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THE ONLY WAY IS UP?

A public housing block set for demolition. A famous old hotel under threat. Jacqui O'Leary investigates Melbourne's culture of redevelopment and asks if the best of the Garden City is being lost. Photos by Ilana Rose.

It's important to retain landscapes—they act as pegs for local knowledge. Without historic landmarks and sites the city becomes alienating through a loss of memory of what was once there...

So says Dr Allan Mayne, a lecturer in history at The University of Melbourne, in response to the massive facelift that is transforming Melbourne's CBD and inner suburbs.

Indeed, with Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett regularly donning a construction hat to inspect a new site—the underground tunnelling of the Citylink project, the Crown Casino Entertainment Complex, the Docklands development, the luxury apartment blocks shooting up around Port Melbourne, Carlton and Southbank—clearly Melbourne is 'on the move'. The question is: to where? And what does the city risk losing in the process?

While Dr Mayne warns against overly-rigorous conservation controls—where the environment

becomes a static 'museum'—he does argue that it's crucial to retain a sense of place. At present, the speed at which the 'out with the old and in with the new' maxim is being applied in Melbourne is a little overwhelming. 'You only have to climb to the top of the Rialto to see how much the original grid has been eroded by high-rise development,' says Dr Mayne.

In the midst of this redevelopment delirium, the Kennett Government has announced it will be earmarking one of the housing commission high-rise towers for demolition, to fulfil a 1996 election pledge. So with a blue ribbon inner-suburban site set to be cleared, property speculators and redevelopers are hovering around awaiting the state government's word of a pending sale. (Ironically, many terrace houses were demolished 30 years ago to make room for the towers.)

The decision about which tower is being condemned, and whether a sale will be negotiated

with private redevelopers, is to be announced within the next three to four weeks, according to Housing Minister Anne Henderson.

'This is part of the government's commitment to developing strategies over the next 20 years of how we deal with the public housing high-rises,' says Ms Henderson. 'We have pledged to demolish only one high-rise during this term of government. This is about trying to provide quality and appropriate accommodation for people in the high-rises...'

Nonetheless, many of the 17 000 tenants in Melbourne's 45 housing commission high-rises are anxious about where they will be relocated if their homes are targeted for demolition. Many fear they will be forced out into unfamiliar, more remote suburbs with fewer readily accessible resources.

Ms Henderson is quick to remark: 'Relocating is not a big exercise for us [the state government], we do it all the time...we

are committed to paying all relocation costs.' She goes on to compare the scale of the exercise with the redevelopment of the old Olympic Village site in Heidelberg. 'We've rebuilt and sold some of the land to the private sector, set up good working parties to establish tenant needs and now we have a much better mix of private and public tenants.'

Of course, many high-rise tenants are more concerned with where they will be relocated than with the economic logistics of the move. 'We have no intention of moving people to the outer eastern suburbs or anywhere else too far outside of their area—that is of course, unless they want that,' says Ms Henderson. 'Obviously we won't be able to relocate them in the same street but we realise and we are highly conscious of people being placed in a similar area to those where they are being moved from.'

But is this possible? Considering many of Melbourne's inner suburban buildings—which

used to serve as low-rent alternatives to public housing—have been replaced with luxury high-rise apartments, relocation to these areas will surely prove difficult. Ms Henderson acknowledges that 'it is a challenge we are faced with', and suggests that when the specific plans are revealed, these issues will be addressed in consultation with tenants.

However, as Lisa Wilkins from the Tenants Union of Victoria points out, 'In all likelihood...tenants are likely to be moved to the city fringe. Relocating tenants to unfamiliar suburbs with less-developed services would generate enormous disruption.' Unlike the old Olympic Village site in Heidelberg, it's highly improbable that tenants from the towers will be temporarily relocated and then returned to the same site once redevelopment takes place.

Lachlan McDonald, spokesperson for the Master Builders Association of Victoria, stresses: '...there is an opportunity because of the location of the buildings to generate public housing alternatives that are more suitable.' But due to funding cuts under the Commonwealth–States Housing Agreement, he continues '...we all need to sit down together and develop a plan that is the best use for the limited money available...' Funds from the sales of towers to private redevelopers could be used, according to Mr McDonald, to create more 'suitable' accommodation.

While the uncertain fate of The Esplanade Hotel on St Kilda's foreshore is a vastly different issue on some fronts from that of the towers, there is a common theme: prime location. And for redevelopers, profit maximisation can lie in bringing out the bulldozers.

The Esplanade Hotel—or 'The Espy' as it's fondly referred to by punters—was acquired by the Becton Corporation in August last year. While the Espy is best known as a place to catch top alternative music or an up-and-coming comedy act over a beer, Becton is best known as a property developer with a particular hankering for redeveloping sites into high-rise luxury apartment blocks. As a reaction to growing concerns that the Espy may be facing transformation into a 25-storey apartment block, The Esplanade Alliance has been formed.

Krystyna Kynst from the Alliance says that the group is 'madly campaigning now to increase awareness about community concerns before any plans for The Esplanade site are formally submitted.'

While Becton has called for tender submissions for an 'urban design concept' for the site, Ms Kynst stresses that any plans should take into consideration not only the actual building but also the distinct and energetic hive of activity going on inside its four walls.

The Esplanade Alliance—which incorporates the residents' group 'Save St Kilda'—is made up of people from various 'walks of life', including local residents, traders, musicians, ex-councillors, lawyers and architects. Says Kynst, '...we really had to sit down and come up with a plan that took into consideration all of the different reasons we had for coming together.' The Alliance has since set down three main focal points for consideration: 'The Espy's heritage architecture (circa 1878), its popularity as a music venue and its imposing but well-scaled presence on the foreshore, which is under threat from an unimaginative high-rise.'

This is not the first time that the Espy has been threatened. As outlined in 'An Exploration of the Espy's Cultural Significance', a 25-page document released last month by the Alliance, plans were lodged in 1988 by then-owners Evindon Pty Ltd for an 18-storey international hotel. Due to strong local resistance, the Espy was saved. A couple of years later Evindon, the local council and the Save St Kilda group ended up in the Supreme Court, before height controls along the St Kilda foreshore saw Evindon finally shelve its plans.

Becton's media spokesperson says that Becton is awaiting one final urban design submission and that '...basically the corporation is out talking to people but no decision has been reached as yet.'

John Spierings, a former mayor of St Kilda and convenor of The Esplanade Alliance, is worried that this time round, the Espy is facing its greatest challenge. 'Becton is rumoured to have paid more than \$8 million when the Espy changed hands... With this kind of money in the works, you'd think they'd be looking for a sub-



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stantial return on their investment.'

Mr Spierings sees the fight to retain the Espy as being 'symbolic' of the overall fate of St Kilda. 'If the Espy goes under, then you've got to ask big questions about the future of the entire suburb...'

And they are questions that not only hang over St Kilda. With the increase in demand for luxury inner-city living, Melbourne's skyline has been transformed over the past decade. As redevelopers look at ways to best utilise sparse inner city space, they are again looking 'up' for inspiration. Condemned as dehumanising and uninspired by many architects in the 70s, high-rise buildings are staging a comeback. Height restriction controls are being slackened at both local and state government levels.

As John Spierings puts it: '...redevelopers are interested in intensification of development to maximise profits...and [are] looking for high yields out of the sites.' Pitching the 'beach' ideal of foreshore, piers, palms and water views—all a stone's throw from the city—has proved a successful marketing formula along the Bay. For redevelopers, in other words, the Esplanade Hotel is a perfect site.

Mr Spierings hopes that by telling people the colourful story of the Espy—how it has meant so

many things to so many people for the past 120 years, and how it continues to be a popular spot for 190 000 people each year—the Becton Corporation will acknowledge the building's cultural importance.

The Espy's colourful story also includes an endless list of musicians such as The Whitlams, Paul Kelly, Painters and Dockers, Archie Roach, The Cruel Sea and Deborah Conway, who count scoring a gig at the venue as an important step in their careers.

Kynst points out that the Alliance acknowledges the imperatives of change and are not suggesting the Espy's culture 'stagnate' or that the building go without altering or required maintenance. But they do argue that changes must be made with respect to the history and culture of the venue.

The conclusion to The Esplanade Alliance's document on the Espy reads: 'An even greater challenge than producing a masterpiece upon a blank canvas, however, is to treat what is already in existence with respect and sensitivity, and to incorporate and carry that living cultural significance into the future.' It is a statement of purpose that should guide developments not only to the Espy but to the city of Melbourne as a whole. ▲