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URBAN SYSTEMS

Tall Buildings in Melbourne: Challenging Policy Frameworks

Lyndsay Neilson

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a brief overview of the history of tall buildings in Melbourne, Australia, and discusses the policy context within which they have developed through various phases. Although the policy techniques have varied, I will argue that they share a common feature of being effectively reactionary in approach.

The need for a more specific design context approach is discussed. The antecedents to such an approach can be found in the 1985 Melbourne Strategy Plan and the 1991 Planning and Urban Design Guidelines; whereas the present Melbourne Planning Scheme has adopted a strict performance based approach that has tended to result in a reversion to a site by site reactionary approach.

Finally, I will discuss the characteristics of a possible design context lead approach and the precedents for this within the Southbank Strategy Plan (1999).

EARLY HISTORY

The 19th Century period of Melbourne's development was naturally characterised by low rise buildings, and the dominant character of the land form is evident in early paintings, where the two hills along Collins Street and the consequent valley along Swanston Street are clearly evident.



With the discovery of gold in the 1860's, the population and development accelerated, and by the 1880's Melbourne was booming – a period known as “Marvellous Melbourne”. It is pertinent to note that at this time Melbourne was one of the most confident and advanced cities in the world, adopting new technologies such as railways and electric light within a year or two of their introduction internationally, and developing buildings of international standard in terms of both scale and technology. Had this trend continued into the 20th century, Melbourne might well have been one of the first to develop very tall buildings.

As it turns out, some of the confidence within the Melbourne society was lost in the depression of the 1890's; and although it remained quick to adopt new technologies such as the hydraulic lift, the city would not seek to rival New York or Chicago as birthplace for the skyscraper.

Through the 1950's a height limit of 40m was imposed, based on the effective reach of fire brigade ladders. The introduction of alternative strategies including automatic sprinkler and alarm systems had led to the removal of similar restrictions in New York in the 1930's and in Sydney in 1957, but it would not be until 1968 that height limits for buildings in Melbourne would be lifted.

Even then, there was little policy discussion regarding the change, and it seems that the removal of height restrictions was largely in response to developer demand rather than an active policy interest in the tall building as a built form.

THE EARLY TALL BUILDINGS

With the removal of height restrictions from building regulations in 1968, a series of office developments well in excess of 40m commenced. Not surprisingly, the initial focus was to locate them where land values were highest and where views and outlook were available. For Melbourne, this was Collins Street, the location of some of the grandest of the Victorian era buildings. The towers were generally achieved by accumulating several sites and removing existing buildings.



The collection of buildings along Collins Street is evident in this image from around 1980.

By the 1970's, Victoria had introduced extensive heritage protection that identified and protected nominated buildings, however many lesser buildings that were lost, while not necessarily of high heritage significance, did provide a context for the significant buildings. A second grouping of buildings breaking the 40m level occurred along St Kilda Road, a broad tree lined boulevard that was flanked by stately mansions with generous garden setbacks. Planning controls protected the garden setbacks, so that the towers which are generally of lower height than those in the central business district also have garden settings.

Until recently there has been little pressure for tall buildings outside the CBD and St Kilda Road, as Melbourne continued to expand outwards with low density development. However since around 1985 there has been an increasing move towards consolidation and a focus on attributes such as Port Phillip Bay and the Docklands and Yarra river areas. It is becoming clear that a more effective policy framework is needed to guide the location and design of tall development generally, and that the experience within Melbourne's CBD is now relevant to many places.

TOWARDS A PRO-ACTIVE POLICY

The first urban design policies aimed at guiding the location of tall buildings in Melbourne appeared in the Melbourne Strategy Plan (1973). This proposed that tall buildings in Melbourne should be located to reinforce the natural geography, and identified two locations where height might be located, termed the "East End" and "West End". Several reasons or objectives are given for this policy, the most prominent being to reinforce the two main hills of Melbourne and to maintain views in and out of the city by restricting height around the perimeter of the CBD.

Development through the 1980's followed this principle and it was reinforced in planning guidelines including the 1985 Strategy Plan and the 1991 Planning and Urban Design Guidelines. A notable exception was the construction of the two slab towers on the river side of Flinders Street for the Gas and Fuel Corporation. The public dislike of these towers led to controls to protect

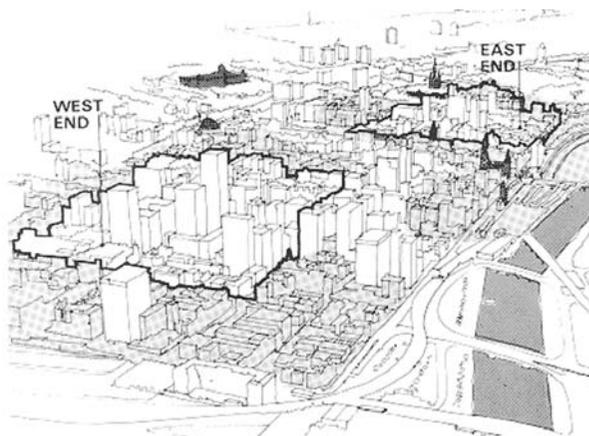


Illustration from the Melbourne Strategy Plan 1973, arguably the first formal encouragement for tall buildings in Australia.

Illustration from early 1980s clearly shows the “valley” reinforced by development on the two hills.



overshadowing of the river, and the eventual demolition of the towers in 1997 to make way for the Federation Square project, now under construction.

THE 1985 STRATEGIC PLAN

The City of Melbourne Strategic Plan (1985) began to provide much more detailed policy to attempt to integrate tall buildings into the city’s built fabric. While the notion of the two hills was retained, two additional concepts were introduced. Firstly, high rise development was encouraged around the underground rail loop, leading to the Melbourne Central Project which stands as an exception to the “valley” effect; and the recognition of the Southbank Precinct that had been identified in the State strategy “Framework for the Future” (1984) as an area for increased commercial and residential development as a partner to the CBD. In a sense, these two concepts were in competition with the East-West End concept.



This diagram from the 1985 Melbourne Strategy Plan indicates the 40m height limit area, and also indicates areas where active frontages may be required.

This image of 101 Collins Street shows the tower set back with a podium to address the street.



The 1985 strategy also proposed height limits of up to 40m for the “retail core” of the city, where the traditional fabric was most intact. This was done in order to maintain a variety of smaller tenancy opportunities and to reduce the upward pressure on rents, both of which were seen to reduce the viability of retail in the CBD. This period coincided with the growth of regional shopping centres in the middle suburbs.

The strategy also introduced requirements for active frontages on key pedestrian streets, and the concept of podium and tower in order to provide a reasonable context to older fabric, and retain a “human scale” for the street environment.

The strategy plan also set guidelines for setbacks; areas where the building line should be maintained to the street, and the podium form to provide a workable relationship between historic built form and the newly introduced towers.

The Central City Urban Design Guidelines (1991) built on this strategy and introduced a number of provisions to guide the design of tall buildings.

These included guidelines about the tops of buildings; further guidelines about tower spacing; and provision of active street edges to protect the street environments and overcome the negative effects of the “tower-in-park” model.

Introduced controls for protection of views and vistas; and encouraged the creation of new public spaces and arcade links to add to Melbourne’s already rich structure of pedestrian arcades and lanes.

The 1991 Guidelines were based on a plot ratio model adapted from the New York planning guidelines of the late 1960’s. This provided base level plot



This recent image from the Southbank area illustrated the earlier mid rise housing and two recent residential towers utilising podium treatments to moderate their scale at the street level.

ratios with bonuses, often to a factor of two that could be achieved by meeting the design objectives such as arcades and active frontages.

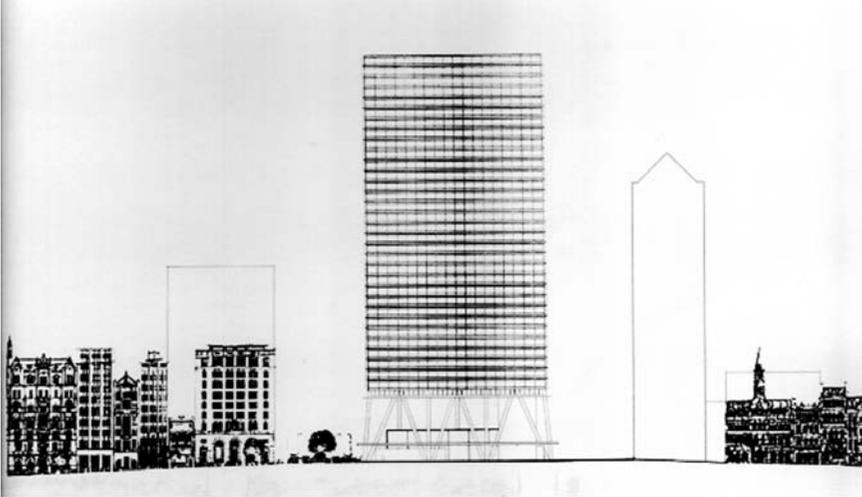
The “new format” Melbourne Planning Scheme introduced three years ago removed plot ratio controls and has moved to a fully performance-based format where design objectives are guided by policy alone. There are no bonuses now.

This has effectively provided greater encouragement for market-led solutions and with height limits now treated as part of policy rather than a control. In the absence of broader design policies, the result tends to be a site by site negotiation which presents a challenge for managing the built form overall.

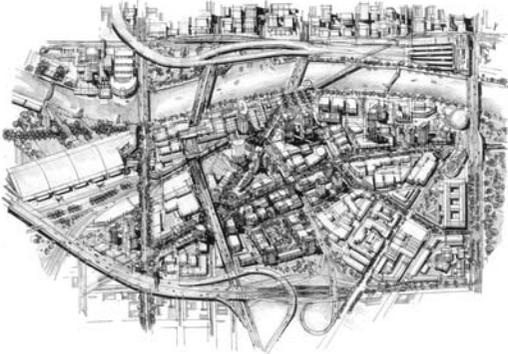
The Development of the Southbank precinct and later Melbourne’s Docklands encouraged taller buildings and more intensive development outside the city grid. Attempts were made to extend the grid into Docklands but with limited success.

A progressive easing of policy in recent years also allowed taller buildings along the Bay foreshore (for example Beacon Cove, Port Melbourne).

Southbank, Docklands, St Kilda Road, and Beacon Cove have all provided opportunities for the dispersal of taller buildings and ‘breaking’ of the original policy frameworks that located the tallest buildings on the two hills of Melbourne.

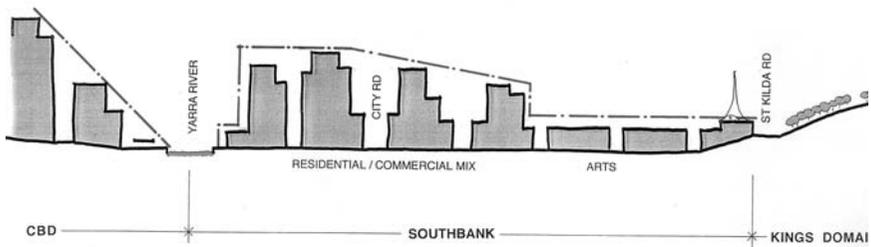


A recent proposal for a new tower over a former open space in Collins Street illustrates the challenge of inserting large tower forms into a more traditional scale environment.



SOUTHBANK

The Southbank Strategy (1999) reviews earlier strategies for the area and amongst other objectives, sets out to provide a design framework for towers in this precinct. The policy from the 1980s established a strong design strategy along the river corridor, and provided height exemptions for any residential development in the broader precinct. At the time, the main interest was in commercial buildings and Melbourne had very little history of apartment dwelling. The new strategy provides guidelines for tower spacing to ensure reasonable privacy between residential uses and maintain key views, and proposes detailed guidelines to vary the height of developments according to location.



PROPOSED SOUTHBANK BUILT FORM PROFILE
(FOLLOWING SOUTHBANK BOULEVARD ALIGNMENT)

Proposed built form profile from the Southbank Structure Plan 1999.

Guidelines also established design attributes for the pedestrian environment, and nominated landmark sites where taller development was expected, such as the development site that has now become the Eureka Development. Never-the-less, the Eureka proposal exceeded the predicted heights, and at 300m plus, will be the tallest building in Melbourne and it is claimed it will be the tallest residential tower in the world.



The Eureka Development located on a designated “landmark” site, will become the tallest building in Melbourne. (now under construction).

DOCKLANDS

Among the proposals for the renewal of the Docklands precinct a proposal for the world’s tallest building has been developed. This is still a potential project, although competing against a number of other bids to gain access to the site.



Proposed Grollo Tower in Docklands, Melbourne.

A tower of this scale presents real challenges not just in its wider impacts of shading and wind. In fact, the design panel assessing the proposal spent most of its time negotiating the conditions at the base of the tower, in order to achieve an urban environment that could provide the pedestrian friendly link between the CBD and the new waterfront.

CONCLUSION

Proposals of this kind represent a major challenge to the resolution of urban design principles for Melbourne. It also demands that we resolve our attitudes to the concept of taller buildings, as we enter the century of sustainability.

The policy history in Melbourne suggests we have only partly been successful in reacting to the tower building on a site by site basis. It could be argued that this is because the model that most contemporary tall buildings have sprung from remains the “tower in park” vision of the early modernists. Devices such as podia and required active frontages can moderate this, but the sheer size of the footprint of a contemporary tower makes it very difficult to integrate with traditional urban structures.

A preferable direction would be to establish an urban design vision for a precinct in terms of the desirable heights; massing; distribution of activities and open space; linkages and access; environmental sensitivities (eg places that should not be shaded) and so on; which would lead to more definite controls. The 1985 Melbourne Strategy Plan and subsequent Planning and Urban Design Guidelines (1991) provide a model for how detailed controls might work; whilst the Southbank Strategy (1999) provides a model for the development of a vision that takes into account both market aspirations; community policy objectives and the need to control environmental impacts.

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