Gentrification, densification and the inner city: some thoughts on the personal, the political and the policies

I have just moved into a new medium-density development in an inner area of Melbourne, and I feel very ambivalent about it. Not because I do not love the house I have bought or the area it is in: I do. But never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be living in one of these developments, advertised in the Saturday real estate pages as ‘Carlton Buyers ... close to Melbourne Uni, RMIT, shops and the city ... priced from ONLY ...’ (take your pick of some outrageous sum that no one living in the area could possibly have thought of 10 years ago).

What is the problem?

First of all it is far from politically correct - built on the site of a school sold off in the first flush of the Liberal ascendancy. Some of my best friends were centrally active in campaigns to save schools like this.

Secondly, my architectural and building-profession friends and colleagues are somewhat contemptuous, if not downright alarmist about the form of the construction: concrete slab. ‘Some of these developments have no damp courses’ they mutter; ‘Remember Ronan Point; remember the Holmesglen concrete panel factory of the 1950s and the concrete houses in West Heidelberg’ they warn; ‘Slums of the future’ they predict. ‘And as for the aesthetics ... pseudo-Edwardian with Brunswick green bullnose verandahs and aluminium Victorian picket fences ... Well, really ...

Playing Pollyanna. I mention my seven-year housing guarantee and the fact that this particular development is quite understated in its use of colours and textures compared with some.

In an effort to help me with my soul searching when trying to decide whether to buy the house, a friend pointed out: ‘Well, at least you’re contributing to urban consolidation and helping to save infrastructure on the fringe’. This was not the comforting support it was intended to be, because the benefits of medium-density housing and infrastructure savings of so-called urban consolidation are far from proven. And I have always been outspokenly sceptical of the Animal Farm slogans: ‘urban sprawl - baad: urban consolidation - gooood’.

So why did I choose to make a home out of built form that causes me so much angst? The main reason is very peculiar to myself and hardly constitutes the basis for market demand: I wanted a view of the city skyline, and this house has three storeys with a truly wonderful view from the attic-style main bedroom.

Secondly, I wanted to live in the inner city, no more than a 30 minute tram ride from RMIT. I know there are wonderful views of the city skyline from Whittlesea and that is a very real option, but I’ve never lived more than 30 minutes away from where I have worked and am in the fortunate position of being able to make that choice.

I also wanted to live within walking distance of shops and supermarkets and not have to use my car unless absolutely necessary. I have, in fact, managed to live
without a car at various times in the past; that was before I had children and
again after they became independently mobile. Not having a car is not an
option for most people with families living in the suburbs and that is one of the
trade-offs we make – individual space and its relative costs versus travel time
and costs.

Now I am able to use the car for weekend recreational shopping, visiting and
country escapes. If public transport were more reliable, frequent and efficient,
more pleasant and safer, especially at the weekends, I would use it much more
often and maybe go without a car altogether.

Thirdly, after hearing about and experiencing the problems associated with
common property and the body corporate, such as protracted legal battles and
endless disagreements over paint colours, pets, maintenance and the rest, I
decided I wanted freehold title. I am very wary of body corporate management
structures, because people join these structures without understanding that the
same relations with your neighbours cannot be expected to exist under these
arrangements, as would be expected under individual titles. More education in
cooporative living is needed to make body corporates work.

I wanted my two cats with me and I wanted them to have ground floor access,
being far too lazy to worry about kitty litter for the rest of our lives. But I didn’t
want a garden with more than a few square meters of shrubbery, herbs in pots
and a spot for some garden furniture and a barbecue.

Also, I wanted my own front door with access to the street – I can’t stand all
those security gates, buttons, buzzers, cameras, speakers, and so on, that seem to
be mandatory in new or renovated multi-unit developments. We are not LA –
thank heavens – and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy to carry on as if we
are. I am old-fashioned enough to want my front door to be welcoming to my
guests, and to not leave them standing out in the rain on the footpath. By the
same token, if things are as bad out there as the security-device salesmen would
have us believe, I don’t want my friends put at risk of being mugged while they
wait for me to remember the combination and raise the portcullis.

Finally, I wanted to live in the area because I have lived here before, have many
friends and feel at home. In other words, I wanted a continuing sense of
community.

I can use my story to illustrate some of the issues related to urban consolidation.

Firstly, the vexed question of the meaning of ‘urban consolidation’. From the
conference, I have heard it used to mean: urban design in general; planned
residential developments in particular, of any era or type; urban redevelopment;
the result of, and response to, global economic restructuring; and the Heidelberg
Town Hall as an example of urban consolidation!! Truly it seems, to paraphrase
Aaron Wildavsky’s famous dictum about planning, ‘If urban consolidation is
everything, maybe it’s nothing’.
The definition I prefer goes something like this: densification or consolidation is an increase in densities of buildings, people or both, so that a given volume of human activity would occupy less land than at lower densities, or that the same area of land could house more structures and/or people.

Using the word ‘densification’ helps to make us think again about what is meant by ‘consolidation’. Note that this definition not only refers to housing densities, but also to buildings and activities in general, and it has been pointed out by many commentators, that just concentrating on residential densities, either numbers of dwellings or numbers of people, will not reduce significantly the amount of land needed for overall metropolitan development. This can be seen by the fact that nearly 30 per cent of the urban area is taken up with things to do with cars: roads, service stations, car sales lots, parking structures, domestic garages. Reducing the use of the car, and hence these land uses, would contribute almost as much to urban consolidation as the most drastic densification of residential uses.

There is also the question of scale – increased housing densities might increase population numbers in a given neighbourhood, but will not necessarily translate into metropolitan-wide increases. Similarly, increases in the number of dwelling units do not necessarily translate into increases in population, if household sizes are falling. We need to be clear about the difference between densities of built structures and densities of population.

Almost all the costs and benefits of urban consolidation are in dispute:
- Cost savings for general urban development.
- Infrastructure savings.
- Environmental benefits.
- Energy savings.
- Housing affordability.
- Increased use of public transport.
- Encouragement of community, conviviality and urban vitality.

I only want to pick up on a few of these here. For instance, creating urban villages around transport nodes will only have beneficial effects in terms of reduced car-use if people actually give up their cars in favour of public transport. You can lead car drivers to railway stations but you can’t force them to commute by train. So far, everyone in residence in my development owns a car, and most cars are driven at least once a day, despite being in a transport-rich area and close to all the amenities that qualify the area to be thought of as an urban village already.

Similarly, while urban consolidation is meant to be environmentally friendly in reducing the use of the car, higher density-built form can involve increased hard surfacing, leading to increased run-offs and, in the inner areas, overloading of the ageing stormwater system (not to mention increased pressures on sewerage systems already on the verge of collapse). Increased hard surfacing needs to be
balanced with increased open space, but this then may cancel out the space savings of the higher density development.

In addition, in my development, the small back gardens in some units are being bricked over to create easy-care areas for non-gardening households. However, this is nothing new, because the original school ground was largely an asphalt surface anyway. And the inner suburbs have been host to outdoor living on concreted surfaces since the postwar immigrants took up residence here. Paved yards have an important social function which should not be overlooked in the rush toward environmental correctness.

On the other hand, European-style conviviality does not automatically come from paved yards and higher densities, although you might think so when listening to the proponents of urban villages. Just because there are six or so pioneering households in my development while construction goes on all around us, does not mean that they came out in force when I held a house warming party which was, in part, an attempt to get to know the neighbours. In fact, the only neighbours who came were a couple newly arrived from Switzerland.

I barely see my neighbours on a daily basis, any more than I would if I lived in Donvale, even though I overlook their backyards and they mine, and even though – true enough, as my architectural friends warned me – we can all hear each other quite well from time to time. I see much more of the elderly Italian couple across the road, whose house I also overlook and who could by rights be extremely disturbed at the massive changes taking place in their street. But they have obviously seen it all before, having been in residence when the houses across the road from them were bought up in the 1970s for the expansion of the school. They are extremely friendly and always ready for a chat over the fence.

On the other hand, the young professional couple next door to them, more recent residents, lovingly renovating their weatherboard house, and equally disrupted by construction works that have entirely ruined the street surface and will go on creating noise and dust for at least another six months, are not as forgiving of the new residents.

All of which is just to say, that community is not bred by proximity, as residents of high-rise developments as different as Double Bay and Collingwood can tell you. Local communities build up over decades and grow out of common concerns such as child care and schools, or fights to save the local environment. It is especially hard to foster locality-based community when everyone is out at work during the day, and eating in restaurants elsewhere at night. Yet these are the visions of the vibrant city which, according to some enthusiasts, are supposed to automatically follow from the creation of denser built form.

In reality, children are a very strong force in the creation of local community, but many inner urban developments seem specifically designed to exclude children, as if they had no part in creating the very ‘community’ that policy-
makers claim will flow from the higher densities of multi-unit developments.

Finally, what of the problems of urban conservation when faced with pressures for urban consolidation? In the case of this site, there was an old school built at the turn of the century. I have no recollection of this building, although I have been told it was a very fine example of Federation school architecture. In all my past wanderings in the area, I can only remember the ‘new’ buildings which were built in the 1970s – they were not very exciting. *Plus ça change...*

These processes of change, development and redevelopment are part of what living in an urban environment is all about. Urban consolidation is not a universal rationale for pulling down old buildings that might find alternative uses while retaining a sense of local continuity. Neither is urban conservation a universal rationale preventing changes, additions to, and deletions from the urban fabric.

More important questions are who has lost and who has gained from the sale of the school and the building of a new residential development?

Secondary school pupils must travel further to school and the community has lost an asset that could have been put to alternative uses, and one day may even have been required for use as a school once again. This has been done in the name of economic rationalist policies that have no use for ‘community’. The building of multi-unit developments on the site has also been allowed in the name of dubious policies of urban consolidation which, ironically, carry a baggage of rhetoric about the creation of ‘community’. These are uncomfortable aspects of this development which cannot be swept aside.

On the other hand, I have gained a house that pretty much suits my needs (give or take a few very silly omissions in internal design – such as the lack of a utility or broom cupboard). I have been fortunate enough to be able to buy myself access to public transport, work, shops, restaurants, theatres and parks (and indeed, schools, community centres, health centres and hospitals should I need them).

I have perhaps made a minimal contribution to the rate of population decline in the inner areas. But I have also shown that the planners’ ideas about matching household size to house size don’t necessarily accord with people’s preferences – by the planners’ calculations, I am over-housed: a single person in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom dwelling. But I want that space, for my books and my furniture of which I am very fond, and because I enjoy having people to stay (including, for very short periods, my sons). In fact, only one of the households in the development so far has three people in it – the rest are couples or in one case, two students sharing. It seems that there is a market for larger houses on smaller blocks, despite decreasing household size.

The rhetoric of urban consolidation has, in fact, begun to spur the provision of
greater variety in housing design and form, and thus is providing more choices for those who can afford it, even if they don’t make the choices predicted for them. But urban consolidation applied to residential densities alone, will not contain urban ‘sprawl’ nor reverse inner area population decline, nor, without strong government intervention, create more affordable housing.

Site-specific assessments of the effects of urban consolidation, in terms of the urban design, increased densities, urban ‘revitalisation’ and the fostering of ‘community’ of individual projects, are inadequate. The whole question of the inequities of urban development and redevelopment has to be addressed in much wider contexts.

In fact, and this is where my argument is finally leading, medium-density housing in the inner areas is mainly a contemporary permutation of the gentrification that has been going on for nearly 30 years. The problems and inequities of gentrification and the displacement of the less well-off from the resources-rich inner areas is also the subject of debate. All too often, urban ‘revitalisation’ can lead to increased property values, which is fine for owner-landlords and owner-occupiers, but not so good for tenants, many of whom need the access to facilities of the inner suburbs. ‘Revitalisation’ can go on to change the types of shops in an area and the prices they charge: fish and chip shops turn into bistros; pubs turn into bars; milk bars turn into delicatessens, and low-income renters and home owners alike are disadvantaged by these changes. This is precisely why it is important that there continues to be publicly-owned housing in the inner areas.

In addition, and unlike the gentrification based on the renovation of the existing urban fabric, medium-density developments can create visually intrusive, deliberately enclosed, physically distinct enclaves, which deny local history and further define the class and culture divisions between the new residents and the old. So on very few counts can these developments be said to be achieving the aims claimed for them by the planners and policy-makers. This is not to say they should be stopped – this would hardly be possible in the short-term – although in the longer-term there may be a reaction against them, as there was to flats in the 1960s.

Rather, we should accept such developments for what they are – a market niche, whether ‘real’ or ‘created’ – and look for more interventionist policies to deal directly with environmental problems, urban conservation and development issues, building regulations, transport, provision of infrastructure, housing and employment. All of these policy areas have questions of equity embedded within them, however unfashionable this may be, the questions are nonetheless pressing.

The other morning I woke up and saw a hot air balloon suspended in the dawn light over the towers of the CDB. It was a magical sight and I felt immensely lucky to be able to have the view I had always wanted and I knew I’d done the right thing in buying my house.
It is now up to me and people like me, to work towards community action and government policies which, in the words of the American planner Walter Krumholz, 'create more choices for those who have few'.

1T. Burke & D. Hayward, 'Housing Melburnians for the Next Twenty Years', Urban Policy and Research, 8 (3), 1990, pp 122-151.
