Maribyrnong River
Master Plan 2011
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Introduction.
RIVER GEOGRAPHY

The Maribyrnong River is one of Melbourne’s largest rivers stretching 130 kilometres from the Macedon Ranges to Port Phillip Bay, and with a predominantly rural catchment of over 1400 square kilometres. Beginning as Deep Creek, the Maribyrnong gathers Emu Creek, Jacksons Creek (south of Bulla), Taylor’s Creek (near Keilor), and Steeles Creek (near Essendon) before joining the Yarra River at Footscray. As the Maribyrnong enters the built up area of Melbourne, it begins a dramatic transformation from a natural river to a highly urbanized working river.

RIVER HISTORY

The Maribyrnong River valley has been home for the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation for up to 40,000 years. Human remains dated at least 15,000 years old have been found along the river, with much older signs of human habitation also present.

The first Europeans to explore along the river were Charles Grimes (1803) and John Batman (1835). With the establishment of Melbourne later that year, sheep runs soon appeared in the Avondale and Sunshine areas as early pastoralists favoured the open grazing country of the Maribyrnong’s upper reaches. Much of the country along the river was taken over by sheep, which ate out native grasses and spread thistles and other exotic weeds.

Whereas the Freshwater took the name ‘Yarra’, the Maribyrnong River was soon dubbed the Saltwater by early settlers, due to the tidal nature of its lower reaches (to Solomon’s Ford in Avondale Heights). The name Maribyrnong may derive from mirring-gnay-bir-nong which in Woiwurrung (the language of the local Wurundjeri people) is said to mean “I can hear a ringtail possum” or “saltwater river”. Marriburnong is an alternate spelling listed on a map dated from 1840. Author Richard Howitt used both ‘Salt-water’ and ‘Mariburnong’ when he crossed near the junction with the Yarra in 1844, and surveyor Robert Hoddle mapped the junction of the ‘Saltwater’ and ‘Yarra Yarra’ in that year. The river, at least in its lower reaches (the river estuary), remained known as the ‘Saltwater’ until 1913.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

During the second half of the nineteenth century much of Melbourne’s industry was located along the river. Abattoirs and their attendant noxious trades crowded the banks and discharged their untreated waste to the rivers. Pipe-works, meat canneries, paint factories, soap works, a sugar refinery and fertiliser plants - all lined the riverbanks, their liquid wastes turning the water red and their fumes polluting the air.

During dry summers, the Maribyrnong often completely ceased to flow, which compounded the problems of pollution, as did official colonial policies and private opportunism. Redevelopment of the Lower Yarra by the Melbourne Harbor Trust from 1877 saw many more noxious trades transferred to the Saltwater River at Footscray and Kensington, where water front land was cheap. The foul air and filthy rivers branded Melbourne as ‘Marvellous Smelbourne’, but locally the western suburbs were stigmatised as ‘Worsted Smelbourne’ or ‘Worsted Smelldom’.

Local agitation for the removal of the trades began in the 1880s but had little success for a century. Sewering of the city abattoirs and the noxious trades at Flemington and Kensington in the early 1900’s led to some air and river improvement, but the expansion of the chemical and defence industries before and after World War I, and of the noxious trades at unsewered Braybrook, soon set the river back.

As the city grew around it, the shape of the Maribyrnong itself began to change. The bed was dredged and cleared of fallen timber, the banks straightened and raised. Eucalypts and casuarinas along the frontage were cut out, wetlands were filled in, and tributaries channelled into drains. The banks of river have been extensively modified since 1920’s with straightening, widening, filling, deepening and beaching works all taking place.
As the city expanded westward at the turn of last century, and the permanent residential population increased adjacent to the river, a change was beginning to take place. Progress associations lobbied for the creation of recreation reserves and the Essendon River League was formed in 1906 with the intention of cleaning and beautifying the Saltwater River. The League lobbied for Crown land along the river to be reserved, encouraged Councils to purchase previously alienated land, undertook tree planting programs, south improvements to drainage and sewage, and raised funds for improvements such as seats, the bandstand, and so on. The League also succeeding in having the river renamed the Maribyrnong in 1913.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Maribyrnong had been one of Melbourne’s most popular fishing grounds since the 19th century. Angling clubs flourished in the surrounding suburbs, as did the enthusiasm for swimming, boating and rowing. The Victoria Rowing Club held its annual regatta in the Lower Yarra and Maribyrnong River until the early 1880s when pollution forced its relocation. Private entrepreneurs operated pleasure launches from Melbourne to the Wine Hall, and to the Riverview Tea Gardens at Avondale Heights; and Melbourne’s Henley-on-Yarra was mimicked by a Henley-on-Maribyrnong in the 1930s. But the river and valley declined during World War II and the postwar years during another wave of heavy industrial development. Passive entertainments and the motor car drew activity and attention away from the river.

With the closure of many industries since the 1960s and 70s, much river front land has opened up to parkland and highly sought after residential estates. Growing environmental awareness in the 1970’s saw local activists successfully lobby governments to clean up the river, beginning with the federal Whitlam Government (1972-75), and successive State governments from 1972, who funded major improvements to the river and valley, and Victoria’s Environmental Protection Authority began to police discharges.

Local groups pressed for improvements, acted as watchdogs, and attempted to transform community attitudes: the Footscray Historical Society initiated the Saltwater River Festival with explorer Charles Grimes as the historical focus from 1974; river cruises were resumed from 1979; pollution controls, dredging and de-snagging encouraged the return of the fish and of anglers; a comprehensive Maribyrnong River Plan was launched in 1984; and the Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley was formed in 1986. Melbourne’s long unloved and unsung ‘other river’ has enjoyed a dramatic rebirth.

As the city continues to grow, perhaps the greatest challenge today is to protect the river from the pressures of continued urban sprawl of the city, and the attendant problems of pollution, loss of habitat and increases in population and usage.
01. RIVERSIDE PARK ZONE (refer pages 28-33)
02. VIDA STREET ZONE (refer pages 34-39)
03. ABERFELDIE PARK ZONE (refer pages 40-47)
04. HOLMES ROAD ZONE (refer pages 48-53)
05. ROWING CLUB ZONE (refer pages 54-57)
06. TERRACE ZONE (refer pages 58-63)
07. WHARF & MARIBYRNONG PARK ZONE (refer pages 64-71)
08. BRIDGES & FLOATING FACILITIES (refer pages 72-83)
STUDY AREA

The master plan study area covers the eastern frontage of the Maribyrnong River within the City of Moonee Valley, from the Raleigh Street Bridge until Riverside Park, with a particular focus on the Holmes Road intersection and surrounding land. This portion of the Maribyrnong River and the associated parklands are among the most frequented open spaces within the City of Moonee Valley. Local residents and visitors to the area are attracted to the varied recreational, cultural and commercial opportunities within and immediately adjacent to the project area. The landscape is highly valued by the community for the river, trees, cycle and pedestrian paths, sporting facilities, and associated activities.

PURPOSE

As the city undergoes growth and residential population continues to rise, there are increased demands on the parklands that will require a substantial improvement in amenity and function. The purpose of the master plan is to successfully negotiate this change by providing a clear vision for the future short, medium and long term design, development and management of the area. The master plan needs to recapture the vision and spirit shown by the citizens of the Essendon River League, who over a century ago has the wisdom, foresight and energy to lobby and create the great series of public landscapes that define the master plan study area. The time has come for a new injection of ideas and enthusiasm to continue this visionary work.
GLOBAL CONTEXT

Any master plan undertaken these days must be framed by one overarching issue - climate change. "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea level". It is now recognised as the major challenge facing society today. It is also recognised that the totality of the issue will inevitably require substantial changes to all aspects of our lives, including how we choose to live and how we design our cities. As a result, the obligation of every master plan is to explore how these changes can become manifest on a site in the most sensitive and timely manner.

Even though a master plan for a relatively small site such as this portion of the Maribyrnong River may appear as a somewhat limited opportunity to affect change on such a global issue, the real opportunity lies in the ability for the master plan to implement small but highly visible changes that allow people to make the connection between on the ground action can and will help mitigate climate change. The mantra ‘Think global, Act local’ has never been more important.

The question then becomes how do you frame this master plan for a small segment of Maribyrnong River within this broad realm of climate change?

SITE CONTEXT

There are two immediate answers; the first is by examining the river itself and ensuring that as much as possible is done to improve its overall health. While most of the changes affecting the site occur outside the study area (and therefore out of the direct control of this master plan), there remains important symbolic changes implemented on this site that reflect a broader desire and attitude to the entire watershed. Many of these changes relate to physical improvements to the health and ecology of the river, and the desire to restitute the river to a state prior to white settlement. The master plan must promote ‘ecological richness’.

The second strategy is to change our relationship with and attitude towards the river; in other words, how we experience the river. This relationship has been revealed through the historical evolution of the river, particularly in the last 200 years when the river has experienced massive and detrimental change. As such, the master plan seeks to dramatically expand upon the types of (positive) experiences we have with the river. Similarly, the master plan seeks to change the manner in which we engage with the river within this framework of climate change. Where possible it suggests different ways of designing cities and public space, consistent with the need to make cities more efficient and socially inclusive. The master plan must promote ‘experiential richness’.
DESIGN CONTEXT

Our attitude towards the river is a legacy of the way we have represented the river. Throughout history, government engineers, cartographers and land surveyors have sought to control the river physically using bulldozers and chains, and metaphorically by drawing the river as a single and (wherever possible) straight line, thereby erasing the inherent difference and variability that gives a river its character. The very fact that the river is drawn as a single line, despite frequent fluctuations in water level, is indicative of this desire to control the river and to see things in black and white. As a result, the river has become a static, immovable and unchangeable element; any variation is erased when the line is drawn.

The master plan seeks to blur this historic static line, and to create intermediate zones that are neither land nor water (or wet or dry). It is in these blurred zones where the greatest possibility for both ecological and experiential richness exists. It is well documented that the highest area of ecological value is the littoral (intertidal) zone, which is also the area that most people (and particularly children) enjoy. The master plan seeks to expand this zone by creating a varied edge condition of pools and eddies, that encourages different forms of ‘richness’ that can evolve and change over time.

Consequently, the master plan seeks to give expression to the inherent variability and changeability of the river, and our relationship with it. At its heart, the master plan is about dramatically improving the ecological and social functioning of the river.