A Tale of Two Victorian Historic Coastal Towns
Dilemmas of planning and conservation in Queenscliff and Sorrento

Ursula de Jong
Deakin University
ursula.dejong@deakin.edu.au

Robert Fuller
Deakin University
robert.fuller@deakin.edu.au

Fiona Gray
Deakin University
fiona.gray@deakin.edu.au

Change has engulfed the coastal fringe of Australia. In balancing the built and natural environment, community needs, cultural significance and economic sustainability, planners aim to improve quality of life and create vibrant communities. Yet managing place change, particularly in coastal areas, is fraught with tensions. Most planning discussions about the rapidity of change, the impact of the Sea Change process and increased development have focused upon the extensiveness of residential expansion and the housing styles that challenge the essence of the character of these coastal towns. Character and sense of place qualities are the very reasons that sea changers desire to engage with and reside within these communities. One aspect missing from this discussion and analysis is the impact that large-scale transformations of iconic buildings are having upon these places. This paper examines the consequences that major commercial development projects have upon the communities of Sorrento and Queenscliff. It considers changes (proposed or realised) to four landmark historic hotels: The Koonya and Continental in Sorrento; and the Ozone and Vue Grand in Queenscliff. This paper focuses on issues of planning, social engagement and community debate.

Keywords: sea change, development challenges, planning and community debate, sense of place, neighbourhood character
Introduction

The built and natural environments, how they interconnect and are perceived, visually characterise and define coastal towns, especially those with significant heritage values. More than a decade after the ABC TV series *SeaChange* popularised “the dream of swapping fast-paced city life for the relaxing balm of the beach”, Victorians’ love affair with the coast continues (Domain, *The Age*, 4 December 2010). Over this decade, improved transport links (Geelong Bypass to the Surf Coast and Peninsula Link to the Mornington Peninsula) have made coastal towns more attractive to those looking to move to the coast and commute to work. Thus there are now full time seachangers, part time seachangers, and second home owners getting away from it all, by moving to the coast. For many, the key incentive remains the lifestyle.

Yet this ‘sea change’ phenomenon is fundamentally changing the coastal towns of Australia. In many instances, this is attracting opposition from established residents. The past national president of the Planning Institute of Australia vividly summed up the current struggle that is occurring in many of Australia’s coastal regions. Barbara Norman (2008) wrote that “the Australian coastline is littered with exhausted communities battling to save the character and environment of their townships”. The National Sea Change Taskforce was established in 2004, as a response to these wider community and professional concerns, and now has a membership of over 68 local councils around Australia. The Taskforce works “to ensure that coastal development is managed with a focus on the sustainability of coastal communities and the coastal environment”. Gurran et al. (2006) conclude that more detailed research is needed to develop new responses to coastal development, particularly in terms of promoting community wellbeing, strengthening social cohesion, avoiding socio-economic and socio-spatial polarisation and preserving sense of place.

This paper sits within a larger ARC Linkage research project, "Sea change communities: intergenerational perception and sense of place". The twin historic coastal Victorian townships of Sorrento and Queenscliff, located either side of Port Phillip Heads, form the case studies for this research. The broader aim is to establish a more rigorous method of evaluating the physical and perceived impact of the sea change process on sense of place, specifically on the relationships between the built and natural environments of coastal settlements, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. This methodology will assist those communities to implement effective, place-sensitive sustainable planning and associated development practices.

Municipal planning schemes include both State and local strategies, policies and provisions that aim to manage change in a manner that preserves local heritage and neighbourhood character. For example, the underpinning vision of the Borough of Queenscliffe Planning Scheme (2009) is that “the Borough of Queenscliffe will maintain its unique natural environment, built and cultural heritage values through the careful planning of land use and development for the benefit of the community”. Despite the intent of this scheme, conflicts over proposed developments continue, with ongoing debate about environmental, landscape and heritage values and visual amenity.

Further, the respective heritage studies undertaken on the Mornington Peninsula Shire (Context with Kellaway and Lardner 1992, 1997) and the Borough of Queenscliffe (Allom Lovell and Associates, 1984; Lovell Chen, 2009) primarily address buildings and artefacts and do not consider place as heritage nor the environmental context of landscape and natural systems, nor the social,
interconnectedness, and visual/scenic significance of the places that determine their tangible and intangible character and place essence.

In determining neighbourhood character, Planisphere (2012) (a partner in this research) has sought to answer the fundamental question: How do buildings and landscape interact? They have determined that the qualitative interplay of built form, vegetation and topographical characteristics, in both the private and public domains, are the physical manifestation of neighbourhood character, that distinguish one place from another.

Changes that have engulfed the coastal fringe of Australia, are clearly manifest in Queenscliff and Sorrento. De Jong and Fuller (2008) have already documented some of the changes that have taken place in recent decades in these two towns. Most notable of these were the transformations of traditional harbours to marinas, historic hotels into luxury apartments and large-scale housing developments. In a subsequent paper, de Jong and Fuller (2010) investigated what indicators could be used to quantify the changes in town character. These included: changes in building footprint, changes in employment profile, decline in the number of permanently-occupied houses and the rise in planning decision appeals. It was acknowledged that while none of these are the perfect indicator of change, they do point to the complexity of change and the difficulty of councils, communities and planners to preserve the integrity of their towns. They concluded that the ‘so-called’ sea change phenomenon is impacting on the look, shape and feel of coastal towns and such towns are being affected by the importation of urban values of housing (size being one clear determinant), altering the very ‘sense of place’ that draws new residents to the area (unspoiled natural environment). These developments all point to a failure to understand and value the local landscape, the sense of place and the neighbourhood character.

While much of the planning discussion has focused upon the extensiveness of residential expansion and the inappropriateness of housing styles that challenge the essence of place character, little has been written about the impact that large scale transformations of iconic buildings are having upon these places. This paper considers four landmark historic hotels: the Koonya and Continental in Sorrento, and the Ozone and Vue Grand in Queenscliff. It examines the consequences that major commercial development projects can have upon communities such as Sorrento and Queenscliff through consideration of planning, social engagement and community debate.

**Sorrento and Queenscliff**

The twin historic coastal Victorian townships of Sorrento and Queenscliff are located either side of Port Phillip Heads, Victoria. Sorrento and Queenscliff are linked by a richly layered complex natural and cultural heritage; by spirit and sense of place; by geology and the formation of the Bay; by aboriginal heritage; by flora and fauna; through shared geographical, marine and social histories; by vulnerability, isolation, perceived roles; by tourism, growth and development. Yet there are marked differences in the way each town was founded, laid out, developed and connected to its own hinterland. At the beginning of the 21st century each has a different identity and atmosphere, resulting from decisions made over the past two centuries of European settlement. In articulating sense of place and character in these two historic coastal towns these similarities and differences must be taken into account.
Andrea Inglis (1999) in her book *Beside the Seaside: Victorian Resorts in the Nineteenth Century*, provides a useful brief contextual history of these two towns. Queenscliff was one of the earliest resorts to develop at some distance from Melbourne. By 1888, *Bruck’s Guide to the Health Resorts in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand* (1888: 87) considered it “one of the principal watering places in Victoria”. The township dates from 1838, when the site, known as Shortland Bluff, served as a station for the pilots who navigated the treacherous waters at Port Phillip Heads. In the 1840s the small local community was composed mainly of lighthouse-keepers, pilots, fishermen and boatmen. In the 1850s Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe named the town, which was to “act as a place of recreation for the citizens of Geelong”, Queenscliff (Beavis and Raison1876-77). So began six decades of growth and prosperity. Inglis (1999) goes on to make the point that “Queenscliff was not only a scenic seaside location”, but “it was also strategically important” (p12). By 1861 Queenscliff had five attractive hotels; in 1879 a railway linked it to Geelong. The 1880s, which saw Victoria catapulted into the boom years, saw frenetic building activity take place in Queenscliff too, and resulted in the construction of a number of splendid hotels, including Baillieu House (the Ozone) (1881-82) and the Grand Hotel (1884). By now thousands of people were flocking to the town – for long or short term stays.

It was in the 1870s that Sorrento became known as a holiday resort. While Victoria’s first settlement had been established there in 1803, it did not last. Not till the 1840s did pastoralists and limeburners, and small fishermen settle in the area. Little changed until a number of Melbourne’s prominent businessmen and politicians took up land to erect seaside residences in the 1860s. In 1870 Hotel Sorrento “a commodious hotel for the convenience of visitors” according to the Guide, *Illustrated Handbook of the Bay* (Melbourne, 1876-77) was erected. In the same year George Seth Coppin saw wondrous possibilities and took on the development of the town. He built the Continental Hotel in 1875. A year later the Mornington Hotel (now known as the Koonya) was constructed by the Bay. By the 1880s Sorrento’s scenic appeal and well-known amenities enticed thousands to undertake the journey from Melbourne. Indeed the magnificent steamers Ozone and Hygeia carried “more than 50,000 people annually down to Sorrento and Queenscliff at weekends and public holidays” (Loney, 1982 p29).

In the 19th century Sorrento and Queenscliff were for many simply seaside resorts: places of escape from hot dusty cities in summer. They were also healthful places: fresh air laden with ozone enabled one to relax away from urban environments or recover from rickets and tuberculosis. Bay and ocean were made accessible at Sorrento by Coppin, who not only constructed a road from the jetty on the Bay to the ocean beach, but organised trams to carry passengers along this route. Through walkways and rotundas Coppin orchestrated experiences and framed the seascape. Different visions set the pattern for the two towns: Queenscliff has wide streets and a grid superimposed on its topography. Sorrento follows a linear pattern along Ocean Beach Road.

**Place and Planning**

Place is a contested term. While place is often perceived as being static and unchanging, it is in fact constantly changing. Queenscliff and Sorrento exemplify this. Over time change has impacted here, sometimes gradually sometimes quickly. During the 19th century Europeans imposed their concept of settlement on both places. The landscape was understood and framed as a European construct. The resorts declined somewhat in the early 20th century with the World Wars and the Depression.
and went into stasis. The next wave of changes came with the advent of the motor-car in the 1950s. Sea change is the latest in a series of changes which have impacted these towns and their hinterlands, dramatically altering the relationship between built form, topography and the natural environment. Understanding place is central to planning. Place research has been instrumental in revealing the complexities of place and highlighting its importance to cultural heritage, identity and well-being. When people feel connected to a place - emotionally, culturally, and spiritually they care deeply about it. A sense of place provides a sense of belonging and of commitment. Place is the repository for our shared memories, experiences and dreams. It is the locus of family and community. Leonie Sandercock (1998) identifies six ways of knowing place: through experience, dialogue, gaining local knowledge, symbolic representation, visual experience, contemplation and action. Yet she argues that the notion sense of place is so difficult to define, because it partly depends on socially constructed understandings of place. Sense of place is not a static construct either. Friedmann (2010) suggests that “place is made and remade on a daily basis” (p153) for humans both understand and transform place through reiterative social practice.

Authors such as the urban planner, Kevin Lynch, and the geographer, Edward Relph, long ago recognised that place has physical aspects as well as social meanings. Lynch (1960) describes place through identifying characteristics such as paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks, clearly evident in these towns. Relph (1976) states that the identity of place is derived from the combination of physical setting, the activities associated with place, the meanings associated with place, as well as the spirit of the place, so relevant to understanding these towns holistically. Relph believes these components are interwoven and inseparable in one’s experience of place and that they need to be understood in order to be able to maintain them. The phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schultz (1984) considered place to constitute the physical location - the “material substance, shape, texture and colour” - and the “atmosphere or character” (p116); the loss of one aspect, diminishing the total phenomenon of place. Norberg-Schulz named the essence of place, that is the combination of the physical and the atmosphere the genius loci or spirit of place. In the historic coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff the genius loci is manifest in inspirational landscapes overlaid with cultural significance.

Practice and theory recognise the value of places of cultural significance individually and collectively. ICOMOS Australia’s Burra Charter (1999, p1) states unequivocally

Place of cultural significance enrich people’s lives, often providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences. They are historical records that are important as tangible expressions of Australian identity and experience. Places of cultural significance reflect the diversity of our communities, telling us about who we are and the past that has formed us and the Australian landscape. They are irreplaceable and precious.

The Burra Charter advocates for the conservation of these places for present and future generations. Sandercock (1998) argues that cities (and towns) are the repositories of memories and that public places can nurture belonging. The communities of Sorrento and Queenscliff would agree (ARC Focus Groups, 2013). The challenge in managing place is complicated by the multiple meanings ascribed to it. These towns, embedded in their physical location, rich in histories, tangible and intangible, accommodate and give expression to diverse meanings. The character of the towns was set in their
19th century beginnings: the scale, form, style and materials of the buildings, public and private, were dictated by Victorian taste and ideas. While both towns have a significant stock of heritage buildings, historical circumstance has meant that Queenscliff has retained much more of its integrity than Sorrento. Both towns face the real pressures of change that threaten the fabric of their identity.

The four hotels which are the subject of the case studies for this paper have significant cultural, historic, architectural and symbolic value in their respective towns. They are integrally associated with the identity and character of their towns. For residents and visitors alike these hotels recall an era in the late 19th century when Sorrento and Queenscliff were coastal holiday resorts of the highest calibre, when money was spent on magnificent architectural buildings to accommodate the social elite. Situated on ridgelines, along significant viewlines, on main thoroughfares, on prominent corners, they are still today clear foci in their towns. The hotels are drawcards visually, aesthetically, physically. They are ever present in the silhouettes of their towns: on approach, on departure. They embody something of the character and sense of place of the historic coastal towns, Sorrento and Queenscliff.

In recent years the question has been asked, what do we do with these grand old buildings? As each hotel has become a balancing act between preserving heritage and commercial viability, communities have loudly voiced their objections to inappropriate development. These hotels highlight the dilemmas at the heart of planning, conservation and economics.

Susan Thompson (2012) in her introduction to Planning Australia: An Overview of Urban and Regional Planning writes that

> At its best, planning is respectful of the built and natural environments, encompassing people and the interactions they have with their surroundings. Good planning respects current and evolving Australian ways of life, meeting the needs of diverse communities by acknowledging their histories and the challenges facing them as they grow and change. It facilitates appropriate and good development, ensuring that economic, social and cultural prosperity is in balance with environmental and species protection. Planning is mindful of the richness that can emerge from community involvement in its processes and recognizes that, ultimately, everyone has a connection to the places they inhabit and use every day (p2).

She also stresses that

> people are at the heart of planning. ... all good planning is about the integration of physical land use with socio-cultural considerations in the quest to build sustainable environments for everyone ... social and cultural concerns are not supplementary or subservient to other aspects of planning practice. That said it is an increasingly difficult task to address the needs, hopes and aspirations of the individuals and groups who live in the diverse communities for which planners have responsibility... (p8).

Understanding what planning is appears straightforward. The Planning Institute of Victoria (PIA 2011) states “Planning is the process of making decisions to guide future action”. Dictionary definitions state planning is “an organised and especially detailed method according to which
something is to be done; a scheme of action, a design; an intention ... A design according to which things are, or are intended to be, arranged …” (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (2007). However, when applied in the modern context of urban and regional planning it becomes more complex as it juggles the built and natural environment, community needs, governmental desires, cultural significance and economic sustainability. Thompson (2012) suggests that the complexity of planning is caused by the overlap between various disciplines, including socio-political, economic and historic contexts which are interrelated and interdependent. The constantly changing environments, the changing perceptions and expectations of governments and communities also contribute to the complexity of planning.

Planning frameworks in Sorrento and Queenscliff both exist within the Victorian State Planning Scheme, governed by The Planning and Environment Act, 1987. The Act states that “the purpose of the Act is to establish a framework for planning the use, development and protection of land in Victoria in the present and long-term interests of all Victorians”. The role of planning in conservation, in permitting development, in preserving sense of place and character in these historic coastal towns is considered in detail in the following case studies. The impact of social engagement and community debate in the outcomes is also discussed. Two postcards, Sorrento, Victoria, Austr, c. 1900 and Sorrento from the pier, near Melbourne, c.1906 clearly show the Sorrento and Continental Hotels silhouetted against the skyline, and the Mornington (now Koonya) Hotel close to sea level. The postcard Queenscliff from the Steamer, c. 1906 shows the stately outline of Queenscliff with its hotel towers (the Baillieu (now Ozone) and Lathamstowe) in the background. The Grand (now Vue Grand) is off to the right. This paper’s underlying position is that changes to these landmark hotels impact on the integrity of the historic coastal towns themselves.

The Koonya Hotel, Sorrento

In 1980 the Shire of Flinders Council News (1980), reported that both the Continental and Koonya Hotels had been “restored to establish a character closely related to the historic nature of Sorrento” (p1). This was considered “rewarding for the township” (p1). The same News noted that the new “Sorrento Townscape Study highlights the need to protect and enhance the historic character of the township, in particular the limestone buildings in Ocean Beach road, and to ensure that new development is sympathetic to this character” (p3). It went on to say that there was currently no protection in place, nor any guidance for the retention of its historic character and its buildings, and no control over type or style of future development. In 1994 forced Council amalgamations occurred in Victoria under the Kennett Government. Some time prior to the formation of the new Mornington Peninsula Shire (MPS), the Shire of Flinders sold the steeply sloping land behind the Koonya Hotel (Figure 1). In 1994-95 it was proposed to build 2-storey buildings at the top end of the site, opposite Stringers Store, which effectively blocked any views to Port Philip Bay. The community rallied. Over 800 objections were lodged with Council. Nearly a thousand attended a public meeting. The unanimous view was that this proposal should be rejected. In 1995 the Council refused to rezone the land to allow construction of the private units that blocked Bay views. Council could not afford to buy back the land, so the wider community formed a Save Our Sorrento Committee (SOSC) and organised a fundraising campaign through Trust for Nature (Victoria) to help buy back half the land for use as a public park. In 1996 the developer Herret Close P/L proposed to build a 14-unit motel on the remaining half of the land. In January 1997 the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council (MPSC)
approved the development; SOSC moved an amendment, such that the covenant attached to the title of land preserved the arc of the view from the jetty to the beach and Bay. The developer agreed to sell half the land and contribute $70k to the establishment of the public park, and the community set up a public appeal.

Three years of negotiations and $160k raised by the community, delivered a compromise and an enhanced entry to Sorrento for the future. By September 1998 the land - a triangular piece measuring 1240 m² - was transferred to the MPS, protected by covenants requiring the Shire to preserve the park as a public facility for all time. The local press reported that the development had grown to include 35 detached or semi-detached houses plus 14 motel units, “all of a good standard”, with the original Mornington Hotel on the corner retained. The achievement was heralded as the culmination of responsible planning and intensive community consultation (The Mail, 10 Dec 1998). The Koonya development was approved under the new Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme, on 20 July 1999. The park was named ‘The Park at Stringer’s Corner’. Construction of the $20m development began in February 2001. The first residents moved into their luxury apartments in

Figure 1: The Park at Stringer’s Corner, looking across the residential development, the Koonya Hotel at the bottom right hand corner, through the Norfolk Pines to Port Philip Bay at Sorrento.
2003. The park took a little longer to establish, but it is now a well vegetated, much used public place with magnificent views over the Bay (Figure 1), and splendid views of the Conti.

The Continental Hotel, Sorrento

This 4-story limestone building with tower sits diagonally opposite ‘The Park at Stringer’s Corner (Figure 2). The Conti, as it is affectionately known, is a striking landmark building on a cliff crest, comparable with the Hotel Sorrento on the neighbouring cliff crest, and regionally significant. Already in 1978 the Shire of Flinders Sorrento Townscape Study recognised historic values as fundamental to the town’s identity. It also noted that a distinctive architectural character enhanced the quality of its streetscape, and that careful planning in consultation with all interested individuals and groups would encourage the township “to age graciously”.

Figure 2: The Continental Hotel, Sorrento, cnr Ocean Beach Road and Constitution Hill Road, presents a striking silhouette on this cliff crest, opposite The Park at Stringer’s Corner.

In February 2000, the MPSC rejected plans for eight 3-storey and two 2-storey apartment buildings in the heart of Sorrento. Two years later grand plans were revealed for the Continental Hotel: 30 one- and two-bedroom residential apartments with a 2-storey underground car park were proposed on land directly behind the Hotel. David Crowder, of Ratio Consultants, who conducted the Town Planning Assessment for the Hotel, considered the 5-storey development appropriate.
The design could generally be described as contemporary comprising flat roof, strong horizontal and vertical elements, and considerable articulation through the use of varied setbacks, building materials, colours and fenestration (p6).

The developers argued that “while contemporary in design, the building would have sandstone paneling to reflect the nearby heritage buildings”. The new 5-storey apartment block “would facilitate the restoration of an important landmark building”. Further, “it will not compromise heritage significance and will respect the character of the area” (27 August 2002). The Nepean Historical Society (NHS) raised objections to the application on the grounds that it was not in accordance with the Planning Scheme; that the 5-storey building exceeds the height limit; is on the highest elevation in Sorrento; is bulky and not in conformity with neighbourhood character; and precludes sea views for the adjoining southern property. Further it did not conform to the requirements of the proposed Amendment 23 of the Sorrento Precinct (NHS 5 September 2002).

Because of the slowness of the processing of the application, in excess of 60 days, the applicant exercised their right to lodge a “notice of review” with the Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) against Council’s failure to determine the application within the specified time meaning that the Council cannot decide upon the application but must notify the Principal Registrar of VCAT their determination to support or not support the proposal (MPC 2004: p3). After lengthy consideration, the MPS’s Development Assessment Committee (DAC) unanimously refused the application, believing that the Hotel’s heritage significance would suffer under the proposal. According to a council officer’s report to the DAC “Sorrento Historic Policy … seeks to discourage the erection of buildings that exceed 8m in height” and “unless the development is reduced in scale and bulk it will continue to have an unacceptable heritage impact”. It was further stated that “the proposal’s design … does not reflect the particular characteristics, aspirations and cultural identity of the community” (The Mail 20 April, 2004). In drawing together the extensive evidence and issues, the Council directed advice to the Principal Registrar of VCAT that it did not support the proposal as documented because of a major compromise of heritage values despite recognising that the physical alterations and use scenario were “reasonable … [and that] many components of this proposal … have significant merit and potential benefits to the community” (MPC 2004: 25, 27, 29). It is of interest that Cr Margaret Bell commented that the Shire at the time was considering applications for nine commercial developments in Sorrento, and did not want to set “the wrong precedent”. She felt this was a real test of Council to uphold its own planning provisions (Mornington Peninsula Leader 4 May 2004).

The Ozone Hotel, Queenscliff

The Ozone Hotel (Figure 3) is one of the four landmark hotels in Queenscliff renowned for their architectural and heritage significance, the others being the Vue Grand, The Royal and The Queenscliff Hotel. The building was constructed in 1881-82 and was originally called Baillieu House, after its builder, James Baillieu. It was re-named the Ozone in 1887 following the arrival of a new passenger paddle steamer which brought visitors to the town from Melbourne (QHM 2003). The town had already established itself as a popular destination for day trippers.

The Ozone Hotel has been described as “a successful blend of the French Renaissance and Italian Renaissance palazzo styles” (Allom et al. 1984:37). The Ozone complements an equally-imposing and
adjoining building called ‘Lathamstowe’. Both buildings sit on a cliff top with commanding views of Port Phillip Bay and access to the beach. In 1980, the Ozone Hotel was listed on the Australian Heritage Register, and in 1995 it was added to the Victorian Heritage Register.

Figure 3: The Ozone Hotel in Queenscliff, facing out to sea.

In early 2005, the owners of Ozone submitted a planning application to convert the hotel into eight luxury apartments, and to build two apartments and a separate two-storey shop and residence on the rear of the site. The owners claimed that the hotel was no longer financially viable. The development was opposed by many people, both within and outside the Borough. Their opposition covered cultural, economic and social concerns. Opposition to the development within the town’s community was spear-headed by the Queenscliff Community Association (QCA). Its members made a detailed submission to the Council and organised a “Save the Ozone” petition, which was signed by 203 people. The QCA were also prominent in a subsequent appeal.

The local council also opposed the development. In an extensive submission to Heritage Victoria, the State Government’s principal cultural heritage agency, the then Manager of Planning and Development in Queenscliff expressed Council’s strong opposition to the application. The council believed that the proposal did “not respect the important spatial, symbolic and cultural characteristics of the site and surrounding area” (Walker 2005). Despite good publicity, including an appearance on a prime-time television programme to voice their concerns to this and other changes
in the town (Stateline 2005), the campaign to save the Ozone as an intact building available to the public was not successful.

In May 2005, Heritage Victoria granted a permit for the development, arguing that since the exterior of the building was not going to change, its cultural significance was unaffected. Similarly, the new two-storey building did not detract from the original building’s cultural significance. Figure 4 shows the front view of this new building constructed at the rear of the Ozone and facing directly onto Queenscliff’s main street, Hesses Street, on which many of the town’s most important historic buildings are located. Access to, or a view of the original building from the main street, has been lost. The only concession made to the objectors was to limit the height of a tower above the original roof line of the hotel which was claimed to be necessary to accommodate a proposed internal lift. In a follow-up letter to the then Minister of Planning, Rob Hulls, the then Mayor of Queenscliffe expressed the “anger and amazement” of the council (Bugg, 2005). The decision was appealed at the State’s Civil and Administrative Tribunal late in 2005 but to no avail and the BoQ was ordered to issue a permit for the development (VCAT, 2005).

Figure 4: Access to the rear courtyard of the Ozone Hotel has been lost and replaced by a real estate office in the main street, Hesse Street, Queenscliff
The Vue Grand Hotel, Queenscliff

This two and three storey hotel, completed in 1882, was the town’s “grandest hotel and at least the equal of Melbourne’s best” (Runting, 2003, p31). There was a fire in the Vue Grand in 1927 and substantial rebuilding was required – it now displays a variety of architectural styles. However, not being an “intact” example of a certain architectural period does not detract from the significance of this building to the town’s sense of place and character. To many, this building is quintessential “Queenscliff”. The size and central position of the building means that it is seen daily by residents and tourists alike. The hotel is located on a corner in the main commercial street of the town and faces another significant historic building, the Queenscliff Post Office. It cannot be missed (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The Vue Grand Hotel, Hesse Street, Queenscliff.

In more recent times, some refurbishment has taken place with council approval. These include the conversion of the front verandah as place where food and drinks may be served. In 2005, the hotel was bought by the current owners, the Closter Brothers, Ross and Anthony. In August 2008, an application was received by the local council for redevelopment of the site.
In addition to the main building, there are a number of other buildings on the site. One of these is the single-storey former manager’s residence (Figure 6). Its demolition and the construction of a three-storey (plus basement) building in its place is the main thrust of the development proposal. The addition will provide 13 new guest rooms, which the owners argue are essential to ensure the ongoing financial viability of the hotel as an accommodation venue. The Ozone Hotel was cited by the owners in their application to reinforce this argument. A heritage report commissioned by the applicant concluded that “the former manager’s residence is of secondary significance ... has limited architectural distinction and undergone some unsympathetic modifications over the years” (BoQ, 2008, p67). The proposal was that the addition be constructed from off-form concrete and have colorbond steel roofing.

The BoQ Senior Planning Officer (SPO) recommended to council that a permit should not be issued for this development. The grounds for refusal were that the former manager’s residence was “considered to be an integral part of the Vue Grand Hotel complex and its demolition will have an adverse impact upon the heritage values of the site and surrounds”. In addition, the application was considered to be “inconsistent with the Local Planning Policy Framework of the Queenscliff Planning Scheme as it relates to heritage and urban character (our emphasis)” (BoQ, 2008: 95). Five
objections were received from the community, including that the height, form and mass, siting, style and materials were not responsive to the heritage character of Queenscliff. The SPO agreed with this assessment. It was also agreed that the building to be demolished was an integral part of the original complex and should therefore be retained. Overdevelopment of the site and contravention of key provisions of the Queenscliff Urban Conservation and Character Studies were among other grounds for objection. The council deferred its decision. Council elections returned a new council that month.

In April of 2009, the applicant lodged an appeal to VCAT on the grounds of ‘Failure to Determine’. Two hearings took place in July and September, and an interim order was issued by VCAT in October (VCAT, 2009a). On the key issue of the demolition of the manager’s residence, the order found in favour of the applicant and overruled the objections of the BoQ and the community. The interim order allowed the applicant to submit amended plans which addressed the concerns of the VCAT commissioner. These were secondary in nature compared to the key issue and focused on building design (roof pitch, separation of the old and new building, window placement and pipework visibility). Another hearing was held at the end of December 2009 at which a permit for the proposal was granted (VCAT, 2009b). The ultimate success of the application meant that the owners could offer the Vue Grand for sale with a planning approval, which they did in mid-2010.

Some reflections

This paper has considered major controversial planning deliberations that resulted in community angst and questions as to place character and compromise. The case studies comprised extensions and redevelopment works associated with iconic hotels in Sorrento and Queenscliff. Each involved heritage considerations, aesthetic values, as well as issues of scale, intensity, development appropriateness, commercial viability and change to the visual and social landscape.

The Koonya development proceeded. It was always a compromise, but achieved community satisfaction in terms of its sympathetic design and integration into the place and streetscape of Sorrento. The project demonstrates above all else the value of considered community, council and developer participation and cooperation in the development and design process, in drafting the terms of reference, setting the standards of what type and form of development could and should occur on the land, and ensuring covenants were put in place for the protection of the public park in perpetuity. The historic Koonya Hotel was restored and forms the cornerstone of the entire accommodation and entertainment precinct on the Sorrento foreshore. It is located at the bottom of the hill that turns and climbs into the Sorrento township.

Visually, aesthetically and spatially, the Continental Hotel at the top of the hill, forms the key entry focal point. It sets the character expectations of Sorrento: based on its heritage values represented by a rich legacy of limestone buildings, and an urban scale with low rise commercial development, in a seaside environment. Any redevelopment needed to be sensitive to the Hotel and its site’s innate and wider values. In contrast to the Koonya development, there was little community and stakeholder consultation, and no discussion which could have enabled a satisfactory economic and redevelopment outcome which successfully addressed heritage and place values. In the end the Council refused the development. It found itself caught between ideistically wishing to enable redevelopment, while at the same time, needing to respect the philosophy and intent of their
planning scheme, and their historic character policies and guidelines for the Ocean Beach Road precinct.

What did the community learn from its failure to save the Ozone? The principle lesson for those involved was misunderstanding and underestimating the role of Heritage Victoria. It surprised and disappointed the opponents of the development that this was sanctioned by an organisation which they had believed would have been sympathetic to their arguments. Other lessons include: resisting the rezoning of commercial premises to residential; protecting the interior of heritage buildings as well as the exterior; listing on-site vegetation on the local historic tree register to prevent its destruction; and finally safeguarding historic hotels from becoming financially unviable. The leverage of this position has been used by others wishing to develop historic buildings in the town of Queenscliff. Other iconic hotels in Queenscliff subsequently threatened to turn their premises into apartments if their development application was not approved (the case of the Vue Grand). The dilemma of preserving heritage buildings, particularly grand hotels, operating in a competitive commercial environment is one that is likely to continue into the future.

Acknowledgments: The authors gratefully acknowledge discussions with Masters students David Allen, Belinda Breheny, Dustin Cashmore and Holly Slater in relation to place and planning; initial research by David Jones in relation to Sorrento planning vis a vis the Koonya and Continental; the help of Doreen Parker, John Alexander and the Nepean Historical Society Archives in relation to the Koonya and Continental Hotel developments; and the insights of David Kenwood and other members of the Queenscliffe Community Association into the Vue Grand and Ozone developments.

Note: Victorian Local Government areas: Mornington Peninsula Shire, Greater Melbourne Outer Metropolitan region, was established in 1994, it covers an area of 723.1 sq kms and has a population of 144,608 (2011 figures); Borough of Queenscliffe, Southwest region, was established 1863, it covers 8.6 sq kms, population of 3000 (2011 figures).

References


ARC Linkage research project: LP110200787 Jones, de Jong and Fuller, "Sea change communities: intergenerational perception and sense of place".

ARC Community Focus Groups, Sorrento and Queenscliff, 2013

Beavis D A and E T Raison (1876-77) (eds) Queenscliffe!: How to see it (Tourist Guide, 1876-77).


Borough of Queenscliffe Heritage Study (1984), Alom Lovell and Associates

Borough of Queenscliffe Heritage Study (2009) Lovell Chen
Borough of Queenscliffe Planning Scheme (2009)

Bruck, L (1888) *Bruck’s Guide to the Health Resorts in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand*, Sydney


Centre for Environmental Studies 1979, *Sorrento Townscape Study*. Melbourne, Vic: Centre for Environmental Studies, University of Melbourne. NHS Archives

Crowder, D (2002?) *Town Planning Assessment for the Continental Hotel Sorrento*, Ratio Consultants P/L, NHS Archives


Loney, J (1982) Bay Steamers and Coastal Ferries, AH and WA Reed P/L, NSW and NZ


Mornington Peninsula Leader, 27 August 2002

Mornington Peninsula Leader, 4 May 2004

Mornington Peninsula Shire Heritage Study, Context with Kellaway and Lardner (1992) NHS Archives


Planisphere (2012), Moonee Valley Neighbourhood Character Study, Final Report


The Guide, Illustrated Handbook of the Bay, Melbourne, 1876-77

The Age, Domain, 4 December 2010

The Mail, 10 Dec 1998; 20 April, 2004. NHS Archives


