

The bridges of Sydney

Planners raise eyebrows at big overhead paths

By GAVIN SOUTER

SUDDENLY, there is something new about central Sydney—pedestrian overpasses, or enclosed bridges linking city buildings 20 or 30 feet above the street.

Already the city centre has three such structures: across Pitt Street (linking Farmer's and the new Centrepoint project), Castlereagh Street (Centrepoint and David Jones), and Market Street (Centrepoint and the other David Jones').

The new MLC project on the Australia Hotel site will have a bridge across Castlereagh Street, only a block away from the one at Centrepoint. There will also be a bridge across Bond Street from Australia Square to the new Stock Exchange building, and another across Grosvenor Street from the new Qantas building to Lang Park. Undoubtedly there will be others.

It is all vaguely reminiscent of those cities in "Buck Rogers" which were criss-crossed by elevated skyways. Are such bridges really good for Sydney? To judge only from the three Centrepoint bridges, I would say not.

These three massive bridges are good for enabling customers to move from one retail store to another. But they are

considerably larger than necessary for that purpose.

They will eventually form part of a central city network of pedestrian tunnels, ground-level footways and overpasses. But as thoroughfares they will not be as useful as other parts of that network, which in its entirety will enable pedestrians to walk from St James station to Town Hall without crossing a street at ground level.

Centrepoint's bridges will not be open all the time, and pedestrians along such routes will inevitably find their passage hindered by retail activity. It could well be that only customers and potential customers will use them.

The bridges will certainly benefit retailers and their customers. But what about the public as a whole? Its judgment will be governed largely by the external appearance of the bridges, and their effect upon the city.

Comments I have heard in buses passing under the double-deck bridge in Pitt Street and the single-deck one in Castlereagh Street have all been unfavourable. For example: "They're too big," "They cast too much shadow on the road," "They block the view," and "What right has a shop got to build over the road?"

The president of the Royal Australian Planning Institute, Mr George Clarke, also dis-



The Centrepoint bridge over Pitt Street

approves. "These particular overpasses," he said, "are too wide, too deep and too bulky. They are visually more oppressive than they need to be."

Admittedly, the bridges are not yet finished. "Don't knock them," says the Centrepoint architect, Mr Donald Crone, who vigorously defends the bridges on all counts. "You're still looking at a very incomplete piece of real estate."

Their raw concrete sides will be clad in white and stone-coloured vinyl, but that will not make the bridges look any smaller. The Pitt Street one is 42ft wide and 27ft from top to bottom. Castlereagh Street's is 42ft wide and 16ft deep, and Market Street's 30ft wide and 16ft deep.

The AMP Society—which is building Centrepoint, and sharing the building and running costs of the three bridges with David Jones' and Farmer's—applied to the Town Hall for building approval in 1968. At that time the city was being run by three Commissioners: Sir Vernon Treatt, Mr J. A. L. Shaw and Sir William Pettingell.

I understand that the City Engineer's Department reported adversely on the bridges, urging that they should be narrower and shallower. But the Commissioners

approved the bridge application as it stood.

Such approval would presumably not be granted today. Standards that the council has adopted in the meantime provide for a maximum width of 20ft on routes with a pedestrian flow of between 180 and 300 people a minute. The recommended width of secondary routes (144 people a minute) is 12ft, and on minor routes six feet.

Mr Crone has assumed a maximum traffic flow of 5,000 people an hour. This is the equivalent of only 83 a minute.

Why, then, are the bridges so big? On estimated traffic flow and according to the council's present criteria, they ought to be 12ft wide—not 42ft and 30ft.

One suspects that they were conceived not merely as bridges, but as extensions of the retail stores which they link. They will all be carpeted (except the lower level of the Pitt Street bridge, which has terrazzo marble) and air-conditioned. Customers leaving one store for another will not feel that they are leaving the retail ambience.

The annual running cost of the bridges—including interest on capital, air-conditioning, licence fees and municipal

rates—will be about \$90,000. City Council is leasing the air space to the AMP for 40 years. It will charge annual licence fees of \$4,200 for Pitt Street, and \$2,100 each for the other two bridges, plus rates.

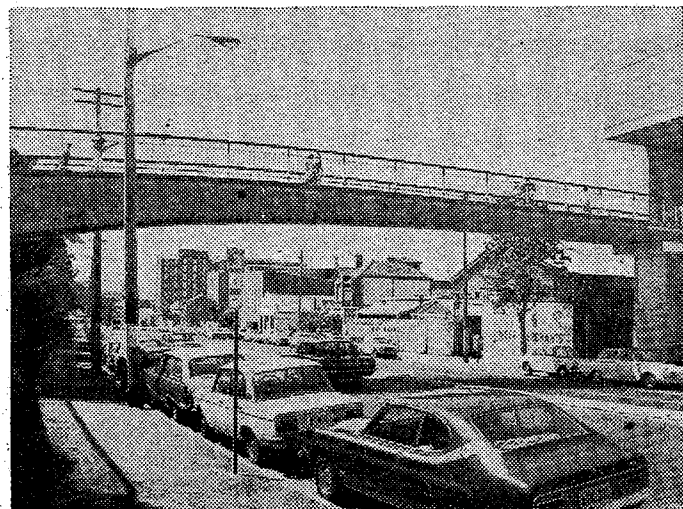
On the lower Pitt Street level, now open to the public, the AMP has sub-let about one-fifth of the floor space for a large coffee shop, which is now in business.

To question the communal desirability of these particular bridges is not to criticise the concept of pedestrian overpasses. Town planners believe that bridges have an important role to play in pedestrian movement.

Three planners to whom I spoke this week were all concerned that public reaction to the Centrepoint bridges might adversely affect the development of narrower bridges elsewhere in the city.

"Every city centre, and Sydney more than most, needs a network of walkways physically separated from vehicular traffic," said Mr Clarke. "Skyways at selected locations can form a valuable part of such a network."

VICTOR ZORZA's Friday column has been held over.



The bridge over City Road leading to Sydney University . . . narrow pedestrian overpasses have an important role to play, say planners.