

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into infrastructure projects

Melbourne — 20 April 2016

Members

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Mr Bernie Finn

Staff

Secretary: Dr Christopher Gribbin

Witnesses

Ms Jill Garner, Victorian Government Architect, and

Ms Sophie Patitsas, Principal Adviser, Urban Design and Architecture, Office of the Victorian Government Architect.

The CHAIR — I will reopen our Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. I welcome you, Ms Garner, as our next witness. I will just explain that the committee is hearing advice with regard to our infrastructure inquiry, and today's evidence is being recorded. I also indicate that all evidence given today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say in here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Ms Garner, I ask you to state your name and the capacity in which you are here today. Then I ask you to move into any introductory comments that you might like to make.

Ms GARNER — My name is Jill Garner. I am the Victorian government architect, and I lead the Office of the Victorian Government Architect.

The CHAIR — Over to you.

Visual presentation.

Ms GARNER — I am going to present considerations on the level crossing projects from the perspective of our office, which is obviously the government architect's office. I thought, by way of background, it would be useful to the group who are here to highlight the role and the remit of our office.

We have an independent, whole-of-government role in offering advice and advocacy in projects that affect Victoria's built environment. We see it as critical that government articulate the visions and values that underpin its engagement in civic investment. We promote the value, in the broadest sense of the word, of good design, and we encourage government to commit to having regard for achieving the best possible design outcome.

We were introduced to the challenges associated with the level crossing removal project by VicRoads, and through our independent design review processes, between 2012 and 2014 we interrogated concepts for five of the early road and rail separation projects. Out of this involvement several key issues became apparent to us. Firstly, that a level crossing removal project needed to be viewed as more than a civil engineering project, which tends to have the sole focus of separating road and rail. Secondly, that the expertise and influence of urban design professionals — including architects, landscape architects and urban designers — was critical from the early stages in developing a design approach. And that, located as they are within existing and functioning suburbs and not in greenfield environments, a level crossing project should be viewed as a catalyst for urban renewal. We took the opportunity to highlight the need to understand the responsibilities associated with these projects, and we championed a multidisciplinary, design-led approach to maximise the contribution to place and to community.

This map showing the extent of the level crossing removal project across metropolitan Melbourne highlighted to us that this is one of those moments in the life of a city where decisions associated with what we build, where we build it and on what principles it is based, and also to what quality we aspire, has very real long-term consequences, and whether these consequences are good or bad depends on a multitude of factors, one of which is design. It is not the role of the government architect's office to suggest the right answer to any problem or any design problem, but we do do our best to steer government towards built outcomes that leave a positive long-term legacy for the community of Victoria.

We concentrated on how these numerous level crossing projects might be steered towards better design outcomes; and with this goal in mind, we have been working to embed real design thinking in the project process. Fundamentally, a true design thinking process must be undertaken on every single site, and the first critical step in this process is contextual analysis. Contextual analysis must be undertaken with regard to three lenses: that of the built environment, that of the landscape that it impacts, and then the people or community that it impacts. All of these three issues are overlaid on the fundamental technical issues associated with a road/rail project.

The Office of the Victorian Government Architect expects a project design team to present a very deep understanding of the built environment to which the intervention is being inserted. Design thinking associated with the built environment presents an interrogation of place. It will understand the architecture, the local history and the culture of that place. There will be interrogation of built form, of scale and materiality, and there will be consideration of what might be an appropriate response to that place.

With respect to landscape, we expect a site response to understand its landscape in terms of, once again, interrogation of place through the landscape lens. There will be interrogation of site connections, of the challenges or the opportunities in topography, and there will be an understanding of local systems, whether these are ecology, water, geotechnical issues, where the weather comes from.

With regard to people, we expect a project team to present an understanding of the community into which an intervention is being made. Considerations in this sphere include, again, the interrogation of place through the community lens; an understanding of local connections, of paths and networks; an appropriate understanding of particular issues, such as community safety, universal design, accessibility and legibility; and an understanding of contribution — the design and construction quality that is needed to build legacy. Now there are many historic examples across Melbourne of both rail down and rail up, so I have a few slides here that provide a backdrop to several observations that I would like to make on behalf of the government architect's office in our role of steward of Victoria's built environment.

Here is a historic example of rail down — this is an image of Camberwell — and in design terms there is something interesting about the way it has been inserted into its topography, but the swathe that it cuts through the suburb is very clear and it is very divisive. The brickwork walls here have a scale, a texture and a quality and an associated cost, I might add, that we no longer see in grade separation projects. There is something elementary about what we call the jewellery of the system — the cables, the steel work, the protective screens and the fences.

This other historic rail down example is from Geelong. There are examples of this right across Melbourne. Another one that comes to mind is the rail line through Ripponlea. In design terms there is something quite attractive about the materiality, the naturalness of this cutting and the way that nature has been allowed to soften it as well. Now what is important is the current regulatory requirement does not allow this to happen. The rules for vegetation and planting, for protective fences and for throw screens preclude this type of response.

Here we have an example of a contemporary rail down project, and we propose this as quite a good example of the type. This is at the station, and we can see here there is a concourse that has quite successfully and generously connected pedestrian and bike networks across the rail cutting. This is the same project. This demonstrates what we believe is a reasonably well integrated design solution. You can see here an integration of structure and architecture which is quite simple and clear, and the place is quite easily understood. Now as an observation, this outcome is complicated by the requirement to provide ramps to each platform, and this requirement has had a significant impact on many of the recently built stations and has resulted in a lot more built infrastructure and I think associated cost than an alternative solution may bring to the proposition.

Out of sight of the station environments regulatory requirements do not always deliver the best outcome for the place in the rail down project type. Here the combination of standard impact barriers, screens and the no-planting rule that exists adjacent to a cutting results in an ordinary and really quite unattractive barrier for the occupants of this particular street. This example of a contemporary rail down model demonstrates an instance where the design problems are solved through — I should say the design problems have not been solved through a multidisciplinary, integrated design approach. So here we have the problem of the structure of the trench, which is solved by the tie beams that you see here that happen at ground level. These tie beams have proved to be an extremely exciting aerial bridge to the local risk-taking teenagers. Here are the tie beams from below, and this image also gives you a bit of an idea of the material, which is a shotcrete that is now used to finish all the interior of the cutting walls.

The problem of those risk-taking teenagers has been solved by a chain wire barrier put around this cutting, and then the problem of being able to climb that chain wire barrier has been solved by decorative fans of razor wire. So this project serves to demonstrate the need to seek out genuine exemplary integrated design solutions that make a very real contribution to their context.

Then I have got a few slides here that provide some context to our observations regarding the option of rail up. Here is one of Melbourne's many historic examples. This is Carlisle Street in St Kilda. In design terms, once again there is something quite honest and simple about the design of this overpass. It is designed to celebrate the industrial nature of the rail network, and, much as I suggested with the rail down model, contemporary rail up brings with it a different set of rules now that are related to the rail jewellery. So there is a different set of rules associated with noise walls, throw screens and overhead lines than what you see in this historic condition.

The contemporary rail up model is common practice internationally, and it can be seen in many instances throughout Holland, Austria, Germany and Scandinavia. This particular example I have got here is from The Hague in the Netherlands, and it is a good example of what I mean when I discuss integrated design. What can be seen in Randstad here is a proposition that combines structure, architecture, urban design and landscape into a sculptural intervention in an existing city. It carries the trains, but it also provides a new experience within a new place in the city that did not exist before, and it also provides connections and continuity on the ground that did not exist before.

The rail up design for the Caulfield to Dandenong project is modelled on these contemporary international examples. We at the government architect's office believe that this design proposal shows a pretty serious commitment to design quality, and it does reflect a cross-disciplinary design response that integrates architecture, structure, landscape and urban design. So it combines an idea about celebrating contemporary public transport infrastructure with enhancement of the public realm. Over and above the intent of that, our office has put on the table that we believe that the success of this project is contingent on a full commitment to the quality, amenity and custodianship of this project in its entirety. To this end our office has suggested that the office of the government architect has an ongoing and independent peer review role in the ongoing stages of this project, as the design is refined and constructed to.

By way of summary, I have included a diagram that outlines the office of the government architect's fundamental message that better design emerges out of an intersection of three critical disciplines. They are design principles, design skills and design review. And in the time that we have been involved with the level crossing program, we are really pleased to have seen a shift in the approach to the projects. Design quality is now considered critical, and it has been embedded in a set of urban design principles against which every project can now be judged. We are seeing multidisciplinary design teams. They are now understood to be critical, and, over and above the engineering design skills, project teams include architects, landscape architects and urban designers.

The other thing that has been introduced is that there is now a design interrogation through peer review, which is being embedded in stages through the project's life cycle from project inception through to project delivery. And it is these three combined commitments that we propose do result in better design outcomes. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ms Garner, we will just move into some questions now, and I might kick off with one. When were you first consulted on the sky rail proposal, and what advice did you provide at that point?

Ms GARNER — We were involved as part of an urban design panel that reviewed the project as it was being framed, if you like, so pre-submission of the final proposals.

The CHAIR — What sort of time? Do you know when that would have been, like dates?

Ms GARNER — I could probably call on Sophie. I have got Sophie in the audience. Maybe Sophie might like to come and sit here with me.

The CHAIR — Yes, absolutely. You are welcome to, indeed.

Ms GARNER — She might be able to contribute to some of the discussion, because we are the two parts of the government architect's office that have been involved in it. I am just trying to put a date on it.

The CHAIR — Would you like to just state your name and title for the record.

Ms PATITSAS — My name is Sophie Patitsas. I am a principal adviser on urban design and architecture with the office of the government architect.

The CHAIR — Fabulous, indeed. So we were just talking about time frames of when you were first asked about the sky rail proposal.

Ms PATITSAS — We were part of the tender process. When the government decided to go out to the market for this particular project, we participated in the interactive workshop process during the procurement, so during the competitive phase last year.

Ms GARNER — Actually, I could also suggest our involvement probably predates that slightly, because these urban design principles that we talk about were embedded in the project brief. So some of our language, if you like, and the idea of having some design principles against which a submission could be judged were embedded into the project brief.

The CHAIR — Okay, I am just conscious that obviously there would have been a variety of interactions with the Level Crossing Removal Authority and others. I am just wondering if you might be able to provide to the committee a time line of the interactions between your office and those authorities.

Ms PATITSAS — With the Level Crossing Removal Authority?

The CHAIR — Yes, or anybody with regard to level crossing removals.

Ms PATITSAS — The exact date I could not point to.

The CHAIR — Happy for you to take it on notice and then provide it to the committee.

Ms PATITSAS — That would be great for the exact time frame. But I would say from mid last year, which I think is when the project went out to market.

Ms GARNER — So you are talking particularly about the sky — —

The CHAIR — The sky rail proposal, yes. Indeed, absolutely.

Ms PATITSAS — We can take that on notice and give you exact dates.

The CHAIR — That would be great. And would you be able to also provide to the committee any advice that you provided to the Level Crossing Removal Authority with regard to the sky rail proposal?

Ms PATITSAS — The advice that we have provided is subject to probity, because we participated in the competitive procurement process. So I think we would need to take on advice what we could release publicly in terms of the advice.

Ms GARNER — I guess probably some of the words that I put down against — I mean, clearly that is the exact advice — the commentary, against that image that I had up, formed the basis of the advice that we gave.

Ms PATITSAS — So whatever we have been able to say publicly we have said, which has basically been framed on our website when we spoke a little bit about that particular proposal in relation to a document that we had also released a few years ago, which was the *Lessons Learned* document relating to level crossings.

The CHAIR — Indeed, which I will reference in just a moment. Any information that you can provide to the committee with regard to that advice, we would be very keen to receive.

Ms PATITSAS — Yes, whatever we can publicly do, we will definitely.

The CHAIR — That would be excellent. I did want to reference the *Lessons Learned* level crossing removals document from 2014 and quote from a particular paragraph, where it states:

An elevated road or rail structure will have a significant physical presence and impact on a place and is typically not a preferred solution.

That was stated in that advice. Then if I were to move forward to February 2016, in the *Level Crossing Removal Project — Caulfield to Dandenong* document, which was also produced by your office, it is stated in part:

We are pleased to have seen a clear shift in the approach to these projects —

in one part, and the second-last paragraph reads:

On this basis the OVGA supports the proposed solution for the Caulfield to Dandenong level crossing removal.

From my reading of that, that represents a giant leap, a fair shift, in terms of the view of your office. I am just wondering if you might be able to explain how that shift occurred.

Ms GARNER — Yes, I can, quite simply I think. What we saw in 2012 to 2014 were concept proposals for five particular projects — and they were not the Caulfield to Dandenong line; they were five other projects. What was presented to our independent design review panel were propositions for five particular sites, and our panel critiqued those particular submissions and they were presented. This is where our *Lessons Learned* document pulled out those key issues that I commented on — about the design skill, the integration of architects, landscape architects and urban designers — because that was what was lacking from those projects. They were presented to us effectively by engineers, and our panel of architects, landscape architects and urban designers were very critical of the approach and felt that the approach was lacking design thinking and design vision.

Really the *Lessons Learned* commentary, that is all we had seen at that time — we had seen those five particular propositions. So the *Lessons Learned* document was as much as anything put out to flag to VicRoads, who presented those level crossings to us, ‘This is not good enough’. In those level crossings that were presented there were a couple of options for going rail up, and I guess our panel’s assessment of those particular conditions was that there was not enough contextual analysis to support the proposition in those locations.

The message that came out of it really was we attempted to be very clear to VicRoads and those that were actually delivering the projects that they did not have the right players around the table. I think that is why I have kind of gone on today — or in our press release, even — and while it does look like a shift, I think what I really am quite gratified by is there has been a shift in the model for delivery, and instead of our team sitting around the table with civil engineers and geotechnical engineers, we are actually sitting around the table with architects, urban designers and landscape architects.

Ms PATITSAS — As well as engineers.

Ms GARNER — As well as the engineers, and we are watching them talk to each other and we are watching them actually come out with what we call an integrated and multidisciplinary design solution, and that is what was lacking in the 2012–14 set of projects we looked at.

The CHAIR — So the 2014 document and the 2016 document, which we have just been referring to, they were both developed by the Victorian Design Review Panel, is that correct?

Ms PATITSAS — This document comes out of learnings from design reviews undertaken by the Victorian Design Review Panel, through our office.

Ms GARNER — Of which I am the chair.

Ms PATITSAS — And then the news release is something that our office put together. Jill and I actually framed that piece of advice based on our experience with the Caulfield to Dandenong project, because we felt that having gone through that process we needed to clarify our position. It was quite clear: there was a position paper out there that was based on some old design reviews that were undertaken in a time frame and things had since moved on actually. So we just felt that we needed to update our position and put that out to the public because we thought obviously people might be confused.

The CHAIR — What I am trying to gather is who would you say is the author of the *Lessons Learned* document, and who would you say is the author of the *Level Crossing Removal Project — Caulfield to Dandenong* document? Who would you say were the authors of those two separate documents?

Ms PATITSAS — The office.

Ms GARNER — Yes, they come from the office, and I suppose in my role as the government architect they are both under my authorship. What they represent is a point in time where the level crossing projects were being attended to by VicRoads and there were some flags there. We were involved in their process, we started to get involved in their process, and we highlighted some concerns that we had. The process has changed, we think, and we do think we have had a bit to do with the way the process has been changed. I guess the later document — once again, I can claim authorship of that document — represents a shift in what we are seeing as the way the projects are being designed, if you like.

The CHAIR — Mr Shane Murray is a member of the Victorian Design Review Panel; is that correct?

Ms PATITSAS — Yes.

Ms GARNER — Yes.

The CHAIR — Did he have any involvement in the later document, the 2016 document, with regard with the Caulfield to Dandenong line?

Ms PATITSAS — No.

Ms GARNER — No.

The CHAIR — I am just trying to get my head around the significant shift, and I certainly take on board the answers that you have already provided. At that point I might hand over to Ms Hartland for some further questions, if she has any.

Ms HARTLAND — Sure, I have only one question, and I can understand how your opinion shifted. You were saying about the size of new stations, around the ramps. I am wondering whether you could just very quickly talk about, or take it on notice, how you think that issue could be resolved. I live near the West Footscray station, and it has the biggest ramp, and the Williams Landing station, which people train on because it is so big.

Ms GARNER — I do feel quite strongly about this. The idea of every station requiring a ramp has thrown a bit of a difficult cat among the pigeons really as far as the new stations go, because to actually drop 9 metres sometimes with a universally designed access way is terribly difficult. I guess my commentary really is about the implications of that in a cutting. It means the cutting has got to be wider because you have to maintain clearances on platforms, and they are switchback ramps — they are very, very long — which in terms of universal design is not always an optimal outcome. We have people who are ambulant who struggle to get down really long ramps, so it is not an ideal solution. It was at the time introduced as a categorical requirement, and we believe there are other options. There were several other propositions put on the table; for instance, two lifts to each platform, which we believe would potentially have solved the kind of problem — —

Ms HARTLAND — Footscray and Laverton are a perfect example of where that does not work, because the lifts break down all the time.

Ms GARNER — Okay, well, I think that was the concern — that if a lift breaks down, there has got to be an option, so if there is only one lift per platform, the only option is a ramp. Several propositions were put in front of us suggesting two lifts per platform, which, interestingly, from a cost point of view, when you actually look at the implications of the scale of cutting or the type of infrastructure that gets built overhead — —

Ms HARTLAND — I will not get into it today, but I really actually would be quite interested in having a conversation about my experience in the west where we have only had lifts. It has been an absolute disaster, so I would love to have a chat with you separately about that.

Ms GARNER — Okay

Ms PATITSAS — It is a conundrum.

The CHAIR — I just had one final question, just a quick one, I believe Mr David Davis asked a question of the Special Minister of State with regard to your office's view on sky rail, in the Legislative Council. I am wondering, after that question was asked, was there any contact made by the minister's office to your office with regard to your view on sky rail? I am happy for you to take a question on notice if you would like.

Ms PATITSAS — Yes, I think so — I do not know that we have been directly approached for our view. I do not know.

Ms GARNER — No, I do not know either, actually.

The CHAIR — Are you happy to take that on notice?

Ms GARNER — Yes, happy to take that on notice.

The CHAIR — And in view of getting Ms Hartland to her radio interview, I thank you very much for your attendance here today. There may be some further questions we might provide you on notice. Thank you for your attendance, and I close our hearing.

Committee adjourned.