

WGT Panel Hearing – Speaking Notes

Alison and James Whitten 15 Sep 2017

(1) Cover slide

My name is James Whitten; I am an urban designer, architect and planner.

My name is Alison Whitten; I am an urban planner and systems engineer.

Thank you for this opportunity to present to the panel. Although we are planners, we are presenting today as concerned residents.

(2) Orientation slide

Our submission to the panel focused on the urban design aspects of the West Gate Tunnel. Drawing on the urban design Vision and Concept Statements from the EES (Environmental Effects Statement) we wanted to understand: to what extent the proposal meets its own criteria for “urban design excellence”.

In our submission, we aimed to extract the stronger criteria informing urban design quality from both the Vision and Concept statements. We found that the following criteria spoke most strongly to the quality of relationships that the project aimed to establish between itself and the surrounding urban environment:

- Responsive and effective urban integration, and
- Positive contribution for local communities

The magenta lines on the map represent our daily commutes, by bike, from Yarraville to the CBD and Parkville. In our presentation, we are going to speak to two moments along those pathways where the proposal intersects:

- The Maribyrnong River crossing, and
- The elevated viaduct and veloway along Footscray Road

Our concerns relate to amenity, environmental and health impacts due to low-levels of urban integration, air pollution, and the potential for road user conflicts from increased traffic flows (in North and West Melbourne and Docklands).

In summary, as per our original submission to the panel, we believe that the West Gate Tunnel proposal does not meet the criteria for “urban design excellence” set out in the Vision and Concept statements. We suspect that this is because the community consultation process is being organized around the process for introducing and assessing market-led proposals.

(3) Definitions of urban design quality

In our submission, we compared the West Gate Tunnel's Vision and Concept statements to other definitions of urban design quality. By way of example, on the top of this slide, we have one definition of urban design quality from the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). On the bottom, we have the opening remarks on urban design in support of the West Gate Tunnel. Because urban design is presented as a central feature of the West Gate Tunnel proposal, we argue that stronger criteria for urban design quality should to be applied in this instance.

The definitions of urban design excellence cited in our report are often applied to large-scale infrastructure projects, including road projects. This is increasingly becoming the case as urban populations worldwide and in Australia expect more from the development of their urban environments.

By comparison, in this project, urban design quality is one of many considerations and, when you examine the EPRs (Environmental Performance Requirements), is subservient if not irrelevant to the project's main objectives; aimed at satisfying the needs of toll-road users.

The vision of urban design quality proposed by PIA is an integrated one. In contrast, the urban design Vision and Concept Statement and EPRs for the West Gate Tunnel leave the door wide open for consequential trade-offs to take place. The urban design features of the West Gate Tunnel therefore present more as big architecture than as quality urban design.

(4) Maribyrnong River Crossing

As mentioned, we have looked at two significant moments in the project. For each, we have considered the urban design strategy, the trade-offs that come from that strategy and the long-term opportunity costs. The first location is where the West Gate Tunnel crosses the Maribyrnong River.

Here, the urban design strategy is to:

- Surface the tunnel on the west side of the river to reduce the project's complexity and cost, again, considering toll-road users and economics as the primary drivers;
- Optimise for port access with a sweeping system of toll-road ramps that impact both sides of the river; and
- Provide some wetland and shared pathway connections to compensate for these impacts.

The trade-offs identified as a result of this design strategy include:

- Compromises to open spaces, river and surrounding development sites due to overshadowing and related impacts, in order to achieve a maximally efficient toll-road design; and

- The impacts from enhanced port access shifted to open-space users, property owners, the river and the wider community.

The long-term opportunity costs include:

- Reduced opportunity to develop an attractive waterfront gateway to the western metropolitan region;
- A reduced impetus to rationalize port uses for brownfield redevelopment, particularly if and when the port uses are no longer in place on this site; and
- An opportunity to extend the waterfront to enhance access for City of Maribyrnong.

We have considered these trade-offs and opportunity costs based on our understanding of the time horizon for the project relative to the potential time horizon for the use of the port.

(5) Footscray Road viaduct and veloway

The second site that we have reviewed is the Footscray Road viaduct and veloway.

Here, the urban design strategy is to:

- Utilize the opportunity of existing industrial areas to bypass assessment of amenity impacts on non-toll-road users;
- Separate traffic flows along Footscray Road to maximise capacity, developing a total of 18 lanes of traffic when considering both levels (a considerable increase over the existing boulevard traffic); and
- Integrate the viaduct with a veloway to provide an alternative to the existing bike path next to the road.

The trade-offs presented by this strategy include:

- Compromise the amenity and safety of pedestrians and cyclists by intensification and vertical separation of traffic flows; and
- Compromised safety and health of cyclists by integration of veloway into viaduct. The veloway is not a positive outcome for dedicated but not professional cyclists such as us, and the existing path will feel extremely isolated given the increase in traffic.

In the long term, the opportunity costs include:

- Potential for redevelopment of brownfield sites to take advantage of city access and create the type of infill and urban density that is required – and desired – to accommodate anticipated population growth;
- Development of Footscray Road into a gateway to the western region (it is currently a great boulevard but this will be lost); and
- Ongoing investment in cycling projects that encourages wider participation of a range of cyclists beyond those who are serious commuters.

In summary, the urban design outcomes seen in these two strategic sites are inconstant with the underlying objectives and principles of current state and local policies regarding the future direction and design of our city. This has been pointed out by the City of Melbourne and the City of Maribyrnong. Other cities globally provide examples of how this type of environment can be positively changed and developed, but in these places, freeways are being taken down in the city centre, not built.

(6) Impact of Market-led Proposal process on consultation process and urban design outcomes

We feel that the skills of the urban design team would be better utilized at a strategic level, to explore alternative solutions to the problems that the West Gate Tunnel purports to address. Urban design has instead been used tactically, to ameliorate difficult to avoid impacts arising from stringent technical, engineering and economic performance criteria.

Zooming out, it appears that the market-led proposal process has neither enabled or promoted quality urban design outcomes. Drivers for the project are focused narrowly on economic outcomes and, possibly, political imperatives.

To illustrate this point, the diagram demonstrates that most if not all of the public consultation process occurred after the West Gate Tunnel received the “green light” from the Victorian Government. Although it is argued that the proposal was strongly informed by the 2008 Eddington Report, this has been questioned by many submissions to the panel and in the media.

(7) Conclusions

In conclusion, our submission to the West Gate Tunnel panel found that:

1. Insufficient information is provided to prove urban design quality; additional analytical diagrams and explanatory texts are required to demonstrate how the project is integrated with surrounding urban form, movement and environmental systems. Basic urban design analysis, at different planning scales, was absent from the EES.
2. In its present form, the West Gate Tunnel does not meet its own criteria for urban design quality because – based on the information provided – it fails to effectively integrate with surrounding urban form, movement and environmental systems.
3. Finally, the West Gate Tunnel proposal is unlikely to make a positive contribution to the urban design of Melbourne because the experience of toll-road users is disproportionately prioritized over that of non-toll-road users.

We would like to thank the panel again for your time. We hope that our work has been useful to your work. We're happy to field any questions if required.