Following the decline of manufacturing at the end of the twentieth century, land and infrastructure speculation continued to drive suburban expansion at the edges of the city of Melbourne. Mass transit technologies allowed suburban sprawl in the 1870s through the construction of light and heavy rail, and again in the 1950s with the mass adoption of the private motor. These technologies significantly altered the urban landscape and shaped today’s city. Melbourne was laid out and developed in a way that projected where developments were going to be, such as along waterways, stock routes, rail corridors, and later, motorways. As the sprawl continues, it also appears ‘up’ is the new ‘out’. Increasing density in the inner city marks another phase in the reshaping of Melbourne. Speculation amongst the urban gentrity surrounding the next suburbs to be gentrified accelerates the rate at which we see cranes claim the inner-city skyline, replacing warehouses with boutique cafes. Modest homes on long, narrow plots continue to be demolished, subdivided, and supplanted by modern townhouses. Is this at the expense of the low-density ‘Australian Dream’ and the cultural heritage associated with the urban frontier, or must we accept that taking to the skies is the way forward? Development occurred in four distinct phases of speculative development, dictated by changing technologies. Firstly, initial settlement along waterways in what would become the metropolitan area using traditional horse and cart modes of transport; the expansion of the walking-city with the installation of light and heavy rail; the explosion of suburban development with the mass adoption of the private motor; and finally the emergence of truly high-rise suburbs in the 21st century. Obsessed with all things speculative since its inception, this paper contends that Melbourne continues to do all it has ever known – remake itself.

Keywords — Watersways; Speculation; Mass-transit; Private-motor

INTRODUCTION

It is a cold winter’s morning and the inner suburbs of Melbourne are veiled by gentle mist. Stiff blades of grass, along with the frosted windscreen of a sleek car sparkle, if the sun dares peek through the dark clouds for even a moment. Those brave enough to face the cold and the traffic emerge from their cottages and 6-pack flats in thick, puffy jackets and scarves to pour water over their cars in the hope they might start, like they did the morning before. Soon they will be parked in traffic on the generic main road. A couple of hundred metres away a scattered convoy of people briskly make their way down the footpath, keeping one eye open for cyclists, and the other down at their smartphone. They are making their way across the lingering level-crossings towards a red brick shelter, fenced off by uninspiring wire, and covered thoroughly with countless blue rectangles. At a time of unprecedented development these stations were once the city’s proudest achievement. How special it must have been for those who got to ride on the new suburban rail network in the closing decades of the 19th century; paid for by a seemingly endless supply of gold (it was not endless), insured by the prospect of healthy patronage from the imagined suburbs.1

For those commuting a shorter distance, their journey continues past the station, past the few remaining workshops and factories in the area, towards the main commercial road. None of the shops are open of course, as it is not yet 9 o’clock. If they look carefully enough amongst the many tightly packed shops, they may observe steam emerging from a doorway. No doubt the steam is coming from the boiler of a brass or cast iron espresso machine, branded with an exotic name. Hands wrapped firmly around the paper cup (or eco-friendly, reusable cup, because saving the environment is a top priority here), the inner-Melburnian steps up onto the tram if it is on time, and continues on their way into the crane-riddled skyline.

Melbourne is a city built upon speculation. The prospect of great wealth brought Van Diemonian pastoralists across Bass Straight and after establishing an illegal town, land speculation became a favourite pastime amongst developers and property buying hopefuls.2 It has remained so across each subsequent decade. Since European occupation began in 1835 Melbourne has always been a place for business venture. It was not founded as a strategic colonial outpost, but by businessmen looking to grow their wealth.3 Melbourne has evolved through four distinct phases of development, largely mirroring global technological advancement. Initial settlement patterns followed the paths of fresh waterways and stock routes and established an urban skeleton to support further development. Mass transit infrastructure towards the end of the 19th century allowed a relatively small walking city to boom outwards on rail. Major arterials and motorways in the mid-20th century brought upon the explosion in ownership of the private motor then pushed the city outwards on bitumen, bringing the metropolitan area into the rural landscape. Finally, the conquest of the sky continues to push the city upwards at an ever increasing rate while simultaneously maintaining the (perhaps unsustainable) tradition of outwards growth. Melbourne truly is a city built, and re-built upon speculation.

PART I — Up the Creek

Melbourne came to be shaped, divided and developed into the form we know today in the early-to-mid 19th century as a result of the various creeks and streams radiating out from the first settlement near the area known today as Endeavour Park, opposite the Customs House on Flinders Street. Sites for villages were surveyed and settled along the Salt Water (Maribyrong) River and Moonee (Moonee) Ponds Creek in the west and north-west, Merri and Darebin Creeks in the north, and the Yarra River and Kooyongkoot (Gardiner’s) Creek in the south-east. These acted as natural boundaries to large estates, farms, vineyards, orchards and such, and would later become the boundaries for the various city and shire municipalities. The initial villages outside of Melbourne Town such as Essendon, Pentyridge, and Oakleigh were placed along these waterways due to the relatively easy access to fresh water. Aerial photographs and colonial surveys demonstrate how rapid and persistent Closer Settlement subdivisions, most notably in the northern suburbs, resulted in streets being distinctly laid out between the waterways, often ignoring the landscape.4 The waterways themselves became the ‘back fence’ for the municipalities they separated as dwellings and commercial centres tended to face main streets such as Sydney Road, High Street, Lygon Street and so on.5 These waterways still significantly impact the ways in which


people interact with the city.

At a time where resources were in short supply, access to fresh water determined the survival of colonisers in young townships across the district. This was the very factor that caused Lieutenant-Colonel David Collins to move his failed Sorrento settlement to Van Diemen’s Land in 1803. Upon arrival members of the Port Phillip Association remarked, “the whole Country is of the most beautiful description and Lands of the best quality”. These would be perfect for fulfilling the pastoral requirements of the founding parties. Immense geological and volcanic activity millions of years ago, coupled with indigenous activity on the land, and their interactions with the waterways created the landscape that appealed to pastoralists in the nineteenth century. Most of the city’s underlying bedrock was originally laid down during the Silurian period, eroding over time to form the desirable hilly landscape, while in the west multiple volcanic lava flows created the relatively flat plains that we know today. Heavy industries came to be attracted, “to the low-lying areas of Port Melbourne and South Melbourne, and those adjacent to the lower reaches of the Yarra and Maribyrong Rivers”, while the hilly areas in the south and south-east attracted the best residential developments and skew the future metropolis in that direction. Furthermore, large clay deposits in the north also attracted many industries. From a general northerly direction nine main valleys fall to a southerly direction, seven to meet the Yarra, and two to flow into Port Phillip Bay. In the south, Gardiners and Koonung Creeks run westerly to meet with the Yarra, and slightly further south, shallow valleys fall in a northerly direction into Port Phillip Bay.

Soon after Melbourne was settled, the confines of the Hoddle/Russell Grid were no longer enough to meet the needs of the rapidly growing population of the town, and village settlements were surveyed and laid down by the colonial government. Figure 1 shows a map of the Land Act 1862 which presents Melbourne Town and its young suburbs of Fitzroy, Richmond, Collingwood, Hotham, and Emerald Hill on and around the Yarra and Maribyrong Rivers, with places such as St. Kilda, Sandridge, Elsternwick and Brighton looking out into Hobson’s and Port Phillip Bays. Satellite villages such as Keilor, Braybrook, and Footscray were laid down along Salt Water River; Broadmeadows and Essendon along Moonee Ponds Creek; Pentridge along Merri Creek; Epping along Darebin Creek; and Eltham and Templestowe along the higher banks of the Yarra. Unwin and Elgar’s Special Surveys which included areas such as Bulleen in the north, and Balwyn in the south are shown laid down on either side of Koonung Creek. Ballyshanassy (Burwood) was laid on Main Creek which fed into Kooyong Koot Creek, where the village of Oakleigh could be found. Areas of the map highlighted in blue indicate Crown land, and land highlighted in red indicate privately owned properties. While reading a map such as this must be done with caution as many aspects of the landscape cannot be captured in a two-dimensional drawing, what can be demonstrated for certain is the immense importance the colonial government placed on the waterways leading into the Yarra River, and Port Phillip Bay. The countless estates that backed onto all the creeks and rivers, particularly between the Moonee Ponds, Merri, and Darebin Creeks gave landowners a direct source of fresh water to supply their grounds and

6 Sullivan, Martin, Men and Women of Port Phillip (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985), 1-7.
11 Map of the Colony of Victoria comprising ten million acres and upwards delineated in blue tint and initialled by the President of the Board of Land and Works, in pursuance of the provisions of [Section 12 of the] Land Act of 1862, PROV, VPRS 7064/P3 Unregistered Maps and Plans (Legislative Assembly), Unit 1.

i. Land Act 1862 Map shows village surveys on intersecting creeks/rivers

Early roads and stock routes were also an important factor in the shaping of Melbourne as a modern city and contributed significantly to speculative developments being able to market desirable land based on their proximity to main roads and transport. A series of diagonal stock routes, such as what would become Upper Plenty Road, as well as Lower Heidelberg Road, were laid at approximately 198 feet wide. These were contained within large estates, leading to marketplaces in the central city. The 1929 Plan for General Development states they were laid at this width to assure a plentiful amount of pasture for travelling live-stock. Being so wide to allow for livestock and horse and bullock crews, the roads were quite prominent on the landscape and appeared in early government surveys. As the large properties that contained these stock routes were subdivided and sold off, the diagonal roads remained. They still act as a vital infrastructural link between outer suburbs and the inner-city. The rectangular street pattern observed on maps and surveys which Melbourne has since become recognised was further established by the construction of roads which followed the perimeters of large allotments. In most cases these became main arterial roads, with examples found in Albert and Victoria Streets in Brunswick, as well as Moreland Road, which served as the Coburg/Brunswick municipal border. The subdivision of estates under the Closer Settlement Acts further accelerated the subdivision of larger estates in the early 20th century into smaller rectangular allotments.

Colonial settlement patterns often disregarded the topography of the land and laid down rigid grids, however it is clear that the natural features of the land across what is now metropolitan Melbourne significantly shaped and influenced the shape and design of the future city. While we are used to ‘speculation’ in a Land Boom context and beyond, it is important to acknowledge that the waterways and their valleys attracted initial settlements due to their settings and resources, and also influenced where some of the first stock-routes, paths, and roads were laid. These in turn attracted speculators looking to capitalise on the aforementioned features. Speculating where estates could have access to fresh water, easy enough access to the city, and an attractive natural environment ultimately dictated where they were built. These very early marks on the landscape were to act as a skeleton that would support future growth of the city.

### Part 2 – Railroaded

Tram and rail networks became the next vital piece of infrastructure that dictated growth within the city. Rather than access to fresh water sources for farming to drive speculation (although access to water remained vital), one’s proximity to easy-to-access public transport became a crucial factor of desirability for potential property owners and developers as the city transitioned from agricultural to industrial. These new technologies allowed outwards growth from the CBD where the centre was still accessible, but allowed a quiet retreat in which to escape. Farms on the outskirts of the city start to be replaced, being swallowed up by tramway suburbs which filled vacant parts of the metropolis, where subdivision continued. Melbourne as a city with boundaries dictated by walking distance, or access to horses/carts could suddenly continue their growth outwards as light and heavy rail enabled travel between areas that were further apart without significantly increasing commute time. Like the villages on the creeks and rivers before, suburbs and estates sprang up along the new rail lines, or at least included rail reserves in their plans in order to entice people to buy property with the prospect that their homes would one day be serviced by rail.

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Rail undoubtedly altered the landscape significantly as Melbourne became much more urban. This new technology opened up tracts of land that had until then been unfit for use due to distance from the city centre. Rail decreased transit times to these areas and made them more desirable places to consider living. It did not take long for railways to be implemented in the city after its establishment - less than 20 years. The railway corridors (whether they had tracks on them or not) were integral for developers anticipating where people might want to live, as well as predicting where industry
may be in order to increase speculators' wealth in both the short and long term. Speculation was paramount to the rapid growth of the young city as new transit technologies such as those mentioned above drove the desire for the children of gold-rush migrants to spread themselves across the urban area, often on the suburban frontier. One such case comes with the comparison of Coburg’s growth with Malvern’s, which is of similar proximity to the city centre. Richard Broome discusses the importance of trains and trams in attracting people to the Shire of Coburg in the 1870s and 1880s saying, “Coburg’s development depended more on the transport facilities than image.” The Coburg and Brunswick councils discussed the prospect of installing cable trams along Sydney Road, as well as an electric train line towards Somerton for many years. These proposals were frequently opposed by farmers who were concerned the rattling from the trams would startle their stock. However, in the 1880s work began to bring these transport facilities to the Shire of Coburg with the council making an effort to cease the approval of certain licences such as those for tanneries, piggeries and so on. Farm land was purchased by companies, and subdivided to be sold to speculators and prospective homemakers. After the eventual installation of the tramlines down Sydney Road Council minutes proudly described the newly purchased carriages as “models of beauty… strength and lightness.”

Land Boom development in the 1880s and 1890s essentially established what we now know as the inner and middle suburbs of Melbourne, with the urban frontier tapering off into wilderness past Sunshine, Essendon, Coburg, Preston, Heidelberg, Caulfield, and Brighton. Grand estates were rapidly dismantled, reshaping every element of the land, bar perhaps the creeks and their valleys which remained the natural boundary between municipalities. Auction posters held by the State Library of Victoria demonstrate the advertisement for sale of land on the sites of former estates, all emphasising the close proximity to the local train station (built or proposed), as well as the benefits of the clean, fresh air on the outskirts of the metropolis. One such poster dated between 1880 and 1890 titled, “Two Grand Subdivisional Blocks of Land”, advertises land in Caulfield on blocks of approximately 20 acres. Citing the property’s close proximity to the Glen Huntley and Caulfield railway stations and the Caulfield Racecourse as, “two of the choicest blocks of land”, these are clearly aimed at speculators looking to further subdivide and profit from their purchase.

Another document, this time a Closer Settlement survey conducted by the Department of Lands and Survey, dated sometime around 1907 reserves the Phoenix Estate in Brunswick, off Dawson Street and backing onto the Moonee Ponds Creek. The survey highlights the proximity to the Moonee Valley Racecourse, as well as a proposed train line going through the estate. The survey also states the properties were, “one mile to Sydney Road and tram line”. In actual fact the estate is 1.7 miles (approximately 2 kilometres) from Sydney Road, or a half-hour or so walk. This meant the proposed train line was the true magnet for prospective buyers. The line was never built and is now a park, however this nevertheless demonstrates that the prospect of a train line was advertised as a means to entice people to buy land on the estate as a way of quickly transporting themselves into the city, even if it was never to come. Advertisements for this period such as ones above are in abundance in the archive and demonstrate the rate at which urbanisation occurred where affluent estates were dismantled for working and middle class housing. They also indicate the significant role that prospective rail infrastructure played in attracting buyers.

During this period large estates set in rural, agrarian settings on the outskirts of the rapidly growing town soon became much more densely settled. Agricultural uses continued on the city’s fringe, at an ever-increasing distance, and were replaced by industrial, working and middle-class urban environments. The rivers and creeks that attracted people so many decades prior were no longer the prime attraction. Instead properties had their backs to them, facing railways lines, parks, shopping strips and so on. The train and tram completely reshaped the urban landscape and the ways in which inhabitants interacted with them, and as Davison’s observation of the ‘hand’ shape of Melbourne shows, dense settlement along these rail corridors were where everybody wanted to live, leaving sparsely developed wedges between them.

**PART 3 – MOTORWAYS AND THE SUBURBAN FRONTIER**

The middle third of the 20th century truly signified the greatest global transformation to the urban landscape since the Industrial Revolution. The explosion of car ownership in the years following the war meant every facet of the built environment changed to accommodate for the machines that would become a mobile extension of the home. The drive-in
The suburb became much more prevalent with time, while simultaneously, our homes evolved to accommodate a new room to store the newest member of the family - the car. The front garden needed to squeeze over for the driveway; roads needed to be realigned, expanded, and lengthened to allow for smooth movement between destinations; trams continued to lose their ability to move unimpeded on the road; trains significantly lost patrons to the car; and most imposingly, a new kind of artery would rise above the creek valleys to pump them into the heart of the city. The city truly changed forever to make way for the private motor. While the suburban frontier generally resembles an aesthetic that transcends time where unplumbed, unlit, unsurfaced streets accommodate the newest in domestic design, it was able to reach incredible new distances from the city centre. People were able to travel faster and further than ever before in the extreme comfort and privacy of their private vehicles. Motorways became the new obsession, and their polished concrete finish became synonymous with progress, wealth and modernisation.  

Melbourne in the late 1940s was still compact. Most people lived in walking distance from a train station or tram stop, and those on the fringes not yet serviced by train or tramways were usually only a short bus ride away. By this time the city’s skew towards the south-east was well and truly cemented, and railways maps of the time show a much more dense network of stations and lines than in the west. The city at the end of the Second World War resembled the one that was laid down during the Land Boom, with only minor adjustments such as road widening or realignment, and infill

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development taking place. The general layout of streets and main roads was unchanged. Melbourne’s urban fringe from west to south-east generally tapered off past today’s middle suburbs such as at Sunshine, Essendon, and Pascoe Vale in the west, and Coburg, Reservoir, and Heidelberg in the north. In the east a complex web of suburban railway lines serviced densely packed suburbs, where further south, they turned to hug the shoreline down towards Frankston.

During this period the metropolis was serviced by far fewer main roads than today. While there were a significant number of suburban rail lines, Melbourne still relied heavily upon the main roads and stock routes that had been laid down during the settlement period and the Gold Rush for its major thoroughfares, such as Geelong, Ballarat, Keilor/ Mount Alexander Roads in the west, Sydney, Plenty, and Heidelberg Roads in the north and east, and Punt, St. Kilda, and Brighton Roads in the south. As Davison has thoroughly analysed, there were still large tracts of vacant land between the radial railway lines.27 The explosion of car ownership that followed the war pushed out the suburban frontier. Lewis Mumford, John Power and Graeme Davison have written extensively that the urban landscape changed in ways never seen before, all to accommodate the private motor.28 The emergence of the drive-in shopping centre, bottle-shop, cinema, motel, university, and service station departed in many ways from the traditional methods of building, where walking was no longer practically achievable between point-of-origin and destination.29

These new types of buildings changed the way Melburnians interacted with the urban landscape as driving emerged as the dominant form of transport. As the roads began to fill, public transport emptied. As a result the suburb and the home evolved to reflect the changing mobility behaviours of the city and its suburbs. Suburbs such as East Keilor, Doncaster, and Bundroora emerged as byproducts of the private motor. No longer would the suburbs be centred around the high street and train station, but instead, the regional shopping centre and highway would become the spine of ‘car suburbs’. Like the speculators before them developers, project builders and the like began buying, subdividing and developing large parcels of land, expanding the city outwards at enormous rates. As where Essendon was on the frontier in the 1940s, by the 1980s it was a middle suburb, with development reaching Taylors Lakes and Sydenham, and by the 2000s, Hillside and Caroline Springs.

Melbourne’s suburbs had generally followed a rectangular pattern for subdivision which can still be observed in the city’s north, east, inner west, and south eastern suburbs. As the car continued to dominate the landscape and push the city outwards planning principles also began to change to become more sympathetic to the natural features of landscape, echoing interwar garden suburb design. Rather than imposing a grid on an unforgiving landscape, such as at Keilor or Pascoe Vale, streets of suburbs that were developed during the period where private motors had cemented their dominance were wide, curved, and followed the topography of the land.30 Front gardens were large and unfenced, and as a front fence may have served a purpose of privacy and security in the pedestrian city, they were not necessary in the motorised suburb where cars groaned past. As driving became more of a need, walking came to be seen as more of a recreational activity, and the importance of footpaths needing to be direct routes to destinations diminished.

Houses in the ‘car suburbs’ also reflected the changing attitudes to mobility. As where houses particularly in the inner suburbs of middle and working class areas had been packed more densely, they were also of a time where storing a large vehicle was not a concern. Once cars became more accessible, but still remaining a luxury, garages started to be integrated into home design. They were usually located at the rear of the property, out of the way. As observed in many bungalow-style homes of the 1930s in areas such as Brunswick and Thornbury the drive-way pressed through the front garden, and passed the residence.31 In an almost stratigraphic manner, it can be observed through the suburbs radiating outwards from the city that as the car asserted itself into the lives of Melburnians, the garage crept from the rear of the property, right up to being integrated into the front facade, with internal access from the home.

Conclusion – Reach for the Sky

Once again the city’s urban and suburban landscapes are in flux. The frontier has moved many tens of kilometres outwards emulate the countless frontier suburbs before it. Now for the most serious adoption since the Housing Commission of Victoria’s tower experiment, and the post-war ‘six-packs’ that were littered around the inner suburbs, our suburbs are growing upwards as well as outwards.32 As Melbourne’s inner suburbs continue to deindustrialise, the skyline is being ever dominated by cranes and scaffolding. Warehouses are being replaced by boutiques cafes, gelaterias, and specialty bars. Brick and weatherboard workers’ cottages and former industrial factories are being cleared rapidly to make way for large apartment complexes with large stores fronting the street, with dozens of apartments packed tightly together above. Interestingly, it seems the extreme subdivision of the Land Boom is in some cases being reversed as these complexes require developers to acquire entire suburban blocks to build upon. Developers buy large tracts of land and announce luxurious projects which attract the middle and upper classes based on promises of shops, schools, transport and freeways close by, and access to the National Broadband Network – some projects of which have not been built, or are not more than the artist’s impression. It seems the car has completed its conquest of Melbourne as large garages have found their way underground – becoming the literal foundations of our new homes, cementing the private motor’s importance.

30 Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Planning Policies for the Melbourne Metropolitan Region (Melbourne: 1971).
31 State Library of Victoria: Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, Architecture Collection; 1839- (Melbourne).
in our lives. The city of Melbourne was born to pastoral parents looking to make a fortune, grew with individuals and families aspiring to acquire their own slice of suburban paradise, and is now maturing with eyes firmly fixed abroad - reaching for the sky.


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Maps and Surveys


Map of the Colony of Victoria comprising ten million acres and upwards delineated in blue tint and initialled by the President of the Board of Land and Works, in pursuance of the provisions of [Section 12 of] the Land Act of 1862, PROV, VPRS 7664/P3 Unregistered Maps and Plans (Legislative Assembly), Unit 1.


Collection
State Library of Victoria: Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning; Architecture Collection; 1839- (Melbourne).

Letter

Podcast

Images
i. Extract from Land Act 1862 map - Map of the Colony of Victoria comprising ten million acres and upwards delineated in blue tint and initialled by the President of the Board of Land and Works, in pursuance of the provisions of [Section 12 of] the Land Act of 1862, PROV, VPRS 7664/P3 Unregistered Maps and Plans (Legislative Assembly), Unit 1.