

Urban Consolidation in Melbourne: a Case Study of the Monash Employment Cluster

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Abstract: This paper aims to discover why urban consolidation in Melbourne has been implemented with difficulties and thus progressed at a slow pace, by analysing the key stakeholders' perception of the planning and development processes and their responses to the perceived issues. Data were collected from 11 semi-structured interviews with key personnel who were in senior positions in organizations that are directly involved with residential development and/or planning in the Monash Employment Cluster. The analysis of the interview responses show that there was a significant difference in stakeholders' perception of the metropolitan plan, understanding of the planning system, opinion about the objectives set out in the plan and their personal motivation for following the guidelines in the plan. The analysis leads to questions about the quality of the plan, which is undermined by unclear objectives and lack of analytical depth; as a result, stakeholders often used their powers for different purposes and lacked a coordinated approach to consolidating the built environment.

Keywords: urban consolidation; stakeholders; urban planning; Melbourne

Introduction

Despite the widespread use of urban consolidation as a counter measure against urban sprawl, the increase of residential density has been proven a difficult task. In Melbourne, urban consolidation has been a key component in state plans but its effects are doubtful (DTPLI, 2014, Kroen and Goodman 2012, Woodcock et al 2011, Rumbold, 2010, DPCD, 2002). This leads one to question why the problem persists.

Previous research has reported that individual stakeholders such as residents, consumers, governments contribute to the failure of urban consolidation (Searle et al 2014; Kroen and Goodman, 2012). However, these findings provide anecdotal evidences by looking at one small aspect of the implementation process (Taylor, 2013; Woodcock et al, 2011; Ruming, 2010; Mitchell, 2004).

This research attempts to answer why anti-sprawl policies fail to be implemented by looking at the multiple stakeholders, especially their interaction with the planning system. It is possible that the planning process yields undesirable results through a series of small compromises, since it is a complex system of interactions between many competing stakeholders. If this is the case, governments may be underestimating the power of forces outside their control to shape the city in unintended ways. This suggests that there is a need to understand the whole process better, and what consequences individual policies might have on the system.

Urban Consolidation and the Main Stakeholders

Urban consolidation is a policy measure that addresses the problem of urban sprawl. The latter describes "the process in which the spread of development across the landscape far outpaces population growth. The landscape sprawl creates has four dimensions: a population that is widely dispersed in low-density development; rigidly separated homes, shops, and workplaces; a network of roads marked by huge blocks and poor access; and a lack of well-defined, thriving activity centres, such as downtowns and town centres" (Ewing et al 2002, p.3).

Urban consolidation is popularly implemented through density increase. This can be done through either redeveloping the existing city fabric, or, building greenfield land at higher densities than the city average (Brooks et al, 2011). In general urban consolidation is implemented through some combination of transport planning, increased residential density, decreased car dependency and human scale design, and is embodied by three best practice design guidelines - Smart Growth, New Urbanism and Transit Oriented Development (TOD). These three terms overlap in meaning, and represent the most recent trend in urban planning practice, offering best practical solutions to urban sprawl. The idea behind Smart Growth and New Urbanism is that the city should be comprised of dense, mixed use, walkable neighbourhoods that offer their residents most amenities within walking or cycling distance. When implemented correctly this should limit sprawl, promote walkability, increase green space and citizen welfare, and limit car dependency (Inam, 2011). TOD is a subset of these ideas and represents the desire to locate high density neighbourhood within 800m of public transport, and can result in high density activity centres, transport corridors or both (Searle et al, 2014).

Unfortunately, these policies often face obstacles such as resident resistance to development or market forces and government direction that does not align with plans. Indeed, the implementation of urban consolidation involves trade-offs and balancing the demands of the neighbourhoods that are the most strongly opposed to increased development (Pendall, 1999). This usually means choosing a suboptimal location for increased density, or partitioning policies like, for example, unconnected transport corridor investments and urban area renewal and density increase. Jandricek (2013) concludes that effective urban consolidation requires unified policies that are pre planned, and involve thorough calculation of required housing numbers, followed by cycles of demolition and urban renewal. On the other hand, urban consolidation has been shown to have negative effects on some communities like a change in character (Save Our Suburbs Inc. 2014), reduced green space (Brunner and Cozens, 2013), sometimes increased carbon emissions (Rowan et al, 2010) and reduced housing affordability (Pendall, 1999).

In Australian Cities, density increase has been quite problematic (Kroen and Goodman, 2012; Searle and Filion, 2011; Foster, 2006). Despite optimistic objectives, Melbourne 2030 did not limit sprawl (Kroen and Goodman, 2012; Woodcock et al 2011; Rumbold, 2010; Buxton and Tieman 2005). For example, Melbourne 2030 aimed to decrease greenfield development and increase residential density around designated activity centres, but resulted in reduced development around said activity centres and a 10% increase in greenfield development (Kroen and Goodman, 2012).

A number of stakeholders have emerged in analysing the failure of urban consolidation. Residents resist development, hindering urban consolidation in both Melbourne (Taylor, 2013) and Sydney (Ruming et al, 2012). The planning system in Melbourne, which is manned by the state and the local governments, is onerous, making fast-track development difficult to implement (Eccles and Bryant, 2011). Consumer preference plays a big role in determining which areas are feasible for higher density developments, thus the proposed high rise developments in major activity centres in Melbourne, such as Dandenong and Ringwood, failed simply because there was no consumer demand (Jaspen Ed. 2005). The state government plays a critical role in urban consolidation, as shown in the TOD project in Footscray (Searle et al 2014). There are numerous less involved stakeholders including The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) and other arbitrating bodies, which create quite a complex and lengthy process of appeal and discretionary decision making in Victoria (Eccles and Bryant, 2011), which can change the timeframes of some projects or decisions.

It is apparent that when researching urban consolidation, most authors have focused on one stakeholder exclusively leading to detailed studies about specific phenomena such as local residents resistance (Pendall, 1999; Taylor, 2013) and government inefficiency (Mees, 2003; Gethin et al, 2012), without offering a nuanced look at the multiple stakeholders. Further, it has been seen that the planning regulations and decisions in Melbourne often affect the behaviour of other stakeholders in the process and can lead to unexpected outcomes, such as in the St Kilda Triangle case (Dowling, 2009). As such, the study of multiple stakeholders with respect to the planning system deserves research attention.

Research Design

The Monash Employment Cluster

This study focuses on a case study area - The Monash Employment Cluster - to allow a more specific and detailed analysis of the forces that shape consolidation attempts in Melbourne. Key stakeholders from the area are interviewed using semi structured questions, the benefits of which are discussed by Yates (2004). In short, qualitative research about a specific area will help the researcher figure out the relationships present in any development project and answer questions about why consolidation policies are not more effective.

Plan Melbourne 2050 defines the Monash Employment Cluster as a major job cluster (DTPLI 2014, p. 52), which needs an increased residential density in the area, in particular around the surrounding activity centres and along the rail corridor (DTPLI 2014, p.180). This has mostly transitioned over from Melbourne 2030, despite that plan failing to deliver increased density (Rumbold, 2010; ABS, 2013). The new plan emphasized residential density increase around employment clusters and urban renewal zones, as well as housing-job proximity and walkability (DTPLI 2014, pp. 30, 48, 7-13). Additionally, the Monash area has a relatively low residential density (Profile.id, 2011) and rate of resident objection to development (Woodcock et al, 2011). Therefore, on the surface, it is a prime area for redevelopment so this research will analyse why this has not happened.

During the implementation phases of Melbourne 2030 Monash had a smaller approval rate of residential development than the average municipality in Melbourne, and did not reach the new dwelling targets set (Woodcock et al, 2011; Rumbold 2010, p 29, 34). Similar zoning was carried over from Melbourne 2030 to Plan Melbourne 2050 in Monash, with the vast majority of the area transitioning from Residential 1 Zone to General Residential Zone. A height limit of 9m (DPCD, 2014), and permit requirements for subdivision and construction of lots under 500m² also present a somewhat conservative approach to density increase. Additionally there is uneven zoning of the Oakleigh-Dandenong Rail Corridor between the three municipalities through which it runs. This suggests an avenue for enquiry about implementation issues with metropolitan plans in Melbourne.

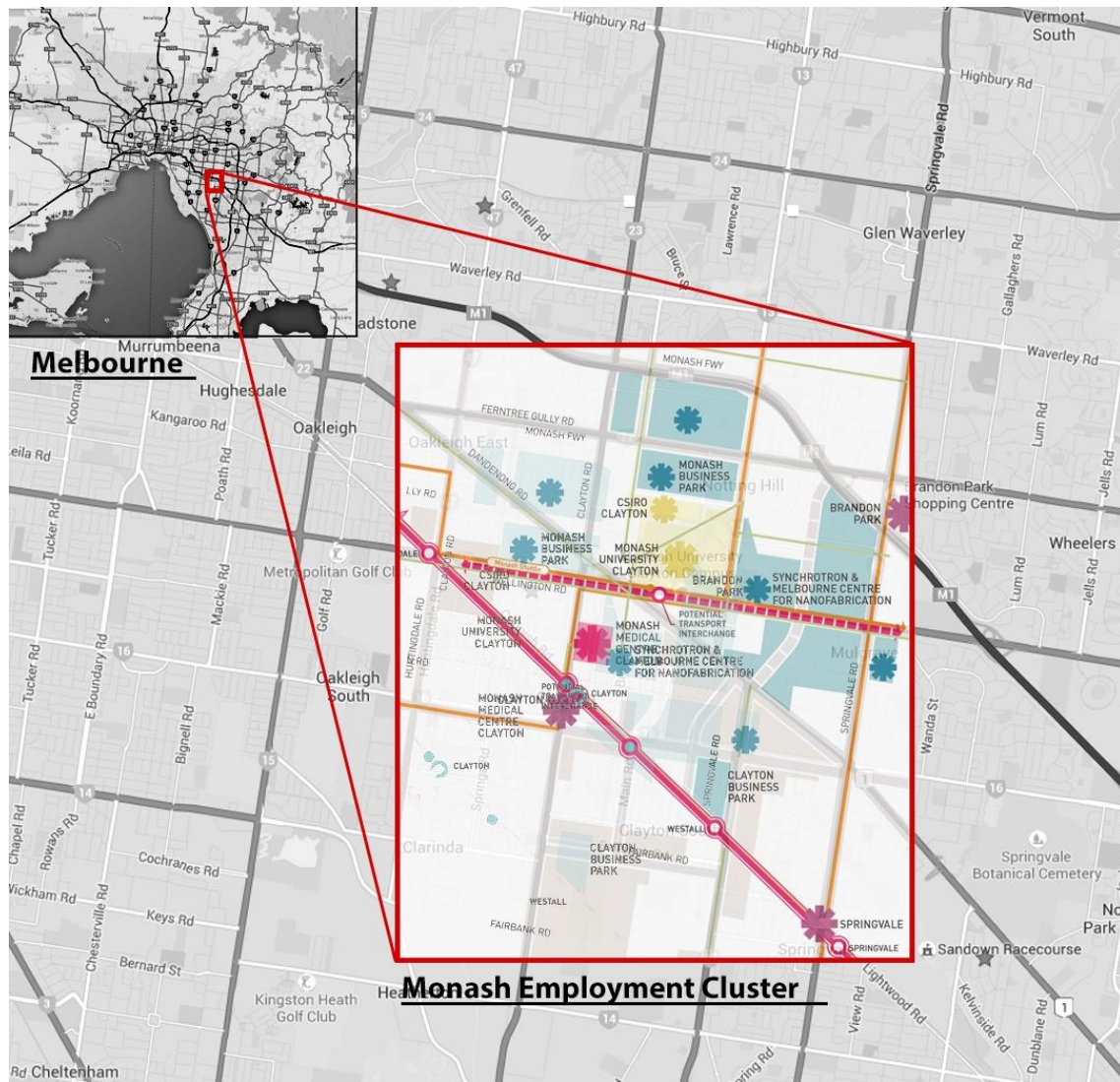


Figure 1 – Monash Employment Cluster in the context of Greater Melbourne. Image created from images sourced in DTPLI (2014, p.52) and Google Map.

Stakeholders

11 interviews, with 12 stakeholders, were conducted for this study between August and October 2014. The participants were, broadly speaking, from the five categories listed above, and were chosen to cover as wide a range as possible of opinions and roles. They have all been recognized as having an important role within any specific development project within the Monash Employment Cluster. They are summarized in table1.

Table 1- Stakeholders Interviewed, their roles, and organizations they work for

Pseudonym	Group	Organization	Role	Place of Work/ Residence
B1	Business	Monash Health	Representatives from Capital Works and Strategic Planning	Clayton
D1	Developer	Olive Construction	Owner/ Developer/ Builder	Whole Monash Area
L1	Local Government	Monash City Council	Head of Strategic Planning	Glen Waverley
L2	Local	Monash City Council	Head of Statutory	Glen Waverley

	Government		Planning	
L3	Local Government	Monash City Council	Mayor	Glen Waverley
R1	Resident	N/A	N/A	Glen Waverley
R2	Resident	N/A	N/A	Malvern East
R3	Resident	Brandon Park Resident Group	Representative	Brandon Park
R4	Resident	Save Our Suburbs	President	Richmond/ Citywide
S1	State Government	Metropolitan Planning Authority (MPA)	Director	CBD
S2	State Government	Hanson Consulting (previously state planning advisory committee)	Director/ Advisor for state strategic plan	CBD

The questions asked of the participants were left open-ended, with a central aim of finding out how the interviewee interacts within the planning system and with other stakeholders. Generally, they were asked about both their preference for city development, what they expected the current direction of the city was, and about how they perceived their own and others' role within that plan. Due to the nature of residential development in Victoria, there is a strong emphasis on local governments making individual planning decision and as such, there is quite a bit of pressure on developers to adhere to subjective requirements, such as neighbourhood character. Lobbying from local resident may also give the councils a lot of incentive to block development wherever possible, while discretionary policy making enables this. Meanwhile, other individuals all have very different priorities, incentives and power, meaning that the planning system may consist of a complex tug of war between different stakeholders that stagnates the system. Since change is desired this is counterproductive. In either case, this study aims to either identify the problem within the system, or refute this hypothesis altogether.

Major Findings

In general, the various stakeholders were quite opposed to metropolitan planning in Melbourne, and to metropolitan plans overall. Usually, only those who were involved in making the plan had positive things to say about it, and sometimes even they were averse to it. That being said, the most stakeholders did agree with the broad objectives of the plan, at least in principle; but thought that the implementation process did not deliver these outcomes due to several failures between what is planned for and what ultimately happens. These failures can be summed up in four broad categories; key disagreements about the meaning and processes within the plan, incentives that do not align with the plan, lack of stakeholder knowledge, and dispersed powers that lead to adversarial decision making. The rest of the paper will present and discuss these failures.

Key Disagreements about the Metropolitan Plan

Each stakeholder has a slightly different understanding of what is optimal for a large city like Melbourne. This contrast can be seen in different opinions expressed about the level of density desired in the city, and the emphasis on different character;

“Urban Consolidation is much, much better than urban sprawl... Everyone wants to have facilities close by, and we would like to see more people inside Melbourne’s boundaries” – D1 (12/10/14)

“I personally wouldn’t be fine living in an apartment. It’s something I’ve always considered should stay in the city” – R1 (18/9/14)

For developers “[it is important] is to understand the character of the area and read our schedule... we have variations [between areas]” – L2 (30/9/14)

There were also key disagreements about how exactly urban consolidation should be implemented;

"We can and need to do more in terms of urban consolidation. In particular, creating density in certain locations, particularly where we've got good transport infrastructure, so along our rail corridors, tram corridor, and so on" – S1 (7/10/14)

"We need to grow, if we want to be a successful country, especially in an economic way, we need to grow, our cities need to grow. I can very easily see that achieved in cities closer to the CBD" – D1 (12/10/14)

"Urban Consolidation is a must. You have to have it. It's how it is implemented [that is important] so that consolidation development gives due regard to the character of an area. Whereas if you are looking for infill development in the way of apartments, they should be located not in your normal residential areas." – L2 (30/9/14)

Misaligned incentives

Personal incentives were found not to align exactly with the plan and almost not at all with other stakeholders. This is important because people tend to follow their personal priorities over those of the whole city, especially if they do not feel that they can influence it much;

"Basically what we are trying to do as a business enterprise [is] survive in the market. We are trying to construct what we can sell" – D1 (12/10/14)

"And one of the major problems that we have in Melbourne is a lack of open space, traffic problems, and here in Monash we have significant infrastructure problems associated with drainage, roads and other issues" – R3 (23/9/14)

Furthermore, various departments within local and state governments had little incentive to work together, and had vastly different priorities to the point of competition rather than collaboration;

"I think that we almost don't coordinate at all with other councils... At the end of the day, I'm not that worried about what happens in Kingston or Dandenong. I wish them the best of luck; I hope things are going well for them. But my interest is in the people and the land that is in the boundary that I am responsible for as a councillor" – L3 (7/10/14)

"Consolidation and infill developments should give due regard to the character of the area" – L2 (30/9/14)

"Much of the housing in the [Monash employment cluster] is actually at the end of its life and is ripe for redevelopment and more medium density housing" – S2 (17/10/14)

"I think we need to look at urban consolidation in a broader sense. Not just housing more people around train stations but providing employment opportunities as well" – L1 (11/9/14)

Finally, some stakeholders were more willing to state their opinion off record, prior to and after the main interview, which sometimes differed to their 'official' opinion, showing a preference for maintaining professional within their organization.

Limited understanding and interest

Many stakeholders did not understand the planning system, the metropolitan plan and their rights; or only understood it as it related to them. There was a lack of big picture thinking even among the policy makers, who often thought the plan was quite transparent;

"In terms of whether [Plan Melbourne] is easy to understand, I know that when I read it I had a few questions around some of the details and how that might connect. To answer your question of whether it's easy for people that might not be involved in the industry... I suspect that probably not for many people" – B1 (29/10/14)

"I think that [the state plan] needs to be [easy to understand for the lay person]... and I think the concepts are fairly understandable..." – S1 (7/10/14)

When asked if she is aware of her rights R2 (8/10/14) said "No. Not at all"

Other stakeholder showed very little interest or understanding about planning issues in Melbourne but were willing to engage in the process only when it directly concerned them;

"My position [on Urban Consolidation] also comes back to my argument about population growth... Plan Melbourne says that we are 1.8% per year, and that it will continue ad infinitum. That, I think, is an extraordinary assumption" – R4 (29/9/14)

"The biggest challenge is for residents who are not that interested in planning... We'll hear from them when there's a proposal to significantly change the house next door to them, or proposal to build something they're very unhappy about... but 2 years earlier, when we've set the strategic vision for that area, when we've tried to engage them it's often been very difficult" – L3 (7/10/14)

Dispersed Power, Adversary and Mistrust

The powers within the system were much dispersed where each stakeholder was given some power to pursue their own agenda, leading to a stagnation of the entire system. Furthermore there was confusion about one's own power and how to use it, while some stakeholders argued that others used their powers to pursue personal preference rather than collective objectives;

"I'm not here to apologize for the system, it's got it failings; we all know that. But we're not about to change the permit system and the appeal system. It is what it is" – S1 (7/10/14)

"Currently we have a culture which isn't action driven, its business as usual driven. A long term strategy for metropolitan Melbourne cannot be achieved by a business as usual approach especially when it comes to the delivery of much needed infrastructure and more jobs in the suburbs close to public transport" – S2 (17/10/14)

"In my experience your result [at VCAT] is based on the actual member in the VCAT session. If the VCAT member is sympathetic to higher density [they] will always encourage higher density... if they are not supportive they can reject it" – D1 (12/10/14)

This leads to several inefficiencies within the system that lead to fewer objectives being accomplished. Firstly, discretionary powers can often lead to 'loud' minorities over representing a certain issue, as demonstrated by Wheelan (2003); people that do not object to development are not heard because there is no reason for them to say anything, even if they are the overwhelming majority of a population. Government were also found to be inefficient at achieving desired outcomes. Monash City Council had done very little within the first year after the draft of Plan Melbourne 2050 was released and intended to do little in the coming years, while state government seemed to be more concerned with public image;

"It'll be a work in progress for Monash for at least the next couple of years... There is significant strategic planning work that is involved in this Roz Hansen has also stated that the government is not willing to commit, and that it is often an obstacle to density increase" – L3 (7/10/14)

"I was told by a senior member of the Planning Minister's staff that '[The Government] can't set targets because [they] can't guarantee, as a government, that [they] can deliver those targets'" – S2 (17/10/14)

Finally, an adversarial system led to a lot of mistrust and lack of collaboration between stakeholders;

"I have to say, there's very few developments I could name where the developers don't leave problems" – R3 (23/9/14)

"The biggest obstacle is the local council or government. They are not supportive of any medium density development" - D1 (12/10/14)

“The development industry are a pack of whingers in my book, and the development industry... are not different from some of the other loudest [minorities] out there” – L3 (7/10/14)

Discussion and Conclusion

It was found that metropolitan planning in Melbourne failed to deliver good urban consolidation outcomes because of a combination of factors that combined to produce an undesirable result. Broadly speaking, these failures can be categorized as vague planning objectives, a lack of holistic thinking, an adversarial and discretionary system that results in stagnation, and inefficient processes.

The metropolitan plans of Melbourne, both the current and the previous one, are very broad and quite vague, as discussed in previous reviews of the plans (Kroen and Goodman, 2012; Mees, 2003). On the one hand, a lot of micromanagement is required at the state level, while on the other hand the policies are so broad that they can be interpreted in different ways. When speaking to stakeholders, especially those who were involved in making the plans, one got the impression that the plans were designed to please almost everyone, and that every possible complaint was included into the plan. These objectives sounded great on paper, but in reality the outcomes were often nothing like what the plan said. Ultimately, it is impossible to incorporate every concern into a plan because some completely contradict others, for example one cannot have both low density suburbs and high rise developments in the same area. Unfortunately, the plan often attempts to do exactly that. This leads each person to interpret the meaning of the plan differently. If we are to have a united, collaborative direction for planning in Victoria the plan needs to be clear, transparent, and with binding objectives that each stakeholder must follow. Most importantly, the government needs to be committed to the plan, and without a political agenda. If these requirements aren't met, then it is very hard to come up with a plan for the entire city that is likely to work.

There is a lack of holistic planning that incorporates all levels of the planning process into the plan. The system itself is flawed because those in power, the individuals who make and administer the plans often do not have an incentive to create a plan that makes Melbourne better off.

“I believe we have a culture, we have a mindset of people within the current state government bureaucracy, particularly at senior levels; who have become complacent and who are not as well informed as they should be. They are not, in my view, offering frank and fearless advice but rather towing the political line of the day. They seem to be in personal survival mode!” – S2 (17/10/14)

Many stakeholders refused to answer fairly straightforward questions, like what their opinion is about the metropolitan plan, because it might negatively impact their career or position. Stakeholders' incentives must be made to align with the objectives of state planning, whether through financial incentives or binding legislation, in order for plans to have intended outcomes. This includes those stakeholders that are a part of the government. The plan also compartmentalizes its own objectives, for example zoning sets independent of building heights, which are unrelated to transport investments, while neighbourhood character and heritage is considered separately. Objectives need to be considered holistically to be effective; for example, growth zones might entail a higher investment in transport, and looser or no character guidelines.

Currently, the planning system in Melbourne is adversarial and discretionary and this is a major problem with almost every application, incentivising local governments to prioritise political or personal agendas (Woodcock et al, 2011; Mees, 2003). This, and the fact that each stakeholder pursues their own agendas using whatever power they are given within the system, stagnates the direction that the city in general can take, and makes any real change slow or impossible. Creating a more rational and straightforward system is twofold. First, there needs to be a collaborative process and decisions need to be made about the direction of the city holistically. This means more than just running a consultation workshop; it means getting the different councils, developers, residents, and interested parties to work with the state in creating a plan that will work long term. It would also be an educational period where interested parties would be informed about why certain decisions need to be made. A collaborative approach might eliminate a lot of adversarial pushing and pulling later on. Both Dong and Gliebe (2012), and Ruming (2010), have discussed the benefits of such an approach within similar contexts. Secondly, most or all regulations need to be made binding and quantifiable, and

discretionary decision making needs to be eliminated wherever possible. This is an issue throughout every level of the planning process, from the vague goals set in the state plan, to the discretionary assessment of neighbourhood character. The inability of developers to plan for developments makes the process inefficient, and the detailed assessment required for each project is a drain on resources. Furthermore, a lack of incentives for councils to implement density increase combined with a lack of binding policy means that it usually isn't implemented, while neighbourhood character seems to be used as a catchall excuse to reject any proposal that isn't popular. Better policies would allow more freedom in the market to shape the city, and would be limited to quantifiable goals with a much stronger purpose.

Finally, a lack of market driven development is inefficient. Applications require a lot of manpower to assess because the policies are discretionary, especially if more and more of them end up in VCAT. Furthermore, discretionary decision making and compromises within the planning regulation makes many development projects unfeasible;

"...they are still encouraging infill development, [meaning] two dwellings on one block, but they are restricting it so that [they] need to be one storey... because [they are] at the back of the block. In 90% cases you couldn't do the single storey dwelling there because it's not going to be big enough and it's not economically viable at all... Theoretically, they are encouraging development; you can do infill development creating two lots from one in almost all residential areas. But in reality when they implement all the rules... it's not actually possible" - D1 (12/10/14)

Governments are also very slow to develop policies and implement plans. As demonstrated by the conversation with local council representatives, implementation of the state plan is intended to take years. Meanwhile, the S1 (7/10/14) states that they are "currently working with local government and government agencies to identify opportunities, and introduce planning controls". This is after several years of developing a metropolitan plan. If a plan takes 3-5 years to fully implement, but is scrapped at the same rate then nothing ever gets done. The process needs to be streamlined and the decisions made need to be long term, whatever they might be. Finally, the new land use controls are simultaneously specific in limiting most kinds of development, and too broadly applied across Melbourne;

"[The three new zones] are a complete disaster. Two of the zones are pretty well the same, the neighbourhood residential zone and the general residential zone.... And the residential growth zone is not about growth at all... Four storeys isn't gonna cut it in terms of meeting our city's housing needs" – S2 (17/10/14)

Looser planning controls that are more market driven would allow for better state level planning and a faster consolidation process. The city is too complex to attempt to explicitly prohibit most uses in most areas, and planners need to realize that they cannot control the appearance of every streetscape, while also having a speedy consolidation process. A better zoning schedule would allow non-discretionary development at least in some areas, so that the process is streamlined, and a more market driven approach to zoning.

The question that we really need to ask is whether we want to change things in Melbourne. While change is touted as the necessary step for Melbourne there is actually very little being done to change the system that is causing it to sprawl. Minor tweaks within that system cannot bring about the drastic kind of change that is being called for. It seems that no one is willing to touch the planning provisions or the legal framework itself, when that is what is required. The reason that plans fail to deliver on promises is because they fail to change the legal and policy context. If nothing changes, then there will be a continuation of the status quo. Given that Melbourne will grow in population by 30% in 30 years (ABS, 2014), that it has a tendency to sprawl, and that the past plan did not stop this trend; than it follows logically that the system needs to be reinvented, not just improved upon. A holistic rethinking of the entire system and the consequences of decisions would allow planning to become less of an obstacle and more of an aid that helps achieve the objectives that it sets out to do.

This research has looked at the stakeholders' perspectives in urban consolidation in Melbourne as a preliminary study to gain understanding of a complex phenomenon. Stakeholder analysis has pointed to several problems with metropolitan plan making in Melbourne that may be looked at further in future research. These include the need for more collaboration, market driven development and binding regulations to address the issues. Additionally, future research might look at more empirical cases to compare with the results of this paper.

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