

Patloch Lane an opportunity gone begging

Description



Warrnambool's Patloch Lane has had a makeover, but nothing like what was originally proposed and remains largely unused. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

Analysis – Carol Altmann

Before I write one word about the upgrade of Patloch Lane – the first of what is intended to be several lane upgrades around the Warrnambool CBD – let me say this: all of the artists involved have done great work.

It is not their fault that the rushed job that became the laneway upgrade is nothing like what was originally proposed and does not address some of the fundamental issues that were raised for this thoroughfare, including that very few people used it, and they still don't.

I doubt, for example, that many people have sat on the two stunning, spotted gum seats hand-crafted by [Lillier Fine Furniture](#). These bench seats are totally wasted by being stuck at the very end of the lane: they should be in one of the main streets – Liebig, Lava, Timor or Koroit streets – where the seating is metal, peeling and plain ugly.



Warrnambool City Council, for all of its grand plans, has a tendency to go for near-enough-is-good-enough and what is often promised is rarely delivered in full or at a level of quality where it can work well for years.

This applies to the big things – such as the [upgrade of the Warrnambool railway station precinct](#) which in 2010 was flagged to become a “public space that the city can be proud of” but remains a pedestrian/traffic nightmare – right down to one of **Cr Peter Hulin’s** favourite topics, [the \\$100,000 disabled access ramp at the main beach](#) which is regularly buried in sand.

It is one thing to bring in the experts to help develop inspiring plans, but it is another to actually *deliver* these plans through a combination of lobbying state and federal governments for funding, combined with clever decision making and prioritising at a council level.

Which is why I am writing this piece, because there are lessons to be learned from the microcosm of Patloch Lane as Warrnambool waits patiently for the long-awaited upgrade of Liebig St that has been years in the making and is now expected to start in 2017, a year later than hoped.

If we can’t get one laneway *just right*, what are the hopes of getting an entire street upgrade right without the temptation of cutting corners, or by-passing the input of the experts? Both of these things happened with Patloch Lane.

Let me explain.



Council workers were last week again removing sand from the disabled access ramp at Lady Bay which has been a constant problem since it was added in 2011. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] T[/dropcap]hrough a combination of Freedom of Information applications, questions to council and talking directly with people involved in the original Patloch Lane project, *Bluestone* has been able to piece together a picture of a lost opportunity to do something truly special for the city.

In a nutshell, Patloch Lane was to be a functional and striking art project that grew from the council's

Hidden Histories project, a series of art events that tapped into the lesser-known stories of our city. (The State Government provided \$150,000 for the Hidden Histories project, including the laneway works).

Patloch Lane was intended to show what was possible, while at the same time becoming the first link in a chain of integrated laneway upgrades across the CBD, rather than a mish-mash.

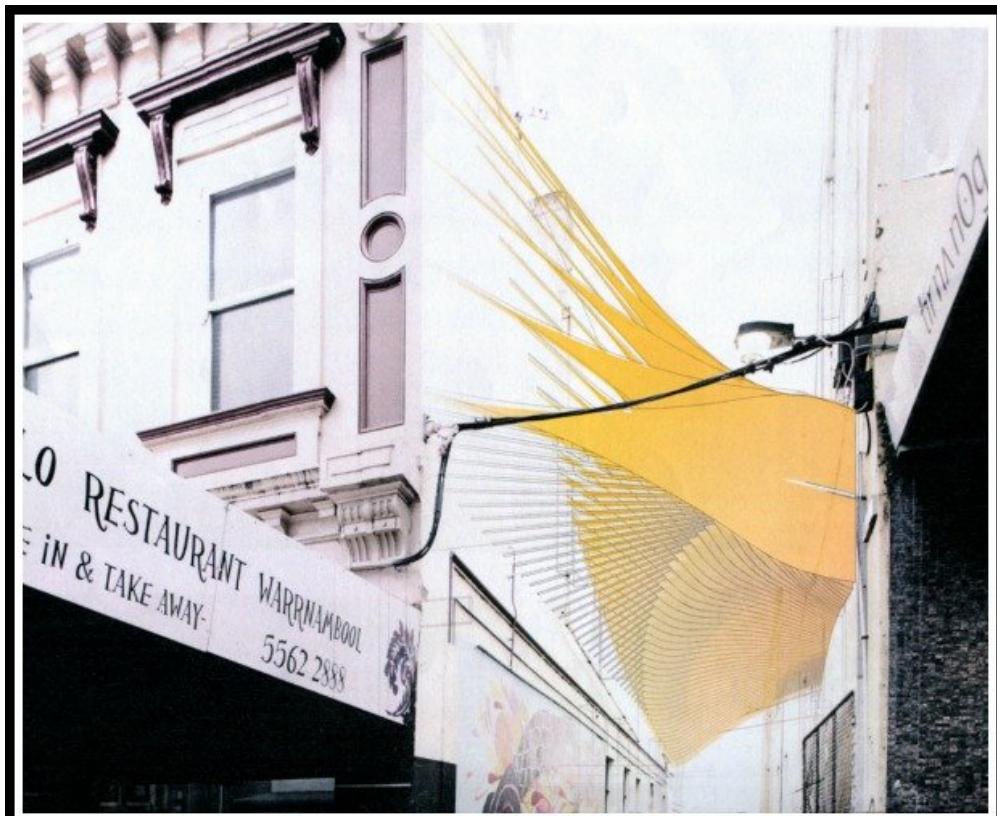


Potholes pock-mark the southern “restaurant” end of Liebig St, just a short walk from Patloch Lane. The long-awaited upgrade of Liebig St is now expected to start in 2017. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

To this end, in late 2013 the council invited the highly regarded **Professor Paul Carter** and his team from the School of Architecture and Design at RMIT University* to oversee the Patloch Lane design as part of a wider brief to develop a “Hidden Histories” public art strategy for the CBD. (*RMIT was paid \$53,625 for its work on the Hidden Histories project).

In consultation with the council and community stakeholders, Prof Carter and his team developed a concept – ‘Breaking Wave’ – that included a canopy structure down Patloch Lane, new paving that could be engraved as an artwork, light sculptures and an audio installation that would recreate the sound of a wave breaking as you walked through the lane, giving people a huge incentive to use it.

It was bold and exciting and was budgeted at around \$90,000 – which is what the council had earmarked for the laneway – excluding engineering works and new paving to replace the cracked concrete which, as Prof Carter had pointed out, was a basic necessity for any upgrade in Patloch Lane.



An artist's impression of the 'Breaking Wave' canopy structure over Patloch Lane that would have included an audio installation and light sculptures. Image: Material Thinking.

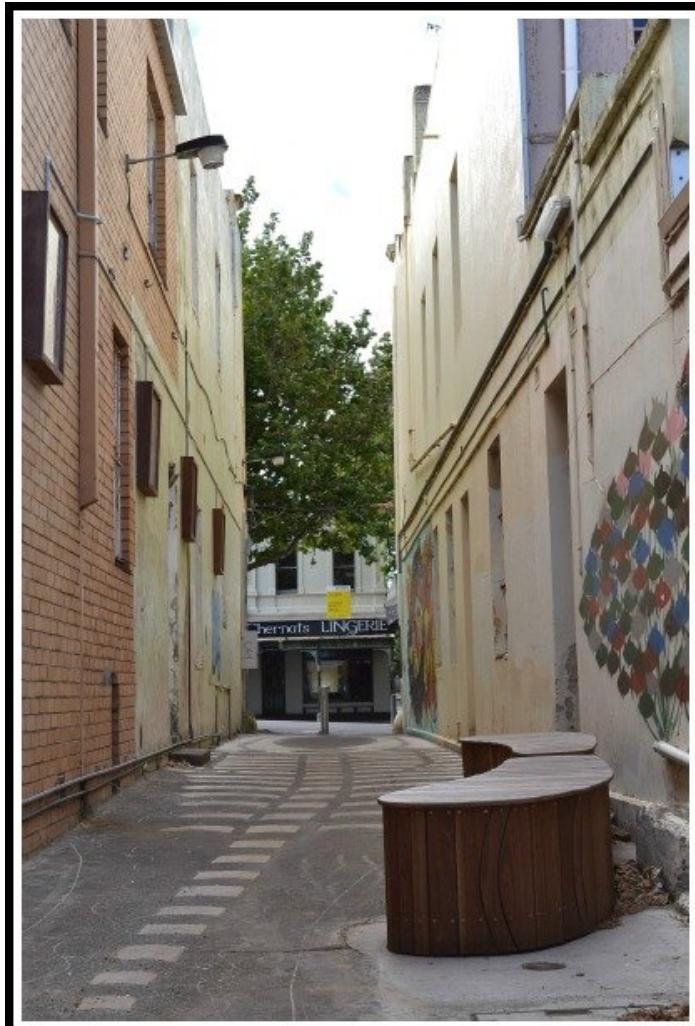
[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] T[/dropcap]he council was inspired enough to ask Prof Carter to provide a detailed breakdown of costs. That was in late 2014 and Prof Carter, in turn, asked if the council could provide an estimated cost for the engineering works and paving.

It was never provided, so Prof Carter suggested developing a scaled down version of 'Breaking Wave' at the laneway entrance, which would be a much cheaper option, but still a 'lure' for passersby.

Again, this went no further, so Prof Carter [submitted his Hidden Histories public art strategy in early 2015](#) which included recommendations on how 'Breaking Wave' could be developed, and left it there.

What Prof Carter didn't know was that the council in late 2014, around the time he was asking for engineering costs, had already hired another consultant (One Design Collective) to help bring a different version of Patloch Lane to life.

The "upgrade" itself was all done within about three weeks from early June and, despite being involved since 2013, Prof Carter was told nothing about it.



Hello? Patloch Lane photographed on a typical Friday afternoon. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] A[/dropcap]nd while the Patloch Lane artists – including **Fiona Clarke, Kate Gane, Jessica Meggs** – have done a great job with the “ocean” brief they were given, the final \$52,000 project was ultimately done in a rush and on the cheap.

(By comparison, as *Bluestone* [has written this week](#), \$178,000 is being spent re-tiling the Aquazone changerooms...)

The whale etching, for example, is engraved into cracked old concrete that will eventually have to be replaced, and there is still no incentive for anyone to actually use the laneway. It is already looking unloved.

All of these same artists could have been involved in bringing something truly special to life: what a wasted opportunity.

In the meantime, Prof Carter remains hopeful his ‘Breaking Wave’ will still show up somewhere in the CBD renewal.

I hope he is right.

[box]The full breakdown of the Hidden Histories \$150,000 project fund: \$29,536 – Patloch Lane physical works; \$22,827 – commissioning artists work in Patloch Lane; \$8690 – One Collective Urban Design Studio, Patloch Lane upgrade consultancy in Jan/Feb 2015 ; \$53,625/\$4950 – RMIT University/Material Thinking for “Hidden Histories: A Public Art and Spaces Strategy” and development of concept plan for Patloch Lane, both overseen by Prof Paul Carter, Aug 2013-Feb 2015; \$32,000 – The F Project, Hidden Histories Laneway Festival Jan-May 2014 including a Patloch Lane mural.[/box]



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