Resilient communities
what role are you playing?

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Lived experience of multiple, rolling lockdowns in the face of COVID-19 sharpens our focus on community resilience. Calls to action in response to our current situation remind us that much of the urban planning system evolved from similar health crises in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Improving our community’s health and wellbeing has been the core role of planning over the last century, hasn’t it?

Yet, key planning decisions have resulted in reduced resilience in our cities, an outcome that is glaringly obvious at this critical time. How can planners ensure that recovery efforts don’t repeat past errors and further reduce resilience of our communities?

The rise of urban resilience

Resilience is not a new concept, but it is most familiar within a personal context rather than an urban one. What comes to mind when we think of ourselves as resilient? This prompts us to ask, resilience to what? Lately, to quite a lot! And what does this look like at a city scale? Urban resilience is focussed on interconnected challenges posed by three global trends: globalisation, urbanisation; and climate change. Increasing dependence on urban systems, combined with their vulnerability to shocks and stresses, prompted The Rockefeller Foundation to fund 100 Resilient Cities – to prepare for and respond to 21st century challenges.

We define urban resilience as the capacity of individuals, institutions, businesses and systems in a city to adapt, survive and thrive amidst acute shocks and chronic stresses. Understanding the interplay between shocks and stresses helps us mitigate their impacts. Stresses can undermine our ability to respond to and recover from shocks, and some can cause the shocks of tomorrow. Ultimately, resilience awareness teaches us that we need to be prepared for the unexpected by taking transformative action to make cities better – in both the short and long-term, in good times and bad.

COVID-19 is testing the resilience of our cities – not just us as individuals

The pandemic proves the need to understand relationships between acute shock events and chronic stresses. At an individual level, those with underlying health issues are at greater risk of being seriously affected by COVID-19. Workers who already string together multiple jobs to make ends meet are most impacted by the economic recession. The lockdown affects those with pre-existing mental health challenges more significantly.

These are not individual problems, although the consequences manifest at an individual scale. They have roots in systemic issues: how healthcare is delivered; how property economics shapes communities; and how city design supports inclusive community connections. We must take the opportunity to reshape these systems, in some cases to redesign them entirely. The ‘new normal’ has become an over-used phrase to describe our need to rethink the way that we work and live. But are we (as planners) taking our responsibility seriously?

Are our response and recovery efforts pointing us in a genuinely new direction where one is needed? Some examples, such as a desperate willingness to fast track approval for any shovel-ready project – suggest they are not.

From a resilience perspective, this is our chance to adapt. Neglecting underlying issues will exacerbate the next shock when it arrives. A narrow focus now neglects the opportunity for a stronger, more resilient economic recovery that readies us for the next bushfire season, economic shift, or social upheaval.

Beginning with our strengths

Urban resilience is fundamentally about drawing on our strengths and using these to shape new ideas and solutions, building on best-practice lessons from elsewhere. Since COVID-19 began, the importance of local social connection has been evident. Neighbourhoods where daily needs can be met have proven invaluable as lockdown conditions have increased our reliance on local networks for basic supplies and these human interactions.

This is a simple reminder that, for the most part, designing places that encourage social connection, active living, and localised access to goods and services is key. As we always knew, designing with people at the centre is also good for the environment. We can’t force social connection, or local business success, or more physical activity but, as planners, we have a range of tools that can make it easier for people to connect with neighbours and the places where they live. The ‘20-minute neighbourhood’ concept, as championed by the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning via Plan Melbourne, provides a helpful framework for describing the characteristics of neighbourhoods that work well.

Effective 20-minute neighbourhoods provide physical environments that encourage active living, support local businesses, and invite frequent and meaningful social connections. The multiple benefits that come from people-centric planning more easily allow communities to thrive when times are good, and hang together when they aren’t – essentially, to be more resilient.

However, even since the concept was announced, it seems that many of our planning decisions (large and small) continue to undermine the concept: retail activity is allowed (nay, encouraged) to shift to out-of-centre locations; height limits dominate structure plan discussions; and residential areas are increasingly insulated from employment areas.

Planners have the tools – but are we using them?

So, what do resilient neighbourhoods look like? We have plenty of examples to draw on, both locally and internationally.
But to keep things simple, here are four tools every planner in Victoria can use to actually plan our city – and make it more resilient.

**Double down on transit corridors**

All over the world, corridors with transit are shown to be highly resilient places that minimise the cost of living in nearby communities. A particular impact is the greater choice of transport mode, meaning that people can choose very cheap transport when they need it. Active transport significantly increases in transit corridors because the intensity of the corridor places many more destinations within easy reach of a large catchment of people. Statutory or strategic, planners need to double down on the PPTN.

**Allow five storeys**

In these corridors, and any activity centre, we should be less afraid of five-storey buildings. Look at how any traveller (from your community) marvels at how enjoyable European towns are. Their attractiveness comes from mixed uses and intensity arising from having 3-8 storey buildings designed at a human scale and creating a range of active public spaces. We don’t need them everywhere, but putting a bit more height in the right places will make communities hum (perhaps even sing). Statutory or strategic, planners need to increase the intensity of our urban form.

**Approve parking waivers**

Clause 52.06 massively overstates the amount of parking communities actually need. This is because the rate is based on parking being free to consumers. If Clause 52.06 related to gelati and it was free, we wouldn’t need Mr Whippy vans. But parking is not gelati. It is way more expensive, and not nearly as nice when you have too much. As all planners know, 8% of Victorian households do not own a car at all. Zero-car households are forced (by planners) to pay for parking that other people use – free parking that makes other people overweight and increases the burden on our health system, a burden that zero car households also subsidise. Statutory or strategic, planners need to reduce parking requirements.

**Involves communities**

Resilient Melbourne is working with partners across sectors to respond to the question, “How do we create and sustain buildings, infrastructure and neighbourhoods that build resilience by genuinely reflecting the needs, values and aspirations of the communities using or occupying these spaces?” Communities need direct involvement in the process of becoming more resilient for two main reasons:

- First, communities are best placed to articulate their own needs, values and aspirations, which can then inform built outcomes.
- Second, the process of involving communities in decision-making is empowering and provides opportunities to build social connection and trust, both among community members and between communities and institutions. This trust comes in handy when hard times hit – as we’ve learned now through multiple rounds of lockdown in Melbourne.

Resilient Melbourne’s ‘Resilient Communities’ initiative has started to reveal the importance and potential of what it means to ‘turn customers into citizens’. Development site partners are trialling various models of involving future residents and key organisations in decisions about design, planning and governance of new residential environments. Statutory or strategic, planners need to be inclusive in the approach to decision-making about cities.

Development and construction are front-of-mind as opportunities to help the COVID-19 recovery. Excitingly, affordable housing, bike lanes, and other social projects are being fast-tracked. But are the commitments coming from a resilience perspective, or were they just another set of shovel-ready ideas?

**Committing to resilience thinking**

Resilience thinking requires a long-term, holistic view, which planners are well-placed to take based on the discipline’s strong understanding of a city as a system. We must first understand the shocks and stresses we are responding to. Then ask: ‘what is the opportunity’ that can open the aperture to projects with multiple benefits. Then take an inclusive approach to developing projects guaranteed to achieve stronger outcomes. Resilience is not primarily about efficiency. Good outcomes and thoughtful processes are strongly linked and now, more than ever, we must keep the long view in sight.

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VCAT guidance on shared parking arrangements in a suburban context

David Vorochheimer MPIA (fellow) and Disha Kamal from HWL Ebsworth Lawyers have reported on recent VCAT guidance as to the provision of off-site parking for a planning permit application, and in particular whether it is appropriate to rely on parking in the locality in the absence of any on-site car parking.

The Tribunal found that there are efficiencies to be gained from the consolidation of shared car spaces even in suburban locations, and that in some instances it may be appropriate for an application to rely entirely on shared off-site car parking in a suburban context. However, in order for a permit applicant to rely entirely on shared off-site car parking for a proposal, the car parking will need to be available in the long term and will be physically suitable for the shared uses.

In the recent decision of Marne Development Pty Ltd v Monash City Council [2020] VCAT 581, the Tribunal found that while a reduction in the car parking requirement to zero, and the reliance on off-site car parking may be acceptable in suburban locations, it was not appropriate for a proposal to rely entirely on off-site car parking which was not within the control of a permit holder and not physically suitable for the proposed use.

The decision is significant as it provides guidance as to the provision off-site parking, and in particular whether it is appropriate to rely on parking in the locality in the absence of any on-site car parking.

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