

RE-IMAGINING BREESE STREET

A COMMUNITY
CO-DESIGN PROJECT

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RE-IMAGINING BREESE STREET

A COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN PROJECT

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The Re-imagining Streets with Green Infrastructure project is run by an interdisciplinary team spanning urban greening, landscape architecture, engineering and social sciences from the University of Melbourne, in collaboration with partners from Mosaic Insights and RMIT University. Professor Sarah Bell, Dr. Kylie Soanes, Dr. Marie Dade, Dr. Nano Langenheim, Dr. Kerry Nice, Dr. Dom Blackham, and Dr. Thami Croeser.

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CONTEXT AND SCOPE

THIS IS A RE-IMAGINING OF WHAT A STREET CAN BE. IT EXPLORES STREETS AS PUBLIC GREENSPACES THAT IMPROVE THE LIVEABILITY, CLIMATE RESILIENCE, AND SOCIAL COHESION OF URBAN ENVIRONMENTS.

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Re-imagining Streets with Green Infrastructure

There is an urgent need to adapt cities to become climate resilient, green and liveable. While efforts to improve cities often focus on parks and greenspaces, the greatest potential lies in the less obvious spaces – city streets.

Streets comprise as much as 80–90% of public land in cities, with most of this space is allocated to vehicles, traffic and parking. Retrofitting green infrastructure to streets represents an enormous – and challenging – opportunity to improve the resilience of urban landscapes and ensure that the benefits of green infrastructure are easily accessible to all residents. However, major reallocations of streetscapes are rare.

The Re-imagining Streets with Green Infrastructure research project aims to explore innovative ways to unlock the potential of streets to improve climate resilience, liveability, and biodiversity. Working in three streets across Melbourne, researchers partner with local communities to co-design street greening retrofits that reallocate street space to green infrastructure in a way that aligns with local priorities and improves climate resilience.



Breese Street, Brunswick

Breese Street has undergone rapid transformation in recent years, as a previously light-industrial and low-density residential zone has been transformed into high-density, residential neighbourhoods. This style of transit-oriented, urban-infill development is increasingly common across Australian cities. However such areas are often underserved by greenspace and vulnerable to climate extremes.

The surrounding community is highly motivated to improve the condition of their street to better support local residents. In 2022, the 'Better Breese Block' group was formed to advocate for the neighbourhood, working with local council, residents, and other stakeholders to improve road safety, community development, and green infrastructure.

Recognising the limited availability of public greenspace in the area, Merri-bek Council created several new 'pocket parks' in the neighbourhood, however their capacity to deliver new greenspace is limited by the high-density urban landscape. Concurrent with this research project, Merri-bek Council undertook a master planning and design process for Breese Street and the surrounding precinct. This included independent community consultation, with the design of new streetscapes currently underway.

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The alignment of community interest, council planning, and technical challenges made Breese Street an ideal location for the research project.

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WHY CO-DESIGN?

CO-DESIGN EMPOWERS RESIDENTS TO BECOME CHAMPIONS OF STREET GREENING RETROFITS

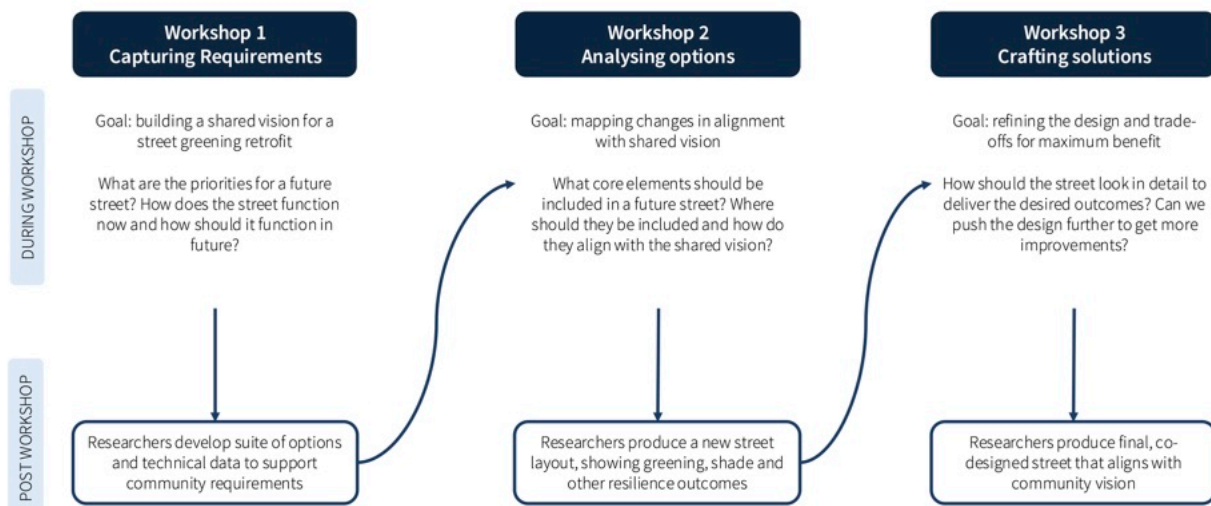
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Overcoming the challenges to retrofitting streets with green infrastructure requires a vision of a future street, creative solutions to common constraints, and a demonstration of the capacity for interventions to reduce disaster risk. The resulting changes associated with a retrofit may have positive or negative impacts on residents and local community members. Changes enforced without consultation or engagement may be poorly received or rejected, and risk mischaracterising community needs.

Enlisting the community in the design process reduces these risks and offers an opportunity to tap into local sources of knowledge and expertise to improve the project's success.

This project uses a co-design approach, based on the 'Co-designing infrastructures' framework (Bell *et al.* 2024). The approach is founded on the idea that the community can be empowered to solve problems and develop novel solutions, resulting in better design outcomes. By supporting the participants with knowledge of technical and regulatory challenges, the benefits to be gained by a greening retrofit, and the alignment with their own shared priorities, co-design enables participants to make informed decisions about the future of their street.

Our co-design process centres on three workshops, each building on the knowledge and ideas generated by the previous. Before the workshops the main objectives of the project are agreed and background research is undertaken to characterise the community and the site. The process is evaluated throughout the project to enable adjustments and to ensure alignment of community values throughout the design.



CO-DESIGNING BREESE STREET

MORE THAN 30 PARTICIPANTS CONTRIBUTED TO A RE-IMAGINED BREESE STREET, MOVING FROM SHARED PRIORITIES TO A DESIGN IDEA IN THREE WORKSHOPS

PARTICIPANTS

We hosted a series of three co-design workshops during February and March 2025. Participants were recruited through an Expression of Interest process, advertised on Merri-bek Council and University of Melbourne websites, and promoted through local groups. We recruited people who lived or worked on Breese Street, or otherwise used the street regularly. In addition, advocates with lived experience of disability were invited through the Merri-Bek Council Disability Working Group. At least one member of Merri-Bek Council was also in attendance at each workshop. The workshops were attended by 35 participants overall, with 17–25 at each session.

Workshops were held at a local business on Breese Street, making it easier for residents and locals to attend, and grounding our discussions in place.

WORKSHOP 1 – CAPTURING REQUIREMENTS

The first workshop focused on understanding how the community used and experienced their street, identifying key needs and opportunities, and building a shared vision for a future greening retrofit. A mix of group-based and individual activities balanced the need to develop a shared understanding while providing space for quieter voices to be heard.

Activities included listing ‘hopes and fears’ for a street greening retrofit, and working as pairs, then larger groups to develop shared priorities. During an ‘infrastructure safari’, participants walked their street and reflected on how it looked, felt and functioned, and mapped these experiences. Finally, the participants ‘crafted their future street’, annotating long, printed street maps with desired design features.

At this early stage, we deliberately avoided discussion of ‘real-world’ constraints. The aim was to draw out underlying needs and priorities unencumbered by preconceptions of ‘what is possible’ or ‘what council would accept’.



ABOVE: PARTICIPANTS WORK IN GROUPS TO CRAFT THEIR FUTURE STREET

WORKSHOP 2 – ANALYSING OPTIONS

During the second workshop, participants were presented with detailed technical information, such as the location of powerlines, sewerage, gas and telecommunications, as well as the distribution of shade, heat, and stormwater.

Participants were then shown their street as a ‘blank slate’, with all parking, traffic lanes and other features removed. Instead of considering changes, they were now asked “Imagine you’re starting from scratch. Keeping in mind the priorities from Workshop 1, what would you put in this space and where?”. Icons scaled to the street design print-outs were used to indicate key features, such as trees, raingardens, seating, carparks and footpaths. Through several rounds, participants added elements of greening, water sensitive urban design, and social and biodiversity spaces. We discussed alignment with priorities and the desired outcomes of each design choice.

This new space was then taken as a design mandate – a functional layout for the research team to formalise.

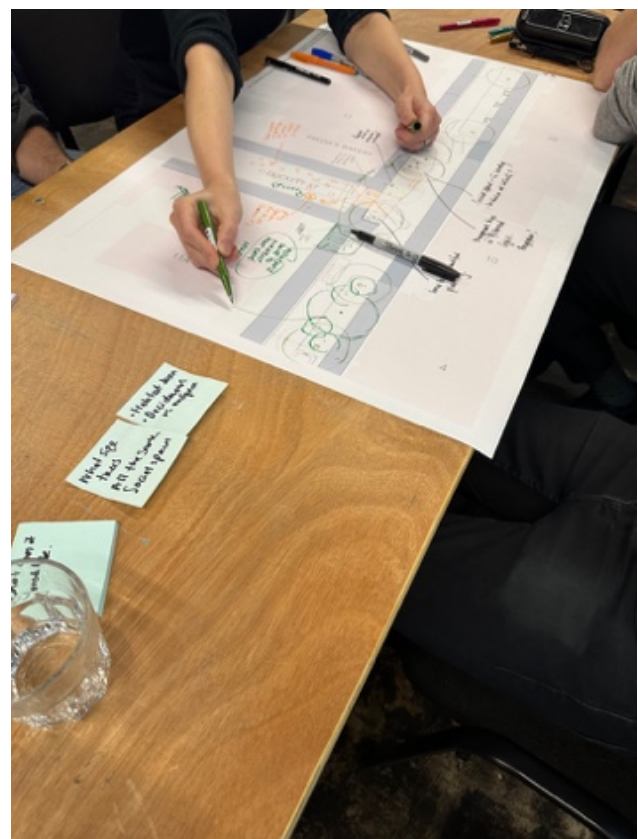
WORKSHOP 3 – CRAFTING SOLUTIONS

The final workshop began with the researchers showcasing the changes made to the street, through scaled drawings and 3D renders.

The primary task now was one of refinement: what kind of trees should be used? Should this reallocated carpark become a raingarden or a tree-pit? How should the new social spaces look and feel?

Participants were invited to visit ‘booths’ at a mock information tradeshow, where researchers briefly presented in their area of expertise (canopy trees, water sensitive urban design, biodiversity, social spaces) and discussed options and visual elements that might align with a community vision for a re-imagined Breese Street.

Four priority locations were selected for refinement, representing sections with the greatest potential challenges from traffic, parking or services.



TOP: TECHNICAL INFORMATION ON OVERHEAD AND UNDERGROUND SERVICES PRESENTED TO PARTICIPANTS TO HELP CHARACTERISE CHALLENGES TO BE OVERCOME AND INFORM DESIGN DECISIONS.
BOTTOM: PARTICIPANTS REFINE LOCATION OF TREES AND GREENING TO ALIGN WITH PRIORITY SOCIAL SPACES

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF BREESE STREET

Information about the physical state of Breese Street was collated from existing records, feature surveys and other data provided by the City of Merri-bek (Breese Street Precinct Background Report), observations made by the participants during the workshops, and data collected and modelled by the research team.

Trees: 3 *Melaleuca* sp. in streetscape. Isolated trees in the private realm.

Carparks: 60 (720m²)

Public Greenspace: 0m² within streetscape. Bulleke-bek park on the adjacent West St was created by Council in 2021.

Services: Overhead powerlines, sewerage, telecommunications.

Heritage features: Bluestone gutters.

Shade: Tall buildings and street orientation result in full sun during middle of day, deep shade in early afternoon.

Heat: Maximum air temperatures during January reached 39°C, while mean radiant temperatures reached 48°C.

Stormwater: Facilitated by bluestone gutter.

Traffic: Weekday average traffic volume ranges from ~1,700 to 2000 vehicles per day.

Land use: High-density residential and mixed land-use, with future development applications for additional multi-storey apartment buildings.

Future change: Level crossing removal works and further development of multi-storey apartment buildings likely.

Other features:

- Poor condition of footpath (narrow, uneven, blocked by power poles, frequent driveway crossovers) particularly for wheelchair and pram users.
- Monolithic street frontages, often with no setback created a feeling of confinement and 'gloom'
- Formal and informal carparking viewed as underutilised, neglected space.
- Greening in private realm facades was a welcome sight, and participants desired more.
- Older, low-rise dwellings were often the only source of natural light onto the street, however also allowed harsh afternoon rays that contributed to heat islands.



COMMUNITY REQUIREMENTS FOR A GREENING RETROFIT

MORE THAN 500 COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS WERE CODED, EXTRACTED FROM POST-IT NOTES, ANNOTATIONS ON MAPS, AND DESIGN DECISIONS

Eight overlapping themes emerged to represent community requirements for a future greening retrofit. The majority of these themes emerged during the exercises of Workshop 1 and were reinforced through design decisions, refinements and conversations throughout the workshops.

- An inviting, cared for place
- Safe and accessible for pedestrians
- A green, living street
- Natural shade, in the right place, at the right time
- Beauty, character, and identity
- Supports community building
- Well thought-out, future-proof implementation
- Resilient to extreme weather

The participants' initial assessments of the current state of Breese Street were largely unfavourable. Breese Street felt unsafe and unwelcoming. Vehicle traffic and parking were viewed as barriers to safe pedestrian access and the use of the space. Feelings of "narrowness" and "gloom" were compounded by monolithic facades and a lack of greenery or natural surfaces. The grey, confining shade of buildings was in stark contrast to the hot summer glare and radiant heat of asphalt. During the infrastructure safari, participants noted litter, hostile "wasted" spaces, and disrepair, contributing to an overall feeling of Breese Street as neglected.

The community shared a vision for a future street that was safe and accessible, prioritised pedestrians over cars, greener, and less concrete. The call for shade and cooling was associated with the desire for trees and greening, and in specific places and times so as not to add to the gloom.

The reduction, or removal, of traffic and parking was seen as the primary way to improve feelings of safety while making space for greenery. Participants removed extended parking at almost every opportunity, and many wanted a one-way street or local traffic only. The condition and design of surfaces was also a high priority to ensure footpaths and crossings were accessible. Any parking retained was done so with purpose, to accommodate the needs and uses of the street.

Beyond the requirements for greenery to take the place of traffic and concrete were specific needs for placemaking. Participants wanted the future street to feel like a place to be, rather than a thoroughfare. Priorities included more art and visual interest, spaces that support community building and activation, and a frequent request that the street be "beautiful". Future changes should maintain the local character and identity, rather than be subsumed in "municipal neat". It should *feel* like Breese Street.

The street was thought about as not just a place for human residents, but for nature and biodiversity – "More birds", "More plants", "More access to soil". During the infrastructure safari, residents noted the few examples of greenery: a small number isolated tall trees in private yards, potted plants in front of local businesses, or trailing vines hanging from apartment balconies.

Participants were wary of the potential for ill-conceived designs that didn't adequately meet the needs of the street. This included maintenance and the selection of plants and designs that provided shade and greenery, but also visual interest, beauty, and local character. Residents saw the future retrofit as an opportunity for major change and leadership.

The community requirements expressed here show strong alignment with the principles of the Healthy Streets Framework, which emphasises streets as safe places to be. There was also strong alignment with requirements identified by the wider community through Merri-bek City Council's broader consultation process. This gives confidence that the co-designed street aligns with broader community desires.

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"My friends refuse to visit me in this concrete jungle"

Quote from workshop participant

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COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF BREESE STREET INCLUDE ON-STREET PARKING, POWERLINES INTERRUPTING FOOTPATH, AND MULTI-STOREY APARTMENT BLOCKS



MATURE CANOPY TREES OCCUR IN ISOLATED POCKETS WITHIN PRIVATE REALM



UNDER-USED, INFORMAL SPACES CONTRIBUTED TO PARTICIPANTS' FEELING OF NEGLECT ON THEIR STREET



INFORMAL STREET GREENING OPPORTUNITIES ARE EMBRACED BY THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

CO-DESIGN RESPONSE

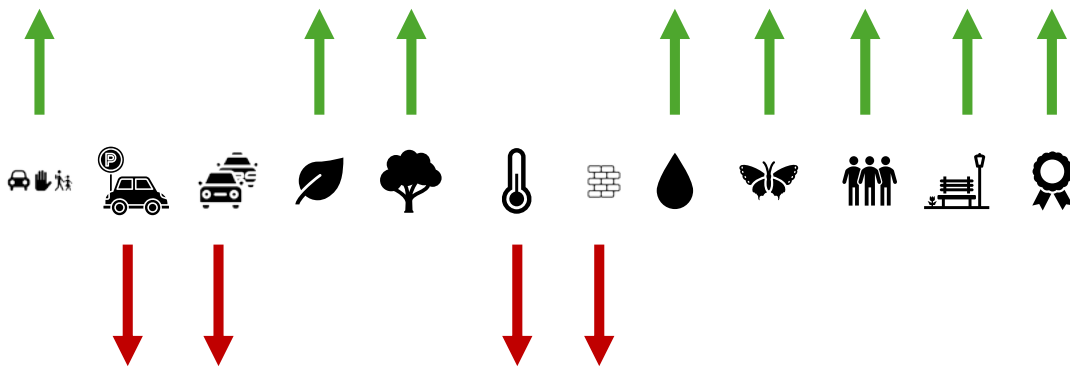
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The co-design process followed the principle of 'community as designer'. It involved constant iteration and feedback throughout the workshop series to ensure the research team understood the design intent of community decisions.

The resulting design response from the Breese Street co-design workshops was guided by the following community requirements.


BREES E S TREET SHOULD BE A PLACE

- Safe and accessible for pedestrians
- Not dominated by cars and parking
- Greener
- Tree-lined
- Shady
- Cooler
- Less concrete
- Water sensitive
- More biodiverse
- Beautiful and cared for
- A space for community
- Leading by example




These requirements were addressed through four 'big moves'.

MOVE 1: Reduce space allocated to cars and traffic



Reduce traffic to one lane
Remove 40 parking spots
Shift traffic lane to co-occur with services


MOVE 2: Allocate newly freed space to greening



32 trees added
24 garden beds (including raingardens)
Greening positioned to avoid services and allow natural light


More than 700 m²
new green space available within streetscape,
predominantly on side of road free of
underground and overhead services

MOVE 3: Maximise impact of greening on community priorities



Greening aligned with social spaces
Plants chosen to maintain sightlines and amenity
Water sensitive urban design to ensure passive irrigation

MOVE 4: Features to reinforce pedestrian priority



Wider footpaths with minimal level changes
Raised intersections prioritise pedestrians
Road meander to reduce traffic speeds

INITIAL DESIGN RENDERS OF A RE-IMAGINED BREESE STREET



A BIRDS-EYE-VIEW OF A COMMUNITY CO-DESIGNED BREESE STREET, FROM ALBION STREET (FAR LEFT) TO HOPE STREET (FAR RIGHT).



STREET-LEVEL VIEW, LOOKING NORTH FROM HOPE STREET. NEW CANOPY TREES AND GREENING ALONG EAST SIDE OF STREET. MEANDERING STREET ALIGNMENT AND USE OF GREENING TO CREATE VISUAL SCREENING, SLOWING TRAFFIC. EXISTING MELALUECA AND POWER POLES SHOWN.

SUMMARY OF CHANGES WITHIN RE-IMAGINED STREET

A full design drawing (in CAD format) can be found in Appendix 1.

Design feature
<p>Reduced parking: from 60 car spaces of on-street parking to 20. Parking located in areas of highest need, providing support for trades, delivery drivers, users of public park, and visitors to apartment residences. Remaining parking spaces 2.4 m wide to improve accessibility.</p>
<p>Reduced road width: varied between 3.3 and 3.8 m road.</p>
<p>Re-alignment of road: carriageway shifted to predominantly occur on west side, redesigned as a meander and negotiated way as a form of traffic control. Avoids conflict with services and powerlines, leaving areas with the most natural light to be allocated to greenery.</p>
<p>Reconfigure carpark: carpark at Hope Street redesigned to create internal circulation, reducing the level of traffic onto Breese Street, allowing excess driveways to be removed to improve pedestrian experience, and increases space available for greening.</p>
<p>Canopy trees: 32 added. Suggested species <i>Eucalyptus leucoxylon</i> subsp. <i>megalocarpa</i>. In heavily shaded zones, <i>Gleditsia tricanthos</i> or <i>Jacaranda mimosifolia</i> for light canopy effects.</p>
<p>Garden beds: associated with canopy trees, social spaces, or as rain gardens. Positioned at road surface level to enable passive irrigation. Edge protection required to reduce traffic run over. Suggested copse plantings, consider <i>Eucalyptus pulverulenta</i> 'baby blue' at 4-m spacing.</p>
<p>Green space placed to align with priorities and enhance success: greening used to extend the footprint of Bulleke-bek park, align with existing social gathering spaces (e.g. eateries and entrances to apartment complexes), and match with available light.</p>
<p>Maintain setbacks: Enforce future developments maintain 4–5 m setback to allow light onto street and support space for greening under future densification.</p>
<p>Raised pedestrian crossings: at intersections, to reinforce pedestrian priority.</p>
<p>Reduce impact of driveways on greening and walkability: Remove or replace existing driveways where no longer functionally required.</p>
<p>Replace existing kerb with semi-mountable: to enable continuous footpath levels for enhanced pedestrian safety and accessibility.</p>

FEASIBILITY, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO A COMMUNITY-LED DESIGN

FEASIBILITY

The re-imagined Breese Street is the result of a community-led design. It has not been modelled to assess impacts on traffic networks or flood risk, and the location of services and challenges are often not revealed until the digging begins.

Nevertheless, the changes suggested are feasible – they do not rely on new technology, untested approaches, or as-yet-undevised solutions. The specifics of the design can be adjusted to improve implementation in line with existing codes and guidelines while maintaining the integrity of the community idea. While an ambitious set of changes, they are not unprecedented.

As a community-led design, it reflects the needs and usage of the local residents. However, there is strong evidence that the choices and preferences of Breese Street residents align with those of the broader community.

CHALLENGES TO FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

The participants had a strong desire for traffic change to improve pedestrian safety and usability of the street space. While a one-way street was preferred, we opted for a 'traffic neutral' design so that the success of the retrofit was not constrained by, or dependent upon, broader changes to the traffic network. Further changes may be required to improve the flow of traffic and mitigate unintended negative consequences. However these can be made while holding true to the design intent.

The bluestone kerbs are heritage listed and any adjustments would require approvals. Several precedents exist for re-working bluestone in street designs to make them more pedestrian friendly (e.g. Merri-bek City Council, City of Melbourne), or repurposing them in the streetscape in other ways (e.g. social spaces, heritage installations).

The design includes recommendations to decommission or redesign kerbs and driveways. These were selected based on community knowledge and potential impact on greening. However, any changes would depend on consultation with affected landholders.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

Throughout the co-design process, there was an emphasis on a 'no regrets' outcome – achieving a greener, more liveable street without depending on changes to traffic management or the private realm. However, the community identified several opportunities beyond the street envelope worth exploring. These included:

- Building setbacks: maintaining setbacks of 4–5 m in future developments to provide more space for street-facing greening, allow light, and reduce the 'canyon' effect created by tall buildings in narrow roadways.
- Driveways: reducing the number of driveway crossovers, particularly where they have become redundant, improves pedestrian access and increases available space for greening.
- Facades: the potential for vertical gardens and green walls on facades would contribute to community desire for greening.
- Balcony greening: encouraging private residences to maintain balcony gardens that contribute to street-facing greening.

REFLECTIONS ON INFLUENCE OF CODESIGN

ON PARTICIPANTS

There was a high energy in the room during the first workshop. Many participants expressed a feeling of frustration with slow-moving official processes and a need to see transformative, rather than incremental change. Throughout the course of the workshops this was slowly replaced with a quiet, working energy, with participants often deep in thought, carefully listening, and problem solving.

As participants worked to develop a functional layout of the re-imagined street, they were quick to consider complex technical information and the needs of other street users. “We need some parking here because families drive to visit the park on weekends”, “How are we going to irrigate these trees?”. Given the opportunity and tools to design the street in realistic terms, participants appreciated the complexity of making changes to traffic and greening in streetscapes.

Many expressed the influence of the infrastructure safari on the way they saw their street, noting that even though they were there every day, having an opportunity to pause and look deeply, provided new insights into why the street was the way that it was and what could possibly change.

ON COUNCIL

Council reported positive engagement with the co-design process. Council representatives noted the value of community members being able to engage with the complexity of street redesigns, and overall the workshops provided a deeper mutual understanding of the goals and challenges faced. There was an appreciation for the opportunity to see more ambitious design options explored than would typically arise through standard processes and a sense that there would be many areas of strong alignment between the community-led and Council designs. The University-led workshops provided an option for Council to be informed by, or incorporate elements from, the research project into their own designs, while allowing Council processes to remain independent.

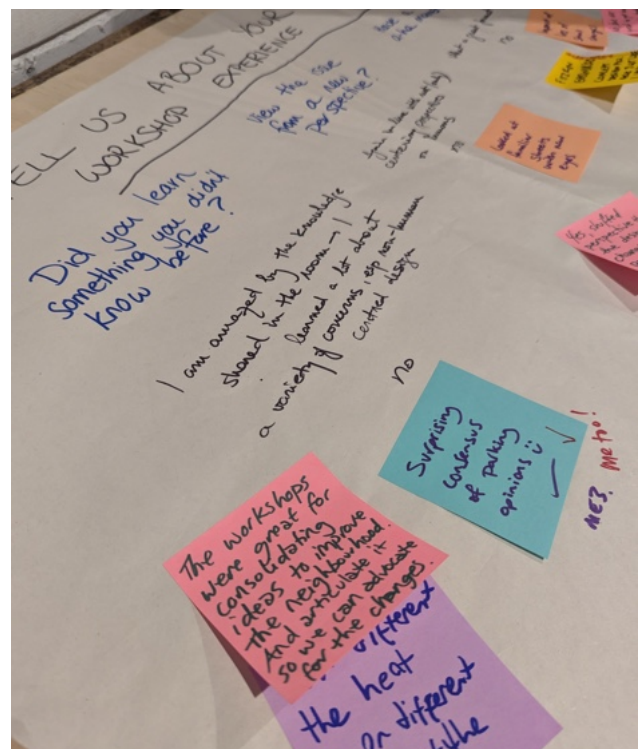
ON THE RESEARCH TEAM

The interdisciplinary research team was present and engaged with the community participants at all three workshops. Their role was to facilitate the community’s desired design, providing support in the form of technical information and tools that allowed the community to articulate their requirements for the street into a measured, real-world design. The goal was to empower the community to make informed decisions, not to direct or lead to a particular outcome.

We observed the community appetite for change, but also their appreciation for data and information that could help them realise that change. While the community’s overarching vision for what the street should achieve remained consistent throughout the process, the methods chosen to achieve that vision were flexible. Participants were quick to adjust the design when presented with information about the outcomes of different actions, or if there was a potential for unintended consequences.

Providing participants with the opportunity to explore design choices at the fine scale using spatially explicit exercises allowed them to engage with the physicality and complexity of a street retrofit. Rather than simply stating a preference for a greener or safer street, the community was able to show exactly *how* that should be achieved: where should changes be made, what should they look like, and why?

The choices made by the participants allowed the research team to explore retrofit options that would not otherwise have been possible.



CLOSE

The goal of the Re-imagining Streets with Green Infrastructure research project is to explore how street greening retrofits, designed by an empowered community, lead to more climate resilient, liveable streets.

Breese Street represents a remarkable case, in which a highly motivated and organised community were eager to make major changes to improve the liveability and resilience of their street. The desire to de-prioritise cars and reallocate space to greening was potentially unique, but opened avenues for ambitious changes. Through the co-design of a shared vision, the participants developed a suite of creative changes that thoughtfully aligned with community requirements, avoided conflict with critical services, and provided strong outcomes for street greening.

While the design is ambitious, it is physically possible and socially desirable.

The research team are currently modelling the impact of the community-led design on resilience outcomes, including heat, shade and water.

The design drawings and findings have been provided to Merri-bek City Council for consideration as they go through their own design and consultation process.

THANK YOU

Finally, we would like to thank the workshop participants – the Breese Street community – who were so generous with their time, energy and ideas. Their motivation and appetite for change was inspiring and enabled huge strides in this research to explore new ways of greening streets. We learned so much from you all during this process and hope that the outcomes help to deliver a greener, more liveable Breese Street for all.



ACKNOWLEDEMENTS

Our research project and co-design workshops would not have been possible without the support of:

- Merri-Bek City Council
- Better Breese Block
- Tempo Rubato
- Brunswick Library

This project is funded by Horticulture Innovation Australia (CON003239).

SUPPORTING RESOURCES

Bell S, Johnson C, Austen K., Moore G, and Teh TH (2023). Co-designing Infrastructures: Community collaboration for liveable cities (p. 235). UCL Press.

Better Breese Block (2023) Transforming the streets of our neighbourhood. Report prepared by Better Breese Block.

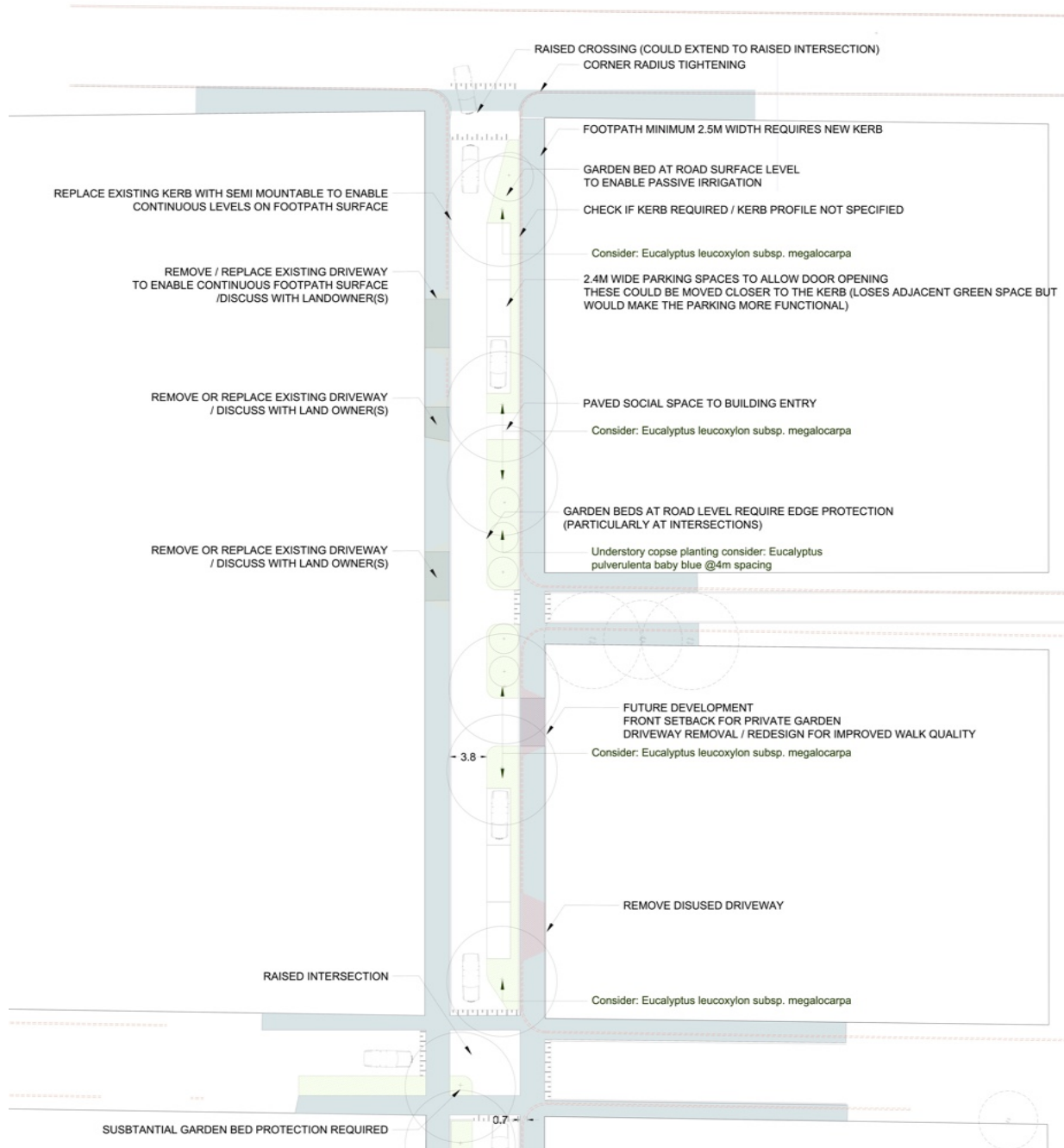
Healthy Streets Framework: Making streets healthy places for everyone <https://www.healthystreets.com>

Merri-bek City Council (2024) Breese Street Precinct Background Report.

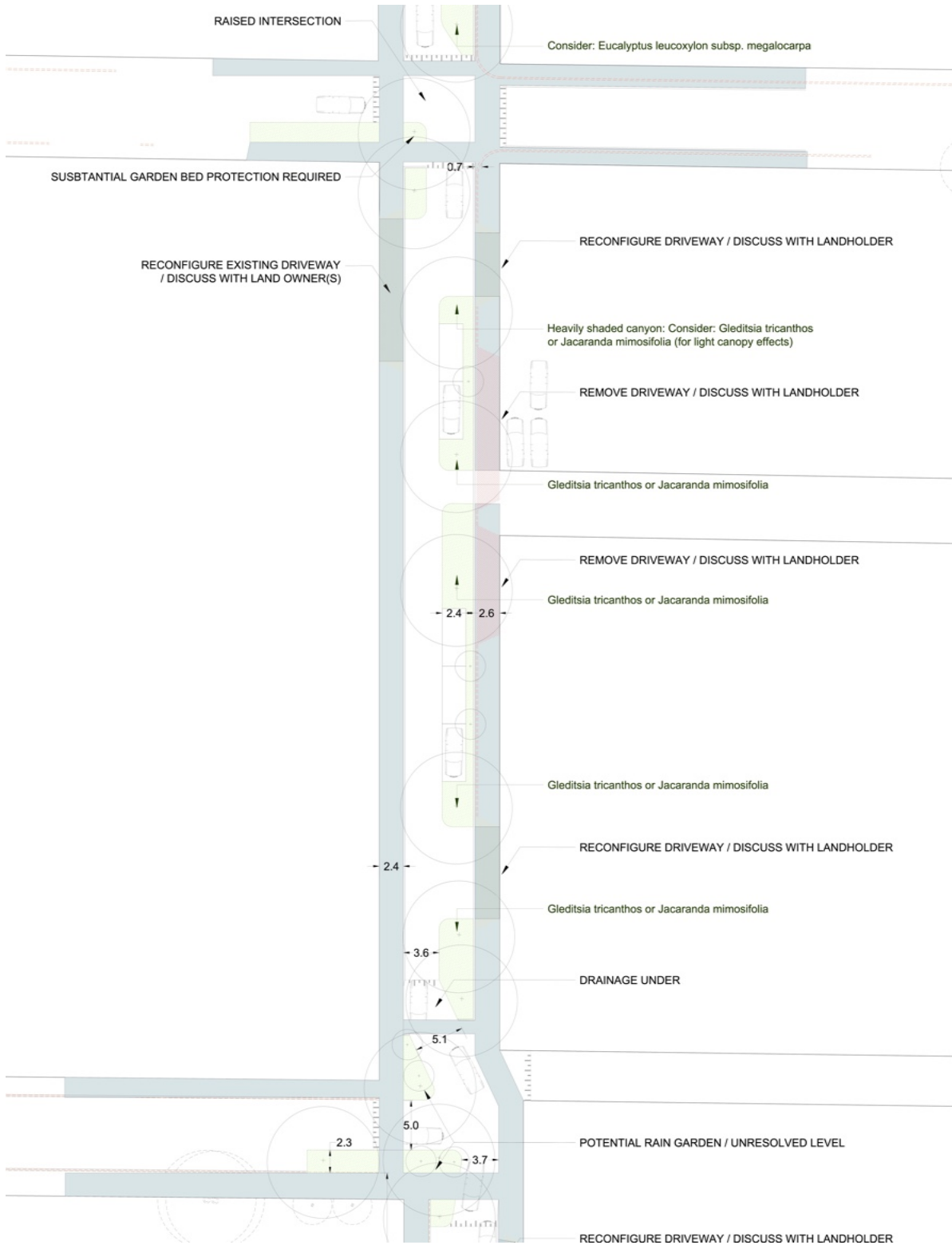
Merri-bek City Council (2025) Breese Street Engagement Report.

APPENDIX 1: ANNOTATED CAD DRAWINGS OF RE-IMAGINED BREESE STREET

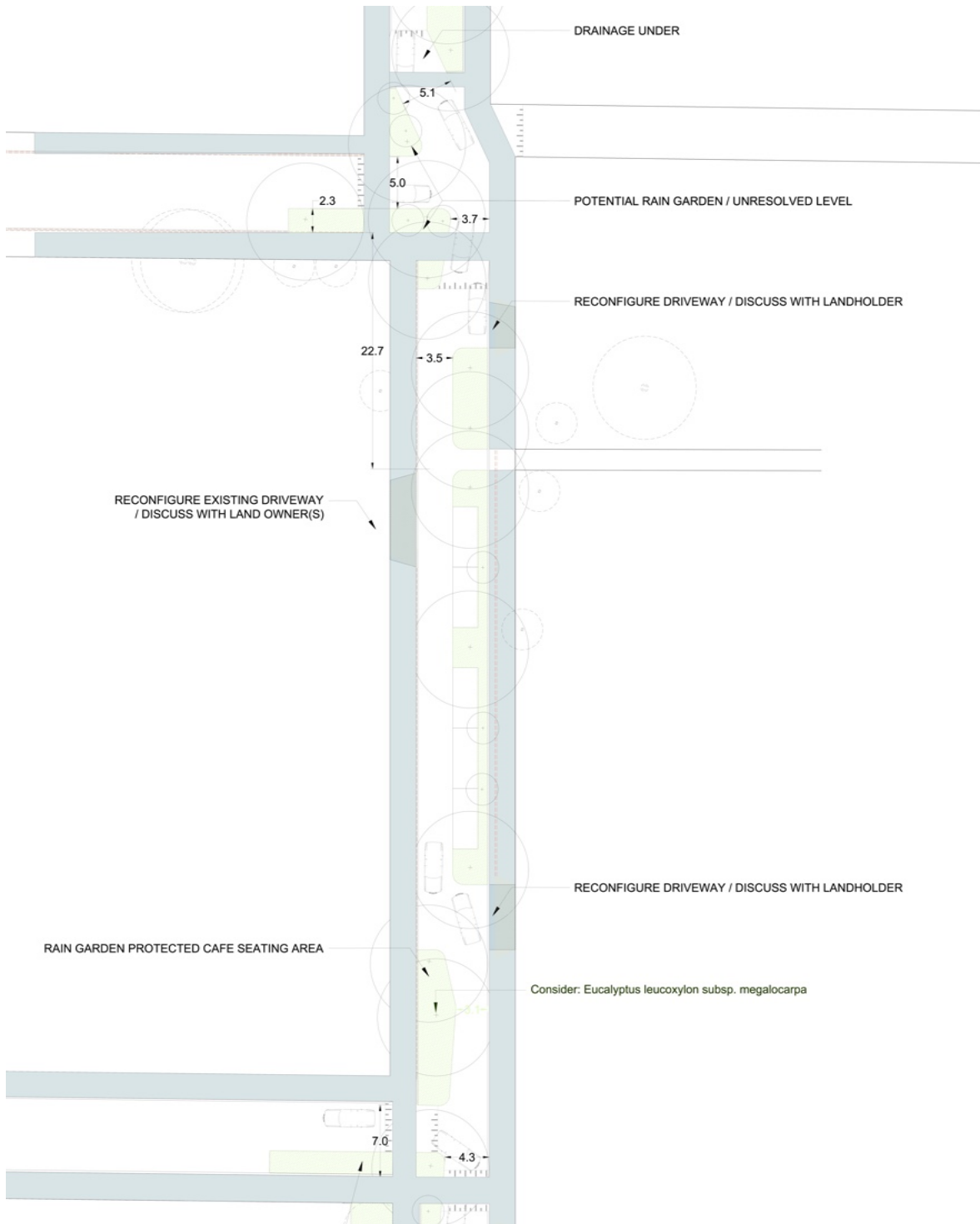
SECTION 1: ALBION STREET (TOP) TO FLORENCE STREET (BOTTOM) INTERSECTION



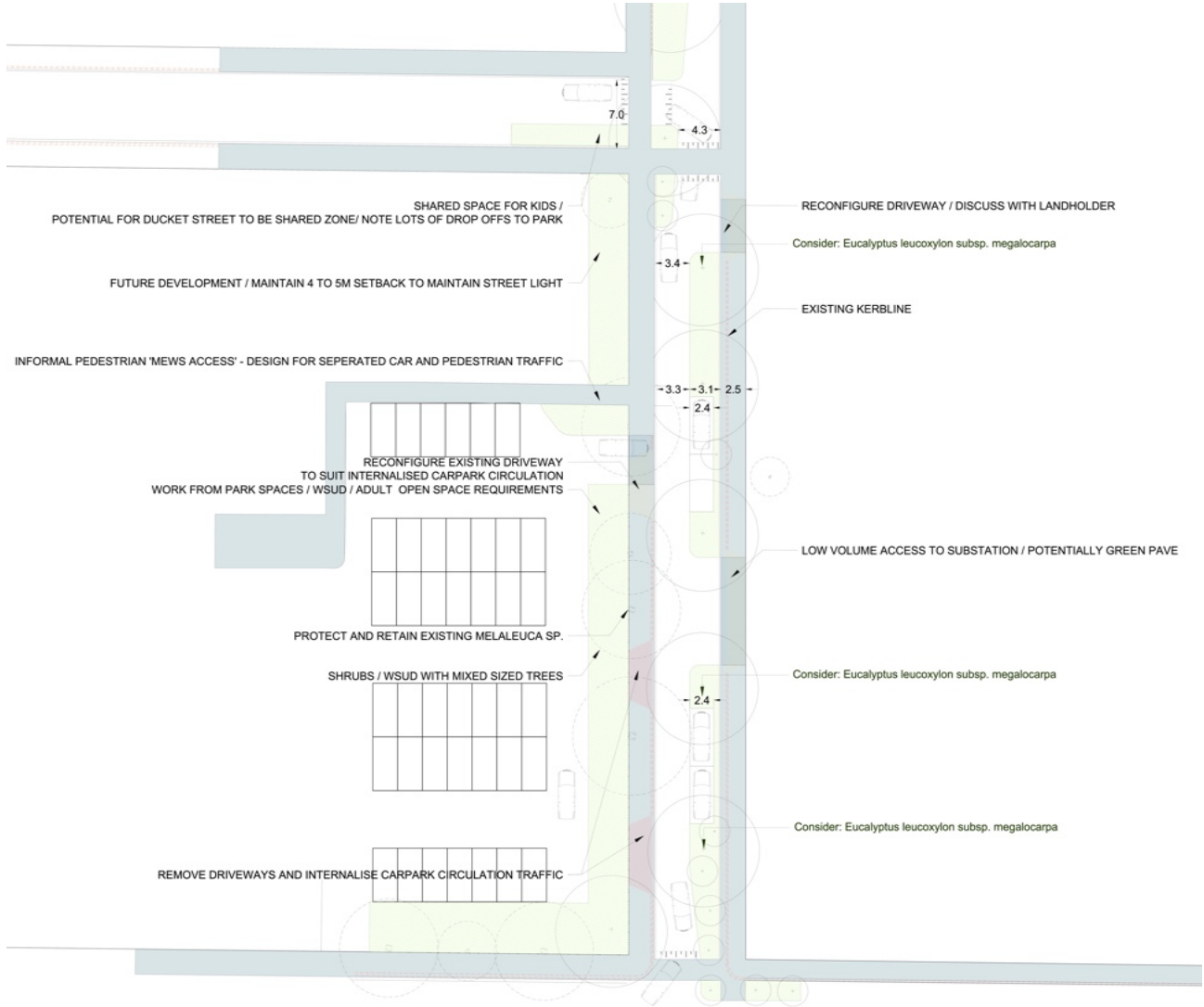
SECTION 2: FLORENCE STREET (TOP) TO WEST STREET (BOTTOM) INTERSECTION.



SECTION 3: WEST STREET (TOP) TO DUCKETT STREET (BOTTOM) INTERSECTION



SECTION 4: DUCKETT STREET (TOP) TO HOPE STREET (BOTTOM) INTERSECTION





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