

Precincts, people and places – forging new partnerships

***The international symposium convened by the University of Queensland
and the PACE precinct initiative***

24th & 25th July 2009, Brisbane

An overview of proceedings

The Symposium aimed to address the role of special precincts as productive hotspots and “living laboratories” for innovation, and to examine the particular importance of precincts in the health system as a springboard and case study for discussion. Four broad challenges emerged:

1. How do we move beyond mere co-location to multi-party engagement and collaboration?
2. How do we better promote real innovation outcomes, and mark out a place for innovative precincts within the wider innovation ecosystems?
3. How do we shape precincts that are “fit for purpose” in the 21st century and in particular how do we optimise across the physical and the virtual?
4. With the health system, could we envisage a national effort similar in ambition to that which the UK has embarked upon?

The discussion at the Symposium was organised around four themes, posed as questions:

1. Do precincts matter?
2. What has been our experience: what has worked and not worked?
3. What are the challenges and issues we need to address to get better outcomes?
4. What is an action agenda for moving forward?

Participants in the Symposium were drawn from universities, research agencies and institutes, industry, government, health service providers and included architects and designers. Discussion sessions and panels were interspersed with provocations from speakers from the US, UK and India. Transcripts of these contributions, videos of special presentations, and copies of selected presentation materials will be available on the PACE and Alba websites: <http://www.paceprecinct.com.au> , <http://www.albacapital.com.au>. The Symposium was convened by Professor Peter Brooks and Dr Terry Cutler. Dr Norman Swan moderated the symposium proceedings with energy and critical probing.

Why precincts matter

The main conclusions from the group are summarised in the following points. Precincts matter because they:

- Provide scale to attract good people, funding, facilities and global partnerships
- Support first class facilities to support first class research and learning
- Provide proximity and access to:
 - people and capabilities which are task critical
 - end users of outcomes (“nesting problem-solving within an engaged community”)
- Facilitate:
 - synergies

- serendipity
- focus
- multi and trans-disciplinary capabilities (allowing “unstructured conversations” across disciplines and entities – trans-disciplinary and trans-sectoral)
- Provide a catalyst for:
 - intergovernmental co-ordination
 - economic development strategies (property/infrastructure, IT, new business models)
- Address the inbuilt human need for face to face social contact (fostering social capital)
- Unlock latent intellectual capital and under-utilised assets
- Secure better public (socio-economic) outcomes for the investment of time, effort and money
- Facilitate a creative, culturally attuned innovation ecosystem.

In contemplating the question of the interface between the physical and the virtual, it was concluded that special attention needed to be given to this interface and to homing in on what can only be best done within a precinct.

The purpose of precincts

The answers to this question about the particular function of precincts were summarised in the following terms:

- To achieve transformative and sustained excellence in science, industry and economic outcomes
- To provide “living laboratories” and arenas for innovation through embedded practice
- To set a challenge that hasn’t been set before
- To shape emerging value chains (accelerating the change to new models) and support innovations across these value chains
- Shift emphasis from the physicality of place to a sense of social belonging and community
- Connect and cross-fertilise ideas drawn from deep expertise from different areas of knowledge to resolve complex challenges needing significant economies of scale
- Enable smart people to hang out in close proximity and develop an ecology that keeps them engaged

What can we learn from our experience?

A panel of people with experience of a cross-section of precincts from around the country opened up this discussion. It would be fair to say that, essentially, the overall verdict was that most precincts were co-locations of convenience, often prompted by the desire to access or support large-scale facilities or infrastructure. Co-location typically translated into little

else. The implication is that “more of the same” is not going to change things or unleash the potential of significant investments.

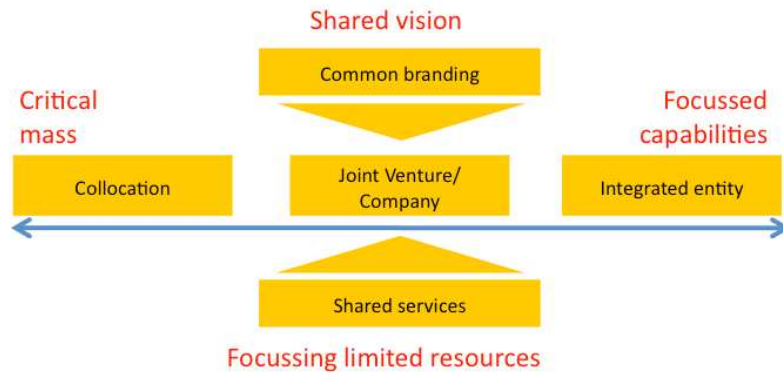
This led into a productive discussion of how we might describe the critical specifications for a successful precinct.

Critical specifications for a successful precinct

This summary checklist of the views of participants is in no particular order of priority.

1. A clearly articulated and understood mission, with short, medium, and long term goals. This needs to be a shared vision, and one that is “owned” by all the interested parties. (The tension between what is achievable in the short term and stretch targets was noted).
2. The vision needs ‘fit for purpose’ governance arrangements to sustain it.
3. Shared cultural values around excellence, openness, adaptability, risk taking and sharing, tolerance for failure, and generosity
4. Strong and self-assured leadership with ‘fit for purpose’ management and enabling skills
5. A clear “cross-fertiliser” role(s), possibly involving:
 - a curatorial function
 - funding compacts and incentives
 - mobilizing functions for programme leaders
6. Clear terms of engagement around resources and roles
7. An engagement strategy for stakeholders and the community
8. Pulling power through being on the global radar (and developed through brand, marketing, and communications)
9. A high concentration of appropriate expertise and standing
10. The capacity to deal with complexity and to ensure diversity of inputs
11. An embedded educational role (and learning capacity)
12. Industry connections, connectivity and relevance
13. Porous, permeable boundaries which promote a clear focus on market and outcome domains (not institutional domains)
14. Incentives geared to outcomes (not inputs)
15. “3D” land and space use (through tiered not linear occupancy categories, with more than one thing in the one space)
16. Shared and creative “play spaces”
17. Time based and sequenced development priorities, enabling evolutionary pathways
18. Sufficient scale to be able to accommodate risk

It was generally agreed that there is no “one size fits all” model: there is a spectrum of models and approaches, shaped around different priorities and emphases. This was illustrated by one table group as follows:



Precinct issues and challenges

Eight particular challenges were identified as demanding close attention, and further work.

1. Engagement of stakeholders and the community
2. Calibrating meaningful success factors (including benefits to the community):
 - performance indicators and milestones
 - focus on outcome measures
 - ensuring adequate and appropriate factor inputs
3. Articulating the governance options: “horses for courses”
4. Delivering the “curatorial” role
5. Expressing “openness” and inclusiveness – in all its dimensions (and noting the tensions with focus and differentiation)
6. Avoiding the risk of precincts becoming silos in themselves, and inward looking
7. Articulating the characteristics of a good “precinct leader”
8. Assuring recurrent as well as capital investment: avoiding the brass plaque syndrome

Barriers to progress

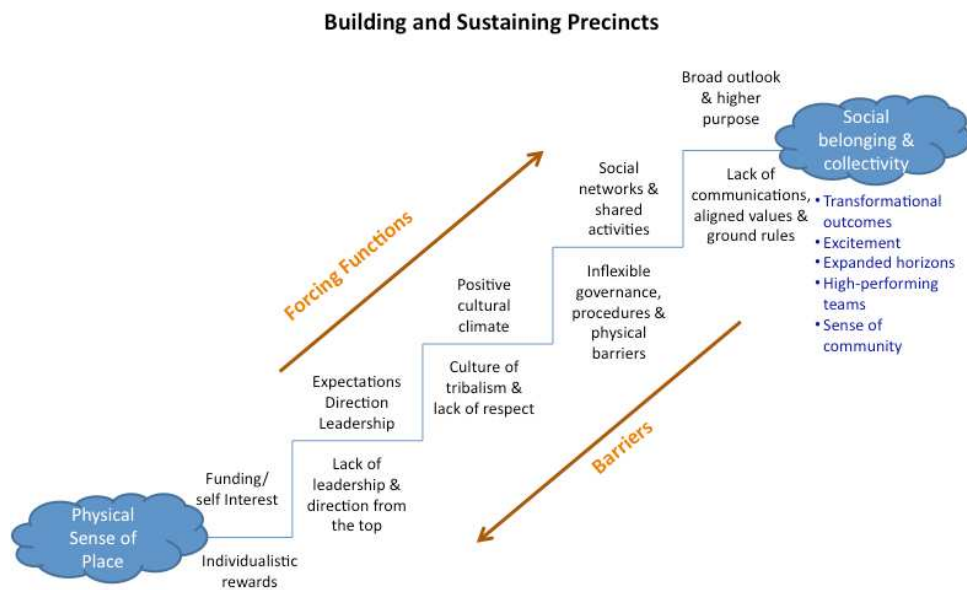
In elaborating on these issues, the following barriers to progress were highlighted:

- Risk aversion, inflexibility, lack of ambition, and conflicting paradigms
- Asymmetric power structures and relationships
- Stakeholder fear of brand dilution
- Use of traditional metrics
- Lack of scale
- The unintended consequences of government regulatory and planning constraints
- Perverse incentives

In addressing these issues various participants stressed the need to;

- Appreciate the evolutionary options
- Recognise the different motivations in play and accommodate them within incentive structures
- Developing new metrics, such as the use of social network analysis to map Emerging outcomes and relationship opportunities
- Think big and not be under-ambitious
- Provide for transient access and engagement

It was noted that the expertise from business schools, which routinely deal with governance structures and the building of innovative teams, was an underutilised resource in discussion of precincts. One table group summarised the enabling and constraining factors within the following schematic.



At the close of proceedings two of the special guest international speakers and participants were invited to present some concluding observations.

Professor James Barlow from Imperial College London provided the following comments.

1. We need to consider the role of precincts within the wider context of the overall ecosystem within which they function. What are the mechanisms for change? How do you incentivise engagement? Barlow asked us whether we could envisage a national effort around the health system similar in ambition to that which the UK has embarked upon.
2. Measures of success - or of value - are problematic. How do you measure the effect of collaboration? This is an area we need to work on.
3. How do we understand the difference between precincts and clusters (and their possible interdependence)?
4. How do we build in the flexibility and adaptability to deal with the accelerating pace of change all around us?

Nick Donofrio, the distinguished IBM Fellow and Alumnus from the US, ended proceedings with a strong challenge to lift our sights.

"It is all about leadership, and leadership needs to be real and hopeful. During the discussions I have heard many aspirational statements, some inspirational contributions, but little in the way of perspirational commitment.

People come before place, and places evolve to support and house people.

We must avoid using 20th century models to address 21st century challenges and opportunities. In the 21st century the question is how and where the physical adds value over the virtual. In the late 1990s during the dot.com boom we had the unproductive argument over "bricks versus clicks". What we found was that it was the inter-relationship of the two that changes things, producing new hybrid models.

Money is not the answer to everything. Too much is as bad as too little. Scarcity sometimes drives greater innovation.

Precincts need to be dynamic and organic. There has to be the capacity to allow activities to grow, die, expand, and contract. For the right task, at the right time, and within the right environment, the talent will come.

It seems to me that you have a collection of things that exist, but not yet a system that works”.

Nick Donofrio’s last point echoes a key finding from the 2008 review of Australia’s innovation system: the finding that we do not have an innovation system. We have research systems, we have business systems, but we do not have a shared agenda for innovation linking universities and research institutes, businesses and industry, and government. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that we find we have collocations, not collaborations; we have building blocks but not yet the exploitation of those synergies that could and should emerge.

There was a strong consensus that the Symposium discussions had been highly productive and timely, significant challenges had been identified and that it is important that the dialogue continue, with a focus on shaping concrete proposals for action and the advancement of precincts as hubs for innovation. The potential of innovative precincts around the health system to unleash demonstrable value has been clearly demonstrated elsewhere in the world, and the meeting identified comparable opportunities in many other fields.

The conveners thank Dr Norman Swan and the meeting’s “innovation sherpas” for their contribution in distilling these key points from the proceedings.

Last words: some quotable quotes

“In isolation we are worthless; connected we can make a difference” – SM

“I need a working environment that functions on a human scale” – RAJ

“The easy problems have been solved” – SM

“ Four ‘eyes’ are better than one: Instrumented, interconnected, intelligent, inclusive” –ND

“We need places to come in from the cold” – ND

“ We need fruitcakes, not layered cakes” – AC

“Anything is better than the current situation” – AC

“Individuals of enormous courage make a difference” – EB

“Life is local” – GS

“Virtual precincts virtually aren’t there”

“Precincts are the physical expression of a partnership” - JM

“My definition of a genius is a person who has the capability to clear their mind of the trappings and of the institutions of yesterday” – Nick Donofrio

“If nothing changes, nothing changes. If you are going to keep doing what you have been doing you are going to keep getting what you have been getting. If you don’t like what you have been getting don’t keep doing what you have been doing. There are only a few ways in this world to go forward. You either get what you want or you get what you deserve. ” - Nick Donofrio