

# Island City

## A 'New Playground for Melbourne' or 'E-coli Village'?

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural  
Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ)  
Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland  
and the Queensland University of Technology,  
Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5426p4zkd

Citation:

Nichols, David. "Island City : A 'New Playground for Melbourne' or 'E-Coli Village?'". In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 73-74. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2024



**SAHANZ** Society of Architectural  
Historians Australia  
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

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## A 'New Playground for Melbourne' or 'E-coli Village'?

**David Nichols.** The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

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In early 1974, the Melbourne Harbour Trust (MHT) released a short, idealistic report credited to Grahame Shaw and Partners with Alan J. Brown and Steven, outlining a solution to a problem that had been concerning the Trust for five years, if not longer. The MHT hoped to expand its industrial, storage, and shipping areas into an area of Fishermans Bend that had been developed under the aegis of, firstly, the State Savings Bank, and then the Housing Commission of Victoria, and which had been a residential area for the previous fifty years under the name "Garden City."

The MHT expansion would, the Shaw report suggested, render "Garden City untenable ... as a residential area."<sup>1</sup> The Shaw solution to this upheaval was to create four artificial islands ("each island ... a complete community in itself")<sup>2</sup> off the coast of South Melbourne in Port Philip Bay, with the preliminary title of "Island City." The new land would not only rehouse those displaced from Garden City, but also provide new valuable real estate for many more. The four islands would in sum provide 600 acres (2.4 square kilometres) of residential area, 90 acres (0.36 square kilometres) of commercial area, and 176 acres (0.71

square kilometres) of recreation land. The 3,400 residents of Fishermans Bend could be relocated there with an additional 2,000 residents, at a density of ninety people per acre. Melbourne's two oldest rail lines, to Port Melbourne and St Kilda, would be joined in a loop that would thread through each of the four islands, with a station on each. A small component of commercial land would surround each station. An arterial road would also be constructed to cover roughly the same route as the railway line.

Island City was debated in the press for a week<sup>3</sup> then quickly abandoned, with even the MHT – much less state or local government – unwilling to argue in its favour. While the Shaw report was cautiously positive about the development's impact on the Bay environment, and tacitly aspired that Island City be considered as part of a contemporary report on the ecological health of the bay, it was quickly decreed an environmental disaster by its critics. The negative impacts it would have on the amenity of South Melbourne beach was seen as particularly problematic.

In considering the Island City proposal as an historical phenomenon fifty years

1.

Grahame Shaw and Partners, Alan J. Brown and Steven, *Island City* (Grahame Shaw and Partners, 1974), 1.

2.

Graham Shaw and Partners, *Island City*, 3.

3.

For instance: Ian Day, "Garden City to go in port plan," *The Age*, January 30, 1974, 1; and Anon., "Bay islands 'ridiculous,'" *The Age*, January 31, 1974, 2.

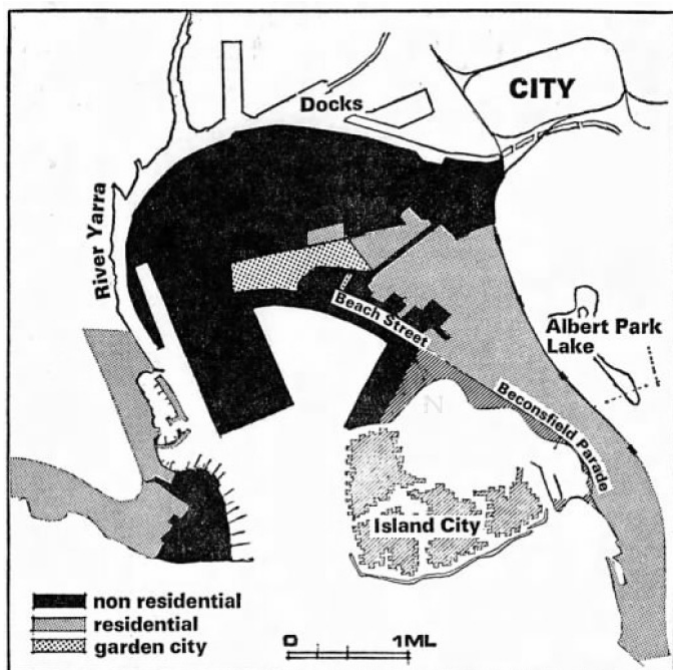


Figure 1:  
Island City proposal, Grahame Shaw and Partners  
(1974). Published in *The Age* newspaper, January  
30, 1974, 3.  
(Used with permission from Hazel Shaw)

later, broader contexts are important, particularly Shaw's body of work. He had been the Chief Architect for the Housing Commission of Victoria a decade earlier and had his name attached, a fact he would seemingly soon regret, to the Shaw-Davey windscreen survey of putatively irredeemable "slum" housing in Melbourne. He also presided over the creation of the new Latrobe Valley town of Churchill. Island City shows his propensity for grand reimaginings, which resonates from his strong adherence to the London County Council's plan for the new town of Hook in the early 1960s, if not before.

Whatever the value of Island City in itself, it is notable that the report acknowledges the taking inspiration from the Toronto Harbour City project initiated by architects Craig, Zeidler and Strong in 1970, and comparison with the Toronto project – the failure of which is regarded even today by commentators as a missed opportunity.

That the proposed Island City was concentrated close to, and had direct impact on, Port Melbourne marks the report's publication as a key incident in the recalibration of that region, most

prominently the Sandridge canal estate of the subsequent decade and the currently extant Beacon Cove development – but also the 2023 demolition of the adjacent Barak Beacon homes.