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**Professor Peter Newton**

# GREYFIELDS REVISITED

PHOTO: PAUL JONES

Australian cities' ageing residential tracts – or 'greyfields' – offer environmental and economic solutions to Australia's hunger for city housing **BY PROFESSOR PETER NEWTON\***

**IN THE NEXT 40 YEARS**, Melbourne's population is forecast to approach seven million residents – a growth fuelled by historically high national targets for population (35 million) and immigration.

This acceleration in growth is already exerting pressure on Australia's major capital cities and their housing markets. Metropolitan planning strategies for Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane – designed to achieve more compact urban development – require that more than half of future new housing be constructed in established, middle-ring suburbs and the remainder in the traditional outer 'greenfields'.

This strategy was to be coupled with other sustainable city objectives related to reducing resource use (energy and water consumption, public transport, medium-density housing and so on) and greenhouse gas emissions. To date, these plans are failing to deliver the desired outcomes.

The failure is largely due to an inability on the part of government, the development industry and local communities to tackle a 'wicked' challenge: creating a workable and replicable model for more intensive regeneration of Australia's 'greyfield' suburbs.

For me, greyfields is a term for describing

the ageing, occupied residential tracts of suburbs that are physically, technologically and environmentally obsolescent and which represent economically outdated, failing or undercapitalised real estate assets.

They are typically found in a 5 to 25-kilometre radius of the centre of each capital city and are service, transport, amenity and employment-rich in comparison to the outer suburbs and urban fringe.

Fragmented, piecemeal, residential redevelopment characteristic of the infill occurring in our greyfields – that is, where one residential property is demolished and

up to four townhouses appear in its place – is necessary but not sufficient to meet the demands for additional housing.

The pace and scale of redevelopment around activity centres and on major arterials is also lagging. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* has reported that the co-founder of Intel likes to say that “companies come to strategic inflection points, when the fundamentals of business change and they either make the hard decision to invest and take a more promising trajectory, or do nothing and wither”.

The same is true for cities. By neglecting the regeneration of greyfields, governments are consigning our big cities to less sustainable, liveable and competitive futures.

During 2010 I will lead a research project with Monash University’s Professor Shane Murray and RMIT’s Professor Ron Wakefield, funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), to articulate a new model for greyfield precinct residential redevelopment – akin to those which successfully operate in the greenfields and brownfields of our cities.

Among the key questions to be explored are:

- Why aren’t we building more medium-density housing in the middle suburbs? And the related question, what can be done about it?
- Where are the most prospective greyfield precincts located? What are the necessary market and community dynamics for precinct redevelopment?
- What range of visions and models for precinct regeneration can be articulated for different places? How can low-rise, high-density be introduced to increase housing yield together with a mix of dwelling types, styles and costs? How can the precinct achieve carbon neutrality; demonstrate application of water-sensitive urban design with integrated urban water systems; minimise waste generation and automate waste disposal; and present more walkable neighbourhoods?
- How can low-rise, high-density be delivered more cost-effectively than at present? What design, construction, manufacturing and labour force

innovations can be brought to bear at a greyfield precinct scale?

- What new institutional and governance arrangements need to be established?

Articulating a new development model for greyfields’ residential precinct regeneration is central to the AHURI project. It also aligns well with the national objectives emerging from within the Major Cities Unit of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, and also city redevelopment objectives, such as the Committee for Melbourne’s Transforming Melbourne Program.

The benefits would be considerable: substantial infrastructure cost savings compared with greenfield-fringe development; more environmentally sustainable and resilient communities; more affordable housing; enabling the large cohort of ageing baby boomers to downsize to a nearby precinct redevelopment with spare cash; and the basis for a new type of property development industry involving government and community partnerships.

Instead of perpetuating the outward growth of Australia’s big cities – the easy but unsustainable path for urban development – our more challenging strategy is to redirect population and property investment inwards to the greyfields as a catalyst for their regeneration, and that of the big cities. ■

*\* Professor Peter Newton is a researcher in sustainable built environments at Swinburne University of Technology’s Institute for Social Research. He leads an ARC Discovery project on the determinants of urban consumption, and has just completed a study on carbon-neutral housing (hybrid building). His most recent books are Transitions: Pathways Towards More Sustainable Urban Development in Australia (Springer 2008) and Technology, Design and Process Innovation in the Built Environment (Taylor & Francis 2009).*

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