



NATIONAL TRUST POLICY

MANAGEMENT OF THE SETTING OF HISTORIC TOWNS IN VICTORIA

Purpose/Objective

This policy is designed to encourage members of the National Trust, heritage organisations, strategic planners and others to recognise that the priceless heritage of historic towns in the state of Victoria needs to be protected, not only through the wise management of internal aspects such as buildings and streetscapes, as is widely acknowledged, but also through sensitive review and regulation of developments which affect the landscapes in which towns are situated.

Background/Context

Heritage Victoria, tourism associations and numerous local conservation groups have identified a number of towns (e.g. Maldon, Beechworth, Yackandandah, Walhalla, Daylesford and Port Fairy) in Victoria that have outstanding historic significance. They are an important part of the State's cultural heritage, with high architectural merit and socio-cultural value as a source of information on how communities have lived in the past.

Significance may lie in the origins and cultural associations of the town, as well as in historic urban features which persist, including not only individual buildings but also streetscapes and urban vegetation. Such features may be in private ownership, or under the management of a range of government agencies including local councils and state transport bodies.

There is a growing recognition that it is not only the internal features of the towns that are important. This policy specifically addresses the value of the landscape setting of a town, which adds significantly to township character because it helps to explain the choice of location and reveals the environment in which the town came into being. It is important that we recognise this interdependence between the town and its surroundings. The Landscape Committee of the National Trust has therefore developed this policy to assist heritage organisations and planners seeking to protect the heritage values of towns not only internally, but also through the wise management of change in the surrounding landscape.

Relevant aspects of the landscape setting of a town may be natural or cultural. They may include hills seen from within the town, and from which the town may be seen. Landscape settings may also include waterways, riverbanks and associated wetlands; views along lines of approach to and departure from the town; linear features such as roads and railways or irrigation channels; mining relics and landscape features such as tailings heaps, dump lines and mullock heaps; avenues of honour, hedges or windbreaks; and the vegetation type – remnant native forests or plantations - and land use of areas around the town. Coastal towns have a special setting character where a foreshore provides a distinct edge to the town. Views from the sea need to be considered where tall structures such as lighthouses become prominent.

Victoria is experiencing both relatively rapid population growth and population shift from major urban centres and remote rural regions towards towns of intermediate size. Data in ‘Towns in Time – Analysis’, a recent study by the Department of Environment and Sustainability, shows that between 1981 and 2001 towns with a population of 2,000-6,000 had higher growth rates than larger towns or rural areas (Figures quoted from DSE 2006 cited in Reynolds 2006). Much of this growth was in housing for people commuting to nearby regional centres, but in places an increasing number of second homes added to the pressure on these “magnet” towns. Population growth or seasonal visits create pressures on resort towns and coastal towns.

Many historic towns attract newcomers. They fall within this band of preferred size, offer good access to cities, feature attractive buildings and streetscapes, and are often located in areas of high landscape quality. As a result they are facing population pressure which, if not well managed, has the potential to diminish their value to those who live in them, as well as their contribution to an understanding of the cultural heritage of this State and the Nation.

Scope

This policy applies to historic towns throughout Victoria, though the Trust recognises that critical aspects of town setting vary across the state, depending on factors such as geography, topography, climate and history of settlement.

Policy

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) believes that effective protection of the heritage value of towns needs to be supported by appropriate management of the landscapes and vistas

in which the towns are located. Without this, the historic features of the town are akin to those seen out of context in a museum, and the sense of history of the place and the community that lived in the town may be diminished or lost.

(1) Understand the nature of historic town settings

The immediate surroundings of each historic town need to be understood and documented. This includes developing an understanding of the history of the town's establishment plus the physical nature and character of its setting. The capacity of a landscape setting to absorb change is critical in the assessment of developments which may lead to adverse visual impacts. Documentation and interpretation of this material will assist in determining the extent of the setting that needs protection.

(2) Protect settings with aesthetic values

The views out from the town, and in towards it, may be important, particularly in hilly areas and coastal locations. The slopes can form the backdrop for the town, defining it as an island of built form in a green setting such as bushland or remnant native vegetation. These ridge lines, hilltops, cliffs or sand dunes frame the view; they may also allow for views towards the town, enabling an understanding of the layout of the streets and historic landmark buildings (e.g. Mt Leura - views towards Camperdown). Prominent slopes and ridgelines that form a significant backdrop to a town should be free of developments that may be detrimental to their character. Such development may include residential properties, commercial or industrial sites (e.g. mining, or quarrying), forestry plantations as well as infrastructure projects.

(3) Protect settings related to industrial origins

The nature of the economic activities that enabled the development of the town, and gave it its character, should be considered. For example, where a town originated as a mining settlement, maintenance of features characteristic of mining landscapes should be promoted. Support for continuation or initiation of mining, forestry or agricultural enterprises may be desirable (e.g. Maldon, Noojee, Orbost), and planning should facilitate this by avoiding subdivision for housing where it may lead to objections about activities such as timber milling or mining nearby. However the visual impact of the industries themselves also needs to be considered as extensive open cut mining or clear-felling and afforestation may detract from the town's setting (e.g. Stawell, Bright, Porepunkah); refer to *Policy (2)* above.

(4) Protect settings related to transport and public utilities

Loss of critical industries may be a catalyst for heritage loss, though it can also offer opportunities. Railways may have played a major role in town development with conspicuous station buildings, and it is desirable to preserve these and their immediate surroundings, preferably for their original use, but if necessary though adaptive re-use (e.g. Winchelsea, Mansfield, Warburton). Rail trails developed on abandoned lines are a good example of beneficial re-use. Many historic towns had major public facilities such as regional hospitals, prisons and asylums that were major sources of employment, and the associated buildings are often of heritage significance (e.g. Beechworth, Ararat, Castlemaine). Following loss of employment associated with such facilities, these towns may face declining population and declining property values, both of which may threaten the survival of the built environment.

(5) Protect the character of the entry experience

There is a need for the protection of existing streetscapes and control of sympathetic development at the main entry points to towns to improve and enhance the presentation of historic towns. Planning controls need to ensure that the heritage character of the setting is not de-valued by inappropriate and excessive traffic signage, advertising signage, promotion devices, gateway structures or overhead services. Defining town edges and major entry points can minimise the intrusion of buildings and infrastructure into surrounding rural areas. This should also reduce linear development along main/entry roads, and the growth of commercial activity, which should be located back from such entries.

(6) Planning controls for new developments

Planning controls for historic towns need to consider the traffic implications, retail centres, and housing styles arising from new development and expansion of existing outlying suburbs. Inappropriate subdivision or substantial built development within and around the periphery of towns needs to be prevented, preferably through the creation of landscape buffer zones to preserve their identity and protect historic towns from encroachment of nearby regional growth centres. Landscape buffer zones could also be encouraged between older established parts of towns and any new housing or industrial development. Significant Landscape Overlays are an appropriate method of planning controls to be applied in this situation. The boundaries of the SLO may be determined by the procedures under *Policy (1)* above, although these may possibly not apply to subdivisions.

(7) Promote awareness of historic town settings

An education campaign is important to inform the public, particularly the decision makers, about heritage values of historic town settings, ways in which these can be threatened, and measures that can be taken to protect them. Local communities and Council officers should be encouraged to participate in the process of understanding the nature of their town's setting (*Policy (1)*). Local Councils can provide support for preservation and management of town settings through the introduction of fiscal incentives which support good heritage planning, such as rate concessions for heritage management (as Mornington Peninsula Shire has done).

Current Policies, Legislation and Guidelines.

A number of registers are in use to identify significant buildings and streetscapes: these include the Victorian Heritage Register (statutory protection) and the National Trust Register (voluntary protection).

The Victorian Planning Provisions allow Councils to protect significant sites through application of overlays. While Heritage Overlays are often the most appropriate, there are other overlays which may be more effective in certain circumstances, including those designed to address environmental significance, landscape significance, vegetation protection, wildfire management, and design and development overlays.

Useful guidelines for protecting landscape values associated with historic (and other) towns are provided in the Great Ocean Road Regional Landscape Assessment Study, 2004, and Coastal Spaces Landscape Assessment Study, 2006.

Implementation

The National Trust will work with stakeholders and relevant bodies to promote awareness of, and adopt and implement, these guidelines.

The National Trust will provide advice on landscape values and the application of this policy to planting proposals in areas where the Trust has completed landscape assessments and classifications.

Further Reading

Heritage Council (2006) *Small Town in the Landscape*. Report of a Forum held at Buninyong, April 2006. Heritage Council, Department of Sustainability & Environment, Victoria.

Department of Sustainability & Environment (2005) *An Atlas of Regional Victoria*.

Department of Sustainability & Environment (2006) *Towns in Time 2001 – Analysis*, cited in Reynolds, J. An Overview of Small Towns in the Landscape. Pp 7-19, in papers presented at a conference on Small Towns in the Landscape.

Leonard M, Hammond R (1984) *Landscape Character Types of Victoria*, Forests Commission Victoria.

Planisphere, (2004) *Great Ocean Road Regional Landscape Assessment Study*, and (2006) *Coastal Spaces Landscape Assessment Study*, for DSE

Tract Consultants, Chris Dance Land Design (1998) *Landscape Setting Types for the Victorian Coast*, Victorian Coastal Council.

Tract Consultants, Chris Dance Land Design (1998) *Siting & Design Guidelines for Structures on the Victorian Coast*, Victorian Coastal Council.

Approved by Landscape Committee [12 Oct 2010]

For ratification by CHC [8 November 2010]

Approved by the Trust Board [20 February 2011]