

MACQUARIE STREET EAST PRECINCT



A vision for one of Australia's most significant places – one that recognises the complex intersection of Aboriginal, colonial and contemporary meanings

Martin Place visualisation
Image: Hassell.

Quick facts

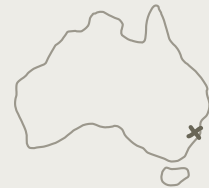
Project type:
Precinct-scale master plan

Location:
Macquarie Street,
Sydney, Australia

**Aboriginal language
landscape group:**
Gadi (Gadigal/Gadigalleon)

Client:
Government Architect NSW,
Department of Premier and
Cabinet NSW, Property and
Development NSW

Project team:
Hassell, Djinjama and
GML Heritage (supported
by Atlas Economics and
Coutts Consulting)



Located on Gadigal Land, the Macquarie Street East Precinct contains some of the state's most significant civic and cultural buildings, including the Parliament of NSW, the State Library, Sydney Hospital, The Mint and Hyde Park Barracks.

Key outcomes

Healthy Country

The Macquarie Street East Precinct master plan identifies a significant opportunity for a re-imagining of this entire precinct through better engagement with its eastern edge, to the Domain and Royal Botanic Garden. There is potential for establishing a contemporary identity, connected to landscape and to Country. The master plan creates space for re-establishing lost landscapes, for repairing natural systems, increasing habitat and integrating water spaces in the public domain.

Better places

Extensive physical, social and cultural research has been undertaken for the project. A key outcome of the master plan is to make this a more inclusive and welcoming part of the city, through improved access to and through the precinct, greater activation and improved safety, and through cultural engagement and programs.

Healthy community

The master plan highlights the importance of Aboriginal community participation through all stages of project design and delivery, as well as precinct governance. This includes involvement of Aboriginal designers, artists and other consultants within project teams, partnership with Aboriginal representatives of the precinct's institutions, and ongoing engagement with knowledge-holders and communities.

Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

The master plan was developed in close collaboration with Djinjama cultural design and research consultancy, ensuring Aboriginal perspectives, understandings and dimensions of place will inform the master plan outcomes. The plan proposes dual naming (for the precinct, its spaces and buildings) as well as multiple expressions of cultural heritage, including wayfinding, interpretation, lighting and public art.



Panoramic view taken from the steeple of St. James Church, 1871

Image: State Library NSW.

Spatial implications / tips for designers

A collaborative team and co-design approach allow better understanding of the complex, layered nature of the precinct.

The master plan is a framework for cohesive and integrated change, rather than fixed and specific design outcomes.

Rebalancing the colonial story will be achieved through big moves (opening up the frontage to the Domain) as well as many small interventions (naming, signage, activations and programs).

Engagement with individual institutions in the precinct needs to continue throughout the process, to align with a shared vision and understand specific challenges, priorities and projects.

Running along a ridge line, at the overlap of 2 original ecosystems, Macquarie Street defines the transition from the Sydney city centre to The Domain and Royal Botanic Garden. It is a complex and contested space, at the intersection of Aboriginal, colonial, 20th century and contemporary political, social and cultural history.

Despite its importance and location, this part of Macquarie Street has been largely overlooked due to low connectivity within and through the precinct, as well as a lack of recognition of culture and heritage, effective placemaking and wayfinding, and a coordinated precinct vision and management.

The master plan explores the potential of buildings, uses and spaces across this precinct and establishes guidelines and principles for their integration into a world-leading cultural and creative destination for Sydney. It builds upon a number of studies, including a strategic framework developed by Government Architect NSW (supported by Hassell) and a review of the precinct undertaken by Paul Keating and Lucy Turnbull.

This master plan recognises an unparalleled opportunity to acknowledge the political, legal, historical and cultural concerns of Aboriginal communities, to be a place of truth telling and healing within the buildings and spaces of the precinct, including their design, operation and governance.

[This place] offers a unique opportunity for an honest reckoning and truth telling ... a chance to come together to celebrate diversity and embed sustainability. It is a space where the difficult stories can be told and stories can be told and heard. A space for genuine change.

If not here, where?

—Dr Danièle Hromek, Budawang/Yuin, 'Reading Country', *Macquarie Street East Precinct Master Plan*

Queens Square visualisation

Image: Hassell.



Enabling multiple perspectives and understandings

The master plan process was led by Hassell, incorporating urban design, landscape architecture and architecture – working in close collaboration with Djinjama and GML Heritage.

This collaboration allowed the team to have a much richer appreciation of this place, including:

- the precinct’s Aboriginal history, as a place of dispossession and displacement, where decisions have been made that have harmed, and continue to harm, Aboriginal people
- the precinct’s complex recent history and the opportunity to reveal and express its many layers, meanings and narratives
- the opportunity to better engage with the precinct’s immediate urban context and leverage government investment in public transport, the public domain and cultural spaces in the city centre.

The master plan is introduced through these 3 dimensions of the precinct – with 3 statements (produced by Djinjama, GML Heritage and Hassell) providing the conceptual and spatial framework for the precinct vision, objectives and strategies.

A culturally appropriate engagement process of yarning with key knowledge-holders was integral in forming the backbone of the masterplanning process, principles and outcomes.

Reading Country

A reading of Country was undertaken by Djinjama. This shares the traditions, stories, beliefs, ontologies, lifestyles, knowledges, ceremonies, and cultural memories of this Country. This reading was supported with walks on Country – with the project team, stakeholders and design review panel – as a way of deepening knowledge of the precinct, revealing hidden stories and layers of place, and both informing and challenging the masterplanning process.

This process generated a series of observations and recommendations from Country, as well as designing with Country recommendations, including:

- an Indigenous interpretation strategy that covers the whole precinct and considers how to tell the longer and more difficult stories of place
- a renaming strategy that reflects place rather than people, not just for the overarching precinct but also individual places and projects in the precinct
- rebalancing the public art and statues to include a diversity of faces and voices, especially Aboriginal people
- an inclusion strategy to consider ways of including a diversity of people, as well as non-human kin
- design by Aboriginal architects and designers of a space for Aboriginal peoples using designing with Country and Country-centred design approaches
- presenting the deep geological and natural formation processes and marks that represent over 300 million years of forces, movements and change in the shaping of Sydney.

Master plan objectives

The master plan describes 5 overarching objectives which highlight the opportunities within the precinct. These have informed the master plan strategies as well as the design guidelines for specific projects and proposals.

Tell the deep histories of this place

While the colonial character and narrative of the precinct predominates, there are many other stories in this place – of lost landscapes and waterways, of social disruption and advancement, of community cohesion and discord. The precinct is an opportunity to acknowledge these conflicting and intertwined political, legal and cultural histories in a place of truth telling and healing – an opportunity of national importance that requires thoughtful, unrushed engagement and decision-making.

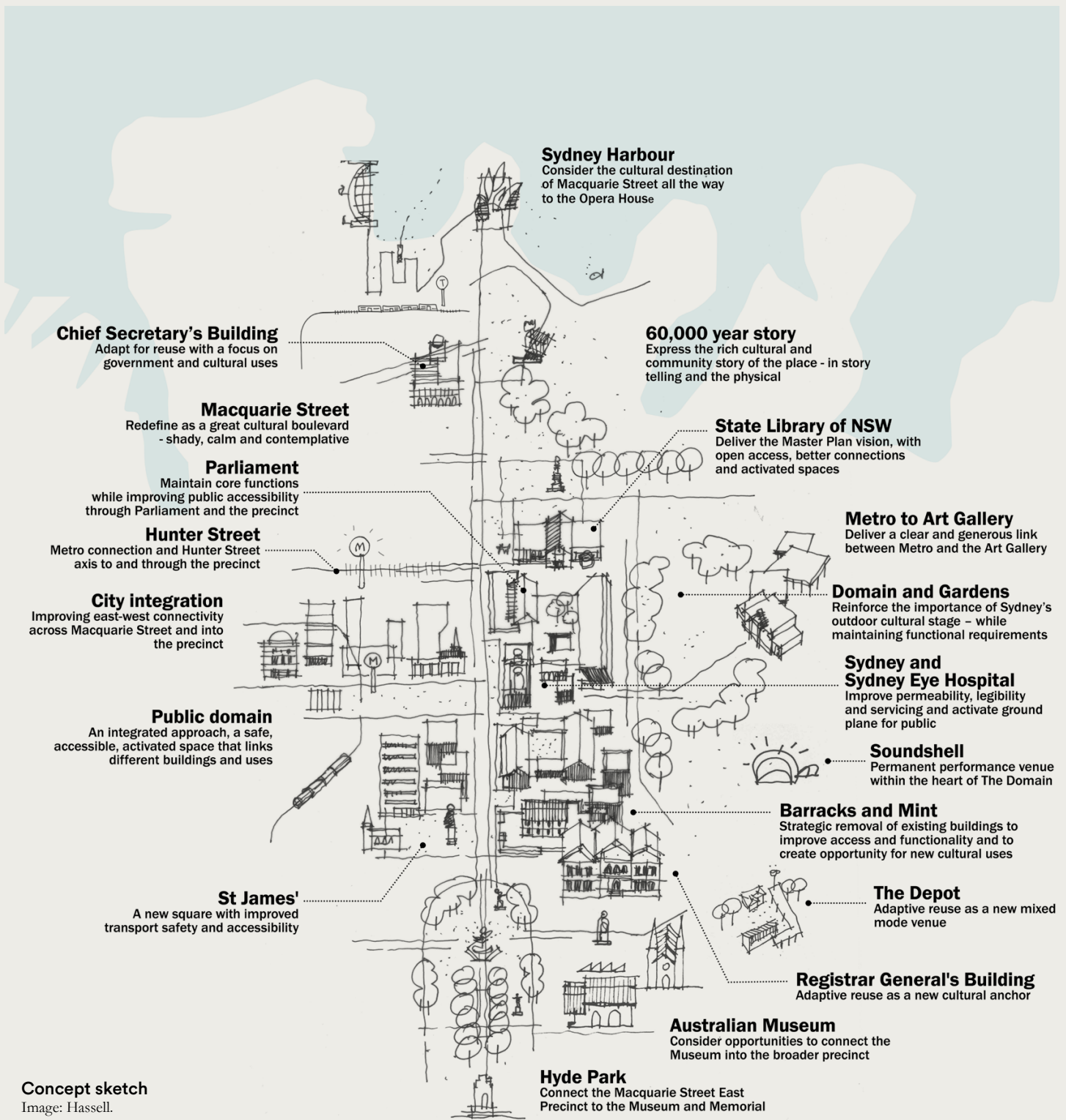
Deliver a cultural destination of global standing

The precinct is part of the NSW Government’s vision for Sydney as a world-leading cultural and creative city. It has significant cultural and civic institutions, each undergoing its own program of revitalisation – and also has the capacity to accommodate new cultural and civic buildings, spaces and activities. Like other global exemplars, a successful cultural precinct needs a diversity of institutions, a rolling program of events and activations, and a public domain that creates a sense of cohesion and connectivity.

Create a welcoming, inclusive place for all

A world-leading precinct is also one that engages with and creates a platform for its community. Big cultural anchors need to be complemented with smaller enterprises, fringe events, start-ups, creativity and youth. Macquarie Street is Sydney’s heartland of democracy, of protest and participation. It houses important public buildings and functions.

The precinct needs to maintain an authentic sense of freedom, inclusiveness, welcome and diversity – a ‘publicness’ that is for all people to experience and enjoy.



Adapt and activate buildings and spaces

The precinct houses a range of functions, as well as a diversity of buildings – many of which have exceptional heritage significance. There is a history of buildings being adapted for different uses as well as well-established civic and cultural functions, and the precinct has a number of under-used buildings and spaces. There is also a broader opportunity to explore how uses may change and buildings adapt over the next 20 to 30 years.

Create an integrated and connected urban precinct

The master plan sets out a cohesive, coordinated framework with the opportunity to accommodate a world-leading cultural destination, one that is integrated with its surrounding urban and natural context. The interface with surrounding streets and parks, and integration with the city's transport and movement networks are prime considerations. A key opportunity is to develop a precinct-wide approach to planning, design and governance, including the meaningful participation of Aboriginal people during every step of these processes.

Significant design opportunities for the precinct

The master plan identifies a number of design strategies for the precinct, delivering an improved interface and integration, connectivity, activation and character.

We can no longer neglect or ignore the memory and history that lurks in places such as the [Macquarie Street East Precinct]. We need to situate these histories in place and enliven them, creating a safe space for conversations that escort locals and visitors alike to the edge of their understandings.

—Sharon Veale, GML Heritage,
'History and Culture', *Macquarie Street East Precinct Master Plan*

Interface and integration

The Macquarie Street frontage is the precinct's primary address – an orderly collection of grand civic buildings along one of the city's most historically significant streets. By comparison, its eastern edge (along Hospital Road) is a tangle of servicing and parking zones, back doors and leftover spaces. These 2 distinct sides of the precinct are acknowledged within 'Reading Country' (*Macquarie Street East Precinct Master Plan*), with the precinct being a place at the overlap of 2 ecosystems. There is an opportunity to better connect with its parkland setting and provide an address for new public buildings and spaces – a Country-centred re-imagining of what this place might become.

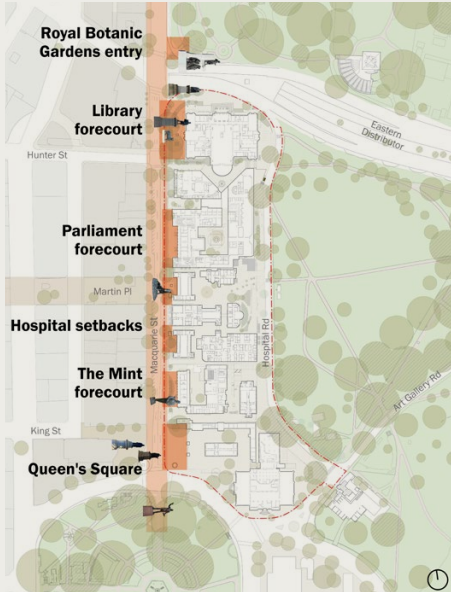
Connectivity

Better connectivity into and throughout the precinct will drive greater visitation, activation and enjoyment of the precinct – supporting the cultural, social and economic life of the eastern edge of the city centre. Connectivity is currently compromised by a lack of clear view lines between the city and parklands, a lack of clarity around public and private space, unclear security arrangements in some parts of the precinct, and the formal (at times unwelcoming) nature of its historic buildings. This can be improved by creating clear and direct connections, as well as a multitude of smaller, exploratory and engaging spaces and laneways – spaces where Aboriginal stories of place can be shared and understood.

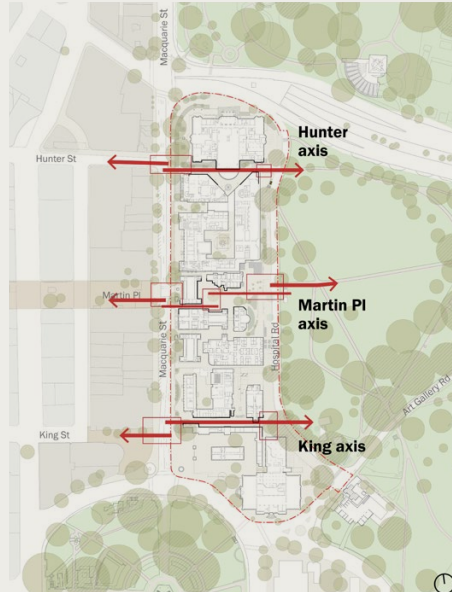
Precinct diversity and activation

Many buildings in the precinct have long-standing uses – an important connection to the early colonial origins of this place. Others have seen adaptation over time, as organisational and community needs change. While the precinct houses significant cultural and civic buildings, it is also an important place for the everyday functioning of the city, accommodating a range of justice, health, education and other uses. This diversity of uses also ensures that a diversity of people access and appreciate the precinct, using it for functional and operational reasons but also to dwell, meet and gather. As the precinct continues to evolve, to reflect a greater diversity of people and stories, it will become an even more meaningful place for the community and the city.

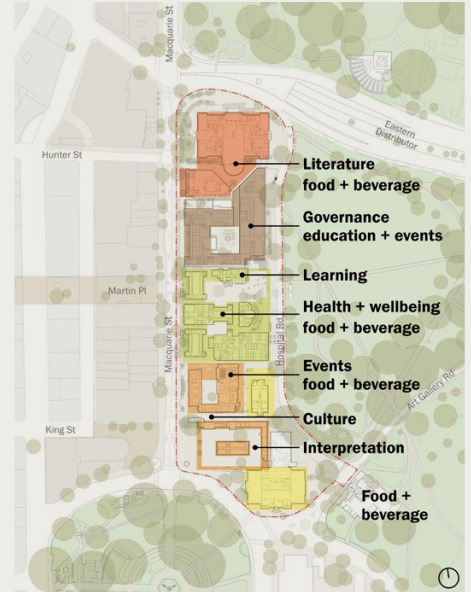
City (Macquarie Street) frontage



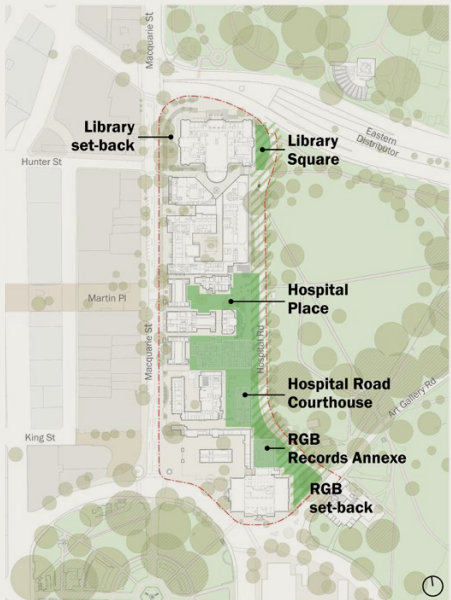
City to parklands laneways



Maintain a mix of functions



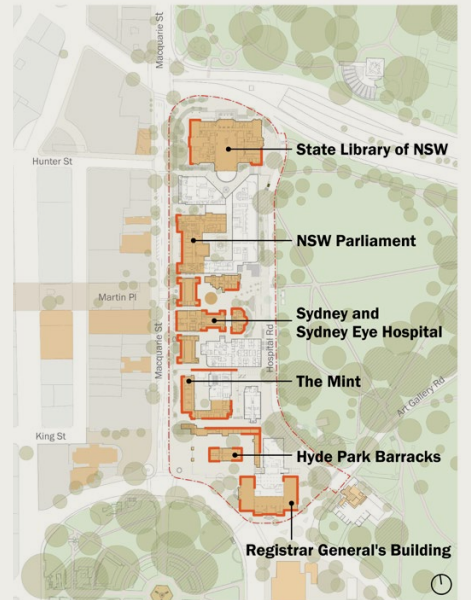
The Domain (Hospital Road) frontage



A network of small spaces and connections



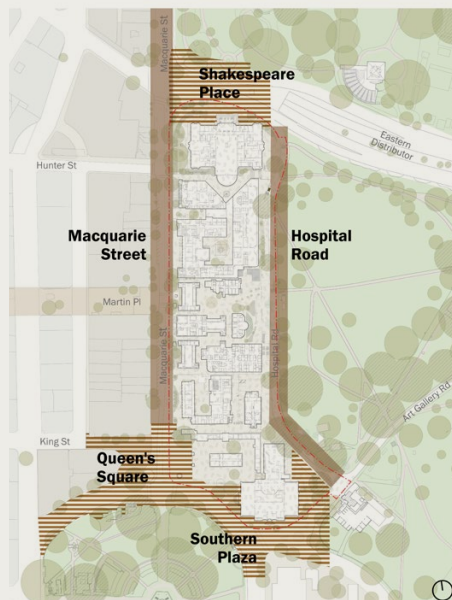
Reveal heritage at precinct edges



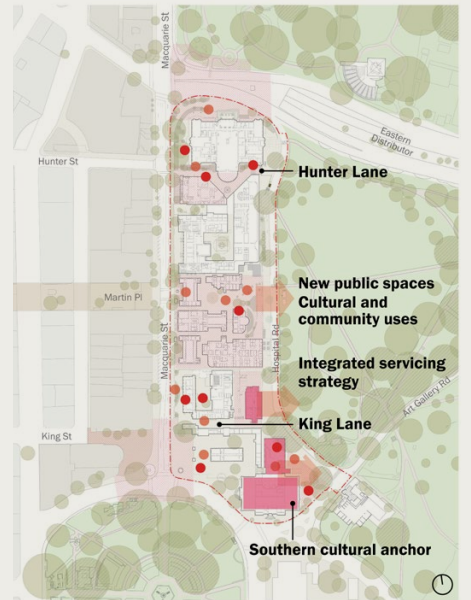
Gardens and cathedral frontages



Enhanced realm at the precinct edges



Opportunities for adaption and activation



From plan to projects

The master plan is the spatial framework for the precinct over time – ensuring individual projects are considered in an integrated way and collectively support the precinct's overarching vision and objectives.

Key projects in the precinct will include new buildings and public spaces as well as enhanced existing public spaces and the adaptation and activation of existing buildings. The timing of projects will depend on a range of factors, such as the evolving needs of different institutions, availability of funding or the need to respond to changes in the surrounding context (such as new developments and destinations).

These projects are governed by a set of precinct-specific design guidelines that include designing with Country recommendations. The recommendations recognise that consistent design elements, materials and colours can be used throughout the precinct to create a strong expression of the cultural and ecological character and meaning of this place. These are derived from the original flora, fauna and geology of the area and can be used to guide the design of buildings and spaces. Specific recommendations relate to:

- design solutions, including horizontal layering, differentiation in forms on the 2 sides of the precinct, expression of water, sustainable practices of re-use, reduce and recycle
- storytelling, a place to tell and listen to difficult stories, to enable change, to embed sustainability and celebrate diversity
- material recommendations, including recycled sandstone and other natural materials, permeable and translucent materials, colours and materials inspired by the earth and landscape
- landscape recommendations, including planting of tree families, native endemic planting, and sustainable resource use.

Public domain guidelines describe the intent and requirements of ground plane materiality, vegetation, street furniture, signage and wayfinding, lighting, security and servicing. These guidelines identify opportunities for responding to Aboriginal cultural and community considerations, spaces for cultural practice and expression, truth telling and storytelling, and for continual engagement with Aboriginal practitioners and communities.

Further resources

PDNSW (no date) *Macquarie Street East Precinct*, Property and Development NSW website, NSW Department of Planning and Environment, <https://www.dpie.nsw.gov.au/housing-and-property/our-business/precinct-development/macquarie-street-east-precinct>.

PDNSW (2023) *Macquarie Street East Precinct Master Plan*, prepared by Hassell for Property and Development NSW, NSW Department of Planning and Environment, https://www.dpie.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/554940/Macquarie-Street-East-Precinct-Master-Plan-Hassell-architectural-version.pdf.

Design recommendations

Image: Djinjama.

Material, colour and texture references



Credits

Research and writing:
David Tickle, Hassell

In collaboration with:
Danièle Hromek, Djinjama, and Sharon Veale, GML Heritage