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From fibro shacks to McMansions: considering the impact of housing change on the sense of place in the historic Victorian coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff

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Abstract:
Eighty per cent of Australians now live within 50 kilometres of the coast.¹ While most of the population remains concentrated in the large capital cities, some people have chosen small coastal towns as their permanent and or second-home destination. Greater mobility and income has increased the feasibility and attractiveness of living in these once overlooked and forgotten towns. The arrival of these new residents has changed the towns in both positive and negative ways. Declining traditional industries have been replaced by tourism and service sectors, providing a much-needed economic revival. The expectations of new residents, both permanent and non-permanent, however, have also brought challenges to the towns. Metropolitan value systems sometimes impact negatively on the unique sense of place and neighbourhood character of these towns.

This paper presents both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the impact on character and sense of place in two historic coastal towns, Queenscliff and Sorrento, in southern Victoria. Census data shows how employment and the number of permanent residents have changed radically over the last 50-60 years, altering the social fabric of the towns. An analysis of the building footprint over a similar timeframe shows a growth in building size as larger houses become more common, and a growth in planning appeals for the towns is indicative of a clash of expectations between the council, long-time and new residents. While these indicators demonstrate the impact on the character of the towns as defined by their built environment, some oral accounts of local residents are used to show the emotional impact of these changes on the traditional sense of place associated with

¹ State of Australian Cities 2011. Department of Infrastructure and Transport, Major Cities Unit, Canberra, ACT 2601.
these towns. Some specific examples of changes to the built environment are provided to demonstrate that local planning schemes are not always successful in protecting neighbourhood character and that further measures are required in order to safeguard the uniqueness of coastal towns from the negative aspects of development.

**Keywords:**
Housing change, neighbourhood character, sense of place, Sorrento, Queenscliff

**Introduction**
The built and natural environments, how they interconnect and are perceived, visually characterise and define coastal towns. These towns attract retirees and second-home buyers from metropolitan centres. The blend of environmental and historic settings offered by these settlements is a powerful drawcard for those who can afford to purchase properties in these locations. However, the values and aspirations of many of the new owners have been shaped elsewhere and can be at odds with the neighbourhood character and sense of place so critical to the identity of these coastal towns. The new owners often have a strong desire to renovate, upgrade or even demolish their new purchase in order to rebuild. An emerging problem is that these differences in values and aspirations often lead to conflict with long-standing residents and local councils. In many cases this leads to frustrations on all sides and sometimes to costly appeals. Addressing these problems is the focus of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project which aims to establish a more rigorous method of evaluating the physical and perceived impact of the ‘sea change’ process on sense of place, specifically on the built and natural environments of coastal settlements, using both quantitative and qualitative measures.2 The twin historic coastal Victorian townships of Sorrento and Queenscliff, located either side of Port Phillip Heads, are the case studies for this project. Four local community organisations, the Queenscliffe Community Association, the Queenscliff Historical Society, the Nepean Historical Society and the Nepean Conservation Group; as well as strategic planning and urban design consultants, Planisphere Pty Ltd, are the Linkage Partners.

This paper presents preliminary evidence charting residential change over the last 50-60 years in Sorrento and Queenscliff. It considers the impact of perceived and documented change on neighbourhood character and sense of place in these towns. The paper begins by defining neighbourhood character and sense of place. Indicators of how the sea change phenomena have already changed the face of these towns over the last half century are then presented. The response of the local councils to protect the unique characters of their historic towns through local planning schemes is acknowledged. Despite these schemes, however, there is clear evidence that these measures have not always been successful. Changes to residential areas that undermine neighbourhood character and sense of place have been allowed, and set precedents against which new aspirants compare their proposals. Two approaches are used. Evidence from a broadly phenomenological approach to housing change and impact in Sorrento is considered, before findings using a quantitative model to analyse change in residential footprint in Queenscliff are presented. The authors consider these methods complementary and both approaches will be used in both towns as the research progresses. The ongoing debate is about environmental, landscape and heritage values, and their relationships, as well as impacts on visual amenity. Some conclusions are then drawn about how to assist the Sorrento and Queenscliff communities to understand and implement effective, place-sensitive sustainable planning and associated development practices.

**Neighbourhood character and sense of place**

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2 The Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (LP110200787), is entitled “‘Sea change’ communities: intergenerational perception and sense of place”. 
Planisphere, in their 2012 Moonee Valley Neighbourhood Character Study noted that ‘there is a clear emphasis in the State Planning Policy Framework (SPPF) and all other Victorian Planning Provisions (VPPs), including those in ResCode, upon the importance of neighbourhood character and contextual design. Neighbourhood character should be recognised and protected. It should also be a key consideration when planning for urban growth’. Objectives, strategies and policy guidelines are stipulated under thematic headings in the SPPF (2010). For example, the theme ‘Built environment and heritage’ (Clause 15) supports the creation of quality built environments that facilitate social, cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing; and development that is responsive to its landscape, built form, cultural and heritage context.

In relation to neighbourhood character, the SPPF (Clause 15.01-5) specifically states that:
- cultural identity, neighbourhood character and sense of place should be recognised and protected by ensuring development:
  - responds and contributes to existing sense of place and cultural identity.
  - recognises distinctive urban forms and layout and their relationship to landscape and vegetation.
  - responds to its context and reinforces special characteristics of local environment and place by emphasising the underlying natural landscape character, the heritage values and built form that reflect community identity and the values, needs and aspirations of the community.

Planisphere has adopted the following definition of neighbourhood character:
‘Neighbourhood character is the qualitative interplay of built form, vegetation and topographic characteristics, in both the private and public domains that make one place different from another’. The authors consider this a useful context within which to understand the impact of residential change in Sorrento and Queenscliff. Further, academic and landscape architect, Raymond Green’s study of the Great Ocean Road found that ‘natural features were by far the most important elements in defining the character of the various towns and which form the foundations upon which the character of these towns are built’.

The view from Mornington Peninsula National Park (Koonya Lookout, Sorrento), across the peninsula to Port Philip Bay (Figure 1) shows houses generally nestled within the landscape, demonstrating the importance of the natural topography and vegetation to place identity in Sorrento’s hinterland, supporting Planisphere’s definition and corroborating Green’s findings. Planisphere argue further that ‘neighbourhood character is a fundamental of sense of place in residential communities’ without however, any further consideration of the concept sense of place.

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4 Planisphere, 2012, 2.1 Planning Scheme, p. 12  
5 State Planning Policy Framework (SPPF) (Clause 15.01-5) quoted in Planisphere, 2012, 2.1 Planning Scheme, p. 12  
6 nisphere, 2012, p. 21  
7 Raymond Green, Coastal towns in transition; local perception of landscape change, CSIRO Publishing, 2010, p. 22.  
8 Planisphere, 2012, 3.3 Character Types, p. 25
The Burra Charter, considered the best practice standard for cultural heritage management in Australia, defines cultural significance in terms of ‘place’. In the Burra Charter Review (1999) substantial changes were made to explicitly recognise the associations between places and people, the importance of the meaning of places to people, and the need to respect the co-existence of cultural values. In the Burra Charter’s words, ‘Place means site, area, land, landscape, building or other work, group of buildings or other works, and may include components, contents, spaces and views’. The heritage practitioners, Peter Marquis-Kyle & Meredith Walker explain that: ‘place as used in the Charter has a broad scope: it is geographically defined and includes its natural and cultural features. Place can be used to refer to small things, such as a milestone, and large areas, such as a cultural landscape.’

The Burra Charter also defines cultural significance and ‘meanings’:

- Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. Cultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects. Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups (1.2).

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9 Refer to Celesina Sagazio, ‘Heritage: future directions’, discussion paper prepared for NTAV Cultural Advisory Committee workshop, March 2006
10 Peter Marquis-Kyle & Meredith Walker, The Illustrated Burra Charter, Australia ICOMOS Inc 2004, p. 103
11 Peter Marquis-Kyle & Meredith Walker, The Illustrated Burra Charter, p. 11
• Meanings denote what a place signifies, indicates, evokes, or expresses. Meanings generally relate to intangible aspects such as symbolic qualities and memories, or stories or beliefs relating to the place (1.16).  

‘Sense of place’ is not easily defined as a concept, because it requires a richly multi-layered-bringing together of the physical attributes and sensory experiences of place, endowing them with meaning and value(s). The Australian place scholar, Deborah Bird Rose argues that ‘Place requires you to be intercultural, inter-temporal, open-minded to the imperatives of the lives that are lived there’.13 A sense of place provides a sense of belonging and of commitment. It is the repository for our shared memories, experiences and dreams. It is a place of family and community ties - of roots - that stem from our connection to a particular location and its people. When people feel connected to a place emotionally, culturally and spiritually they care deeply about it. Thus, ‘sense of place’ depends on understanding place, experiencing place and what some theorists have called, place attachment.

**Indicators of the Sea Change Phenomenon**

Many seaside towns were traditionally built on industries such as fishing and hinterland land use – resource extraction (timber, limeburning), farming and/or grazing. Some seaside towns, including Sorrento and Queenscliff also developed as seaside resorts in the nineteenth-century. This was possible because of their natural beauty, favourable health-affirming climates and proximity to the growing metropolis of Melbourne. Up until the 1950s traditional industries remained the main employers. This has since been transformed by the growth of tourism in these towns. Figure 2 shows the relationship between fishing and hospitality in the Borough of Queenscliff (BoQ) between 1956 and 2011. The decline of employment in the fishing industry is mirrored by the increase in the tourism sector. The data shows that the town has become reliant on tourism for employment. These occupational shifts have changed the face of the town’s commercial precinct. There are now at least fifteen establishments open for morning coffee but no hardware store. Similar data cannot be easily constructed for Sorrento, primarily because the township was part of two different shires. Recent ABS data however shows that the percentage of Sorrento residents employed in the accommodation and food industries has risen from 5.5% to 10.8% in the last 10 years.

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12 Peter Marquis-Kyle & Meredith Walker, *The Illustrated Burra Charter*, p. 103, 104; see also Articles 12, 13 and 24  
Another indicator of change in these towns is the declining number of permanent residents. Hansen and Context, in their 2000 urban character study of the Borough of Queenscliffe state “… the character of an area is strongly associated with its building fabric and environmental features, but not exclusively. Social, economic and environmental factors also influence the character of an area: the type of people who live in and visit the area; the type of uses and activities that occur (emphasis added)”.14 Figure 3 shows the relationship between the permanently-occupied dwellings and the total number of dwellings in the BoQ. By 2011, more than half of the dwellings (52%) were permanently unoccupied, compared to only 23% in 1954. The impact on the town’s character can be seen particularly in gardens, where low maintenance has become necessary, and in a quieter town on weekdays, outside of peak holiday periods. Unlit houses at night create a different atmosphere. A similar picture emerges but can only be assessed over a shorter timeframe for Sorrento because of local boundary changes. The number of permanently occupied homes has fallen from 28% to 20% in the last 15 years, according to ABS data.

These changes do not necessarily pose a problem or threat to the town provided that, in the case of employment in tourism, it can be maintained. A decline in permanent residents results in a different town vibrancy, one that is based more on visitors, second home owners or holiday makers, than locals. The data also shows that different driving forces and values now exist to shape the towns, potentially with impacts on their identifying neighbourhood character and sense of place.

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Since the 1950s housing changes have been marked. Building footprint has increased; building materials and construction techniques have changed; the style, shape, height and bulk of residences have changed; and relationships between the built form and the environment have shifted (Figure 4). To chart the impact of housing change on neighbourhood character and sense of place in Sorrento and Queenscliff it is helpful to have some idea of what it means to ‘dwell’ in place. The philosopher, Martin Heidegger argues that ‘building is dwelling’ and that ‘dwelling is the essence of existence, the very manner by which men and women are on the earth, and involves an openness to and acceptance of the earth, the sky, the gods and our mortality’. Where once Sorrento and Queenscliff could be characterised by small houses on large blocks surrounded by gardens, much larger houses are now being built and site coverage has increased (Figure 4). The architectural historian and phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz suggests that ‘To gain an existential foothold man has to be able to orientate himself; he has to know where he is. But he also has to identify himself with the environment, that is, he has to know how he is a certain place’.17

15 The authors would like to acknowledge the research of Eleanor Taylor undertaken for her 2012 Masters thesis: “How is the demise of the (fibro) beach shack changing the ‘sense of place’ in Australian coastal towns?”, School of Architecture and Built Environment, Deakin University.

Figure 4. Old Melbourne Road Sorrento: a house and place; a house and its neighbours (2013) (L to R neighbouring houses side by side: a 1950s shack in local habitat; a 1960s cottage with...
This paper uses the terms ‘beach shack’ and ‘MacMansion’ metaphorically. The shack representing small unpretentious dwellings, often owner built, constructed of cheap materials (fibrous-cement) and nested in place. ‘McMansion’, a widely used pejorative term with roots in America, is deemed useful here to describe the larger pretentious contemporary houses generally from a suburban neighbourhood, not fitting into the existing coastal neighbourhood, abutting property boundaries, crowding adjacent dwellings, at variance with the ‘local’ culture and so impacting place. The change from beach shack scale and values to McMansion typology demonstrates a significant shift in how people dwell in Sorrento and Queenscliff (Figure 4). Many residents and their representatives in these towns are concerned about the changing nature of their built and natural environments. In these historic coastal towns, this concern is particularly acute because locals are aware that what brings tourists to their towns is the unique blend of built and natural environments. When houses like the Sorrento contemporary (Figure 5) are advertised as ‘... it’s just like living in the city...’ residents know their neighbourhood character and ‘sense of place’ have been seriously compromised. How, they ask, are they going to stop transplanting the suburb into their fragile coastal environment?

Figure 5 Sorrento contemporary.

Differing perspectives
The geographer and philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan observes that the visitor 'has a viewpoint', while the local 'has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment'. In order to be able to identify and continually refine and redefine the spirit of a place, a place must be experienced as meaningful. Today, too many people's

18Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia; a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*, Columbia University Press, 1974, p. 63, see also the discussion that follows.
experiences of their environment are fragmentary and fleeting. As landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn notes from her own experiences, 'To read landscape deeply requires local knowledge'. Tourism, investment, development and rapid growth have had devastating impacts on the land/seascapes either side of the Heads. Sand dunes, which constitute the underlying fabric of the tips of the Peninsulas, are notoriously fragile and unstable. In the late nineties, environmental scholar, George Seddon called for us to learn the geology; respect the landform, the soil, the hydrology, the natural vegetation, and the cultural landscape; and celebrate the context and the genius loci. Norberg-Schulz concludes his book, Genius Loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture, by stating that 'Only when understanding our place, [may we] be able to participate creatively and contribute to its history.' While Sorrento and Queenscliff are themselves quite distinctive towns, their residential areas are still dominated by a coastal land/seascape. Situated either side of Port Philip Heads these towns have a shared physical location, a shared history and now face similar development pressures.

The ubiquitous Australian summer beach holiday really came about in the 1950s with the introduction of paid annual leave and accessibility to private transport through greater ownership of cars. Social researcher, Susan Hosking believes that these circumstances also led to the construction of fibro beach shacks, ‘to enable families and/or friends to holiday together, generally in the same places, year after year.’ Yet building in place inevitably heralded change. The historian, Richard White suggests that already from the 1960s ‘the impact of mass car ownership and the spread of the holiday houses threatened the physical destruction of the very meaning of those places famed for being natural and undeveloped.’ In the seventies, while the biologist, Winty Calder recognised ‘an awakening to landscape values and their importance to the human spirit’, she also warned that ‘it is time we took stock in case our material affluence is blinding us to spiritual poverty …’ By 1989, environmental scientist, David Forster noted that ‘For too long our society has been satisfied with repairing damage to our environment’, and that ‘growing urbanisation is now threatening many of the environmental values that attracted people to move to the area’. Nonetheless urban/suburban development continued apace. In 1997, planner Leonie Sandercock stated categorically that “Urbanisation dramatically changes the character of natural landscapes, disgorges huge amounts of residuals from both production and consumption, and renders much of the natural environment unfit for further use as well as destroying the habitats of thousands of species of nonhuman nature”. She highlighted that this “transformation of nature is now one of the most basic and critical processes shaping the urban habitat.”

20 Refer to the map ‘Sorrento geological survey No 867 zone 7’, in R A Keble, (1968) The Mornington Peninsula, Geological Survey of Victoria, Memoir 17, Department of Mines, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
21 George Seddon, Landprints Reflections on place and landscape, 1997, Cambridge University Press, chapter 12, pp. 113 - 118
23 Susan Hosking, 'The Australian midsummer dream; from beach shack to Tatiana's palace' in Susan Hosking, Rick Hosking, Rebecca Pannell and Nena Bierbaum, Something rich and strange; seachanges, beaches, and the littoral in the antipodes, Wakefield Press, 2009, p. 37.
25 Refer to Winty Calder, Peninsula Perspectives, Centre for Environmental Studies, University of Melbourne 1975 p. 13.
At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Peninsulas, and their respective towns, seem to be in the grip of yet another boom, and the problems articulated in the early seventies through to the late-nineties require ever-more urgent measures to address them. In 2010 Green wrote: 'The upshot of these changes is that the locally unique constellation of landscape features that have traditionally defined the character of many coastal towns is slowly, but surely, being eroded and replaced by one of global uniformity in the built environment and a degraded natural environment'.

A changing built environment 1950 – 2013

Beach shacks (Figures 6) typically had 2 or 3 bedrooms and open plan living. On stumps, timber framed, with shallow gabled or flat roofs, these shacks were clad with a cheap readily available material: fibrous cement sheet, locally known as ‘fibro’. The ‘style’ of the beach shack learned simplicity of design and basic functionality from ‘high style’ modernism. They allowed their owners to live in ‘place’; they generally sat on large blocks creating little disturbances to the surrounding topography or vegetation. Much of the time was spent outside or on the beach. Charles Pickett, a curator of social history, believes ‘its casual look was perpetually expressive of the spontaneous and the unplanned.’

A beach shack according to photographer Simon Griffiths was ‘a spot where kids can run wild and nothing is precious – here no one worries if things rust or look shabby’. The make-do shelter for family or friends on summer holidays ‘was all about enjoying the coast and the catch. The shack’s a place you can hose out at the end of summer, lock up, leave and not worry about it’. Mathew Newton, a wilderness photographer agrees: ‘beach shacks are about fishing, they are about barbeques, they are about families and connecting with the people and the natural world that surrounds them’.

In February 2005, Neil Briggs of Briggs and Shaw Real Estate, in his address to the Nepean Historical Society spoke about life in the 1950s on the tip of the Mornington Peninsula. ‘Our place’, Briggs recalled, ‘was a tiny asbestos cement sheet house in Landsdowne Street, called Illawara; a high place near the sea.’ It provided basic accommodation: there was ‘no electricity, water, sewerage or phone; ice chests were the

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28 Raymond Green, *Coastal towns in transition; local perception of landscape change*, CSIRO Publishing, 2010, p. 22


33 Neil Briggs, of Briggs and Shaw Real Estate, address to Nepean Historical Society, February 2005
silent night refrigerators’. ‘We had two water tanks, no hot water …’. It was a simple shelter for a family who wanted to return year after year to their favourite beach destination for ‘idyllic holidays’. Family engagement meant ‘lamps, games in the evening, cards, chess, draughts, monopoly’; by day ‘beach and boat sheds; cricket; swimming; surf boards; mussels off Canterbury jetty; exploring pirate caves; fishing off flat rocks; reading the waves; abalones were prolific – prising them off rocks; trapping rabbits, skinning rabbits; picking mulberries (off St Johns Wood road); mulberry fights!!’ Families went for the beach, for the place, and nothing else. They lived with the tides. Few locals still do so today.

Into the 1980s these modest ‘needs’ began to be replaced by greater ‘wants’ and ‘desires’. Another local, Sue Ward, reflects on the impact changes have brought to the Mornington Peninsula. ‘We … bought a house in Rye. The sense of place is slightly different in Rye. It’s more built-up. Modern houses are taking the place of beach shacks and many beautiful old trees are being replaced with vast lawns that have sprinkler systems. Some houses look out of place and don’t nestle down into the environment like the beach shacks did [Figures 5 and 6]. Sometimes I wonder what the future holds for the Mornington Peninsula – there seems to be a struggle between catering to the needs of the tourists and property investors - and catering to the environment that lured us here in the first place. Like the Aboriginal people, I feel that we’re losing the land that’s been so good to us.’34 Ward points to the beginnings of ‘placelessness’, which geographer, Edward Relph suggests, is ‘a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experiences.’35 Figure 7 shows an example of contemporary development in Queenscliff, where building now masks the topography and urban values have subsumed the local coastal environment. Change in neighbourhood character is manifest.

Figure 7 Twenty-first century McMansions: Queenscliff contemporary housing (2013)

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34 Oral history project. Ward interviewed by the de Jong in 2006
Local Protection of Urban Character

Coastal towns like Sorrento and Queenscliff recognise the importance of neighbourhood character not just as something worth preserving for the enjoyment of permanent residents but as a key asset in their economic survival. The Queenscliffe Planning Scheme “clearly identifies the importance of the character of the townships and foreshore areas of the Borough to the attractiveness of the municipality … for tourists as a place to visit. As such the Borough’s character is fundamental … to its economy, which is based largely on tourism (emphasis added)”. The protection of character is reflected in the planning scheme, heritage overlays, and design and development overlays. Five areas of significant urban character have been identified in the Queenscliffe Planning Scheme. Two of these relate to the town of Queenscliff itself and are known as the Queenscliff Urban Heritage and Urban Contributory Areas. The former (core) area is where character features are strong and consistent, and a contributory area is one which abuts and is important to the character of the core area, but where lesser planning control is deemed appropriate (QPS, 2013).

Effectiveness of local planning schemes

Evidence indicates that local planning schemes have not always been successful. Changes to residential areas have been allowed to undermine the existing character and set precedents against which new aspirants compare and argue their proposals. Two indicators of the problem are the level of appeals by local communities, with and without the support of the local council, and the growth in the building footprint in the coastal towns.

Planning Decisions and Appeals

The current State body reviewing planning decisions and hearing appeals is the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) which was established in July 1998. De Jong and Fuller have analysed the decisions relevant to Queenscliff and, with caution, have suggested that up to 66% of these could have argued for the status quo and against the loss of town character. Prior to 1998, other state bodies existed for residents and councils to lodge appeals against developments that they considered were detrimental to town character and sense of place. The Town Planning Appeals Tribunal (TPAT) (1969-1981) was followed by the Planning Appeals Board (PAB) (1982-1987); and thereafter VCAT. Quantitative data in various forms (hand-written card indexes, computer print-out and on-line data-sets) is available and provides some information about the appeals against planning decisions presented to all these bodies. The quality of this information varies and some from TPAT 1969-1976 is missing. Some annual volumes of selected cases are also available. Manual inspection of the records covering the period 1976-1999 has enabled an estimation of the number of cases heard each year. Post-1999 VCAT records have been downloaded and searched by area to provide an estimate of the number of cases from that time up until 2009. The quality of the data varies. In the case of the hand-written cards and computer print-outs, only the most basic information has been recorded. This lack of information means that any interpretation of the data must be viewed with caution. Changes to the boundaries of the shire in which Sorrento is located make comparison problematic. Figures 8 and 9 show the number of planning appeals relevant to Sorrento and the Borough of Queenscliffe (which includes the township of Point Lonsdale) between 1976 and 2009 respectively.


An increasing trend in planning appeals is evident in both locations. A rise in appeals is particularly apparent since the year 2000. The general community impression of planning decisions that go to VCAT on appeal is that a decision in favour of the development is likely, albeit with slight modification. This leads to growing cynicism and weariness amongst those attempting to preserve town character. Without doubt defending council decisions before the tribunal is costly, in terms of money, and staff and community time.
Building Footprint
The most prominent change is manifested in house size.\(^{38}\) Tracking the change of the building footprint on a site over an extended period provides evidence to indicate the preference of more recent owners to cover more and more of their plot with built structures. As part of the ARC Linkage research project aerial photographs of Queenscliff have been used to analyse the change in building footprint of 30 building precincts. Approximately 580 buildings, mainly residential, were included in the analysis. This number represents approximately 22% of the residential buildings in Queenscliff, according to 2006 ABS figures. Figure 10 shows the change in building footprint for 580 buildings in the town of Queenscliff at four different intervals over the last 50 years. In 1957, buildings covered on average 25% of their site. The data clearly shows the increase in footprint over the 50-year period. Similar Sorrento footprint analysis is currently underway.

While a picture of overall gradual growth in building footprint is indicated by a whole-town analysis, more detailed inspection of individual precincts show that the building footprint of many houses exceeds the maximum permitted by Design and Development Overlay No.1 (DDO1) in the QPS. Significantly over a third of the remaining sites covered by this overlay have building footprints which exceed 40%. Some of these are mixed use zones where higher coverage (60%) is permitted and some appear to have had larger site coverage going back many decades i.e. well before the present restrictions were in place. Whatever the reason, councils trying to maintain the unique character of their towns need to be more mindful of the growing building footprint and its impact.

![Building Footprint-to-Site Ratio](image)

**Figure 10** Average building footprint-to-site ratio in Queenscliff (1957 to 2006)

Failure to Protect?
Despite State and local planning schemes, there is evidence to suggest that the coastal town character and sense of place are vulnerable and being eroded by development. Some specific examples of the failure to protect local urban character are given below:

Loss of Older Buildings
Late in 2010 an application for a planning permit was received by the BoQ for the construction of a modern double-storey dwelling on a site that was occupied by a single-storey 1950s weatherboard house. Two objections were received opposing this development and at the April 2011 council meeting, the Senior Planner provided a report

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\(^{38}\) R J Fuller, R H Crawford and D Leonard, “So What is Wrong with a Big House?” 43\textsuperscript{rd} Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Architectural Science Association. This paper’s Table 3 for material quantities for 1950 nad 2009 houses is particularly relevant to this paper.
which found, on balance, that the proposed development “is appropriate for the site and is consistent with the provisions of the Queenscliffe Planning Scheme which relate to this property”.\textsuperscript{39} The original house and the new dwelling are shown in Figure 11. As Green notes in his studies of the coastal towns of the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, the significant impact of ‘the gradual changes that result from older single family homes being torn down and replaced by ‘modern’, bigger houses are … insidious’.\textsuperscript{40}

The QPS identifies two ‘character themes’ within its borough, one of which covers Queenscliff and the other, Point Lonsdale. These themes are further divided into ‘core’ and ‘contributory’ areas, as described earlier. However, the site of the house in Figure 11 is actually in a third ‘character management area’ which relates to areas along Swan Bay and Port Phillip Bay. The border of this ‘Foreshore Area is the Urban Contributory Area (QPS, 2013: Map 1). Site coverage is inexplicably allowed to be higher in the Foreshore Areas (55%) than in the Urban Contributory Area (40%). If views of Swan Bay and Port Phillip Bay were held to be of prime importance for locals and tourists alike, the protection of the town’s natural character would permit less dominant structures on the foreshore rather than ones that legally can be significantly larger (38%) than one street back from the foreshore. It is interesting to note that approval for this building was subsequently used as a precedent by another applicant for a planning permit several streets away in the Urban Contributory Area.

![Figure 11](image)

**Figure 11** (Left) original 1950s house and (right) new 2012 dwelling

**Protection of Waterscapes**

Waterscapes, that is views of the water from various vantage points are usually intrinsic to coastal towns. In the case of Queenscliff, their protection is specifically highlighted within the Queenscliffe Planning Scheme and applies to Urban Heritage and Urban Contributory Areas alike. The Scheme states that its policy is to protect “the opportunities for long views towards Swan Bay or Port Phillip Bay and shorter views to intact historic buildings and streetscapes”.\textsuperscript{41} Figure 12 shows a view of Port Phillip Bay, now lost due to the construction of large double-storey houses, at the end of this street. As one resident remarked: “I used to be able to see the Bay and now all I see is roofs”.\textsuperscript{42} Clearly there has been a failure to protect an aspect of town character by this development.


\textsuperscript{40} Green, R. ‘Sea change on the Great Ocean Road’. *Landscape Australia*, 2004, 26, 104, 73-77.

\textsuperscript{41} QPS, 2103, p.201

\textsuperscript{42} Verbal communication with Fuller, 2013
Building Height
The desire to obtain views of the water and/or natural surrounds has led to great pressure on councils to allow buildings of increasing height to be built. The QPS acknowledges that this is a key issue within the municipality. The earlier urban character study of the Borough of Queenscliffe carried out an extensive community consultation process and found that the “community generally expressed a desire for greater control and certainty over the height of buildings”. Furthermore the study stated “the issue of height correlates to the main change which has a negative effect on the character of the Borough expressed in the questionnaires and workshops in relation to the dominance of new large buildings from the foreshore and within established areas”.

Figure 13 shows a recently completed two-storey addition to a house in one of the streets of the Urban Contributory Area of Queenscliff. This street, like much of the town’s non-heritage core, has a “range of domestic architecture, representing almost every style from the 19th century to the present day.” This “diverse collection of individual building types and forms from the historic and modern eras is one of the central features of Queenscliffe’s urban character”. The common feature of the dwellings in this street, like many others in the town, is that they are all single storey. There is only one other double-storey house in this street, a 1960-70s building on one corner. The permission to allow the addition of a full second storey (rather than an attic room) on this house will likely lead to other similar renovations in the future, with this building used as a precedent in any planning application. A simple thought experiment which imagines the whole street transformed from single to double-storey homes provides an insight of the fundamental change in the character of this Queenscliff street that would result. The authors of this paper contend that such a transformation would have a negative impact on the very aspect that draws new residents and tourists alike to the coastal towns.

43 Hansen and Context, 2000, p.17
44 Hansen and Context, 2000, p.40
Some conclusions
This paper has documented some changes from shacks to McMansions from the 1950s to the present, through perceived changes and footprint analysis, and argued that urban values, suburbanisation and development pose significant threats to neighbourhood character and place in the coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff. As McMansions have become more and more visible on the Peninsulas, in and around the towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff, the natural features have become less visible (Figures 4, 5, 7 and 12). Relph sees the ‘mass movement of people with all their fashions and habits’, as encouraging the spread of placelessness.45

Key issues and threats to neighbourhood character and sense of place in these historic coastal towns are second-storey additions; new multi-storey houses; contemporary infill; as well as landscaping, siting and building rhythm unsympathetic to local topography, coastal environment and coastal habitat (Figure 4). The authors have yet to consider the impact of fencing; garages and carports as possible further contributing factors. Planning controls need further tightening; foreshore area site coverage needs revisiting. Coastal areas such as the tips of the Bellarine and Mornington Peninsulas - near to the metropolitan centres of Melbourne and Geelong - have been undergoing rapid change. Existing environmental and heritage overlays have not protected the historic towns of Sorrento or Queenscliff and their hinterlands. Coastal scenic quality is an amenity that attracts new residents yet is threatened by new development accompanying them. The pressures of the ‘sea change’ phenomenon, increased tourism and second- and holiday-home ownership, and ever-improving access have had major impacts on neighbourhood character and place. Local communities are not against development per se, but they are against inappropriate development. They value their planning overlays – environmental and heritage – and ask that they are upheld and enforced. They ask that permit applications only request variations to the overlays for sound reasons. Too often a permit results in a compromise of the overlay. Controls need to be more explicit for consistent outcomes.

The research will now complete the documentation of the changes in built form, character and vegetation; further evaluate the effectiveness of planning scheme provisions in achieving their stated objectives and policies; and combine both the qualitative and quantitative measures into a user-friendly methodology to assist in place-making that can be applied to coastal ‘sea change’ communities seeking to address sustainable development issues.