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URBAN CONSERVATION

The urban conservation strategic objectives include encouraging continued occupation and maintenance of buildings of architectural or historic significance and providing for new development compatible with them.

15.1 What is Urban Conservation

Urban conservation is concerned with those parts of the built environment that are of architectural or historic significance. This includes buildings (individually or in groups), localities (streets, blocks, environments or precincts), special gardens or landscapes, and other structures.

Conservation does not mean preservation of buildings, localities or other features for all time. Only a few buildings are so highly significant that they should be retained in a wholly original form. Many more buildings of character can be retained if they are adapted to allow continued economic occupation. This may mean a changed form of their original use or an entirely new use and this is emphasised in the Board's strategy. Lack of maintenance is a major reason for the loss of many worthwhile older buildings. Their continued occupation ensures that they are maintained in a reasonable condition. The Metropolitan Planning Scheme already allows some flexibility in the use of buildings of architectural or historic importance.

15.2 Localities and Buildings

Buildings, groups of buildings, localities and other urban features worthy of conservation may be selected by various criteria.

Architectural or historic merit are fairly obvious ones. Others include style, social significance, association with important people or groups, function, geographical

significance, uniqueness of character, originality and street character. Buildings may have no special visual appeal but be worthy of conservation for other reasons.

Conservation of localities is appropriate in cases where several buildings are worthy of conservation not so much for their individual merit as for the contribution they make to the character of the locality. Changes to buildings in such localities should be carefully considered, to ensure that this will enhance rather than detract from the area. New buildings should be designed to be compatible with the established character of the area.

15.3 Importance to the Community

Urban conservation is important to the community in terms of savings (in both money and energy) in the re-use of older buildings as opposed to the construction of equivalent new structures.

The older part of the building stock is generally a reflection of gradual alterations made to enable buildings to meet the changing needs of their owners and occupants and the strategy seeks to encourage this process of adaptive re-use.



Overseas estimates of the costs involved in adaptive conservation of older buildings for new uses indicate savings of up to 50 percent on the cost of new structures. Restoration of older buildings tends to be labour intensive rather than materials intensive and some restoration projects help preserve trades and skills that might otherwise be lost.

Urban conservation can have the important social and economic benefit of reviving depressed commercial areas. It encourages an inflow of higher income residents with a greater disposable income. New shops develop in the local commercial centre to cater for these people, and the general amenity begins to improve. People from a wider radius come there to shop, to eat, or just to look. Tourists too are attracted to urban conservation projects such as The Jam Factory and Gordon House.



One aspect of urban conservation to be kept in mind is its potential effect on the availability of low cost housing. The inner suburbs have been important in providing a pool of relatively cheap housing, both rental and owner-occupied, yet these areas are amongst those most likely to attract urban conservation projects. In the process that has become known as 'gentrification', relatively affluent people move into inner suburban housing and rehabilitate it. The process tends to snowball, property values and rents rise steadily, and rental accommodation is sold to owner-occupiers. The process forces out the less affluent people who previously lived in the area. The process may have merits in urban conservation terms, but it can be very difficult for those people who are displaced.

As well as the economic benefits already described, urban conservation offers to the people of Melbourne a range of social benefits. It helps us establish and recognise our national identity - 'when we keep things from our past, we retain the essence of what gives Australia its individuality'. Melbourne is internationally recognised as one of the world's great cities of the Victorian age in architectural terms.

People are undoubtedly attracted to urban conservation areas by their human scale and aesthetic appeal. In the South Melbourne Conservation (Social Impact) Study, a substantial number of people gave answers that indicated aesthetic factors as being important in their decision to move to the area.

Urban conservation provides people with a physical and social record of how their city developed into what it is today. Recognition of the qualities of urban conservation areas may help acceptance of newer forms of building. Terrace housing, for instance, provides low-rise medium-density housing, for which there is a current need.

