

Report on public open space component of Meriton DA Precinct C Lots 101 and 102, 52 Walker Street, Rhodes

In pre-DA discussions with Meriton three primary objectives for the public domain were discussed. The three objectives were:

1. to secure a substantial area of deep soil on the Shoreline Avenue frontage to allow mature 'soft' landscaping to be achieved. This is to give some consistency to the landscape character of Shoreline Avenue as exemplified in the landscape proposals for Precinct B and in the Foreshore Open Space zone;
2. to secure a line of sight vista from Walker Street to Homebush Bay (water view) along the line of Darling Avenue; and
3. to develop a 'three room' landscape concept through the site, being a 'soft' landscape along Shoreline Avenue, an urban paved landscape adjacent to Walker Street and a transitional zone between the two contrasting spaces.

These objectives form the background to this assessment.

1. Shoreline Drive. A substantial zone of deep soil suitable for soft landscaping is achieved. However the deep soil is not exploited with sufficient in-depth planting and far too much of the deep soil is allocated to large areas of paving in geometric shapes that have no meaning. I do not consider this satisfactory.

My preferred landscape is a dense edge of trees to the deep soil zone that will grow to 20m in height (= 6 stories) set around a horse-shoe shaped grass sward graded from the edge of the soft soil zone (at RL8.5m) down to Shoreline Avenue (at RL7.0). Narrow pathways, say 1.5m wide, should follow the edge of the grass sward with simple 'off the shelf' seating as illustrated in the landscape report set back from the pathway under the tree canopy. The southern pathway should be aligned to connect with the footpath on Darling Street. The northern pathway, as indicated on the plan, should be merged into the line of Shoreline Avenue.

The planting in depth should be continued along the Shoreline Avenue frontage of Residential Block C included the street 'verge' allowing a 15m wide zone of deep soil planting, that is sufficient for trees that will grow to 20m+.

2. The line of sight vista is achieved but it is poorly articulated. I like the totem pole concept. To make them meaningful I think they should be bunched closer together (as at the MOS which is illustrated) to form a definite frame for the line of sight vista. The small 'poop-deck' lookout adjacent to the shop at RL10 is also a good idea. However the scale is too mean and the area will be seen as a private zone – an extension of the café-table area outside the shop in Block A. This should be extended into a terrace at about RL10 that flows in from the Walker Street

pavement. There is scope for some good quality urban steps down to RL8.5 (plaza level).

It is good urban design to incorporate a series of 'markers' or points along a vista to both lead the 'eye' and the viewer through the vista. The markers need to be better articulated than is indicated on the landscape plan. The 'poop' deck could be one such marker placed centrally on the view corridor.

3. The 'three room' or three different landscape character zones concept was not pressed at the pre-DA meetings partly because there was uncertainty as to the form of development and the exact location of the boundary between the public open space and the private zone. The driving force behind the idea was that the Walker Street frontage was likely to be mostly hard surfaces and steps to accommodate the variable level frontage (from a low of 8.5 to a high of 10.5) and the Shoreline Avenue frontage was intended to be mostly soft landscape. The central zone was envisaged as a transition zone a zone of reflection.

The proposal satisfies the requirements for disabled access with a through route on the north side of the open space. However it is noted that the Access Report makes no reference to the public open space. The stepping, narrowing and widening of the paved areas has no sense of flow through the site and does not reflect any identifiable line. The areas of lawn are arbitrarily located with angular throttle desire points on the pathways that have no obvious purpose. There is no sense of a way through. There is no sense of alternative routes; for example people wanting to get to Walker Street to catch a bus need a direct route. Parents taking a young child for a stroll would want a slow route, a route with different textures, colours, sense of enclosure etc. There is no sense of a destination. There is no sense of place.

My preferred arrangement remains the 'three room' concept. The central 'room' would occupy the central area over car-parking from the edge of the deep soil zone to the line of re-entrant angle (south boundary). This could be treated in a formal manner with groves of trees as indicated plus totem poles. I might characterise it as an introvertive space with internal focal points. The Walker Street plaza could have some lawn area but the dominant surface should be paving. I consider the single steps to be dangerous and better avoided. I would prefer a set of wide easy steps from the terrace level (RL10/10.5) to the plaza level (RL8.5) with the variations in level along the Walker Street frontage taken up by a wall or some similar device.

The concrete seats are both visually crude and uncomfortable to sit on; they should be discarded in favour of standard seats (see Riverside Park at north end of Rhodes Peninsula to verify how unsympathetic a material concrete can be). A water feature might give some life and movement to the Walker Street plaza.

The tree species are OK but there are too few substantial trees. The specimen trees, flowering species etc are good for particular areas (eg the groves). Greater care is needed in the selection of plant material to reinforce the design intent.

Conclusion

The three key shortcomings of the Landscape design of the public open space are:

1. Inadequate deep soil tree planting;
2. Poor articulation and expression of the view corridor; and
3. Design of pathways does not reflect desire lines nor provide attractive recreational routes for a range of users.

In sum this proposal yields very little public benefit. Why, and how, would anyone use this space?

In my opinion this layout should be rejected on urban design grounds. It yields insufficient public benefit for the private benefits conferred on the developer.

John Toon

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