

Site Assessment Audit: Personal Safety in Footscray

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Introduction

Footscray is a suburb located west of the Melbourne CBD (Figure 1). The suburb is small and densely populated with an ethnically diverse community and ranks one of the lowest on the socio-economic index for areas (SEIFA) (Maribyrnong City Council, 2009). Footscray has unfortunately gained a bad reputation over the years due to drug problems in the area (Tzobanakis, 2009). However, Footscray has a lot of potential to become a more healthy community, with council and state government focusing much attention on its redesign. Upon conducting a site audit of Footscray, several problem areas have been identified using the tools: *Design for Safe and Healthy Communities: the Matrix of like Design Considerations* (Heart Foundation of Australia, 2004) and the *Making Safer Places: a resource book for neighbourhood safety audits* (Cavanagh, 1998). The focus of this paper will be on personal safety; analysing positive and negative aspects of Footscray's design and providing suggestions for improvement where necessary.

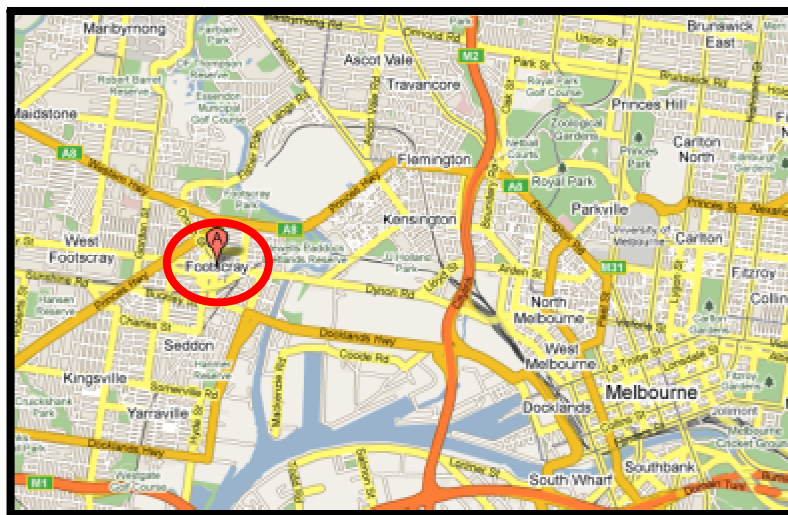


Figure 1: Map of Footscray in relation to Melbourne CBD (Google Maps Australia, 2009)

Study Site

This map (Figure 2) shows the route taken around Footscray. From the starting point, the route follows the main streets surrounding central Footscray, including the Railway Reserve (adjacent to McNab St) and Maddern Square.

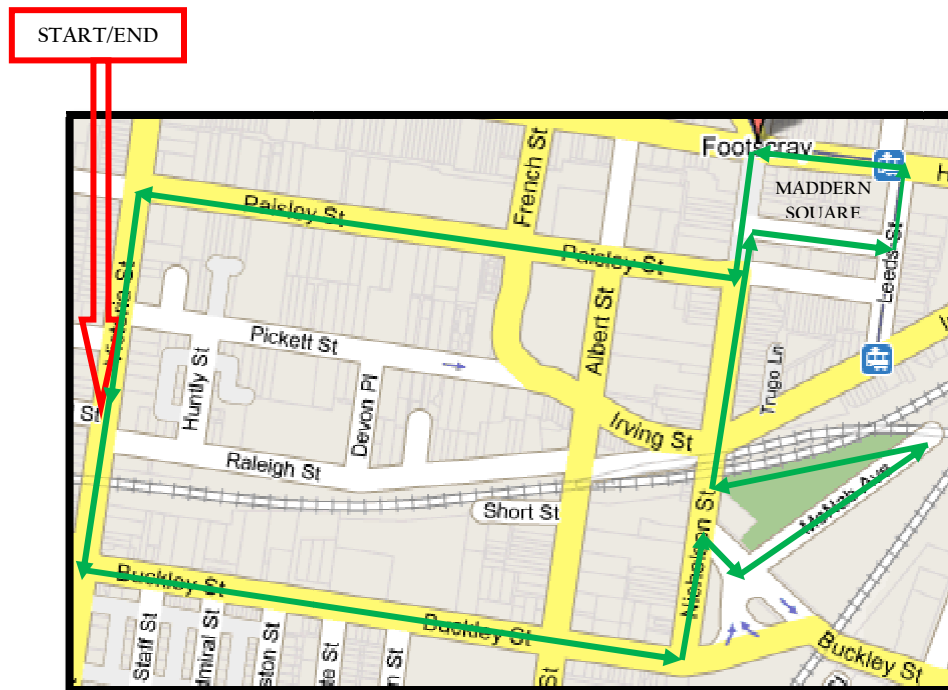


Figure 2: Study Area in Footscray (Google Maps Australia, 2009)

Positive and Negative Aspects of Design

Maps and Signage

Signage is one of Footscray's strongest points. The centre of Footscray has many directional signs, indicating where popular facilities and public places are; such as train stations, libraries, main streets, parklands etc., as well as the distance in kilometres to ride or walk there (Figure 3). This has many clear benefits for newcomers and tourists in the area who may not know their way around; easily becoming lost in an unfamiliar place (Cavanagh, 1998). People who look lost and disorientated could become more vulnerable to unsafe situations. Footscray also has very prominent maps around the centre as well as a directory on Nicholson Mall indicating significant facilities, services and places such as the nearest police station and hospital, as well as safer routes to schools signs (Figures 4 & 5). Well signed areas are shown at the intersections shown in Figure 6.



Figure 3: Directional and distance information



Figure 4: Active signage at Victoria University



Figure 4: Safe Routes to Schools

Lighting

Lighting is quite good around central Footscray, particularly on Paisley Street and around intersections shown on the map below (Figures 6 & 7). There are also several bad lighting spots such as Railway Reserve (adjacent to McNab St) where there is no lighting in the park whatsoever, and Middle Footscray Station rail bridge and ramp access, whereby no lights are working under the bridge and the ramp access to the station is poorly lit (Figures 6, 8 & 9) and the car parks on Paisley St are also lacking in sufficient lighting.

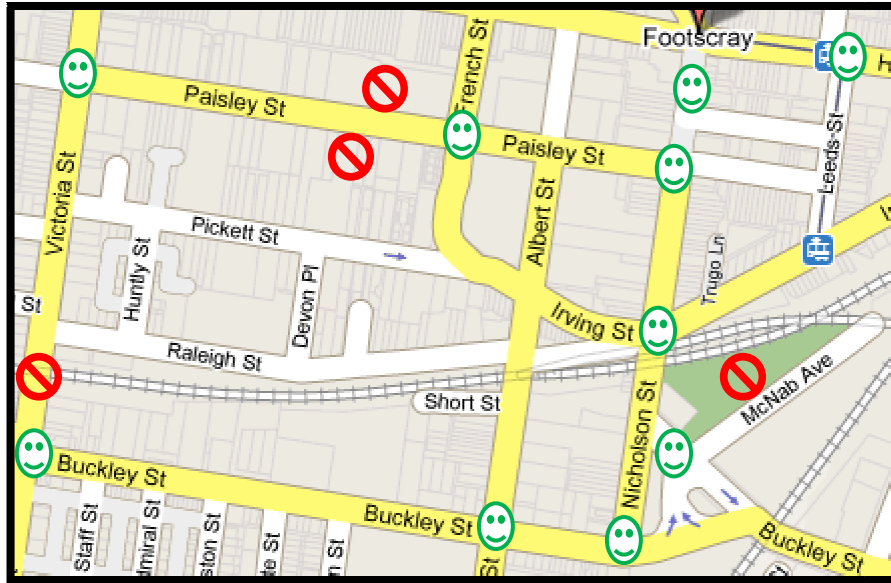


Figure 6: Good and bad lighting and signage spots (Google Maps Australia, 2009)



Figure 7: Well spaced lights on Paisley Street



Figure 8: Middle Footscray Station ramp access



Figure 9: Middle Footscray Rail Bridge

Litter, Vandalism and Maintenance

There are some really unsightly areas of Footscray with regards to graffiti and litter. There is a lot of graffiti around Middle Footscray station (Figure 10). Much of Buckley St has vacant, derelict and vandalised buildings, as well as on the southern end of Nicholson St (Figures 11 & 12). Mc Nab St has a vacant lot on one side and an abandoned building on the other which looks ugly and desolate and is heavily vandalised (Figure 13). Railway Reserve and the entrance via Nicholson St is a disgrace: there are obscene amounts of litter strewn about; empty bottles and cans of alcohol, cigarette butts and broken glass (Figures 14, 15 & 16). There is graffiti over all surfaces; bins, seats, walls of buildings nearby and there are often dogs roaming around (Figure 17).



Figure 10: Graffiti at Middle Footscray Station



Figure 11: Abandoned service station on Buckley St



Figure 12: Badly maintained building, corner Buckley and Nicholson Sts



Figure 13: Abandoned building adjacent to Railway Reserve



Figure 14: Uninviting entrance to Railway Reserve via Nicholson St



Figure 15: Litter in Railway Reserve

These areas feel unsafe because it indicates that there are people using these spaces that do not respect public space used by other people in the community. People identify poorly maintained buildings, graffiti and litter with crime arising from anti-social behaviour (Beebeejaun, 2009, 225). These spaces do not encourage people to linger, only encouraging those who misuse these spaces to continue to frequent them.



Figure 16: Worn grass, bottle caps and cigarette butts

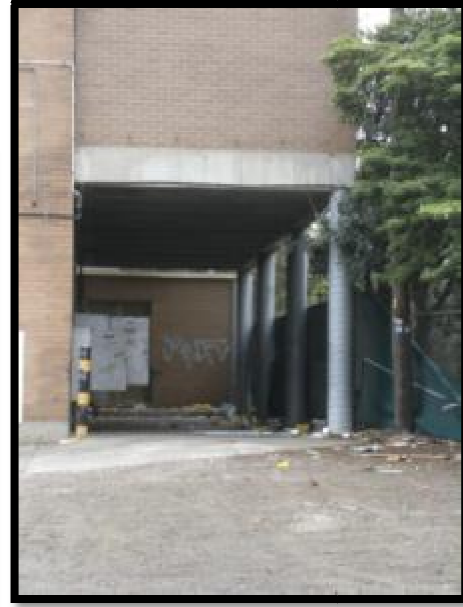


Figure 17: Graffiti damage to seating and bins

Open Space and Trap Spots

Railway Reserve is certainly an unpleasant open space to be in. I felt slightly intimidated when I chose to walk through the park as there was a large group of men gathered around drinking and smoking. The park is not designed for children as there is no play equipment- it serves, rather, as some sort of meeting and drinking place for groups of men. The park has effectively become a territorial space for a certain group of people, and certainly an unsafe place for most others. Solving the issue does not mean removing these groups of men; rather the space needs to be inclusive of a more diverse range of people to encourage mixing of different groups, particularly for women and children.

There was only one potential area along the route that could be a potential trap spot, or at least an area where someone could hide if planning an attack. This was around the abandoned building adjacent to Railway Reserve (Figures 18 & 19). Maddern Square (in between Nicholson and Leeds Streets), in contrast, is a great example of making an alleyway area a safe and attractive thoroughway, with at least three exit/entry points (Figure 20).



Figures 18 & 19: Potential trap spots



Figure 20: Well designed Maddern Square

Pedestrian Activity and Street Design

Most of Footscray experiences high pedestrian activity because Footscray is a densely populated suburb (Maribyrnong City Council, 2009). The most pedestrianised areas along the route were near shops, eateries and public transport hubs at the intersections of Nicholson and Irving, Nicholson and Paisley, Nicholson Mall and the corner of Leeds and Hopkins Streets (Figure 21). It definitely feels a lot safer when there are lots of people around, particularly at night. Less pedestrianised areas were Buckley Street and McNab Street. McNab Street acts as a throughway to and from the train station and

Victoria University- but it is a very quiet street with a vacant lot/ temporary car park on one side and an abandoned building and park on the other, giving the street a very unsafe feel. Footscray centre discourages car traffic with the nature of design for pedestrians. This design includes yellow marked crossways at intersections, bluestone paving, zebra crossings, pedestrian signs, Nicholson pedestrian mall, wide pathways at crossings and slow traffic around the centre (Figure 22). Designing for pedestrians means more natural surveillance and 'eyes on the street' (Heart Foundation Australia, 2004).



Figure 21: Pedestrian activity on corner of Leeds and Hopkins Streets



Figure 22: Slowing down traffic flow

Mixed Neighbourhoods

Along Buckley St, between the Victoria St and Albert St intersections, there is some light industry present, which makes the area feel somewhat unsafe to walk around, particularly late at night as there is no natural surveillance. There are several derelict buildings and construction sites and a bus port, adding to the homogeneity of the area. There is, however, a newly built Youth Centre on Buckley St which is a positive aspect and adds to a mixed use environment. Along the route, it feels safer when closer to Victoria University, Nicholson and Paisley Sts, Nicholson Mall and Leeds and Hopkins Sts because of the mixed use; there are many shops, restaurants, pubs and cafes, residential over commercial; and public open areas such as Maddern Square and Nicholson Mall.

Sightlines and Surveillance

Much of the route provided good sightlines particularly in and around Nicholson Mall where it is very open (Figure 23). Buckley St is the worst in terms of sightlines; pathways are narrow and the construction sites and industrial buildings make it difficult to see what is up ahead and to the periphery. There is a lot of electronic surveillance around Victoria University and Nicholson/Paisley Sts in particular. The cameras placed around do not make me feel safe whatsoever. It is mainly people presence, lights, shops and open sightlines that provide comfort (Beebeejaun, 2009, 227). There was police presence on Nicholson St when I did the audit which is good in some ways, yet makes Footscray feel like an unsafe area at the same time, because the police have reason to be present.

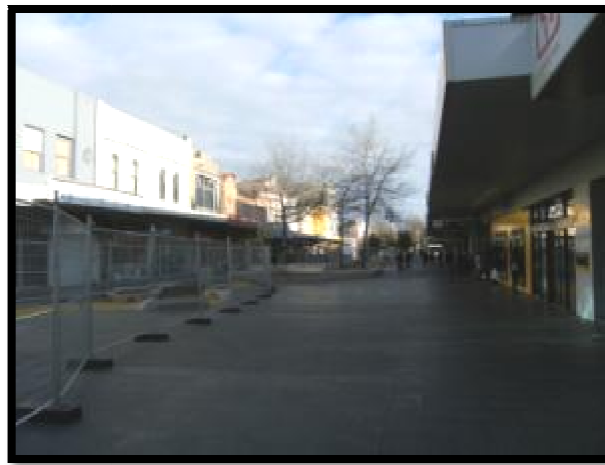


Figure 23: Open design of Nicholson Mall

Suggestions for Improvement

This audit has provided three main problem areas (Figure 24): Railway Reserve (priority 1), Middle Footscray Station (priority 2) and Buckley St (priority 3). These areas are the least pedestrianised with the least natural surveillance, lighting, signage and mixed use, generally serving as unsafe spaces and an unsafe route.

Priority 1: Railway Reserve

- Demolish or revitalise the old Telstra exchange building next to Railway Reserve, using it as a central community hall for regular events, such as a fruit and vegetable exchange, hire-a-bike

depot, adult learning centre (e.g. English language tutoring), holistic health courses and classes (e.g. yoga, meditation), women and children's playgroup.

- Turn Railway Reserve into an attractive park- opening up access from Nicholson St with signs and lights, extending the park in and around the newly refurbished community hall. Re-landscape the park, put in play equipment, seating and lights.

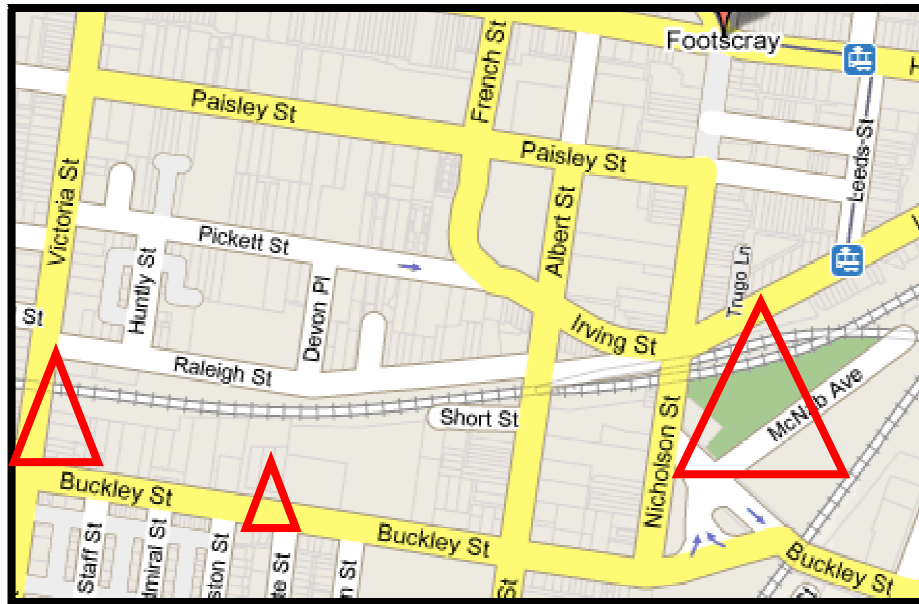


Figure 24: Identified problem areas (Google Maps Australia, 2009)

Priority 2: Middle Footscray Station:

- Improve lighting at the end of the ramp and underpass
- Add directional sign at end of station ramp and at intersection of Buckley and Victoria Sts, linking the station to the central activity area of Footscray and to Seddon shopping area on Victoria St.
- Encourage graffiti as public art on surfaces

Priority 3: Buckley St

- Encourage more mixed use on Buckley St: revitalise derelict buildings into residential, commercial or art space that could be beneficial for Victoria University students in particular, opening up opportunities for natural surveillance.

Conclusion

Personal safety is certainly an issue in Footscray. Along the route, I identified three major areas that are unsafe areas. These areas are unsafe because they provide the least lighting, signage, mixed use, sightlines and opportunities for natural surveillance. In addition, each area has evidence of anti-social behaviour in graffiti, litter and other vandalism, which makes people feel like they are areas where crime happens. The safest places in Footscray are where people most frequent; where shops are open and active, where lighting and signage is abundant, where streets are designed for pedestrians and where public space features allow people to linger. The positive design features that central Footscray has need to be incorporated into surrounding problem areas to not only make safe places, but safe routes to and from destinations.

References

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