

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee
on
Environment and Heritage**

**Inquiry into
Sustainable Cities 2025**

**Submission by the
Australian Council of National Trusts**

November 2003

Introduction

The National Trust

The National Trust, one of Australia's first conservation organisations and still the nation's largest community based conservation organisation, welcomes the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage Inquiry into Sustainable Cities 2025.

The eight State and Territory Trusts are committed to the conservation of Australia's natural and built environment, and advocate for the identification, protection, care and celebration of Australia's natural and cultural heritage.

The Australian Council of National Trusts

The Australian Council of National Trusts the national secretariat to the National Trust movement, is pleased to be able to contribute to such a significant and far sighted initiative on behalf of the National Trust movement nationwide.

We believe the opportunity the Inquiry provides for members of the community to focus on the complex issues raised by your position paper, and to consider imaginative and balanced solutions to those problems, is a very positive contribution towards the goal of achieving sustainable cities in the not so distant future.

The National Trust strongly endorses the principle of sustainable use of resources, but is concerned to ensure that measures supportive of good environmental outcomes do not impact adversely on cultural heritage values.

We are firmly of the view that sustainable cities will only be achieved within an overall national commitment to the conservation of our cultural and natural resources, and therefore urges that a national approach be taken to the issue of achieving sustainability, involving rural as well as urban Australians.

The Trust would like to thank the Committee for outlining such a comprehensive vision for the future of our cities. We are keen to work with the Standing Committee in articulating a balanced vision for our cities, and this submission should be seen as a first step in our contribution to that endeavour.

Sustainable Cities 2025: A Blueprint for the Future

The Standing Committee's discussion paper provides an excellent summary of the pressures impacting on Australia's urban environments, and the challenges they present to present and future Australian communities.

National Trust Policy Position

The National Trust supports the visionary objective of achieving Sustainable Cities 2025, and is committed to an engagement with communities and governments to seek balanced resolution to the environmental issues raised.

We believe that achieving this vision of sustainable cities requires a national approach: one which is able to consider the environmental pressures, evaluate the environmental and cultural impacts of proposed solutions, and develop holistic and balanced solutions which will sustain and maintain Australian cultural and environmental values.

Therefore, while the Trust recognises and acknowledges the significance of the concerns raised in all seven sets of issues outlined for discussion, we would like to inject a note of caution into the discussion.

Environmental issues are often presented as having an over-riding imperative, requiring immediate and radical solutions, as having precedence over all other considerations.

A Holistic Environmental Policy

We would argue that the evidence of our own past history indicates that solutions to problems can sometimes be as damaging as the problems they are seeking to solve, unless holistic and balanced consideration is given to all possible impacts of problems and their potential solutions.

It seems to us that some of the kinds of solutions proposed to remedy 'environmental' issues can be as damaging to heritage places and values as the problems themselves.

So, while action is necessary to achieve a sustainable future, consideration of the best means to achieve that ideal needs to take account of the complete range of environmental values and issues. Planning is certainly necessary, but it must be planning informed by a range of principles reflective of all issues and all options.

One needs only to look at Circular Quay, blighted by the Cahill Expressway, graced by the Opera House, to see how damaging or how enhancing 'planning' decisions can be.

This submission therefore will focus on the set of considerations which the Trust believes are essential to determining a framework for establishing truly sustainable solutions to the significant issues you are considering.

The National Trust suggests that for

Cities of the future to be sustainable cities, able to meet the future social and economic needs of Australia within the unique context of the Australian landscape

1. A national commitment must be made to the conservation and sustainability of Australia's rural and urban environment;
2. A national conservation ethic must be fostered;
3. The distinctive Australian urban environment must be valued and sustained;
4. A holistic environmental policy must be developed, protective of natural and cultural values;
5. Mechanisms must be developed to enable communities to make informed and balanced decisions concerning urban environments.

Recommendations for all sections are consolidated at the end of the submission.

1 A national commitment must be made to the conservation and sustainability of Australia's rural and urban environment

Sustainable cities require sustainable countryside. No urban environment will ever be completely independent of its hinterland for food, resources and amenity.

In Australia, with 90% of our population clustered along the coast, this poses particular problems.

The State of the Environment Report 2001 identified the withdrawal of government services from regional communities, and the inequitable distribution of essential infrastructure, as critical to the loss of rural heritage.

Rural and urban communities are mutually dependant. Together we live in such a fragile environment that failure to build sustainable land and water management practices impacts adversely on us all.

Equally, failure to support and sustain robust communities, especially in inland Australia, will add further pressure to already overcrowded coastal cities.

A national approach is required, embracing urban and rural Australia.

Two complementary strategies must be developed:

- strategies to ensure that communities in remote, rural and regional Australia have the infrastructure, services and opportunities to enable them to thrive, and therefore not add further pressure to the urban fabric;
- strategies within cities, focussed primarily on managing the developmental pressures on the urban environment

2 A national conservation ethic must be fostered

Conservation lies at the heart of sustainability.

No community, no nation, will manage its resources in a sustainable manner without a strong commitment to the conservation of its natural and cultural inheritance.

Unless this inheritance is acknowledged and valued, what reference point is there other than the present, and what reason therefore to conserve for the future?

As cultural commentator John Hawkes comments:

Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present

Communities will conserve resources if they understand their value for future generations, and believe they will be valued by future generations.

Individuals will commit to managing resources in a sustainable manner if they recognise that their present-day actions will have a direct bearing on their own immediate circumstances, and also on the circumstances of those in the future.

Therefore, in order for the principles of sustainability to guide decisions about the use and allocation of resources, communities must be able to locate their decisions in a timeframe which sits within the context of the past and the future.

The National Trust believes a transformation of the community view-scape is required.

A nation-wide conservation ethic needs to be developed.

Development of a Nationwide Conservation Ethic

The key question is how to ensure individuals and communities think practice and behave in sustainable ways.

To foster this, governments need to work with community organisations to:

- Demonstrate through a nationwide commitment to the conservation and celebration of our heritage – cultural as well as natural – that places valued by communities will be protected and cherished by present as well as future generations;
- Encourage communities to understand the impact their individual decisions are having on the sustainability of finite resources;
- Ensure that citizens understand and are encouraged to practise a conservation ethic as individuals and as community members.

3 The distinctive Australian urban environment must be valued and sustained

Australia is a country of paradoxes, we are:

- the only nation to occupy a continent, and yet we are the most urbanised nation on earth;
- the driest inhabited continent, yet we are the heaviest users of water
- the most diverse biosphere of all the continents, yet we have brought in and rely upon a greater preponderance of exotic plants and animals than any other nation

- amongst the world's largest generators of greenhouse gases yet we have renewable resources – wind and sunshine – in abundance.

These paradoxes are reflections of the culture created by European settlers within the unique Australian environment. They created a distinctive society grafted onto a much changed and much challenged landscape.

The Australian urban environment, the aspects of our cities which make them distinctive, and which gives them individual character and amenity, is a product of these paradoxes.

From the suburban back yard to much treasured public gardens, from Griffin's 'garden city' Canberra to Colonel Light's Adelaide, from the terrace to the triple-fronted brick veneer, our cities developed with scant regard for their impact on the natural environment, but this did result in the development of a distinctive cultural environment.

The Heritage Value of the Urban Fabric

Our cities are composed of layers of time in which many peoples have built and planted and planned and changed environments to suit their own immediate interests and needs, and much of this is now imbued with history and meaning.

We all lose if this densely woven fabric is not considered and valued by all decision makers.

As Elsa Atkin, Executive Officer of the National Trust (NSW), addressing the Sydney Institute in 2001, advocating for the retention of Sydney's multi-faceted heritage places commented:

We need the richness and awareness of the layers of our past if our lives are to have solidity and depth. ...for it is those layers which bring light and shade into the composition. Which build a rich complexity of cultures, traditions, trials and achievements. A social history of richness and poverty, of adversity and triumph which, together, create a living city and gives it a sense of place.

Urban planning and development measures – however well motivated - which fail to respect these hybrid elements, will result in destruction of irreplaceable parts of our cultural inheritance.

Urban environments are not static, cannot be frozen in time. Change must be possible; change must be allowed for.

It is managing for change which is the issue.

Managing Change Constructively

In order for the principles of sustainability to guide decisions about the use and allocation of resources, managers of change must be able to locate their decisions in a time-frame

which sits within the context of the past and the future. They must themselves have a clearly developed conservation ethic embracing all elements of the environment.

As recent UNESCO document concerning world Heritage management commented:

The continuity between the past and the future should be integrated in management systems accommodating the possibility for sustainable change, thus ensuring that the evolution of the local value of the place is not impaired

Sustainability Issues and the Suburban Garden

A good example of the conflicting pressures regarding sustainability resides in the average suburban garden.

Australia, as noted above, has imported a larger number of exotic plants than other settler societies, and these plants dominate gardens and parklands throughout our cities.

These imported species are now so ubiquitous they are integral to our urban landscape. While they may not be the most suitable plants for our restricted water supply, removing and replacing them with natives does profoundly alter the streetscape, the parkland, the garden, and this can be damaging to amenity, and to heritage values.

The recent 'green' parklands decision in Melbourne to strive to replace exotic trees with native species, if carried out, will destroy one of Melbourne's cultural and natural treasures – its city parks.

This loss will not simply be a loss of irreplaceable places, it will also diminish cultural memory. The loss of these parklands, in all their magnificence, will diminish the capacity of future generations to understand the past, and therefore to make sense of their present

Those parklands were planted specifically to recreate the homelands settlers missed, and that recollection is a very important one, for it can assist future generations to understand the framework within which past decisions were made, decisions which may now be having adverse environmental consequences.

To remove or replace exotic trees and plants completely would arouse considerable community resistance and damage or destroy many valued gardens and streetscapes. Is this in fact necessary or even desirable? A broader debate is needed, and wider consideration needs to be given to the truly long-term impacts of what is often a solution to a very immediate problem.

Conflicting Pressures in the Built Environment

Similar questions need to be asked regarding the changes impacting on the built environment of our cities – changes seeking to address other perceived environmental impacts.

- What have been the ‘benefits’ thus far of the reconfiguring of our urban environments, much of it in the name of achieving sustainability?
- How much have we lost in these attempts to radically modify urban fabrics to achieve specific ends?

Or has the discussion been somewhat mis-cast? Has it been presented as too stark a choice between two seemingly opposed possibilities - urban in-fill with all its adverse impacts on heritage values or environmental disaster?

Whatever the solution, throwing out the baby with the bathwater is not a constructive resolution.

As Robert Hughes has commented:

You cannot throw out the past like a Kleenex. A city needs deep memory, without which it becomes merely a stage set.....Intelligent preservation is democracy at work. It affirms we have a shared history, one which comes with shared forms of consciousness. (SI)

And without that shared consciousness, sustainability will remain an ever elusive goal.

4 A holistic environmental policy must be developed, protective of natural and cultural values

The environment embraces both natural and cultural heritage.

This holistic concept of the environment has been articulated with increasing consistency at national and international forums, yet much environmental policy is still destructive of heritage values.

- Internationally, the management of World Heritage sites is focussed increasingly on supporting the *intrinsic relationship between culture and nature, people and place, and cultural diversity*.
- Nationally, the new national heritage regime is integrated with environmental protection. The recently passed ‘heritage’ bills embed heritage conservation and protection within the Commonwealth’s environment legislation, and establish new registers of protected heritage places – the National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List - which can be places of natural, cultural and/or Indigenous values.
- Increasingly, management of national parks is concerned to ensure that all values, be they natural, cultural (as in remnants of settler heritage), or Indigenous, are articulated, protected and conserved.

The Trust strongly endorses the principle of sustainable use of resources, but is concerned to ensure that measures supportive of good environmental outcomes do not impact adversely on cultural heritage values.

We believe policy making should require an assessment of all possible environmental impacts, and should always seek to provide for a balanced resolution of competing interests where there is conflict.

All policy development should strive for a net environmental gain/benefit, and should be seeking an informed balance between all concerns.

So, where natural and cultural interests appear to conflict, in urban consolidation or alternative energy development for example, mechanisms to assist resolution (to articulate and resolve conflict) should be developed and utilised.

It is reasonable to ask the question as to why it is that Australians, who are now faced more directly with the consequences of their impact on their landscape than most other peoples, still seem less responsive to the evident consequences of our way of life than logically they should be?

Why, when the degradation of our major waterways, the loss of productive land to the steady creep of salinity, and the terrors of bushfire and flood confront us at every turn - are we so reluctant to embrace the concept of sustainability, and to commit to the principles of sustainable development?

Could it be because it seems that the immediate cost - the loss of character, amenity, and heritage values which has been required so far – seems out of proportion to the long-term gains?

5 Mechanisms must be developed to enable communities to make informed and balanced decisions concerning urban environments

The terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ have many meanings. For this submission, we are utilising the definition of ‘sustainable development’ used by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment in New Zealand:

Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

To ensure then that sustainable development can occur, and that decision-making fits within a sustainable framework, mechanisms need to be developed and integrated into policy and planning decision-making to ensure :

- that present community needs are understood and can be met

- that the meeting of these needs does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

However, as sustainability itself will be an ever changing goal, it must be underpinned with strategies to ensure communities are empowered to understand consequences and make informed choices about issues which impact on the amenity and liveability of their cities

We need to be able to ‘take stock’ of what we have, before we initiate radical change.

Achieving Sustainable Urban Planning Principles

A framework is needed to assist communities to articulate the amenity value, the distinctive character, and the meaning and value – including the heritage value - of their neighbourhoods, suburban landscapes and town precincts.

If communities were engaged in this way in documenting and describing the particular values they ascribe to their own urban environment, they would then begin to be in a position to make informed choices about possible change.

Planning for sustainability can certainly be a double-edged sword.

The State of the Environment Report 2001 indicated that a key pressure destructive of urban heritage values was the destructive impact of urban consolidation measures.

Two recent ‘planning’ decisions in Melbourne and Sydney suggest a welcome re-evaluation of the hitherto broad-scale imposition of damaging solutions attempting to mitigate genuine problems.

Craig Knowles, Minister for Planning and Infrastructure in NSW, has just announced that changes are to be made to the much opposed State Environment Planning Policy (SEPP) 5, which has seen 100,000 new home units built in Sydney in 5 years. ‘There is a good argument to reset the pendulum away from urban consolidation’

Unfortunately, Mr Knowles’ words come too late for many residents of affected areas who have seen their streetscapes altered, amenity and character values diminished, trees removed, and many significant structures adversely affected by the policy which failed to achieve its intended outcome of providing medium density accommodation for those over 55.

More positively, residents of Carlton have welcomed the very recent VCAT decision rejecting proposals for massive and inappropriate redevelopment in that much valued inner city area. The development in question was in concert with the *Melbourne 2030 Plan*, but in this instance at least, the costs of the destruction of the community amenity was greater than the community could support, and the developers have been sent back to the drawing board.

The Trust would contend that learning from the past is essential for the future well being of ourselves as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. Certainly these examples suggest there are fundamental flaws in the approaches currently being taken to planning for sustainability in our cities.

We suggest that while an over arching planning framework – holistic in concept – is essential to the achievement of sustainability, it should not, and cannot reasonably be a detailed plan.

Detailed plans require certainty about the future, and certainly this is problematic. How far ahead can communities reasonably be expected to project into the future? After all, who predicted the transformation of distance and speeding up of information exchange through the use of the internet a decade ago?

We agree with John McKerral who recently wrote in *About the House*

what is needed is a set of principles or tests which should be applied to planning policies, strategies and regional plans and local plans; not a rigid set of rules but a flexible set of mechanisms designed to monitor, assess and explain trends and impacts to communities

ACNT Recommendations

This submission is being written within the context of several key changes and opportunities regarding the management and future sustainability of national heritage places.

- The new Commonwealth heritage regime will commence early in the new year, and this, plus the *Distinctively Australian* program, should open up long-term opportunities for better informing, alerting and engaging communities throughout Australia regarding their heritage places.
- Next year, 2004, has been declared the Year of the Built Environment and this should provide a particular focus for opportunities specific initiatives concerning the Australian urban environment, and much of this will be focussed on sustainability issues.

The National Trust suggests that the achievement of Sustainable Cities will by necessity require:

- A national commitment to be made to the conservation and sustainability of Australia's rural and urban environment;
- A national conservation ethic to be fostered;
- The distinctive Australian urban environment to be valued and sustained;
- A holistic environmental policy be developed, protective of natural and cultural values;
- Mechanisms be developed to enable communities to make informed and balanced decisions concerning urban environments.

Recommendations to achieve these national changes

Two complementary policies need to be commissioned by the Environment, Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) and endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments.

A *National Sustainability Policy*, a key element of which would be a commitment to the continued development of rural and regional transport and communications infrastructure, and to an equitable distribution of services and cultural opportunities throughout the nation,

A *National Cultural Heritage Policy*, based on the Vision document currently being finalised by the National Cultural Heritage Forum

The EPHC should then

Commission the development of the National Sustainable Development Planning Principles

- commission the development of a set of principles or tests – in accord with these policies - which should then be applied to planning policies, strategies and regional and local plans to achieve balanced and holistic environmental policy and decision making;
- work with communities to endorse such a set principles, and

Develop a National Community Sustainability Education Strategy

- Develop, promote and resource with Commonwealth and State/Territory authorities a ***National Community Sustainability Education Strategy***
- seek new and creative ways to inform and empower communities to enable them to understand the choices and recognise the consequences of the decisions which moves towards sustainability will require.

Commonwealth Commissioner of the Built Environment

A very useful way to focus such a nation-wide endeavour would be the establishment of a Commonwealth Commissioner of the Built Environment – a non-statutory office, able to stimulate and support community discussion nation-wide and broker imaginative and constructive ways to address issues such as the development of strategies and mechanisms to assist communities to:

- more effectively understand the impact of their own use of resources on the environment
- to develop neighbourhood solutions to local issues
- to make informed choices
- to resolve conflicts constructively where there are tensions between various environmental and developmental options.

State of the Environment Reporting

Indicators should be developed for measuring the state and pressures relating to:

- urban amenity values
- character assessment

- heritage values

Commitment should be made and resources allocated to better integrated data collection on the built environment across all constituencies

Specific Year of the Built Environment Initiatives

Organisations such as the National Trusts and Australia ICOMOS could be commissioned to workshop and develop guidelines for

- adaptive re-use of heritage buildings
- urban in-fill in sensitive areas
- investigation of the value of the energy embodied in 'old-build' structures, vs that required for 'new-build' structures.