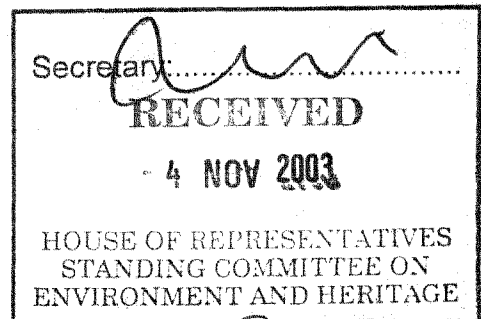


30 October 2003

The Environment & Heritage Committee
 House of Representatives
 Parliament House
 Canberra A.C.T. 2600



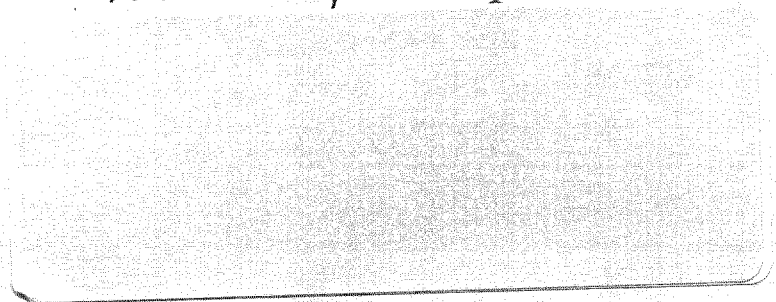
A RESPONSE TO YOUR DISCUSSION PAPER
 ON SUSTAINABLE CITIES 2025.

1. The very first term of reference for the Inquiry posits, that ~~urban~~ urban development has assumed a 'gawling' character. The adjective is seldom used save in a pejorative sense. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines it as being "stretched out on the ground etc. in an ungainly or awkward manner;" alternatively "stretched out. . . in a wide and straggling manner."
2. I believe the word to be aptly chosen for what, in the common perception, is an unsatisfactory and characterless mode of development of our cities, and I would extend it also to the kinds of development along the coastal fringes of the more populous part of the country although these do not lie within the Committee's terms of reference.
3. If such a scene constitutes the existing order of things, do we desire ~~to~~ to "freeze" it in that condition, seeking sustainability of our cities within their present geographic compass, or does the Committee contemplate further growth from the edges, but with such radical reconsideration of the whole as to meet the canons of sustainability, among which would be the effacement of the visual offence of "sprawl"?

4. I put this initial question rhetorically, rather than to introduce my own broad proposals (addressing only a few selected aspects of the problem,) about how such a change might be brought about. I raise it in the context of a viewpoint that in attaining their present population levels within a generation hung up on the use and enjoyment of the independent household motor vehicles, with respect to our major cities no prospect of the achievement of sustainability is feasible unless the frequency and distance of car-journeys is restricted, and the physical facilities that cater for private car use are greatly contracted.

5. The material you present in Case Study 3, on Vancouver's sustainable transport strategy, is indicative of what might have been done in the Eastern Seaboard Australian cities had the initiative been seized several decades ago. It may now be too late, being politically impracticable to implement similar strategies here, however in Perth under the the persistent influence of Newman and Kenworthy, public transport is weaning a significant number of commuters away from their erstwhile car dependency.

Respondent:
Tom Errey



(3)

Desideratum No. 3

viz. to

Establish an integrated sustainable water and stormwater management system addressing capture, consumption, treatment and reuse opportunities.

1. The recent (and continuing) experience of Melbourne in a period of relative drought shows that notwithstanding the construction of a system of dams in the hinterland of the city, diverting a large volume of water which might otherwise have been available for agricultural pursuits, a crisis of resource depletion has occurred and water use restrictions implemented.
2. Within the vast expanse of land occupied by the city, however, in a seemingly inexorable process driven by the exigencies of the motor vehicle, we have seen the extension of paving of the unbrilt ground surface with impermeable materials, excluding only the areas reserved as parks and gardens. In my own lifetime, from my childhood in Adelaide, I witnessed the transformation of suburban streets from having merely a sealed central strip of carriageway to being entirely encased in impermeable bitumen or concrete from kerb to kerb. At nodal points within the suburbs, around public buildings, supermarkets and cinemas, vast acreages are now sealed as parking lots. While within private boundaries, driveways are frequently constructed that seal off a considerable part of the allotment surface.
3. When to this practice of ground treatment it has become the norm for the brilt premises to occupy more of the aggregate space than in former times, it is evident that all the rain falling upon these paved or roofed areas, instead of being available to sustain local herbage or trees, must be turned into the storm-water system, taking with it all the contaminants of petro-carbons, dogshit and other debris.
4. Some mitigation of this freshwater loss might be effected by making compulsory the provision of rainwater tanks to capture the bounty of heaven upon the roofs of dwellings, commercial and public buildings, but this would still represent a lesser ratio than the run-off from non-porous ground surfaces.

Desideratum 3 (cont'd)

5. Hence the existing situation might be viewed as the metro-polis extracting a valuable resource from its hinterland - using portion of this to keep its own parks, gardens and lawns green - at some cost to rural productivity or else to the environmental health of streams in the catchment area, while squandering the benefit of local (ie. intra-city) rainfall and laying an extra burden upon the stormwater removal system.
6. We have grown accustomed to the concept of waste water, but the Sustainable city should seek to expunge the epithet "waste" from its vocabulary, endeavouring by all possible means to extract the maximal use from water that has already entered the drainage system. Clearly this must involve filtering processes to remove heavy metals or other deleterious material, but what should most urgently be avoided is allowing this stream to flow into natural waterways or the ocean (the ultimate dump!). If, before the general adoption of deep drainage in the 19th Century - at least in advanced countries - most cities were places befouled by human ordure and the effluents of noisome trades, what is too often seen today is the scaling-up of that squalor by merely moving the muck beyond the bounds of the urban area but still close at hand, where in its vastly concentrated bulk it adversely affects not only the human amenity but the marine environment, endangering aquatic food production zones.

Desideratum No. 4
viz, to

Manage and Minimise domestic and industrial waste.

1. The consumer society echoes Hamlet's words: "As if increase of appetite had grown / but what it fed on." On every weekday our letter-boxes are stuffed with printed exhortations to spend and acquire even more, when our junkrooms already embarrass us by their overflow. A reversal of this trend, as your document says, is fundamental to the development of sustainable cities. How to set this counter-current in motion?
2. It appears we might begin by inserting some blockages near the source, where the advertisers trust upon our notice the new goods for sale, putting temptation in our way. Sacrilegious as is any advocacy, in our market-driven culture, of any shade of policy that impedes trade, we may even have to reach agreement to do this, starting with a ban on the distribution of 'junk-mail'. It would save the nation a very large bill for imported paper, and relieve our refuse-disposal sites of a considerable volume of spent cellulose matter. It would also imperil the livelihood of the sometimes highly talented people who write/design these inducements to consume, but in the present context this might be viewed as the elimination of a parasitical element in our society. It would, I concede, be less possible to exclude from the ether or the TV screen the siren songs to "buy, buy, buy."
3. At the "throwaway end", however, more might be done to convert us from the habit, now so ingrained, of too quickly turning over our possessions, cleaning out our wardrobes &c, and consigning the excess to the "refuse" site. I would contend that local government has played a placatory if indeed not an accessory rôle in confirming us in the habits of over-consumption by providing us with over-generous forms of collection service. The introduction of wheelie-bins and mechanical lifting devices has assuredly made simpler and less noisome the chore of collection. On the other hand, the large capacity of the bins and the frequency of collections is no deterrent to their being rapidly filled with consumption detritus.
4. The analogy of "traffic calming" is useful here. We have come to accept these impediments to the speed and manner of driving as a minor irritant compared with the hazards of unchecked road behaviour. Placing physical limits on our weekly out-turnings would serve the common good in much the same way by its contribution to the major problem of community waste disposal.

Desideratum No. 5

viz., to

Develop sustainable transport networks, nodal complementarity and logistics

Proliferation of vehicles \times autonomous drivers = gridlock.

1. This nation has had a love affair with the private automobile surpassed only by the better-off sections of the Societies of North America. Only the comparative sparseness of our population and consequent relatively low density of road occupancy has saved us from developing before this the critical point of vehicular overload and atmospheric carbon saturation met years ago in such areas as Los Angeles. But in our larger cities that problem is now pervasive.
2. Policies to abate this problem have been slow to evolve. Legislators at all levels of government are themselves almost to the last person owner-drivers, and bring a schizoid outlook to any consideration of constraining the use of vehicles in their socially non-beneficent aspect. The entrenchment of the car-makers, dealers and promoters is in our minds as well as deeply in the economy. Yet we are also conscious of how in so many ways the manifest conveniences of car ownership in cities essentially re-designed for their use have a flip side. Hospital wards contain their victims, repair shops flourish in every suburb, supermarkets squeeze out more congenial corner stores, school-children for their own safety must be conveyed on wheels rather than walk. We have lost the custom of exercise of our limbs and grow fat. And always we sense the dangers of speed or negligent driving, of din and vibration and polluted air.
3. Yet sheer necessity - as with the drowning man struggling to retain breath - has dictated some breakaways from the dominance of the car-lobby and its inward reflection. Traffic calming is a case in point. Begun in a somewhat tentative way by the more innovative local authorities, it has been widely emulated as its advantages have been established, not without strong and lingering resistance by many car owners. And even in its present form it bears all the signs of being an unsatisfactory compromise, a modifying "after-thought" on a road system designed to facilitate faster movement in both direct line and corners.

(†)
Desideratum No. 5

(continued)

4. Short of rebuilding this 'sorry Scheme of Things entire' (Omar Khayyam) - which can hardly be on the agenda - it seems we must resort to putting splints upon the existing order. This will still entail bold thinking, and the resort to economic prods that emit a shock where they touch. That is the character of the scheme imposed on the London commuters, to loud screams of protest, by Lord Mayor Livingstone. But once instituted its merits were generally recognised, if still resented by that segment of the motorists obliged to change their driving habits. The more important business of the city was transacted more efficiently.
5. Individual priorities in this connection, so much indulged up until yesterday, must give way to social priorities. And these must be reflected in the allocation of road space. Where the breadth of arterial roads allows it (and possibly by some amount of radical surgery on the built fabric to assist - though less brutally, please than Baron Haussmann's in Paris) zoning and streaming should be enforced, to award priority to essential public transport over private vehicles. Channeling to favour public buses, ambulances, fire-quelling and other emergency vehicles should be de rigueur. Preferably, motor-buses might be disentangled from the top-priority motorised channel by, where feasible, allocating one side of the road to a light rail service, as pioneered in Europe in Freiburg.
6. Beyond this, authorities should pursue a philosophy of ~~the~~ active deterrence of those commuter-drivers (who on average carry less than one passenger on their daily to-and-fro car journeys) whose vehicles stand idle through most of the day in the inner city or an otherwise busy node, within a parking station or ground-space. Instead of placating the demands of developers for this kind of 'inactive' parking space, authorities must hold their nerve and put a ceiling on present provision by disapproving applications for more such space (whether created expressly for the purpose, or incorporated in the design of other structures) in already congested precincts.

Desideratum No. 6.

viz, to

Incorporate eco-efficiency principles into new buildings
and housing

1. This is written without access to a computer, & hence I go on recollection only of a Sociological survey of Melbourne publicised in *The Age* about two years ago. Incorporated in this was a table of residential occupancy levels which revealed a marked "thinning" of house occupancy in the middle-aged (in terms of the physical fabric) suburbs. Residences which only a generation ago sheltered a then average-sized family were now, in the main, occupied by splinters alone of families, frequently by one inhabitant only, more often by only two, whether "empty-nesters" parents or more casual partnerships arrangements. The attachment of these occupants to a particular district might, as suggested, stem from reluctance to leave a familiar neighbourhood but quite as likely could be related to affordability or some other economic motive.
2. It is apparent, however, that when these suburbs were laid out they were provided with requisite services in the form of roads and streets, electric power and telephone cabling, & possibly gas-mains, as well as water supply and drainage, all of these more or less adequate for the needs of the once-denser populations they once sustained. They would also have had reasonably close access to rail and/or tram services. Yet those services still require maintenance to retain the same standard of efficiency.
3. In contrast - while not losing sight of a recent new concentration of inner-city home-makers - the main action today in the unrolling of services is in the new suburbs at the periphery, where young families tend to set up their first home, and here, if only for a decade or so, the relative population density is higher.
4. To use a culinary metaphor, Melbourne's older suburbs now resemble a soufflé rather than a doughy pudding, while on the outside there's a thicker crust.
5. If this perception be an accurate one, it is in these older suburbs there is both more scope and urgency for renewal incorporating eco-efficiency principles than elsewhere (I assume Melbourne would not be an atypical case). Yet the comparative social inertia of those suburbs might make them more resistant to change.

6. Another witness, however, is that the research on capita dependence upon the key economic web of decentralized services in those suburbs might now easily conduce to the utilization of "urban hubs" as envisaged in your paper, in substitution for such extended - and opening - their now readily traversing the district as integral parts of a unitary metropolitan-wide provision.