

Background report to the Board of
Yarra River Business Association Inc.

Waterfronts of the Pacific Northwest (USA/ Canada)

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Seattle, WA, USA

Background

YRBA's Executive Officer, Tim Bracher, visited the Pacific North West of the United States/ Canada in September 2019. The cities of Seattle, Vancouver and San Francisco were selected for study because of their significant waterfront developments, each with a major emphasis on tourism.

The three waterfronts provided a contrast, as each was experiencing a different lifecycle and stage of development, not dissimilar to Melbourne's Lower Yarra River and Docklands.

Introduction

The Port of San Francisco's Waterfront Plan quotes Karen Alschuler, Global Urban Design Leader:

“ There are five characteristics of great urban waterfronts:

- 1) the edge and curve that define the waterfront's form and relation to the water and land;*
- 2) the aspects about the waterfront's relationship to the many different sights, sounds and experiences of city;*
- 3) telling the story of the city of which it is a part, and its history;*
- 4) an invitation to come and enjoy the water's edge, appealing to the diversity of residents, workers and visitors; and*
- 5) frame and connect the waterfront with surrounding neighbourhoods and setting.”*

Seattle, Washington State, USA

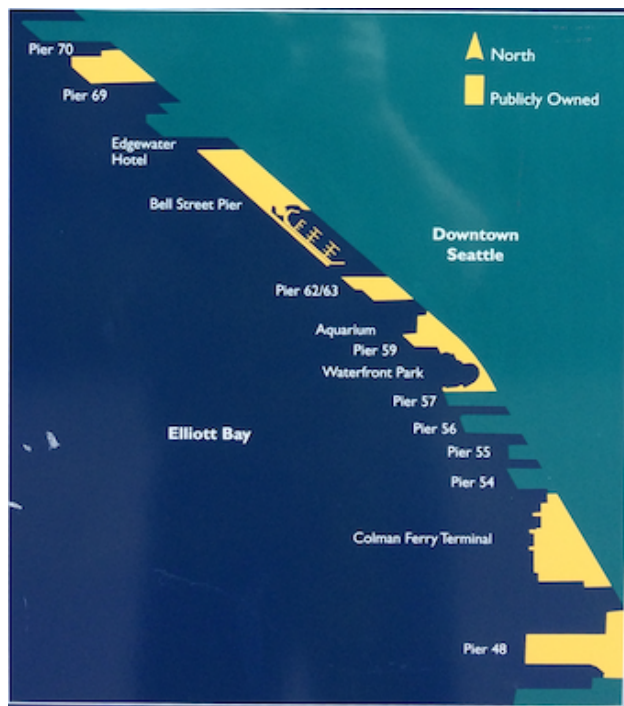
Seattle's downtown waterfront is an integral historic component of its city. Its original form was low-lying, swampy land, which has been progressively in-filled with rubble and earth behind a seawall during the past 120 years. The sidewalk and roadway have been built upon that rubble. The waterfront has played a major commercial role for the Pacific North West, including the maritime servicing of South-East Alaska. While there have been eating places along the waterfront since the 1930s, Seattle's modern waterfront developments date from the 1970s.



Ownership and governance

The State of Washington owns the water area. The State constitution states that the harbor areas be.. *"forever reserved for landings, wharves, streets and other conveniences of navigation and commerce"* Most features are State owned and can never be sold, although they can be leased. Leasing is administered by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources. On the downtown waterfront, the Port of Seattle leases Pier 48, Bell Street Pier and Pier 69. The City of Seattle leases Pier 59 – the home of the aquarium , Pier 62/63, Waterfront Park, and the areas between the piers. The City of Seattle owns the sidewalk and the roadway, 'The Alaskan Way'. The State of Washington owns the Coleman Dock Ferry Terminal, from where it operates the ferries. Piers 54, 55, 56, 57, 70 and the Edgewater Hotel are leased by private entities.

Piers 54 to 63 are the hub of commercial activity on Seattle's Waterfront. The area to the south of these is reserved for more maritime related activity , while the piers to the north of Pier 62/63 are the city marina and Bell Street Pier, which is the city's major cruise shipping hub. North of Bell Street Pier, the waterfront progressively becomes parkland, replete with public sculpture, as part of the Olympic Sculpture Park project.



The business activity of Seattle's Waterfront is overseen by the Seattle Waterfront Association, which was established in the 1970s. Its formation was prompted by the City talking about tearing down the historic piers. The Association was re-invigorated in 2007 when the City's proposed to demolish the elevated viaduct highway along the waterfront and close Alaskan Way for 10 years while it built a replacement. According to Bob Donnegan of the Seattle Waterfront Association: *"About 2500 people work in small family businesses along the waterfront and the businesses didn't want to lose either their businesses or their employees for 10 years"*.

The Waterfront Association's goals are:

- To assemble comprehensive data about the waterfront;
- To help the city, county, state, and federal government understand Seattle's historic waterfront and make good decisions based on our facts and analysis, not Misconceptions;
- To lobby for reasonable laws and regulations around access, safety, transportation, transit, and clean water; and
- To provide a mechanism for members to talk with each other and have fun.

The organization includes most of the 45 businesses along the waterfront, some businesses along the east side of the street, (not on the water side), and many of the residents in the apartments and condominiums near the waterfront.



According to Bob Donnegan, the idea for a tunnel under the city to replace the viaduct was first proposed by the waterfront association. At the time of my visiting, the last sections of the Alaskan Way viaduct were being demolished, thus completing the opening-up of the CBD to the waterfront.

Traditionally, Seattle's steeply raked CBD and the highway viaduct made it difficult for visitors to reach the waterfront. Seattle's world famous Pike Place Markets now has a seamless connection to the waterfront. Piers 62/ 63 are under major redevelopment as an active public space for concerts, recreation and kayaking.

Visitation

The Seattle Waterfront hosts 17 million visitors a year (survey May 2019), which includes ferry passengers. Non-ferry visitors number 6.7 million, of which 54% visit during the 4 summer months. Parking on Seattle's waterfront has been a perennial issue for visitors and traders, with

34% of interviewees saying it is 'poor or inadequate'. The area has lost 1,134 parking places since 2009. The area is not serviced by public transit.

Between 2017-19 the Waterfront Association teamed with the City of Seattle to provide a waterfront shuttle service, which operates for 9 months of the year. The 15 minute shuttle buses operate free of charge along the waterfront and up to the Space Needle between 10am and 8pm. They also provide a free city loop through the CBD to the Convention Centre and Pike Place markets. At the time of visiting, funding continuation for the shuttle was under review. The 2018 budget for the service was US \$895,000

Observations

The Seattle waterfront is an area under review and rejuvenation. Historically, it has been a working area of the Pacific North West, with strong maritime connections to West Canada and Alaska. Much of the commercial development and repurposed buildings reflect the style and urban planning typical of the 1970s/ 1980s era.

There is a high degree of commercialism in the main waterfront hub, similar to the San Francisco waterfront, although on a much smaller scale. The Promenade is best described as utilitarian. There is little in the way of street art, sculpture or respite areas. While vibrant because of the commercial nature of attractions and the flow of people to and from the ferry connections, it lacks character and soul.





Use of garden beds and hanging flowers along the waterfront and into the CBD help to soften the utilitarian nature of the area and it is evident that authorities are starting to plan and make an effort to soften and humanise the waterfront, by providing more areas for passive recreation, which they have already done in the section that contains the Sculpture Park. The current redevelopment of the piers promises “*flexible park spaces for concerts and recreation*”.



The removal of the tiered viaduct and the undergrounding of Alaskan Way will provide major opportunity to synergise the CBD with the waterfront and to make use of the vast swath of urban land previously reserved for vehicles and car parking. In particular, the connection of Pike Place Markets (see pics below) to the waterfront will provide a seamless experience for the tens of thousands of people who visit the world famous markets every week.



The development of the Seattle Waterfront appears to have been primarily commercially driven for the past 40-50 years. Its detachment from the CBD has given it a remote ‘nodal’ destination feel, rather than being an intuitive part of the city experience. Removal of Alaskan Way and redevelopment of some of its piers to humanize its offer provides hope that this waterfront area will be able to match the character and style of downtown Seattle itself. It should provide an opportunity to create a seamless connection and to use the space to soften the harshness of the built environment, to provide more sheltered places of gathering and to build a strong sense of place.

Learnings for Melbourne

Although Seattle's waterfront is much older and a more established tourist destination than Melbourne, there are parallels that can be drawn with the Docklands development of Melbourne City.

Seattle's waterfront is evolving and, like Docklands, faces the issue of its connection to the CBD. Like Melbourne's Spencer St railyards and Marvel Stadium, Seattle's waterfront has been kept remote from its CBD for 70 years because of the Alaskan Way viaduct. Like Docklands, it has also been an area that you 'visit' rather than intuitively flow-into from the city centre.

Like Dockland's challenge to establish itself as the new western end of the CBD, Seattle now has a great opportunity to physically and psychologically synergise its city centre to its waterfront.

Seattle's waterfront is a place of embarkation for many of the City's commuter ferry services and tourism charter services. This provides it with a level of constant activity and an authenticity' that is currently lacking in Docklands. The proposed commercial maritime hub for Harbour Esplanade in Docklands is expected to activate and provide a more human scale to what is currently a car-dominated and a fairly desolate stretch of river frontage.

Vancouver Waterfront, B.C. Canada

Vancouver is one of the world's most beautifully sited cities and is a regular contender with Melbourne for the title of 'Worlds Most Liveable City'.

Its city waterfront has been traditionally a working area. The recreational waterfront of Vancouver has been traditionally located along the southern river frontage, specifically at English Bay and along the long seawall that encompasses Stanley Park.

During the rapid residential development of the 1980s and 1990s, the transformation of the Vancouver economy from secondary to tertiary industry started to see a gradual change in the City's relationship with its waterfront and the uses made of its key waterfront areas.

Since the early 2000s, city authorities have turned their attention to the large scale redevelopment of the waterfront, culminating in the major works undertaken at Canada Place for the 2012 winter Olympic games. The redevelopment and gentrification of Gastown alongside the Vancouver waterfront (see pics below) has dramatically boosted visitation to the northern edge of downtown Vancouver.



This more recent redevelopment of the city waterfront, in response to higher density urban living and increased tourism, has seen the evolution of a high quality public realm. It is a waterfront that does not overwhelm and, within a business and tourism scope, it also provides for respite and relaxation, even in its most intensely visited areas.



A key feature of the Vancouver waterfront is its treatment of cycling and cyclists. Clearly distinguished and delineated cycle paths, with excellent signage, ensures that pedestrians are separated from cyclists, even in the high traffic areas.



The Vancouver waterfront has clearly designated areas for commercial and recreational craft, from cruise shipping and seaplanes to small tourism and self-hire craft.



The quality of street furniture and an emphasis on highly accessible art within the public realm is evident throughout the Vancouver waterfront. Hard stand areas are tempered by garden beds and mass plantings, which emphasizes the urban/nature interface.



In its western section, downtown Vancouver seamlessly melds into the Coal Harbour Precinct, and then into the seawall and the historic Stanley Park. This provides 17 miles of continuous waterfront passive recreational opportunity.



Whilst not located on Vancouver's city waterfront, the transformation since the 1970s of the formerly industrial Granville Island into a hub of creativity with a strong tourism focus is worthy of mention because of the long-awaited redevelopment of the Lower Yarra River's northbank

While Granville Island occupies much more space than either Batman or Enterprize parks, the concept of repurposing small buildings to house and display local creative endeavor is admirable and has created a major tourism attraction in its own right. Careful placemaking attention paid to the undercroft of Batman Park, Enterprize Park and even Banana Alley, could achieve a similar outcome for Melbourne



Learnings for Melbourne

Master planning of Vancouver's city waterfront public realm is clearly evident. It has not been allowed to simply 'evolve' or be determined by private sector developments. The current lack of oversight and planning for the Yarra River's northbank, and its potential connectivity with Docklands, is in contrast to Vancouver. Most people explore a city's waterfront as a single experience, therefore coordinated and integrated management is important to achieve a world-class recreational experience.

The 2012 Olympic Games was a motivating milestone to prompt Vancouver's most recent waterfront developments, as was Melbourne's 2006 Commonwealth Games. However, unlike the Vancouver experience, the legacy of 2006 for the Melbourne waterfront was minimal, as has the attention paid to the Lower Yarra since that time.

Vancouver's blending of nature with the hard edge of urban development is particularly impressive. Also outstanding about the Vancouver city waterfront is its planning for cycling, and the tasteful segregation of pedestrians from cyclists in high traffic pedestrian areas.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA

San Francisco's waterfront was one of North America's earliest attempts to re-purpose marine industrial land into a tourism precinct and since the 1970s it has formed the heart of the San Franciscan tourism experience.

The Fishermens Wharf Precinct of the waterfront is one of the busiest and well known tourist attractions in the western United States. It is best known for being the location of [Pier 39](#), [San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park and adjacent museum](#), the Cannery Shopping Center, [Ghirardelli Square](#), a [Ripley's Believe it or Not](#) museum, Madame Tussauds, the floating Forbes Island restaurant, and restaurants and stands that serve fresh seafood. The continued presence of a healthy fishing industry at Pier 39 is essential to meeting a huge local demand for seafood as well as maintaining a colourful ambiance and authenticity.

Governance

The Port of San Francisco manages the 7½ miles of the San Francisco waterfront, between Aquatic Park in Fisherman's Wharf and Heron's Head Park in Bayview-Hunters Point. The Port also

provides long-term berthing for a number of historic ships. Most are concentrated within Fisherman's Wharf at the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park on the Hyde Street Pier.

For the purposes of this examination, the scope of study is the city's prime tourism focus, the northeast waterfront and Fishermans Wharf area.



Since 1997 the Port of San Francisco Waterfront Land Use Plan (“Waterfront Plan”) has guided development in the area. However, new challenges also emerged during the past 20 years.

Many of the Port’s finger piers have proven far more difficult and expensive to redevelop than anticipated in the Waterfront Plan.

The popularity of the revitalized waterfront has led to congestion and conflicts between the thousands of pedestrians, cyclists, maritime businesses, transit operators, and commuters who today vie for space along the water’s edge.

Since 2015 the Port has been working with state and city authorities plus community organisations to develop a much-needed Port Update plan.





It's waterfront is heavily commercially focused. It blends embarkation points for ferries with water tourism experiences. The embarcadero area of the waterfront remains heavily focused on larger shipping, particularly cruise shipping. The Central Embarcadero Piers Historic District is a [Registered Historic District](#), consisting of Piers 1, 1½, 3 and 5, and is one of the largest surviving pier complexes along San Francisco's Embarcadero. The Central Embarcadero Piers Historic District was added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#) on November 20, 2002.



The later commercial developments, featuring such tourism landmarks as Madame Tussauds and Ripleys Believe it or Not, have continued that strong commercial focus of the area. The Coney Island type feel of this area is a deliberate response to the needs created through mass tourism, but it is significantly lacking in quality street scaping and any sense of place making.



One notable addition to the San Francisco retail waterfront is a strip of retail outlets housed in repurposed shipping containers. The strip is stylish and modern and reinforces linkages with the maritime activity of the area.



Observations

The Fishermens Wharf and north-east areas of the San Francisco waterfront is a busy, buzzing area of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, tempered by some greenery and the vintage tram cars.



However, the more modern urban planning ideal of waterfronts providing a blend of commercial, recreation and human-scale places of respite has not evolved in San Francisco's downtown waterfront yet. What's more, it may never evolve given the huge success of the commercial product offer and its demand on prime commercial land.

For this reason, the San Franciscan waterfront now appears dated, when compared with many of the waterfront developments of other cities around the world.

It is not a waterfront that appears to have an epi-centre or a community heart or even a strong local component, as does the Vancouver waterfront. It is a more scattered commercial offering, with no clear delineation between sections.

Seattle's transitional stage in its waterfront development could learn from the mid-century planning mistake of San Francisco, by retro-fitting parks, recreational areas and more intimate places of respite and reflection.

Learnings for Melbourne

Melbourne has arrived relatively late to waterfront development and because of this has perhaps not suffered the effect of mass commercialization evident in San Francisco and, to a lesser extent, Seattle. The return of the Docklands area to the control of the City of Melbourne has probably saved Docklands from overdevelopment. However, Docklands suffers some of the vehicular congestion that afflicts the San Francisco waterfront, which, in itself can alienate pedestrians.

Notwithstanding, the difference between the master-planned area of Southbank and the initial developer-led Docklands is a lesson why any public place, especially waterfronts, need to be human spaces that soften the urban environment and provide a blend of nature and metropolis.