STREET SMART

Corporate Development in Historic Town Centres
Throughout Australia the conservation and appropriate management of traditional main streets and precincts with heritage character is an important issue for all levels of government and local communities. Community awareness of both the social and economic value of historic town centres has risen substantially over the last 20 years. There are now many examples where physical improvements to heritage precincts have led to dramatic turnarounds in the economic fortunes of formerly depressed environments.

The revolution in Australian eating habits, accompanied by the introduction of outdoor cafes has changed the nature of street character and use. Streets have become outdoor rooms for the whole community. Australia’s temperate climate encourages outdoor eating, street life and social activity.

Over the last decade the introduction of corporate outlets in Australia has also increased dramatically. The proliferation of fast food companies, video chains, hardware stores, petrol stations and other national and multinational companies has been accompanied by large brightly coloured signs and standard building designs, often imposed on a streetscape with no consideration of the existing traditional character. Supermarket developments have routinely included large open expanses of carparkting surrounding monolithic buildings which make no reference to the scale or style of other buildings nearby.

As there is a clear commercial advantage for those outlets to be as visible as possible, corporations normally propose the maximum allowable signage and easily recognisable colour schemes in their development applications to local councils.

This has had a negative impact on the visual amenity of many heritage precincts and conservation areas in Australia. By contrast, in certain areas of Europe and North America corporations have been required to modify their proposals, restrain the signage and change building designs to accommodate local character considerations.

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This document provides a framework policy for corporations, local government and the community to assess and guide the introduction of new businesses into established townscapes which have heritage character. Heritage surveys of municipalities and main streets have identified much of what is of heritage significance. As a consequence many metropolitan areas and country towns now have designated historic conservation precincts or streets, either recognised equally in planning schemes or listed by the National Trust of Australia. This policy document applies to identified conservation areas in local planning schemes as well as traditional town centres not covered by detailed conservation planning controls. It assists local planning authorities with simple suggestions for modifications to the approvals process, and encourages private sector organisations to respect the character of the environment in which they do business.

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The Rocks in Sydney provides a good example of a carefully managed heritage precinct where considerable attention is given to building presentation, signs and appropriate design of new development.

Physical improvements to buildings in country towns are actively encouraged by government. This Broken Hill example shows the transformation of a significant corner building.

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Townscape Context

Townscape context is a result of spatial patterns set by the relationship between buildings and their settings. It includes features such as setbacks, heights, overall form, landscaping, vistas, landmark buildings and topography. The essence of this character should be recognised and repeated in any new corporate development.
When designing a new building for use by a corporation so that it fits into a significant townscape, it is useful to compare the urban street to a room. Streets have their own walls, floor and furniture, all of which contribute to their character.

- the walls of a street include the buildings and the contribution they make to the edges of the townscape. Most buildings are privately owned;
- the floor of a street is its public space including the street and the pavement itself, its configuration, material and function as a transport corridor and its role as the place for people to walk;
- the furniture of a street includes trees and plants, street furniture, seats, lights, signs, garbage bins, monuments and public art.

Corporations can make positive contributions to townscape by taking into account the impact of any proposed development on the overall character of the street and by adopting the following principles:

**Location**
Any developments should be sensitive to the overall character of the location. Retention of established landscaping, consideration of local building character and form and general townscape context issues must be considered.

**Scale, Mass and Height**
The general scale of adjacent buildings should be respected. Standard corporate units should not be used in precincts with consistent townscape character. New development should continue the predominant height of the surrounding buildings and lining up of parapets and string courses. Large wall areas should be broken up with surface decoration which echoes that of neighbouring buildings, and large areas of glass or unrelieved walls should generally be avoided.

**Siting and Setback**
Traditionally, commercial heritage streetscapes have buildings erected to the footpath line with a veranda over the footpath. This principle should be adopted with new buildings and with the adaptation of existing buildings for new corporate use. New outlets such as fast food premises are often set back behind large open car-parking spaces. This breaks the continuity of the established frontages and streetscape character.

**Streetscape Form and General Proportion**
Consideration should be given to the continuity of the existing proportion and rhythm of architectural elements such as verandas, parapets, windows and doors.

When adapting a heritage building in a commercial streetscape for use by a corporation, developers should adopt the following principles:

- respect the heritage significance of the building
- obtain expert architectural advice
- retain original elements, particularly on the exterior
- reconstruct original verandas if this has been removed
- design new elements such as shopfronts which are appropriate and sympathetic to the character of the building.

This example in Melbourne shows oversized intrusive buildings (left) which make no reference to the opposite side of the street (right) where consistent Victorian shops have an established character.
Conservation areas and heritage precincts generally are covered by advertising sign policies which have been adopted by local councils. In New South Wales the following government advertising guidelines are available for reference in preparing local policies:


Similar documents have also been prepared in other states. These policies address the appropriate size, design and positioning of signs on buildings. When signage is unregulated, buildings can become unrecognisable or concealed beneath a jumble of brightly coloured and mis-matched signs. When signs are carefully regulated the visual blight of advertising and corporate signs elsewhere in the Australian urban environment becomes apparent. Do not cover the building and site with signs. A small number of well positioned signs is always sufficient for visual clarity. Signs should be positioned in logical and clearly visible locations on buildings. Often sign panels on reconstructed verandas provide much clearer information than a jumble of signs on shopfronts and parapets.

Restrictions on corporate signage are now well accepted in conservation areas where planning controls are well defined. Large internally lit corporate signs can be very intrusive elements within a streetscape context and can disrupt established building detailing and decoration. Controlling the number, type and position of signs adds to their overall clarity and effectiveness.

These two examples in Hawaii show fast food outlets designed to reflect and complement local character.

A standard corporate design imposes on a streetscape without reference to the building underneath.

This McDonald's in Melbourne is an excellent example of a new infill 'fast food' outlet which sits well in the streetscape.

These US examples show sensitively designed petrol stations which have responded to local design issues – Washington (left); Hawaii (right).
Corporations and councils should engage in constructive and collaborative debate. Corporations often indicate they will relocate unless all their corporate image requirements are met in a certain location. This bargaining tactic can be successfully met with negotiations to achieve a development which is suitable both for the corporation and the local community. Corporations and franchisees always research the suitability of the location for their business. In response councils should clearly indicate the objectives and policies that are applied to all development proposals.

**Guidelines for Corporations**

Many traditional corner buildings are now being adapted to fast food outlets and are more successful when signage is restrained (Hawthorn, Victoria).

For the development of corporate outlets in identified townscapes and heritage precincts, companies can assist the development approval process by undertaking the following steps:

**Consult with Local Councils at the Outset**

If a conservation area or other special character zoning exists, refer to all relevant planning policies. Ask the local planner to explain the objectives for new development within the townscape.

**Obtain Appropriate Specialist Design Assistance**

Corporations should engage a suitably skilled architect to outline the appropriate design parameters for new building, alterations to existing buildings and the installation of signage. Many councils retain consultant heritage advisers who are able to provide free architectural advice at the early stage of the design process. Preliminary concept plans should be prepared and feedback sought from council staff prior to preparing final documentation.

**Pay Special Attention to the Location**

A one-off design reinforces the cultural and visual qualities of the locale, while it can sometimes be more expensive than a standard unit, it can be marketed as a positive contribution by the corporation to the community. This approach is now common in Europe and the United Kingdom and is demanded by local planning authorities. The results are always very positive.

**Undertake Community Consultation**

In particularly sensitive areas this can assist the formulation of appropriate design solutions. It is preferable to undertake consultation prior to lodging a development application. Be receptive to the wishes of the local community and negotiate positive win-win situations for all parties concerned.

**Guidelines for Local Councils**

Any applicant, from a house owner to a large commercial corporation, needs to be given clear guidelines at the outset about the appropriate built form and framework of a proposed development. Councils can assist with the development approvals process by undertaking the following:

**Be Prepared with Clear Policies**

Policies which outline the desired future character and heritage requirements for an area should be in place. Clearly explain these policies at preliminary meetings with the corporate applicant. Councils need to carefully assess the impact of the new development on the existing townscape character.

**Provide Essential Comment and Free Design Advice at the Preliminary Stages of Discussion**

Clear and unanimous support for established conservation policies should prevail. Avoid conflicting and inconsistent advice from various levels of local government staff and council elected members. Be confident and provide visionary leadership.

**Establish These Development Parameters at the Outset**

This is particularly important for built form and car parking issues. For established commercial streetscapes, buildings generally are aligned to the front property boundary with car parking located at the rear. These principles should be established clearly at the commencement of discussions.

A new shopfront for McDonald’s in Hampstead, London. Restrained clear signs are appropriate in this conservation area.
In Fremantle, WA, the local council was able to successfully negotiate an appropriate new building for a Hungry Jack's outlet with the developer.

An appropriate application of fast-food signs to an existing heritage building in Melbourne.

Service station in Moama, NSW where pitched roofs are successfully incorporated into the design configuration.

Pizza Hut in Randwick, NSW is an example of the reuse of an existing building with restrained signs.

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Front cover photograph - McDonald's Circular Quay - restrained signage achieved through constructive debate.