

“REIMAGINE THOSE SPACES. THEY ARE PRIME LOCATIONS”

All Housing Commission high-rise towers “...will be replaced by 2051. The first phase of those – five towers – they will be gone by 2031. This is a massive agenda to reimagine those spaces, they are prime locations.” Premier* Daniel Andrews, 20 Sept 2023

Mr Premier*, we can only agree. Rethink housing, certainly – but let’s also rethink the surrounding spaces! Here we reproduce two articles from *Terra Publica* past...

* Ex-Premier. Congratulations Jacinta Allan!

PUBLIC SPACES GONE WRONG

from TP July-August 2009

Good cities succeed because their public spaces succeed. The parameters of this success are complex: scale and accessibility, economics and commerce, cultural and historical diversity, and governance. Can this success-matrix be planned, or must it simply evolve?

Melbourne Docklands is a failure not because it is unplanned, but because it is *badly* planned. The Kennett-era reliance on market forces led inevitably to Docklands becoming a showcase of private high-rise architectural statements plonked down in a residual, dysfunctional public realm. Not that some left-wing utopian vision would necessarily have done better – just take a look at the good old socialist Housing Commission of Victoria.

The Housing Commission High-Rise

Atherton Gardens in Fitzroy is one of a dozen HCV high-rise estates from the 1960s which still dominate the skyline of inner Melbourne. In common with Docklands their failure is reflected in, and exacerbated by, their failed public spaces. These estates are memorials to Le Corbusier, the self-promoting French architect who dreamed of ‘Radiant City’ – a forest of identical residential skyscrapers set in a sea of parkland, criss-crossed by freeways. The park setting was to be a boon, conferred on a deprived population by benevolent planners.

Writing at its zenith, Jane Jacobs turned this paternalism on its head: such city parks are, she said, deprived places upon which the boon of life may be conferred or withheld by their constituencies. The Atherton Gardens constituency has given its park setting the thumbs-down.



Surveyed in 2007, residents saw the estate’s external setting as a positive – mentioning public transport, community services, education, proximity to the city and shops. On the other hand the negatives: drugs, alcohol, noise, vandalism and graffiti – whose domain is the corridors, gardens, carparks and playgrounds which comprise the estate’s public places. The government’s response – ‘private property’ signs, more security guards and surveillance cameras.

But we can fix Atherton Gardens. There is no longer any political commitment to the social engineers of the 1960s, and Le Corbu himself has flown off to Radiant City in the sky. We have long recognised that the housing issue requires a more sophisticated policy response than simply herding people into the Housing Commission high-rise. We retain these estates only because they’re there. So what should we do with them?

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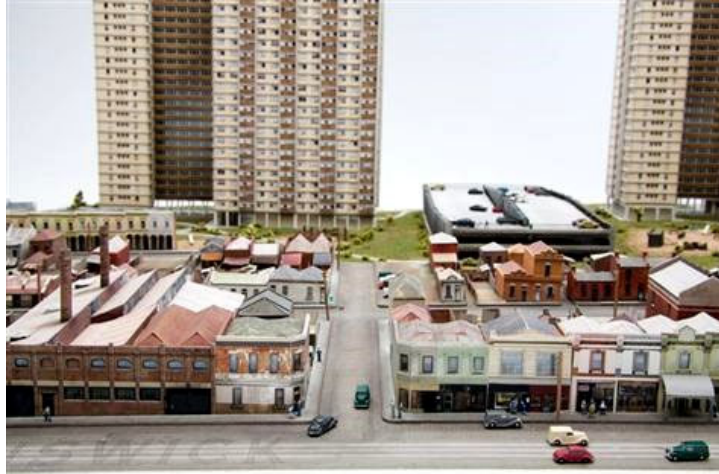
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Bring on the Visigoths

From *Terra Publica*, February 2011

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Our Calendar of Professional Development courses for September to November 2023



Melbourne Museum model. In the background, the Le-Corbusier inspired Towers in the Park; in the foreground, the pre-1960 Brunswick Street frontage awaiting demolition.

Continued ...

Public Spaces Gone Wrong ... from TP July-August 2009

In 2008 Melbourne University Architecture school set its masters students the task of re-imagining Atherton Gardens. Well-acquainted with the coffee shops and galleries of Brunswick and Gertrude Streets, the students knew that if their own professional antecedents had just left it alone, central Fitzroy would have regenerated anyway.



The Brookes Crescent action put an end to the Housing Commission's 'slum clearance' program.

Their responses to the task involved, in various combinations, demolition of the high-rise blocks, their retention and refurbishment, and the reinstatement of the surrounding low-rise milieu which had been destroyed: new apartments, studios, offices, workshops and retail spaces.

And interspersed within this low-rise milieu – public spaces that might actually work. Just imagine: public spaces of a scale, aspect, accessibility and diversity that they actually invite people to enjoy them.

At a time when government is desperately seeking to re-invigorate its Melbourne 2030 vision, Atherton Gardens should be elevated from *problem* to *solution*. No need to acquire the land – it's already in public ownership; no need for dispossession – residents could choose between their existing apartments and the newly reinstated low-rise. No need to retain the social ghetto; no need for new transport infrastructure – it's there on the doorstep.

Best of all, a re-built Atherton Gardens could provide a model for socially diversified, high-density inner Melbourne.

It could be a tangible response to the fear-driven social elitism and density aversion of Save Our Suburbs. It could redeem planners from the stain on their profession left by the Docklands.

If they had a mind to get it right (for once), they could forget about planning show-case buildings set within residual public space; they could plan instead the public spaces between the buildings.

Having fixed Atherton Gardens, how do we fix the Docklands? Sorry folks, it will be another 20 or 30 years before the private sector writes off its ill-advised investment and demands a taxpayer-funded makeover. ♦

The Public Land Consultancy acknowledges that our core work relates to the lands of Victoria's Traditional Owners. We promote recognition of Indigenous rights through study, policy and the law. And we support The Voice.

From *Terra Publica*,
February 2011

Bring On The VISIGOTHS

Why are cities in Australia so different from those in Europe? Here, we had no Visigoths to keep out (or Vandals or Vikings or other assorted barbarians). No need for city walls, gates, ramparts and moats.

We didn't need to squeeze ourselves into our urban environments, to maximize land efficiencies, to create the multiple-function public spaces which so typify and define European urban form – and hence European urban life. In America, Manhattan alone is a walled city – walled in by its encircling rivers – and it's Manhattan's public places that make it uniquely a quasi-European city.



Tango dancers, Las Ramblas, Barcelona

So what? Perhaps we don't want to be French, or Spanish, or Italian – or Manhattanian. Perhaps we're happy being suburban (*i.e.*, less than urban). But is this a happiness we can afford? Wallowing in the residual culture of *terra nullius* Australians continue to squander space as if it is an infinite resource; as if, like water, fuel, or food it will last forever. So wrong.

Melbourne will never become Copenhagen, or Milan, or Lyons – but we could improve our act. To date, our bleak high-rise apartment blocks and our pathetic efforts at 'medium density' detached housing have served only to tarnish the concept of urban (as against sub-urban) cities. Here's the bit we have yet to grasp: if Melbourne's liveability is to survive and flourish, it must be led by public land.

Public places should not be the residual negative bits left over between the private, 'positive' bits; they should be at the very heart of urban design. Let's look to Europe for some illustrations...

Las Ramblas is the main drag in Barcelona – but you could hardly call it a road. It's alive with all manner of street vendors and entertainers; you might even see the invisible man. Three factors in combination make it work: its physical form, its commerce (both monetary and social), and its governance regime, shaped by the *Ajuntament*, or council. Las Ramblas is the Sunday market on St Kilda Esplanade, writ large, and doing business twenty-four seven.



The Brunswick Centre, Bloomsbury

London's Brunswick Centre is, believe it or not, public housing. It always had architectural presence, but until recently, was commercially dead and socially ghettoised – an urban failure to equal the worst of Melbourne's Housing Commission legacy. Now, a collaboration of private and public investment has transformed it into a model of liveability, enlivening the whole precinct; the beneficiaries including its own council-subsidised tenants.



Neal's Yard, Covent Garden

Neal's Yard was an abandoned off-shoot of Covent Garden flower market, now recycled as London's Hippy Central. Why does it work? Our three themes again: physical form, commercial vitality and the right set of governance arrangements. Here, Melbourne measures up well – in the form of our CBD laneways.

Above all, it's population density that makes urban public places (and therefore cities) work. Barcelona is ten times as dense as Melbourne. Perhaps we need a pro-high density lobby group to counter Save our Suburbs. Let's call ourselves the Visigoths. ♦

Lunchtime Conversation
Tuesday 10 October 2023 12 noon to 12:45 pm
Road Deviations
To enrol for this Conversation [click here](#)

Professional Development, Oct –Nov 2023

NOTE: some presentations are 3 sessions, each of 2 hours duration;
others are 2 sessions, each of 3 hours duration

	Coastal Land Management <i>Presenter: Richard O'Byrne</i>	Tues 3 Oct, 10am – 12pm Wed 4 Oct, 10am – 12pm Thurs 5 Oct, 10am – 12pm
	Roads Governance <i>Presenter: David Gabriel-Jones</i>	Tues 3 Oct, 10am – 12pm Wed 4 Oct, 10am – 12pm Thurs 5 Oct, 10am – 12pm
	Land Law for Managers of Rivers And Riparian Land <i>Presenter: Jo Slijkerman</i>	Mon 16 Oct, 10.30am – 12.30pm Tues 17 Oct, 10.30am – 12.30pm Fri 20 Oct, 10.30am – 12.30pm
	Land Information and its Interpretation <i>Presenter: Robert Steel</i>	Tues 24 Oct, 10am – 1pm Wed 25 Oct, 10am – 1pm
	Statutory Approvals on Public Land <i>Presenter: Nick Sissons</i>	Tues 31 Oct, 10am – 1pm Wed 1 Nov, 10am – 1pm.
	Crown Land Governance <i>Presenter: David Gabriel-Jones</i>	Tues 14 Nov, 10am – 12pm Wed 15 Nov, 10am – 12pm Thurs 16 Nov, 10am – 12pm
	Land Law and Subdivisions <i>Presenter: Mark Bartley</i>	Tues 21 Nov, 10am – 1pm Wed 22 Nov, 10am – 1pm
	Leases and Licences of Public Land <i>Presenter: Richard O'Byrne</i>	Tues 28 Nov, 10am – 12pm Wed 29 Nov, 10am – 12pm Thurs 30 Nov, 10am – 12pm

Cost:
\$495 including GST, course
notes and certificate of
attendance

Accreditation: These courses
are eligible for CPD points for
lawyers, planners, valuers, and
FPET for surveyors.

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