01 Introduction

The Port Melbourne waterfront is a highly valued place to live, with good access to a variety of services and facilities. It is a walkable, safe and mostly quiet neighbourhood seen by residents as a village on the doorstep of the city.

For a number of years there has been uncertainty around several key sites in the area and the integration of these sites with the public spaces of the waterfront. The Princes Pier refurbishment is one example that provides a significant opportunity for the community to be more involved in the area’s history and its future growth.

1.1 WHY THIS UDF IS NEEDED

The Port Melbourne Waterfront Urban Design Framework (UDF) provides direction about the future of the waterfront at a time of growth and change. The UDF addresses a number of conflicting requirements in the area and proposes appropriate and positive solutions. These requirements were identified and discussed as part of the community consultation process. Following this, conceptual designs were developed to determine possible solutions to specific challenges and create a shared vision for the area.

This UDF describes the physical form of places that make up the Port Melbourne waterfront, including buildings, important public places and streetscapes. In consultation with the community, a vision for the waterfront and a set of supporting design objectives were agreed. In response, a series of design concepts were developed to create a better understanding of the link between the vision, objectives and the proposed physical forms and their underlying principles.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

In 2010, Council used the Port Melbourne Waterfront Revitalisation Report (2005) and the Waterfront Place Urban Design advice (MGS Architects 2009) as the basis to prepare the current draft UDF to address issues facing the Port Melbourne waterfront area.

The UDF was also informed by a series of community inputs coordinated by AECOM consultants that included information sessions, a visioning workshop, children’s workshop and drop in sessions. This input was captured in the July 2011 Vision Report from which the UDF’s Vision, Principles and Objectives were later drawn.

From December 2011 to March 2012, Council released the draft Port Melbourne Waterfront Urban Design Framework for public consultation. Following this consultation period Council resolved to do further work on the Draft UDF, particularly relating to the Waterfront Place Precinct.

Following a forum of key stakeholders in late 2012, Council engaged specialist consultants to prepare studies on views and vistas, and transport and access, and design and development relating to Waterfront Place. These studies informed the preparation of a new public realm concept for Waterfront Place.

At this time Council also decided to remove the consideration of private land from the UDF and allow it to focus exclusively on the public realm. To provide strategic direction for the private land contained within the study area, Council will facilitate the preparation of design guidelines for each of the privately held sites as part of the implementation of the UDF. Design Guidelines 1-7 Waterfront Place (2013) is the first of these design guidelines documents.
1.3 HOW THIS UDF IS STRUCTURED

The UDF begins with an overview of the rich history of the Port Melbourne waterfront, followed by the vision and principles for the area, developed by the community. The existing conditions and opportunities along the Port Melbourne waterfront are discussed and a number of opportunities are highlighted. This establishes a framework for responding to a range of issues, and forms the basis on which recommendations are made.

Design objectives and preferred outcomes are outlined for five distinct public realm precincts. These outcomes clearly build upon the community-led vision and create opportunities for a series of projects that realise a new future for the waterfront.

The Implementation Strategy outlines the costs, timeframes and possible funding sources.

Note: The Key Site Development Guidelines shown in the Draft UDF (2011) have been removed from the Final UDF document and now form a stand-alone document titled Design Guidelines 1-7 Waterfront Place.

1.4 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Port Melbourne waterfront has a rich history that has helped determine the character and activity of the area today. However, in terms of its built form and urban character, the waterfront has been dramatically transformed in recent decades. This has occurred through the introduction of the substantial Beacon Cove residential development, the construction of large-scale residential buildings/towers along Beach Street and the adaptation of many former industrial buildings to residential and commercial uses.

Other historical characteristics of the area that have been diminished or removed include (for Beacon Cove) the industrial BP site that originally adjoined Princes Pier (at the north end), the railway infrastructure which serviced piers, the seawall (retaining wall) between Princes and Station piers and the 1930s Centenary Bridge. The current landscaping treatment of the public areas, including the promenade along Beach Street and the publicly accessible northern ends of Princes and Station piers, is of relatively recent origin.
When settlers arrived illegally from Van Dieman’s Land to claim fresh pastures for their sheep, they brought about the founding of Melbourne.

Two miles (3 km) from the new settlement was its nearest beach, where a place of deeper water was quickly recognised as the best landing site for new arrivals too impatient to make the difficult – and expensive – journey upriver to the town. This place – where the Port Melbourne Yacht Club stands today – was soon identified by a barrel raised on a pole. It marked a rough foot track blazed through the scrub to the falls at Melbourne, where in a dry season you could cross the Yarra River on stepping stones.

This is why Port Melbourne’s foreshore proved significant to the colony of Victoria from the beginning of settlement. Here we subsequently welcomed generations of immigrants, at first from Britain, but soon from around the world.

In the earliest days the Port Melbourne foreshore was known simply as ‘The Beach’. Then adventurer Captain Wilbraham Frederick Evelyn Liardet, his wife Carolyn and their nine children came ashore at the landing place, and stayed on to become our first settlers.

After Wilbraham and his three eldest sons widened the foot track to a road and built a watchtower, a jetty and the Pier Hotel resort, this area became known as ‘Liardet’s Beach’. From here the family ran a ferry service to William’s Town (now Williamstown), a carriage service to Melbourne and a mail service between the town and the ships in port. They also offered a myriad of entertainments to those who visited the Pier Hotel.
Figure 5 | Historic Map 1860
Officially, Liardet’s Beach was designated ‘Sandridge’— and very sandy it was too, with enormous dunes toward the river and drifts of sand smothering the track that eventually became Bay Street. Even though for over a decade the tree-rimmed beach held only a straggle of huts and tents plus the Marine and Pier hotels, the government had plans. In 1849 it laid out the first six streets and replaced Liardet’s little jetty with the more ambitious Town Pier. Bristling with multi-masted ships, for a time the Town Pier was the centre of maritime activity, and in 1852 welcomed the first direct mail ship from England. But surprises were in store for Sandridge. Just at the time that Victoria won its independence from New South Wales, gold was found in the new colony. It took time for this news to reach the outside world, but by 1853 Sandridge was booming and transformed. Shops, rooming houses and fine brick hotels sprang up near the bay. The forest was gone, leaving only sand littered with possessions that people had left behind in their frenzy to reach the goldfields.

When the frenzy reached the point where thousands were arriving each week to crowd Hobsons Bay with steamers and sailing ships, Australia’s first steam passenger railway was completed from Flinders Street to Sandridge – four rail lines running onto a grand Railway Pier and directly to the ships. It was 1854.

However, pride in this achievement soon turned to the grim realisation that arrivals were mostly bypassing Sandridge. Over the years the Borough continued to hope for fame and wealth in a role as premier port of Victoria. It seemed promising at first because it was so difficult – for larger ships, sometimes even impossible – to sail up the nine miles (14 km) of shallow, winding river to the wharf near Spencer Street. Whereas one could come to Sandridge and travel quickly overland to Melbourne. However, a final blow to local ambition came in 1887, when the Coode Canal was cut through to Melbourne, where the major port then developed. In time ‘The Beach’ became Beach Street, lined with rowdy pubs, shops, ships’ chandlers and sailmakers. Spreading around the original landing place, yet for many years confined between saltwater Sandridge Lagoon and the railway, were cottages for the families of waterside workers, railway men and those employed in major industries that established here to be near shipping and rail transport.

Prosperous in some ways, impoverished in others, ‘the Borough’ and its people have suffered many hard times, particularly in the major depressions of the 1890s and 1930s, and during waterside strikes related to the appalling working conditions forced upon our stevedores. The 1928 strike, which took Port Melbourne into the Great Depression earlier than other areas, was notorious for police firing on desperate workers whose difficult conditions and meagre earnings had been further slashed. When wharfies gathered at Princes Pier in an attempt to protect their jobs, four were shot, one fatally. Allan Whittaker, a quiet WWI volunteer previously wounded at Gallipoli, died after being shot from behind.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries the railway was sold to the State and the piers came under the direction of the new Melbourne Harbor Trust. Deteriorating Railway Pier was renamed and rebuilt as Station Pier by 1930, once the two 1924 beacons were in place. One by land and one offshore, these contained the Leading Lights that steered ships up Port Phillip to our piers. Meanwhile a New Railway Pier had been built in time for troops to depart for the Great War. (After the Prince of Wales disembarked there in 1920, it was renamed Princes Pier.)
Locals continued to enjoy the beaches and swim between the piers. But a growing perception over the 20th century was a perception that Port Melbourne’s industrial foreshore was too unsightly to welcome important visitors. Beautification plans were proposed, although not implemented. To avoid embarrassment, Royal visitors who disembarked here were quickly whisked off by launch to St Kilda, where a more seemly official ceremony of welcome would precede a grand procession down St Kilda Road.

Finally, in time for Victoria’s Centenary in 1934, a fine, three-way, modern bridge was completed beside Station Pier for the Duke of Gloucester’s official visit, for the first time providing direct road access over the railway yards to Princes Pier. This became known as Centenary Bridge and was a source of pride for Port Melbourne and Victoria, but was demolished in 1991 to make way for development of the waterfront area we now know as Beacon Cove. A single pylon is left standing to remind us of what once had been.

In the 1950s, century-old Town Pier was removed. Melburnians continued to flock to Station and Princes piers to visit the ships and throw streamers to increasing numbers of Aussies off to see the world. With post-war immigration also increasing, our piers were places of frenetic activity, and Bay Street swarmed with the crews of visiting ships. From the Town Hall hung the flags of nations whose ships were in port.

Ours was always a busy waterfront, but particularly so when vast crowds came to see special visitors to our piers (today they’d be referred to as blockbusters). There was Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet from America in 1908, when 1,400 U.S. sailors landed at Town Pier to march to Melbourne; the 1924 visit to Princes Pier of the great battlecruisers HMS Hood and HMS Repulse; in 1925 the 42 ships of the U.S. Pacific fleet, with three battlehips and a cruiser on display at Princes Pier for three weeks; the exciting arrival in 1938 of the Empress of Britain, our first sight of the new, gigantic, streamlined liners – all drew visitors in their thousands to our foreshore.

From Liardet’s little ti-tree jetty to Australia’s largest passenger pier – where today the Spirit of Tasmania and towering cruise ships arrive and depart – a century and a half of maritime activity remained a focus for Port Melbourne, together with the railways and the great factories lining the foreshore of this proudly working class area. The piers at Port Melbourne continued to retain significance as the place of arrival for people. From gold diggers to refugees to post-war migrants, all arrived at Port Melbourne – until the 1970s, when emphasis shifted from ships to aircraft. But we still welcome people by the shipload today; although now they come as tourists, not immigrants.

In the 1980s attention focussed on former industrial land, with the realisation it had more than a few desirable features after all. After the community fought off proposals for highrise office blocks, luxury hotels and a gated community on artificial canals, and after an intensive community workshop to determine what should be there instead, Beacon Cove came into being – the newest of the 20th century’s historic housing estates on Fishermans Bend.

Our foreshore today is lined with apartments – some in beautifully recycled factories, some in new high-rise structures. It’s a changing Port Melbourne, but one that takes immense pride in its maritime and industrial heritage.