

Sustainable urban form and the shopping mall: An investigation of retail provision in new housing subdivisions in Melbourne's growth areas.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of sustainability now underlies much strategic urban policy. In Victoria the current strategic plan intended to underpin future growth in Melbourne, *Melbourne 2030*, adopts the goals of sustainability as its guiding ethos, indicating amongst other goals the desirability of a more compact urban form and a move away from near total car dependence. One of the key components of the strategy has been to nominate a large number of activity centres into which more development should be encouraged. These existing activity centres are to be rated against criteria to measure their sustainability and improvements are to be sought where performance is found wanting. Many of these improvements may be difficult to bring about. It is often difficult and expensive to retrofit existing urban form and infrastructure as it involves the combined elements of large private capital investors, public and private sector transport and infrastructure providers, local governments, retail and other business owners. Given this, new retail and activity centres currently being planned for and developed in growth areas on greenfield sites on the fringe should be designed from the outset with sustainability criteria in mind.

This paper presents results of research into the retail provision currently being planned and built in the newest residential estates on Melbourne's urban fringe. It examines this new retail provision against a range of criteria designed to assess their contribution to sustainability, considering environmental, social and economic criteria. The criteria used are based on those presented in *Melbourne 2030* with some modification in the light of a review of current literature on sustainable urban form. A key element of this assessment is the accessibility of these retail centres by means other than the private car, as this can be seen as a fundamental environmental and social goal. The results of this survey are presented and the significance of the findings discussed.

Traditionally in Australia planners have been reluctant to intrude into what has been seen as a free market activity. This is in contrast to many European countries including Britain, where far more attention has been paid to ensuring the maintenance of traditional strip shopping centres and the importance of walking scale local centres and public transport accessibility to larger centres. The findings of this research suggest that far greater attention needs to be paid to this aspect of growth area planning.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability now underlies much strategic urban policy. The definition of sustainable development is accepted as generally meaning that which improves, and does not harm, the environment, (Newman and Kenworthy 1999). To many this sounds like unremarkable

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commonsense however it has recently been described as “the greatest change in human thought and behaviour for 3000 years” (Low, Gleeson et al. 2005). While the overall approach may be achieving a broad level of acceptance, the details and implications for urban development and land use of this revolution in thought are bound to be far more contentious while being worked out.

In Victoria the current strategic plan intended to underpin future growth in Melbourne, *Melbourne 2030*, adopts the framework of sustainability as its guiding ethos, indicating amongst other goals the desirability of a more compact urban form and a move away from near total car dependence (Department of Infrastructure 2002). One of the key components of the strategy has been to nominate a large number of activity centres into which more development should be encouraged. Activity centres are very broadly defined in *Melbourne 2030*. “Activity centres provide the focus for services, employment and social interaction in cities and towns. They are where people shop, work, meet, relax and live.” (Department of Infrastructure 2002). Over 100 existing activity centres are to be rated against criteria to measure their sustainability and improvements are to be sought where performance is found wanting (Department of Infrastructure 2002). Many of these improvements may be difficult to bring about. It is often complex and expensive to retrofit existing urban form and infrastructure as it involves the combined elements of large private capital investors, public and private sector transport and infrastructure providers, local governments, retail and other business owners. Given this, it would be sensible to ensure that new retail and activity centres currently being planned for and developed in growth areas on greenfield sites on the fringe are designed from the outset with sustainability criteria in mind.

One of the difficulties in seeking a change to the urban form is that there are very long lead times in development. Change is incremental and often slow. Progress depends not only on government policy but also on favourable economic conditions for investment in urban developments and a healthy development industry. In Australian cities governments, usually state, provide varying degrees of both strategic direction and statutory regulation over development in general. However, when it comes to retailing there has been a reluctance to intervene and direct location and limited success in restricting the size or spread of the car based shopping mall.

In Melbourne the most concerted attempt was made in the early 1980s with what became known as the District Centre policy. This policy sought to direct the location of large retail and office developments into 14 nominated suburban centres. The policy struggled from the outset with the large retailers campaigning against the restrictions on growth of shopping malls not located within nominated centres and pushing for developments at free standing out-of-centre sites. The policy was officially abandoned in 1992 but in reality had not been enforced for some time. The current Victorian government strategy, *Melbourne 2030*, has revived some aspects of the district centre policy, but without its regulatory power and has included many of the stand-alone shopping malls in its extensive designated list. The shortcomings of this policy have been analysed in more detail by Goodman and Moloney (Goodman and Moloney 2004).

This reluctance to regulate the retail market is in contrast to much current practice in Europe, which has seen a revival in interventionist strategic policy in many countries throughout the 1990s. Countries such as Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Spain and Portugal have all enacted legislation to in some way direct the location of new retailing in order to protect traditional centres. Much of this policy has been driven by a concern for the tendency towards increasing dispersal of retailing and its concomitant car dependency. “New forms of retail development resulting from retail decentralisation, especially out-of-town developments, have distorted the traditional retail hierarchy and heightened the issue of sustainable development at both local and global scales”(Ibrahim and McGoldrick 2003).

Sustainability, Retailing and Activity Centres

While the concept of sustainability has gained general acceptance as a framework to guide public policy across many areas, at its worst it can be just another form of public relations spin, overused in the vaguest of policy documents with very little rigour to ensure it has meaning. It can, however, provide a useful structure for assessing the multiple impacts of urban development, considering as it does the triple bottom line of environmental, social and economic impacts. Some conceptions have added a fourth dimension to the assessment, including cultural as an aspect separate from the broader category of social.

There is considerable literature about what sustainable urban form might mean. Perhaps predominant in this literature have been debates about density and the sustainability or otherwise of the traditional suburban development which typifies Australian cities outside of their oldest inner cores. We have seen much of the debate polarise between those who believe that an increase in density is necessary to some degree, (Katz 1994; Breheny 1996; Newman and Kenworthy 1999; Newton 2000; Buxton and Tieman 2004; Buxton and Scheurer 2005) and those who feel that urban consolidation poses a threat to the characteristics that make up liveability (Troy 1996; Lewis 1999; Birrell, O'Connor et al. 2005). While there would seem to be compelling argument for some increase in density it is not the purpose of the present paper to contribute further to this particular debate.

Greater agreement surrounds the sustainability of various forms of urban transportation. This is an area where many scholars and analysts agree that the extent of automobile dependence seen in Australian cities is undesirable due to its environmental impact, and unsustainable on a number of counts, most obvious of which is the traffic congestion which makes increasing car usage self defeating (Cervero 1998; Mees 2000; Bannister 2002; Low, Gleeson et al. 2005; Pears 2005). However there is less agreement about what to do about it, with some seeming to favour the public persuasion campaign designed to change behaviour (Australian Institute for Urban Studies and City of Melbourne 2003) while others take a more institutional or systemic approach (Mees 2000; Bannister 2002; Ibrahim and McGoldrick 2003; Kenworthy, Murray-Leach et al. 2005).

Consideration of sustainability of shopping centres necessarily touches on aspects of both the urban form and transportation debates. Accessibility of shopping centres depends on their location close to residential populations. Their economic viability depends on having sufficient population within their catchments. In classic central place theory, the lower the residential density, the further apart retail centres will need to be in order to be viable (Christaller 1933). Thus their accessibility decreases with population density and an increase in population around activity centres becomes an obvious, if problematic goal.

Retailing is one of the great attractors of people. It is both a necessity for everyone, (or at least every household), and for many people it is also a form of recreation and a means of social interaction. Jacobs famously believed that the presence of retailing within mixed-use areas added to the public and communal life by making it safer, both in reality and by perception. Her argument is that retailing gives people a reason to walk and use the footpaths, and to pass by places that would not in themselves be attractions, thus spreading a sense of activity around. Jacobs made the point that the sight of people walking, or shopping is an attraction in itself (Jacobs 1961). More recently, the importance of the places we shop in has been recognised internationally, for example in Toronto where an investigation into the role of retailing concluded that “shopping is an activity that almost everyone does...where we shop very much defines the way in which we experience our community, the places that become familiar to us and the routes we learn about”(City of Toronto Land Use Committee 1994). The idea that the activity generated by retailing adds to the public life and sense of community of a city by providing activity in the public spaces of the streets is reinforced by the work of the Danish architects Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe, (Gehl 1987).

The accessibility of retail outlets to a range of people depends on their being serviced by a range of means of transport. The figures frequently quoted for the proportion of all trips taken by public transport (in Melbourne it is usually put at 9%) disguises the fact that there are still significant numbers of people who do not, or cannot, drive themselves. Whilst it is true that we are predominantly a car based society, there remain a significant number of households without a car, (12% nationally), and many households which only own one car, (41% nationally), (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998), and there are significant groups within the community who cannot drive for other reasons such as young people, the elderly and the disabled. The importance of retail outlets, and particularly those selling food and other goods considered necessities, being accessible to the broadest range of people is a matter of social equity in addition to its environmental imperatives. There has been considerable discussion recently of the concept of food deserts, and recent work suggests that the availability of food outlets, particularly fresh food, varies considerably across metropolitan areas within cities adding a the health dimension to the social goals for activity centres (Smith and Sparks 2000; Cannings 2001; Clarke, Eyre et al. 2002; Wrigley 2002; Wrigley 2003).

The economic aspects of sustainability suggest at the most obvious level that retail centres need to be economically viable, but in a broader sense that they ought to provide economic opportunities for the community which they serve. This can mean employment opportunities and also the chance to start up new businesses. It is here that concerns about corporately owned and managed shopping malls are raised. Corporate shopping malls tightly control their tenancies, and their particular mix of retail functions are prescribed by a formula considered to provide the lowest risk for the investor. Thus unusual, quirky or particular niche shops are not usually found within shopping malls. The antique violin restorer, importer of north African foodstuffs, or traditional Italian tailor would not be granted a tenancy in a corporately owned shopping mall, even if such businesses could afford the rents charged and abide by the conditions for opening hours etc. This can be viewed as a cultural issue, as well as one of economic opportunity, as the shopping malls provide the blandest representations of a monoculture, and add very little to the diversity or individual sense of place. It is only in the strip shopping centres of our cities that ethnic and other diversities can be truly represented.

Sustainability Assessment Criteria for Activity Centres

Melbourne 2030 has suggested a range of criteria by which to assess the degree of sustainability of activity centres. There are 19 of these divided into the three categories of economic, environmental and social listed in Table 1 (Department of Infrastructure 2002). At least six of these criteria (indicated with an *) will be partially or fully achieved if a centre is accessible by a range of means, particularly by pedestrians, wheel chair users, bicycle riders and public transport users. This suggests that accessibility by a range of means is the pre-eminent measure of sustainability, with other criteria of importance being the range of uses available (goods and services, community facilities and public meeting places), the availability of economic opportunities and the adoption of environmental performance standards.

More recently the Department of Sustainability and Environment and has released a set of Activity Centre Design Guidelines (Department of Sustainability and Environment 2005). These identify eight aims for activity centre design which are as follows:

- Develop a good-quality public environment.
- Promote street-based patterns of connection.
- Improve community safety – through street frontages and active uses on ground floor.
- Encourage a mix of uses.
- Improve pedestrian and cycling amenity.
- Promote a public transport focus.

- Increase accessibility and integration.
- Encourage environmental sustainability.

Table 1: Activity centre assessment criteria in Melbourne 2030.

Category	Criteria
Social	Improve the liveability (safety, convenience, comfort, aesthetics) of the area
	Increase opportunities for social interaction and provide a focus for community
	Contribute to the area’s natural, cultural and historical heritage
	Make a wide range of services and facilities more accessible to all*
	Relate well to surrounding development, land uses and landscapes
	Meet the needs of all segments of the population*
	Maintain or improve transport choice for all*
	Maintain or improve public health
	Contribute to economic competitiveness that provides wide community benefit
Economic	Promote urban forms that minimise overall land and transport requirements*
	Improve the efficiency of land uses and infrastructure provision
	Improve freight movement and business logistics
	Improve business and employment opportunities
	Encourage the development of urban transport systems that will limit pollution from fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas emission*
Environmental	Improve energy-efficient building design and layout
	Retain natural ecosystems within urban areas and protect the integrity of the natural environment
	Limit the amount of waste generated for disposal off-site
	Increase water conservation, including water-sensitive urban design
	Control noise emissions to achieve reasonable levels near sensitive uses.

An ideal model of an activity centre can be deduced from the Melbourne 2030 criteria, the DSE guidelines, and the available literature on the issue. It is of a centre based around public transport nodes, (but with accessibility by car also), with an urban form that provides easy pedestrian and wheel chair access, multiple ownership which allows for new businesses to emerge, mixed uses, with public spaces that enable social interaction for all segments of the population and with building design and layout that considers energy efficiency, water and waste treatment. Furthermore, within any given residential area there should be a sufficient supply of small or neighbourhood sized shopping centres to ensure that most people are able to obtain basic goods within walking distance, traditionally consider to be a 400 metre radius. The questions that were addressed when looking at the planned or newly built centres in Melbourne’s growth areas are detailed in Table 2.

It is clear that this model is much closer to the traditional suburban strip centre than the corporate shopping mall. Neither has generally paid much attention to the environmental performance measures, but the large single storey enclosed mall, with its complete dependence on artificial lighting and air conditioning of very large spaces, probably performs worse in environmental terms, using significantly large amounts of energy.

Most Australian cities have this traditional form of retailing in abundance. Exact figures are hard to ascertain since the demise of the ABS retail census but one estimate suggests that approximately 65% of Melbourne’s retail floor space remains in this form, with Adelaide showing a slightly greater proportion and the other major cities slightly less. Corporately owned, stand alone, shopping malls account for approximately 25% of all retail floorspace in Victoria (Jebb Holland Dimasi 2000). However a visit to any of the newest suburbs of our cities suggests that the traditional style of shopping strip is no longer being constructed. While strategic work at a state government level

has gone into analysing the components of a sustainable form of retailing, at the local level this may not be being translated into reality.

Table2: Activity centre assessment criteria used in this study

Transport and accessibility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the activity centre have public transport, and if so what form and how frequent? 2. Is the activity centre easily accessible by foot and wheelchair from all surrounding areas? 3. Do the shops face directly onto the street to create multiple and individual points of access and lively street environments? 4. Does the centre appear to be dominated by car parking?
Range of Activities and Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Does the activity centre provide places for social gathering and community use? 6. Does the activity centre provide a range of community and or health services? 7. Does the activity centre provide a good variety of food outlets and a good range of other businesses?
Economic Opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Does the activity centre provide opportunities for new businesses to start up? 9. Is there mixed or individual ownership of business premises?
Environmental Measures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Was the energy usage of the building considered in its design and construction? 11. Are there any discernable environmental measures adopted such as water sensitive urban design, remnant vegetation preservation, pervious surfacing etc?

Investigation of Growth Area Activity Centres in Melbourne

For the purposes of this research we visited each of Melbourne’s major growth areas, having first mapped all new subdivision currently under constructed or planned for the next five years. Many of the activity centres for these areas have not yet been built, as retailers require a certain level of catchment population before it is viable to open, so frequently we assessed partially completed centres or plans of varying degrees of detail. These were examined to assess whether the strategic goals identified in Melbourne 2030 are being translated into plans for actual centres using the set of questions in Table 2.

There were 21 centres profiled in total across five different local government areas. Interviews were conducted with planning officers at four of those municipalities to gather additional insights into the strategic priorities for centres in each area and the process that planners go through to affect actual outcomes. It was not the purpose of this investigation to single out particular centres, municipalities and individual planning staff for either praise or condemnation, so whilst we have compiled profiles of individual centres and could make observations about particular municipalities, these will not be included here. Instead the results of the investigations have been aggregated and the discussion will focus on the broader findings and their implications.

Summary of the Emerging Activity Centres

Transport and Accessibility.

Most of the centres being currently planned or built are very poorly served by public transport. Few of the growth areas have existing train lines, and although some proposed extensions these have yet to be actively planned or budgeted for. The poor state of bus services to the outer suburbs is widely acknowledged by state and local governments and has become the subject of comment from many quarters even including the recent freeway dominated report from the Committee for Melbourne (Committee for Melbourne's Transport Taskforce 2005). Despite widespread recognition of the

problem some new suburbs are still without any public transport at all, and many more with buses no more frequent than hourly, and that within peak periods. While service providers may be waiting until there is a larger concentration of population in some of these areas, if the time delay is too great the households will have been forced to purchase their second and maybe third car, making car dependency even harder to break.

With so little transport provision the task of locating activity centres close to existing public transport is hard to achieve. However, even where train lines exist, new activity centres are rarely being planned around them, but instead are being constructed along major roads. For example in the City of Casey the East Cranbourne shopping Centre is proposed for a site on the Narre Warren-Cranbourne Road at least 1,500 metres from both the existing Cranbourne railway station and the proposed East Cranbourne station. Likewise in Cardinia, the Cardinia Lakes neighbourhood centre is located just south of the Princes Highway and north of the newly constructed residential subdivision, while the proposed Lakeside railway station is located at least one kilometre away on the southern end of the residential development. Further retail expansion is planned on the northern side of the highway. The City of Cardinia does have plans to locate a future activity centre adjacent to the railway line at Officer but this is still in the early planning phase as the area has yet to be subdivided.

Only eight of the centres investigated have any public transport provision at present and these were bus services, usually on hourly timetables. Of the remaining thirteen centres three were expected to have bus services when they were completed, and there are hopes that some of the centres in the City of Whittlesea will eventually benefit from extensions to the existing heavy and light rail lines. There are two proposed rail extensions north, from Lalor up to Epping North and from Epping across to South Morang and Mernda and a suggestion that the light rail that presently terminates at Bundoora be extended further up Plenty Road and then taken on a loop that would pass through both the Plenty Valley shopping centre and Mill Park Lakes before returning to Plenty Road.

Most of the centres investigated are designed around car parks with the clear expectation that their customers will arrive by car. With very few exceptions, the new or planned centres are surrounded by large areas of car parking, with no clear pedestrian walkways into the centres from surrounding streets. Where this was not the case and the centres had been deliberately designed to have shops facing straight on to the streets and car parking at the rear, it was the result of determined effort by planners as a matter of policy. There were few examples like this and most of those were still in the planning stage in the cities of Cardinia and Whittlesea. In interviews planners consistently described how retailers believed it was imperative to provide a large supply of car parking in the front of centres clearly visible to passing motorists. Two of the planners we spoke to clearly saw the value in trying to ascertain shops with active street frontages and individual entry and exist points to the centre. However they encountered significant resistance to this by retail developers and were frequently unable to convince them of the economic viability of such a form.

Not all shops within the design of the newly built centres faced into the centre. The more recently designed centres frequently include a row of shops entered directly from the car park that do not lead into the centre. These positions are most commonly occupied with take away food outlets, which serves the dual purpose of enabling customers to access the take away food quickly and directly from the car park and keeps the teenagers who often congregate at such centres outside the shopping mall where they might hinder or annoy more affluent shoppers.

Design for pedestrian access for the car park surrounded mall is critical. However we saw few instances where separated pathways into centres were included, leaving pedestrians to walk unprotected through car parks. The surrounding new subdivisions frequently are provided with good walking paths and yet these often do not extend into the retail centres where it is clearly

assumed that the visitor arrives by car. Only one of the municipalities visited, Whittlesea, was incorporating pedestrian and cycling plans into the strategic planning process for the centres still in the planning phase. There was no sign, however, of such a plan having been instituted in the existing sections of the Plenty Valley centre, the Melbourne 2030 designated major activity centre being constructed at South Morang.

Both Whittlesea and Cardinia intend to provide neighbourhood scale centres that could be walked to for basic convenience shopping. At Cardinia this had progressed as far as the detailed design phase and with considerable negotiations with site owners was looking promising, in terms of accessible design and good access paths for pedestrians, shops directly fronting the street and car parking mostly relegated to the rear. In the City of Whittlesea there are plans for quite a number of small neighbourhood sized centres throughout the new subdivision in Mernda, Doreen and Epping North, although most of these areas are yet to be developed.

Range of Activities and Services.

It was difficult to assess the range of goods and services and the mix of uses that will ultimately be present in those centres that are still in the planning stage or under construction. However in most proposed centres a range of services and community facilities were planned, particularly for the larger centres. There seems to be a general intention to locate facilities such as medical centres, childcare centres and sports facilities close by to the retail centres, if not within them, demonstrating an awareness that mixing of uses is a desirable goal.

Of those already operating, the centres of the standard mall type offered little in the way of community spaces at present, beyond the ubiquitous coffee shop that customers could pay to use as social space. However a number of these centres were still in their first phase, with plans to enlarge at a later date (presumably when further residential development had occurred around them), and some community facilities or services were proposed for later phases. We visited one new subdivision at Laurimar where a community hall has been built, with an adjoining shop and café, by the developer as part of a negotiated contribution. This small facility already provides a focal hub for the establishing community and is an interesting model that could be emulated elsewhere. It will be interesting to see how the single shop survives beyond the first few years of regular trade from the construction workers, given that conventional retail wisdom seems now to be that single stores are only viable if they include petrol bowsers and belong to a convenience store chain.

The recently opened centres visited are dominated by a supermarket and a range of standard chain stores and take away food outlets. The proportion of the latter in even quite small centres was remarkable, the implications of which for public health can only be guessed, suggesting an area for further research.

Economic Opportunities.

The single ownership of the new retail developments automatically gives a degree of central control over tenancies which is not found in traditional multi owner strip centres. This imposes some degree of limitation on economic opportunities for local businesses as previously discussed. The extent of control over tenancies will vary and will depend on a number of factors, not least of which is the economic prosperity or otherwise of the centre in question. In other words, centres struggling with low customer bases and poor turnover will be less able to charge high rents and pick and choose their tenants. Never the less, that additional degree of control through centralised management and ownership exists in all the new and emerging centres investigated, part of the nature of our staged subdivision process. It was not possible to tell how easy or otherwise it would be for new businesses to get premises in the centres visited for this research. When the issue was raised with council staff in interviews, it was varyingly acknowledged as an issue, or resisted as being of little importance, but in no case were there any policies or programs suggested to counteract the problem.

Environmental Measures.

None of the centres already in existence investigated for this paper had adopted in any specific environmental measures. Some centres, such as the Manor Lakes neighbourhood centre currently under construction in the City of Wyndham claims to have a 'high quality environmentally sustainable design' and design which reflects 'the landscape and cultural heritage of the site' (Dennis Family Corporation 2005). Further and more specific information was not available, although the website specifies that there will be 400 car parking spaces for a centre of only 3,700 square meters. The centre has no public transport.

In Whittlesea several proposed centres are being planned with solar provision and energy efficient design as a prominent feature. These developments also plan to include landscaping which minimises ongoing maintenance and preserves significant remnant native vegetation. If these developments go ahead as planned they may well provide new benchmarks in effective environmental measures for retail developments. This is certainly the intention with Aurora at Epping North which has come about in part because of state government involvement through its land development agency Vicurban.

ISSUES CONCERNING THE PLANNING AND APPROVAL PROCESS

A number of issues concerning the process of planning for new activity centres arose from discussions with planners that are worthy of comment. One of these is the extent to which local government planners can affect the nature of newly constructed retail centres and in particular those attributes which affect its sustainability. Planners need to understand and utilise the control that they can exert over a number of areas and show greater resolve in their efforts to attain good outcomes.

There is at least one important aspect which is largely out of the control of local government, namely public transport provision. Where a train or tram line exists, planners can ensure that development occurs adjacent to stations and tram stops. However where this is not the case, local planners' role in attaining adequate public transport provision is that of lobbyist and advocate, an important role that should not be underestimated. In addition to this, planners can ensure that new centres are designed in such a way to give prominence and easy access to public transport even if at present the provision is inadequate or non-existent.

Most of the other attributes of a more sustainable form of activity centre can be negotiated between planners at the responsible authority and the owners and developers of the site. The outcomes of negotiation depend on a number of factors, most obviously the perceived levels of power of the two parties and the degree of determination and willingness to compromise. A number of prominent analyses over the years have suggested that the power of capital is too great in relation to planners and that capital will therefore always be able to determine outcomes (Logan 1986; McLoughlin 1992). Such a view is confidence-sapping and ultimately self-defeating for planners. The power to determine outcomes often falls to those who appear to be more determined and uncompromising, rather than because there is no choice.

The range of factors which planners could control includes many of the design characteristics such as environmental measures, active street frontages, pedestrian and cycling facilities and the placement and amount of car parking. Local planners can also ensure that small neighbourhood retail centres exist, and are within reasonable walking distance of all residents in a new subdivision. Ensuring that there are sufficient people (i.e. adequate net densities) to make such centres viable is also within councils' control. These are all matters about which local authorities could devise strategic policies that could be incorporated into planning schemes to be given statutory weight. Much would still come down to negotiation, but local policies would make councils' intentions clear and ultimately new developments require planning approval. In addition to strategic policies,

councils can also use the normal statutory approval process to determine outcomes. Land in the growth areas set aside for development is often placed in a holding zone such as the Comprehensive Development Zone while the details of the development plan are determined. Council approval is therefore needed in order to rezone to the final zone of industrial, residential or mixed use. Relevant overlays can be used to provide additional control over development. The Development Plan overlay, for example, requires that a development plan must be prepared to the satisfaction of the responsible authority. This plan then governs permits to subdivide land, construct buildings and to carry out works.

Retail developers are understandably conservative, preferring to minimise investment risk by adhering to formulas that have proved successful in the past. Many are clearly uncomfortable with the street frontages and the multiple entry and access points that a main street design imposes, preferring the enclosed nature of shopping malls which capture and direct the shopper's route through the centre. Conventional wisdom amongst shopping centre developers is that available car parking must be able to be seen by passing motorists in order to attract shoppers. However, this could be challenged, particularly for neighbourhood style centres where customers are likely to be regulars who might be expected to remember where the car parking spaces were last time they visited. Part of the difficulty for planners in these discussions is that many of the developers involved are large and influential companies used to dictating terms. They can, and do, use the threat of simply walking away from a development if the conditions required are ones which they feel they cannot comply with. These may or may not be empty threats. Not all modifications a council might suggest will be met with refusal however. Some environmental measures, for example may simply not have been considered, or thought of as a priority before but would not be strongly resisted if required.

The issue of economic opportunities for new small businesses in activity centres in the growth areas is a complex one that is beyond the reach of the planning process alone. The chance of a return to centres with multiple ownership seems unlikely given the staged nature of the development of greenfield sites controlled by individual large owners and developers. If the lack of start up opportunities for new businesses in these areas is recognised as a problem by local economic development officers, it might be that targeted programs of assistance to encourage, and perhaps financially assist, new initiatives could offer some solution.

In discussions and interviews for this paper there appeared to be a surprising lack of concern at trends in activity centre development that are delivering fairly poor results. The creation of better community places with greater vibrancy and economic generation does not appear to be a major priority within the conscience of many involved at a local level. Some we spoke to clearly felt overworked and under resourced, and for them retail centres were not a high priority for their attention. There is a general acceptance that the basic and characterless shopping mall is just standard for new suburbs. It was even suggested to us by a planner in one area that people were different in the outer suburbs - they didn't like walking or the sorts of mixed-use centres I was referring to. It may well be that, as JB Arrington suggested in a presentation in Melbourne recently on transit oriented development (Arrington 2005), what is needed are a few really good demonstration projects built, or at least fostered, by government to be used as exemplars. Perhaps some of the proposed new centres which are currently at the very early stages of planning, will provide these.

There were certainly some signs of hope in the form of quiet determination by some planners, in two of the municipalities, to achieve better outcomes. It seemed no coincidence that they were in the same places where some of the better centres are being planned and built. One of these planners suggested that not only did it require clear council policy on better activity centres, but it required strong political will, not just from the planners but the council CEO, the mayor and the council

itself. The role for planners in achieving that consensus and determination is in communicating to councils the purpose of strategic policies on activity centres, clearly and with conviction.

CONCLUSIONS

The major concern that gave rise to this research is that we are currently creating places that many of us would not want to live in. In some of the outer suburbs visited for this research there are few places to walk to, nowhere nice to catch up with friends over coffee, or go browsing amongst shops. The simple stereotyping that suggests that inner city commentators are merely imposing their values on outer suburban residents with different concerns and priorities, can be used to justify the continuing provision of unimaginative substandard places that in reality are coming about because they are the cheapest and easiest option. This is not good enough. Everyone needs and deserves to have pleasant places of social and commercial interaction which can develop individual place identities and reflect the communities surrounding them.

Some of Melbourne's growth areas are being created around existing traditional town centres that retain old strip centres and a sense of public place and community. However in the majority of Melbourne's growth areas suburbs are currently being created where there are so little retail and community facilities that there is nothing for people to do outside of the private space of their own house and (frequently small) back yard. The eventual social consequences of such poor planning and provision can only be guessed at. The impact of the lack of spaces for social and community interaction is not felt evenly across all sections of the population but will affect particularly harshly those that cannot easily get into a car and drive away - teenagers, parents of young children isolated at home during the day in a one car household, the elderly to suggest a few.

The planning profession in Australia needs to take the issue of retail provision more seriously than it presently does and follow the lead of Britain and Europe in not simply allowing the market to dictate the form and nature of retail provision. This research has suggested that the multidimensional criteria for assessing the sustainability of activity centres should be used right now as criteria for approval of new centres. Chief amongst these is accessibility by a range of different means of transport including on foot. This in turn means that new residential areas must be planned with neighbourhood shopping within walking distance as an essential element, and of course, that the government must get serious about providing adequate transport, in particular bus services, to the neglected new suburbs.

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