

THE LEVEE AND RIVERLINK BUILDING, MAITLAND



Reconnecting the city's main street with the river

Better fit: A new portal sits contextually within High Street and adjacent to the river. Image: Brett Boardman.

QUICK FACTS

PROJECT TYPE:
Main street upgrade

LOCATION: High Street Central Maitland and the adjoining banks of the Hunter River; Maitland is a town of 78,000 people

REGION: Hunter

CLIENT: Maitland City Council

ABORIGINAL CUSTODIANS OF THIS COUNTRY:
Wonnarua people

PROJECT SCALE:
Large: **SITE AREA** 10,200 m²
COVERED PUBLIC SPACE 220 m²
RIVERLINK PAVILION NET LETTABLE AREA 181 m²

PROJECT COST:
STAGE 1 \$10 million council-funded
\$285,000 grant for lighting (Community Energy Efficiency Program)
\$70,000 NBN utility contribution
STAGE 2 \$432,800 council-funded
\$9.92 million Restart NSW Resources for Regions Grant

YEAR: Completed 2018
STAGE 1 2012–16 **STAGE 2** 2015–18

PROJECT TEAM:
ARCHITECTURE CHROFI
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND MASTER PLANNING McGregor Coxall
TOWN PLANNING JBA
HERITAGE City Plan
MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL, STRUCTURAL, SERVICES AND LIGHTING ENGINEERING Northrup
STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING Cardno, SDA
HYDRAULIC ENGINEERING Whipps-Wood
PUBLIC ART Braddon Snape
CONSTRUCTION Landscape Solutions, Graph Builders, Keller Civil Engineering
DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT Maitland City Council

PROCUREMENT PROCESS: Selective tender process, lump sum contract

AWARDS INCLUDE:
2019 NSW Architecture Awards: NSW Architecture Medallion, Sulman Medal for Public Architecture, Award for Urban Design, Blacket Prize

2019 The Good Design Award – The Chicago Athenaeum International Architecture Award – Civic and Community Centers
2019 INDE.Awards – The Building
2019 Newcastle Architecture Awards – Public Architecture, Urban Design, Jury Prize
2019 National Trust Heritage Award – Highly Commended – Continuing Tradition
2018 World Architecture Festival – Civic and Community – Completed Buildings
2018 Blueprint Award – Best Public-use Project with Public Funding
2018 Think Brick Awards – High Commendation for the New Entrant Award
2018 Architizer A+ Award – Popular Choice Winner, Concepts, Plus-Architecture +Urban Transformation
2017 Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) NSW, Civic Landscape Award; AILA National, Civic Landscape Award

The regional city of Maitland, 40 km from Newcastle, has revitalised its heritage core and attracted new business to town, all based on rethinking its relationship with the Hunter River.

A long-term, large-scale project to reactivate Maitland's city centre was kickstarted by the chamber of commerce to reverse a decline in the local economy. Starting with a proposal to upgrade the city's mall, the project gathered momentum with support from Maitland City Council.

As the potential of the site was discussed and explored, the brief expanded, eventually leading to the development of an overarching master plan that now encompasses a network of streets, connected spaces, related buildings, and the riverbank.

This new approach is based on understanding and reframing the challenges and opportunities provided by the town's location and setting. The new urban design strategy positions the river as the economic heart of town – as it had been historically.

Integrating with the natural environment and landscape

In the early 18th century High Street began life as a bullock track following the Hunter River. Over time shops were developed along High Street with a frontage to the street and services access backing onto the river. The ever-present possibility of flooding had restricted further housing development and new business activity. Although the flooding problem had been resolved many years ago, by installing engineered levee banks, until this major recent intervention the town still had its back turned to the river.

An existing pedestrian pathway was refurbished, and follows the engineered riverbank for the length of the town centre and beneath the Belmore Bridge, with the ends of the path returning to bring people back into the town streets. The new access has encouraged shops and cafes to turn and face northwards, taking advantage of the prospect to the river.

The street and riverfront precinct has been rebranded as "The Levee" to give it a new identity. Initial community views were cautiously optimistic, however local businesses and residents now show strong support for the The Levee's continued development.

Better look and feel:

Large-scale artwork and integrated seating all contribute to creating an engaging and welcoming public place. Image: Simon Wood.



Better value:

(top) This urban design intervention has a benefit for the wider centre and community. Image: Mark James, Edge Commercial Photography.

Better for community

(above) The new river frontage has become a thoroughfare and popular public open space. Image: Simon Wood.

Connecting through a gateway

The centrepiece of the city is the Riverlink Building – a spectacular, sculptural "gateway" that physically and metaphorically connects the main street to its unique river setting, framing views of the river and drawing people to the waterfront. Viewed from the river, and from afar, the building is a landmark and orientation point, creating an iconic identity for Maitland.

The bold form of the building, with its unusual angles, splayed walls and raked ceiling, focuses activity on the riverfront plaza and the connecting Riverwalk. The building houses a restaurant as well as spaces for public seating, and its generous roof creates a covered plaza – an attractive meeting place that has become a "public living room". Warm materials like timber battens, and smaller, tactile details like curved and projecting bricks, give the space human-scaled qualities. Seating, shade, and amenities welcome informal socialising but can also host larger events like outdoor film screenings and theatre.

Public amenities are included within the building as a result of engagement with the project stakeholder reference group and other forms of community consultation. The community requested high quality amenities similar to those found in contemporary commercial shopping centres.

Finding the right site and fit

Site selection for the gateway building was critical. The designers worked closely with council to evaluate and test several sites in order to find the best location and maximise value and impact. The chosen site's elevated location, on axis with Bulwer Street, and ability to revive a run-down part of the main street, made this selection ideal.

The height of the gateway building is scaled to match the parapets of neighbouring buildings, and the use of face brick as the primary building material complements their character and texture, all designed so the new building fits well within the heritage streetscape.

Better working:

The redesigned mall has better spaces for socialising, supporting the return of a more vibrant local economy, and opportunities for night-time activity. Image: Simon Wood.



Creating a harmonious streetscape and revitalising the main street

The refurbished heritage mall (between Bourke and Elgin streets) provides level access and gives priority to pedestrians while also allowing limited vehicle access. Parking spaces can become outdoor dining areas, as required. Street furniture and tree planting has been moved from the footpath edges towards the centre of the street. This increases the visibility of the shopfronts and encourages a more vibrant street life. The space is considered a shared zone in accordance with State government shared zone guidelines.

A coordinated suite of custom-designed street furniture includes lighting, seating, bus stops, tree planting, garden beds, wayfinding signage, bike racks, bollards, bins, and fixed shade structures. These have been designed to be unobtrusive, turning attention to the heritage fabric rather than cluttering the street setting.

A palette of distinctive yet restrained and enduring materials has been selected to complement and highlight the colours and character of the main street's building facades, amplifying the heritage qualities of the place and making it an attractive destination for shopping, meeting, and entertainment.

Improving connectivity, walkability, and cycling opportunities

Key connections with the shopping centre via arcades have been strengthened to promote main street activity. Footpath connections to either end of the mall and several small lanes connecting to council car parking have also been refurbished (Preschool and Drill Hall lanes) and cycling is encouraged too.

The project master plan also creates stronger connections between the city's other main cultural centres including the Maitland Regional Art Gallery and the exhibitions space at the Maitland City Library, being geographically centred between the two.

Integrating trees into the street design

Street planting uses indigenous species that reflect the character of the region, provide habitat for local fauna, and offer shade and protection to the public realm. Tree planters within the street reserve act as bio-retention soil beds, filtering stormwater collected in dish drains as well as harvesting water to irrigate trees. Tree planting design was coordinated with heritage significance to screen detracting items and showcase buildings that contribute to the street's heritage character.



Better fit:

The scale and materials of the contemporary Riverlink Building enable it to fit well within Maitland's historical context. Image: Simon Wood.



Better performance:

Street planting has been designed to harvest stormwater, improve the street's appearance, and provide shade. Image: Simon Wood.

Enlivening the public realm

The public realm has been equipped with infrastructure, including retractable power and water supply bollards, that can support a regular program of events and activities such as concerts, festivals, markets, street food, and temporary art installations, all of which have become attractors, both for locals and visitors. This new activity has significantly supported local businesses and the economic revitalisation of the region more generally.

A series of interpretative works enlivens the public spaces. People are encouraged to look up at heritage facades, local history information is embedded in footpaths, and curated walks tell local stories with the aid of smart phone applications.

Smart technologies provide free wi-fi in the public domain, and programmable lighting systems allow the atmosphere of the street to change dramatically to suit the seasons and particular events.

A facade lighting scheme has also been incorporated, highlighting architectural features with particular focus on significant heritage facades. This involved extensive engagement with all building owners to gain permission to install the LED lights.

A public sculpture (*Clouds Gathering* by Braddon Snape) is a generous offering to the new plaza, its shiny surface capturing the sun and animating the gateway building with moving patterns of reflected light.



Better value:

As the project's potential was realised the design brief grew, leading to a rethink that has revitalised the whole town centre. Image: Simon Wood.

Design objectives for NSW

Seven objectives define the key considerations in the design of the built environment.



Better fit
contextual, local
and of its place



Better performance
sustainable, adaptable
and durable



Better for community
inclusive, connected
and diverse



Better for people
safe, comfortable
and liveable



Better working
functional, efficient
and fit for purpose



Better value
creating and
adding value



Better look and feel
engaging, inviting
and attractive

Find out more
ga.nsw.gov.au



Better fit: The revitalised town centre has retained the character of its heritage buildings. Image: Simon Wood.

Better for community: Designed for flexibility, Maitland's public spaces can support a diversity of formal events and informal gatherings. Image: Joshua Zoeller.



Engaging with the city's historic assets

The project also demonstrates the benefits of investing in building upgrades. The Levee is a good example of how respect for the character of a historic main street can create a new identity for a centre. Facades have been renovated and tired heritage buildings have been given a fresh new context. This has encouraged the uptake of retail leases. Shop vacancy rates have decreased. Average daily pedestrian traffic has increased.

Good process: take the time, and engage a dedicated team to see it through

A dedicated group at Maitland City Council worked on the project for over seven years, achieving a large-scale transformation within a limited budget. In-house design expertise has been an asset for the council and has ensured assistance with briefing and allowed hands-on project management and design management.

A team of consultants were involved with the project for over five years, first helping to develop the vision alongside council and then following through to documentation and implementation. The tender selection process included "non-price" selection criteria, focusing attention on design excellence and experience on similar projects.

The success of the mall refurbishment provided the confidence to expand the delivery of the master plan to the gateway building, riverfront walk and other improvements.

Key considerations

Maitland has looked carefully at its natural attributes and has sought to capitalise on them to reposition the city as a dynamic retail and cultural centre. Emphasis has been placed on positive aspects, like providing opportunities to showcase the region's high-quality produce.

The project demonstrates the value of investing in carefully considered, high-quality public realm and buildings using their ability to transform the economic, social, and environmental fortunes of a place by creating rich experiences.

MORE INFORMATION

GANSW policies:

Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW

GANSW guides:

Integrating Urban Design

Urban Design for Regional NSW

Design Guide for Heritage

GANSW advisory notes:

How to develop a design brief

How to select design consultants

Collaboration

Strategic visioning

Master plans

This case study has been developed in conjunction with the Urban Design for Regional NSW guide.

1. Horton D (creator) & AIATSIS (1996), AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz.