



## We need to talk about legacy

By Andrew Hoyne, Principal and Creative Director, Hoyne

*A short rant on the role developers, councils and the general public play (or avoid) when it comes to shaping our future.*

*Life may be about the now but, if you ask me, that concept belongs mainly in the yoga studio. Out in property development and infrastructure land life should be just as much about tomorrow. Too often I see lacklustre or even detrimental development evolve simply because everyone involved was too focused on present realities to consider future legacies.*

Property development – the addition of buildings and infrastructure to our communities and landscapes – is an inherently risky business. People risk money and professional reputations. Because of this there is a tendency to make choices based on ease, speed and – worst of all – fear.

Despite strong arguments about how innovation can deliver better economic and social outcomes, some developers are tempted to replicate what has been done before, as long as that previous incarnation turned a dollar in the short term. Long-term results – social and economic – do not come into it. This explains the proliferation of towers by some second-rate developers that I find so depressing.

Private developers are not the only culprits here. Local councils also are very much at fault. There is a television program on Australian screens called Utopia. It is supposed to be a satirical comedy about the smoke and mirrors behind government departments and what they love to call ‘nation building’.

I struggle to see the funny side; it’s all too distressing – and uncomfortably accurate.

To be fair, councils are not developers, they’re bureaucrats. They’re people trying to meet the needs of an unwieldy electorate and, generally speaking, this does not lend itself to progressive thinking.

Sadly, too many local councils have the attitude that they’re not the Sydney CBD or Manhattan or Paris so they can never do anything amazing. As a result they fall back on what’s been done, locally, in the past. What they eventually deliver is based on 20-year-old community requests, not what the community will actually need in 20 years to come. The result is replication, rarely innovation.

On page 98 of *The Place Economy*, Leigh Gallagher says this kind of replication in her home country, the US, is falling out of favour. Families, in particular, are voting with their greenbacks for new modes of housing and communities. Developers are responding and innovating to compete. The new approach

is becoming the new standard. We hope.

A combination of over-cautiousness and narrow vision seems to drive much of the poor decision-making – and therefore the results – we see in Australian development. Even when you outline the opportunity that exists in terms of greater economic returns and meaningful legacy, if just a bit more time and thought is applied to planning and innovation, the message falls on deaf ears. It’s frustrating because the results could exceed the expectations of investors and voters alike.

Time is the second most important word to introduce to this discussion. If I had a dollar for every time a private developer or a council representative mentioned timelines and deadlines as an excuse for unimaginative, undercooked or ill-advised decisions (or lack thereof) I would have enough cash to build a few mansions or upgrade a train station myself. ➤

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Companies are often risking a lot of money (their own or shareholders) when embarking on new projects. Often they’ve purchased large and/or expensive tracts of land and need to manage funding costs, and require financial returns as soon as possible. This means that, bizarrely, timings are batted back as the most common argument for bland or inadequate planning and implementation. Even when you explain, in a fully substantiated manner, that this other approach may take a bit longer but will achieve much better outcomes with more lucrative profit potential, you get shown the door, or at least a long-suffering smile.

With government and councils, of course, it’s all about answering to the people and being seen to meet mandated timelines. These timelines can be wildly impractical or illogical, even fantastical. Administrative staff in an office somewhere may have jotted them down from the minutes of a meeting and they become set in stone. A culture has

developed where challenge is high treason.

When a new timeframe or deadline is announced, a new press release goes out and a new photo opportunity is created. Governments love making announcements. Out pops a politician in a hardhat and ‘high vis’ gear, the cameras go snap and everyone moves on to the next project. The deadline – of course – is not met. The project goes onto the back burner, a new team is voted in, the project becomes a hot topic again, a new deadline is put in place (by a new secretary) and out goes the press release. Rinse, wash, repeat.

Just ask anyone living in Queensland and dreaming of the Brisbane Cross River Rail Project (former premier Peter Beattie identified the need for something like this back in 2008 and the 2016 federal election campaign saw the subject revived). Just ask the people living in Melbourne’s booming west. Type the words ‘Melton train line electrification’ into Google and see what comes up!

The people – the voters – can be their

own worst enemies. That’s why forward-thinking, imaginative development professionals (in the private and public sectors) need to do the thinking on their behalf, and then the convincing.

At heart we are self-centred beasts. Humans like comfy lives and easy, painless solutions, particularly ones that don’t cost too much money. Sure I know a new park, a new university, an Olympic-standard swimming pool and a train station upgrade would be great in my area, but the construction and trucks are going to be in and around my local streets for the next three years. I can’t bear the inconvenience. If I have the time to stand up, speak up and get my message into the best-placed ear, should I ruin this kind of progress for future residents? Because I’m paying rates now should I have the power to punish the generations who move into this neighbourhood in the future?

Not everything is so dire. Great developments are taking place in Australia and overseas. Many of them are celebrated in this book. Smart people

and great ideas are cutting through the mediocrity.

Internationally, one of my favourite developers is Sweden’s Oscar Properties. This company is my touchstone whenever I’m feeling down. I take a virtual tour of their world ([www.oscarproperties.com](http://www.oscarproperties.com)) and feel excited. Oscar’s work is stylish, contemporary and progressive; it makes me realise there is commercial opportunity in regenerating old buildings, as well as a substantial market for premium residential product.

On the local front, companies such as Cornerstone and Frasers Property continue to lift the bar and innovate. They think in the long term and persist in adding new and crafted elements to their projects to enhance day-to-day living for immediate residents and also share positive impacts with the surrounding areas. The critical and financial performance of projects such as Holt and Hart, Casba, Cleveland and Co, Putney Hill, Lumiere and Central Park is the ultimate proof. — ●