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Planning for People

The review of the SA Planning and Design Code is welcome as the current code is not fit for purpose to deliver the best long-term sustainable development outcomes for the people of South Australia.

Planning our physical environment should be about providing the most attractive, safe and healthy places for us to live, work and play. It should be about supporting us in being part of a community.

Unfortunately most new developments merely suit the business models of developers. The Planning Code developed by successive governments has basically been designed to make it easy for them to do whatever they want.

Our cities and suburbs are being re-developed for profit and not for people.

Most developments and re-developments are planned to jam as many swellings on small blocks as physically possible. Any decent size tree is removed with little room left for new ones, creating uncomfortable heat islands.

It doesn't have to be like this.

We could have well-planned sub-divisions providing homes incorporating significant natural environment, creating amenity and a sense of community.

We could have well-designed houses that are environmentally responsible and that meet our family and social needs.

This is the job of governments acting in the best interests of the people.

Developers and builders won't do it as their job is to run a successful business. Governments must be responsible for ensuring we have quality living environments. They have the ability to ensure this with appropriate regulations, incentives, planning and education.

Decisions made now affect our city long into the future.

Who will stand up for creating pleasant communities and making development desirable for people and not just the convenience and profit of developers?

Principles

There are some key principles that are important to guide future planning. These have been well articulated in past planning documents, (and are alluded to in the announcements about the current Code review), however they are rarely seriously incorporated in any actual development.

Planning

One of the current problems with planning is that there is no genuine planning that drives the development of healthy, liveable, safe communities.

What we have is mere development, where the general public rightly distrusts the process and outcomes and believes that the system favours developers and not people who live in their communities.

Most new developments merely suit the business model of developers and the current code is generally designed to make development easier, not necessarily better.

Planning, on the other hand should be about creating development that provides healthy, liveable, convenient and safe communities.

Most new medium to large scale developments just deliver sprawling medium density suburbia – witness Mt Barker, Aldinga and others. On the small scale, ad-hoc infill development sees substantial houses demolished, trees razed and as many new homes jammed in as possible.

Older communities such as in Norwood and Glenelg are incorporating increasing densities while retaining their vibrant sense of community. Sadly this is not being created in newer developments such as at Port Adelaide and Football Park. There are many examples elsewhere which demonstrate good planning – refer to writings by Jan Gehl and Herbert Girardet (including their *Thinker in Residence* reports; see later) as well as other experts such as Steffen Lehmann, Paul Downton and Philip Roetman, all of whom have spent considerable time in Adelaide.

Density

Increasing urban density is necessary but it must be planned well and with sensitivity. It must be done in a way that adds to the amenity of where we live. The key is planning and governments must be bold in setting standards and requiring compliance. The housing and development industry will inevitably complain about anything that changes their comfortable way of doing business, but the role of government is to provide *“a bold vision and strong planning laws ... or we risk losing the character of our streets and neighbourhoods”* in the words of Minister Champion.

Some of the more recent places that provide exemplary planning and design for lifestyle with an increased density include:

- Christie Walk (Sturt Street, Adelaide) where 27 dwellings occupy a small 2,000m² block with landscaping, food gardens and community facilities.
- Lochiel Park model green village of over 100 dwellings demonstrating exemplary environmental planning and design.
- Aldinga Arts Eco-Village of some 150 homes delivers a successful model for community-oriented sustainable living. (Sadly the adjoining Aldinga town development has ignored the lessons of the village in how to create liveable, sustainable communities).

These have all received awards for excellence, including internationally. They have created communities that are loved and enjoyed by the residents. Why are these not the normal?

Increasing density needs to be done very carefully in specific areas to create a more compact and efficient urban form, which requires strategic planning, not just left to the market place.

Showcasing examples of good planning and design that provide successful communities (here and elsewhere) should be done to encourage development that provides long-term benefits.

Sustainability

As we experience a changing climate with more heat waves, hot days and storm events it will be essential that our cities and suburbs develop in ways to reduce the worst impacts of these. Current developments continue to create uncomfortable heat islands in our suburbs.

It is the role of governments to plan future development to address our changing climate.

Good residential design needs to incorporate passive environmental principles to make living conditions comfortable with minimum input from air conditioning. Such principles include orientation of houses to the north, high levels of insulation, shading of walls and windows (including eaves overhangs), greenery around houses and light colours to roofs and walls. The current energy rating compliance requirements do very little to ensure houses are designed appropriately, even with the recent move from a 6 to 7 star energy rating.

Recent research by the University of SA concluded that most houses are still poorly designed, often achieving only a 4-star rating in operation. Good planning and design can easily change this.

So many new houses have the current trend of black roofs creating hot boxes that need air conditioning running flat out in summer to provide any semblance of comfort conditions. This will continue to put strain on the state's electricity supply to meet peak demands.

In 1952 the Australian Government produced an excellent guide *“Designing Houses for Australian Climates”*. More recently *“Your Home – design for lifestyle and the future”* was produced, a guide to environmentally sustainable homes. It has been regularly updated, and provides excellent information on how to plan and design new housing. Sadly most new developments ignore the

wisdom it contains and governments appear not to care that we are creating expensive and uncomfortable living environments for the future.

In a warming climate, reducing open space and tree canopy is the worst possible thing we can do.

Trees

Adelaide is unique and fragile in that most of our open space is contained within private backyards – which are rapidly being eliminated. We have only 10% of our suburban land given over to public parks, compared with 20% in Melbourne and 50% in Sydney; and even 40% in London. We do not have enough public ‘commons’ on which to plant new trees to compensate for the continuing loss of private open space and large trees through densification of our suburbs.

Minister Champion rightly says: *“The tree canopy is part of the character of Adelaide that sees us so often highly rated in liveability surveys. Protecting that canopy should be central in our planning system as should the heritage of our architecture and built environment.”*

Refer to the excellent reports from the Conservation Council of SA on the current problems with our declining tree canopy cover and the poor legislation that encourages its continued destruction, as well as measures to reverse the trend.

Integrating public transport

Increasing public transport use and integrating good public transport into urban planning will require major changes to the nature of public transport provision, not merely upgrading the existing light & heavy rail network and tinkering with timetables and bus routes.

Small increases in public transport use will make little difference to future sustainability and climate change resilience.

Radical improvements in public transport must occur at the same time as urban consolidation and increased density. The previously proposed development of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) still has relevance for our future but must be well planned and integrated.

Health

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that the built environment can influence our health and well-being for better or worse. This has become more relevant now with the changes to our lives brought on by the pandemic, and we all have a responsibility to ensure that our environments enhance our lives.

This is nowhere more important than having opportunities in our neighbourhoods to have easy access to open space and green landscape for passive and active recreation.

The concept of the ‘biophilic city’ – (biophilia means our basic human desire to connect with nature) – is one that promotes the greening of our urban environments. Contact with nature has been found to enhance healing and recovery from illness, improve social behaviours, and create healthy childhood development.

The biophilic city also absorbs more carbon than it emits, positively influencing the local climate and the well-being of its inhabitants.

Incentives

Incentives for compliance and penalties for non-compliance are required if any of the vision, principles and general good intentions are to be met. Too many documents in the past have contained guidelines and desirable intentions but have generally been ignored as ‘business as usual’ prevails.

Concessions for above-standard performance planning and design solutions should be considered. Industry should be encouraged to develop world best practice, not merely given minimum standards with which to comply.

Governments have a responsibility to ensure there is compact and efficient urban planning with adequate affordable housing, a wide mix of designs, good environmental outcomes and desirable communities.

In Summary

Done well our cities and suburbs can be beautiful, healthy, comfortable, highly desirable places in which to live, work and play. But it takes courage and commitment from those with the ability to shape and reshape our environments. Cities are continually being remade as buildings get demolished and new ones built. We have choices all the time about the way this is done.

Decisions for a better future need to be made now. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that we live in environments that are desirable for all citizens to live, work and play in; not just for the few who have the most money and power.

There are serious opportunities in new developments at Cheltenham, Morphettville, Keswick and other places to do it well but it needs a committed government to ensure that appropriate ground rules are set, not just guidelines that can be ignored.

The Planning Code does not currently do this and needs a major re-write to make it deliver better outcomes for our suburbs and our people. It needs to encourage excellence.

There is no shortage of good information on how to plan our suburbs and design our homes to make them energy efficient, healthy, safe and sustainable. Sadly governments, developers and builders do not take these seriously enough, hence we continue to get suburbs and houses that are far from ideal.

Housing should be about providing shelter, comfort and amenity, not just commercial real estate.

Successful communities are complex and don't happen by accident. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that good planning and design is undertaken that delivers known benefits to people and communities for the future.

The Government must treat this document with much more seriousness and rigour than any in the past.

References

In the 2000s the state Labor Government had a program of Thinkers in Residence. Many of these explored the built environment and produced important reports outlining ways to develop our city for the benefit of people. Their guidance is still relevant, even though most recommendations were never implemented.

"The advantage of Adelaide is that it has good bones – it has inherited one of the world's premium examples of city design"

"There are some fantastic projects in Adelaide – but for people to understand the value of good design, there's got to be a demonstration of it, and there's not enough demonstration of really good design" – Laura Lee (An Integrated Design Strategy for SA 2011).

"Integrating transport planning and urban design is the key to building viable, liveable cities" – Fred Hansen (All on Board – growing vibrant communities through transport 2011).

"I am amazed by Adelaide. This is a very lucky city. Your city fathers were far-sighted because it has what all cities dream about – a city with fantastic potential".

"A city must increase the quantity and quality of well-planned beautiful public spaces that are human in scale, sustainable, healthy, safe and lively".

"The compact city is the only environmentally sustainable form of city"- Jan Gehl (Public Spaces and Public Life – City of Adelaide 2002).

"We need to reconceptualise the way cities work to replicate natural systems – circular and cyclical systems" – Herbert Girardet (Creating a Sustainable Adelaide 2003).

"South Australia was planned with conscious purpose. Creating healthy neighbourhoods is achievable because of the urban form left to us by Colonel Light" – Jay Weatherill.

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