Urban conservation and urban consolidation – 20 years progress?

Introduction

This paper is too brief to adequately cover the 20 year history of this subject. It can only attempt to address some of the key landmarks and issues.

1976 saw the beginning of a process to conserve culturally significant urban areas in Victoria. The term 'urban conservation' first came into use at this time. Urban conservation was primarily aimed at the management of urban redevelopment in significant areas. Redevelopment has been a factor of Melbourne since the gold rush swept over the sleepy pastoral town. It was retitled 'urban consolidation' in the 1980s. I have prepared a separate chronology of events that I have seen as landmarks in the history of urban conservation, and its influence on urban consolidation. This chronology provides a context for this paper and is attached at the end.

This anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect on the urban conservation movement, how it started and where it is going. In Victoria, it was for a period extremely vigorous and was setting standards comparable, if not better than, overseas practice for areas of similar value. New procedures were established, including heritage advisory services which institutionalised the role of the freelance conservation professional. For a time urban conservation practice in Victoria was leading the other states of Australia.

Demand for change

The urban conservation movement represented a response to the development boom of both the public and private sector of the 1960s. Both community groups and the National Trust were concerned about the losses to the inner and middle suburbs that had for many generations helped define the character of Melbourne.

The most prominent cause of discontent was the Housing Commission urban renewal programs. These were creating numerous high rise estates around Melbourne, leading to the destruction of significant areas of Carlton, Fitzroy, and South Melbourne. Les Perrott, a prominent town planner had prepared a notorious plan for the redevelopment of most of North and South Carlton for both public housing and private sector flats. This area is now recognised as being the largest, most intact and cohesive area of terrace housing in Victoria and possibly Australia. This wholesale activity was mirrored at a micro level by private flat developers, constructing box-like flats through large areas of the inner to middle suburbs, and facing few constraints. There was a parasitic character to this activity. The best areas were targeted by developers, yet the resulting developments were the antithesis of this desirable character. A consequence was that many of the areas that survived that period were not representative of what had historically been the most significant urban areas.

The National Trust now not only had an interest in buildings of individual value but recognised significant urban areas as a whole. This was first manifested by
the classification of Maldon as an entire town in 1966. At the same time new professional disciplines emerged, such as those established by architectural historians George Tibbits and Miles Lewis at the architecture school at Melbourne University. These were to be crucial to the rapid development of rational conservation procedures by government in Victoria. The battle to save Collins Street, in the central city, created a metropolitan-wide campaign that carried real political power by the mid 1970s.

First government actions

The disputes of the 1960s and 1970s helped change the political will to ensure the conservation of historic areas of cities and towns in Victoria. There was a shared vision between the federal Labor and Victorian Liberal governments. Tom Uren's Department of Urban and Regional Development took a particular interest in cities and the means of avoiding the traditional public housing clearance schemes. The Australian Heritage Commission was formed in 1974, and in Victoria, urban conservation powers were added to the Town and Country Planning Act in 1973 and the Historic Buildings Act created was in 1974. The eight 1976 CBD studies were launched with a spirit of idealism that was the hallmark of most new urban conservation initiatives in Victoria for the next 10 years or more.

The development of comprehensive conservation programs in Victoria began with these eight conservation studies, commissioned by the Historic Buildings Preservation Council. They were a personal initiative of Premier Hamer. The average cost of each study was $10,000 and this represented an unequalled financial commitment to such studies. The studies were a turning point in state government commitment to the conservation of the architectural character of Melbourne. Despite their shortcomings by today's more rigorous standards, these studies were responsible for identifying many precincts and buildings that are now highly valued.

The Historic Buildings Preservation Council administration was expanded to form the 'Heritage Unit' which became the patron and catalyst for urban conservation programs throughout the state. They helped commission conservation studies such as those for Fitzroy, and Ballarat in the 1970s. Operating directly under John Lawson, then Deputy Secretary for Planning, they helped establish and service the first heritage advisory service and restoration fund at Maldon in 1977. (The Urban Land Authority, now chaired by John Lawson, is well regarded for the conservation objectives of many of its projects.)

Tangible results occurred with conservation programs for inner suburbs where there was little incentive for redevelopment. The high density housing stock had become more valuable than new developments. The programs were strongly supported by local community groups. Victoria enjoyed an enviable reputation for the development of many new initiatives and methodologies. While local
government had the responsibility for most of the new initiatives and the administration of controls, the active support of the heritage architects and planners of the Heritage Unit was crucial to the success of many programs. The sustainability of the gains made during this period was not questioned. A number of conservation professionals were working in the field by 1980. Public awareness was high with many conservation studies undertaken and heritage advisers achieving good media coverage. First heritage guidelines were produced which offered a conservative approach to infill design.

Consolidation of programs
By the mid 1980s, the City of Melbourne led the state and indeed the country with the sophistication of its conservation programs. They covered the inner suburbs of East Melbourne, South Yarra, Carlton, North Carlton, Parkville, North Melbourne, Flemington and Kensington. The program provided a very precise approach to alterations, additions and new infill buildings. The standard data forms, streetscape classification, the 'Scott matrix' (which combined building gradings of A to D with streetscape levels of 1 to 3), and associate guidelines provided the certainty that governments had been demanding since the late 1970s. A new equity was established between neighbours and the program was the basis for many successful appeal decisions. The City of Melbourne was the first local government body to engage heritage consultants on an ongoing basis.

By 1986 the City of Melbourne was refining urban design principles within the framework of existing conservation policies. They allowed more innovative design responses for new infill buildings within strict siting and height requirements for new structures. The Burra Charter provided the philosophical framework to express this 'importance of the real'. Although many architects were often critical of the perceived loss of creative freedom, they were frequently surprised at the manner in which conservation constraints provided an interesting challenge that could actually improve the design response. For a period urban conservation provided a vision of a better future for our cities, where the best aspects of our historic environment were conserved, while innovative new development was actively promoted through conservation planning controls. Architectural innovation has continued to be fostered by those heritage advisers who have a defined philosophical view and a commitment to modern design.

In some areas, however, councils and some advisers have clung to the earlier, more derivative guidelines. These guidelines helped the growth of reproduction styles and have fuelled a general back lash against controls.

First problems
The first real problems occurred in the areas of detached housing in middle suburbs such as Prahran, Malvern and Camberwell. Conservation objectives and
amenity objectives were frequently blurred. The confused agendas of some 
councils led to the use of urban conservation controls for amenity purposes, 
effectively discrediting bona fide conservation measures and providing 
ammunition for detractors. Many significant houses by important architects of 
the 20th century have been lost because of these problems. In addition there 
was much public ignorance about 20th century architecture while nondescript 
Victorian houses were treasured and even replicated. The revival of the over-
ornate boom style Victorian mansion of the late 1880s represented the power of 
money over rational design. Unfortunately this trend continues, although now 
mainly in a corrupted neo-Palladian form.

These problems were compounded by the general excesses of the building boom 
of the late 1980s when any new development of any quality pushed the 
boundaries of acceptability to a new low. Controversial decisions by the State 
Government did not improve this climate. The demolition of the pioneering 
reinforced concrete Bow Truss wool store at Geelong was the symbol of this 
era. The saga that saw the almost total demolition of the Queen Victoria 
Hospital began at this time, paving the way for the extraordinary decisions of 
the subsequent Liberal Government. Both demolitions occurred through the 
involvement of state premiers.

Some councils, without a clear philosophical grasp of conservation principles, 
began to promote the growing trend of false historicism. This remains a 
continuing threat to conservation values and has been fostered by so-called 
urban character studies.

The crash of 1990 produced its own problems. There was more pressure than 
ever before to achieve 'outcomes' given the difficult financial climate. It was 
during this lull that Central Equity emerged to become the city’s pioneer and 
most prolific developer of high density industrialised housing now called 
'apartments'. Their first project was in a large disused industrial site in North 
Carlton. This site included the only surviving example of a cable car engine 
house with an adjacent car barn. These two features were retained for 
communal car parking after some debate about full or partial demolition. The 
new units were to be sold from the plan before work started. They were to be 
built of tilt slab concrete, a novel material for residential construction at that 
time. Disguised with rich red paint with applied mouldings, the design was not 
startling and seemed unlikely to sell. My judgement was wrong, however, and 
soon they were building on two large sites in Drummond Street South, 
previously planned for office use. Negotiations on heritage matters took only an 
hour compared with the tortured months and years spent over previous 
commercial schemes that did not materialise.

The air of uncertainty in the closing years of the Labor Government meant that 
the commitment to urban conservation implementation, let alone urban design 
matters, began to wane. At a number of councils that previously were 
recognised for their strong programs, budgetary resources for heritage advice
was drastically cut. At councils such as the City of Melbourne, consultants were more readily removed than permanent staff. Changes of planning personnel meant many town planners lacked the ‘bonding’ that occurred when the conservation programs were introduced. Novice town planners often had some difficulty understanding the rationale for urban conservation altogether. Other high level ‘new brooms’ felt the need to disturb the equilibrium, as part of a career path strategy, with no respect for established procedures. ‘Green fatigue’ frequently occurred where there was no ongoing community education to maintain the initial publicity campaigns. To compound these problems, the initial strong support from the State Government was not maintained. Limited resources were spread over a larger area and many responsibilities previously accepted by the State Government were transferred to local government.

**Shock of the new**

The ‘apartment’ boom that the first Central Equity projects started became the *leitmotiv* of the building industry revival under the new ultra-conservative Kennett Liberal Government. They have changed the face of many of the inner suburbs and even the city itself. The main problem was that design issues were no longer considered important; many opportunities for urban design negotiations for key sites were squandered. The model of apartments based on European precedents using innovative designs but adhering to controlled heights and setbacks was not generally adopted. The process of selling from the plan has meant that designers (including those that are architects) have not had sufficient time to resolve schemes. Some designs have actually evolved from the advertising material.

Councils came under direct pressure from the Minister of Planning to be more lenient. Residential usage was treated like a sacred cow and more freedom was exercised than would have been the case for office developments. Ironically, many developments are now planned to be able to be converted to office use if the market changes again. Most developments are notable for the gimmickry of their streetscape presentation.

The new streamlined planning approval processes have been compared by senior members of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal as little different in many respects to those of the 1960s, when there were few checks on the flat boom that scarred much of Melbourne. The first response to community unease about the current flat and unit boom (simply renamed as apartments) in residential areas was VicCode 2. While containing linkages to conservation areas it was open to interpretations that were completely at variance with the objectives. It raised more anger than when there was no policy at all. The revised code is still causing some concern. Now called the Good Design Guide, it has some improvements. These are that proper site analysis plans are required and that applicants are encouraged to have a prior meeting with council planners to understand the issues. It does aim to encourage innovative design and respect conservation issues.
The changing structure of local government has further eroded conservation practice. With council amalgamations there has been a loss of collective memory in local government, with the departure of many long-term personnel and all elected councillors. Elected councillors were replaced by government appointed commissioners for a period of approximately two years. Many commissioners appeared to have a clear direction to encourage development at any cost and ignore established procedures. This has lead to a change of culture amongst town planners, many now re-titled ‘economic planners’. Fear of job losses has in some cases driven planners to make decisions that would have once been unthinkable. The role of heritage advisers has been marginalised in many cases. These dramatic changes have combined with a general ‘green fatigue’ syndrome and the continuing crude use by developers of an eclectic pseudo-historicism. Many councils have not changed policies and controls, but are deliberately not administering them.

The idealism of the pioneering years of urban conservation in Victoria now provides a poignant contrast to the various manifestation resulting from these changes to local government, let alone changing community values. The effect of these changes, in many cases, has been to jeopardise the cultural values of many of our most significant urban precincts.

Conclusion

Sadly, it appears that the institutionalism of the conservation process has sapped community reaction to most of these issues. Conservation fatigue has eroded the will of many previously active participants. Community apathy, and the sense of powerlessness must be reversed if any real changes are to occur.

The first case studies provide a vision of the potential for urban conservation programs to promote urban consolidation, maintain sound conservation practices as well as promote innovative urban design. More recent examples highlight how irreversible damage has occurred through the interruption of orderly planning processes. Consistency is an essential prerequisite for conservation planning — there must be a respect for the process. Successful conservation programs elsewhere in the world are based on long-term objectives and are divorced from short-term political influence. The vulnerability of our cultural patrimony to political change has highlighted the fragile nature of the achievements of the last 20 years.

There is an urgent need to redefine our objectives and create a culture that sees conservation as a long-term process, free from the influence of sudden political swings and the vagaries of public taste. There is a need to maintain conservation standards consistently and impartially.
Urban conservation/urban consolidation: selected landmarks


1954 Bolte Liberal Government in Victoria; Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works metropolitan planning scheme.

1956 National Trust established; Sir Daryl Lindsay and Professor Brian Lewis prominent public spokesmen for buildings of major significance.

1960 Authors E. Graeme Robertson and David Saunders raise public awareness to a wider architectural heritage.

1960 Housing Commission high rise renewal programs; the private sector flat boom.

1966 National Trust classifies Maldon following comprehensive research by Miles Lewis and others.

c.1966 Birth of resident action groups and serious conservation battles to protect whole areas.

1966 Melbourne University School of Architecture develops a more rigorous discipline in architectural and urban history.

1970 Hamer Liberal Government in Victoria; first conservation controls at Maldon assisted by National Trust expert committee.


1975 Australian Heritage Commission established by Federal Government; National Estate Grants Program (NEGP) commenced which was to fund many conservation studies.

1976 New era of conservation programs commenced – eight conservation studies of Melbourne CBD.

1977 Heritage adviser and restoration fund at Maldon, central Victorian goldfields; beginning of historic towns program supported by Historic Buildings Preservation Council administration; commencement of the ‘Heritage Unit’, a catalyst for urban conservation studies and programs.

1977 First conservation studies with guidelines: Fitzroy, Parkville (Melbourne), Ballarat (Victorian goldfields city).

1977 MMBW resistance to urban conservation controls based on Gobbo report on compensation.


1979 Beechworth (gold town, north east Victoria) – second historic towns program.
1980 Rapid expansion of conservation studies for inner and middle suburbs, as well as rural towns and cities.

1980 National Trust urban conservation advisory committee members resign over Rialto deal between Northern Territory chairman Rodney Davidson and developer Bruno Grollo, urban conservation advice left increasingly to heritage advisers.

1980 Causes célèbres; Rialto redevelopment and demolition of Robbs Building; architect Norman Day and his Doug Wade house, Parkville.

1980 Ballarat, Queenscliff, Bendigo, Port Fairy and Portland, Talbot and Clunes Historic join historic towns programs.


1983 Urban conservation introduced to large sections of inner Melbourne after Gobbo compensation liability report of previous government disposed of by planning minister Evan Walker; UC1 for residential areas and UC2 areas for parks and environs.

1983 City of Melbourne refinement of conservation procedures; first direct local government appointment of heritage advisers on a regular basis.

c.1985 The spread of urban conservation programs into middle suburbs created the first major conflicts for the profession.

1986 MCC develops a more sophisticated response to infill design in place of derivative guidelines; some other councils retain historic reproduction as a basis for guidelines.

c.1987 Conservation planning legislation amended; government urban consolidation boost to reduce urban sprawl and infrastructure costs.

Urban consolidation part 2

1989 Property and building boom peaks, matched by architectural highs and lows; reproduction styles become entrenched (legacy of derivative guidelines?).

1990 Commercial and residential property crash.

1991 First Central Equity project commenced (in an urban conservation area).

1992 Apartments-lead recovery of property market ‘over 15 years of unsatisfied demand’.

Urban consolidation part 3


1993 Palladio – designer of the year.

1993 MCC boundary changes and commissioners appointed, contraction of conservation program.

1993 Major residential redevelopment boost by State Government; focus on planning constraints by local government; many planning appeals called in by minister.
Urban consolidation part 4

1994 Local government amalgamation of inner and middle suburbs; down sizing of heritage implementation and resources – loss of collective memory.
1994 VicCode 2 provides an attempt to regulate urban consolidation, receives community backlash.
1995 Downsizing of historic towns program.
1995 Local government changes to outer suburbs and rural councils.