‘Iconic development’
Is there such a thing?

Ms Gregoria Taylor
Deakin University
gregoria@integratedplanningsolutions.com.au

Dr Beau Beza and Dr David Jones
Deakin University

By way of definition, dictionaries such as the Oxford Dictionary note that the word ‘icon’ is a noun meaning ‘a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration’ (p. 654). More recently, the phrase ‘iconic development’ has crept into the town planning vernacular making reference to built or planned works that are intended to be an urban ‘benchmark’. However, in terms of planning practice in the State of Victoria, Australia, the meaning of ‘iconic development’ is unclear amongst property development professionals – one only needs to peruse the local newspaper, The Age on any given week and publications by key bodies such as the Planning Institute of Australia, the Victorian Planning and Environment Law Association, the Urban Development Institute of Australia and the Property Council of Australia on their websites and in professional newsletters, to appreciate the different ways the phrase is used in the property development context. This paper reports on key themes arising from interviews with 52 Victorian property development professionals, who were interviewed to determine their perceptions about what constitutes ‘iconic development’ in Victoria. Arising from the interviews, the study confirms that ‘iconic development’ is the new buzz phrase in property development circles, it is no longer just being used as a sales and marketing tool, but has been appropriated by technical professionals and introduced into different planning documents including certain local clauses in the Victorian Planning Provisions. Different professionals in the development industry, such as architects, planners and lawyers ascribe different meanings to this phrase, thereby presenting confusion in the property development industry. By understanding what these different professionals mean by the phrase ‘iconic development’ a more collaborative understanding of the phrase is arrived at to provide the practitioner and public with a more informed understanding to review realised and/or planned ‘iconic development’.

Key words: Iconic Development, Architecture, Design, Landmark site, Urban Planning
Introduction: What is ‘iconic development’?

Iconography and iconic development, whilst subjective, inevitably contributes to the development and identification of the built form in a place. In the interests of clarity, it is accepted that heritage places or objects have heritage value or significance provided to them through definitive criteria afforded through clear legislation and controls. Whilst some heritage places or objects are sometimes referred to as being ‘iconic’ there is no formally clear cut definition or criteria articulated to ‘iconic development’ as there is to heritage. The focus of this study is not on heritage places or objects but rather on development that is referred to as being iconic more broadly. Focusing on Melbourne, Victoria, the term ‘iconic development’ is being used in a planning context at Planning Panels Victoria and at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. However, there is no statutory test to determine what the criteria for an iconic building is and therefore no consistency in the use of the term in a professional context. The cases illustrate that there are different views on what is ‘iconic’ and what constitutes ‘iconic development’. Iconography is generally defined as the “…study of images or symbols in visual arts”… “the visual images, symbols, or modes of representation collectively associated with a person, cult, or movement”. The word ‘icon’ is a noun meaning “…a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration”. However, in a town planning context, the meaning of this phrase is unclear.

To better understand the extent of inconsistency with the use of the phrase ‘iconic development’ and how the phrase in being used in the Victorian context, it was determined that it was important to interview different professionals using the term. This paper reports on the key themes arising from interviews with 52 Victorian property development professionals to determine their perceptions about what constitutes ‘iconic development’. The interviews reported in this paper are but one research component that forms part of a broader research study, which investigates the planning process for developments, which are ‘iconic’ in Melbourne, Victoria.

As well as a discussion on the collective meaning and understanding of the phrase ‘iconic development’ noting key examples as articulated by the property development professionals interviewed; five key themes arose. The key themes described the extent to which:

- iconic developments contribute to identity and character of a place.
- planning regulations and policies affect iconic development projects.
- the economic climate influences iconic development.
- value is associated with iconic development; and
- politics influence iconic development.

These themes are discussed in more detail below. However, before going into these themes in detail, it is important to appreciate the literature on the topic and the method used in the interviews component of the research in the context of the broader study.

Literature Review

The term ‘iconic development’ is presently being used to describe the build form environment in the Victorian planning context. Apart from Kevin Lynch,(1960) who includes ‘landmarks’, as one
element in his discussion on the five key elements that make up the ‘image’ of a city; there is generally an absence in planning schools and in the social sciences, of research into the use of the phrase ‘iconic development’ as a descriptor for the built form, not to mention the built form in the Victorian context. There are various authors who discuss the impact of various external factors to the delivery of the built form from a process perspective in Victoria such as Sandercock,(1975) Buxton, Budge, Goodman,(2003) and Dovey(2001). Sandercock discusses the extent to which politics influences the planning process and development in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney focusing in the period up to the mid seventies. Buxton, Budge and Goodman collaboratively look at the legislative process under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic) and the extent to which planning policy and regulation influence development. Aside from his brief discussion in collaboration with Sandercock (2002) on ‘imagining’ Melbourne’s docklands, Dovey is more interested in the links to urban design and architecture and the extent to which development contributes to character and identity. Whilst there are many other terms which have similar connotations, such as ‘landmark’, ‘urban renaissance’, ‘gentrification’, ‘modernity’ and ‘tower building’ to name a few; there is no specific reference in the literature that discusses this illusive term ‘iconic development’, despite its common use in the town planning vernacular by various experts in the property development industry in Victoria. Lynch however, takes the view that there does exist ‘a quality in a physical object, which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer’. He calls this ‘imageability’. Using the following overarching elements to describe the physical form of a city; legibility, building the image, structure and identity and imageability; Lynch further breaks down this notion of imageability into five distinct elements; paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. It is the latter element (landmarks) that is of some relevance to this paper. In his discussion of the city form in the context of this concept of imageability, Lynch states “…landmarks are external. They are a point of reference, usually a rather simple defined physical object; a building, sign, store or mountain. They are frequently used clues of identity... and are relied upon as a journey becomes more familiar.” Lynch suggests that spatial prominence can establish elements as landmarks by making the element visible from many locations or by setting up a contrast with nearby elements. This is confirmed by Gieseking (2014), who quotes and accepts Lynch’s five distinct elements in the context of reading the city. Other scholars such as Gehl(2011) and Kaika(2010) discuss these elements in the context of illustrating good architecture and urban design outcomes. Gehl’s work focuses on spaces between buildings and the activation of street frontages. Kaika discusses ‘icons’ as brands for cities and their influence on surrounding architectural form. Perhaps the phrase is quickly becoming a ‘buzz word’ or even ‘weasel word’ (Watson 2004) in the town planning vernacular. On this basis, it could be said that the term ‘iconic’ is being used to market a development. However, as indicated in the literature above, there are a number of ‘influencing factors’ that determine whether something will be/ is ‘iconic’. Based on the literature, it seems that ‘iconic development’ is a phrase that could be used metaphorically to convey an aspiration in the built form context by exaggeration to convey that the built form being described is and/or will be venerated, and this is indeed how the phrase is being used today.
Research method

The 52 interviews (which form part of a larger body of work) use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. As outlined by Bryman (2008), qualitative and quantitative research constitutes different approaches to social investigation, which carry with them important epistemological and ontological considerations. There are two major types of research models or research paradigms for the collecting of data. The first is the ‘quantitative’ research model (Creswell 2007). Also known as traditional, positivist, experimental, or empiricist; the quantitative data collection method relies on data collection instruments that fit diverse experiences into predetermined response categories. The second, is the ‘qualitative’ research model. (Creswell 2007) Also known as the constructivist, naturalistic, interpretive, post positivist or postmodern perspective; the qualitative method is used where data is collected in forms including words, images and video, which are then analysed and summarised into themes. Usually, only one type of content analysis model is used however, there are occasions, where combining methods can be useful. This is generally referred to as triangulation,(Creswell 2007 & Bryman 2008) where there is a use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis. The use of triangulation, which combines methodologies to study the key data draws on the qualitative and quantitative data collection procedures, (for example ‘statistics’ + ‘survey + in-depth interview’). Hence triangulation was used in this research to achieve results that are cross referenced.

A combination of the ‘structured’ and ‘semi-structured’ interview was undertaken for each of the 52 participants. The structured and semi-structured interview combination utilised in this study uses a combination of open and closed questions. As indicated in the literature, open questions are where the respondent can answer on their own terms. This method allows unusual responses to be derived. Useful for exploring new areas or ones in which the researcher has limited knowledge, they are useful for generating fixed-choice format answers. In order to reduce variability in the interview technique, each interviewee was emailed a formal pack of information (including the list of questions to be asked in the interview itself) for consideration at least 48 hours before the interview. The questions were asked in the same manner and answers were recorded by hand to ensure interviewees were comfortable with the confidentiality of the interview. Of the 52 professionals interviewed 82% were male, while 18% were female. The interviewees were chosen based on their professional experience, position and individual contribution to the industry as judged by key industry bodies. There were 16 town planners, 7 barristers/ lawyers, 9 politicians, 12 architects, 2 urban designers and 2 academics. Not including the 2 academics, 22 experts worked in the public sector, while 25 worked in the private sector and 3 worked across both sectors. All of the interviewees had over 30 years experience in their field of expertise and most had been actively involved in the planning approval process of developments that are considered iconic. Four were retired. Each interviewee signed a declaration during the interview process to ensure they understood how their information would be used in accordance with the ethics requirements for the study.

Having regard to the spectrum of ‘views’ presented by Meinig’s (1979) ‘ten versions of the same scene’ theory, the type of questions asked enabled interviewees to provide not just a quantitative yes or no, or, type specific response, but also more elaborate responses. Meinig’s work is based on the notion that “...any landscape is comprised not only of what lies before our
eyes but what lies within our heads”. As discussed by Bryman, qualitative interviewing is meant to be flexible, it should not be too structured in its application and should allow some flexibility in the asking of questions, which allowed for detailed responses to be provided by the interviewees.

The structured and semi-structured research interview combination resulted in some answers being able to be standardised and others to be analysed and grouped into key themes based on subject matter. When analysing and codifying this qualitative component of the research, the language used by interviewees in their responses was examined using generally two approaches; conversation analysis and discourse analysis, as too were the key themes in the context of the subject matter. The triangulation method provided robust results with the key themes outlining new knowledge and deeper understanding of the subject matter.

In keeping with Bryman’s accepted method, full ethics was adhered to in accordance with the both LaTrobe University and Deakin University’s Human Ethics Committees, the data collected and interviews of participants was conducted in the same style and manner and individually coded to ensure confidentiality.

There are several ways of combining quantitative and qualitative research and of representing mixed methods research. Hammersley’s(1989) classification of approaches to mixed methods research is the basis for the strategic method of this study. As Hammersley outlines, the method provides for a more robust finding because of the overlap between approaches.

Results and Discussion

Many of the experts interviewed, had different opinions on the meaning of the word ‘iconic’. Some said it was “...grossly overused”. There was consistency amongst the interviewees that the use of the phrase did not have common meaning amongst their peers and therefore professionally did not carry a lot of meaning.

In better understanding the meaning of the phrase ‘iconic development’ in the manner it is being used in Melbourne’s property development context, the interviewees were asked; ‘What constitutes an ‘iconic’ development in your opinion? Why? Some interviewees said ‘iconic development’ had come to mean “...a built form structure that shapes a city and captures the imagination.” For other interviewees, truly iconic developments only existed in the international context. The one comparable Australian iconic development according to various interviewees was the Sydney Opera House. This inferred that ‘iconic development’ was significant and known not only by the local community but by the transient tourist.

According to the interviewees, the Opera House is an example of exemplary architecture, its setting adds to its uniqueness and sophistication of design. However, in listening to the interviewee’s responses, the Opera House was much more than that. This is well articulated in various references including a recent documentary, where the structure is presented as a ‘cultural icon’ and the political symbol of change by the Government of the day. Some interviewees suggested that almost anything on the Opera House site would have been iconic given its locale. Terms associated with ‘iconic development’ according to the interviewees might be ‘landmark
development’ as articulated by Lynch earlier or a project of ‘State or Regional Significance’ as defined in the Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic), under section 201F.\textsuperscript{xl} When pushed further to articulate examples of iconic development in Melbourne, some of the experts responded by saying that the City of Melbourne was still young on the international scale. It was noted that whilst ‘landmark’ sites existed, these were usually buildings used as ‘place markers’, a term used by various scholars (Gould 1986 & 2002. Gieseking 2014).\textsuperscript{xl} For other experts, Melbourne had ample iconic developments. Whilst not all were in the geographical demarcation of the City of Melbourne, the list of examples provided by the interviewees was long and varied. What becomes clearer in the examples cited, is that the definition of ‘iconic development’ is a metaphor. On this basis, it is suggested that if one accepts that ‘iconic development’ is a metaphor in planning terms, one can accept its use as a colloquially used word, which has come to be used as a subjective descriptor or to convey an aspiration about a built form development or space with whom the general public have a bond with akin to veneration. The objective of this study is not a detailed linguistic one or a discussion of heritage places; rather, the paper focuses on the definition of how the phrase ‘iconic development’ comes to be used in reference to built form projects based on the responses from the 52 interviewees. By analysing the collective understanding of what ‘iconic development’ means according to the interviewees, five key themes become clear. These are summarised below.

1. The extent to which iconic development contributes to the identity and character of a place

There is no absolute agreement on what constitutes a national icon—that elusive ‘thing’ or concept that is regarded as quintessentially Australian or instantly recognisable as uniquely Australian. Much of the tourism literature, and associated marketing brochures, identify Australia’s national icons as including the Northern Territory’s Uluru in the red centre, the Great Barrier Reef and the Sydney Opera House. The country’s unique kangaroos and koalas also rate a mention. So too does a cricketer named Don Bradman, a mighty racehorse called Phar Lap, a bushranger named Ned Kelly and a hat known as the Akubra, as well as the ‘Aussie’ meat pie, a yeast-based spread called Vegemite, and a square sponge cake dipped in chocolate and coconut known as a ‘lamington’. These icons are all elements of our national identity as taught in the curriculum at many Australian schools(Tudball 1991).\textsuperscript{xlii}

The icons of a city and the identity of the people it represents is intrinsic to people’s association with that city. Identification with a place takes many forms. Often identity can occur by way of a reference to a specific name but also by reference to a specific building or landmark. Focusing on Melbourne, the interviewees drew on various examples both locally and internationally, to illustrate how iconic developments contribute to the identity and character of Melbourne. Almost by definition iconic developments contribute to way finding and the legibility of a city. This evident in the literature and was identified by various interviewees.\textsuperscript{xliii} Described as “landmarks”, “meeting points”, and “mental map locations”, these contribute to the make up of society that different people identify with.

As identified by Meinig, the idea of place brings with it so many reactions and emotions. Iconic development can influence perception after an experience in a place. One interviewee stated “…experiences create cognitive images, which people then use as navigational tools attaching their own meaning to a place based on their own experience.”\textsuperscript{xlvii} Through one’s imagination, an experience in a place can be not just physical but sentimental.
This concept is also identified in a broader sense by another academic Thomas Kuhn(1962), who discusses this philosophy of one’s experience through imagination. On this basis, Federation Square is not just a public square, but the ‘people’s square’, the Eureka tower is a sculpture in Melbourne’s skyline that “…like a fireball in summer, lifts the spirit,” and the Shrine of Remembrance is a testament to the memory of our fallen soldiers never to be forgotten. These places stir different emotions for each of us. In the literature, this is reflective of Meinig’s position in the context of place.

When articulating some of the aforementioned examples of iconic developments in Melbourne, the experts indicated they were at the cultural heart of Melbourne’s identity. One interviewee said “Melbourne is distinctive … just like the many facets of its multicultural makeup, there is not just one iconic development that comes to mind immediately when one thinks about Melbourne’s identity – there are many. Melbourne can be identified as a culmination of various parts.” Another interviewee said on the subject of identity “Melbourne has a collective identity made up from the character of all built form”. Put differently, it could be said that identity cannot be separated from character in the built environment. Spaces, which are venerated by the public are places that people identify with as a collective of various characteristic parts. Iconic developments and their surrounding spaces are intrinsic to the identity of cities particularly when these buildings and spaces are ‘owned’ by the people who inhabit the place.

Many of the architects and designers interviewed acknowledged the impact of a brand to the identity of a place. For example, the ‘Guggenheim effect’ and the impact of the Guggenheim brand in different cities. This is consistent with the position of Kaika(2010). Whilst brands are important in the discussion about identity, context, as identified by Gehl,(2011) is also important. One architect said “…this would allow for the brand to grow as a whole.” On the other hand, another interviewee said “…icons can kill character and in turn the identity of a city … if they don’t fit.” On this basis, given Melbourne is notionally a young city in the global context of the built environment whose identity is still growing, the vision for the development of the city’s identity through the built form is important.

2. The impact of planning regulations and policies

Planning policies and regulations should provide a vision, direction and set objectives for development. The key governing documents in Victoria are the Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic) and the Victorian Planning Provisions together with their incorporated and referenced documents. Whilst most policy documents are considered important by the planners and other professionals working within the Victorian planning system; policies and regulations often set only minimum standards, therefore presenting limits. According to the interviewees, typically, iconic developments challenge and push the boundaries set in the Victorian Planning Provisions. Many of the architects and designers interviewed were of the view that policy and regulations hinder iconic development. One architect said “…regulations dumb things down, often placing tick box requirements on the design of a development which often lead to constraints. This doesn’t stop development but certainly inhibits any innovation.” According to the lawyers and barristers interviewed however, policy affects the assessment of these developments in a limited way because policy has the elasticity to assist iconic development. One barrister said,
“...if it’s a genuine iconic project then there’s a case for breaking the rules”.lviii It was recognised by the interviewees that the process for applications that push boundaries, is inherently different to the process for modest applications. That being said, most development applications are assessed under the standard application procedure under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic).

During his time as the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal President ('VCAT'), and head of the Planning and Environment List at VCAT, Justice Stuart Morris(2006) highlighted that a substantial body of law evolved as to the limits within which an administrative decision-maker must operate when applying a policy in the exercise of discretion.lix Policy and how it is applied is important, particularly in the ‘standard’ process, where proposals come before VCAT. These issues may involve the identification of applicable policy; the interpretation of policy; the lawfulness of policy; the status of policy, which may depend on the author of the policy; the weight to be given to policy; the balancing of competing policies; and the extent to which policy should give way to the circumstances of the case. On this basis, it is important to appreciate the reality and effects policy has at VCAT.

Whilst planning policies and regulations have an impact (particularly for ‘standard’ planning developments), it is evident that they are more of a reference document than a systemic requirement for iconic developments.

3. The impact of the economic climate

Melbourne is a leading financial centre ranked the world’s most livable city since 2010.lix All of the technical experts interviewed confirmed the economy has an impact on the development of iconic developments in Melbourne. From its’ early beginnings when it was declared the capital of the colony of the Port Phillip District in 1851, the growth and development of “marvelous Melbourne”lix was stimulated by the gold rush, an event which had a significant impact on the local economy that saw Melbourne become the richest city in the world.lx The boom in the economy at the time saw the delivery of many of the city’s surviving institutional buildings such as Parliament House, the State Library and the Supreme Court, Old Melbourne Gaol, the General Post Office, Government House, Melbourne Town Hall, St Paul’s and St Patrick’s cathedrals and the Queen Victoria Market to name a few. Since this time, the peaks and crashes of the economy have continued to impact the delivery of built form development in the City of Melbourne. By the Federation of Australia on 1 January 1901, Melbourne had become the largest city and leading financial centre in Australasia. The first federal parliament was convened on 9 May 1901 in the Royal Exhibition Building in the ‘capital’lxiii as it became known until 1927 when it moved to Canberra. In the immediate years after World War II, Melbourne expanded rapidly, its growth boosted by post war immigration primarily from southern Europe and the Mediterranean.lxvi During this time the ‘Paris end’ of Collins Street in Melbourne began the city’s boutique shopping and open air café cultures. In 1958, height limits in the Melbourne CBD were lifted resulting in the construction of ICI House, which transformed the city’s skyline with the introduction of skyscrapers. Australia’s financial and mining booms between 1969 and 1970 resulted in the establishment of many corporate companies (such as BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto) in the city.

Melbourne remained Australia’s main business and financial centre until the late 1970s, when it began to lose this primacy to Sydney. As the centre of Australia’s ‘rust belt’, Melbourne
experienced an economic downturn between 1989 to 1992, following the collapse of several local financial institutions. In 1992, the newly elected Kennett government began a campaign to revive the economy with an aggressive development campaign of public works coupled with the promotion of the city as a tourist destination focusing on major events and sports tourism, which saw the Australian Grand Prix move to Melbourne. Major projects included the construction of the Melbourne Museum, Federation Square, the Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre, Crown Casino and the City Link toll way. Other strategies to combat the downturn in the economy included the privatisation of Melbourne’s power and public transport and a reduction in funding to public services such as health, education and public transport infrastructure. Since the mid-1990s, Melbourne has maintained significant population and employment growth. There has been substantial international investment in the city’s industries and property market. Major inner city urban renewal has occurred in Southbank, Port Melbourne, Melbourne Docklands, South Wharf and more recently Fisherman’s Bend. Today, Melbourne’s central business district hosts some of the nation’s tallest buildings like the Eureka Tower and the Rialto, with reports of further projections of growth according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. On this basis, whilst it is suggested there may be some minor ebbs and flows in the local economy, it is expected that the economy will maintain this momentum in the immediate future.

Exemplified through history, and confirmed by the interviewees; in buoyant times, we are more likely to see the delivery of significant developments in Melbourne. Many experts said “…iconic projects are built during boom periods”. One economist observed “…privately funded buildings are often more affected by the economic cycle compared to public projects”. Iconic projects are underpinned by their economic feasibility. In tougher economic times the private sector is more risk averse and prudent. During these times therefore it is virtually impossible to deliver an iconic development, there is too much risk. One architect said “…when we are in a time of prosperity it’s often a prickly process to get a development approval. During a time of recession, decision makers are not as choosy”. Many of the decision makers interviewed confirmed that it was generally easier to obtain approvals in tougher times.

According to the interviewees, in tougher times, good Governments fill the void and seek to deliver iconic development. This was particularly evident in the Kennett era. Kennett himself confirmed this at a public address in 2014, where he said “…the economic climate has an impact on how we plan our cities”. He said, “political will was just as important as the economic climate.” Canes-Wrone (2001) economic theory supports these comments. According to Canes-Wrone, in down times governments open the public purse reflective of the genesis of economics being able to stimulate the economy. This was confirmed by interviewee 35.

4. The actual and perceived value of iconic development

Melbourne has been awarded the world’s most livable city, an award it has won four years in a row from 2010 to now. Whilst one could say that economically the award lifts the status of Melbourne a dollar figure cannot be placed on it. Arguably, it is invaluable. What people value differs. Therefore, what is considered valuable may be different for different people. There are different considerations when assessing value. The economists interviewed indicated that when
assessing value, there were four types of value; (i) tourism value, (ii) business, commercial or economic value, (iii) aesthetic value and (iv) personal value. These value types were reflected in the interviews.

For many interviewees, the value of iconic development was not quantifiable. Metaphorically, the value for the interviewees was the contribution the development brings to the people who ‘use’ or experience it. For developers, often the value is that of a commercial return in dollar figures. One of the expert economists interviewed said “...we can undertake an economic assessment based on both the quantitative and qualitative values of a development - where there is a quantifiable dollar value you can clearly demonstrate a return, where there is a non quantifiable dollar value (more of a qualitative value) then it is more difficult to demonstrate a return in today’s economic terms.” So where there’s a non quantifiable value, it becomes more of an investment ‘for the people’ particularly if its contribution will be venerated. Whilst this lends itself to better positioning from a marketing and commercial perspective, it is suggested that this value is unique. One interviewee said “…there is an enormous value in giving people a sense of pride for their city which is what iconic developments do”. One key example highlighted in the interviews, was the Sydney Opera House. The Opera House has both a very tangible value associated with the number of locals and tourists who view shows there and an intangible value associated with the number of people who don’t necessarily spend money there but value it as part of the Sydney Harbor landscape. This is known as the ‘postcard effect’. One planner stated “When a structure acts as a ‘phillip’ to a place, (ie. the way that the Opera House does to Sydney), it encourages other things to happen there.” This type of value is not quantifiable according to the economists that were interviewed – it is invaluable.

5. The influence of politics

It is commonly accepted that politics do influence development. This has been illustrated in the satirical comedy *Utopia*, which is a good representation of the current state of play in the Melbourne development industry. As outlined earlier, the process for ‘iconic’ developments as opposed to ‘standard’ developments is inevitably different and often involves Members of Parliament notably the Premier, the Minister for Planning, and to a lesser degree, the local member as key decision makers. This is particularly the case for projects in Melbourne’s CBD greater than 25,000 square meters. One barrister said, “…before technical experts have an opportunity to comment on a significant project, politicians have often already made up their minds”. Politics and politicians have significant influence on the delivery of significant, often ‘iconic’ projects. Key examples as noted by the experts interviewed were; Federation Square, City Link, the East/ West link, the Shrine of Remembrance, the Queen Victoria Hospital redevelopment, the Windsor Hotel, Southern Cross Station, Grollo’s proposal to build the world’s tallest tower in the Docklands, the Melbourne Museum, the Carlton Gardens, the Dome at Parliament, the National Tennis Centre, the Rialto Towers and the Eureka Tower. As the examples above illustrate, politics can influence the approval and delivery of these projects.

The interviewees said “…the process is inherently political”. Politics are a catalyst for change. One planner noted “…when there’s a change of government... the incoming Government wants to leave an imprint on the landscape”. Others said “…politicians have an interest in leaving a built form legacy”. A retired planning minister confirmed this stating “...you try to resist but
you’re not always successful… sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse.”

Another retired politician said “…when a political party gets a project on the ground, they get political capital… politicians often turn political capital into votes/ power rather than just money.”

The interviewees generally observed that there was no difference between the major parties, both want that illusive built form plaque. One decision maker said “…because of the limited duration of a political term, if a politician wants a project to be delivered during their term then they will have a rapid approval delivery.”

Politicians live for ‘turning of the sod’ launches and red ribbon cutting ceremonies. The 52 interviewees unanimously confirmed that iconic development in Melbourne is heavily influenced by politics. Based on the responses in the interviews it is suggested that politics have a significant influence on the approval and delivery of iconic development.

There are numerous calls to “de-politicise” strategic land use and infrastructure decisions by putting them at arm’s length from state and local government politicians however, the likelihood of this occurring according to the interviewees was low.

Conclusion

The phrase ‘iconic development’ has rightfully or wrongfully crept into the town planning vernacular. One could say it is the new buzz or weasel word (Watson 2004) much in the same way that works like ‘landmark’ have been used in the past to have similar connotations. The specific meaning of the phrase is varied as outlined in the interviews that were undertaken as part of this study and used differently by different professionals. What is considered iconic for one person, may not be for another.

What is clear on the evidence however, is that this phrase is colloquial and has come to be used as a subjective descriptor to convey an aspiration about a built form development or place with whom people have a bond, akin with veneration. The way different people deploy ideas of built form being ‘iconic’ in order to have it approved or built, often in the face of community opposition is a key finding and thereby explains the reason for its use.

It was clear in the interviews that what is or becomes considered to be iconic development is impacted or influenced by five key factors in Melbourne. These are; the extent to which they contribute to identity and character of a place, the impact of planning regulations and policies and the economic climate in which they are approved and developed. The actual and perceived value is associated with iconic development, and the politics of the day. On this basis, it is suggested that these key factors may inform key criteria to determine what is ‘iconic’ and what is not in the context of how the phrase is being used today.
Endnotes


2. Planning Scheme Amendment C172 (15 June 2015), where a proposed development was referred to as the “iconic” podium tower development; Planning Scheme Amendment C107 (5 May 2015), where reference was made to St Kilda Road as a nationally recognised “iconic” boulevard; Planning Scheme Amendment C106 (25 June 2013), where reference was made to the St Kilda Triangle as an “iconic” asset within the St Kilda foreshore.

3. Metropol Planning Solutions Ltd v Knox CC & Ors [2013] VCAT 359 (25 March 2013) where the site in this case was considered not to be “iconic”. Melbourne City Council v the Minister for Planning [2010] VCAT 1459 (30 August 2010), where it was debated whether the city of Melbourne could accommodate more than one “iconic” building. IT was submitted in this case that the Planning Scheme does not require buildings to be “iconic” rather it encourages exemplary architecture and innovative building design. Adspace Pty Ltd v Melbourne City Council & Ors [2003] VCAT 1057 (30 July 2003) where the Arts Centre precinct was described as have “iconic” cultural status.


Interviewees 39, 45, 53, 44, 52, 49 & 16.

Interviewees 39, 11 & 40.

Interviewee 35.

Interviewee 33.


‘Melbourne again world’s most livable city’ AAP 19 August 2014. Melbourne obtained an overall rating of 97.5 out of 100 in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s annual livability survey.

Interviewee 35.

Interviewee 52.

Interviewee 48.


Interviewee 6.

Interviewees 28 & 16.

Interviewee 24.

Interviewees 8 & 33.

Interviewee 12.

Interviewee 3

Interviewee 40.