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Analysis OCTOBER 2012

Response to Kevin O'Connor's Foundational Analysis of Melbourne's Planning and Development

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Kevin O'Connor has presented a searching and humane analysis of the recent past, present, and future story of Melbourne's development.

Furthermore, with his notion of the 'Five Melbournes', he has made an important imaginary leap which he has backed up with some very solid empirical research. It's now a question of how the new understanding can be taken forward, either by himself, or with others drawing on his work.

The quality of what we have heard is nothing less than I would expect from Kevin. (Hopefully, Kevin will find the time to give us a list of some of his more recent publications - reports, book chapters, and anything else that he has written.) I probably became aware from about the 1970s of the solid work he was doing in understanding Melbourne's growth patterns. Others may remember his series of carefully detailed reports when he was at the Monash University Geography Department. The occasional series was called *Monitoring Melbourne*, and each one usually received some coverage in the daily press.

At a later period, after he had ended a time at the former Ministry of Planning, Kevin told me that he was working on an extended thesis which he had entitled *Five Melbournes*. It was a theme that appealed to me, both because it had the potential to question prevailing thinking of what was a tired mindset about Melbourne - that is, 'the central/inner areas and the suburbs' - and because it brought back memories of an early 1970s politically aborted Town and Country Planning Board proposal to divide the metropolitan area into several (6 or so) sub-metropolitan planning areas, with decision authorities to match.

Kevin's talk tonight, and the subsequent discussion, has unpicked many threads. Too many of course to mention here. I would like though to take a step back and say I sense in the thinking today about city developments that there have emerged *two competing views of their future*.

One view is the prevailing Mainstream one, which is that we need to plan for a considerable expansion in population, a spate of central area functions based on rich R&D and commercial activity, and increasing densification of living space with a concentration of high-exposure entertainment and tourist hubs. And of course, according to this view, it's the job of urban planning to accommodate all this in physical settings. It's a high-spending, high-consumption view of the world with no apologies given, and of course, the significance of all this is played out in our media on a daily basis as we debate our reactions to potential very heavy foreign investment of real estate development.

OK - within this view, there are some variants – is the population growth to be accommodated by more or less suburban expansion? What are the differences about the extent of provision of rail versus road infrastructure? Do we have more or less environmental features in building construction? And so on. Just

last week, Richard Florida (author of the earlier book, *Creative Class*, wrote that the hi-techies were reversing their longstanding outward growth developments and returning to work in established urban centres. So, for him, and for Edward Glaeser with his *Triumph of the City*, we should embrace the fact that we are headed for high-living, high-tech, 'prosperity enclaves'.

(My note on the high-density debate, raised during discussion of Kevin's paper, follows at the end of this paper.)

The other view – a sharply competing one - is still being born, and cannot be articulated with as much clarity as the mainstream position. However, some things that can be said about it include that it sees the mainstream view as based on inadequate perception of the future; for this other view, the natural world has to find increased immediacy in our lives. Speaking of economic futures, it sees the need to abandon the 'economic growth forever' ideology that underpins mainstream activity and instead maintains that 'you can't have economic growth forever on a finite planet'.

Typically, we don't as yet see media discussion of this approach, but nevertheless academically and in many low-key community and local ways there now is emerging a very perceptible challenge to the Mainstream economic agenda. I refer to foundational positions such as are expressed in the literature of *Steady-State Economics* (Herman Daly, US, and Geoff Mosley, Aust); De-growth proposals, (for example, a major international conference in Venice, Sept., 2012); 'Simpler Way' analyses (Ted Trainer); Simplicity Collective (Samuel Alexander); *Prosperity without Growth* (Tim Jackson, UK); World Economics Association/New Economics discussions.

Richard Heinberg has recently completed a speaking tour of Australia, promoting the theme 'the end of growth'; Paul Gilding's book anticipates *The Great Disruption* – see paulgilding@me.com; Graham Turner (CSIRO) has updated the 1972 analysis of the 'Limits to Growth' Report, (Club of Rome), and at 2010, 40 years later, finds the BAU scenario aligns well with the original report: *'On this rather aggregate perspective, it looks compelling that collapse – quite possibly imminent collapse – is playing out as modelled.' (http://www.gaia-online.net/).* Lester Brown (Earth Policy Institute), speaking globally, thinks that 'the overriding threats to this century are climate change, population growth, spreading water shortages and rising food prices.

I'm not specifically adopting any of these positions here but simply asking people to give them serious thought. Their substantial weight is compelling. Graham Turner for one concludes 'from a rational risk-based perspective, that planning for a collapsing global system could be even more important than trying to avoid collapse.' In other words, there's a need consciously to build in 'resilience' and 'adaptation', disaster-preparedness/recovery and infrastructure assessments (against fire storms, sea-level rise, peak oil, cascading economic – environment, environment –economic events) and so on. (PMJ Fisher – 'Disaster Recovery: Critical Infrastructures: Building Back or Doing it Differently?')

Following on from these critical (second view of planetary and urban futures), fortunately, we do have at a local level, some notable initiatives. Thus, in many places, there's an emphasis on adjusting to the built environment as we have it now – 'retrofitting the suburbs', if you like. Some have taken these second view macro-positions into localisation initiatives such as Transition Towns, Sustainability Streets, community gardens, etc., where grass-roots movements are meeting with surprisingly strong local support.

I said before that these two views of urban futures were competing ones. And I believe just that. I understand that practitioners may find themselves having to give advice within the first range of choices. But I firmly believe that in the end, society has to choose one or the other direction.

Kevin's thoughts penetrate into both views of how we look at Melbourne's – and other cities' – futures, and that's why I consider them foundational. They have deep-seated lessons for us all and for that I'm sure we are most grateful.

My personal view is that his analysis could form a basis for the second competing position that I've outlined above. For me, the second view of our cities' futures speaks to us not only of the pragmatics of different urban design solutions, but more basically of different levels of spiritual awareness, e.g., returning to the virtues of frugal living, and so on – but that's another story. Meanwhile, I would like to see the discussion so capably initiated by Kevin taken further so that we achieve a broader interlocking regional and local emphasis in the way we plan for the future.

So, some early general questions

How might the approach Kevin has outlined be advanced, whether in governance, or academically, or by NGO's or other local groups?

Does the notion of sub-metro cities lend itself to reinforcement of Melbourne's structural green spaces – rivers, creeks (buried or otherwise), major parklands? A lot of this work has been done in the past. It would be a valuable exercise to overlay maps of green space so that they become structural elements in the sub-metro sectors?

Footnote to the increased high-density debate

A personal recollection of mine regarding this debate is of meetings between State and federal planning officials in the late 1970s and early 1980s at which there was widespread agreement that *medium-density* housing should be encouraged, and that high-rise apartments were considered undesirable. Memories of the Housing Commission flats of the post-war era were fresh in people's minds. However, it was almost instantaneous that any notion of well-designed medium-rise flats, surrounded by common gardens, close to public transport was quickly abandoned by a development industry that was either incapable of putting such designs on the table, or just felt they would not be profitable enough.

Applications for high-rise apartments started to pop up everywhere and were gradually approved with simplistic arguments about the need to 'go up, rather than out', and so on. Further, in appealing for justification for high-density development, its proponents sought comfort in pointing out the phase of 'McMansions' that had swamped the 'outer suburbs', not recognising that they were a product of several coalescing happenings: permission through local regulatory provisions for houses to be built on smaller blocks, a period of high-income growth and consumption mania, a loss of some leading architectural building firms which would never have countenanced such poor quality construction, little understanding of sustainable building techniques. (Oversized houses are now existing, and their future adaptation is an issue to be faced – but that is another story.)

The situation is now precarious for any full-scale building programs of medium-density, medium-rise housing. Some determined individuals will persist with trying to establish these compact settings. But cashed-up investors, Australian and foreign, pressing for high-rise, high-density residential developments; governments eager to attract their money to accommodate economic and population growth (we've seen governments all round the country lie down before the mining juggernaut and allow the degradation of agricultural land and town life in just this mindset); architect institutes offering awards to designers achieving larger and larger buildings on smaller and smaller sites; tales of massive city-building in China that make any opposition here to such thinking seem parochial (yet when I visited China in 1978, there was no doubt that the traditional life-style was lived in small community enclaves around enclosed spaces, and when as visitors we pointed out some very uninviting high-rise apartments near Beijing, our guides gave us a dismissive reply: 'They were built by the Russians'!

Further, a plethora of high-rise apartments are now being sold as suitable for families with children, as it's said that people are happy to move with their children into them. The absence of access to garden or outdoor space is brushed off with simplistic notions that parks or rooftop gardens are provided. But closer examination of many of these proposed or built places – certainly the lower-cost ones - show poor access to these facilities, or in the hands of contractor gardeners, where the residents 'don't get their hands dirty'. This is hardly leading to a situation described by the late Thomas Berry to meet the challenge for people (and children) to have 'the immediacy of experience' with the 'surrounding natural community in which we belong…' (*The Sacred Universe*).

The temptation surely will be for people, and especially children, where there is no easy/ready access to green space activities, to fall back on the magnetic attractions of screen-based activities, and the brain-changing effects now becoming measurable by neuro-scientists. This is not a potential outcome that can be brushed aside in the name of investor enticement and accommodating unrestrained population growth.