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Martin Place Pedestrian Precinct:
Life Between Institutions

In her 1986 survey Australian Architecture Since 1960, Jennifer Taylor described Clarke Gazzard Architects’ design for the pedestrianisation of Martin Place (1971–79) as “the most impressive” result of the local government’s “action plans” to “conserve” the historic fabric and “enhance” the social agency of the inner Sydney environment during the 1970s.¹ In Taylor’s view, the revitalisation of the vehicular street as an outdoor civic room, “reminiscent of some of the squares of Europe”, was emblematic of the period’s “clearly discernible” change in attitude to planning and building. Critical of the alienating impact of modernisation, “handsome” and “humane” public “forums” were here emphasised as the democratising and thus necessary intermediary between the city’s elite commercial and civic institutions. Taylor’s account captures the late-twentieth-century reception of Martin Place as a neo-traditional solution.

This paper broadens this received understanding through a synthesised reading of three key proposals integral to the project’s early conception, subsequent development and imagined future. The design for the pedestrianisation of west Martin Place (1968) and the ‘action plan’ for the expansion of the precinct to Macquarie Street (1972) form the core of discussion; the latter is reviewed in the context of the City of Sydney Strategic Plan (1971). Gazzard’s report on the built precinct and recommendations for its conservation (1984) is addressed in the conclusion. With a focus on conceptual continuities and tensions in this sequence, the paper traces the evolving character of the design. The paper suggests that the Martin Place political campaign and the ensuing commission – to design the space in between institutions, monuments, infrastructure and landscape – gave this architect and planner the opportunity to explore, on a grand stage, a progressive vision for an eclectic yet interlaced urban territory.
The pedestrianisation of Martin Place forms a significant episode in Don Gazzard’s 2006 professional autobiography, *Sydneysider: An Optimistic Life in Architecture.* Indeed, our contemporary knowledge of this urban project and the political context for its realisation is largely indebted to Gazzard’s written work, with his autobiography his most recent and most personal account. Here, the early impetus for the Martin Place proposal is described via a comparison with the Seidler CBD landmark, Australia Square (1967) at that time recently completed: “Seidler ... had created a busy people space as part of a commercial development; now was the time, I thought, to create an important public place as the forerunner of a more civilised city.”

As a young engineering student, Gazzard had worked in Seidler’s office and trained in architectural design via Seidler’s method (1950-54). Perhaps with this early association in mind, and in the context of a retrospective account of his career, he takes care to subtly distinguish his approach from Seidler’s resolute modernism. Through an implied distinction between the commercial and the civic, and between the dynamic and the participatory, Gazzard privileged an elevated notion of public space.

The association of Martin Place and its late twentieth-century revitalisation with a pre-modern, humanist urban order, typically emphasised with reference to the first stage of the proposal, has been a recurring theme in the representation of this work. However, obscured in this reading are the alternative priorities that informed the subsequent designs, encompassing several stages and developed over a period of a decade. It is this project’s evolving trajectory that this paper considers.

**Square: Martin Place as civic court**

The proposal for the pedestrianisation of western Martin Place, prepared by George Clarke and Don Gazzard, in association with Professor Denis Winston, the Dean of the Faculty of Country and Town Planning at the University of Sydney, was put to the City of Sydney on September 10, 1968. A three-page letter, together with architectural plans, perspectives and technical reports outlined the project and made a vigorous call for its implementation.

Their solution was modest and direct: to close Martin Place, between George and Pitt Streets, to vehicular traffic and reconfigure the ground plane as a unified and expansive stone platform. Formal, strictly symmetrical arrangements of trees were fundamental to the design. They framed the square’s outer limit, defined pedestrian portals and amplified the central location of the cenotaph. Customised street furniture, lighting and kiosks were located at the periphery and amplified human activity at the architectural threshold.

Anticipating the commissioners’ resistance on pragmatic grounds, the design team drew on expert advice. Rankin & Hill Consulting Engineers considered the project’s traffic implications and endorsed the “imaginative” proposal categorically. Thompson & Wark Quantity Surveyors estimated the total cost to be between $150,000 and $175,000 –
relatively low, Clarke and Gazzard claimed, for “the creation of the sort of civic amenity that this Square would give to the City of Sydney.” Representatives from the Returned Servicemen’s League were consulted and were reportedly “sympathetic” in their response. The pedestrianisation plan, the report ultimately concluded, was “entirely feasible.”

It was, however, not practical but ideological priorities that galvanised Clarke and Gazzard’s presentation. With an emphasis on their sustained commitment to the scheme, they dated the strategy to more than a decade earlier, first in 1954, by George Clarke (with Geoffrey Faithfull) and subsequently in 1966 by Don Gazzard in the context of the RAIA exhibition and the associated monograph *Australian Outrage: The Decay of a Visual Environment*. They argued that the presence of the cenotaph set against the post office rendered lower Martin Place the “ceremonial core of Sydney”. The site thus presented the logical grounds upon which to establish a “great city square, a place for ceremony and dignity”. What Clarke and Gazzard effectively called for was the translation of a vehicular road to an open-air war memorial.

The disciplinary motivations informing the strategy were nuanced. Proposed in one sense was an elevated civic domain; a spatial support that balanced everyday urban activity with inspired ritual. In another sense the design team prioritised imageability. The cenotaph – among the oldest World War I monuments in Sydney – along with the surrounding nineteenth-century institutional fabric, conserved and consolidated by a new urban environment, was here framed as a memorable image of inner Sydney.

A photomontage by Don Gazzard visualised the ’68 scheme. Pedestrians stroll along an expansive, elegant promenade, set against the grand backdrop of the post office. Some pause by the cenotaph, others are more direct in their movement; some walk alone, others are in conversation. The post office loggia appears animated; people cluster close to the colonnades in conversation. A young woman dominates the foreground. She stands with a camera, looking across the perspectival space, ready to photograph her male companion. In a later amendment to the artwork, the male figure is erased. It is now the urban environment that forms the photographic subject.

The artwork accompanied an early *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial, “Square Proposed in Martin Place, Cenotaph to be focal point”. The constellation of significant architectural heritage, war monuments and public amenity presented a vivid image, not only as urban form but, importantly, as saleable political message. A relationship between urban design and local politics was fundamental from the outset. Endorsed by the Civic Reform Association, the conservative party contesting the 1969 elections against the Labor party, the proposal was enlisted in their campaign. Urban design was thus explicitly framed as political policy.

In 1969 Civic Reform won the majority of council seats and within months the trial of a civic square at Martin Place was endorsed. Implementation was arduous, with Clarke and Gazzard intricately involved in the lengthy and negotiated process. By September 1970 the trial closure of Martin Place commenced and the traffic implications were scrutinised.
Within three months of the closure, on 9 December 1970, the state authorities approved the precinct as permanent.

“Martin Place: an historical perspective”

Concurrent with the trial closure, Architecture in Australia published an article by Nicholas Tesdorf “of Clarke and Gazzard Architects” with the title “Martin Place: an historical perspective”. This was a chronological, albeit selective, historical overview of Martin Place, beginning with Barnet’s design for the General Post Office building in the early 1860s through to the 1968 pedestrianisation plan. Tesdorf’s critical agenda was clear from the outset. Here, late nineteenth-century, and typically unrealised, civic proposals were marshalled in support of Clarke Gazzard’s contemporary position. Via reference to past “mistakes” and missed opportunities, he called on the authorities to render the Martin Place trial permanent.

Beginning with land acquisitions for a modest laneway in 1868, to calls for a “noble street, wider than George Street” in 1870, leading to the more ambitious claims for an expansive “Post Office Square” in 1884, and the legislative register of the “Post Office Street” in 1889, Tesdorf explained that the design and construction of the GPO over several stages went hand in hand with a persistent effort to secure a pedestrian court or thoroughfare to the north of the building. Although this narrative sequence was interspersed with economic, legal and legislative obstacles, it was ultimately the Great Fire of 1890 that in Tesdorf’s view denied this urban vision. Within two years of the fire, he lamented, lower Martin Place was opened to motor traffic.

Tesdorf’s narrative concludes with the Clarke Gazzard ‘68 pedestrianisation scheme, and reiterates their rationale. Newly outlined in his description, however, is Clarke Gazzard’s fresh, explicitly ahistorical, conception of the plan; they noted that they “were at that time not aware of the previous history of this part of Martin Place.” A footnote to the article further supports this claim. Here Tesdorf cites “a talk given by Professor J. M. Freeland in July 1970” as the prompt for his enquiry. The implied serendipitous alignment between Clarke and Gazzard’s proposal and its late nineteenth-century counterparts appears polemical. In Tesdorf’s discussion the ‘68 proposal was assigned a cultural foundation and an association with classical civic civility, yet the project remained untainted by nostalgic or historicist associations.

Seven graphic plates illustrate the overview. Striking among these is a perspectival print dated to 1888. Imagined to the north of the GPO is an expansive landscaped thoroughfare. A monumental fountain dominates this setting, the first of two shown along the length of the promenade. Classical in form and with a towering central cannon, they project jets of water high up, well past the GPO parapet. Rows of palm trees and low shrubs bound the space to the north and provide a canopy over the strolling pedestrians. Clouds roll overhead as if to signal pending rain and at a distance a fictive built form culminates the passage. A lush tropical environment, over-scaled ornate fountains and a neoclassical building, as assembled here, evoke an eclectic and theatrical sensibility, and one in contrast to the
elegant and deliberately austere resolution of the precinct by Clarke Gazzard Architects. When viewed relative to the evolution of the scheme over the following decade, however, this image gains poignancy. In one sense it loosely alludes to the eclectic character of the subsequent designs. In another sense it forms a recurrent image in the post 1980s retrospective representation of the project and plans for its future.

System: Martin Place as urban territory

The Clarke and Gazzard ’68 plan was never intended as a lone entity. In an early review published only eight days after the proposal was presented to council, the *Sydney Morning Herald* branded the scheme as the “first step in a complete facelift for Sydney”. The report suggested that the political approval and successful realisation of the project could pave the way for future, larger scale, more substantive interventions in the city. With reference to project “town planners”, a number of possibilities were outlined. These included the eastward expansion of the pedestrian precinct “between Pitt and Castlereagh Street”, with underground car parks below. Anticipating the MLC development, “giant towers” were envisaged opposite the GPO, “with plenty of room between them for more outdoor eating”. Particularly ambitious among the projected plans was a “system” of uninterrupted pedestrian networks, incorporating “plazas”, “walkways” and “arcades” between Australia Square and Martin Place. Compared to the vigour of these imagined futures, the scheme at hand appeared demure. However, the two proposals were not incompatible. The decorous revitalisation of Martin Place as both a “civic square” and war memorial provided an uncontroversial opening towards a more progressive vision for an urban territory. This vision would be soon explored in the context of a strategic plan for the City of Sydney.16

City of Sydney Strategic Plan

On 2 March 1970, Urban Systems Corporation (USC) submitted an application “for appointment to assist the City of Sydney Council in the preparation of a Strategic Master Plan”.17 The cover letter to the application introduced USC as “the successor to the urban planning and architectural firm of Clarke, Gazzard and Partners”. From early in the 1960s Clarke and Gazzard’s practice had been multidisciplinary. With expertise in architecture and town planning, respectively, they advocated a research-based and integrated approach to design thinking and production. Self-described as Australia’s first private urban research and planning practice, within ten years Clarke Gazzard was engaged across a diverse range of projects including significant master planning work in a number of major Australian cities. Anticipating further expansion, both in Australia and abroad, the partnership was incorporated in 1970 and rebranded as Urban Systems.18 At a prosaic level, the new title signalled a readiness for large-scale urban commissions. Conceptually, it subverted traditional disciplinary limits and hierarchies. The representation of the city as an interlaced network of visible and invisible systems blurred the distinction between architecture and the urban terrain. Moreover, it reconceived of the designer as strategist. In this view architects and urbanist were not only charged with resolving what the city looked like, but how it was managed.
The USC bid was made in association with McConnel, Smith & Johnson Architects and Planners, for their “longer records of practical achievement on behalf of government clients”, and W.D. Scott and Company “Management, Operations, Research, and Economic” consultants. Additionally enlisted were an expansive range of experts, both professional and academic, with diverse specialisations; for example, in planning, architecture, traffic engineering, sociology, government studies and geography. The document called for a multivalent approach to rethinking the city. The proposal must have been compelling. Roughly one month after receipt of the bid, The City of Sydney Development Committee recommended the consortium’s appointment, with its contract formalised on 10 August 1970.19

The initiative attracted immediate press coverage; it was reviewed in some detail by The Bulletin.20 With reference to George Clarke’s explanatory statements, the article noted the progressive character of the proposed approach: “They are not working on an old style city plan. There will be no map in different colours to show the areas reserved for different land uses – red for housing, green for parks, yellow for offices.”21 It went on to suggest that fundamental to this innovative planning process was a “work and decision schedule”, a process of decision making “in which ideas and information are to be thrown together into a tentative strategic plan which is then to be subjected to a progressive dosage of public consultation and plan adjustment.” The “Work and Decision Schedule”, an extension of the more conventional term “schedule of works”, formed a key section in the USC application for appointment. Set out as a graphic chart, it succinctly conveyed the consultants’ proposed methodology. Directly communicated was the production sequence: a preliminary evaluation and planning phase, followed by a three staged review and adjustment, leading to the final report. With the client authority and community consultation integrated within the process, envisaged was a fast-paced “action planning,” or “planning in action”: an ongoing and synthesised review and implementation process, unhindered by political and bureaucratic inefficacies. Further to an explanation of work sequence, the schedule outlined the thematic framework for analysis. Three discrete yet interrelated categories – “movement system”, “activities system” and “management system” – presented a consistent structure throughout. The suggestion was that a coherent approach to urban infrastructure, program and administration would not only lead to community-centric city planning, but would give form to a legible and integrated urban field.

On 15 July 1971 the “first copy” of the 200-page City of Sydney Strategic Plan was dispatched to Lord Mayor Emmet McDermott. In an accompanying letter, labelled “personal”, George Clarke described the favourable press the plan was likely to receive.22 With an exuberant tone he wrote that according to the “latest information” the initiative would be featured in numerous news outlets including prominent newspapers in Sydney and interstate, suburban “re-prints”, and public and commercial television news channels. The sheer magnitude of the coverage, Clarke wryly suggested, may be of “interest” to the Minister for Local Government.
Clarke’s provocation alluded to a core motivation behind the Strategic Plan; that is, to bolster the local government’s jurisdiction over the city structure and associated patterns of change and renewal. The claim for localised power was in one sense pragmatic. No doubt, the consolidation of the administrative network would have paved the way for a more efficient planning process. In another sense it promoted a culture of activism, a call to arms for localised citizenry action. The reclamation of legislative authority from the state and associated statutory organisations was seen as a tool for democratising the city.

With the citizens’ right to the city as a core message, the City of Sydney Strategic Plan was structured according to four broad objectives: first “management”, second “accessibility”, third “diversity” and fourth “environment”. The consultant’s earlier conception of the urban terrain in terms of systems remained at play, with the terminology refined to reinforce the document’s populist tenor. “Movement” was thus approached via the objective to improve “access” to the city, and “activities” was reframed as the desire to increase the diversity of community services.23

Clarke and Gazzard’s ’68 proposal for the pedestrianisation of the western section of Martin Place between George and Pitt Streets was incorporated into the City of Sydney Strategic Plan, albeit as a modest component within a vast schema for “accessibility”. Broadly envisaged was a city core, protected from major vehicular roads, and abounding with a modernised and hybrid public transport network: mini-buses, electric tram-transit vehicles, monorails or other elevated electric tracked vehicles, electric trolleys operating in pedestrian malls, and a moving footway and escalator system. Added to this was an expanded system of parking stations and an “integrated city wide pedestrian movement system” that linked transport interchanges “to each part of each Precinct”. The strategy was, however, not limited to circulatory infrastructure. It stated: “There are two essentials to implementing the pedestrian system. One is an explicit plan. The other is a practical method of implementing it.” The report went on to recommend operational tactics.24 Through an amendment to the Floor Space Ration Code already in place, the suggestion was for “a series of bonuses in return for the financing and/or construction by developers of subways, bridges, arcades, malls, and plazas approved by Council as part of the pedestrian system”.25 It was precisely the convergence of elevated aspirations and practical measures that broadly characterised the City of Sydney Strategic Plan.

A schematic cross section for the “Wynyard Pedestrian Network” visualised the proposed character of this circulatory environment.26 Depicted was an integrated vertical and horizontal pedestrian experience across the city. Multi-level passageways and ‘plazas’ above and below the ground plane not only eliminated a contest between pedestrians and cars, but provided visual drama and spatial variety within this matrix. Indicated was a diversity of uses – shops, galleries, childcare – with the implication that their adjacency would offer increased opportunities for social interaction and exchange. The composition eroded formal and typological boundaries and blurred the relationship between private and public ownership. Within this three-dimensional urban design exercise pedestrian pathways were ultimately depicted as the scaffold to a city conceived as a single entity.
Action Plan No. 24

Clarke Gazzard’s proposal for the extension of the pedestrianised Martin Place was among the early initiatives to ‘activate’ the core objectives of the City of Sydney Strategic Plan. Subtitled Action Plan No. 24, one of the 83 nominated Action Priorities, the initiative signalled the council’s positive charge towards implementation.27 An A4 folded brochure provided a succinct and clear description of the scheme.28 On the cover an aerial photograph of Martin Place, oriented east, was placed directly below its drawn double, the latter reworked to depict the full length of Martin Place as a pedestrian precinct.

An expressive pencil rendering, the after image was striking. It showed a cascading sequence of urban environments stepping down with the landfall, each space alive with pedestrian activity. Lush tree canopies dominated the setting, as if the Domain had continued its green march across Macquarie Street and down Martin Place. The field was further populated with built elements, permanent and ephemeral, grand and intimate: monumental fountains, temporary kiosks, an amphitheatre, a shade structure over a restaurant, street furnishings and umbrellas. They gave support to a variety of activities, some specific and others more open-ended. Rather than objects within an open space, these elements collectively shaped the space. The approach was topographical, a synthesis of architecture, landscape and urban planning.

However, in this before and after shot the recently completed first stage of the pedestrianisation was missing. Indeed, the two proposals were seemingly informed by discrete, if not contradictory, impulses. More fully represented in plan and section, the length of Martin Place was drawn across the folded inner leaves. In this drawing, the austere and symmetrical composition of the lower court appears at odds with the hybrid character of the later proposal. However, when considered as an overall assembly, the forecourt to the GPO reads as a coherent entity within a consortium of public spaces along Martin Place, each conceived as a response to its immediate environment. Less concerned with formal consistency, the scheme promoted an eclectic yet interconnected spatial sequence.

The section was informative in this regard. Oriented south, Martin Place was depicted against the urban background with the street level fenestration rendered in detail. The drawing highlighted the individual character of the adjacent built works, with each fronting a particularised public environment. Incorporated in the section was the Martin Place railway station, at that time in progress. Located below ground, between Macquarie and Phillip Streets, the concourse and associated circulation were extended as a below ground arcade stretching west. The forecourts to the proposed MLC tower, in turn, supported an elevated pedestrian experience. In this design, the core principles of the City of Sydney Strategic Plan were tested in context of a specific urban environment. The result was an episodic yet interconnected urban field, a knitting together of architecture and city.
**Void: Martin Place as frame**

In 1984, nearly a decade after the Clarke and Gazzard partnership was dissolved, Gazzard and Partners prepared the *Civic Design Study of Martin Place*. Jointly commissioned by the Heritage and the City councils, the report was part documentary, part review of the existing regulatory framework and part recommendations for new regulatory measures, those concerning heritage preservation in particular. A “dramatic change in scale” brought about, for example, by the replacement of the Rural Bank Building with a “33 storey tower”, was cited as the impetus for the study. Written by Don Gazzard (with the then practice partner Brian McDonald), the report presented a chronological history of Martin Place and described the “townscape” character of the precinct, the latter supported with catalogued items of environmental heritage or “townscape significance”. Effectively coalesced here was research and written work developed over a decade, albeit reproduced in a new logical sequence. The commission also gave Gazzard the opportunity to outline discrepancies between the proposed design and the realised work and, importantly, to highlight major omissions.

Within this retrospective, however, a new critical attitude was evident, and the description of the project via the terms “view” and “vista” were in this regard indicative. The report’s findings were succinct and expressed as two related recommendations. The first was the protection of two “views”, from the upper sections looking down towards the GPO and from the lower sections looking up towards Sydney Hospital, with the circular fountain terminating the latter “vista”. The second recommendation was to conserve the character of each block as a coherent ensemble within the “townscape”. Martin Place as a vast opening in the city was thus valued as an urban frame for memorable scenes. Moreover, the project was charged with heritage value. Only five years after its completion the urban fabric of Martin Place, together with its immediate setting, was depicted as a picturesque urban ensemble worthy of preservation. Significant in this narrative was the aesthetic value of these visual episodes, alone and in their assembly, as a “townscape”. Apparently lost here was the agile urbanism of the early 1970s. Instead it was Clarke and Gazzard’s early impulse to clarify an “imageable” urban field that was privileged.

The term “townscape” was dominant throughout the report. Here Gazzard returned to the theoretical field within which his very first discussion of the Martin Place Project was grounded; that is, his exhibition and the associate book *Australian Outrage: The Decay of a Visual Environment*. The text was modelled on publications by the British architectural critic Ian Nairn, a major protagonist in the British “townscape” editorial campaign. The association has been subject to critical attention. Scholars commenting on the transcultural impact of the Townscape movement have referred to Sydney’s Martin Place as a localised manifestation of this discourse. With this in mind, this paper has worked, in part, to highlight the challenge in unpacking this association. Gazzard’s interpretation of the Townscape movement, when examined in relation to the early and late discussion of the scheme, appears as timid version of its British counterpart. However, when traced relative to the project’s longer trajectory and in the context of Clarke and Gazzard’s interdisciplinary ambitions, the
comparison gains complexity and critical nuance. Interspersed across multiple conceptions of this urban space is a spirited effort to frame a contemporary and hybrid urban terrain as a multivalent forum for public life, in service of the public good.

1 Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960* (Redhill, ACT: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, [1988] 1990), 52. The author notes that this paper is a work in progress and part of ongoing research on the pedestrianisation of Martin Place.
3 See, for example, Don Gazzard, “‘The People’s Promenade’: Martin Place 1860-1985,” in *The Design of Sydney: Three Decades of Change in the City Centre*, ed. G. P. Webber (Sydney: Law Book Co, 1988), 70-94.
5 In his notations to a number of his papers, George Clarke explains the association with Denis Winston as largely symbolic; for example, notations to a photocopy of “Letters to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1968,” read “We invited Denis to be in on it, to give our proposal some status!”: Newspaper clipping of Letter to the Editor SMH 19 December, 1968, George Clarke Papers held at the State Library of NSW (from here cited as GC Papers), Box File 29, Martin Place, 1970-1979, document 11.
6 George Clarke and Don Gazzard letter to City Commissioners, GC Papers, Box File 29, document 13. The letter also cites an association with R. Seifert and Partners. This association is absent in subsequent records of the project.
7 See Hayes’ letter to Gazzard, August, 6, 1968, GC Papers, Box File 29, document 14.
9 A copy of the artworks is held at GC Papers, Box File 29.
10 “Square Proposed in Martin Place: Cenotaph to be Focal Point,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 18, 1968.
11 A committee of Aldermen consisting of Loe Port, Andrew Briger and Nicholas Shehadie oversaw the project.
13 Tesdorf, “Martin Place,” 878.
14 Tesdorf, “Martin Place,” 878. Gazzard’s autobiography similarly notes that Freeland was the prompt for the historical investigation and acknowledges Tesdorf’s role in researching the topic. Gazzard, *Sydneysider*, 63.
16 *City of Sydney Strategic Plan* (Sydney: Council of the City of Sydney, 1971).
19 *City of Sydney Strategic Plan*, 2.
22 Letter from George Clarke to L.M. McDermott, September 15, 1971, GC Papers, Box File 29, document 76.
23 For an overview see *City of Sydney Strategic Plan: The Strategy Summarised* (Sydney: Council of City of Sydney, 1971).
24 *City of Sydney Strategic Plan*, 104.
25 *City of Sydney Strategic Plan*, 104, 116.
26 *City of Sydney Strategic Plan*, 104, 114.
27 The council formally adopted 4 Objectives, 16 Policies and the 83 Action Priorities of the Strategic Plan.

30 For example, the historical trajectory set out in the 1971 article by Nicholas Tesdorpf was presented here as the logical precursor to the 1968 scheme.

31 Gazzard, Australian Outrage.
