**Toronto and Melbourne**  
_{Reflections on the wisdom of Jennifer Keesmaat}_

_Sebastian Moseley RPIA (Fellow)_

As Toronto's Chief City Planner from 2012 to 2017, Jennifer Keesmaat was not afraid to push the envelope. She publicly disagreed with Mayor John Tory's proposals for a subway extension, challenged the status quo and tweeted that councillor speeches were “insufferable”. And yet, it is not her outspoken views that Jennifer is best known for, but rather her policies. This includes a $154 million Cycling Network Plan for 525km of cycling infrastructure, ground-breaking affordable housing initiatives, and an overhaul of Ontario's planning tribunal.

Given this, the Victorian Planning Authority was delighted to have Jennifer as keynote speaker at our second Futures Thinking event on 8 April, which was proudly sponsored by Ethos Urban. The VPA is the Victorian Government agency responsible for planning for quality growth in designated urban areas across the State. We believe that fostering an informed debate about urban growth is an important means to have Jennifer as keynote speaker at our second Futures initiative, and an overhaul of Ontario's planning tribunal.

Jennifer was unequivocal that urban change must first and foremost be led by transit investment. Reinforcing the old planning for Victoria's urban future.

Melbourne and Toronto are remarkably similar in many ways. They are on the edge of significant waterways (Port Phillip Bay and Lake Ontario), very multicultural – with nearly 50% of residents being foreign-born in Toronto and 35% in Melbourne – and have networks of light rail vehicles (trams and streetcars) underpinning inner city transport. And both Melbourne and Toronto are undergoing significant population growth, with the Greater Toronto area increasing by 6% between 2011 to 2016 and Melbourne's population increasing by 12% over the same period.

But what learnings might Melburnians draw from Toronto's urban renaissance over the past couple of decades? Jennifer proposed five “big moves” for managing urban growth. I won't try to do justice to each one but will outline some reflections on what these principles could mean for Melbourne.

**Fix wonky policy**

In Toronto's case, the 'wonky policy' was a lack of clarity and consistency in identifying where urban growth will go and, just as importantly, where it won't go. Setting strong limits to growth, Jennifer said, enabled Toronto to grow sustainably, protecting the environmental and productive landscapes valued by its communities and driving the creation of compact, walkable mixed-use communities across the city.

In Melbourne, both sides of politics are committed to preserving our urban growth boundary in its current location, but we recognise that eventually greenfield land within the boundary will run out. At the VPA we are constantly challenging ourselves: are we creating enough opportunities for new housing in established Melbourne? Are we unlocking as much growth as we can in our regional cities and towns? And are we driving efficient use of the remaining stocks of greenfields land within the boundary?

We will continue to re-evaluate these considerations as we finalise important documents, such as the updated Structure Planning Guidelines, working in collaboration with key partners such as DELWP.

**Plan land differently**

Jennifer says that if we want to increase density within our suburbs, we need to ensure we are also providing clear benefits to the community. This could involve creating new streets and public spaces, mixing uses (and tenures and income groups) within buildings, and delivering amenities that the community wants and needs. By focusing on community benefit and planning differently, Toronto has secured the 'social licence' to achieve some outstanding (and high density) urban renewal outcomes.

This is why the VPA negotiates strongly to achieve a package of community benefits – particularly including affordable housing – in our urban renewal projects. At Altona North, for example, we successfully negotiated a requirement for 5% of all 3,000 homes (townhouses and apartments) to be affordable. We are now working towards a similar outcome for a project in Bentleigh East. And at Arden, in North Melbourne, the Victorian Government has a target for at least 6% of all new housing in the precinct to be affordable for low to moderate income households.

**Invest in the public realm**

Jennifer spoke strongly of the need not just to build these spaces, but to program and curate them. In other words, we need to look beyond changes to the planning scheme and actively pursue place-making initiatives that will bring people joy. Sometimes this can involve creative ideas that we wouldn’t usually plan for. A fountain featuring somewhat kitsch iron statues of dogs, for instance, has become one of Toronto's most loved public spaces!

In Melbourne, our inner city has some of the best public realm in Australia. And the quality public spaces created under the elevated rail lines delivered as part of the Level Crossing Removal Program are the most innovative of their kind nationally. But as our city becomes denser, we need to do more to create the amenity that will support this. Rooftop gardens, micro-parks, active street spaces, spaces for performing and digitally enabled spaces will brighten our neighbourhoods and provide crucial meeting places for people to gather.

At the VPA, we are looking to the Arden precinct, 2km from the city centre, to pilot new forms of innovative public realm. By planning for blue-green infrastructure (combining open space and flood mitigation) we hope to create a distinctive sense of place around water in the landscape, provide open spaces for recreation and biodiversity, and reduce stormwater and flooding risks.

And in Bentleigh East, the VPA has been partnering with Glen Eira City Council to plan for the transformation of a 24-hectare site previously used for cigarette manufacturing. When preparing this plan, the VPA ensured design was at the forefront of the new community. The town square will be located at the centre of the precinct, so that future residents and workers will have a place to meet, sit and relax. And we have also set aside 10% of the precinct as open space (almost double the standard local requirements). Innovative design solutions have meant that the open spaces are multi-functional, with our redesign of Marlborough Street Reserve delivering both additional water storage and a new synthetic surface soccer field.

**Lead with transit**

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saying that “the best transport plan is a land-use plan”, Jennifer set out four key principles: moving people, moving goods, moving minds and moving less.

Toronto’s King Street Transit Pilot, which is now permanent, is an inspiring example of all of the above. King Street has the highest concentration of jobs in Canada, and the King Street streetcar (similar to a tram) is the busiest route in Toronto, transporting 84,000 people per weekday. However, the streetcar kept getting stuck in traffic because cars turning left would hold up the entire route.

To fix this problem, in November 2017 the council restricted through traffic movements at intersections in the busiest 2.6km of the route, giving the streetcars clear passage. The pilot was about moving people efficiently, improving public space, and supporting businesses and the economy. The results spoke for themselves. Streetcars now travel faster during all periods of the day and approximately 30,000 minutes of travel time are saved by King Street streetcar customers daily.

In addition, 45 unique amenities were introduced across 18 new public realm spaces in the curb lane, including cafés, art installations, public seating areas, and parklets. These spaces created opportunities for people to linger and provided extra space for pedestrians to walk when sidewalks are crowded.

There is much to reflect on here for Melbourne. While we love our trams and trains, we are overwhelmingly a low-density, car-based city. In this environment, would this sort of change win the ‘hearts and minds’ of a community that is still very wedded to cars? Undoubtedly the space to watch here is the Suburban Rail Loop. Done right, this project will be much more than just a transit project. It has the potential to drive walkability, density and diversity to areas around transit stops, resulting in new places where people want to live, work and relax.

Build capacity for change

Jennifer concluded with a call to all urban professionals to build the capacity of communities to understand and shape the decisions affecting their environments. All too often urban change happens despite community input, not because of it.

Jennifer called for us to shift this paradigm through three simple steps: find believers, create new constituencies, and build technical expertise. This simple recipe recognises that local champions can be as powerful in driving change as they can in opposing it, and that evidence-based decisions are key to sensible urban outcomes.

At the VPA, we are increasingly shifting our focus to more and better engagement with communities, earlier in the planning process. We acknowledge we have some way to go in this, and that many Councils are leading in this space. Our goal is to ensure that the communities affected by our plans have genuine opportunities to be heard and to shape those plans.

Key decisions ahead

So, should Melbourne follow Toronto’s urban trajectory? Well, there are clearly many features of Toronto’s planning context that have similarities to Melbourne’s, mirroring outcomes sought in Plan Melbourne 2017-50. We face important decisions in the next few years that will significantly influence our urban future: decisions about affordable housing policy, value creation, and land around major transport projects. The VPA looks forward to helping tackle Melbourne’s big issues and opportunities.

Stuart Moseley is the CEO of the VPA, the Victorian Government’s lead agency for planning urban growth and renewal of key sites and precincts across urban Victoria. He can be contacted at stuart.moseley@vpa.vic.gov.au

Perambulations and Prattle

Compiled by Kristen Wilkes MPIA

Both Emily Mottram and Ben Weiner have recently farewelled the Victorian Planning Authority. Emily has just taken up an exciting opportunity as the Executive Director of Precinct Design at the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, while Ben is now a Principal Project Manager at the Department of Health and Human Services. Peter Sagar will act as Executive Director of both the Inner and Middle Melbourne VPA teams over the next six months, while Steve Dunn continues his secondment at DHHS.

Alan Tran has left AECOM and has begun his new role as Senior Urban Designer at Rail Projects Victoria. Wyan Vong has also started at Rail Projects Victoria, as a Planning and Environment Advisor.

Yarra Ranges Shire Council have recently said goodbye to Keryn Williams who is now enjoying her retirement. And Anastasia Badina, previously at Hansen Partnership, has started a new role at Melton City Council as a Strategic Planner. Lastly, Ethos Urban has welcomed Tom Eastick to their Economics team and have sadly farewelled Chad Griffiths, who is enjoying doing contract work and the rest of his life.

Contributions to Perambulations and Prattle can be made by the 12th of each month to Kristen Wilkes at kwilkes@ethosurban.com

Welcome to our new members and congratulations to elevating members

VICTORIA

MPIA: Miza Moreau, Julia Bennett, Kate Johnson, Tudor Taylor, Janine Coffey, Anne-Marie Pisani, Samuel Hilton, Michelle Lee, Murray White, Bahar Manouchehri, John Allworth, Nicholas Andrews, Anthony Scarpaci.


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