

WORDS NOEL PROBERT
PHOTOGRAPHY GRANT NOWELL
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THE PLACEMAKER

Gilbert Rochecouste shuns shopping malls and champions civic spaces, injecting life into cities around the country. So what's he going to do for Murray Bridge?

What has Murray Bridge got in common with Melbourne and Dubai? The answer, besides being built on a river, is placemaker Gilbert Rochecouste. "What is a placemaker? That's a big question," says Rochecouste. "It's an emerging area. At its core is creating meaningful, connected places that people want to visit. It's harnessing the combined force of economic development, architecture and social elements to create something locally distinctive and unique."

Rochecouste's company is called The Village Well, and probably best-known for revitalising Melbourne's Flinders Lane and Degraeves Street, as well as the Queen Victoria Markets: it's also currently working on a multi-billion dollar rejuvenation of the old section of Dubai. The common theme is a determination to retain the things that make each place distinctive. "It's about striking a balance between local authenticity and commercial reality," he says.

Commercial reality is something Rochecouste is familiar with. Formerly a development manager for Myer and director of the Chadstone shopping centre in Melbourne, he went to work for Malls America in Minneapolis in 1990. But he

became disillusioned with the super-regional shopping centre concept and started to think about ways of reinvigorating the traditional town centre. He returned to Australia and started The Village Well in 1992. Since then he has worked on hundreds of projects, from Kings Cross and Rouse Hill in Sydney to Newcastle, Ballarat and Mildura.

He's come to Murray Bridge to pave the way for a major new project. A joint venture between the Murray Bridge Racing Club and Burke Urban, the development will combine a state-of-the-art equine racing and training facility with a village of 3,500 allotments. The developers are working with the Rural City of Murray Bridge to make sure their project is something more than a run-of-the-mill subdivision.

Placemaker Gilbert Rochecouste.

"Usually, The Village Well is hired by councils to rejuvenate existing streets," Rochecouste explains. "This is a first in Australia with a greenfield developer – Burke Urban is willing to invest out of its comfort zone. It costs a huge premium, but these are long-term investors who want to leave a legacy. These guys are savvy, they can see that doing good is good for business."

In Murray Bridge, Rochecouste is starting work well before the first sod is turned, looking at the town, its culture and history, and working with local traders and the council to revitalise the shopping strip.

The Village Well will facilitate an intensive community engagement process in Murray Bridge in late February 2011. The workshops will start to uncover what lies at the heart

of Murray Bridge and how the public and private sector can collaborate to pave a bright and prosperous future for the town that ensures it retains its own authentic story.

"The 'wow' factor is the river," he says. "I'm working to guide the community to a larger vision for their town. We look at things like the retail mix, perhaps establishing a farmers' market or a community arts space. It's about collaborating to build more love for the old town centre, all before the new development starts, so it doesn't just 'land' there, it arrives with a sense of place."

He says the developer wants to avoid an "us and them" mentality – understanding the new shouldn't take away from the old. "We don't want to suck the life out of the existing

town centre," he says. It's equally important for residents in the new village to be able to fit into the existing town. "It's always the first residents that struggle, with nowhere to go until things develop."

Rochecouste talks passionately about the way planning needs to change to deal with future challenges. "If you don't engage up front you'll get community backlash," he says. "Washed-out prefabs destroy the fabric of a place. We can use a local palette, recycled materials, develop a local distinctiveness."

Much of Rochecouste's thinking springs from New Urbanism, an urban design movement that began in the USA in the 1980s. At its heart is the idea that neighbourhoods should be designed around the needs of people. A key element of the philosophy is an obvious town centre, with most of the dwellings built within five minutes' walk away. A mixture of detached houses, townhouses and apartments provide options for a diverse range of people. Young, old, families, and people from different socio-economic strata can all be catered for, providing diversity in the population. A mix of retail and office space caters for the day-to-day needs of the community, while schools and playgrounds are located within easy walking distance.

Other important elements of New Urbanism include a focus on community connectedness, eschewing the suburban model of uniform large blocks with distant, self-contained shopping centres and service precincts. Although it's called 'new' it actually harks back to a more traditional way of living.

Rochecouste's vision is for an urban environment based around the idea of the local village. He was born in Mauritius and lived in a village where people would meet and interact, fostering a sense of community and extended family. He wants to see us move away from the socially isolating model of the last 50 years, returning to a more traditional ideal.

"Quarter-acre suburbia is a paradigm we were sold in the 1950s. Before World War Two we used to build towns, build communities. Town elders built halls, community centres, parks, clocks and churches. There was investment in the civic realm. We can't push all of this onto the community," Rochecouste says.

"We can deliver quality of life if we want to. Developers can go beyond self-interest, but there are lots of disincentives that encourage cut-and-run development. In many ways the current system fights against what we are trying to do."

One problem with the quarter-acre suburban model is the need for a car to perform daily tasks. The need to drive to work, often some distance away, and to distant shopping centres and schools is counter to our desire for community. Rochecouste's approach is to blend residential and retail precincts in a way that creates what he calls a 'third place', where communities can interact. "We want to give you a hundred reasons to walk out of your house to other places. I do get challenged by 'Save Our Suburbs' and NIMBY groups who want to maintain big blocks, but we can't keep building over all of our beautiful soil. We should be densifying our town centres," he says.

"We're being sold the suburban dream, but it's turning into a nightmare. We need to sell a dream that is authentic. We need to build-in the concept of everyday sustainability. It's messy and it's complex, but that's what life's about. We're seeing lots of tipping points. Peak oil, peak soil, climate change and population growth are all issues that are converging. High petrol prices will not go away. Climate change will not go away."

He doesn't think change is going to be easy. "It's challenging. We might need to live more simply – walk more, work closer to home, socialise closer to home. But our current approach has yielded very average social outcomes, and bland, bland, bland suburbs," Rochecouste says.

"We need a new narrative. What would it be like if you got back five hours of your life each week – five hours out of the car?"

Rochecouste was pleasantly surprised by local council figures showing between 70 and 80 percent of Murray Bridge residents work in the town, or nearby, rather than commuting to Adelaide. He says that the confluence of employment opportunities brings an opportunity for a thriving community. In addition to the Big W distribution centre and abattoir, there is a lot of cheap industrial land with railway access to encourage significantly more investment and employment into the area. There is also the potential for a greater range of white-collar employment as well, fitting in with the notion of a broad social mix making up a vibrant and diverse community.

He looks to the Adelaide Hills for examples. "Stirling and Hahndorf are thriving, resilient places that people want to visit," he says. "There's a blend of art, retail and welcoming areas that make these places work."

Taking the elements that produce successful, resilient communities is at the heart of his philosophy, but there is only so much he can do alone. He is enthusiastic about the team behind the Murray Bridge project: Bill Burrell is the urban designer and Steve Thorne is responsible for the detail of the town centre design and Geoff Bone is managing the master plan and how it all fits together. "They are renowned New Urbanists – very wise designers," says Rochecouste.

"What a new, exciting story Murray Bridge has got. It's about food security, reconnecting with the river – it's all in the grass roots. We want that fine grain to remain realistic and authentic. My heart resounds in the deep places that will nourish life."

His enthusiasm is not blind though, and he is aware that not everyone will automatically see his point of view. "It takes a certain understanding, a certain sensibility to buy into this," says Rochecouste. "Our culture is still a 'me' culture, not a 'we' culture. But it needs to come from consumers. They'll see through the whitewash, the greenwash, the localwash, and they'll seek out what is real and authentic. New Urbanism can build good bones – the community can build on them to make their own place."

He stresses that he is not advocating a retreat from growth. "The biggest game in town is consumption and I know that game. I'm a big fan of growth but I believe we need to look at different indicators of improvement – more people working close to home, more people walking, using local materials – that's sexy," says Rochecouste.



Placemaker Gilbert Rochecouste walks the Murray Bridge town centre.

"But we still run on a market capitalist system, and the hard numbers back it up." He points to rising rents in Degraes Street as evidence that people crave a more connected community, and hopes that as more enlightened developments arise, more developers will come to the party. "Hopefully the super funds and the banks will see the need to invest with developers who are on the right track," he says.

He might not have to wait too long to see that. In addition to the Murray Bridge project, Rochecouste is involved in six other projects in Adelaide, including Rundle Mall, Port Adelaide and King William Road. He's also on board with a new greenfield project which he can't announce, but which he says will be the biggest city project to be built in Adelaide.

"I feel privileged," he says. "I'm working on seven projects in South Australia. I'm watching Adelaide emerge with a new narrative."

He's optimistic about the future, believing that people are demanding more from their councils, governments and developers.

"People have a primal need for community," he says. "Not in a romantic sense, but a real understanding of what quality of life is. They're tired of new estates designed by 'one-handed architects' that all look the same. People look to vibrant communities in Africa and Asia, and the best of Europe and the US and they want that for themselves. The revolution will not be advertised." *

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