Revitalising laneways in inner city Brisbane

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Introduction
Laneways are precious micro-spaces that can be found within crowded inner city street networks. The revitalisation of laneways is a current planning issue relevant to inner city Brisbane. Laneways in other Australian cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Perth are currently undergoing revitalisation to catalyse growth and development.

This paper seeks to define laneways as they exist within inner city areas of Brisbane. It then examines the successes of laneway development in other Australian cities and suggests ways through which laneway spaces in Brisbane can be developed or revitalised.

In order for laneways in Brisbane to be transformed into thriving activity centres, it is important to determine which attributes of laneway development contribute to successful revitalisation. How can we encourage and facilitate the growth of laneways in Brisbane in order to make it a more interesting and attractive place? How is it possible to influence our thinking about the development of Brisbane laneways? Broad recommendations for future laneway planning and development in Brisbane will conclude this paper.

It is important to note that this paper is a broad investigation into the concepts that have the ability to facilitate laneway revitalisation and development and their potential impact on Brisbane’s built environment. This paper is not intended to suggest specific actions or strategies for laneway revitalisation in Brisbane. Its intent is to define laneway spaces and focus on the broader concepts behind city shaping and laneway revitalisation. My purpose is to suggest that laneway revitalisation can improve and shape Brisbane into a more unique and interesting destination, benefiting the community and Queensland’s economy.

Defining laneways
It is necessary to define laneways to show how they fit into the overall urban structure of an inner city area. For the purposes of this paper, laneways have been defined in accordance with Brisbane City Council’s definition of laneways.

Laneways are different from normal CBD streets; they are narrow public streets that have traditionally provided vehicular access and servicing to the rear of adjacent buildings (Brisbane City Council 2010). Alternatively, alleyways form part of private sites and although they traditionally serve a similar purpose, alleyways are subject to operational works at the discretion of the private owners (Brisbane City Council 2010). Arcades are pedestrian only linkages that can be inside or outside a building. Arcades can provide links between buildings and can form an integral part of a pedestrian network and pedestrian accessibility; however, they are not subject to the same development guidelines as laneways and alleyways (Brisbane City Council 2010).

Activated laneways contribute positively to the pedestrian network of an inner city area by encouraging activity and interaction in the public realm. Along with laneways, alleyways and arcades also help to complete the network of ‘off-the-street paths’ that connect different land uses, activities and nodes in cities.

An operational definition
For the purposes of this paper the following definition of laneways will be used:

*Laneways are small-scale public streets that adjoin directly to buildings. Both vehicles and pedestrians can be accommodated in a laneway.*
Understanding laneways as places
In order to effectively understand the requirements for laneway revitalisation, it is important to clearly establish exactly what the term “laneway” embodies. This section of this paper seeks to establish a functional definition of laneways, identify differing typologies of laneways and their functions, as well as develop an understanding of the value of laneways in cities.

Several characteristics become evident when examining laneways as an urban concept. There are a number of ideas as to what constitutes a laneway, or which term is used to describe ‘that small space’ between buildings that often still retains the character of its historic neighbourhood.

In Life Between Buildings, Jan Gehl stipulates that,
‘It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what life between buildings means…opportunities for meetings and daily activities in the public spaces of a city or residential area enable one to be among, to see, and to hear others, to experience other people functioning in various situations.’

In line with Gehl’s assertions, Ray Oldenburg (1991) suggests that one's "first place" is the home and the "second place" is the workplace, where people may actually spend most of their time. “Third places”, then, are "anchors" of community life and facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction. Laneway revitalisation in Brisbane presents a distinct opportunity to create a network of intimate “third place” experiences throughout the inner city, diversifying the urban realm and providing a range of factors that will influence a laneway’s typology.

A laneway’s typology is influenced by many factors. Cubitt (2008), citing the works of Martin (1996, 2001, 2002a, 2002b), explains that paving, styles of fencing, vegetation, lot depth, building scale, setbacks, and lane usage are all important elements in describing different types of lanes that can be found in different locations within an urban realm.

**Pragmatic lanes are utilitarian:** extensive paving, service poles, garages, and parking areas all point to an actively used, functional lanescape. These laneways can be found frequently in areas fronted by higher densities, rental housing, or commercial districts.

**Hidden lanescapes:** secluded with high fences closing off yards from public view. There are generally few signs of life, giving the impression of a forbidden and potentially unsafe passageway. Laneway maintenance is less attended to, and frequently these alleys are unpaved.

**Revealing alleys:** allow glimpses of less formal back yard landscapes and suggest that the lanes are safe and semi-private commons. Walking down a revealing lane, one can observe features of the houses, see and hear family pets, find signs of children’s presence, and notice residents’ activities of daily life.

**Fundamental attributes of laneways**
The revitalisation of inner-city areas has elevated the status of laneways and restored an element of laneways’ social connectivity by creating intimate yet accessible common spaces. New urbanism and revitalisation trends within planning have had a positive influence on the resurgence of laneways in cities. In order to further understand laneways as a concept, it is necessary to discuss the defining attributes that identify laneways as part of the urban form.
Form
Laneways can exist in a singular form, or as part of a network of laneways within a street network.

Scale
Laneways in Brisbane are generally smaller versions of CBD streets that directly adjoin built form on either side.

Function
Based on the definitions of laneways and related concepts above, it is possible to identify a range of functions that laneways provide to the urban form and structure of an inner city environment:

1. Environmental – such as a green space in the middle of a city. Laneways have the potential to be transformed into community spaces with gardens to provide shade and a soothing environment.
2. Social – laneways have the ability to provide spaces for formal and informal social interaction.
3. Health and recreational – laneways can act to improve health by promoting accessibility and through the connectivity advantages that they can provide. Laneways can also enhance recreational benefits within a community by providing a place of social interaction, a destination where people not only want to go to but stay as well.
4. Accessibility and connectivity – laneways can provide cross-block/through-block pedestrian linkages that positively assist accessibility and connectivity in the street network of an inner city area.
5. Amenity – laneways can offer shelter and shade, as well as provide a place in an inner city area that is not noisy and that promotes safety whilst simultaneously affording a positive visual amenity.

Utility
Jan Gehl describes places, in this case laneways, in terms of their utility – being an area for different types of activity encompassing necessary, optional and social activities. Gehl provides the following definitions for the three types of activities:

- **Necessary activities** are ‘almost compulsory’ – they have to take place and therefore their existence is not dependent on the physical environment. Examples of such activities include going to work or school, or waiting for a bus.
- **Optional activities** are those that take place if ‘there is a wish and time’ – such as activities that only take place if the weather or place make the setting desirable for undertaking the activity. Examples of such activities include going for a walk, or sunbathing.
- **Social activities** are an evolution from necessary and optional activities – they depend on the presence of at least one other person. Examples of such activities include social events, performing arts and outdoor entertainment.

Ownership
The laneways in inner city Brisbane that are relevant to this paper are publicly owned streets, similar to the main streets of any city. This therefore allows laneways to be classified as public spaces.

Laneways in Brisbane should exist as an inter-connected network in order to achieve the best possible function and utility for users. These small-scale, publicly owned spaces should be revitalised.
Australian laneways in recent times
In recent times, the revitalisation of laneways has become highly publicised and popular in the media. Laneways in Australian cities such as Sydney and Perth are undergoing dramatic changes in order to achieve a more diverse urban city structure, similar to that of Melbourne. The City of Sydney is proposing to ‘breathe new life into CBD laneways with a range of creative initiatives to encourage more activity’ (Sydney Media 2010, p.1). Similarly, the City of Perth is undertaking laneway revitalisation projects so that laneways can continue to offer ‘human scale experiences...full of charm and character’ (City of Perth 2007, p.1). Brisbane City Council (2010) is following suit in an attempt to uncover the hidden potential of Brisbane’s laneways, through the Vibrant Laneways and Small Spaces initiative, as part of the City Centre Master Plan.

Laneway revitalisation requires stakeholder interest, capital works programs, small business grants and specific planning guidelines. As a result, laneways can strengthen the economic role of city precincts (City of Sydney 2010). Brisbane City Council is currently working in conjunction with key stakeholders to redevelop laneways in the CBD, Fortitude Valley and South Brisbane (Brisbane City Council 2010). Council is undertaking this redevelopment program by examining best practice examples from other Australian cities such as Sydney and particularly Melbourne.

Laneways in Melbourne have been a vital part of the street network since the early planning and design of the city in the 1900s. Today, Melbourne City Council’s Lanes Policy 22.20 identifies laneways in Melbourne as a valued and vital part of the city’s urban form (City of Melbourne 2010). The policy emphasises the importance of the preservation or enhancement of connectivity, 24 hour public access, sight lines, active street frontages, service functions and pedestrian amenities in relation to laneway preservation and revitalisation. All of these practices have successfully elevated laneways in Melbourne and should be considered in revitalizing laneways in Brisbane.

*Laneways provide high quality street environments, pedestrian safety and comfort which are critical to the community’s positive perception of the city (Melbourne) (Hansen Partnerships 2004, p.1)*

Implications of laneway revitalisation for Brisbane
Activated laneways have the ability to:

• Provide safe, legible pedestrian linkages
• Create desirable destinations
• Create inspiring spaces and places
• Provide a canvas for street art and creativity
• Allow for an alternate use of space.

Bielaczyc (2006) describes four main elements that should be considered when designing and planning for this social infrastructure:

• Cultural beliefs – does the community need spaces for any specific purpose?
• Practices – what usually happens in public spaces?
• Socio-spatial relations – how do people interact in public spaces?
• Interactions the infrastructure has with the surrounding environment – how do people interact with the environment?

For the purposes of revitalising key laneways in the inner city of Brisbane, the four principles asserted by Bielaczyc have been adapted in order to suggest a way to achieve best practice laneway revitalisation. Important elements for the development of Brisbane’s laneways include:
• The identification of community needs – establish what the community requires from laneways. Do residents in inner city Brisbane support laneway revitalisation? Are laneways places that people would like to frequent?
• The identification of spatial relationships – an investigation into the best possible locations for laneway revitalisation. Which key laneways in the inner city would catalyse organic development and encourage small businesses?

Laneways have the potential to be transformed into small scale spaces that inspire and catalyse the growth and densification of Brisbane’s CBD. New possibilities should be considered for Brisbane; we cannot just re-invent or re-use the laneway revitalisation techniques used by Melbourne and Sydney. Laneways in Brisbane need to be adaptable, flexible and enduring in order to spark community interest and serve as interesting places within the urban realm of the inner city.

Existing laneways in Brisbane have the potential to be transformed into lively, dense and human scale spaces providing a high level of interaction for users. Built form and character have the potential to be enhanced along with pedestrian amenity, legibility and connectivity, creating interactive and desirable places.

The revitalisation of these currently underutilised spaces will encourage social, economic and environmental benefits for Brisbane. The economic role of the CBD precinct will be strengthened while there will also be an increase in the diversity of entertainment and fine-grain opportunities in the city. Cultural experiences will be afforded to a wide range of CBD visitors and residents as these laneway spaces will be able to showcase different art forms as well as provide to meet away from busy main streets.

Alleyways represent urban “retreats” just off the busy street, precisely the sort of ‘just-off’ locations that American tourists seek when they go to Europe. They allow an intimacy that, when well designed, can be offered by the interior of hundreds of blocks in most historic North American cities (Clay 1978). It is my view that laneways in Brisbane should aim to exude the intimacy and romance of alleyways in Europe.

It will take a significant and concerted laneway upgrade, of not only one laneway, but of a network of laneways, for Brisbane to evoke the kind of atmosphere Clay (1978) mentions. There is no doubt that the inner city laneways in Brisbane have the potential for redevelopment and revitalisation. The type of development needs to be imaginative and visionary. Brisbane is a city that needs to be shaped and moulded in order to transition through some significant future challenges. This development potential needs to be recognised. The laneways require transformation from utilitarian urban corridors to attractive and innovative back streets that appeal to and attract users whilst simultaneously providing a high level of inclusive social infrastructure for community use.

As previously mentioned, Brisbane needs a different solution to that of Melbourne and Sydney. If laneways are to be functional areas within the CBD network, the development needs to ensure that these places are designed for Brisbane, and for Queensland. It will be particularly important that any revitalisation and development to be responsive to our climate. If laneways are to put Brisbane ‘on the map’ they need to provide innovative and interesting elements that prove why Brisbane is a city that should become a destination.

The growth of laneways in Brisbane may be best facilitated by strategic policy and planning at both local and state government levels. A recent change in small bar licensing has encouraged a handful of new venues to open their doors, but we are still a long way away from achieving an inviting laneway atmosphere in Brisbane. For the best and most sustainable outcome, the growth needs to be encouraged to occur organically.
We need to see a shift in the way spaces in between buildings are valued by communities and developers alike. Specifically, the full range of benefits that laneways can contribute to a city need to be fully accounted for and translated into economic and social terms so that government authorities, developers, and the community can grasp the importance of laneways. If this is achieved it is likely that laneways would be regarded less as a “left-over” or negotiable space in developments, and more as an asset warranting protection and improvement.

An unfortunate example of the disregard developers, and ultimately local and state government, can have for precious laneway space is the recent loss of the Elizabeth Street laneway. This laneway was home to ‘The Coffee Supplier’ and an arts and music space called ‘The Alley.’ According to a manager from The Alley, ‘this (the Elizabeth Street laneway) was the first laneway that really grew organically in Brisbane.’ These two businesses thrived as a result of their unique laneway location, away from busy Elizabeth Street. Some say that the construction of a new $180 million office tower that will result in the loss of this laneway, is a testament to a lack of genuine support for the organic growth of laneways in Brisbane.

It was Christopher Alexander (1977) in his work *A Pattern Language* who suggested that ‘when you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but (you) must also repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole; and the thing which you make takes its place in the web of nature, as you make it.’ In order for laneway revitalisation to occur and for inner city Brisbane to reap the benefits, the network of existing laneways need to be encouraged to grow together into meaningful spaces.

**Concluding statement**

Good laneway planning will not only allow inner city Brisbane to accommodate change, it will also effect it. We can shape the future orientation of Brisbane.

Laneway revitalisation requires creativity and innovation as well as a robust and poignant analysis of what inner city Brisbane really requires. What is the smartest way to conceive the future of small urban spaces in inner city Brisbane? A planning vision for inner city Brisbane needs to be visionary and transformative – we need to decide what the desired future for Brisbane really is – are we really destined to become Australia’s ‘new world city’?

It is important to allow recent momentum in this space to continue for the sake of Brisbane’s inner city development. Brisbane City Council needs to continue to foster growth in these valuable microcosms of the city, as major economic and social benefits could potentially be forgotten if we do not act now.
References


Brisbane City Council 2010b, City Centre Master Plan 2026, Brisbane.


