

City Shaping Lessons from Melbourne's Past

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Like many other cities around the world, Melbourne's population is growing more rapidly than at any time in its history and is threatening the liveability and health of our urban environment.

Attention is being drawn to the lack of infrastructure spending to support this population growth. Infrastructure debates at the Federal Government level are dominated by transport with recent reports from Infrastructure Australia listing transport as the top priority projects.

What is surprising is the lack of attention given to 'green infrastructure'.

Green infrastructure is the investment that gives us a healthy environment, open spaces to enjoy, water for everyday living and industry whilst also helping to treat much of our waste, and protect us from hazards such as flooding, pollution and heat waves.

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After several decades as an urban and environment practitioner, I have seen great advances in our knowledge of how to better managing our cities to support a healthy environment and liveability.

But it has been disappointing to see that at the same time as our thinking is growing to accommodate this new knowledge, many of the policy and economic reforms related to cities have left us with narrow vision and limited ambitions for our cities as places for people and the many species that share our urban environment.

Small steps

Using Victoria and Melbourne as an example, it has been great to see a scattering of Government and independent reports recommending greater consideration of green infrastructure.

Infrastructure Victoria's *30 Year Strategy* has heeded the call of industry and recommended the development of a *Green Infrastructure Plan*. *Plan Melbourne*, the State's blueprint for urban growth and development acknowledged the role of the urban forest and will hopefully move further with its implementation plan to support greater commitments to green infrastructure in a time of high population growth and climate change. The Government's *Action Plan for the Yarra River* (for which I served as chairperson on the supporting Ministerial Advisory Committee) released earlier this year has recognised the irreplaceable but fragile benefits provided by the River and its open spaces as well as other waterways across Melbourne and puts in place some much needed protection measures.

The recent release of Melbourne's *Metro Tunnel Living Infrastructure Plan* is an inspiring example of how very large major infrastructure projects can put in place legacy measures at the human and landscape level to ensure a net positive benefit for future communities.

These are significant initiatives and a good sign that planning for our cities does not take the quality of our environment and liveability for granted and that Melbourne's consistent placing at the top of most liveability rankings is not seen as reason for complacency.

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Perhaps there are many of us, who look around Melbourne and think that we are already providing very well for nature and liveability in our city.

However, much like Australia's remarkable record of 25 years of continuous economic growth, many of the policy and institutional reforms that delivered this legacy occurred decades ago. There are lessons to be learned from the past. This is not the first time Melbourne has faced a period of rapid population growth that has put pressure on infrastructure, services and the environment.

Ensuring that our city liveability is protected and the urban environment remains healthy so that its many values can be enjoyed by future generations is likely to require some challenging policy and institutional reforms.

Can we repeat the leadership of yesterday?

The arrival of European settlement in the early 19th century ignored and displaced the knowledge and connections with country of indigenous tribes of the Kulin Nation and what grew in its place was initially little more than a shambolic frontier town.

The gold rush, the subsequent population and property booms and the lack of city services of the 19th century led to Melbourne gaining an international reputation as 'Smellbourne'.

But then over several decades, visionary plans set aside an arc of green open space around the Hoddle grid including:

The Botanic Gardens, Alexandra Gardens and Kings Domain edged by the boulevard of St Kilda road to the south of the Yarra River.

To the east, Treasury and Fitzroy Gardens and the more utilitarian Yarra Park and Gosch's paddock now home to Melbourne's famous sports and entertainment precinct.

To the north, Carlton Gardens, later to be graced with the bold and startling presence of the Royal Exhibition Building and beyond, the huge expanse of Royal Park and Princess Park connected by the majestic, tree-lined boulevard of Royal Parade.

At the same time, we constructed one of the world's earliest sewerage systems and reserved the forested headwaters of the Yarra River for water supply.

And so, together with profound social and cultural changes, in a relatively brief period, our shambolic frontier town transformed into 'Marvellous Melbourne'.

Remarkably little investment in open space and green infrastructure occurred over the following decades. The First World War, Depression and Second World War were times of austerity and sacrifice.

The 1956 Olympics was perhaps the event that signalled Melbourne's awakening from that somewhat bleak period. It was again time for optimism and vision and Melbourne's population was again booming. The 1954 Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme reflected this growing optimism and highlighted the potential for a network of open spaces across the rapidly expanding city but it took time to build momentum for its implementation.

By the 1970's sprawling development had virtually doubled the extent of the metropolitan area. Post-war scarcity meant services such as the sewerage system had not kept up. The Yarra and our waterways and the Bay were neglected and becoming grossly polluted.

The City's planners revived the earlier vision for Melbourne's open space network along with the idea of green wedges and development corridors.

There was community pressure to tackle pollution problems caused by industry and unsewered suburbs.

Slowly the momentum began to build behind this vision and greater prosperity and community expectation sustained the investment need to deliver it.

The Environment Protection Authority was created in 1971 to regulate industry, the second EPA to be created in the world. A huge investment by State and Federal Government was made in sewerage the suburbs. A new Metropolitan Plan identified open space corridors for our waterways including the Yarra and land began to be acquired to build this network and the trail systems that connects it.

Victoria became known as the 'Garden State' in 1974 principally because of Melbourne's vision for an extensive network of green open spaces across the City

This period stands out as Melbourne's second great wave of visionary planning and investment and it has left us with a wonderful legacy of a world class open space network, much of it built around our waterways and the Bay.

We must ask, do we have the policies and institutions with the capability to deliver such a new vision?

Where to today?

Until now, we have been able to sustain our liveability and a reasonably healthy natural environment largely because of the planning and investment undertaken more than 40 years ago.

But as Melbourne experiences its third, great wave of population growth with a predicted 7 million or more people by 2050, sustaining or improving liveability is a massive challenge that will require a vision and an ongoing commitment to deliver it by future governments over many decades.

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In Melbourne, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works once had responsibility for town planning, parks, waterways and floodplain management as well as water and sewerage services.

It used the Metropolitan Improvement Fund (a property rate levied across all Melbourne properties) to play its part in the planning and delivery of the City's green infrastructure. Much of the land for green open space corridors including the Yarra River and other waterways was acquired using this fund which later was re-branded as the Parks Charge. Where is the equivalent green infrastructure funding today?

We are in danger of exhausting the legacy of our last 'city shaping' phase of visionary planning and investment in green infrastructure and open space that all but ended in the 80's.

Our practitioners now have the knowledge, skills and understanding to better plan for these complex city needs, but this is not enough to help shape a better future for coming generations.

Without a vision and effective policies and institutions to deliver it, we will risk ad hoc and wasteful decision making and investment and ultimately, poorer community well-being and economic prosperity.

Governments risk making short term decisions that reflect the entrenched cost efficiency or 'city servicing' mindset that is an all too narrow policy setting in an era of unprecedented urban population growth.

Our expanding suburban fringes will lack amenity and a healthy environment that may entrench disadvantage.

The per capita area of open space in our existing suburbs needs offsetting investment in improving quality, access and connectivity.

Green streetscapes and open space and tree cover are important for amenity and mitigating urban heat in a warming climate. But in addition to addressing threats to liveability, coordinated investment in green infrastructure can unlock new economic opportunities for our cities.

An historical third wave of planning and investment in open space and green infrastructure is needed to underpin Melbourne's liveability as we grow but, as the past has shown, little will happen without significant policy and institutional reforms to revive an effective city shaping capability to deliver a new vision. Such reform to drive Melbourne's third wave of visionary planning and investment will be essential to ensuring a healthy environment, community well-being and Melbourne's liveability and prosperity in the decades ahead.

Alternatively, we may find ourselves tumbling down the ranks of world's most liveable cities, with consequent declining standards of health and well-being, our best and brightest drawn to greener pastures while the World asks in astonishment, "how did they let that happen?"

Chris Chesterfield works at the CRC for Water Sensitive Cities, Chairs a not for profit, Loci Environment and Place, is a Commissioner of the Victorian Environmental Water Holder and recently chaired a Ministerial Advisory Committee for protection of the Yarra River which reported to the Ministers for Planning, Water and Environment and recommended the establishment of a Task Force to develop a vision and strategy for Melbourne's natural (green) infrastructure