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Foreword

Learning from Merchant Builders' and Louis Sauer: *A Case Study Approach to Medium-density (Courtyard) Housing*, by Professor Alan Pert.

"The really interesting thing to do was to have control over not just one house and its garden but a group of houses and their gardens." (David Yencken of Merchant Builders' Interview with Alan Pert, August 2015).

Molonglo's townhouse development at 46-52 Breese Street, Brunswick proposes a residential solution that draws upon the history of medium-density (courtyard) housing in Victoria.

For this project, a forthcoming publication on the history and legacy of Merchant Builders' served as the basis for early design workshops in 2024 with the design team. Merchant Builders' seven townhouse developments, constructed between 1967 and 1969, provided a starting point for discussions regarding the integration of site planning, landscaping, and architectural design.

These townhouses, characterized by their shared external walls or 'collective form' as described by architect Graeme Gunn, were typically clustered around shared spaces. This arrangement generated a dense urban fabric with a clear delineation of public and private open spaces.

The transition to medium-density development in Victoria was facilitated by the *Strata Titles Act* of 1967. This legislative change enabled a new type of development wherein houses could be freely sited and better integrated. Merchant Builders' capitalized on this opportunity. Their grouped townhouse developments demonstrated that higher densities could be achieved without compromising environmental quality or the lived experience.

Merchant Builders

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Merchant Builders' inaugural group development, initiated in 1967 at 16–22 Yuille Street, Brighton, comprised eight houses varying in size from 14 to 21 squares. The Yuille Street project served as a pilot to assess the efficacy of the 'Courtyard' and 'Studio house' models in combination, and it proved successful. The one and two-storey units were staggered to provide variety and informality, and the strategic orientation of the houses ensured privacy within the integrated courtyards. The material palette, featuring light-colored brick and dark-stained timber, along with Ellis Stones's landscape treatment using railway sleepers and indigenous plantings, lent formal cohesion to the development.

During 1968–9, Graeme Gunn was commissioned to design two townhouse schemes at Grange Road, Toorak, and Yarra Grove, Hawthorn. The steep slope of the Grange Road site prompted Gunn to establish a new program, with parking at ground level and terraces and open-plan living spaces above. Gunn also began to introduce more sculptural forms, which were further developed in a townhouse scheme at Molesworth Street, Kew. The six two-storey townhouses at Molesworth Street are constructed of grey concrete block with dark grey stained timber details. The severe, cubic forms are enlivened by angular roof profiles and cantilevered balconies.

In 1970, the Molesworth Street townhouse development received the RVIA's Bronze Medal. Up to that point, Gunn had designed all of Merchant Builders' medium-density schemes. Subsequent projects were designed by Max May, Cocks & Carmichael, and Daryl Jackson, among others.

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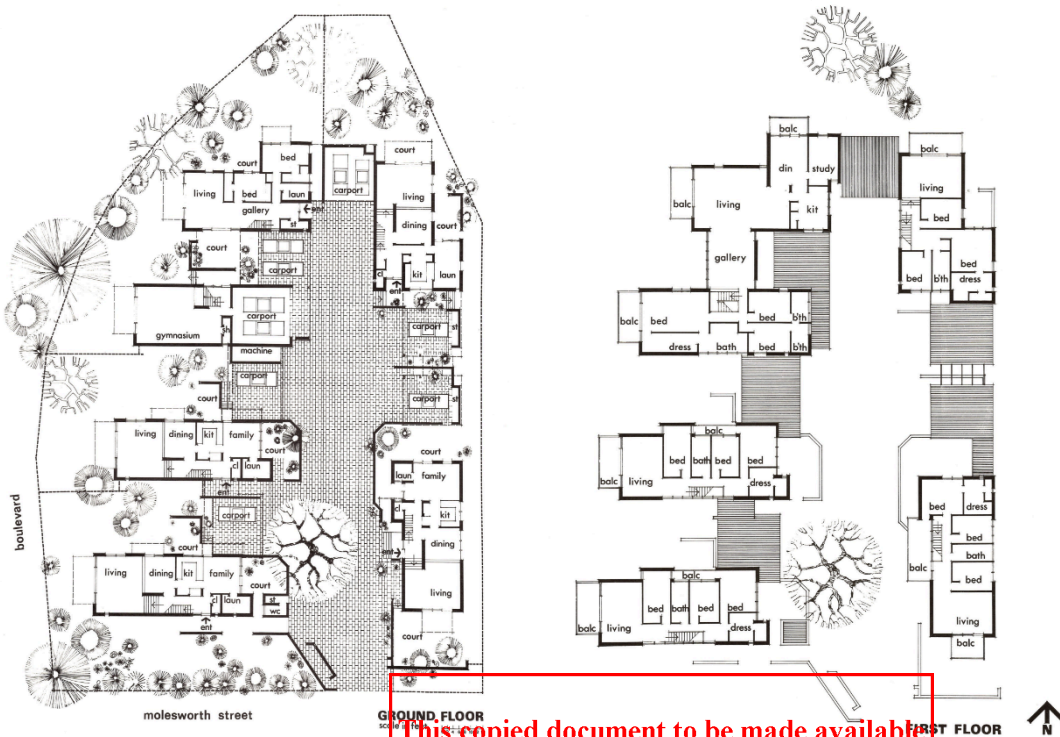


Figure 1 - The ground and first floor plans of Merchant Builders' Molesworth Street Townhouse Development in Kew, winner of the RVIA's Bronze Medal in 1970.

Merchant Builders' venture into medium-density development demonstrated the effectiveness of the company's principles in aggregate. The company demonstrated that private courtyards and public space could be provided at higher densities without compromising environmental commitment or design quality. This principle has been central to the Breese Street site in Brunswick.

Within the context of the Merchant Builders story, the medium-density schemes were a crucial stepping stone to the cluster housing developments at Winter Park and Vermont Park.

Louis Sauer

In interviews, Graeme Gunn referenced the pioneering projects of Louis Sauer, who practiced in Philadelphia between 1961-79 and later relocated to Melbourne in 1997. Sauer, known for high-density, low-rise housing, inspired Gunn, who visited a series of Sauer projects on his world tour in 1972.

Similar to the Breese Street site, Sauer's developments were typically three stories tall, featuring configurations of intertwined townhouses set in patterns that provided each home with a private yard connected to a shared courtyard.

"At the root of his architectural works, especially residential, Sauer observed a distinct difference between what is on the inside of a building and what is on the outside. For him, a residential building has a dual reason for existing and so responds to two worlds – to two environments. It needs to dignify the "internal" domestic environment as well as fit into the "external" city's contextual environment to which it represents social value.....His facades are often treated as a membrane that shrouds the building. They are designed, built and conceived to comply with the rhythms, lifestyles and proportions of the street context, the public world, rather than the interior's idiosyncratic domestic world of privacy." (Five Masterworks by Louis Sauer, Antonino Saggio, 2009)

Penn's Landing Square has been a particular case study for Breese Street. Sauer created a “sense of place” with three-story street facades that fit into modest residential streets, contrasting with the interior context of intimate courtyards and passages that foster a strong sense of community.

At Breese Street, Sauer's idea of ‘two environments’ has been extended through communal courtyards, described as a ‘third environment’. These shared walkways and raised planter boxes mediate the private aspects of the terraces. These shared spaces also create moments of intimacy and curiosity through careful planting by Tim Pilgrim.

Conclusion

Melbourne seeks to increase density and affordability within a challenging construction sector. The design team for the Breese Street townhouse development has drawn upon the work of Merchant Builders' in Victoria and Louis Sauer in Philadelphia to understand how these practices addressed similar issues in the 1960s with low-rise infill and townhouse developments.

The townhouse typology is a needed housing style. Townhouses in Australia often lack design quality, landscape, and amenity. The Breese Street development offers an integrated solution with a robust urban perimeter and a rich interior landscape providing various public and private experiences.

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Project Objectives

The project is founded on an ambitious set of objectives which are provided below.

Location and Features

- Deliver 43 townhouses, introducing approximately 130 new residents to Brunswick, adding to the area's diverse community by bringing a mix of individuals, couples, and families, all contributing to the local character.
- Provide convenience, affordability, and lifestyle benefits in a difficult housing market.
- Offer direct access to both public transport and active travel corridors.
- Maximise comfort, energy efficiency, and overall livability by facing townhouses toward the north.
- Offer openable windows to the north and south to provide natural ventilation, allowing fresh air to flow freely through the home, reducing the reliance on mechanical cooling systems.
- Offer flexible layouts with multiple living areas, allowing residents to customize their spaces to suit their specific needs, enabling homes that can evolve with the residents lifestyle.
- Provide a barrier free design where every townhouse features a level entrance to ground level, ensuring easy, step-free access for those with mobility needs, parents with strollers, or anyone who prefers a more accessible living environment.
- Dedicate up to 25% of the site area to deep root landscape to provide much needed relief from the area's dominance of concrete and asphalt surfaces.

Services and Amenities

- Provide a self sufficient design, with individual roofs, gutters, and mechanical systems, allowing for easy ongoing maintenance, where residents can manage any repairs or upkeep independently, without impacting other homes.
- Reduce shared assets to keep owners' corporation fees low, reducing the financial burden of ongoing costs.

Materials and Environment

- Design with environmentally responsible construction practices which have minimal disruption to the natural earth and require little or no excavation or soil removal.
- Prioritise sustainability through a lightweight construction method, focusing on the use of timber, a renewable natural material, while significantly reducing the use of concrete.
- Select materials that are easy to maintain, have a long lifespan, and are recyclable, without compromising on durability. Prioritise homogenous natural materials over artificial materials or synthetic finishes.
- Target a high energy efficiency rating (NatHERS 7.5 stars or higher), contributing to reduced energy costs for residents upon occupation.
- Provide car access for residents via a car share provider, offering residents an eco-friendly and cost-effective alternative to private car ownership, making it easier for residents who don't own a car or prefer shared transport options.

Social Value

- Offer housing that balances security and privacy while providing access to community and neighbours.
- Provide a minimum of 10% of dwellings owned by a tier one Community Housing Provider.
- Include well-designed and accessible outdoor spaces, with green areas for recreation and community connection.
- Design well-lit, green walkways between townhouses offer a sense of connectivity for well-being, while offering passive surveillance for the neighbourhood.
- Provide a designated shared community space, designed to foster a sense of connection and strengthen relationships among residents.

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Site and Surrounds

Site Details and Subdivision

The development site comprises four contiguous land parcels, totaling 3,121 square meters, and is zoned as Commercial Zone 1 within the City of Merri-bek. The four constituent land parcels are as follows:

- 1/TP830385J (2,581 sqm), located at 655-661 Sydney Road.
- 1/TP129123C (202 sqm), located at 50 Breese Street.
- 1/TP257052H (276 sqm), located at 52 Breese Street.
- 1/TP971497H (61 sqm), which constitutes the discontinued right of way off William Street.

On 19 March 2025, Merri-bek Council issued a Subdivision Permit for the subdivision of 1/TP830385 (2,581 sqm) into two distinct parcels: 659 Sydney Road (a new parcel with frontage to Sydney Road) and 46 Breese Street (a new parcel with frontage to Breese Street).

The parcel of land at 46 Breese Street (approximately 1,776 sqm) will be consolidated with the three remaining land parcels to form a single 2,315 square meter parcel, designated as the "Site," which is the subject of this Design Report.

Site Analysis and Existing Conditions

The Site is generally rectangular in shape and possesses three street frontages: William Street to the north, Breese Street to the west, and Florence Street to the south.

The Site's existing conditions are characterised by two distinct areas. The northern half of the Site contains a surface car park and an access ramp, while the southern half features a single-story warehouse with a rooftop car park.

Site Interfaces

The Site is situated within a predominantly residential context, encompassing a mix of single dwellings, low-rise townhouses, and medium-rise multi-unit developments. The Site's immediate interfaces are described as follows.

Directly to the north of the Site, along the William Street frontage, are six three-story, three-bedroom townhouses (1 to 11 William Street), completed in 2014. Further west along William Street, the Site interfaces with a seven-story multi-unit residential development (60 Breese Street), completed in 2020 by the developer *Milieu*.

To the west of the Site, along the Breese Street frontage, are four single-story dwellings (49 to 55 Breese Street). Further west, towards the Upfield rail corridor, are two of the earlier multi-unit residential Nightingale developments: *The Commons* (9 Florence Street), completed in 2013, and *Nightingale 1* (8 Florence Street), completed in 2017.

To the south of the Site, along the Florence Street frontage, the Site interfaces with a large surface car park. To the east, the Site abuts an unnamed lane accessed from William Street and the rear of the newly created lot at 659 Sydney Road, due to the aforementioned subdivision process.

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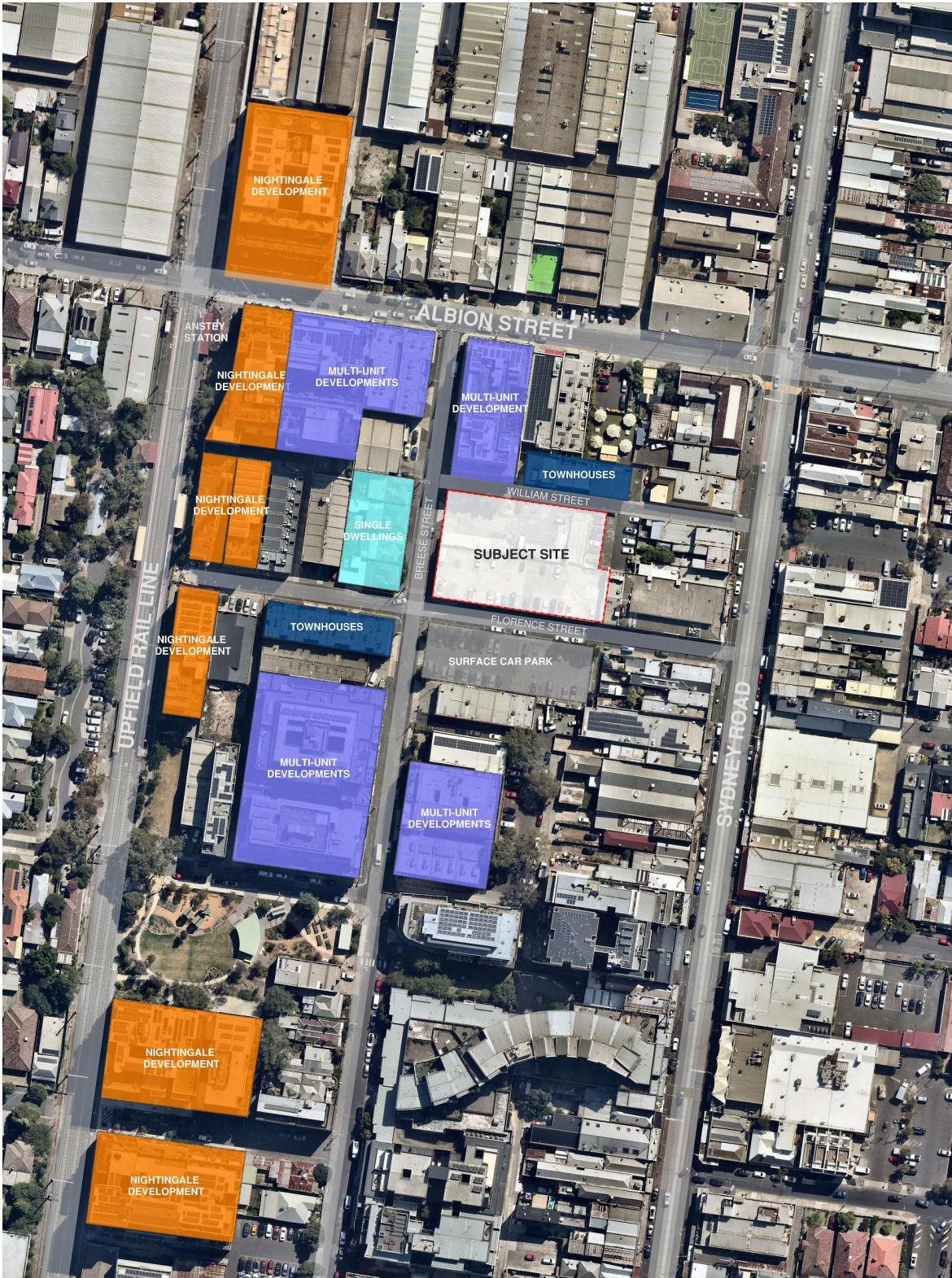


Figure 2 - Aerial photograph depicting the development site at 46-52 Breese Street, Brunswick, and its surrounding context, including the proximity to existing Nightingale developments.

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Design Concept

Master Plan

The master plan for the Breese Street development is conceptually inspired by Louis Sauer's *Penn's Landing Square* in Philadelphia and Al-Jawad Pike's *Chowdry Walk* in London.

The Breese Street design arranges 43 townhouses in three east-west rows and one north-south row across the site. This arrangement, combined with subtly angled facades, optimises the orientation of the townhouses for passive solar design and energy efficiency. By maximising natural light and solar gain in winter while minimizing heat gain in summer, the design enhances resident comfort and reduces energy consumption.

Beyond the built footprint, over 22% of the site area is allocated to deep-root landscaping. Unlike typical urban developments with shallow root systems, this approach enables trees and other plants to establish deep root structures within the soil.

These deep root systems play a crucial role in absorbing and storing rainwater, mitigating runoff, and improving water quality. Furthermore, they help to break up compacted soil and enhance soil structure, fostering healthier ecosystems. This is a significant departure from conventional urban landscaping, where soil compaction and limited space due to underground structures often impede tree growth.

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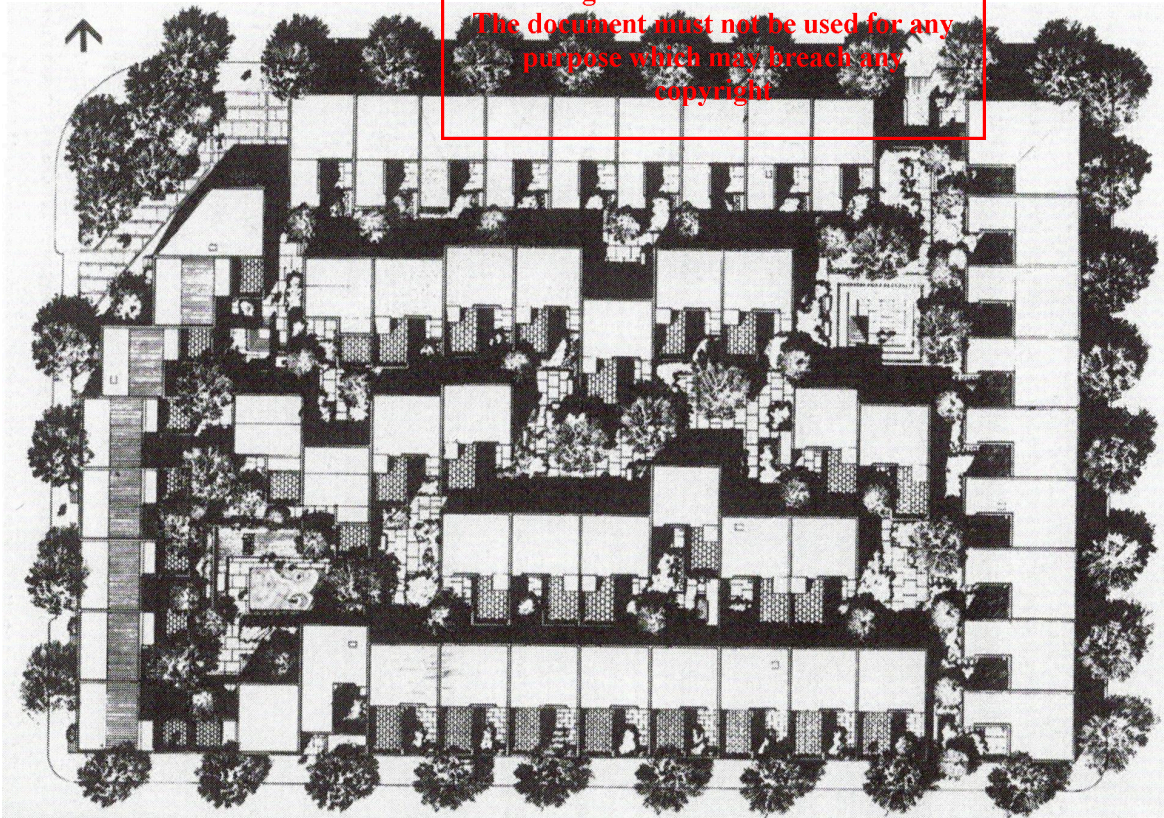
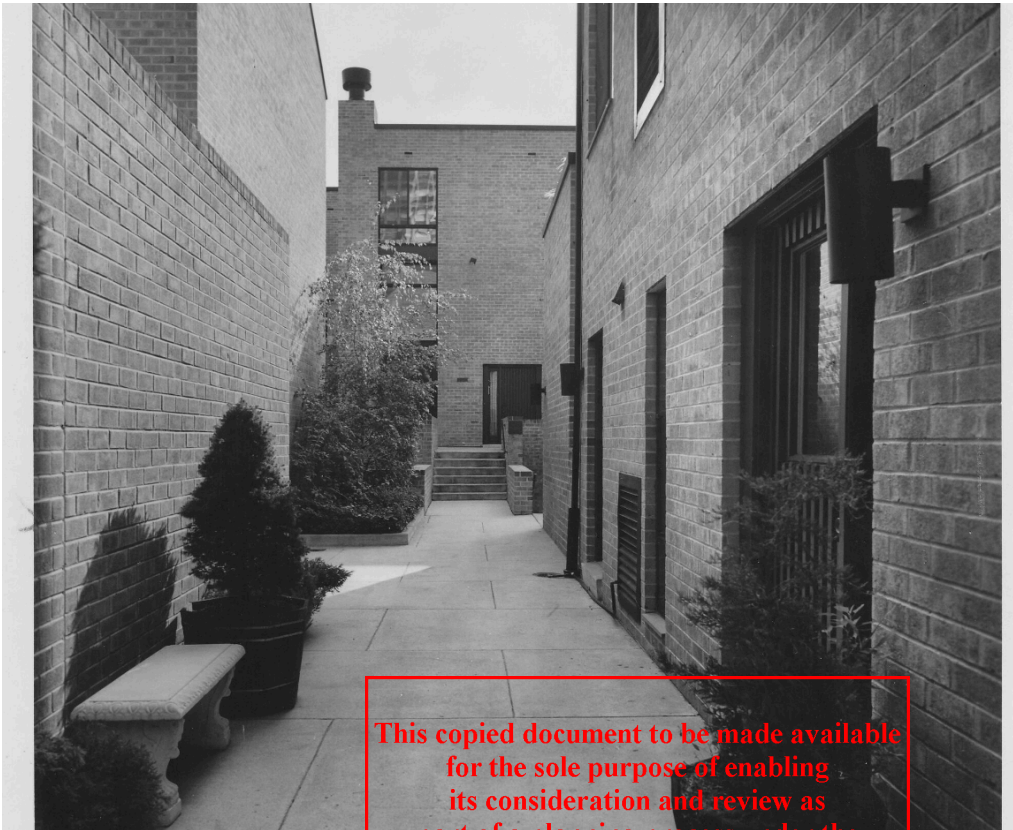
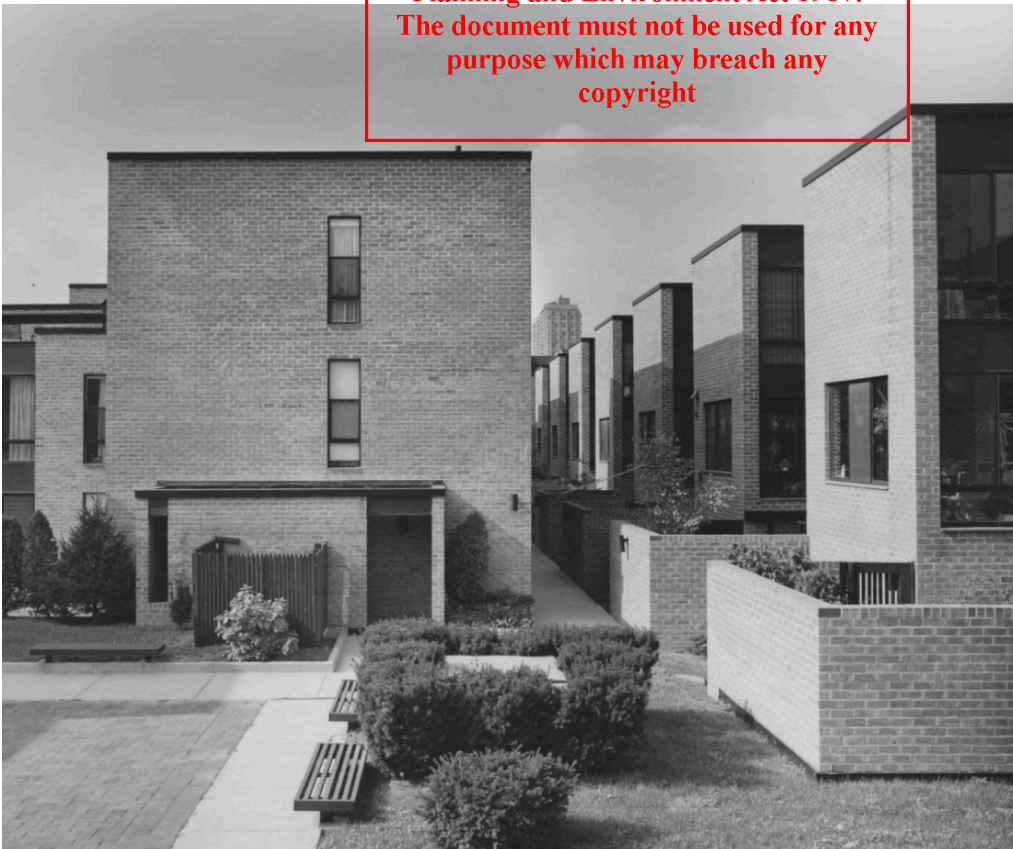


Figure 3 - Illustrative Master Plan of Penn's Landing Square, Philadelphia by Louis Sauer, a key architectural influence on the Breese Street development.

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Figures 4 & 5: Built in 1970, Penn's Landing Square in Philadelphia offered a modern twist on traditional rowhouse living, by its ingenious composition of units on a single city block (photo courtesy of Louis Sauer)



Figure 6 - A view of the angled facades and single external material of the Chowdry Walk development, set within the urban context of Greater Hackney, London. (Architect: Al-Jawad Pike)

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Landscape-led Design

Throughout the design process, Molonglo collaborated closely with Tim Pilgrim of Tim Pilgrim Gardens (TPG), a renowned Victorian garden designer, to develop a distinctive and dynamic landscape for the development.

TPG's design concept centres on a *Seasonal Woodland*, envisioned as a landscape that evolves continuously through the four seasons. The plant selection is meticulously curated, considering plant aromatics, edibles, flower production, and color, texture, light, and shade.

For instance, the delicate light green foliage and textured bark of the *Pyrus nivalis* provide an elegant canopy for the late winter and early spring blooms of the *Helleborus 'Ice N Roses'* and the vivid deep blue *Muscari armeniacum*. As summer transitions into early autumn, the floral palette shifts to the rich purple of *Liriope muscari* and the soft light pink of *Anemone hupehensis*.

An internal pedestrian network, featuring paths slightly elevated above the ground plane—inspired by the *Remiseparken* in Copenhagen—facilitates step-free circulation for residents and visitors, enabling seamless movement between street entries and townhouses.

Adjacent to the townhouse entrances, thoughtfully designed courtyards with elevated planter beds and integrated benches offer residents private outdoor spaces to fully appreciate the evolving seasonal landscape.



Figure 7 - Elevated pedestrian path networks at Remiseparken in Copenhagen, appearing to float above the surrounding landscape. (Landscape Architect: BOGL)

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Built Form

The townhouses comprise both two and three-storey structures, designed to correspond in height with the existing three-story townhouses located opposite the site—specifically, 1 to 11 William Street to the north and 47 Breese Street to the southwest.

Drawing inspiration from Al-Jawad Pike's *Chowdry Walk* development in London, the design incorporates angled facades to provide visual interest and architectural relief along the three street frontages, while also enhancing passive surveillance opportunities.

These angled facades extend into densely planted landscape areas situated between the built form and the public realm. This landscaping features full-sun street plants such as *Pyrus calleryana* 'Capital' along William and Breese Street and full-shade varieties like *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' and *Laurus nobilis* along Florence Street.

Townhouse Design and Mix

The development features three primary townhouse typologies: a three-bedroom, three-storey design; a four-bedroom, three-storey design; and a one-bedroom, two-storey design. All townhouse designs adhere to the stringent new *Livable Housing Design Standards* in the 2022 National Construction Code.

The three and four-bedroom townhouses include a central kitchen and dining area on the ground floor, a north-facing second living space or study with full-height windows, a separate laundry, and a powder room with WC and vanity. A switchback staircase provides access to the upper levels, and ample storage space, sufficient for a bicycle, is incorporated into the ground floor. The upper levels house three or four bedrooms, a generous living area, and two bathrooms.

Depending on their location, the three-bedroom townhouses feature either a single entry (north or south) or a dual entry, with the majority of townhouses in the central row featuring dual entries.

The one-bedroom townhouses are positioned above the *Pilotis*. Their ground floor entries include a full-size laundry, a powder room, and a linear staircase leading to the first floor. To optimize space, the first floor is designed with minimal internal walls and doors. It includes a kitchen and dining area, bedroom, living room and bathroom.

Materiality

The site's materiality is primarily expressed through the rich and diverse planting scheme designed by Tim Pilgrim. The plant selection has been carefully calibrated to consider available light and shade, texture, aromatics, edibles, and flower production. Furthermore, to minimise owner's corporation fees and ensure a healthy, vibrant landscape throughout the development's lifespan, plants have been selected based on their maintenance needs.

For example, plants requiring quarterly maintenance have been prioritized over those with more frequent maintenance demands, meaning the horticultural maintenance visits will be less regular, and the owner's corporation fees lower for residents.

Late winter/early spring



Helleborus 'Ice N Roses' White

Seasons of interest: Late winter flowers

Maintenance: Dead head



Anemone nemerosa

Seasons of interest: Spring flowers

Maintenance: N/A



Camassia 'Moody Blue'

Seasons of interest: Spring flowers

Maintenance: N/A

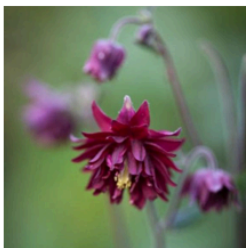


Muscari armeniacum

Seasons of interest: Spring flowers

Maintenance: N/A

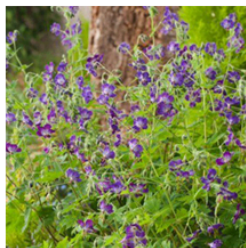
Mid spring



Aquilegia 'Ruby Port'

Seasons of interest: Mid spring flowers

Maintenance: Herbaceous (late winter cut back)



Geranium phaeum 'Lily Lovell'

Seasons of interest: Mid spring flowers

Maintenance: Herbaceous (late winter cut back)



Anthriscus sylvestris 'Ravenswing'

Seasons of interest: Mid spring flowers

Maintenance: Dead head



Ajuga australis

Seasons of interest: Mid spring flowers

Maintenance: Dead head and thin as necessary

Figure 9 - An extract from the plant selection for the development showing some of the flowering plants selected for late winter, early spring and mid-spring in the planting areas which receive part sun and part shade.

Given the selection of over 3,200 plants for the development, the external materiality of the townhouses has been intentionally designed to be simple and restrained, ensuring that the visual focus remains on the landscape.

The exterior materiality of the townhouses is primarily defined by two key elements: metal cladding on the upper storeys, floor-to-ceiling windows on the ground floor. When combined with a densely-planted courtyard, these elements combine to produce a successful composition, as referenced in Retallack Thomson's 'Steel House/Stone House', provided in Figure 9 overleaf.

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Figure 10 - Architect Retallack Thompson's 'Steel House/Stone House' showing the successful composition of metal cladding on the upper storey, floor-to-ceiling windows on the ground floor and a densely-planted courtyard in the foreground.

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Other Facilities

The development's Recycling and Mobility Hub, car-share facility, and authority services cupboards are located on the southeast side of the Site.

Recycling Hub

The Recycling Hub is equipped to handle four separate waste streams: recycling, food organics and garden organics (FOGO), glass, and general waste, using a combination of hoppers and mobile garbage bins (MGBs). Residents access the recycling hub via the development's internal pedestrian path network through a dedicated resident entry door.

Waste and recycling collection occurs via a roller door that opens onto the existing public lane accessed from William Street. This public lane is currently used for waste and recycling collection by the neighboring properties at 663, 665, 667, and 669 Sydney Road.

Mobility Hub

The Mobility Hub is a secure facility providing residents with secure bicycle parking and the car-share vehicle. It is accessible via the development's internal pedestrian path network or an external entry door from Florence Street.

A parking space with an EV charger is provided for the development's car-share vehicle on the south side of the Mobility Hub. It is anticipated that an agreement will be established with an established car-share provider to maintain a permanent car-share vehicle at this location.

The development's electrical and water service authority cupboards are situated adjacent to the car-share vehicle's parking space. As the development is gas-free, no gas authority cupboard is required.

Summary

The townhouse development at 46-52 Breese Street, Brunswick, represents a carefully considered response to the growing need for high-quality, medium-density housing in Melbourne. Inspired by the pioneering work of Merchant Builders' and Louis Sauer, this project aims to create a vibrant, sustainable, and community-oriented living environment.

By integrating thoughtful site planning, landscape-led design, and architectural innovation, the development seeks to provide residents with not just a dwelling, but a place to thrive. The 43 townhouses are designed to maximize natural light, energy efficiency, and accessibility, while fostering a strong sense of community through shared spaces and pedestrian-friendly pathways.

The emphasis on deep-root landscaping, featuring over 3,200 plants, transforms the site into a seasonal woodland, providing visual relief, ecological benefits, and a unique living experience. The materiality of the buildings is intentionally simple, allowing the landscape to be the focus and create a harmonious balance between the built and natural environments.

With its commitment to sustainable construction practices, social value, and thoughtful design, this development is poised to contribute positively to the Brunswick community. It offers a model for future

urban infill projects, demonstrating that higher densities can be achieved without compromising quality, amenity, or environmental responsibility. The Breese Street townhouse development is envisioned as a place where residents can enjoy a convenient, affordable, and fulfilling lifestyle, connected to both nature and their neighbours.

This document serves as an overview of the design concept, objectives, and features of the development, laying the foundation for its successful realisation and long-term contribution to the urban fabric of Brunswick.

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