

DWELLING: PLANNING

How to get creative with an arts district

Public input is key to arts precinct success says Australian who planned Melbourne's much talked-about square

TREVOR BODDY

The last empty block in Vancouver's downtown core will soon get built out. Whatever else gets constructed, there most certainly will not -- surprise, surprise -- be a single condo-to-come on the block bounded by Georgia, Cambie, Dunsmuir and Beatty Streets.

Instead, the block that currently serves as a Canada Post parking lot next to the Queen Elizabeth Theatre will be the hub of a planned new "arts precinct," a different kind of public-private partnership that could be worth \$400-million or more. With feasibility study funding in place from city council, planning for this keystone block is being overseen by consultant Ken Dobell, former city manager and senior aide to Premier Campbell.

Unfortunately, the silence from key players about what is being planned for the site is deafening, and planning is proceeding almost entirely out of the public eye.

That's not how they did it in Melbourne.

"You need to bring the public in right from the beginning," suggests Australian Robyn Archer, artistic director of the Melbourne Festival for most of this decade. The urban hub for her widely-praised festival is what may be the most successful arts precinct ever constructed for a city of about Vancouver's size -- Federation Square, near Melbourne's Yarra River.

A highly-regarded international expert on arts festivals and urban cultural programming, Ms. Archer was in Vancouver to give an address to her arts colleagues gathered for Vancouver's recent PuSh Festival.

Ms. Archer watched Federation Square get built from her adjoining Melbourne Festival offices, and arranged the initial performing arts event there -- a street theatre production about urban homelessness -- while the construction hoardings were still up.

This kind of involvement by the public in the planning of the city's arts precinct was essential, says Ms. Archer, "because all of Melbourne felt the space was theirs; people rushed in as soon as the hoardings were down, and it's been the heart of the city ever since."

Federation Square is a major public space ringed by art and history museums, and linked to a nearby performing arts complex. This is almost the same formula as being discussed

for Vancouver, where all-new premises for the Vancouver Art Gallery might join a possible National Museum of Aboriginal Art and theatre on a small "Olympic Square," located adjacent to our current cultural node of Library Square, CBC and Queen Elizabeth Theatre and Playhouse. The block will be used for live cultural events during the Winter Olympics, with permanent construction of museums and theatres to follow.

In a tour of the downtown block earmarked for Vancouver's arts precinct, Ms. Archer gets right to the point, Aussie-style: "It's a bit of an unloved place, isn't it?" When told an office tower might be part of the arts precinct block, she snorted "Shows you what they think of the arts!" Ms. Archer spoke of the river views and warm sunset light on Federation Square's sandstone pavers, then asked "Why isn't the arts precinct on your marvelous harbour?"

The short answer to her excellent question is that a landmark arts facility was earmarked and even partially funded for a waterside location -- the 1,800 seat Coal Harbour Theatre -- but it got bumped by convention centre expansion planners (led by Ken Dobell, then in the premier's office) who were convinced that an even larger waterfront site was needed for windowless meeting halls.

The Coal Harbour money will likely drift onto the new arts block, but it seems more and more likely that most of the block will be consumed by an all-new Vancouver Art Gallery, leaving little space for a Federation Square-like large plaza, or even its wide mixture of arts and museum uses. VAG is pushing for an architectural competition of some sort.

Cost figures from Toronto, Seattle and other cities that have gone the high-profile "starchitect" route is that a building the size of the expanded VAG could cost up to a quarter billion dollars. Unlike Vancouver, to date, Melbourne did not chase after a celebrity designer like Frank Gehry or Daniel Libeskind. Instead, the striking buildings around Federation Square were produced by Australian architects, and have since garnered global acclaim, despite some initial unease. "The architecture debate goes away as soon as the people occupy the spaces," says Ms. Archer. She says Vancouverites should not place undue importance on architectural "eye factor."

Completing our tour, we passed by Vancouver's main post office on Georgia Street, a largely-empty fine modernist building that will soon be sold off by the Harper government. "This would be ideal for your art gallery and aboriginal museum," says Ms. Archer, adding that this would free up space on the arts precinct block for a true downtown square, plus the small- to medium-sized theatres Vancouver now lacks.

Maybe we should start playing by Aussie rules.

tboddy@globeandmail.com