The urban design theorist and historian Alexander D’Hooghe has argued that Josep Luis Sert’s idea of the core is a key to understanding the “abandoned foundations of the late modern project” in architecture and urbanism. “The Core”, D’Hooghe argues, “is a series of precisely circumscribed figures of publicness in the background of a (dis)urbanizing, privatized territory”.

As outlined by Sert in the early 1950s and reconceptualised by D’Hooghe fifty years later, three things define the core: its abstract and monumental formal properties, its limited extent, and its liberal political resonance. Far from being a fully realised alternative to post-war urban expansion, the core was conceptualised as a strategic and intensely civic intervention into a wider urban realm. In these qualities it resonates with the civic mission of the post-WWII (1945-1980) university in Australia. Post-war campuses in Australia were characteristically suburban in setting, but were also treated as test beds for new urban thinking. While courtyard and grid were more explicit organising devices for Australian campuses, this paper suggests that revisiting the idea of the core can help us to understand the underlying civic aspirations and liberal assumptions embodied in Australian tertiary education in the post-war decades. Drawing on archival and published sources produced by a range of leading architects and planners including Denis Winston (Professor of Town Planning at the University of Sydney), Wally Abraham (leader of Macquarie University’s Architect Planner’s Office 1964-1983) and Roy Simpson (leading Melbourne architect and the master planner of the La Trobe University campus), the paper opens up a discussion of the meaning and legacy of the campus as a model of civic form.

**Introduction**

This paper begins with a question: how should we understand the civic form of the new universities of the expansion era in Australia (Monash 1958, Macquarie 1964, La Trobe 1964, Newcastle 1965, Flinders 1966, James Cook 1970, Griffith 1971, Murdoch 1973, Deakin 1974, Wollongong 1975)? These universities were mostly situated in suburban locations, a response to their anticipated size, the ambition to make them accessible to a wider spectrum of society, and to the perception that existing inner urban universities had little room to grow. Yet the campuses – in their compactness, density and arrangement of civic spaces – were also conceived as urban fragments, where urbanity was a signifier of civility. The architects and planners involved in their development described the challenge and opportunity of creating new campuses, ex-nihilo, and the ambition to create cohesive and symbolic environments. As such, the question animating this paper recognises the conjunction of a theoretical agenda in mid-twentieth century architectural discourse that revolved around the interrogation of civic form, with the ‘civic mission’ of the tertiary education sector in Australia and internationally in the post-war decades. The question is also inspired by observations about the present predicament of these campuses, which now appear to compete with the favoured ‘city campus’ model, and are threatened by a lack of sympathy for their overall aesthetic and a lack of heritage protections that account for the campus environment as a whole.
The paper takes La Trobe and Macquarie universities as case studies, two expansion era campuses that adopted a pedestrian focused grid layout surrounded by a ring road. It brings together analysis of their planning and resulting campus designs and asks how they can be read through the literature on urban design and civic form. La Trobe and Macquarie were two of the first universities to be wholly planned as a result of the shift to a national system for the funding of higher education in Australia, an outcome of the Murray Report (Murray, 1957) and the establishment of the Australian Universities Commission (AUC) in 1959. Both universities were established by acts of their respective State parliaments in 1964, as independent institutions from the outset. Formal planning commenced for them in the same year. The established Melbourne firm of Yuncken Freeman were appointed to prepare a campus master plan for La Trobe in December 1964, and the Interim Council for Macquarie appointed Walter (Wally) Abraham in the same month to establish its in-house Architecture Planning Office (APO) (Mansfield and Hutchinson, 1992).

Both Macquarie and La Trobe positioned themselves in the vanguard of university development. The desire to rethink the university as an institution was a pervasive trend internationally at this time, and translated to the pursuit of new models for campus planning. As Mansfield and Hutchinson (1992, p.30) noted in their institutional history of the university, Macquarie hoped to be: “Australia’s most radical and unconventional university”. While Roy Simpson, the Yuncken Freeman partner who took charge of the master planning of La Trobe, expressed the possibility of “new forms of beauty drawn fearlessly from today’s necessities and aspirations, with hardly a backward glance at the cloister of yesterday” (Simpson, 1967, p.829).

The discourse around the theme of civic form in the mid-twentieth century was multivalent and made various claims for how architectural and urban form could affect society. These ranged from the call for a ‘new monumentality’ (José Luis Sert, Fernand Léger and Sigfried Giedion, 1943) and the set of ideas that emerged from the Heart of the City meeting of CIAM (1952), specifically Sert’s concept of the ‘core’; to the constructivist planning, ‘counterform’ and ‘scales of association’ of the Team X protagonists (Bacon 2008). In the postwar years in western Europe and North America, these urban and architectural concepts were underpinned by a liberal, political tendency. The idea of protecting minority populations against majoritarianism, were especially important in the postwar context (D’Hooghe, 2009). This paper suggests that such liberal commitments and assumptions not only underpinned Sert’s notion of the core, as others have noted, but was also a powerful background to the effort to rethink and reinvent the Australian university campus in this period.

While neither La Trobe nor Macquarie was explicitly planned with Sert’s idea of the core in mind, the term does appear in relation to the campus master plans, and both can be read through this concept. An obvious reading identifies the urban and architectural concepts as underpinned by a liberal, political tendency. The idea of protecting minority populations against majoritarianism, were especially important in the postwar context (D’Hooghe, 2009). This paper suggests that such liberal commitments and assumptions not only underpinned Sert’s notion of the core, as others have noted, but was also a powerful background to the effort to rethink and reinvent the Australian university campus in this period.

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THE CAMPUS IN THE SUBURBS

In a 1960 article in Vestes the Journal of the Federal Council of University Staff Associations of Australia, Dennis Winston (1960, p.27-28), the Professor of Town and Country Planning at the University of Sydney, wrote of the importance of the university as a place of social life and how that social life would shape society:

The aim is to produce good men ... The overall planning and design of a university should encourage and provide for easy meeting outside formal lectures and seminar times. ... Every university should have a central heart or focus, a court or more open landscape area round which the main assembly buildings are grouped as a visible reminder of the meaning of university life, a place to remember affectionately in after years ...

Winston’s call for high-quality open space to play a defining role in university identity as a symbol of its civic role, reflected changing sentiment in international circles about the role of architecture in defining the urban realm – both in terms of the expression of society, and in its attitude towards unchecked urban growth.

Winston’s article was published in 1960, a year after the formation of the Australian Universities Commission (AUC), the administrative body that would oversee the expansion of the tertiary education sector in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. Winston would go on to play an influential role in the way the new universities were planned during this period. His work at ANU was a national touchstone for a number of the new campuses including Macquarie and La Trobe. And as Professor at the University of Sydney he exerted direct influence on his former pupil and colleague, Wally Abraham.

Winston (1960, p.28) concluded his 1960 Vestes piece on campus planning by warning against an approach that would see campuses “taking colour from their drab surroundings.” They should become instead, he argued, “centres from which civic improvement radiates ... they should indeed be cities built on a hill, visible symbols of the supremacy of spirit” (Winston 1960, p.28). Such civic idealism was familiar to those who had engaged with the discourse around the planning and design of schools in earlier decades. The influential New York planner Clarence Perry (1929, Front Matter), for example, argued in 1929, that schools should not simply be folded into the fabric of their urban surrounds, they should be a “neighbourhood capitol” deserving of a “dignified site”.

While Winston made a virtue of the siting of the new universities, the reality was that the decisions about their siting were driven by pragmatics and constrained choice.

The most obvious drivers for site selection for the new campuses in the 1960s were availability of land, demographics of projected university enrolments and questions of road access and public transport. In Melbourne the Third University Committee, the group selected to steer the foundation of what would become La Trobe University, had just 33 months from the time they received their commission until the first students were expected to enrol (Glen, 1989, p.23). The constraints imposed by the tight timeline were amplified by the political and economic considerations that limited the type of places that could be considered. The Henry Bolte-led Liberal state government directed J.R. Archibald Glenn, chairman of IC and foundation chancellor of the new university, that, just as for Monash University several years earlier, no new campuses would be made available for land for the third university. Consequently, Glenn’s committee would have to choose a site on crown land. Moreover, as with Monash, they could not consider existing parkland as a site for the new university. Finer considerations of topographical quality and the architectural ambience of the environs, therefore, were not prominent in their deliberations (Davidson, 2012, p.11-23).

From 57 sites identified by an aerial mapping survey the Third University Committee selected 27 for inspection and eventually settled on a piece of land used as a farm for the Mont Park Asylum in Bundoora on Melbourne’s metropolitan fringe, about 12 kilometres from the city centre. The site was not well connected to existing public transport, with the main connection to central Melbourne being a suburban railway line and the nearest station at Macleod two and a half kilometres away, beyond easy walking distance for staff and students. The subcommittee on site selection did note that the development of a new regional shopping centre, Myer’s Northland in nearby Preston, would provide a “fan” of new bus routes radiating to the various centres in Melbourne’s North. But ultimately the committee pointed to the trend towards private transport, already pronounced at Monash, “that would ameliorate the difficulties of public transport” at the Mont Park site (Third University Committee meetings 3&4).
Reflecting on the chosen site, La Trobe’s master planner, the architect Roy Simpson, described it as “daunting – a desolate, run down farm in a swampy valley, devoid almost of trees, or of views less depressing than the encircling panorama of mental hospitals, a cemetery, school yards, a gasworks, and industrial backside.” Yet Simpson saw advantages in the “unstimulating” site conditions at the metro fringe, and especially in its lack of an outstanding topographical feature. This absence of strong existing identity provided “freedom” he argued, and “for the creation of an original setting” (Simpson, 1967, p.39).

If Simpson could see the upside of his site in 1967, even amidst the somewhat bleak and poorly serviced conditions on Melbourne’s northern fringe, a year earlier Macquarie’s architect-planner, Wally Abraham, (1966, p.131) was frank about the limitations of such sites. In an article published in The Australian University he approvingly quoted recent comments from Kevin Lynch who had remarked that high intensity uses, like universities, were falling victim to centrifugal forces in the 1960s and as a result “these uses seize on random suburban locations where land happens to be available and cars can be parked.” Even more pointedly Abraham pointed to a 1965 Australian Planning Institute Journal editorial, which suggested that “Bedford Park (the site of Flinders University), Macquarie, La Trobe and Monash all suffer from the same defects. All are inconvenient to get to and add nothing to our urban life.” For the time being at least, Abraham agreed.

The site chosen for Macquarie University in North Ryde was in a designated green belt in the lower section of the Lane Cove river valley about 15 kilometres from the centre of Sydney. Unlike the Victorian government’s approach to site acquisition for that State’s new universities, NSW spent a million pounds acquiring 332 acres for Macquarie. But in other respects the Macquarie site was similar to its contemporaries in Victoria and SA. It was roughly the same distance from the city centre and the site was host to a typically peri-urban set of land uses, a mix of market gardens, orchards and poultry farms. Its connections by public transport to central Sydney and other key activity centres nearby were weak. For Abraham the chosen sites of the new universities, including Macquarie, did not give due consideration to the potential defects. All are inconvenient to get to and add nothing to our urban life.” For the time being at least, Abraham agreed.

The flexibility provided by private transportation, especially cars, was the most important factor that influenced the selection of cheap and very large peripheral sites for Australian universities in the 1950s and 1960s. But the threat posed by cars to positive architectural and environmental conditions were already well recognised by architects and planners such as Winston, Simpson and Abraham. In fact, approaches to site planning that explicitly excluded cars were among the most important drivers of master plans at both La Trobe and Macquarie. But in other respects the Macquarie site was similar to its contemporaries in Victoria and SA. It was roughly the same distance from the city centre and the site was host to a typically peri-urban set of land uses, a mix of market gardens, orchards and poultry farms. Its connections by public transport to central Sydney and other key activity centres nearby were weak. For Abraham the chosen sites of the new universities, including Macquarie, did not give due consideration to the potential generators of urban activity and, therefore, their overall value. The focus instead was on land cost and availability. Abraham (1966, p.132) could only hope that time would “redress the balance” and that the Macquarie campus could become a meaningful centre in itself.

The impact of their siting on the resulting campus plans of La Trobe and Macquarie was most immediately felt in the delimiting of the campus territory by an encircling ring road, a strategy to preserve the campus proper as a pedestrian environment alongside recognition that they would be predominantly served by private vehicle transport. This followed the influence of Radburn planning principles in mid-century planning. It was also a declaration of the campus as a civic space.

In the 1965 Planning Report for La Trobe (Yuncken Freeman Architects, 1965, p.24-25), a series of diagrams explained the grid layout adopted for the campus as an evolution of the radial planning approach employed by William Pereira at the University of California Irvine, which was based on the concentric arrangement of the academic centre around a central open space, surrounded by academic buildings and then colleges, within an encircling ring road. The resulting layout of La Trobe was centred on an ensemble of key buildings and spaces – library, theatres and the so-called ‘Agora’, surrounded by a checkerboard arrangement of academic buildings and landscaped courtyards, with a raised circulation concourse connecting them. Beyond this were sites for the colleges and the surrounding ring road.

Macquarie, under the helm of Abraham, also prioritized the creation of the campus as a pedestrian environment. In the Provisional Development Plan for the campus Abraham determined a development grid that followed the cardinal points, establishing a framework for good building orientation as well as a prospect from the site towards the Lane Cove River. For this reason, the campus grid was conspicuously different in orientation from the surrounding lot layout. The ring road that marked the edge of the campus was nonetheless connected into the existing street network at several points. In addition to the development grid, which was an efficient way to determine an engineering service layout and sites for building, an east-west pedestrian spine was introduced and became a prominent organizing element in the evolution of the overall campus.

In both campus plans the ring roads enclosed an area that could be covered in a ten-minute walk, ensuring the campus would be a walkable pedestrian environment (Yuncken Freeman Architects, 1965, p.25; Abraham, 1966, p.134). The raised concourse at La Trobe and the east-west spine at Macquarie turned the cloisters of past campus models outward and made pedestrian circulation a primary expressive element in their overall form.

The early development of both campuses was a balancing act in demarcating and establishing a logic for the whole campus as a cohesive campus territory and the fast-paced construction of the first buildings, which were to play a significant role in declaring an identity for the new institutions. In both campuses an area at the centre of the regulating grid was designated to be a social and symbolic focal point. Both Simpson and Abraham refer to these areas as ‘cores’ of the campus (Simpson, 1967, p.828; Abraham, 1967, p.1001). These ensembles were groupings of buildings and open spaces, and echoed, if not explicitly referenced, Sert’s core in their conception as spatial ‘counterforms’ that nonetheless had particular formal qualities: consisting of predominantly low-medium rise buildings with a contrasting tall element, incorporating buildings with social as well as commercial uses, using abstract repetitive patterns in the composition of fenestration, and following the idea that architecture could function as an abstract art in the creation of an aesthetic urban environment.

At La Trobe the Central Academic area was formed around the Agora (Academic Quad), a landscaped space bordered by student facilities (Agora East and West, Yuncken Freeman) and the raised pedestrian concourse. Beyond the concourse, the Agora was surrounded by a group of significant buildings: the Library (Yuncken Freeman, 1967), the East Lecture Theatres (Roy Grounds, 1968) and the Agora Theatre (Roy Grounds, 1973). The Library was one of the first buildings on the campus, and established the use of light-coloured brick as an expressive material that would be taken up by many of the academic buildings. The lecture theatres were distinct figures within the campus grid, set against the backdrop of the concourse, and marked through their common use of brick. The concourse was also envisaged as an important element in providing a space for casual encounters around the Agora. A rendering from the 1977 master plan report (Yuncken Freeman Architects, 1977, p.76) shows the vision for this space as the social centre of the campus.

At Macquarie the University Centre was to be the ‘monumental’ heart of the campus and was sited within the Development Plan grid but with a northern prospect towards the Lane Cove River (Abraham, 1966, p.135). As at La Trobe, it was formed around a major space – the Quad – and an ensemble of significant buildings: the Library (NSW Department of Public Works, Peter Hall Project Architect, 1967-71), Council Building (Edwards Madigan Torzillo, 1972), Great Hall (Stafford Moor and Farrington, 1964), and the Union (Anchor Mortlock Murray and Woolley, 1969). The Architect Planners Office (APO) determined building envelopes, layout grids and a material palette for these buildings. They were to be treated uniformly as a central composition through the use of off-form and precast concrete and a shared monumental expression, and distinguished from the surrounding academic buildings, which would use dark brown brick.

While the ‘cores’ at La Trobe and Macquarie were treated as special areas, they were also carefully integrated into...
the campus as a whole. In both cases, the overall campus layout was influenced by a level of pragmatism in relation to dealing with the problem of ‘planning for uncertainty’, and the imperative to plan for growth. The organizational grids provided a framework for the creation of a cohesive environment that could be realised over time. However, their overall cohesiveness was also a product of their formal and material consistency, and can be attributed to the long-term involvement of Simpson at La Trobe and Abraham at Macquarie, and the aesthetic agenda that each brought to the campus design process, as described by Simpson (1967, p.829): “a new aesthetic that must seek beauty in the bones rather than in embellishment.” For Simpson (1967, p.834) the campus plan at La Trobe thus provided a model for wider suburban development in which “functional, economic and aesthetic considerations share[d] equal importance” and the “integration of buildings, services, traffic, patterns and landscape in one cohesive pattern” was both “efficient and beautiful”.

Abraham (2005, p.1 and 45) was more explicit in recognising the significance of the abstract formalisms that had developed out of constructivism during the twentieth century, often quoting figures from this movement including Naum Gabo and Lucio Moholy-Nagy in his recollections about the development of Macquarie. While he objected to the use of the term brutalism, with its pejorative connotations, during his long-term involvement with Macquarie he nurtured a robust yet modest aesthetic. Abraham (2005, p.42) saw this as the natural product of the non-competitive ethos of the APO, and the collective goal that the cohesive development of the campus epitomised, which he described as an “unselfconscious vernacular”.

FORMAL, PUBLIC AND LIBERAL

Despite the expressed aim for both campuses to be flexible in their pattern of growth, the master planners of both La Trobe and Macquarie employed formal strategies to invoke civic or expressly public concerns in two main ways: through the formal cohesiveness of the overall campus plan (creating a setting) and by defining a special area at its core (a setting within a setting with strong formal resonance). If the central area of the Macquarie and La Trobe campuses were to be their expressive core (as per Sert’s schema), it is the rigour, consistency and formal strength of the whole campus that now demarcates them as disruptions to the pattern of urbanisation and their immediate suburban contexts.

Writing recently about the ambitions of urban design in the 1950s and 1960s, the theorist Alexander d’Hoooge (2011, p.27) has argued that its proper task was the creation of “a series of precisely circumscribed figures of publicness in the background of a (dis)urbanizing, privatized territory.” For D’Hoooge those figures of publicness should act as guarantors against the liquidation of shared cultural and physical space in modern cities, which, he argues, are subject to a relentlessly private logic or sprawl. Architectural and urban design theorist Pier Vittorio Aureli (2011, p.2) has likewise argued for a “specific architectural form that is a counterform within and against the totality of urbanization.” For Aureli such counterforms are the very possibility of politics. Such counterforms must be physically distinct but not iconic buildings in the contemporary sense. Their political salience is formed in and through their formal separation from the fabric of the urbanisation process itself. This paper proposes that it is in this sense that both Macquarie and La Trobe can be read as liberal. They both mark out a space for ideas, performance and for public sociability, in places surrounded by private dwellings and consumption.

In their history of Monash University, Graeme Davison and Kate Murphy (2012, xxvii) have described the New South Wales University of Technology (1949) as an “ominous sign of what could be in store” for those involved in the establishment of other new universities. It was set up, they argued, on “strict public service lines” and its historian Patrick O’Farrell has described its ethos as “hierarchical, distant, rule and regulation-ridden, socially conservative, respectable to the degree of scruple.” It is no coincidence then, that Macquarie and La Trobe, formed in the mid-1960s, would respond to different social forces and political tendencies. Of course they were not intended as technological universities like the university that would become UNSW, and there was broad agreement among key actors involved in founding both institutions that they should imbue the new institutions with a sense of liberality. To be politically liberal in the period suggests a number of subtly different things and it is quite clear that foundation committees for La Trobe and Macquarie and their architect-planners did not share a coherent vision of what the universities might mean politically. But there is little question that they did share a belief that the institutions should encourage a sense of liberality, and should defend against narrowly drawn technical or economic rationales for their activities as institutions.

CONCLUSION

There is a current vogue in the tertiary education sector for creating or expanding city-campuses. These campuses privilege urbanity and connectivity as tenets of the ‘knowledge economy’. RMIT and UTAS have the largest and most dynamic of such campuses at the heart of Australia’s biggest cities. But other institutions are looking to compete for students and advertise their offerings in ways that points to the value and desirability of urban settings for prospective students. University of Newcastle has just completed a major development in the city centre led by the prolific Lyons Architecture, and in recent decades Deakin University and Notre Dame University have developed significant campuses in Geelong and Fremantle respectively by reusing existing buildings in established urban areas. These institutions have all invested significant resources in architecture, urban design and place branding in an effort to build their profile in the sector and highlight their integration with the new economy (Saniga and Freestone, 2017).

In many ways the campuses developed by Macquarie and La Trobe since the 1960s are counterpoints to this model and to the apparent homogenisation of civic, educational and commercial space that the recent city-campus model seems to imply. But leaders at both institutions have recently indicated that they have an appetite to shake off their sense of separation, as civic places in the suburbs, and become more urban by refuting their campuses and engaging in various commercial partnerships and campus redevelopment strategies. In a period in which governments have been trying to place more of the burden of the cost of education on users – the students – and promote an industry-led research agenda such strategies no doubt look like an obvious and rational response to wider conditions. But it is worth asking what might be lost. Can Macquarie and La Trobe preserve some of the sense of liberality that the original visions for the campuses engendered by thinking carefully about the legacy of planning and design that they have inherited? To prosper, must they surrender to the managerialism and economism ascendant in tertiary education today? Or can some semblance of civic idealism re-emerge on these post-modern-era campuses? Are the leaders at these places capable of seeing them as powerful counterforms that at once resist the pattern of sprawl around them but do not deny the desirability of having meaningful civic places deep in the suburbs?

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University in association with Hale & Iremonger.


