Towards the Use of Cultural Indicators in Planning for Vibrant Activity Centres

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Abstract
Across Australia, capital cities are developing strategies for Activity Centres where increased housing density and improved employment opportunities are supported by high-quality public services and facilities. The recent Moreland Activity Centre and Housing Strategy (MACHS) identified the need for Activity Centre planning to consider economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits, and sought to develop indicators across these domains. In recognising the importance of cultural vitality within Activity Centres, Moreland City Council’s cross-functional working group and consultant team considered the interplay between cultural factors and planning considerations – including the correlation between cultural vitality, built form and particular place conditions. This paper touches on some of the questions that council staff and consultants engaged with during the development of the Moreland Activity Centre and Housing Strategy. It includes some key challenges and possible solutions for planning and enlivening Activity Centres in order to meet cultural as well as social, economic and environmental aims.

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Introduction
All too often, the rationale and planning processes for urban redevelopment focus overwhelmingly on economic and environmental values, to the detriment of other more loosely defined aspects of place. It is unsurprising, then, that economic and demographic indicators dominate the planning processes for areas designated for intensification, which are known within the current state planning system of Victoria, Australia as Activity Centres. These economic and demographic indicators are intended to assist in ensuring that various competing interests are subjected to robust and objective forms of evidence, quite literally giving visibility to these areas of concern. However, by focussing on indicators for such a limited range of dimensions within Activity Centres, the planning process effectively fails to recognise a number of other critical factors for the success of urban places. In particular, the wider dimensions of social and cultural vitality tend to be only summarily recognised. If we are to consider a balanced range of issues in planning for Activity Centres, we need to identify and incorporate corresponding forms of evidence. Alongside accepted measures of economic development and environmental sustainability, what kinds of cultural indicators might contribute to planning for the liveability of Activity Centres and for other comparable land use strategies?

Our interest in this question arose from reflections on our experience as part of an interdisciplinary team of consultants and council officers developing a major Activity Centre land use strategy for the City of Moreland. During the development of this policy, questions arose around the use of cultural indicators, leading to a series of observations and propositions informed by our respective professional backgrounds in planning for arts and culture within a local government context, and in urban design and planning. This paper considers the potential role and structure of cultural indicators within a land use strategic planning process. It looks at the interface between planning for cultural vitality and planning for housing intensification and economic vitality – especially within the context of the state-mandated framework for Activity Centres in Victoria, Australia. While we have focussed on a single case study, we have also drawn out lessons for promoting arts and cultural objectives within strategic planning processes that are potentially applicable in many urban contexts.

Introducing Moreland
The City of Moreland, in Melbourne’s inner north, is distinctive in its multifaceted diversity. The municipality covers a wide range of different contexts, stretching from the inner-city neighbourhoods of Brunswick and East Brunswick out to the more suburban areas of Fawkner, Pascoe Vale and Glenroy. It has a distinctly multicultural population composed of both first- and second-generation immigrants representing all the waves of twentieth-century migration. It is a municipality that covers a broad socio-economic spectrum, with significant population diversity ranging from the relatively affluent and well educated, to poorer residents, students and the elderly. As with many parts of inner and middle-ring Melbourne, Moreland is undergoing rapid renewal and change, with clear signs of gentrification apparent, particularly in the southern end nearer to the city.
From a culture and place perspective, Moreland is probably best known for the eclectic inner suburb of Brunswick, which has become a well-recognised base for artists and creative practitioners. Brunswick presents an excellent example of a suburb with strong cultural vitality, supporting an intense and diverse range of public expressions of culture. Brunswick’s diversity is apparent not only in its population and cultural activity but also in its range of built form. Up until the late 1980s, Brunswick was a major manufacturing centre with a particular focus on the clothing and footwear industry. The demise of these industries left behind many underused spaces mixed into local neighbourhoods. Small shops and workshops are interspersed among houses, based around narrow streets and walkable centres. Together with Brunswick’s dense network of pre-war pubs and narrow shops, these former industrial spaces now provide opportunities for creative practitioners to live, work and exhibit.

Beyond Brunswick, Moreland’s northern suburbs offer significant contrasts in terms of both built form and culture. Coburg shares many of Brunswick’s qualities but has more distinctly defined retail, residential and industrial areas without the degree of mixing found further south. Further out again, the neighbourhoods have a more traditional suburban character, typified by single-family homes on larger blocks with widely dispersed, smaller retail shopping centres. Each of Moreland’s suburbs has its own kinds of cultural activities and expressions of culture. The concentration of arts activity and creative industries in Brunswick, and increasingly in neighbouring Coburg, presents more easily recognisable forms of cultural vitality compared with the often less publicly visible expressions of culture in the more suburban areas of the municipality.

The importance of arts and cultural participation across Moreland is recognised, promoted and supported through a wide range of council policies, services and programs. Council’s community development, urban design, economic development and strategic planning departments demonstrate a relatively strong understanding of the links between cultural, social and economic vitality. Arts and cultural activity is recognised as a critical enabler of place making (Moreland City Council, 2011).

**What are the Activities in an Activity Centre?**

How might Activity Centre planning address dimensions of arts and cultural vitality, as well as economic development and environmental sustainability concerns? Firstly, it is worth briefly considering the role of Activity Centres in the planning system. Since the release of *Melbourne 2030* in 2002, Victorian urban-planning policy has favoured urban consolidation and renewal in an attempt to shift future residential growth back into established areas within the city (Department of Infrastructure, 2002). The aim is to help improve the sustainability and liveability of our cities, based on the logic that this will limit sprawl and make better use of existing infrastructure. In order to do this, the planning system needs to encourage change in established suburbs. This approach has, however, been quite contentious within existing residential areas. Increased residential density achieved through redevelopment inevitably changes the existing community mix, and usually also requires the demolition of older buildings whose character may be valued within local communities. The compromise solution within the Victorian planning system has been to encourage residential redevelopment in formerly non-residential areas, such as in specifically defined shopping strips and surrounding hinterland areas, or in redundant semi-industrial precincts. The aim has been to retain existing retail and other current uses while increasing housing density, resulting in intensified mixed-use areas known as Activity Centres.

So then, what about the other activities that are vital parts of successful Activity Centres, but are not residential, services or shopping activities? A casual visit to the centres of Brunswick, Coburg, Glenroy and other areas of Moreland will show that all kinds of diverse activities take place in these areas, many of which do not neatly fall into these categories. Given that the major policy aim of *Melbourne 2030* was to increase the residential population in Activity Centres (Department of Infrastructure, 2002, p. 46), it is unsurprising that the planning policies for Activity Centres are narrowly focussed on achieving increased residential densities, balanced with high levels of...
commercial activity. Not surprisingly, the specific empirical indicators used in planning for Activity Centres focus on issues such as supply and demand for residential development, current and projected population density and demographics, measures of economic viability for commercial and retail uses, employment numbers, and public transport access. Apart from being highly technical, these indicators measure only a limited proportion of the activities which are valued by the wider community, and critical to the liveability of Activity Centres.

Quite clearly, there is much more to these places than such narrow measures of activity. Recognising the diversity of other less commercial activities is marginalised within many planning strategies. Unfortunately, experiential and cultural measures of place are too often crowded out by more technical measures. Most councils, and Moreland is certainly among them, include broadly defined cultural and social development objectives as part of their Activity Centre plans. However, these objectives are only loosely defined within the planning system and are often seen as secondary to the more technical aspects of the planning process. The current approach lacks a robust framework enabling the integration of social and cultural considerations alongside economic and environmental concerns.

The MACHS Project

During 2012, we were participants in the development of an Activity Centres planning policy known as the Moreland Activity Centre and Housing Strategy (MACHS). This policy provides a useful case study highlighting the tensions noted above. It demonstrates both the current established processes involved in Activity Centre planning, as well as some of the challenges and potentials for the introduction of cultural indicators that might be included alongside economic and environmental indicators for liveable centres.

The stated purpose of the Moreland Activity Centres and Housing Strategy was to provide a guide for housing demand and growth in Activity Centres across Moreland. While it aimed to set up a long-term plan for genuinely mixed-use neighbourhoods with a wide range of activities, the emphasis of the strategy on housing was clear from the project title onwards. The initial research phase undertaken by council officers and consultants identified a number of useful indicators, such as housing demand and transport accessibility. These were then mapped across the whole municipality and confirmed through site visits to the relevant neighbourhoods. Each neighbourhood was ranked in a hierarchy in descending order of size and economic importance. The process was geared towards providing guidelines that addressed this hierarchy of uses.

Moreland City Council is recognised as a relatively progressive council that promotes integrated planning approaches including social and cultural considerations alongside economic and environmental concerns. The project steering group established for MACHS included economic development, cultural development, community development and social policy officers alongside strategic planning, statutory planning and urban design officers, thereby encouraging a multidisciplinary and integrated approach. The aim of the steering group was to work with the consultants to ensure consideration of a range of dimensions relevant to creating sustainable, liveable centres. While the multidisciplinary team generally supported the aim of adopting a broad range of indicators including social and cultural indicators, the challenge of identifying these indicators was problematic. A primary issue was that the mandatory State Government policy framework is relatively weak on cultural concerns, focussing instead on the technical assessment of housing and retail needs viewed from a market perspective.

In the remainder of this paper we reflect on the tension between the State Government-mandated policy framework for Activity Centres and the MACHS steering group’s aspiration to protect and promote cultural vitality through the use of cultural indicators.
Counting Culture

Early in the MACHS process, there was a general acknowledgement among the multidisciplinary team that cultural activity is an important component of vibrant Activity Centres, and therefore ought to be considered in planning for them. The challenges lay, however, in clarifying which forms of cultural activity might be most relevant in Activity Centre planning, and how these activities might be made more visible and countable. At a relatively superficial level, Council’s provision and support of cultural facilities such as the town halls of Brunswick and Coburg, the Counihan Gallery in Brunswick, and performing arts facilities including the Brunswick Mechanics Institute, demonstrate its valuing of cultural infrastructure and might be viewed as indicators of cultural vitality. In addition to these facilities, it was also recognised that there were forms of cultural activity within the centres that were of equal or greater significance. For example, cultural vitality is clearly indicated through a wide range of festivals, events, performances and exhibitions presented by Council as well as by community, private and not-for-profit groups. Networks of creative businesses and entrepreneurs are also highly significant within the Moreland context and there are other informal – even at times illegal – expressions of cultural vitality within the centres, such as graffiti and urban art. While all of these forms of cultural activity and infrastructure can more or less easily be located and measured, their relationship to residential development is not always straightforward.

In considering the nature and range of significant cultural activity and the relevance of these to the MACHS planning process, a number of central questions arose including:

· What indicators might be used to capture the interrelationship between the types of new development in Activity Centres?

· Does cultural activity encourage or hinder development, and vice versa?

· How might Council measure the potential impact of residential intensification on the conditions for cultural vitality?

While the MACHS steering group generally shared a commitment to an integrated, multidisciplinary approach to strategic planning, it also contained widely divergent interests, professional languages, and ways of registering what goes on in Activity Centres. This divergence at times presented challenges in trying to achieve a shared understanding and approach. In considering the nature of cultural activity that occurs within Activity Centres, cultural development and social policy officers were interested not only in the more easily recognised forms of organised arts and cultural activity such as festivals, events, public art, exhibitions and performances, but also recognised the importance of some of the more informal social and cultural activities that are an important part of community life in and around Activity Centres. They identified, for example, that there were areas within some shopping centres where there were particularly rich forms of social and cultural connection. Some of these had clearly evolved organically over time, and were often the result of initiatives by individual leaders or communities rather than a direct result of any planned process or government intervention. In grappling with the challenge of identifying relevant social and cultural indicators, members of the team explored some at times richly experiential manifestations of culture. For example, the social and cultural character of the open-space Victoria Mall in Coburg is strongly defined by the daily gathering of older men – mostly from Italian, Greek and other European migrant communities. These men gather around a popular and cheap coffee shop in the mall and not only provide invaluable reciprocal social support to each other, but also lend a strong sense of cultural identity to the place. However, as long as such manifestations of culture are treated as essentially anecdotal, they fail to be registered as important characteristics of place in the planning process for Activity Centres.

Questions were raised as to which cultural activities should be counted, and how their importance should be recognised in the MACHS. Within Activity Centre planning
processes, comparisons between one geographical location and another tend to be based on large-scale datasets, such as census data and planning databases held by Council. However, the defining characteristics of specific places, and the social or cultural activities within them, are often highly particular and difficult to capture through quantitative or analytical approaches relying on standardised data. For example, a specific local area might host an annual street festival, while another might provide a platform for illegal but culturally valued urban art on fences and buildings. Both are significant but the nature of these different forms of cultural activity are really too diverse and were not able to be easily incorporated within the MACHS. It seemed that no easily formulated and transferable empirical indicators were available to be applied to the MACHS process.

Ultimately, the majority of potential cultural indicators which were considered as relevant to the Moreland context were found to be incompatible with the technical nature of the other indicators informing the strategy. This failure to meet the challenge of incorporating cultural indicators into the MACHS prompted further reflections on how future Activity Centre planning might better capture and promote the importance of cultural vitality.

What Qualities Should We Look For in Cultural Indicators for Activity Centres?

The challenges encountered within the MACHS project suggest that in order for cultural indicators to gain traction and make a difference within Activity Centre planning, they need to have some specific characteristics. We suggest there are four characteristics that these indicators should possess.

Firstly, in order to capture diverse cultural identity and expression, the indicators should be place-specific, while also lending themselves to comparison across larger geographical areas. In short, the activity needs to be located, in order to show not only how much cultural activity is taking place, but also to demonstrate the nature of the activity and specifically where it is happening. Where relevant, these indicators should also be linked to other dimensions of Activity Centre planning, such as economic development and environmental concerns.

A numerical measure of, for instance, library usage or of employment in creative industries, can be generated from data aggregated across a whole suburb. These measures might potentially then be linked to levels of economic development and social connectedness. However, they still lack more specific data relating the activity to particular place(s) within the suburb. Too many of the city ranking and economic geography approaches of Richard Florida (2005) and his successors use data on the level of the city region or suburb at best. The reality of cultural activity is that it may flourish in specific pockets within a street or suburb, according to particular conditions in that area, such as the co-location of businesses with meeting places used by cultural groups, or the presence of open space or buildings which support cultural activity. In order to capture important dimensions of cultural and social activity, to plan for change or to protect existing conditions, it is often important to be able to measure activity at the level of specific streets or individual buildings. This level of detail allows for meaningful comparison between different parts of the municipality and for benchmarking with neighbourhoods in other municipalities or cities.

Secondly, the indicators should address how culture is anchored to particular places. Some cultural activities are very difficult to correlate with specific spaces. Where, for instance, does the cultural activity of reading a book take place? In the living room or café where it is read? At the bookstore where it was sold? In the studio where it is written? At a writers festival? While all of these spaces share some level of attachment to the activity of reading, not all are relevant to the planning system or to place-making projects. An indicator that shows the number of books purchased per capita may be interesting but does not assist with planning, since it is linked more to population than to place. On the other hand, an indicator that locates bookstores, or writers’ studios, or
venues for festivals can reveal something quite specific about the neighbourhood these are located in, and is therefore more useful for planning purposes.

Thirdly, the indicators need to capture both formal and informal kinds of cultural activity. It is relatively easy to locate businesses or cultural providers that have a fixed address, such as bookstores or council-funded facilities, but what about the creative practitioners who don’t have a registered business, or the activities that aren’t businesses at all? Rather than solely focussing on the activities themselves, we might also look for the settings where activities could occur. While there are limits to the availability of ‘hard’ data that might indicate such informal activities, it may be useful to identify proxy indicators that relate to settings and opportunities that are conducive to these activities.

In looking for settings which are conducive to cultural activity, it is important to consider not only sites of community participation, cultural consumption or presentation, but also sites which support cultural production. If a neighbourhood is full of public art but bereft of artists actually living and working in the community, this becomes a concern for the sustainability of cultural vitality within that neighbourhood. While the presence of an artefact or a venue is relatively easy to identify and locate and might be interpreted as an indicator, reliance on this type of data poses a potential risk of bias, as it fails to also indicate the needs of people involved in cultural production. The locations of cultural production – the workshops and rehearsal areas – also need to be considered within the planning system if we are to support the conditions for sustainable cultural vitality.

Finally, it needs to be recognised that the resources for establishing cultural indicators will often be limited, so the development of cultural indicators will most likely need to be derived from existing datasets rather than developed from scratch. Luckily, the databases kept by rates and planning departments within most councils include rich spatial datasets that lend themselves to building a better understanding of a range of cultural conditions and activities. To give an example of the kind of cultural indicator that might be useful, let us return to the idea of identifying settings that can be used for cultural activities. Some types of buildings are inherently more suitable for use as spaces for creative production due to their size or internal configuration. For instance, small terrace houses would be unsuitable for a dance studio or a sculpture workshop, in contrast to small warehouse spaces which are particularly flexible because of their open plan and ease of access for deliveries. In Moreland, these buildings provide affordable opportunities for artists to creatively adapt and reuse as studios, rehearsal, recording and performance spaces. A map indicating the location of small warehouse buildings might be useful as a proxy indicator for the density of opportunities for cultural production, practice and presentation.

While the connection between the existence of such spaces and levels of artistic activity isn’t absolute (keeping in mind that many of these warehouses might also be converted for other non-cultural uses such as dwellings or office space), their existence and affordability can certainly provide more favourable conditions for sustainable cultural vitality. Take the example of a vacant milk bar. The shop type was not designed for cultural production and exchange, but its prominent location and large windows facing onto the street mean that it can be reused quite successfully as an improvised gallery and workshop for a visual artist. In this example, it is the public–private interface of a building that promotes adaptability for cultural uses (see Dovey and Wood, 2011, for further discussion of this relationship). Through developing an understanding of the distribution of certain types of buildings and of particular types of built-form interfaces, we can better understand the potential for certain sorts of cultural activity to flourish within a neighbourhood.

While neither the presence of empty warehouse spaces or vacant milk bars can be taken as definitive measures of cultural vitality, both provide affordable and adaptable spaces, creating conditions which are favourable to cultural activity. In developing cultural indicators for Activity Centres, the inclusion of built-form settings provides a measure that is compatible with the language and measures used by statutory
planners. Building form and interfaces can easily be linked to concepts within technical statutory planning such as neighbourhood character, or Activity Centre design guidelines. When linked to a statutory planning framework, the indicators could be used to make the planning process more sensitive to existing conditions for cultural activity and supportive of the needs of cultural producers. At the very least, these indicators can be used to help inform a council about the nature and extent of opportunities for certain types of artistic and cultural activities within its neighbourhoods.

**Place, Politics and Pragmatism**

One of the key concerns for sustainable arts practice in Moreland, and for other comparable post-industrial suburbs, is the survival of ‘creative spaces’ in warehouses and former factories. However, over the past decades Brunswick, along with many other inner-city suburbs, has seen the loss of many of these spaces as gentrification has driven the rezoning of these areas from industrial to residential use. Many properties have already been converted into desirable and often expensive warehouse-style accommodation or demolished to provide sites for larger developments.

From an arts and cultural development perspective, the creative adaptation and utilisation of such spaces by artists is a positive trend, and Moreland’s Arts and Culture Strategy acknowledges the importance of maintaining such affordable space for artists. In the example of Brunswick, the conditions under which many of these spaces remain affordable for artists depends largely on whether Council maintains its industrial zoning of the areas in which they are located. Many of these sites offer clear potential for further housing intensification and commercial development, in line with the objectives of Activity Centres but at odds with their existing and potential desirability as creative spaces.

In principle there is a clear case for Council to map and register spaces which are currently used for creative activities, as well as those that could be adapted. Through making creative uses more visible, and ensuring these are registered at the highest level of local government’s planning frameworks, we can hope to promote a critical mass of creative spaces and help to keep artists at work in local areas.

However, marking the presence of cultural activity and creative spaces may not always be the best strategy for preserving these spaces. This is the case especially when some uses by artists and others can be controversial, and may even be in contravention of local laws protecting public safety and neighbourhood amenity. In highlighting these areas and any problematic uses, there is an inherent risk that such uses may be politicised, inadvertently inviting efforts to efforts to ‘clean up’ such areas and in doing so, stymie creative use.

During the development of the MACHS, there were a number of widely publicised and controversial instances of the use of local buildings within Brunswick, including very large, illegal parties associated with disturbance of neighbours, as well as a tragic accident associated with artists’ illegal use of an unsafe building. In the light of such instances, it is clear that issues of safety and amenity need to be balanced with promoting the sustainability of creative and affordable spaces for cultural activity. As a way of working towards increased compliance, and the reduction of accidents and local disturbances, the Arts and Culture Unit at Moreland began in 2012 to work with Council’s Urban Safety and Communications units to improve awareness among artists about the need to observe building and safety regulations. Strategies that address safety and acceptable practices within creative and adaptive reuses of space need to be developed alongside strategies to increase awareness and political commitment to protecting the conditions in which cultural activity can flourish.

Following the completion of the MACHS, Moreland commenced a review of its Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS), which strategically links land use to Council’s economic, environmental, social and cultural objectives. Alongside the MSS, Council is also developing a long-term Community Plan. Through such planning processes,
opportunities exist to further highlight the nature, level and value of creative activity supported through these spaces, and also to develop cultural indicators which can be used to track the numbers and location of such spaces while promoting acceptable levels of safety and amenity for local neighbourhoods.

Conclusion
Clearly the emphasis on economic and demographic indicators presents an overly narrow basis from which to plan for vibrant Activity Centres. It misses much of what already makes these centres the focus of everyday life and activity in the suburbs. We need indicators that can adequately locate and measure cultural activity and which ‘speak’ to the planning system in such a way that these activities are better valued, protected and supported. Through this case study in strategic planning for Activity Centres in inner-suburban Moreland, we have demonstrated the need for cultural indicators and outlined some initial key characteristics. However, the implications of creating such indicators may at times demand more complex consideration within the local context. We need to adopt a pragmatic approach to the role of spatially specific cultural indicators in assisting us to identify, articulate and promote those cultural values which we recognise as vital to liveable, creative cities.

References