

# 'Big Ideas in Place' - Day One

Chairman [Bob Perry](#) opened by acknowledging the event was presented as part of Vivid Ideas and was therefore a “safe zone for very strange ideas and very strange people”.

His own contribution suggested that place existed where commercial imperatives meshed with “civic purpose”, where it was entirely possible for big new developments to extend, or create from scratch the “unique, civic identity” of a neighbourhood.

He felt place was where “each of Sydney’s 672 suburbs found its heart” but also where each bought into the idea of a greater Sydney that needed to compete for talent and investment.

“This is not really a normal conference” he said. “We have way too many speakers for that, so rather than easing you into ideas we will be, more or less, throwing them at you”. With that, the Place Leaders 2017 conference was underway.

## Session 1 “art, activation and place attachment”

This session brought [Ignatius Jones](#), the creative powerhouse behind Vivid, to the stage, together with the somewhat controversial view that “place is just another word for experiential marketing”. We learnt that Vivid sprang from a need to plug the winter gap in the Sydney events schedule but quickly evolved into something tapping the human urge to huddle together on a cold night (“the campfire effect”) and tell stories.

Vivid, we heard, succeeds because it knows what it is - a celebration of the creative industries and not an arts festival (these have “had their day”). It uses the latest technology to “take art off the walls and splash it around the streets”; offers experiences for free; tells the story of a city; and pulls in international tourists by the plane-loads. That small centres and neighbourhoods are now seeking to interpret and reproduce Vivid at the local level is regarded as the high mark of success.

[Matt Jones](#) from Melbourne’s [Federation Square](#) followed, providing a rich insight into the world of a true mixed use precinct that “breathes the city around it”. Fed Square, he explained, works because it takes every opportunity to give agency to individuals, willing them to interact with the space. Visitors see their image writ large on screens at the touch of a button. They become ensconced in temporary artworks that literally reach down and envelope the viewer. Maintaining a diversity of activity is key, so too is staying true to the [civic and cultural charter](#) that everyone including the carpark operators sign up to, but the greatest challenge is reconciling the binaries that come with public space; remaining accessible but also embracing the iconic, welcoming all facets of the community but also staying commercial.

Both speakers joined the ensuing panel discussing the merits of authorities “getting out of the way”. For [Central Park](#), this meant turning over space to artists as a first step in the revitalisation process. The use of art encouraged locals to connect with a precinct that had been off-limits for over a century and did more to signpost the project as arts-friendly and environmentally-friendly than a slick marketing campaign could have achieved.



We went to the community of [Fairfield](#) next, one of the most ethnically diverse places in Sydney. While authorities “step in” to make space available to migrants and young people, they “step out” when it comes to growing sunflowers on footpaths, or erecting shrines in front yards. Fairfield doesn’t court attention but it is receiving it from the Sydney media and visitors (and groups like us), with people being drawn to the authenticity of the place, and that fact it is absorbing the bulk of Sydney’s [refugee](#) intake. We were left wondering to what extent authorities should try to harness this new-found curiosity.

Bendigo, we learnt from [Leftbank Co](#), has made a name for itself as a food/wine and cultural capital through an aggressive and very successful council-led strategy that has had the unintended consequence of leaving parts of the community behind. The council is now reaching out to locals to try to re-connect them to Bendigo’s changing identity.

We heard too about [Demolished Sydney](#); an exhibition by [Sydney Living Museums](#) of a restless city continually remaking itself, and saw on screen the buildings sacrificed in the process. Modernist buildings are under threat now, with a surprisingly young demographic – 25-30 years old, being the main defenders. [Brutalist architecture](#) was flagged as the next heritage battlefield for Sydney.

## Session 2 “culture, identity, and inclusivity”

Session 2 was a highlight and Auckland’s [Frith Walker](#) wowed with a presentation on how “ancient wisdom”, passed through the Maori language to modern day place-makers, has guided the redevelopment of the [Auckland waterfront](#).

We heard how the Maori concepts sat at the forefront of the minds of the project team, and were treated as prized assets - ‘kaitiakitanga’ – reciprocity between people and place and indigenous people’s role in nurturing and protecting the land and ‘manaakitanga’ – taking care of others, and ‘Mātauranga Māori’ – the relationship between ancestral knowledge, local place and the wider world and universe. [Panuku](#), Frith said, believes the keys to designing for the future, lie with the past.

The Maori words that permeated Frith’s speech were delivered so perfectly and powerfully, many of us were left wondering why we bother appropriating words for complex place concepts in English at all.

[Aunty Ruby Rose](#) led off with the gem; “we don’t make places, we absorb them”. Places imbue, she said, they seep into the body. Our role is to not assert “power over” a place, we just have to listen. Place-making is receiving. (You must imagine a collective pause at this moment as everyone took in the simple genius of these statements).



Harking back to Ignatius’s contention that everybody wants a place by the fire, Aunty Ruby said places are about belonging. She told how her Aunties suggested building a fire pit at the QLD State Library, a suggestion that was originally laughed at, adopted the architect Tim Hill, and but has since become a key draw card.

[Jia-Ping LEE](#) from [Think City](#) took us on a tour of Malaysia next, showing us a series of clever community-led interventions, “the many many small things creating big change” in Georgetown and sections of Kuala Lumpur that have succeeded in combatting blight and social friction. Big on the agenda was the idea of respect for newly arrived groups, particularly from Syria, the “I understand you are different to me, and I am ok with that” mantra.

Design excellence has played its part too, helping Malaysia shake off the “chill dude culture” that has led in Jia-Ping LEE’s view to mediocre urban outcomes in the past.

Interventions included the brokering of long term rents to blunt gentrification and alienation, subsidised heritage restorations that have enlivened streets, protections for hawkers (“if you move them inside, it’s not street food anymore”), and programming that includes live doodling, photo comps, busking and arts-on-the-move.



The session finished with [Zanda Cameron](#) and [Stefanie Matosevic](#) from [Roberts Day](#) taking us to [Ellenbrook in Perth](#), once a sand quarry, now an 8 village self-contained town housing 30,000 people that has won a swag of international design awards. It boasts a diverse housing mix and a collaborative stakeholder model that continues to the present day despite the development stage coming to a close.

## Session 3 “measuring the value of place”

Session 3 was another standout, surveying the latest thinking in place metrics.



We heard first from [Deakin University](#) who took us on the “qualitative turn” that researchers have made in recent years in attempting to unpack “the vibe”.

Researcher [Matt Novacevski](#) said liveability indices did a good job of ranking cities and driving competition, but offered little in terms of explaining the human, emotional aspects of “liveability”. Instead, qualitative, open ended inquiry was needed to unearth the intangibles behind place attachment.

Deakin’s [lovability research](#) suggests that places are most loveable when they have: 1) The old, 2) The vibe, 3) The beautiful, 4) The local and 5) The different.

[Studio Huss](#) has been researching in the same vein, interrogating the hypothesis that “we feel a space first, then try to rationale it”. Director [Jonathan Daly](#) explained that the perception of space occurs in the “affective gap” between psychology and physiology. It has subjective and objective dimensions and both are processed in the subconscious. To test the theory, Huss is [kitting out volunteers with sensors](#) to measure skin responsiveness, brain activity and heart rate and partnering with The Parsons New School of Design in New York to run tests with students. Jonathan put out a call to the room for volunteer test groups to trial the Huss Index in Australia.

[David Adamson](#), lead researcher at [Compass Housing](#) agreed we can measure place but we routinely measure the wrong things. He noted that money is spent on designers, but not “measurers”, pointing to a skill gap in the profession. He called for measurement to be embedded in the daily practices of local councils, strata managers and others so the effectiveness of a place strategy can be tested all the way along, not just at the end of an initiative.

David has developed a three-part framework for measuring place which looks at 1) Atmosphere, 2) Landscape and 3) Horizon.

[Place Partners’ Kylie Legge](#) shared the [Place Score](#) model, developed in-house, that has been used on over 11,000 respondents. It hones in on: 1) Attraction (magnetic qualities), 2) Attachment (stickiness) and 3) Value (the things people care about).

For one project Kylie ran the tool on 20 neighbourhoods, all within a single Local Government Area, and each had a different set of values.

She pointed out that place metrics are a work-in-progress that still have a way to go before they can counter economic arguments within government. She said the field was progressing and consensus was building.



## Session 4 “workshops round 1”

The program broke for the afternoon into four concurrent sessions that offered 11 different talks covering skate parks, politics, pop-ups and healthy urban design. Places featured included [Port Macquarie](#), the [Northern Beaches](#), Palmerston North, [Waverly](#), [Green Square](#) and [Hobsonville Point](#) in New Zealand. And, of course, ongoing and deep thinking from [Lucinda Hartley](#), CEO of [CoDesign Studio](#).

# 'Big Ideas in Place' - Day Two

Day 2 opened with an address from Bilbergia, with Rik Graf saying that developer-funded facilities needed to be in place before major building projects started. He said it was irrational to think communities would accept density without seeing local infrastructure upgraded, and while this meant developers had to forward-fund multimillion-dollar projects, it also opened up opportunities. Building the Bennelong Bridge at Homebush Bay for example, brought thousands of people to Rhodes, and made ground floor retail feasible in areas that had not been scoped by the masterplan. Rik called this a "good trick" by developers that also delivered a win to local residents in the form of a new civic heart.

Place Leaders Board Member Lindy Hyam recommended the group keep Newcastle on the watch list. With a university moving into the commercial core, green space replacing heavy rail corridors, new lightrail, museums, galleries and temporary retail programs – it is one to keep an eye on.

She also suggested listening out for the term "solostalgia" - the homesickness you have when you are still at home, caused by environmental change. It affects mining town residents in Australia and is now being used in legal disputes.

She ended with a challenge to the room - that place leadership, in her view, was the "disrupter of today's planning".

## Session 5 "new urban futures"

[Jason Twill](#) from [UTS](#) and [Urban Apostles](#) opened session 5 with an extraordinary presentation on how city living is leading to more sharing. He spoke about the share economy – taking us to America and Europe to look at models supporting the sharing of land, homes, cars, bikes, dining tables, backyards, businesses and tools.

He noted that Australia had just a handful of cities – and all of them were in crisis. He said that where this had happened in other countries, citizen-led responses had devised ways to combat disappearing affordability, and to retain mid to low income workers, students and artists. Australia in many respects was lagging behind.

He was followed by [Zara Whitwell](#) from [ConnectMacPark](#) and [Alice Woodruff](#) from [Active City](#) who spoke about Sydney's [Macquarie Park](#). Here was a high value, rapidly growing business park, second only to Global Sydney in terms of output, with great jobs to offer but zero place appeal. It was also being crippled by lone driver traffic.

We heard how large firms, together with the university, were starting to partner on ways to curb car use, "co-hopping", working from-home and "co-working hubs" being some of the strategies in play. Work was underway with managers too, challenging the idea that "if you weren't at your desk, you weren't producing". The success of the program rested on good technology, extra communication within teams and open-minded managers who were prepared to try new working models themselves.

The [Gold Coast Council's Patrick Duigan](#) concluded the session with a quick survey of the city's latest forays into place-building. New additions included the development of a Chinatown District and the creation of a new plaza complete with stage for events and festivals at Broadbeach. "Only on the Gold Coast could we create a Chinatown where none existed before."



## Session 6 “place experience and property value”

Crowd-favourites [Gilbert Rochecouste](#) from [Village Well](#) and client [Narelle Hutchins](#) from [AMP Capital](#) took us to the world of the modern shopping centre next, where the industry has “woken up” to the value of place-making. This has seen asset owners like AMP pivot towards putting social and cultural considerations first, and letting the commercial gains follow.



Recognising that people no longer need to shop, and only do it for the experience, shopping centres are now designing in lawns, pools and bars as part of their complexes. Artworks are being installed in the spaces between shops, or on the building itself, to entertain and communicate but also to drive social media traffic.

There is an acceptance that people stay longer (and spend more) in places that are social and beautiful (for Gilbert these are the “new rituals of consumption”). AMP’s [Macquarie Centre at Ryde](#) has doubled its market share since expanding the centre and adopting a place mindset across the project team.

[Optus-Singtel’s Andrew Parker](#) continued the Macquarie Park theme discussing the on-campus initiatives underway to improve culture and connectedness in a campus that boasts the population of a small city. We saw how big changes were occurring not only to space – outdoor areas and common rooms – but also to social dynamics. New forms of entertainment and programs had made a marked difference to the way people engaged at work, and small groups were now applying for grants to develop and drive their own initiatives. Andrew employs two full time staff to continuously consult with employees.

Brand specialist [Andy Hoyne](#) followed with the interesting proposition that those in the development field needed to “start with the legacy”, that is, start by investing a site or a place with meaning.

For [Hoyne](#) this meant making 5% of a project budget available to the things that simply delight. “Start with the park, start with the playground, start with the things that

give a place an identity”. This seeds the brand, and helps people connect and care. While this, he reasoned, is good for the community, it is also good business because highly valued spaces that people care about command higher prices.

He urged practitioners to “park the rules” at the start of projects, and bring them back in later, once the thinking had been done. An example of great thinking, he said was [Market Hall in Rotterdam](#). He urged people to look it up on line.



We were joined at the end of the session by mathematician and digital transformation consultant [John Dobbins](#) who talked about spaces that facilitated the “collision of brains”. These are spaces that assist knowledge to spill from one head to another between people who typically move in disparate networks.

Incubators, he said, do this. They build networks of innovation. Over time, they become resilient, so if one node dies, another quickly replaces it.

He also showed how spillovers could be graphed, and how this helps illuminate not only areas of intense activity, but also areas of isolation. This, he said, is the flag placemakers and facilitators needed to intervene with place strategy, spaces and programming.

## Session 7 “workshops round 2” and Session 8 “workshops round 3”

The second round of workshops comprised nine different talks ranging across the topics of governance, innovation, cultural disruption, analytics, hacking and crowd-sourcing.



The third round of workshops commenced after lunch. Many were interactive and included tours of Wentworth Point, architectural exhibitions by students, art walks, participative workshops as well as talks on libraries, makerspace programs and cultural mindfulness.



## The Great Debate, “Place-making is a product for developers, not a process for the people”

After an hour’s networking and wine-sipping, everyone was ready for the Great Debate, facilitated by Kylie Legge.



The “process for the people” team argued strongly, saying developer-led place-making delivered amenity and convenience, but not a true sense of place. They “can’t make community, and they can’t make art, they can’t make real place beauty and they can’t make history”. So no matter how consultative a developer is, a top-down process is about selling something at the end of the day, and great places are not about selling.



The “product for developers” countered by pointing to Central Park saying “look at it, its developers-led and people love it. They’re telling you that with their feet and their wallets”.

They admitted many developers were still following the “build it and get out” model, but a progressive new breed understood great places, and deserved a seat at the table. They pointed out that developers have the financial capability and the willingness “to bring the experts in”, noting that “when we say experts, we’re not talking about the bad guys, we’re talking about everyone in this room”.

Passionate arguments were made on both sides (with one member of the opposing team reaching for a bag of water balloons before being restrained, and another getting the rooms up for a war dance) but the “product for developers” team snatched the victory by a nose.



# “Housing Affordability Forum”, Day 3

Day 3 heralded the start of a day-long deep-dive into housing affordability. It was characterised by a series of speakers and a 7 person panel discussion.

## Keynotes

[David Adamson](#) returned to the stage pointing out we are in the midst of a dysfunctional “urban flip” whereby the inner city has ceased to be the preserve of new migrants, low income groups and workers, and was now almost exclusively home to hip knowledge workers.



He noted Australia had signed up to the lofty ambitions of the Habitat III, [New Urban Agenda](#) agreement but [questioned how we will meet them in 20 years](#) without a Federal Housing Minister, or a National Housing Plan to drive a national program of publically supported home building or tax reform (“we are currently a paradise for the wealthy”).

He called for “more meddling with the market” and a breakdown of the silos that distort the development process (he noted the conference was doing that and that “it was a buzz to be part of it”). Place offers the best level for experimentation with developers now willing to deliver affordable housing at a place scale. The built and social outcomes are large enough to be tangible, but small enough not to alarm communities.



[Fong Chun Wah](#), our esteemed keynote from the [Singapore Housing & Development Board](#) (HDB), shared a number of lessons from Singapore, where 82% of people live in publicly built housing and the vast majority come to own them.



He supported a strong role for government in housing markets as a way of mapping a path to ownership (this is regarded as a key driver of community belonging). He urged a re-think on density too, suggesting that it can co-exist with liveability. His organisation’s liveability mantra is “ABC: active, beautiful and clean”.

We were acquainted with the role HDB plays in masterplanning, building and activating high density communities. We saw new [eco towns](#) coming to life, man-made waterways and sustainability technologies permeating new estates. We also witnessed the enormous efforts made to house multiple generations of families in single units, and to keep communities together through whole-of-tower refurbishments.

## Session 1 “case studies”

The case studies session took us on a fly-through of some of the places now experimenting with affordable housing.

[Washington Park Sydney](#): a Payce development with a significant portion of high-spec social housing placed at the centre of the estate. The housing provides for ageing-in-place, and adapts to accommodate young families in the future. St George Housing has a full time presence on-site and services issues early to maximise cohesion.

[Wentworth Point Sydney](#): a Billbergia development that has evolved into a high-density town centre through its own infrastructure initiatives such as the Bennelong Bridge, library, childcare and enlarged public domain. Activation, connectivity and shared proximity to services are all factors affecting affordability and ,moreover, private sector funding of infrastructure such as the bridge can be extended to the provision of housing for key workers in return for higher densities.

Canada Bay Sydney: Council is [collecting affordable housing stock](#) through voluntary planning agreements despite having no formal obligation to do so. It is seen as a key resilience strategy, aligned to the 100 Resilient Cities Framework, and will likely feature in future iterations of the council’s Community Strategic Plan.

[Wynyard Quarter Auckland](#): Far from affordable itself, but the product of a partnership with the [Green Building Council \(GBC\)](#) that now offers an exemplar sustainable housing model for adaptation to more affordable schemes. [Manukao](#) is flagged as one to watch where, in a first, the GBC is giving credits for social housing.

Switzerland and Germany: The rise of the “cluster apartment”, a model that offsets costs, but also strengthens social bonds and safety nets. Bedrooms and bathrooms are typically self-contained, and kitchens and living rooms are shared. European examples include Kraftwerk and [Kalkbreite](#).



## Session 2 “design and social dimensions, governance and finance”

[Ben Hewett](#) from the [Office of the NSW Government Architect](#) led off session 2 advising the group of the new role of the Office within the Department of Planning. They are tasked with “putting design at the forefront of planning” and “brokering between government priorities, the planning context, and industry expertise”. He recommended the draft document “[Better Placed](#)” to the room as the go-to bible for design guidelines.

[Craig Allchin](#) of UTS and [Six Degrees Urban](#) argued the issue with affordable housing is not lack of design, “but lack of a realistic, achievable brief”. He pointed out there was no clear vision or plan for densifying the middle ring at a time when people were moving away from suburbs and seeking inner city urbanity. He saw a good opportunity to locate density between the two cities of Sydney and Parramatta along the river corridor. This would create more high density housing on harbour peninsulas, which history has shown to be a most desirable and distinctly Sydney typology.

He proposed establishing a development corporation for each of the areas receiving the proposed metro line, rebuying land at above-market rates by Government partnering with the super funds, to deliver an improved transport matrix. This would intensify land use in prized locations, including the peninsulas, to make tomorrow’s Sydney for 8 million people better than today’s at 5 million.

The [Greater Sydney Commission’s Heather Nesbitt](#) told us the Commission’s research had found that people in Sydney “generally love their place” and the reasons for doing so vary across the metropolitan area. She said the Commission’s three major themes – housing choice, great places and better collaboration - had garnered strong support from the community in response to the [Draft District Plans](#). She confirmed they are receiving large numbers of proposals for affordable housing.

[Tracy Howe](#) from the [NSW Council of Social Services \(NCOSS\)](#) asked the group to remember that while the housing affordability issue was a complex policy jigsaw puzzle that is slowly coming together under the stewardship of many of the organisations in the room, the issue is still about real people. At-risk groups must be front of mind she said, as thousands were teetering on the edge of homelessness. NCOSS’s membership is changing with exciting new groups looking to partner; Payce being one, philanthropists and superannuation funds being others.



Dr [Tim Williams](#) from the [Committee for Sydney](#) spoke on the issue of governance and finance, applauding the leadership of Billbergia and others for engaging on issues like inclusionary zoning.



He felt the private sector could accept it if given enough time to gear up, however, other models like build-to-rent and co-ops needed to be taken seriously too. Tim argued the key to delivering more housing was delivering more public transport. He also called for a register of public lands, more diverse funding models and support for the [Federal Government's idea of the bond aggregator](#).

[Adrian Harrington](#) from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute ([AHURI](#)) and fund manager Folkestone said Australian institutional investors were holding back from affordable housing unlike the UK where it has been embraced. Barriers were lack of rental performance, fragmentation of the industry and unclear government policy. Getting it right however would likely see 5 year rent agreements locked in with tenants because institutions like stability.

He too said the [bond aggregator](#) was interesting in that it could help “roll up” small community housing players into larger groups, and once they were S&P-rated, could facilitate funding. He called for a housing finance corporation, a national infrastructure fund to remove blockages and tax incentives to lure local and offshore investors. He also predicted mergers and acquisitions in the community housing sector as organisations scrambled to scale up.



## Panel discussion

It was clear from the panel discussion that disparate groups were thinking alike on the issue of affordability and that a strong bottom-up movement “was underway”.



The need to message housing as infrastructure was a strong theme, so was the call for political bi-partisanship at all levels. The panel agreed that “ordinary people were now getting that this is an issue affecting my kids and grandkids, not just someone else’s problem” and were starting to push for solutions.

Several conversations were flagged for “opening up”; the sexy side of density, “the RMS problem” in Sydney; and the limitations of design competitions.

The idea of place being “more important than ever” came through strongly, as did the need to prototype new models of funding and building, even if it was only for people to pick them apart. “The thing itself doesn’t matter”, Bob Perry concluded, “it’s the process of many minds working to improve something that needs to happen”.

With those wise words, the Place Leaders Conference 2017 came to a close.



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