



A Place for Leisure, Culture and Entertainment

Cairns Esplanade

Text by Stephen White
Photography by Roberk Gesink

LEFT Uninterrupted views to Trinity Inlet across Lagoon.

RIGHT Birds-eye view along Esplanade and Promenade Precincts.



Project Background

Tract, as Principal Consultant and in collaboration with Cox Rayner, won a national design competition in 1998 for the Cairns Esplanade Redevelopment. The third and final stage of Tract's work, the Esplanade North Parklands, incorporating a Skate Park designed by Convic was opened to the public in December 2006. This was achieved with difficult political and funding issues as a backdrop over a lengthy eight-year period. Despite these challenges, the design layout and intent remained substantially unchanged from the original competition entry to its completion – evidence of a strong and clear idea, well founded in environmental, cultural, social and historical principles.

The Brief

City Council's brief for the project came after extensive public consultation, before the competition even began. The brief was that the Cairns Esplanade should:

- Promote a mix of interesting, vibrant and exciting leisure activities that will attract both residents and visitors;
- Reflect the culture of the region;
- Reinforce the Cairns Central Business District (CDB) as the principal community, business, entertainment and cultural centre for Tropical North Queensland;
- Become a marketing icon for Cairns and the region;
- Be attractive, exhibit a high level of amenity and enrich the character of the CBD and foreshore; and
- Exhibit sustainable development.

The project has delivered on the brief by protecting and enhancing the environmental aspects of the foreshore and mud flats and attracting unprecedented numbers of residents and visitors back into the CBD and has been the catalyst for significant private investment in the further development of Cairns, particularly the CBD.

The Site

The existing park adjacent to the CBD was approximately 600 metres long and very narrow, only 40 metres in some places. It is traditionally a place used by residents in the early morning (for exercise) and at dusk (for recreation). It was used by visitors at all times of the day. At low tide, the mud flats extend 800 metres out to sea.

Local and migratory wading birds gather in three distinct nodes along the Esplanade, opposite to the ends of the north/ south streets, where storm water sediment has raised the level of the mud. These raised areas give the birds an extra 40 minutes of feeding time per day ahead of the ebbing and flowing tide. These sites are very popular with bird watchers and are internationally recognised.

The area of mud flats to the east, between the Esplanade and the Pier Marketplace, was known to the locals as the "dead corner." This area collected debris and litter, since it was not flushed well by the tides and was in a much degraded state.

The Concept

This project was as much about revitalising the CBD as it was about designing a piece of public open space. In the mid 1990's, a new regional shopping centre, Cairns Central, was built on the southern edge of the CBD (over the railway station). This decimated the vitality of the traditional shopping strip, Shields Street, as the best traders were drawn to the new complex. Council tried to revitalise Shields Street through various streetscape projects with some success but what was really needed was a more holistic view of the CBD.

The design team began by looking at the entire CBD and identifying all the existing important nodes, the new nodes that needed developing and the linkages required between them all. This included looking outside the site at Cairns City Port, a project we were already master planning for the Cairns Port Authority.

The concept also recognised that The Esplanade is Cairns' most active "place for people". While tourism is a vital attraction, the Esplanade had long been an important focus of resident recreation, yet in parts, had become crowded and overused.



ABOVE Bird's-eye view to Lagoon Precinct.
RIGHT Lagoon and Shield's Street Plaza extension and Boulevard.





ABOVE Structuring and thematic concept diagram.

To combat these localised issues and address the state and current usage of the Esplanade, increased and usable recreational space became the focus of the existing city and water edge.

The design aimed to substantially widen the recreational space to the Shields Street end where it was most needed, while ensuring the preservation and protection of the habitat's natural qualities to the north.

To assist in the complexity of the redevelopment, the design team identified a Recreational Hierarchy and Structure Plan to achieve key objectives in integrating the Esplanade with the whole city centre. Consistent with objectives of both the Council and Cairns Port Authority, the structure outlined six key structural initiatives based on elements of direct linkages, equidistant placement, axial relationships and transformations, while concurrently focusing on integrating the character and amenity of the whole Cairns waterfront. These initiatives further instigated the driving basis for generating a series of different thematic layers along the Esplanade, ranging from natural to urban and active to passive spaces. These would provide for a legible pattern of change along the full city centre foreshore. The image below illustrates this hierarchy and structuring.

A new six-metre-wide boardwalk was constructed along the majority of the foreshore, supported by the existing seawall on one edge and piles on the other. In this way, the impact on the mudflats and the ecology was minimised. The boardwalk was also widened at key activ-

ity nodes to provide an expansive recreational area for bird watching, for staged and ad hoc events, for rest and contemplation and for family outings with children's facilities, thereby optimising its recreational diversity and opportunity.

The eventual concept was simple - link the CBD to the water (Trinity Inlet) via major, legible pedestrian boulevards and promenades:

- The Boulevard - running south to north linking Cairns Central Shopping Centre with The Inlet via the swimming lagoon.
- The Promenade - running west to east linking five new nodes - the Environmental Interpretive Centre (stories of the mud flats and the world heritage reef and rainforest), the Heritage Interpretive Centre (history and heritage of Cairns), the Pacific Interpretive Centre (indigenous and pacific cultures that have shaped Cairns), the swimming lagoon and the performance space in Fogarty Park.
- The Reef Fleet Link - a diagonal linkage from the Shields Street Plaza near the lagoon to the Reef Fleet Plaza in City Port.

The three interpretive centres are located in close proximity to the three bird feeding nodes and the boardwalk at these nodes has been widened to allow comfortable viewing without impeding pedestrian thoroughfare.

The swimming lagoon's elongated shape and design expression of urban and natural edges act as a visual water linkage between the CBD and Trinity Inlet. It brings water into the CBD. When viewed from the Shields Street Plaza, the lagoon's elevation above the mud flats allows

an uninterrupted water-to-water view even with the tide fully out.

Significance of the Project

Much of the success of the redevelopment has hinged on the success of clearly capturing and enunciating cultural, environmental and historical features of Cairns and the Far North Queensland region, expressed through its design elements and features, including the Interpretive Centres, artwork and signage.

The use of the boardwalk and its wider nodes has protected the bird feeding sites with minimal impact and provides a comfortable space for bird watchers to study the avifauna. The interpretive signage incorporated in the boardwalk balustrade educates others of the species of wading birds using the sites.

The lagoon has provided a safe swimming environment, away from marine stingers, for both residents and visitors right in the heart of the CBD. Together with the boardwalk, Interpretive Centres and additional park land achieved through four hectares of reclamation, the design satisfies all aspects of Council's original objectives.

In order to meet the requirements of the brief, some reclamation was required to relieve the pressure on the existing Esplanade Park. The site chosen for the reclamation was the "dead corner" - the area with the greatest degradation. The semi-circular shape was derived to give this area the greatest cleaning by the tides.





ABOVE Bird's-eye view across Shields Street Plaza to lagoon and Trinity Inlet.

RIGHT Aerial View of the Lagoon Precinct.

The protection of the bird feeding sites has been enhanced via a height difference between the boardwalk and the mud flats and a full-height balustrade. This gives better visual access to the wading birds without any filling of the mudflats and giving significant security to the birds.

The success of the project didn't come without the usual and its own unique problems and complexities. However, the design team was able to overcome these obstacles through adaptive measures and responsive outcomes.

Apart from challenges faced by Tract Consultants as Principal Consultant for a project of city scale and regional significance, one of the major problems faced over the duration of the project was the constantly changing political and Council landscape. The big challenge was to maintain the original design intent through to project completion. The original competition entry responded to some early rigorous public consultation. This combined with thorough research resulted in a design that would ultimately be loved and looked after by the residents and visitors, and consequently designed to meet their needs and key values. As each Council Officer and Project Manager was replaced and became involved over the eight-year period, there was persistent pressure on the design team as these individuals attempted to "put their stamp" on the project.

As much of the development occurred over reclaimed land and predominantly over the existing tidal mud flat environment, there were numerous technical challenges in designing structures, including the lagoon, pier boardwalks, seawalls and pavements, over land which would constantly be undergoing settlement over time.

Cairns Esplanade North

Following this multi-award winning work at Cairns Esplanade and Lagoon, Tract Consultants was again engaged by Cairns City Council for the master planning, design guidelines, landscape design and documentation of a further 1.5 kilometres of existing parkland along the Esplanade.

The key design features of this parkland included a skate plaza by Convic Design, along with beach volleyball courts, improved promenade and paths, barbecue facilities, refurbished playground, decks and jetties.

The overall success of the entire Esplanade Redevelopment has since been a catalyst for significant private investment and has since provided the much needed revitalisation and liveability of the CBD and the greater Cairns region. 