

***“Plan Melbourne and coping with growth”***  
**A critical presentation by Professor Gleeson**

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**See <http://www.sustainable.unimelb.edu.au>**

Thank you very much for inviting me to come and talk to you ...

As an urbanist I'd like to pay tribute to you all for devoting your personal and perhaps your professional time to the cause of making Melbourne a sustainable and liveable city. I am originally from Melbourne ... but I've been away for twenty years, working in the states and overseas. I have been back every now and then ... but I had not seen Melbourne for a while before I came back. Some of these reflections are based on personal concern as well as my professional observations about what's happening.

I think it's a regrettable fact of our times that too much of the work we do, the community and the professions, for urban improvement, is now defensive. It is a rear guard battle too often against forces and interests that discount the ideals of liveability, equity and sustainability, which I think are good guiding urban ideals ...

I refer particularly to the force of unmanaged population growth and I want to be clear that I am not against growth, but I will talk about the growth model that's got its hand round our necks. The unmanaged population and development growth and the interests that tell us simultaneously that: we must have this growth; but we can't afford it; we can't pay for it; we can't provide the social and physical infrastructure that's necessary to maintain that growth sensibly and equitably. And therefore as a consequence we can't maintain the amenity, equality, beauty and functionality in the city, why we love it, and why it's been justly famous. This kind of view, unmanaged growth view can take other tones, different kinds of thoughtlessness, I think, it is a kind of thoughtlessness, for example, the idea and the kind of assumption of Melbourne's liveability, to use that term, is somehow like a magic pudding, we can just keep drawing from without diminishing, what I call the cut and come again image.

There exists in my observation a pretty steadfast coalition of corporate and institutional interests that maintain this paradox of un-costed growth, not only in Melbourne, and in the face of its manifest and I think increasingly serious failures. I don't think it is a failing in the current political cycle, I'm going to stay right out of politics, which is about to turn again, but I do think this entrenched problem is worse than it's ever been ...

Crisis is an overused term in public debates, often, but I feel forced to use it when I describe the state ... of the planning system in Melbourne. It's simultaneously, it's not completely gutted, it's both potent and impotent ... Its processes of moderation are being abused in quite potent ways to favour power over the public interest, but at the same time many of its structures are weak and ineffectual. So in a time of unprecedented growth and also of grave environmental crisis, this crisis is very worrying indeed.

Perversely, the planning system, and this is worth thinking about, has been twisted to violate its very core and historical and founding rationale, which is to control urban development in the public interest, and to provide for the needs of urban development and growth, through timely provision of social and physical infrastructure - Town planning 101, that we would have learnt some time ago. But that basic rationale, that essentially planning exists to correct for market failure, that basic rationale has been tipped on its head in the planning system and it is now deployed as an instrument of economic development. I think that is a category error misunderstanding of what the planning system is about.

This view has held sway before, it's not an uncommon failing actually ... but history and observation show that when this view holds sway, which it does here, it generally promotes chaos, inequity and dysfunction as well as causing public anxiety.

But let me underline and emphasise without ambiguity that I do not make a partisan political point. The uncosted growth model has been around a long time. The AAA Ratings God has reigned for a long time. There has been a bit of what I think of as a spring carnival of freewheeling growth and it has been supported by bipartisan political consensus that displaced an earlier ethos of growth supported by public endeavor and timely provision. I've frequently meet urban professionals who are utterly dismayed by the state of the system and what is held to be the planning system these days ... I'm amazed by how many retired road engineers have written to me privately to oppose the East-West Link, saying it's not necessary, it shouldn't be built ...

I am not opposed to growth but the question is always what sort of growth do we want? The model they're enforcing is depriving and impoverishing, in my view, a growth that actually shrinks. The growth, this same growth, this model, trumpets Melbourne's much heralded livability. Economists the last couple of years are ranking us as number one. Let's leave aside some of the concerns one can have about those liveability rankings and tables and things.

But the un-costed growth model is clearly drawing down the long legacy of good planning and living in Melbourne. It is like squandering an inheritance. So considerable and rich in fact is this heritage in Melbourne that it'll take some time to dissipate. I think the best metaphor that I could come up with, was a giant wedding cake that's taking a couple of generations to consume. It is certainly not a magic pudding.

Melbourne's current and I observe diminishing, in many areas, liveability, is the product of a long century of good governance and planning that followed the speculative main booms of the 1880s in this city, which ended so disastrously for this city. Our memories are short, we've forgotten just how terrible chaos and injury and pain those land booms ended in. It coincided also with a drought, the environment, nature, in the early 1890s.

And at the end of that boom-bust cycle, the bust was a really terrible for the city and for its citizens. As, I would say, all laissez-faire attempts at letting cities grow wildly are. It should be a cautionary tale for us because I think we are in a different, in some ways in a grip of another kind of boom-bust cycle mentality and hands-off-the-wheel governance. History shows us that a kind of madness often of grips enterprise and ambition right on the eve of a bust or the fall of an order. ... I was reading the other day about the trend of selling off the plan before planning permission has even been sought. This is going on in Asian cities, for example, and investors. That seems to be ... the level of folly that precedes a fall in my view. System integrity has shrunk, has sunk so low, it seems, just as feverish expectations have soared. This has to be a worrying sight.

In the chaotic and destructive wake of the 1880s boom the MMBW was established in 1891 to provide for growth in a different way: to accept and to value growth but to cost and provide for it in a different way through sound, de-politicised planning and through the timely provision of infrastructure. Not everything it did was perfect but its ultimate legacy over a century of existence was arguably a very powerful one. This legacy did much to contribute to the liveability that we're now drawing down from at an alarming rate.

That we remain liveable at least in some assessments compared to other world cities is not at testament to our current I think too-often chaotic un-costed approach to planning and growth. It is quite the reverse. It testifies actually to the enormous human and environmental wealth that can be accumulated that through a long steady period of good planning, if we wish it ...

At the time I was graduating with my planning degree from the University of Melbourne in the mid 1980s, there was a sense that broadly the MMBW had run its course. Whatever you think about those arguments, there was little enthusiasm for what was perceived as MMBW's rather authoritarian, technocratic approach to planning. It had become quite inflexible and unable to accommodate the need for fundamental change as the growth model – a growth model that served us very well. The motorcar served us extremely well – but you know, everything for a time, and you know, it's been obvious now for a long time that we can't continue down the road, the road literally, of mass motorisation, environmentally, socially, and physically in our cities. We need a new model. Cities have to evolve ...

There is a sense of *déjà vu* .... In the 1970s citizen action like yours emerged to oppose the monoliths of road building and soulless redevelopment to push back against dictatorial over-inflexible governance. Now it seems ... like citizen action is coming from a different point now, which is to serve the public interests in what seems to be a vacuum of not too much governance, but not enough, to push back against freewheeling growth and the inequities and injuries that it produces.

But it also has to counter another kind of vacuum that is really disturbing to come back and see, the rampant culture of secrecy and non-disclosure in our development system, of favoured but clandestine access to decision makers. This almost always signals to me that something is afoot that runs counter to the public interest. This shadow culture seems to run through the entire planning infrastructure system, from the secrecy surrounding the East-West Link business case, to the perception of - and I make no direct accusations - but the perception of favoured and unsolicited access to ministers and decision makers.

Now at some point, if mindless growth continues, we will lose the crown of liveability, perhaps when the 90 or so recently approved towers, if they are built, are built in the CBD. It would be an interesting exercise for The Age to do a visualisation of the city with the towers and put it on the front page and let people have a little think about what that's going to look like. Or if the East-West Link destroys the amenity and heritage of our inner suburbs, cements us into car dependency that other cities are abandoning. And what of the destruction of Royal Park? What other city in the world would go and destroy their central park?

Consider also, the surge of social division and anguish from those losing out in Melbourne's growth struggle. There are winners and losers. I've been back here for nearly two years now and it's very interesting - visitors from out of state, the people coming back here are really shocked by the amount of homelessness in the CBD and the city and the sense of social distress. So we have the underside of growth as well, the people losing out.

For the first time, in our history, we need an army to guard us on the trains. Now that's seen as a good thing but I don't think it's a good thing at all. I mean I understand why we need to have them and I've been in situations where I've felt more secure about them being round, but what does that signal? Essentially, the militarisation of the public realm?

The un-costed growth model, in a sense, is full of contradiction and I think venal intention. It is damaging our beautiful city. We've witnessed the relentless damage of the CBD, the dog-box towers that damage the environment and amenity. Density can be a good thing but it can also be a very damaging thing if it's produced through market driven compaction. We're forced to acknowledge the relentless march of vertical sprawl. The growth model is depleting. It's also irresponsible. What's responsible about record population growth in Melbourne? What's responsible about welcoming new citizens into a context of declining quality of life?

All this relentless growth and yet housing affordability is at crisis point. We are told the solution is yet more barnstorming low-rent growth - let the market rip and it'll produce affordable housing. Well, it will not. We have to acknowledge that housing quality and affordability, two major areas of human need, are major areas of market failure, if we look at history. I am not arguing against markets. But free markets, will not produce, will not house us in acceptable ways. We need strategies and investments in place to shape and supplement the mainstream, and also to dampen speculation that thrives in freewheeling growth, and speculation is so destructive to amenity, affordability, and equity. What is responsible about the stubborn inaction on environmental, economic and social threats?

One of Europe's most important intellectuals who I doubt has ever had much to say about Australia, recently spoke about what he called the "Australian syndrome" in a widely discussed public lecture he gave in Copenhagen. He described the Australian national disorder as "voluntarily sleepwalking towards catastrophe". He was thinking about our national approach on climate change. But I think you can make that kind of observation about what we're doing to Melbourne in some ways.

Plan Melbourne, the new plan for Melbourne has some strengths but it also has some serious deficiencies and many people have put that on the record.

It does nothing to prepare us for climate change. I work with Climate Scientists and the like at Melbourne University. They are showing us that Melbourne's climate is shifting. Many people who have been gardening for a long time know that we have rainfall depletion. We have more heat extremes and the like and we are going to have more of that.

Plan Melbourne, quite amazingly, doesn't really acknowledge that at all, in fact it dismisses it. It says: "our climate is constantly changing due to a wide range of human and natural factors" This is a way of brushing it off that is truly reckless and unacceptable. The planning system is ignoring the weight of scientific evidence, incredible stuff we could have access to.

The National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, the CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Universities, are producing a lot of technical assessments about what is going on and what we can expect. A study done for the Commonwealth looking at our cities and up to 2050 and the number of heat related deaths we can expect ... we have plenty of technical assessment of what is going on but planning seems to be in another parallel universe ignoring all this.

We have some really important work at Monash University ... it reverses some of our notions about sustainability. High-density inner city areas are actually more dangerous than others suburban areas in heat stress situations. That makes some sense, it's not an argument against high density but its saying we have to be mindful of the fact that because of the urban heat island effect and the way that works, our understanding of the science of that, by building these very poorly designed and constructed dog box tower landscapes, we are leaving those people vulnerable to climate change shifting.

We have had reports for the commonwealth saying that we need planning frameworks to respond and take this up, some years ago, but we aren't doing anything about this.

We have to prepare the city to make it more resilient. We can make it more resilient if we are more purposeful about that. I read with dismay the report yesterday that there's now a proposal to possibly get rid of the market gardens in Werribee, which was set up under the earlier careful planning regime. They are fed with recycled water from the sewer. It is marvelous, it provides 10% of the vegetables for the state and there's now a proposal to put a port development there! We are going in the opposite direction to where we need to go. Not only are we standing still, we are actually going towards a much riskier form of development.

The Metropolitan Planning Authority is a start, it is a recognition that we've had a vacuum since the MMBW. But it needs a lot of strengthening. It needs local government involvement, which it doesn't have now. That was one of the benefits of the MMBW, it drifted off in the last few years, but it always had local government representation, which kept local issues at the front, preventing it from becoming monolithic though there was that assessment of it in the end. But the MPA is a start, a tick for that, but it needs a big overhaul, it needs to be truly independent, and it needs to have a proper planning and delivery powers. It needs to redo Plan Melbourne and take on things like climate change. But it must not become a monolith, in fact move in the other direction, it needs more formal representation and participation from the local level.

There are also some great things which are going on but which aren't being acknowledged or supported in the state or metropolitan planning system. Melbourne City Council is doing great things with the tree cover, vegetation work they're doing, they're trying to do good things in many ways being undermined actually by the planning system. You have to have some sympathy for them with that call in power by the Planning Minister, where everything is automatically [decided by the Minister] and all the perversities we're seeing coming from that.

Other local municipalities are struggling in doing good things with very limited resources.

So to the book “**Melbourne – What Next?**”

**[available as a free download at:**

**[http://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/Melbourne\\_What-Next.pdf](http://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/Melbourne_What-Next.pdf)**]

There was a forum, a different kind of professional community forum that had a series of big discussions in Deakin Edge, which led up to the creation of this book, which I helped to edit, which has a series of public statements, everyone from the Lord Mayor to the head of the Salvation Army, and also academics and chapters and analyses. It is a fascinating compendium, I recommend, it, you can download it for free, doesn't cost you a cent! It's on Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute's website, it's a really nice comprehensive, up to date study. There's a really good chapter in there from David Karoly, the world recognised climate scientist on what is happening to Melbourne's climate.

We want to do more of that, and try to create some means and mechanisms for the community to be able to discuss and then record and access these things for free. We've had over 5000 downloads of that already, which is pretty significant ...

Just to conclude, one mindset that we have to let go of is this obsession with the AAA rating, which is used to justify the underspend and the chronic under-provision of social and physical infrastructure, which then ends up costing us far more down the line. If we'd been more like a sensible household, what house runs its finances in that way? If we'd provided for it early on.

As Kenneth Davidson in *The Age* often says, that AAA rating is simply not worth the marginal benefit it gives us in the discounting of our loan repayments. If we were to go down a notch or two, we would be much better off for it and ultimately pay less for the repair work we're having to do, socially and physically and to the environment. That obsession has to go, although I don't advocate building up debt and being irresponsible by any means.

At the moment the Commonwealth, the Federal Government, has put its head back in the sand ... that's unacceptable in an urban nation. We need the Commonwealth back at the table and supporting the cities, helping us to manage growth sensibly. It is the one with all the levers. It is the one driving the population growth rate at the moment. It is absolutely not good enough for it to say well, states and cities, you're on your own. It's unacceptable for it to say, we'll make the decisions and we'll stoke the growth but you're on your own.

I don't know what'll cause change. We have an election, I don't know whether we'll have any significant change. My fear is that it'll take some major event like a major loss of life during a heat wave extreme to start to shatter that mindset, to realize that this can't go on, the freewheeling.

Everyday I walk past the CBD sites and see where the people were killed by the wall falling down. I make no link, but it's a metaphor for something that's gone really wrong. That terrible site that was cleared before I left Melbourne and it's still a bloody bomb site.

I applaud the work of this group and commend also the advocacy of this network.

Some of you may remember Paul Mees, who died last year, a very close friend of mine. He was a national and indeed international figure. Sir Peter Hall, a great man of planning also just died, he was a great admirer of Paul. We're launching this book "**The Public City**", published by Melbourne University press on the 4th of December. It has a really good collection of essays that bring us back and try to remind us that there used to be a different view of the city, the public city that really was about the public interest.

There's Paul floating above the city [in the image on the slide]. Bruce Petty contributed the cover. And I commend it to you.

**"The Public City - Essays in Honour of Paul Mees" is available at:**  
<https://www.mup.com.au/items/154962>