

Planning rules try to stop us making the same mistakes twice

TASMANIA, and in particular Hobart, is currently in the midst of some dramatic changes to the way our cities and towns are rebuilt and used.

These changes can be directly linked to the new statewide planning scheme as well as the associated political intent that is driving an agenda directed towards the building development and assessment process.

Two issues in particular stand out as potentially “game changing”. These are the use by developers of the discretionary capacity of

We should be worried when there is a risk of seeing heritage values damaged by bad development, says **Garry Forward**

planning schemes to gain approval for buildings that are out of scale and context with their surroundings, and the impact of short-stay visitor accommodation on the fabric of our residential areas.

Both of these could have an enormous impact on the historic fabric of Hobart, a city

renowned for its charismatic qualities based around small scale 19th century buildings and streetscapes.

Having spent a professional lifetime fighting for the appropriate recognition of our built heritage, I along with many others find this a very disturbing situation.

Over a generation from the 1960s we have progressed from having the then, newly formed National Trust, as the only collective voice for conservation.

At that time there were no planning schemes aimed at heritage values and there was no state or federal legislation to recognise and conserve our built heritage.

The Battery Point Planning Scheme initiated in the 1960s was effectively triggered by the demolition of historic buildings to make way for flats.

The rise of Empress Towers

was perhaps the watershed event.

In Battery Point the issue was not only the desire to save irreplaceable historic buildings but also to reverse the process of changing houses into multiple tenancies with the consequential dilution of a permanent community.

Hobart at large only moved to include the recognition of built heritage, both single buildings and significant clusters called “conservation areas”, in a study done in 1979.

This too was triggered by pressures on the inner city for demolition and

redevelopment resulting in the loss of many significant buildings, especially in Macquarie Street.

The next watershed was the International Hotel now the Grand Chancellor.

This development triggered such a public reaction to its inappropriate scale and context that a new special planning scheme was written just for Sullivans Cove.

While there are other examples, what is abundantly evident from these “watershed” changes to our planning schemes is that in each case it was publicly

unacceptable developments that forced the changes.

Are we at the front end of another such event? Many would think it so.

It is also worth reflecting on the nature of our planning schemes over time.

Ever more complex schemes that we might expect to provide certainty have moved from prescriptive controls on such measures as height, scale, context and visual impact to include discretionary alternative or “performance-based solutions”.

These are seen by planning

authors as good because they are exhortative rather than dogmatic. The outcome however, is often to reduce certainty and overly complicate the building approval process.

By comparison, would we think it was fair and reasonable for a driver having been speeding to say to the police officer, “Oh yes, I was exceeding your speed limit but that should be allowed because I have done an advanced driving course”?

In other words, “I am different”.

The performance criteria in

planning schemes create uncertainty when our society is crying out for just the opposite.

All our planning schemes start with definitions that outline their intent and purpose but all are weak because their detail does not ensure that these good and clear intentions are always met.

A well-known quote may be worthy of repeating at this time:

“If we ignore the lessons of the past we are bound to repeat the same mistakes.”

We must hope that the

current proposed hotel developments are not in that category or that the likes of Airbnb do not destroy the social and historic fabric of our residential areas.

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