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The suburbanisation of the coastal communities of Sorrento and Queenscliff: measuring the effects of overdevelopment.

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Abstract

Architecture is often read as a marker of change. The Victorian towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff are undergoing immense change as a result of rapid modernisation and building due to the ‘sea-change’ phenomenon. It has been argued that this is adversely affecting place, diminishing ‘sense of place’, destroying neighbourhood character and leading to unsustainable development. Planning strategies such as Melbourne 2030 have exacerbated this trend by advocating increasing population densities without regard to specific local environmental or historical conditions.

Richard Neville comments generally that ‘Architecture is a lightning rod for passions about community, development, taste and lifestyle. Few issues engage and enrage people more than development – whether a prominent public site ... or a more local issue such as housing design or density.’ Anecdotally the increase in building footprint is one measure of cultural lifestyle change that has occurred in the last half century in the coastal areas of the Mornington and Bellarine Peninsulas. While the change from the 1950s ‘fibro shack’ to the 2000s supersize ‘McMansion’ in Sorrento and Queenscliff demonstrates increasing prosperity and sophistication, these developments show little awareness of the local coastal landscape or place identity.

If the impacts of this ‘sea change’ phenomenon on place are to be considered as more than anecdotal, ways of evaluating these impacts are required. Monitoring and documenting the impact of changes to place will enable the researchers to quantify overdevelopment as site specific and recommend that modern planning schemes need to value and address place differently.

Introduction: the impacts of sea change

The ABC TV series Sea Change1 clearly demonstrated that ‘it was the sense of mutually supporting, small town community values, non materialistic attitudes and small scale coastal setting that drew visitors in.’ Burnley and Murphy argue that ‘there was not much new in this; people have been escaping, or dreaming of escaping, from high cost, high pressure metropolitan lifestyles for decades, even centuries.’2 There are, however, very real public interest questions that arise from the current population growth and change driven by ‘sea changing’. Burnley and Murphy note that ‘on the one hand there is the apparently straightforward demand for effective public planning to accommodate growth. On the other hand there is a political problem arising from resistance to further growth by the existing residents of such places.’3 This summary belies the
complexity of the sea change phenomenon and the multifaceted problems sea change towns have to deal with. In a situation where qualitative data is often perceived as being partial, the lack of quantifiable data has led to problems at planning tribunals, and decisions that allow the risk of inappropriate development to place.

This paper recognises that the sea change phenomenon is fundamentally changing the coastal towns of Australia. In many instances, this is happening against the wishes of the local residents. The past national president of the Planning Institute of Australia vividly summed up the current struggle to protect Australia’s coastal regions. She wrote ‘(T)he Australian coastline is littered with exhausted communities battling to save the character and environment of their townships.’ In response, the National Sea Change Taskforce was established in 2004 and now has a membership of over 68 local councils around Australia. The Taskforce works ‘to ensure that coastal development is managed with a focus on sustainability of coastal communities and the coastal environment’. Gurran et al conclude that more detailed research is needed to develop new responses to coastal development, particularly in terms of promoting community wellbeing, strengthening social cohesion, avoiding socio-economic and socio-spatial polarisation and preserving sense of place.

Architecture is often read as a marker of change. The Victorian towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff are undergoing immense change as a result of rapid modernisation and building due to the ‘sea-change’ phenomenon. It has been argued that this is adversely affecting place, diminishing ‘sense of place’, destroying neighbourhood character and leading to unsustainable development. Planning strategies such as Melbourne 2030 have exacerbated this trend by advocating increasing population densities without regard to specific local environmental or historical conditions.

Richard Neville comments generally that ‘Architecture is a lightning rod for passions about community, development, taste and lifestyle. Few issues engage and enrage people more than development – whether a prominent public site … or a more local issue such as housing design or density.’ Anecdotally the increase in building footprint is one measure of cultural lifestyle change that has occurred in the last half century in the coastal areas of the Mornington and Bellarine Peninsulas. While the change from the 1950s ‘fibro shack’ to the 2000s supersize ‘McMansion’ in Sorrento and Queenscliff demonstrates increasing prosperity and sophistication, these developments show little awareness of the local coastal landscape or place identity. In fact, Burnley and Murphy see that shifts in housing confirm the dominance of metropolitan centres, changes in economic development and the impact of sprawl, stating that:

today’s weekenders are more likely to be designer homes or apartments, because building regulations have become much tighter and many people have much more money to spend. Many of the older, fibro cement or weatherboard cottages in the coastal areas are now occupied by the less affluent permanent residents.

This trend is evident when comparing the towns of Portsea, Sorrento, Blairgowrie, Rye, Rosebud and Dromana on the Mornington Peninsula.
If the impacts of this ‘sea change’ phenomenon on place are to be considered as more than anecdotal, ways of evaluating these impacts are required. Documenting and monitoring the impact of changes to place will enable the researchers to quantify overdevelopment as site specific and recommend that modern planning schemes need to value and address place differently.

An integrated approach is required to make coastal towns more resilient because the issues are multi-dimensional. The sea change phenomenon is impacting on the look and shape of coastal towns: the newly proposed mainstreet landscaping for Sorrento (2009) introducing rows of Canary Island palms is a case in point. Such towns are being adversely affected by the importation of unrestrained urban values of housing, destroying town character and the very ‘sense of place’ that draws new residents to the area. Unrestrained development is undermining coherence and community. The sea change phenomenon is also undermining the towns’ economic and social sustainability by a new dependence on tourism and loss of traditional employment and exodus of permanent residents. Furthermore, the environmental sustainability of coastal towns is threatened by climate change. These towns will also bear the brunt of some particular impacts of global warming. These include storm events, habitat loss and beach and dune erosion; all will change the natural environments of coastal towns beyond the normal variations of a dynamic system. In general, it is the local communities in these towns who have worked to protect these national assets, usually with inadequate resources.

The aim of the researchers is therefore to establish a more rigorous method of evaluating the impact of the sea change process on place, specifically on the built and natural environments of coastal settlements, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. This methodology will assist those communities to implement effective, place-sensitive sustainable planning and associated development practices. The twin historic Victorian townships of Sorrento and Queenscliff, located either side of Port Phillip Heads, will be used as case studies for this research.

The specific objectives of the research are to quantify the changes in town and residential character using ground and aerial photographs, building permits, rezoning, employment profiles, demographic data, planning disputations and land and home ownership, in order to develop a robust methodology for incorporation into a local planning scheme which will then provide better protection for town character and ‘sense of place’. Eventually the researchers intend to develop an integrated model for community sustainability for each of the townships. The model will include economic, social and environmental components. Such an integrated model recognises the interdependence of livelihoods, social and ecological aspects of living well in place and aims to assist decision makers in balancing each of these dimensions.

This paper explores a number of indicators which will be developed to quantify the changes taking place in the historic coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff.

**Sense of Place – a research context**

The built and natural environments, how they are used and interconnect, define historic coastal towns. These towns attract wealthy retirees and second-home buyers from metropolitan centres. The blend of environmental and historic settings is a powerful
drawcard for those who can afford to purchase properties in these locations. Unfortunately, the values and aspirations of many of these new owners have been formed elsewhere and are often in conflict with those that have determined the very characteristics which have drawn them to the town originally. The new owners usually have a strong desire to renovate, upgrade and/or enlarge their new purchase. More and more frequently, the former dwelling is demolished and replaced by a new home or units. As Green notes in his studies of the coastal towns of the Great Ocean Road ‘the gradual changes that result from older single family homes being torn down and replaced by ‘modern’, bigger houses are more insidious.’\textsuperscript{10} The difference in values and aspirations often leads to conflict with the local council and local residents. If a satisfactory resolution cannot be obtained at the local level, the dispute is usually heard at the relevant State’s appeals board e.g. the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. Local councils and/or local residents’ associations can find themselves paying for one appeal after another.

In an attempt to preserve the town character, local planning schemes have been developed and supplement state wide planning schemes. The Borough of Queenscliffe, for example, has such a scheme (BOQ, 2009). Two key objectives of the physical infrastructure policy are to: (i) ensure that the installation of physical infrastructure has minimal impact on the landscape and heritage values of the Borough and (ii) maintain the visual amenity of the Borough by preventing the inappropriate location of services and physical infrastructure.

The Mornington Peninsula Shire (MPS) in their \textit{Strategic Plan 2008/09-2012/13} respond to identified community needs by setting clear goals, outcomes and strategies for the next four years. Three of the major goals are:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item Nurturing our local character and sense of place.
  \item Protecting our environment and tackling climate change…
  \item Supporting a sustainable Peninsula economy.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{enumerate}

Despite the intent of the BOQ planning scheme and the MPS Strategic Plan, battles over proposed developments continue and there is a continuous erosion of landscape and heritage values, and an increasing loss of visual amenity. For example, a 2008 decision to allow a shop to be constructed at the rear of the historic Ozone Hotel on the main street of the Queenscliff has removed vision of and access to the rear of this iconic building. The apartments built behind Sorrento’s Continental Hotel have impacted adversely on the town’s skyline from the sea. Waterscapes can be another casualty of inappropriate development. Defining these visual amenities often means stepping back some way from the immediate surroundings and assessing the view from typical resident and/or tourist access routes. For example, one particular Queenscliff waterscape of Port Phillip Bay has been destroyed by a new multi-storey housing where small single-storey Defence Department accommodation previously existed prior to the sale of the site and their demolition by the developer. This experience is verified by research. Milton has analysed the various components of Victoria’s planning scheme for their ability to protect place attachment.\textsuperscript{12} These include: the State Policy Planning Framework (SPPF), local planning frameworks, zones, overlays and incorporated documents. She found that local planning policy frameworks could partially protect, depending on how well they were written. The SPPF has little ability to be sensitive to local issues such as place. Milton also looked at two case studies (Torquay and
Frankston) where the incorporation of community sentiment had been attempted. The methodologies used to determine this suffered from poor community participation i.e. less than 5%. A key principle of sustainability is participation. Participation in local development does not mean discussion with one’s architect or builder. Here a much broader concept is implied. Fowles claimed that community participation in local development will strengthen social sustainability.  

Coastal historic towns are rarely homogeneous in terms of their architecture. This means that it is impossible to be prescriptive about the type of dwelling, whether it be in terms of height, construction materials or style. A building that is out of place in one town may be quite suitable in another. For this reason, and to achieve further differentiation, towns, or parts of towns, could be divided into ‘precincts’ where the general character can be defined in specific guidelines. An application to build or renovate in a particular precinct could be guided by these guidelines. What is really required, however, is a robust generalised methodology which can be applied to any part of a town, and which produces an acceptable result to both the local community and hopefully the proponent of the development. Various researchers have developed different techniques to assess different aspects of what might constitute ‘town character’.

Sowman developed a systematic procedure for assessing the recreational carrying capacity of coastal resort areas. This work has particular relevance to historic coastal towns. A nine-step procedure was presented for determining carrying capacity. Wallis in a short paper has reviewed the visualisation of landscapes as a means of determining community preferences for environmental scenarios. Some of the general principles will be applicable to this research. Green has developed a 4-phase technique (interviews, projective mapping, photo survey and photo sorting) to obtain information about a community’s visual preferences that could be used directly by town planners. Photographs of local views and scenes, selected by from interviews from a sample of local residents, were used to explore how a community perceives and values their visual environment. Stock et al developed an interesting technique ‘to provide communities with visions of how their landscape may change’ prior to any development. The system used geographic information system (GIS), virtual reality and other techniques to allow a ‘visual exploration and evaluation of future landscape scenarios’. The system is portable and was tested at two public workshops in north-eastern Victoria. Several negative factors qualified the overall success of the system. Audiences needed time to become acquainted and comfortable with the technology, technology failures were disruptive and a high degree of planning was required to facilitate discussion. Workshop dynamics played a crucial role. In addition, some participants did not respond well to the lack of photo-realism. The work Graymore and Kevin are developing on a visualisation tool to determine people’s preferences for water allocation using photos of the local environment fits in well here. There may be some scope to develop this tool as an indicator so that it could be able to determine how people value the visual environment and what they prefer (modern houses versus historic seaside shacks; local markets and shops versus big supermarket chains, etc).

More recent ‘place-attachment’ research points to differences based on length of residency, socio-cultural factors, social groupings and loss, and provides a critical starting point for this research. Ryan used a photo questionnaire to explore the relationship between place-attachment and both environmental experience and
attributes in three urban park areas in Michigan. He found a difference between neighbouring residents of the park and recreational users, and volunteers and staff working in the areas. It was concluded that place-attachment is multi-faceted, depends on the relationship of the respondent to the area in question and had the potential to be conflictual. Recent differences in the coastal town of Queenscliff over tree removal/management in one of the Borough’s prime camping grounds exemplify this problem. In order to protect the natural landscape, local residents felt that campers should be relocated rather than trees removed from the town’s former botanic gardens for safety reasons.

Ryan employed a similar technique to explore the views about development in rural areas of New England, US. Attitudes towards open space preservation and perceptions of rural character were investigated. Three groups were studied: homebuilders, planners and local citizens. It was found that although there were some similarities between groups, the planners demonstrated ‘a more limited view of compatible development than did either local residents or homebuilders’. These studies illustrate powerfully the differences that can be found amongst study participants. In relation to the preservation of town character, it will be particularly important to note the differences across gender and age cohorts, as well as the length of time people have lived in the town. In historic coastal towns, where preservation of both ‘sense of place’ and town character is an on-going requirement, it is vital that the perspective of the next generations of influential residents is considered and factored into any strategy.

Possible Indicators of town character

It is difficult to define the term town ‘character’ precisely. Measuring this concept is even more difficult. At best, we can measure various variables which might be indicative of ‘character’ and trace how these have changed over a reasonable period of time. These variables might include: house footprint, planning decision appeals, town boundary changes and rezoning, employment profile and vacancy rates. Some of these are likely to be strong indicators of changes in ‘character’ (which impact on ‘sense of place’), while others are weaker. The above five variables are considered below.

Housing Footprint

Undoubtedly the most visible impact on the ‘character’ of coastal towns is changes in house size and the increase in their footprint. The growth in house size in Australia is well documented. The vast majority of houses built between 1946 and 1950 were between 112 and 121 m². By 2002-3, the average floor area of new houses built in Australia was 227.6 m² i.e. a doubling in just over 50 years. The traditional residential dwelling in coastal towns has been a small single storey house surrounded by garden on a relatively large block. This characteristic has been changing, along with national metropolitan trends, but in doing so, part of the ‘charm’ of these towns has arguably been eroded. Two ways to track this change in housing footprint are being investigated.

The first methodology, and undoubtedly the most reliable, is to gain access to and then analyse the building permits granted over recent decades in a particular location. The increase in house size, as a result of rebuild or renovation, can be recorded and
compared with the previous construction. This methodology has two significant drawbacks. Firstly, access to council files can be difficult. The permits are often stored away and some time, effort and cost is therefore involved in their access. Issues of privacy and confidentiality have also been raised by Queenscliffe Council and suitable arrangements need to be made to overcome this problem. Analysing the permits themselves is also very time-consuming. The advantages of this methodology, however, are significant. The precise degree and date of changes to a particular footprint are known, and changes in both the horizontal and vertical plane are known. Building a second storey in order to obtain an ‘ocean view’ has become particularly popular and its effect on town character can be marked.

A second methodology currently being investigated is to use aerial photography and a cadastral map. The latter shows the streets and housing blocks in a particular locality. If suitable aerial photos can be obtained, their image (scale-adjusted) can be underlaid on the cadastre map using suitable software e.g. AutoCad. The tracing of block size and dwelling size at different dates can then allow the growth in footprint to be calculated with reasonable accuracy. Figure 1 shows a suitable aerial view of Queenscliff in 1966 that will be used to demonstrate this methodology. Disadvantages in this methodology include the requirement for suitable aerial photographs from past decades and the one-dimensionality of the analysis. It is not possible to assess the impact in the vertical plane from second storeys.

![Figure 1 Aerial view of Queenscliff in 1966](source: Queenscliff Historical Museum, 2008)

**VCAT Submissions**

The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) was established in July 1998. The purpose of the tribunal is ‘to deliver a modern accessible, informal, efficient and cost-effective tribunal justice system to all Victorians, while making quality decisions’. The Planning and Environment List (PEL), one of a number of VCAT’s committees, hears and determines

3.1.1.1 applications to review decisions made by Municipal Councils and other authorities under a number of Acts of Parliament
3.1.1.2 applications for enforcement orders, applications to cancel or amend permits and applications for declaration relating to the use and/or development of land under the Planning and Environment Act 1987.

Applications may originate from individuals, companies or organisations who disagree with a council decision related to the granting/refusal or conditions attached to a planning permit. Survey data from the PEL between 2001 and 2008 lists six types of application relating to planning permits (PP), namely:

- **Type A** - challenging a decision of council to grant a PP
- **Type B** - challenging a decision of council to refuse a PP
- **Type C** - challenging imposition of conditions on a PP
- **Type D** - for failure to decide on a PP
- **Type E** - for an enforcement order
- **Type F** – ‘other’.

Table 1 shows the number of applications of each of the above types over the seven year period 2001-2008 for the Borough of Queenscliffe. The data in shows that nearly 40% of applications are challenges to decisions made by the BOQ Council (Type B), while 26% are challenges to planning permits granted by the council (Type A). While caution is required when interpreting such a small data set, it could be argued that 66% of applications have argued for the ‘status quo’ and against any change in the ‘character’ of the town. The greatest number of applications of any type occurred between 2003 and 2006, when 16 of Type B applications were received by VCAT.28

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type A</th>
<th>Type B</th>
<th>Type C</th>
<th>Type D</th>
<th>Type E</th>
<th>Type F</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 and 3 show planning activity and VCAT data for the whole of the MPS which includes Sorrento. While further research needs to be done to distill the information for individual towns, the data demonstrates clear trends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Planning Permit applications lodged</th>
<th>No. of planning decisions</th>
<th>No. of decisions relative to the no. of new applications</th>
<th>No. of reviews lodged at VCAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>2,983</td>
<td>1,943</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>207 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>2,855</td>
<td>2,022</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>157 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>2,823</td>
<td>2,043</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>170 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>2,927</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>165 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>3,387</td>
<td>2,959</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>185 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Planning Permit Activity Reporting, DPCD, Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme Review 2009 (DRAFT:12)
Table 2 shows the number of decisions made has steadily increased since 2003. While the MPS argue in their 2009 *Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme Review* that ‘This provides some indication of productivity in the Statutory Planning Unit, and indirectly of the effectiveness of the Planning Scheme in facilitating decision making’,” for us it is clearly an indication of the increased building activity and steadily growing development of the Peninsula.

**Table 3: VCAT Data 2004-2006 Mornington Peninsula Shire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeals and Enforcement</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of VCAT Appeals</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type A: Appeal by objectors about decision to grant a permit</td>
<td>64 (42%)</td>
<td>46 (39%)</td>
<td>29 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type B: Appeal by applicants about decision to refuse a permit</td>
<td>30 (20%)</td>
<td>23 (19%)</td>
<td>25 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type C: Appeal by applicant about conditions</td>
<td>21 (14%)</td>
<td>18 (15%)</td>
<td>12 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type D: Appeals by applicant over failure to decide an application</td>
<td>36 (23%)</td>
<td>32 (27%)</td>
<td>24 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type F: Other</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>Not recorded</td>
<td>20 (18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme Review 2009* (DRAFT:13)

Table 3, while not directly comparable to Table 1, clearly shows striking parallels. Again caution must be exercised with such a small data set, but nevertheless Table 3 shows over 50% argued for the status quo. While not tabulated here, the *MPPSR 2009* states that the change to the number of permit amendment applications received between 2005/06 (443) and 2006/07 (812) almost doubled.

The *MPPSR 2009* notes that through general consultation with Council, the community and other external stakeholders several common themes emerged with relevance to planning, including:

* Opposition to the ‘suburbanisation’ of the Peninsula;
* Protection of the ‘unique and much loved’ characteristics of the Shire;
* The importance of a sustainable approach, encompassing social, environmental and economic issues; and
* Council’s advocacy role on issues such as public transport.

Consultation since that time has confirmed the widespread and continuing support for these themes. The MPS Statutory Planning Unit has identified more recent concerns which are relevant to both of the historic coastal communities of Sorrento and Queenscliff and this research

* Lack of support in VCAT for ESD conditions.
* The problems of balancing Business Zone objectives (which support more intensive development) with local character objectives, and
* The complexity of heritage assessments.  

Clearly further work is needed in data collection, sorting and analysis, but these preliminary findings indicate that VCAT submissions and Shire records and statistics are a rich source of relevant data.
Extension of Town Boundaries and Rezoning

One reliable indicator of a changing landscape is the rezoning and extending of town boundaries impacting on town character and ‘sense of place’. Traditionally these small towns are bordered by rural properties used for farming, grazing or forestry. Pressure to rezone land comes from landowners (farmers or developers) or even from councils themselves.

Its peninsula location severely restricts Queenscliff’s expansion. According to Hill, an ambitious council tried to extend the Borough boundaries several kilometres inland in 1960. However, this was ‘quickly squashed’ by the neighbouring Borough. Figure 2 shows the current boundaries. Although boundary extension is not possible for the Borough of Queenscliffe, elsewhere on the Bellarine Peninsula the threat and subsequent impact of rezoning on coastal towns is commonplace. In Portarlington, for example, a proposed retirement village requires rezoning of the town’s structure plan which the controlling authority has approved. In Barwon Heads, the community is fighting to retain the existing boundaries to protect a Ramsar-listed wetland in the face of housing development threat. While rezoning of land on the edge of the Borough of Queenscliffe was disallowed in 2006, approval of a 760 dwelling development on a wetland area has recently been approved despite opposition by an overwhelming majority of local residents.

Figure 2: Current boundaries of the Borough of Queenscliffe
(source: DSE, 2003)

Under ‘strategic challenges’ the MPPSR 2009 notes four points relevant to our discussion: housing, vegetation removal, heritage listings and commercial development. In the period under review 2003–2008, while there has been no expansion of the UGB on the Mornington Peninsula, (a) ‘… there has been substantial additional housing growth’. Of the approximately 6,000 new dwellings added between 2001 to 2006, about half were attached dwellings or units / apartments (b) ‘The level of applications for native vegetation removal suggests that this activity has generally been brought under control, enabling consideration in terms of achieving “net gain” and protecting landscape character. In most significant cases, where vegetation removal is approved, an appropriate offset is provided’. (c) ‘The listing of heritage properties and precincts has expanded considerably, providing greater ability to protect sites of local significance. Although there have been controversial developments, there have been no “Mitcham Towers” approved i.e. the scheme is providing a reasonable safety net in preventing development inconsistent with Council’s long term goals. Arguably the most significant gap is in
relation to caravan parks in the Green Wedge Zone, with the risk of de facto residential development outside of the UGB.
(d) ‘There have been significant increases in commercial floorspace, in line with population growth, but the distribution of new floorspace has been generally consistent with the hierarchy of centres as supported by Council policy and there have been no major out of centre retail developments.’

The Shire’s interpretation differs somewhat from the assessments of the Nepean Conservation Group and Nepean Historical Society of the impacts of strong housing growth, vegetation removal and commercial development in Sorrento. All recognise, however, that the key issues requiring urgent action fall within the categories of ‘Housing and Settlement’; ‘Neighbourhood Character and Heritage’ and ‘Green Wedge Planning.’ The accommodation of additional housing within existing townships clearly places pressure on existing character and heritage sites. Additional demand for recreation from the metropolitan Growth Areas e.g. the Casey–Cardinia corridor also tends to drive proposals for commercial development within the green wedge and in coastal areas of the Peninsula, with the risk of over-development and a change in the valued character of these areas. The Mornington Peninsula Shire rightly recognises that it consists of a mixture of townships, coastal and rural areas and has a unique and varied character. It also acknowledges that local community identity and local character are highly valued by residents and visitors alike. Yet in arguing that ‘it is vital to ensure that important qualities are retained while supporting economic development and allowing growth as appropriate’ it does not recognise that achieving the balance is the real challenge.

Changes in Employment Profile

The fishing industry in Queenscliff, as in many other coastal towns, has been important to the local economy. Queenscliff has a long-established commercial fishing industry, beginning around 1860. Its peak was in the 1930s, when over 150 men worked in the industry from the town. This number has declined significantly and at present there are very few commercial boats based in Queenscliff, fishing primarily for demersal or seabed fish like flathead. A small charter boat industry for tourist fishing also operates from the harbour. The census data for two relevant categories from the early 1950s show the rise and fall in the fishing and hospitality industries respectively (Figure 3). The rise in hospitality numbers is particularly spectacular. These numbers indicate the shift in economic base and are likely to impact on town infrastructure and its character and sustainability.

Queenscliff, unlike many coastal towns, has long been a tourist destination. By 1876, according to Hill, the town ‘had emphatically defined itself as a resort.’ The picturesque surrounds and benign climate were essential ingredients but it was the steam ferries plying to and from Melbourne several times a week and later a rail line from Geelong that made the early tourism industry possible. But the advent of the motor car opened up the possibility of travel to other coastal towns, and Queenscliff as a tourist destination went into decline, but some revival has occurred since the 1980s.
Various factors have contributed to the demise of the fishing industry in Queenscliff, principally declining catches from overfishing and deteriorating financial viability for small operators. The rise in tourism and pleasure boating has led to pressure to expand the traditional harbour to a marina-style harbour. The remaining local fishermen now fear they will not be able to afford the sharp increase in berth fees, forcing them to locate elsewhere, making the demise of the industry complete (BOQ, 2008). The two peninsulas share concerns regarding employment opportunities. The MPS sees that diverse and viable employment opportunities on the peninsula are the key to sustainable vibrant communities into the future.

**Changes in Home Ownership Profile**

One of the possible indicators of the changing nature or ‘character’ of a coastal town is the change in home ownership profile. What that profile tells us depends to some degree on how we define ‘character’ and understand ‘sense of place.’ If ‘character’ is only defined by bricks and mortar, then vacancy rate may not necessarily indicate any change of ‘character’. If it includes a human component, then vacancy rate may well be an indicator of change of character. Vacancy rate is an indicator of non-permanent residents and therefore reflects a presence of metropolitan-based residents and usually their predisposition to repeat or mirror their city lifestyles. Small houses in coastal towns may be regarded as too pokey and their gardens too much trouble for busy city folk. Since the non-permanent residents have few ‘local’ friends, accommodating other urban families for the weekend ultimately means extensions and/or even rebuilding to enjoy a home-away-from-home lifestyle.

Second home ownership has grown significantly in recent decades. Frost provides an historical overview of the development of ‘second home tourism’ and argues that it was the expansion of the railway system down the eastern side of Port Phillip Bay (as far as Frankston) in the late nineteenth century and later the rise in car ownership that enabled the ownership of a second home to become established on the peninsulas either side of Melbourne. Vacancy rates i.e. the ratio of unoccupied to total private dwellings is often quoted as a characteristic of the sea change phenomenon. For
example, the Victorian Coastal Council (2009) cites a dozen coastal settlements
where vacancy rates range from 59% for St Leonards to 82% for Venus Bay.

Census data from one particular year, however, does not show whether this
c characteristic of the town, namely a growing percentage of non-permanent residents,
is changing and at what rate. Data from the various census of the Australian Bureau
of Statistics (ABS) has been used to calculate the vacancy rates and the ratio of
unoccupied to occupied dwellings in the BOQ between 1954 and 2006 (Table 4).
While the total number of homes has increased by over 260% over 50 years, the
number of unoccupied homes has risen by nearly 570%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Unoccupied Homes (A)</th>
<th>Occupied Homes (B)</th>
<th>Vacancy Rate (%)</th>
<th>Ratio (A/B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>729</td>
<td>1097</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>1256</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1228</td>
<td>1487</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1288</td>
<td>1298</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1325</td>
<td>1313</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS, various dates

Figure 4 shows the data in Table 4 together with the census population data. The total
number of houses in the Borough is rising while the population has stayed relatively
stable, even apparently declining on its highpoint in the early 1990s. 47


discussion

This paper has looked at a number of quantifiable indicators through which to
document and monitor change in the historic coastal towns of Queenscliff and
Sorrento. At the outset it acknowledged the difficulties associated with defining ‘sense
of place’ and town ‘character.’ It argued that measuring ‘character’ is even more
difficult! At best it was suggested, we could measure various variables which might be
indicative of ‘character’ and trace how these have changed over a reasonable period of
time. The variables addressed here are house footprint, planning decision appeals, town boundary changes and rezoning, employment profile and vacancy rates. Even though this paper reports on preliminary research only, we can nonetheless make some useful observations regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen indicators of changes in ‘character’.

House footprint is a very strong indicator of change. Searching and documenting building permits will give a very accurate and complete picture of the extent of building/rebuilding, though the methodology is time consuming and labour intensive. Aerial photography and cadastral maps, again time consuming and labour intensive, can plot changes over decades, area by area, giving a clear picture of, for example, the ratio of built to natural environment. While second or third storey additions do not show up, the increase in house size to plot ratio and loss of vegetation cover is clearly revealed. Integrating the two methodologies and supplementing them with ground photography will give a clear picture of changes over time to character of place, and enable future monitoring. Planning decision appeals (VCAT submissions) allow us to measure the level of community opposition to what is being approved to be built, and why. This data also tells us how much development, and what scale of development, is being undertaken. It allows monitoring of physical changes to place and the documenting of implied values. For example what aspects of ‘sense of place’ and/or town character are seen as critical by objectors.

Over time town boundary changes and rezoning are clear indicators of change: is sprawl or greater density encouraged? What are the positive and/or negative impacts of these strategies on historic coastal towns like Queenscliff and Sorrento? Both are indicators of the development pressures faced by the towns. Both require solutions. While the two municipal authorities agree that planning should meet the needs of the community and respect local values, as well as achieve site and area responsive design for new development, how to do this sensitively has not been resolved.

To date the little research that has been done on employment profile has revealed major shifts: traditional work categories on the peninsulas such as agriculture, forestry, fishing (the case study discussed here) and extraction have given way to accommodation, cafes and restaurants to service thriving seasonal tourist industries. Both the BOQ and the MPS are keen to foster a much greater range of employment opportunities in their municipalities in order to ensure diverse vibrant communities into the future. Changes in employment patterns and infrastructure do impact on the character of these historic coastal towns as well as the communities they are able to sustain in the long term.

Preliminary data collated for Queenscliff over the fifty year period from 1954 to 2006 regarding changes in home ownership profiles confirm that while the total number of houses built has not surprisingly increased substantially (260%), unoccupied houses have risen by a remarkable 570%. Observation confirms that the increase in building numbers have had an enormous impact on the character of place in both peninsulas: with built environment replacing natural environment; with the demand for holiday and second homes impacting on real estate prices, causing permanent residents to sell and move up the peninsula in the case of the MPS; with low occupancy rates over most of the year adversely impacting on the ability to sustain viable vibrant
communities; and with the influx of seasonal visitors putting a huge impost on local communities and fragile coastal environments over summer.

Conclusions

The sea change phenomenon is impacting on the look and shape of coastal towns. Such towns are being adversely affected by the importation of unrestrained urban values of housing (size being one clear determinant), destroying the very ‘sense of place’ that draws new residents to the area (unspoiled natural environment). Unrestrained development is undermining coherence and community. The sea change phenomenon is also undermining the towns’ economic and social sustainability by a new dependence on tourism and loss of traditional employment and exodus of permanent residents. The five indicators of ‘character’ of place addressed in this paper, house footprint, planning decision appeals, town boundary changes and rezoning, employment profile and vacancy rates are all strong indicators of change in the two historic coastal towns of Queenscliff and Sorrento. While none of these variables is of itself capable of giving a full picture of the changes over time, they do point to the complexity of the situation facing local communities, municipal authorities and planning experts. With preliminary findings suggesting that issues are clearly multi-dimensional, the researchers are proposing an integrated approach to make coastal towns more resilient. What is not yet clear is how the data from these variables can be effectively integrated. Suffice it to say that the data will allow a community to make better decisions. They will be better informed, aware of changes and able to make planning decisions based on quantitative data not just subjective or anecdotal observations. Educating local communities is critical to being able to understand what their town and /or place was like, how and where it has changed, and how it is trending.

Acknowledgements

Dallas Leonard of Wild Design, 13 Star Street, Geelong, 3217, for supplying cadastral map and Yolanda Esteban for assistance in overlapping technique.

1 The ABC TV’s Series Sea Change screened in Melbourne in 1999-2000. In brief, the story set in Barwon Heads, on Victoria’s surf coast, revolves around high-flying lawyer Laura Gibson (Sigrid Thornton) who has grown sick and tired of her frantic life in Melbourne and decides to move to somewhere more peaceful, a place where she can rediscover herself and her values. She settles on the sleepy town of Pearl Bay and, after initial apprehension and a period of adjustment, allows herself to relax and enjoy the laid back lifestyle the idyllic location has to offer. She meets a variety of colourful characters and finds romance with the laconic and enigmatic Diver Dan (David Wenham). However the town is not without its problems, namely the Local Mayor and developer Bob Jelly (John Howard), who has his eyes set on profiteering from the town's picturesque beauty, forcing Laura to fight for the town she has grown to love.

2 I. Burnley, and P. Murphy, Sea Change: Movement from Metropolitan to Arcadian Australia, Kensington: UNSW Press, 2004
3 Burnley and Murphy, Sea Change p. 13
4 The past national president of the Planning Institute of Australia, Barbara Norman, quoted in The Age, 2008
Report for the National Sea Change Task Force, Planning Research Centre, University of Sydney, 2005


5 R. Neville, Librarian, Mitchell Library, SLNSW, 2007

8 Burnley and Murphy Sea Change, p. 27


11 Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme Review 2009 – DRAFT [MPPSR 2009]


18 M. Graymore et al, current research project at Deakin University, Waurnambool Campus, personal communication


21 K. Pollard, ‘Campers on the outer’, The Echo, 10th September 2009


23 For a definition of urban character, as envisaged by the Borough of Queenscliff, see pages 3-4 of the Borough of Queenscliffe Urban Character Study (2000).


25 ABS Australian Home Size is Growing, 2005, Canberra: Yearbook Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

26 In Victoria, many images are available from the Land Information Centre, Department of Sustainability and Environment

27 VCAT, Planning and Environment List Survey, 2008, Melbourne 3000: Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, p. 10

28 Disputes over planning permits prior to the establishment of VCAT were handled regionally by a variety of other bodies. Up until 1977, the Geelong Regional Planning Authority (GRPA) was the responsible body. This was superseded in at that date by the Geelong Regional Commission, which was the arbiter on planning matters relating to Queenscliff until May 1993 when it was abolished and replaced by the City of Greater Geelong.

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Such as written submissions from community members; feedback provided at community forums [e.g. 2008 Residential Zones Forum; 2008 Green Wedge Food and Function Centres Forum]; written responses from statutory authorities; discussions with Council’s Statutory Planning Unit, and the series of ‘Your Community Your Future’ consultation meetings held in 2003-04

The MPS also considers that formal analysis of all VCAT decisions would be worthwhile to get a complete picture of the impact of planning decisions in the Shire ((MPPSR 2009 (DRAFT Appendix 3.2))


It is not surprising that these should be critical areas, as the increased rate of population growth, as indicated in the Melbourne @ Five Million report, places additional pressures on both housing supply and urban growth boundaries.

It is worth noting that the MPPSR 2009 (DRAFT) Appendix 3:1 suggests that planning should meet the needs of the community and respect local values; and that planning should set out to achieve site and area responsive design for new development. While these aims are laudable, it does not state how this should be done.

E. T. Raison, Queenscliff as a fishing Port 1860-1987, Point Lonsdale: Queenscliff Historical Publications, 2002


The categories are: 1) agriculture, forestry and fishing and 2) accommodation, cafes and restaurants

A history it shares with Sorrento.

B. Hill, The Enduring Rip p. 132


U. de Jong, and R. Fuller, ‘Developing sustainable communities’

BOQ, ‘Berthing fees threaten economy’, Borough of Queenscliffe Media Release, 10th June 2008

Mornington Peninsula Shire Strategic Plan, 2009


This requires further investigation.