TOP SECRET PRECINCT
MASTER PLAN 2021

A vision for a major tourism and gateway hub in outback Queensland
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MASTER PLAN
2021 IN BRIEF

1. VISION
4. DESIGN OBJECTIVES
10. TRANSFORMATIVE PROJECTS
The vision of Murweh Shire Council is to continue to develop and enhance our healthy, vibrant, sustainable and resilient outback community. We consider tourism, in combination with other economic sectors, as critical for the sustainable development of our region, providing meaningful employment opportunities for the local community. The Stage 2 Master Plan (2021) for the Top Secret Precinct, developed in collaboration with Griffith University, has been endorsed by council and demonstrates the continued commitment of council to the pursuit of sustainable tourism as a vehicle for economic growth. The Stage 1 Master Plan (2017) resulted in significant state government investment into the Top-Secret Precinct, including the development of a Planetarium and WWII Interpretative Centre commemorating life on the Top Secret US Airbase. We seek feedback, engagement and endorsement from the federal government on this ambitious vision articulated in the Master Plan 2021. To unlock further potential would not only benefit Murweh Shire but the entire region, strengthening its existing assets with some new national-level attractions.

Mayor Shaun (Zoro) Radnedge
Shire of Murweh
Regional towns in Australia often face a variety of challenges that leave little room for creative thinking and even less to rethink anew their existing assets. Yet, the opportunity to significantly shape the future development of the Murweh Shire and boost its economy was provided with the (re)discovery of World War II heritage (a secret army base!) at the Charleville airport site.

Embracing the opportunity, Murweh Shire Council, in close collaboration with Griffith University, has embarked in the journey to become a major tourism and gateway hub in outback Queensland. This ambitious master plan has been prepared to strategize the development of the 100 hectares of the tourism precinct.
Murweh Shire is a predominantly rural area, with a small township at Charleville and smaller townships at Augathella and Morven. The Shire encompasses a total land area of about 40,770 square kilometres. Rural land is used largely for agriculture, particularly sheep and cattle grazing and grain growing.

The 2019 Estimated Resident Population for Murweh Shire is 4,295, with a population density of 0.00 persons per hectare (idcommuninity, 2021).

Charleville is the largest town of the Murweh Shire, 747 km west of Brisbane, Queensland.
Major features of Murweh Shire include Chesterton Range National Park, Tregole National Park, Morven Conservation Park, the Warrego River and several state forests, the Morven Historical Museum, as well as the assets found in Charleville.

Specifically, Charleville tourism assets include the Historic House Museum and the heritage trail, the Corones Tour, the Bilby Experience, the Cosmos Centre and Observatory, the World War II Tour and the Royal Flying Doctor Service Base, Golf Club, Charleville Botanical Reserve, Graham Andrews Parklands & Recreation Complex.

The downtown is very well serviced and within a perimeter of roughly 7km x 0.8km, it offers a good diversity of sport and recreational facilities. These include a gymnasium, swimming pool, stadium, showground, and several parks. Charleville is also home to an operating railway station, as well as several health providers (dentist, healthcare office, hospital, aged care housing).

Assets surrounding Charleville include agriculture, Lake Eyre (with air tours), and historical places, both manmade and natural, reflecting the outback history.
The perimeter used for the Top Secret Precinct includes the airport boundaries on the north, east and south sides, while the western boundary follows the railway tracks.

The total area of the Precinct is approximately 600 hectares located between the downtown to the west and the bush to the east. For the most part there are two areas that group the main activities: the housing, depot and local government services to the west; and the core tourism activities in the center (~100 hectares).

The natural landscape is characteristic of the bush: red dirt soil and dry types of vegetation (shrubs and mulga trees). The original terrain was flattened by the different phases of the airport development.
Qantas built the first landing grounds in 1922 and the aerodrome grew steadily with the development of the Air Mail Service. In 1934, Charleville went under the spotlight with the MacRobertson Air Race.

The major historical event occurred in 1942 when the aerodrome became both a secret US air base and the terminal for the bomber aircrafts from the US to the South-West Pacific Area. Despite the large investment (new runways, 3 camps, 5 new hangars), the story is a short one as dismantling started in 1943 and was completed in 1944.

Today, few buildings are remaining, the most important being the bomb sight concrete vault and Hangar 104. Many concrete traces are spread throughout the site.
2. VISION

Based on a structured analysis to identify environmental, program and development constraints and opportunities in the precinct, the Master Plan is a non-statutory document that outlines a vision to guide growth and development of the site over the next 5-20 years. The document provide strategic direction on the following:

- How the top secret precinct can (as opposed to will) develop and redevelop into the future to provide maximum benefits to the local community and local tourism industry.
- A high level plan intended to set out objectives and strategies to manage development and change over time accordingly.
- A process that defines what is important about a place and how its character and quality can be conserved, improved and enhanced.
- Identification of key historical sites for preservation and to assist council to identify potential sustainable future development options.

The Master Plan delivers a project vision and design principles based on identified opportunities that are interesting, accessible, and unique, and a planning approach that integrates them into a coherent and successful tourism product. It includes an action agenda that outlines the necessary short-term and medium-term actions to implement the plan.
DESIGN OBJECTIVES

Objective 1
Create a strong and unique identity for the Top Secret Precinct by building up on the WWII tour, existing strengths and developing new ideas.

Objective 2
Enhance the qualities of the precinct by creating better visible hierarchy and spatial quality.

Objective 3
Improve the quality of the open space by developing active transport and new places for everyone.

Objective 4
Improve the number of tourists to help stimulate economic growth and private investment.

This Master Plan aims to reinforce the character of the site as a Top Secret Precinct and as a premier destination for visitors and locals. Focus is given to the World War II tour to transform it into a greater attraction. By reconsidering the overall tourism journey and adding some new attractions, the master plan will provide distinctiveness and uniqueness to the attraction. Overall, new buildings, signage and public open spaces will be developed to provide new amenities, clearly hierarchised landmarks and support recreational, cultural and social activities. New activities may include extended outdoor opportunities, business, creative or cultural activities. This transformation is a great opportunity for the town to maximise such a large site, add vibrancy to the area and support the local economy.
In 2017, a first Master Plan was elaborated to guide the growth and development of the tourism precinct, based on the unique and charismatic WWII heritage (Top Secret US Air Base) and the Cosmos Centre (astronomical tourism / celestial ecotourism).

The assumption was (and still is) that a strategic combination of charismatic attractions within a single tourism-focused precinct will generate the scale economies and synergy among stakeholders required to stimulate long term development.

The full detailed Master Plan 2017 is available at https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/handle/10072/394837
Master Plan 2017 has already yielded major outcomes. Below is a list of the key outcomes delivered from state government funded projects.

➢ **Building Our Regions Grant** ($612,000) from the Department of State Development to construct a Planetarium (picture 1), the largest in the southern hemisphere. The Planetarium was opened by the Governor on 10/06/2020.

➢ **Growing Tourism Infrastructure Grant** ($1.51 million) from the Department of Innovation, Tourism and Industry Development to revitalise the Cosmos Centre and surrounding precinct. The revitalisation of the Cosmos Centre has included, a virtual space shuttle, an immersive theatre, ten new interpretative experiences, the creation of a cosmic time warp facility, a telescope workshop, a facility which houses the largest telescope in Australia for non-research purposes (picture 2), and associated capital works.

➢ **Advance Queensland Fellowship** ($706,000) from the Department of Innovation, Tourism and Industry Development to research the history of the Top-Secret WWII base in Charleville, develop three prototype visitor experiences, and form the basis for translation of research into a purpose-built visitor centre.

➢ **Outback Tourism Infrastructure Grant** ($1.23 million) from the Department of Innovation, Tourism and Industry Development for a project titled ‘On the Brisbane Line: Development of an Experiential Tourism Hub.’ The facility, a replica WWII hangar (picture 3), has been constructed and includes the exhibit internal fit-out.
The permanent exhibition at the Cosmos Center
Welcome aboard, you're sharing 1 room with 14 men

6 triple bunks, 2 small port holes and 1 small bathroom with sink - this is your new home. Don't think of something to do like the men who they're for barrels, bags, helmets and cans - when it's warm they're out fishing and you're not busy with duties or drills, try to grab a slice of space on the deck.

30,000 meals a day

With so many men aboard the Queen Mary, a boiling family dining room, it's no wonder that up to 30,000 meals are cooked in a entire day - all happy families on its stomach.

If you want to eat, don't forget your name card. This will tell you where your meals are served, either in the dining room or aboard each deck. Breakfast is served from 9:00 am to 10:00 am, lunch from 1:00 pm to 2:00 pm, and dinner from 5:00 pm to 6:00 pm. You can eat anywhere in the dining room, as you like. Just choose your table or chair. If you want to eat the same 3 courses, please go to the main dining room, as you like. If you want to order your food in advance, you should go to the chef's table. Otherwise, you need to go to the cashier after you finish your meal. The cashier is open until 8:00 pm.

Roll the dice

The dice is a special feature of the Queen Mary. You can roll the dice and get a surprise. It's fun and exciting. You can choose your own dice color and number. The dice can be rolled by hand or machine. You can also choose to roll the dice in the morning, afternoon, or evening. The dice can be rolled in the dining room, lounge, or main deck. The dice is opened to enter.

The new exhibition at the WWII base,
TOTAL NUMBER OF VISITORS TO THE COSMOS CENTER
(all attractions included, source: Cosmos Center Data)

12,654 (2018)

14,928 (2019)

26,983 (2020)
Despite COVID!

Despite COVID!
Master Plan 2021 provides the opportunity to evaluate the progress to date and reassess the set objectives, strategies and design principles. The assessment relied on site visits, spatial analysis, interviews conducted with the main stakeholders (council members and staff at the Cosmos Center) and a street survey. The 1st master plan had identified 4 main design objectives. If the last 3 years have contributed to building new attractions and thus bringing in tourists (Objectives 1 & 4), the precinct still needs a better visibility and spatial quality (Objective 2) to enhance its identity, as well as attracting residents to use it (Objective 3). Elements to consider are,

- **Coherent signage**
  - To increase wayfinding within the precinct and raise the awareness of the large offering
  - To connect with the town center

- **Public space**
  - To enhance the visitor experience (e.g. transition between each facility) and promote the precinct as a whole
  - To provide community engagement opportunities

- **Strategic landscaping**
  - To provide safe pedestrians and congregation areas with more shaded areas
  - To enhance the outback experience
  - Fencing strategy to reconsider to avoid cutting off the landscape

- **Upgrade of some of the existing facilities/ experience**
  - To maintain overall architectural quality (e.g. entry and outside of Cosmos)
  - To enhance comfort during tour (e.g. with creative information display and shade structures)

- **Add new facilities**
  - To enhance the identity of the precinct with an Outback museum, Bilby Centre, Information hub

- **Strategic Marketing plan**
A street survey was conducted December 1st-2nd, 2020 to identify the general feeling about the tourism precinct. The set of questions included:

1. Are you local?
2. Do you know about the Top Secret Precinct in Charleville?
3. Do you know there are a Cosmos Centre and WWII museum in Charleville?
4. Have you been there before?
5. Any suggestion to improve the area?

We had 18 participants with almost equity in gender (10 women and 8 men), among which 11 were residents and frequent visitors for work (6) or shopping (1). Although the small number of participants limits the generalisation of the results, these results indicate a certain trend:

- only 33% of the participants knew about the Top Secret Precinct (the good news is that among them 1/3rd were non local)
- All participants without exception knew about the Cosmos Centre and the WWII museum
- only 33% of the participants had been to visit the Top Secret Precinct (the good news is that among them 1/3rd were non local) and half visited the Cosmos Centre only

The comments received from 7 of the participants regarding question 5 identify mostly two main concerns: develop more activities and develop the marketing for the local community. Concerning the activities, one participant specified ‘more activity areas for children. Preserve the tranquility of the centre of town and develop the tourism precinct apart from it’, while others suggested ‘art and events’, ‘activities that involve the community’ and ‘exciting activities’.

Although the current attractions are known and propose incentives for revisitation (‘pay once, free for 12 months’), it seems that the engagement with the community to use the precinct is underdeveloped.
Based on the assessment of the existing assets and following consultation and a co-creative process with the Murweh Shire Council, Council has decided to focus on Objectives 2 & 3 (spatial quality and engaging residents) for this 2nd phase of the Master Plan, with the additional design of new attractions as shown in the diagram below. **10 transformative projects have been identified.**

Figure 4: Program for Master Plan 2021
10 TRANSFORMATIVE PROJECTS

1. OUTBACK MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA (OMOA)
2. PRECINCT PUBLIC SPACES
3. SIGNAGE, INCLUDING THE ENTRY STATEMENT TO THE PRECINCT
4. AIRFIELD MUSEUM
5. RELOCATE THE BILBY CENTER
6. CANOPY WALK
7. LANDSCAPING & PARKING
8. RSL MEMORIAL SHED
9. BUSH DISCOVERY WALK
10. REJUVENATE EXISTING ASSETS

1. New high-impact tourism attraction. National level museum, that will unveil the contemporary features of the outback environment and its people. Strong identity.

2. To create a new vibrant community hub with event space, picnic area, playground, etc., that will also provide tourists with authentic experience of outback town life.

3. Develop consistent signage across the precinct and town to enhance visitation and information.

4. New tourism attraction exploiting the rich aviation history of Charleville.

5. Better natural environment and exposure to tourists will increase visitation numbers.

6. Creation of a pedestrian structure over the canopy of the precinct to enjoy views and wildlife.
The radial development is driven by emphasizing the main site axis (Qantas drive), providing a flexible project construction and expansion, while adding a focal point for the users' journey on the site. The bottom diagram shows how the new focal point could provide a good centrality for the existing roads and buildings, and how the Qantas drive divides the master plan into two areas, one with existing assets and the other half for future expansion. For this proposal, the suggestion is to concentrate the development on the east side of Qantas drive, with 3 areas of development being identified and as shown below.
The heart of the radial development is the focal point (#8), a main plaza that serves as a converging public space from the existing roads and new pathways. Car parks also align with the plaza, while a radial grid of circulation links all the attractions together. The radial grid provides a smooth journey for tourists and locals alike, allowing visiting the attractions one after the other without missing any of them and within a short distance between each of them.
The new axes are designed to be shared roads, four meters wide to ensure easy, fixable and safe usage of the development. Regular shaded and sitting areas will provide a nice walkable experience.
Most of the development concerns soft landscape. Hardscape will be constituted with interlocked tiles when possible, to increase the penetrated surfaces, decrease the negative impacts on the environment and improve the project sustainability.
Master Plan 2021 proposes the creation of 6 new buildings either to relocate existing attractions (e.g. Bilby Center) or to host new attractions (outback museum, skywalk, baseball facility, RSL heritage shed, WWII experience). The above plan illustrates the location of the new buildings and the hierarchy movement between them. It also includes the proposed building usage and areas.
A series of activities to be held in the precinct for both visitors and locals during day and night have been devised to increase the precinct usage to the maximum. The above plan identifies the location of these activities.
To anchor the precinct in the memory of visitors, it is important to embed the attractions in a comprehensive ‘packaging’ that extends the public realm. By offering free gathering and open areas, pedestrian traffic and sharing moments can be enhanced. It will also encourage local life, healthy lifestyle and economic opportunities.
As the main distributing axis of the project, Qantas Drive requires an enhanced landscaped treatment. The choice was made to concentrate only on one side of the Qantas Drive for this proposal, thus visually contrasting areas with and without attractions. The journey along Qantas Drive has been divided into five main identified zones.
Key plan 1 located at Mitchell Highway includes an entry statement at both sides of the road, with a welcoming plaza that contains information boards and directs the visitors. The landscape design includes a gravel ground and a variety of trees that underline the borders of the area.
Along Qantas drive and before reaching out the plaza when traveling towards the airport, a new garden is proposed to introduce an insight into the landscaping knowledge of the Traditional Custodians of the land.
This plan shows the central part of the Qantas drive, that is the main plaza. This plaza has a radial design theme and contains the lookout.
New landscaping proposed at the WWII base
Arriving to the airport, a new landscaping welcomes the visitors, alternating hard and softscape and introducing native plants.
In this airport section, the main design element is a soft landscape including gravels and aligned trees with a distinguished rhythm along the Qantas drive. This part of Qantas drive focuses on deriving the visitors' attention toward the airport (if they are coming from the city) or guiding their attention toward the central plaza (if they are approaching from the airport).
Three main phases have been identified for the completion of the Master Plan 2021.

The 1st phase (short-term) includes the beautification of Qantas drive, the construction of pedestrian infrastructures to link the existing assets, the construction of the RSL shed and the competition call for OMOA.

The 2nd phase (median-term) concerns the construction of the main new infrastructures, as well as the relocation of the Bilby Center.

At last, the 3rd phase (long-term) includes the construction of the smaller attractions and the rejuvenation of the existing assets.
Estimated Total Cost for the entire completion: $12 -15 millions

The cost estimation is based on the reference unit price in Brisbane, adjusted using a regional index, 1.25. The partial cost breakdown can give an idea of the major costing, mostly for OMOA, while the Capital investment plan informs how to distribute the cost according to the timeline phases.

**Capital Investment Plan**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Capital Investment</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 (2021-2022)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (2023-2028)</td>
<td>$9-11,000,000</td>
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<td>3 (2029-2034)</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
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**Partial Cost Breakdown Structure**

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Estimated Cost</th>
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<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Outback Museum of Australia (OMOA)</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bilby Centre</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RSL Shed</td>
<td>300,000</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Air field Museum</td>
<td>450,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>Carpark 1, 2, 3</td>
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Important note: these numbers are only indicative and the authors won’t accept any liability.
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<th>New Buildings</th>
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<th>sqm</th>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Outback Museum of</td>
<td>790</td>
<td></td>
<td>8063</td>
<td>6,369,770</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Australia (OMOA)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bilby Centre</td>
<td>542</td>
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<td>6537</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Artfield museum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(internal fit-out)</td>
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<td><strong>73,100</strong></td>
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<td><strong>1,492,274</strong></td>
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This Master Plan identifies five key projects within the Top Secret Precinct that contribute to the realisation of the design objectives, besides the overarching development of a new public realm. These projects are the Outback Museum of Australia (OMOA), the new signage campaign, the Airfield museum, the new Bilby Center and the Canopy walk. The following pages present some design ideas at the conceptual level.

As per the requirements under the Building Act 1975, building approval is required when a structure is proposed to be built or altered to ensure it will be structurally safe and located appropriately. As such, at this stage, there cannot be any liability for the information provided in this report.
The Outback Museum Of Australia (OMOA) aims to celebrate the diversity of the Australian outback regions, unveiling some of their mysteries. Moving beyond stereotypes and cliches, OMOA will reveal the contemporary true spirit of the outback natural environments and of the people who inhabit them. It is expected to become a major tourism drawcard in Queensland, complementing the Longreach Hall of Fame and Qantas Museum, thus contributing to the attraction to the region. **It is strongly suggested to organise a design competition**, as it will attract the best architects and media attention. In turn, that might increase the number of visitors and investors.
The analysis showed that there was a disconnection between the downtown and the precinct, whilst signage was ageing on the site. An opportunity to renew signage will improve the general information and connection.

Based on 2 materials, concrete and corten steel, the new signage campaign proposes 4 types of design, depending on their location:

- **Type 1 Signage:**
  - Entrance to precinct

- **Type 2 Signage:**
  - Entrance to Cosmos Hub
  - Entrance to Tech Hub

- **Type 3 Signage:**
  - Hospital
  - Showgrounds
  - Historic House
  - Railway Station
  - Airport
  - Cosmos Centre

- **Type 4 Signage:**
  - WW2 Heritage tour sites
The relocation of the Bilby Center to the tourism precinct represents a formidable opportunity to discover the secret life of these unique mammals within their natural environment. Night tours will contribute to maximising the length of proposed activities in the precinct and will compliment the current star watching attraction.

Green roof and solar panels will improve the energy efficiency of the building and reduce maintenance costs.

Entry signage to the precinct
Example 1 of downtown signage
Example 2 of downtown signage
5.3 Airfield museum

Located in the first airport building and adjacent to the current airport building, the Airfield museum will provide the opportunity to get an insight of the unique history of aviation in Charleville. It will also cater for visitors before or after their flights and community members (e.g. schools).

The design for the actual refurbishment is currently undertaken by Xzibit, a Queensland-based exhibition-expert firm.
The relocation of the Bilby Center to the tourism precinct represents a formidable opportunity to discover the secret life of these unique mammals within their natural environment. Night tours will contribute to maximising the length of proposed activities in the precinct and will compliment the current star watching attraction. Green roof and solar panels will improve the energy efficiency of the building and reduce maintenance costs.
Contributing to the discovery of the natural environment of the tourism precinct and its fauna, the canopy walk is also designed to offer unique visual experiences on the surrounding buildings. It has the potential to become a new great community asset by enhancing walking and running, thus enhancing healthy lifestyles.
6. Appendices
6.1 Design development

Downtown signage, design development
Entry signage, design development
WWII signage, design development
WRITTEN SOURCES

About Charleville

About Charleville airport
-Roger Marks, Queensland Airfields WW2: 50 years on, Brisbane, 1994.

About Charleville general History
https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ

PICTURES

Unless otherwise specified, all the images and drawings have been produced and developed by the design team.

p.9, 10, 15: Google
p.10: Cosmos Centre website www.cosmoscentre.com
p.16: Exhibit
The involvement of key stakeholders is crucial during the development of the Master Plan to ensure its relevance and to make sure that the expected outcomes are achieved.

We would like to thank warmly all the persons who welcomed us very openly in Charleville, locals and visitors who answered our questions, and the Murweh Shire Council for its appetite for new ideas.
Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the people who are the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which this project stands. We pay respect to the Elders, past, present and emerging, and extends that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Prepared and written by A/Prof Karine Dupre
1st of February 2021