

Advice regarding consideration of the Site Bounded by Nelson Place, Ann Street, Kanowna Street and Cecil Street Williamstown

Commissioned by Save Williamstown

for submission to Planning Panels Victoria's Port Phillip Woollen Mills Advisory Committee.

Provided by:

Andrew Davidson, Architect (registered in Victoria)
60 Cole Street Williamstown
Bachelor of Architecture (RMIT)

Background

This report refers to issues of design of built form, planning and urban design. Other issues, including safety and infrastructure have been ignored for this report as they have been addressed by researchers in these fields.

Introduction

Williamstown is a very close knit community and this community can only be maintained by a design which engages with the local people and the local built fabric.

The backlash shown by the numerous rallies, illustrates that the proposed development concept has already alienated large sections of the local community. Williamstown prides itself on its sense of a community village, and it would be preferable to work with and expand this village rather than adding a new separate enclave onto the tip of it.

Williamstown is a cultural and historic asset which must be preserved for all Victorians. The aim of this report is to develop guidelines to ensure that the development of this site can progress whilst preserving this asset for perpetuity.

Location

Williamstown is a suburban location, with poor transport links to the CBD. The site is located on the tip of a Peninsula, with road access through three residential streets

The West Gate Bridge is a highly unreliable link in any peak times, with travel times varying from 25 minutes during quiet times up to an hour or more during busy times.

In terms of public transport, there is one irregular train and no other direct links to the city except by Taxi.

The travel times for the train are about equivalent to Noble Park in the south east. As a comparison, examination of the current Metlink Timetables will show that there is a city bound train departing at exactly 3PM Monday to Friday from both Williamstown and Noble Park. The service from Noble Park is timetabled to take 35 minutes. The service from Williamstown is timetabled to take 37 minutes. In terms of frequency, there are 90 services from Noble Park daily and there are 53 services from Williamstown.

Any comparison of timetables will show that in terms of public transport, Williamstown rates as a distant suburban location.

There is no plausible argument that can be mounted in favour of Williamstown being assessed as an 'inner city' location.

The site in question is not located within close proximity of the major activity centre in Williamstown.

Setting out by foot, a resident would start by walking 690 metres to the corner of Nelson Place and Cole Street.

Then the trek would be another 360 metres to the corner of Ferguson Street and Nelson Place, followed by another 350 metres up Ferguson Street to Douglas Parade. From here it would be a mere 50 metre hike to the Coles supermarket.

The total distance covered would be 1.45 kms. It's hard to imagine many residents doing this on a regular basis, especially with a load of shopping. Therefore, each new residence on this site is going to add numerous motorized transport trips through the quiet residential zones of Williamstown for the simplest tasks such as obtaining a loaf of bread or a litre of milk.

This is contrary to the recommendations of 2030 and Melbourne @ 5 Million which have a clearly stated aim to encourage walking and discourage excessive motorized transport.

Under 2030 and Melbourne @ 5 Million, high density housing is only appropriate at locations with good transport links and a transport hub, and within walking distance to a major activity centre.

Therefore Williamstown cannot support high density housing under two of the key requirements of Victoria's planning policy.

Urban Fabric and Urban Design Considerations

Development of this site should engage with the surrounding urban fabric in both scale and form. Any development of the site should enter into a dialogue with the surrounding urban form and thereby enhance the area rather than create a new 'island' of development.

1. Whilst the name "Nelson Place Village" has been adopted for the proposal, the design should try to avoid creating a new village or municipality. Williamstown is already an intact village, and the design must be controlled to be an extension of and enhancement of the Williamstown Village rather than a new village as it has been branded to date.
2. Williamstown is currently unique within all suburban municipalities for the following reasons:
 - It was laid out on a grid by Robert Hoddle similar to the grid used for central Melbourne and for regional Centres such as Hamilton in the Western District.
 - Unlike the CBD village which was founded on the banks of the Yarra by Batman and Fawkner, development pressures have not eroded Williamstown's original colonial character. This is unique within the Melbourne Metropolitan area and is an extremely valuable asset which can be retained through careful development controls on the site.

Williamstown exists as a low rise historic village which is still dominated by the church spires, and this character must be retained.

Impact on the Historic Fabric

The proposed towers submitted in the rendered views in the reports by McGuaran, Giannini & Soon lack character and diversity. The use of repetitive elements on the different tower blocks is inappropriate the Williamstown urban context, which is characterized by uniformity of small scale and diversity of formal language. Even the facades of the Nelson Place historic precinct, whilst uniform in scale, are eclectic and diverse in style. These aesthetic cues should be absorbed and studied as part of any new proposal.

Typology of Built Form

Tower Blocks

The use of the high rise tower block is not an appropriate typology for Williamstown, for the following reasons:

- medium rise ministry of housing blocks developed by the Housing Commission of Victoria in the 1960s are not an appropriate precedent because these blocks were developed independently of any studies regarding appropriate urban form.
- The medium rise ministry of housing blocks have a maximum height of 32m for the habitable floors compared to the DPO proposal of 46.5m height limits for the residential floors.

For the purposes of this assessment, a tower block is considered as any building element with an uninterrupted vertical rise of over 3 storeys without stepping.

Stepped Massing, Building up form using Existing local Massing Types

In order to create a design which is in harmony with the scale of the surrounding fabric, stepped forms must be incorporated into the design. This should build up the mass in increments to higher zones in the centre. The increments could feature a 2 storey edge to the site but any further increments must be no greater than this height, with the horizontal distance at each step at least equal to the rise and relating to the sightlines discussed below.

A local contemporary example of a stepped design is the Jaques Richmond project currently under development.

Whilst the overall height in the Richmond development is far higher than would be acceptable in Williamstown due to infrastructure and planning issues this development uses stepped massing and an assemblage of horizontal forms to successfully achieve transitions of scale to surrounding streetscapes.

Again, the use of a stepped profile instead of 'tower' forms will achieve the visual effect of integration and growth from the existing Williamstown fabric. This is a preferred urban design outcome.

The tower block typology must not be adopted as there is not a critical mass of this typology in the area, therefore adopting this typology will create discordance with the surrounding urban form rather than a dialogue with it.



Another example of compact housing units with stepped and articulated forms which have been recently produced commercially are the Riverside Housing Units by Mirvac in Port Melbourne (shown above).

Here, heights are limited to three storeys, and forms are skillfully articulated to reflect the local industrial portside vernacular whilst providing high quality state of the art accommodation. This formal language could be applied equally to commercial or residential uses if a mixed use was preferred and in the example shown the units are also advertised as home offices.

Sightlines

In order to protect the value of the existing fabric in Williamstown, certain sightlines must be protected. Building massing should be manipulated to ensure that no elements higher than 3 storeys are visible from any of the historic zones on Nelson Place around Commonwealth reserve. These are the high value areas of the Williamstown Historic precinct, and they are of international value. Sightlines should be constructed from the tide gauge in commonwealth reserve as well as various points along Nelson Place to ensure that the three storey maximum is protected.

Cecil Street, running towards the rear of the site, also has unique and historic streetscape looking towards the sea which must be maintained. From outside the Stag's Head Hotel, sightlines should be constructed ensuring nothing higher than a 2 storey frontage is visible.

Careful adherence to these sightlines will ensure that the Historic Village Character of Williamstown is maintained.

Conclusion

The unique character of Williamstown as a well preserved seaside village within the metropolitan area should be maintained as a priority. It is too important an asset to be squandered by irresponsible development, especially development which doesn't comply with the state planning scheme.

The recommendations above provide concrete measures which can be taken to ensure responsible development takes place which retains and enhances the character of this special locale and national treasure.

Declaration

I have made all the inquiries that I believe are desirable and appropriate and no matters of significance which I regard as relevant have to my knowledge been withheld from the Advisory Committee.