Urban consolidation: formal opening address

The Hon Robert Maclellan MLA

Rob Maclellan was first elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for Gippsland West in May 1970 and was re-elected in 1973. He was elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for Berwick in 1976, re-elected in 1979, 1982, 1985, 1988 and in 1992, elected Member for Pakenham. Mr Maclellan has an LLB from the University of Melbourne and is the current Minister for Planning in the Department of Infrastructure for the Victorian State Government.

When I became Minister for Planning in October 1992 I was very much aware of the efforts of previous governments to contain Melbourne’s sprawl, and also the wide range of community reactions – from acceptance to frank hostility – engendered by consolidation policy. It is no secret that I have had to contend with some very intense debate about these issues, particularly from the leafy, long-established suburbs of middle Melbourne.

There are two themes to Melbourne’s long-term drive towards consolidation of the metropolitan area:

• The efficient use of land and infrastructure.
• The liveability of the city.

The reality is that if we allow fringe development to proceed unchecked we will soon be subdividing the outskirts of Orbost in East Gippsland.

If one goes to the regional section of all metropolitan planning schemes you will find themes of metropolitan policy which seek to:

• 'Enhance and consolidate residential and employment opportunities in the established urban area'.
• 'Concentrate Melbourne's outward expansion in nominated prime urban growth corridors'.
• 'Strengthen the role of central Melbourne'.
• 'Reinforce the established pattern of activity centres'.

We should consider the consequences of failure to pursue an overall policy of consolidation very carefully: Do people want to spend more of their lives travelling in cars from home to work, to shop, deliver children to school, or visit friends and family?

Should suburban Melbourne spread into viable agricultural land on the edge of the metropolis and increase the costs of local fresh food production, or into environmentally sensitive areas like the Dandenongs? How does a body such as Melbourne Water plan 20 years ahead for the construction of sewage and water services if there is no surety of the location of population? Would the public stomach the expense of ad hoc decision making or, worse still, the absence of such environmentally-sensitive services? Should central Melbourne, the location of 160-odd years of Victorian investment and the showplace of Victoria’s economy, be allowed to wither? Is it really sensible for essential public facilities to be located away from other mutually-supportive and synergistic land uses? Do people like to see schools and hospitals closing for lack of clientele in long-established inner-urban areas?

I think the community’s answer to all these questions is 'No' – although many people do not actually want to see increased housing density in their own suburb. For this reason, I am pleased to see that an organisation such as Australia ICOMOS – dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage – is prepared to discuss the issue of urban consolidation.
On the topic of heritage, you will be pleased to know that the Office of Planning and Heritage (OPH) has three funds which allocate money. The Government Building Restoration Program has allocated $10 million over the last two years to the restoration of government-owned historic buildings, with another $3 million allocated over each of the next three years. The Historic Buildings Council (now the Heritage Council), which provides grants and loans for the restoration of registered buildings, allocated $1.16 million to this purpose over the last three years. And the Historic Towns Program, which covers restoration of identified buildings in historic towns such as Beechworth, Maldon, Yackandandah and Chiltern, has allocated $1.12 million over the last three years.

In the past, the heritage conservation industry has seemed to be obsessed with individual buildings and sites with, perhaps, too little emphasis given to the vital issue of how the preservation of our heritage can co-exist with the demands of the future.

Since October 1992 I have had countless discussions with Melbourne residents, their professional consultants and their politicians, about the need to allow denser housing forms in the leafy green suburbs of Melbourne. Be assured that the arguments which are consistently used against consolidation and medium density policies relate to the physical and built heritage of those suburbs, along with the social value – for which we can read heritage – of those places. The local councils which administer those areas have consistently sought to use urban conservation policies and statutory provisions to control the redevelopment of those suburbs.

In 1995 I was very pleased to be able to launch the Good Design Guide for Medium Density Housing. This has been a successful attempt to point out to councils and residents that they can overcome some of their concerns about redevelopment by ensuring that the design of new development is, most importantly, good, but that it is also in keeping with the character of the area. The Good Design Guide sets an agenda for the design and assessment of medium-density housing that fundamentally springs from an analysis and recognition of the values of the site and its locality or neighbourhood. In essence, the guide describes the thought process that skilled designers have used for centuries. It does not predict outcomes or dictate slavish copying of what already exists; rather, it guides the user by asking the right questions and encouraging a dialogue between designer, adjudicator (council or the Administrative Appeals Tribunal) and neighbours to determine the parameters of acceptable outcomes for the neighbourhood, the developers and the ultimate occupants of the housing.

Performance standards are not easily comprehended if you have been brought up on a diet of regulation, litigation, control, disputation and dependence. Judgement, recognition of the rights, roles and responsibilities of the various players and dialogue between the parties is required to get it right. And get it right we must because Melbourne’s suburbs are second to none in quality throughout the world.
The OPH is currently investing considerable time and resources in working with professional groups to train local government and building designers in these techniques and we are starting to see results.

The Good Design Guide is about delivering manageable change, because any infill development will change, to some degree, the character of a neighbourhood. The guide promotes an acceptance of that change among existing residents, for the longer-term benefits it will bring those residents and their community; while on the other hand, it promotes acceptance from the development industry that the change must be positive and sensitive to local environments and needs.

I believe it is important for heritage professionals to get behind this notion that heritage values do not need to be destroyed by denser development. Heritage professionals need to help communities develop a better understanding of exactly what the heritage they are trying to conserve is, and how that can be achieved without sealing the place up altogether. Such an approach is at the core of the Burra Charter. The first step in the conservation process is to establish significance, then to set policies which support the retention of that significance, and then to outline plans which address the policies. It all sounds very logical and simple but is not – to my reading at least – about preventing change.

I understand that Australia ICOMOS has recently spent some time considering issues related to the conservation of social value – a key issue to inhabitants of affluent, ‘desirable’ areas of heritage significance, who want to ensure that the tone of their neighbourhood is preserved. A conference on urban consolidation thrusts Australia ICOMOS into the centre of this sort of debate.

Whether walking through the local shopping centre or driving through the streets, it is possible to quickly gain an understanding of the physical conservation issues. But consideration also needs to be given to the sort of social conservation issues which inevitably test the concerns of the residents. The level to which the conservation of people’s beliefs and values can be achieved in any one place is debatable – and no doubt these urban consolidation papers will advance that debate considerably.

The OPH has inherited responsibility for the Metropolitan Services Coordination System (MSCS) from the Treasury. MSCS is a monitoring and database system for residential land development. It provides demographic projections, land-release forecasts and consistent information about the location of available and serviceable land development activity. The first land-release forecast was published this year. It maps the location and timing of land that will be released for residential development in the growth and fringe areas of Melbourne over the next 15 years. This forecast will be updated annually, and subsequent, complementary surveys will also identify sites in the inner and established suburbs of Melbourne for redevelopment. As an annual monitor, these forecasts will take the locational guesswork out of public facilities
planning and expenditure, and give developers clear guidance as to where to
direct their investments.

The MSCS is a powerful urban management tool because it is drawn on broad-
scale demographic data, provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, but also
on spatial decisions in strategic and statutory planning taken by councils.
Alongside the MSCS are two key planning policy statements: Victoria's Capital
City Policy Creating Prosperity and Living Suburbs, the Metropolitan Policy.

These complementary policy documents set out a vision and framework for
Melbourne that is locked into the State Government's integrated budget
management cycle. This means that service and infrastructure agencies must take
account of its directions when preparing their business plans or budget submissions.

Like the Good Design Guide, these policies strive to accommodate the changing
needs of Melburnians while paying due respect to the past. And our needs have
changed greatly. Household sizes have consistently fallen over the last few
decades to the point where almost half of the current households contain two or
less people. Yet 77 per cent of our current housing stock is made up of
conventional detached housing. Population in the inner and middle suburbs has
consistently fallen and the average age of residents in these suburbs continues to
rise. New generations are forced to move further out to gain access to housing.

If we are to arrest the wholesale evacuation of the inner and middle suburbs we
must provide a range of housing choices – including smaller dwellings – for
those who wish to live in these suburbs. Such people may include:
• Empty nesters who wish to remain close to friends and family.
• Working people who value mobility and proximity to work.
• Young adults seeking entry to the housing market close to the family home.
• Singles and childless couples.

This demographic change is presenting Melbourne with exactly the same
dilemma faced in the 1960s, when postwar immigration created a demand for
more housing in established areas: how do you accommodate new housing
forms without destroying the urban fabric of those neighbourhoods? At that
time the approach adopted was to impose a set of mandatory rules based on the
‘one size fits all’ theory. This led to the era of the ugly ‘six-pack’ flats which,
thankfully, will never again be repeated in a city which prides itself on the
quality of its residential environment. The new approach, encapsulated in the
Good Design Guide is all about ensuring quality development which can co-
exist with, and even complement, our rich cultural heritage.

Urban consolidation is relevant to all of us at different levels and, frankly, I can
see no alternative to it as an underlying overall philosophy. The alternative
might see Melbourne’s suburbs marching well past Warrigal, fragmentation of
communities and decline of our standards of urban environment. This is not a
prospect any of us, I am sure, would welcome – so we must continue to work
with and refine this principle that holds our city together.