultimately the market that determines the pace and scale of change in any centre and in this context, when the market is ‘ready’ the plan must also be ready. The plan, in whatever form it takes, should be able to guide the form of that change and, most importantly, amplify it in order to bring the widest possible benefits to the place. This means that the vision for the centre establishes the future direction, the master plan guides decision-making along the way and the development industry delivers change. In this context the plan must bend to meet the needs of the market and offer flexibility (rather than prescriptive outcomes) whilst ensuring the vision and intent of the master plan is realised.

“Planning certainty is critical to attracting private sector investment into any renewal area.”

James Tuma, National Director Design, Urbis

Development is the vehicle for delivering significant change, bringing new built form, streetscape improvements and economic activity to centres. The reality for development is that if it is not viable it will not occur. Fostering positive and mutually beneficial relationships between developers and councils goes a long way toward achieving great outcomes for both parties.

**Key Learnings**

- Design our centres to accommodate, facilitate and encourage economic activity and development, and as much of it as viable.
- Build relationships with developers to foster change and agree outcomes.
- Incentivise change through discounts to fees and charges for uses or locations that achieve wider renewal objectives.
This constant conversation throughout the life of the project (and beyond it), is where the real insights and value lie. In every one of the activity centre strategies we have completed, at least two of the most significant ideas about the future of the centre has been initiated and crystallised through this on-going dialogue. A simple but important process.

‘Engaging’ with stakeholders rather than ‘consulting’ with them, strengthens the ownership and ultimately the deliverability of a master plan. When people are behind it, they will work to achieve it.

### Key Learnings

- Embrace new and emerging technology to make the job easier.
- Involve the widest possible audience to contribute to the development of the plan to encourage ownership and buy-in.
- Engage in a constant, two-way conversation that garners momentum.

No one knows your centre better than the people who live in it. It may seem an obvious statement but the worst place to commence a process of centre revitalisation is from the position of preconceived ideas. In this instance, process becomes important. Evidence based decisions that are popular with the community and backed up by the views of key stakeholders inform the most successful urban interventions. That is not to say there is no room for new ideas, there most certainly is, but they need to be offered up in a wider framework that is wholly built around the existing capital of the place.

The most successful strategies we have been involved in are those that engage the widest possible audience, many times, in the simplest possible way. Importantly this is about embracing technology to make the job easier, feeding information back to people and gathering momentum throughout the process.
Strathpine Regional Council followed up the preparation of their activity centre master plan with the planning of a new community facility, library and public plaza adjacent to their train station.

“A single, small, but beautifully executed change to a centre has far more impact and return on investment than an expansive program of moderate changes.”

Paul Hardyman, Director Design, Urbis

**be focused**

**CONCENTRATE INVESTMENT TO MAXIMISE IMPACT**

Resources spread too thinly are resources that are not working to the best effect. A single, small, yet beautifully executed change to a centre has far more impact and return on investment than an expansive program of moderate changes. Additionally, a concentration of change in the form of a group of new and/or refurbished buildings in a single location gives an overwhelming impression far greater than if it is scattered across a wide area. As this is this case for private sector development so too is it the case for public sector investment. Investing in public realm improvements or essential infrastructure to support, or as a catalyst for, private development will leverage the individual benefits of each to deliver a much greater overall benefit.

A key learning in our master plan experience has been the importance of understanding the projected growth of a centre and the resulting demand for floorspace. How much floorspace, in what form of development and where it will go are all essential decisions in planning for change of our centres and identifying locations for investment. Remember, the entire vision for a master plan will not be realised instantly.

**Key Learnings**

“Concentrate investment and change in a single location to produce the greatest overall impact.”
act early
AND KEEP ACTING

Brisbane City Council’s Ideas Fiesta staged a temporary picnic along Albert Street in the heart of the city as a demonstration of one of the transformative projects proposed in the master plan. The overwhelming response was one of support including adjoining businesses who experienced increased revenue during the picnic. In Townsville, the $56 million redevelopment of Flinders Street in the CBD has provided a catalyst for renewed confidence in the commercial and retail potential of the precinct.

Actions speak louder than words. The public sector has a key role in catalysing development activity through strategic investments in infrastructure and public realm. The key here is to act early, and keep doing it. The best activity centre strategies are those that define a diverse mixture of implementation priorities and projects, considering and identifying both public sector investment and initiatives as well as private sector investment opportunities and the relationship between these.

The ability to implement the plan is linked to the idea of flexibility and the continued delivery of projects despite changes to the market and/or decision-making spheres. In this context we need to acknowledge that cities, and activity centres, are never finished. They are dynamic places that are always changing, growing and evolving. Nothing provides more market confidence than an on-going program of investment and development.

An emerging trend in initiating long term change, due to often limited capital, is tactical urbanism - undertaking temporary or short term action to demonstrate an idea before initiating long term change. The employment of temporary initiatives and demonstration projects allows people to test new ideas and garner public support before committing significant financial investment. These temporary installations also allow people the opportunity to experience the benefits of a project for themselves, rather than just being told about them.

Key Learnings
“ Ensure a staged and deliverable action plan is in place.
“ Test ideas through temporary initiatives that generate support for long term goals.

“Temporary initiatives and demonstration projects allow people to test new ideas before committing significant financial investment.”
Natalie Hoitz, Director Design, Urbis
Say it until you believe it, then say it to everyone else. Without question, the leadership and ownership of a vision for any place is a critical component in its successful implementation. The clarity of message and almost biased messaging given by leaders is truly essential. Who will follow a plan that has no leader?

Leadership comes in many forms too. It is required at the grass roots of every organisation in the form of capacity building to ensure good decision making occurs every day. At management level it is required to ensure integrated decisions are made across all departments and directorates. And it is also required at the highest levels, to lead from the front and champion the delivery of the vision. If the leader of the organisation thinks and communicates that the vision is important, then everyone else will.

Linked to this issue of leadership is accountability. The most successful activity centre strategies and studies we have prepared are those with the greatest clarity about accountability. Each project, initiative, action and strategy will ideally clearly describe the individual in the organisation accountable for its delivery. Without this line of sight it is very easy for the best intentions to slowly cloud and the initial energy of a plan to fade. If immediate action is required - name names.

**Key Learnings**

- Lead the project with passion and confidence.
- Don’t be afraid of making the difficult decisions.
- Identify roles and responsibilities to ensure things get done.

Janette Sadik Khan is a great example of a leader who has championed real change in her city, New York. As the Commissioner for the Department of Transport (DOT), Janette Sadik-Khan has transformed many of New York’s streets into safer places, including her boldest move which involved closing down Times Square to traffic and transforming into a plaza for the people of New York.

"Lead from the front. Political and corporate leadership can have a great impact on the success of the master plan."

Peter Hyland, Regional Director, Urbis
A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. In order to give the centre the best chance at succeeding, a comprehensive approach to master planning and implementation must be adopted. City-making is multifaceted and requires consideration of a range of factors from design to marketing and implementation. Forces must align to ensure that the right outcomes are being sought, the right planning framework is in place and people are behind it to make it happen.

A multi-disciplinary and united team is required to work closely together, and with stakeholders, to ensure an effective approach during all phases of the process – from vision to delivery. Drawing from the expertise from within your organisation and appointing the right people to assist along the way will ensure the master plan is successful, and can, and will be delivered. The ten insights set out in this document, including this one, are essential components in the preparation and implementation of a successful master plan that accommodates growth and delivers change.

“*A powerful strategy produced through an effective process will have the best chance of being implemented.*”

James Tuma, National Director Design, Urbis
about Urbis

OUR MULTI-DISCIPLINARY OFFER

Urbis offers expert advice regarding the development, expansion and optimisation of property, cities and communities. Urbis is an integrated multi-disciplinary consulting firm with a unique and comprehensive service offering. We are able to bring together project teams that utilise the skills of our researchers, planners, economists, designers and social planners to provide clients with comprehensive and implementable advice.

With offices in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth we offer a national service that is supported by local market knowledge and experience. Our consultants share information and findings to ensure advice is based on best practise processes and unique market insights.

Committed to providing practical solutions and creating measurable value, we bring informed advice that preserves your vision and goals. With Urbis, you tap into a trusted resource that complements your own capabilities.

Expertise to Deliver Optimum Outcomes

- Urbis is a trusted advisor for some of the largest developers, not for profit organisations and government departments
- With over 350 staff, Urbis has the resources to handle projects from the simplest to the most complex
- We understand the commercial drivers of your projects and provide the advice you need to achieve maximum commercial success
- Through years of experience, Urbis has established networks and relationships with key industry players, including all levels of government and industry bodies

Our Services

- Urban Design & Master Planning
- Landscape Architecture
- Planning
- Property & Retail Economics
- Consumer & Market Research
- Valuation & Advisory
- Heritage Consulting
- Public Policy
- Social Planning
- Telecommunications

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Major Activity Centres
1. Brisbane City Centre Master Plan 2013
2. Ipswich Regional Centre Strategy
3. South Bank Retail and Food Strategy
4. Toowoomba City Centre Master Plan
5. Townsville CBD Master Plan
6. Valley Cultural Precinct

Activity Centres
7. ABC Site Toowong, Master Plan
8. Albion North and Central
9. Albion South
10. Beenleigh Central Revitalisation
11. Burnett Lane Retail Strategy
12. Capalaba Town Centre Master Plan
13. Crosby Road, Albion Master Plan
14. Flagstone
15. Flagstone Economic Development Strategy
16. Goodna Town Centre
17. Kangaroo Point South Renewal Strategy
18. Kawana Town Centre
19. Newstead Circle, Market Advice
20. North Lakes Town Centre
21. Point Cook Town Centre Master Plan
22. QIC / Westfield Coomera Town Centre
23. Smithfield Town Centre, Market Review
24. Smithfield Town Centre Master Plan
25. Stanley Street Plaza Makeover, Activation Strategy
26. Strathpine Major Regional Activity Centre Master Plan
27. Toombul / Nundah Neighbourhood Plan
28. Thuringowa Town Centre / Riverway Master Plan
29. Waterway Gardens Town Centre, Master Plan
30. Willows Shopping Town, Master Plan
31. Wynnum Neighbourhood Plan
32. Wynnum Plaza Market Profile Analysis
Specialty Activity Centres

33. Brisbane Airport Aerotech Park Precinct Plan
34. Brisbane Airport International Terminal
35. Christchurch international airport vision
36. Darwin International Airport Commercial Master Plan
37. Export Park Precinct Plan
38. JCU Cairns Institute
39. Hobart International Airport, Market Assessment and Strategic Property Vision
40. JCU & Townsville City Council Enquiry By Design
41. Mater Hill Hospital Precinct
42. Oceanside Health Hub, Transit Centre and Town Centre, Kawana
43. PACE (Stage 2 & 3) Urban Context Report
44. Prince Charles Hospital Master Plan
45. QUT 2033 Master Plan
46. SCU Gold coast Campus Master Plan
47. SCU Lismore Campus Demonstration Projects