Tracing the 'Zombification' of Undeveloped Estates in Greater Melbourne and its Outlying Regions

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Abstract: The ‘zombie subdivision’ is a phenomenon identified by the Lincoln Institute as ‘once-promising projects’ now ‘distressed’, with the fulfilment of plans or visions for the site effectively stalled. The pattern of subdivision may also be criticised as inappropriate or unviable in a contemporary context. Services such as water, electricity, and roads are often absent in these areas, leaving them partially-occupied, or more often, completely vacant. These incomplete subdivisions fit into a broader framework of urbanisation, albeit as punctuations in a narrative of growth and development. Numerous examples exist of inappropriate subdivisions where the machinery of governance and planning have allowed resolution through buy-back schemes and subsequent restructure plans: Summerlands, in Phillip Island, and the Ninety Mile Beach Subdivision along the Gippsland coast, are two such recent local examples. Past research by three of the present authors has established the Solomon Heights estate in Sunshine North, 10 kilometres west of the centre of Melbourne, as a contrasting incidence of a ‘zombie subdivision’ in an urban Australian context where resolution is protracted and problematised; however, it is not a lone example. This paper identifies two similar sites spanning Western Port and Port Phillip Bays and examines their development histories, locating causes of their arrested development and in turn revealing the numerous factors leading to their enduring ‘zombiefication.’ Particular attention is paid to the commonalities which emerge: these sites were initially poorly-sited and speculative in nature, and were later sterilised through their locations proximate to noxious or dangerous industry. The paper details repeated planning attempts at resolving the atrophied conditions of each site. In particular, this paper notes the difficulties in restructuring estates with splintered private ownership where funding or municipal guidance are largely absent, or not in keeping with the scale of the problem. In concluding, we outline some of the implications of zombie subdivisions: as literal ‘gaps’, they counter Moltoch’s growth machine theory—of cooperation between government and private interests as a facilitator of development—and assumed narratives of growth and development which exemplify Melbourne’s urban fringe. These idiosyncratic sites are examined as examples of ‘interstitial spaces’, revealing the logics and oversights of growth models and acting as sometimes absurd counterpoints to planning aspirations toward ordered and defined development.

Key words: town planning, urban history, zoning, subdivision, property rights

Introduction: Solomon Heights Re-Runs
In 2015, Taylor, Nichols and Kolankiewicz recalibrated one prominent definition of the contemporary ‘zombie subdivision’ to encompass an Australian example from close to a century earlier. That paper told the story of the 32.8 hectare area known, since 1987, as ‘Solomon Heights’: a subdivision first offered for sale in 1926 and at that time divided between 130 lot owners but, since 1954, under a zoning which rendered it effectively ineligible for either industrial or residential development. The present Brimbank City Council planning scheme additionally warns against development on the basis of the site’s indigenous flora, with a significant coverage of Basalt Plains Grassland on the site largely on account of its century-long political and economic limbo.

Unusually, perhaps, for an academic conference paper, the Solomon Heights investigation became a part of local discourse in following years, as public interest renewed in the site. This interest was not, of course, solely due to the conference presentation, but to the paper’s availability via any internet search at the same time that the Solomon Heights area was in news coverage, principally because of the activities of a company known as Glen Ora Estate Pty Ltd. Glen Ora claimed connection to the original subdividers of the land, and established in the High Court that it, rather than Brimbank Council, owned the ‘streets’ in Solomon Heights (Star Weekly 7 March, 2017; Glen Ora Estate, 2016a). While the
authors of the original ‘zombie subdivision’ paper were unable to locate the name of the 1926 estate, there is evidence that ‘Glen Ora’ was its original name or at least that there was an estate of that name in Sunshine in 1926 (Hartwich, 1926). In early 2017, the Victorian Planning Authority gave Brimbank $75 000 to contribute to the creation of a masterplan intended to solve the impasse between council and landowners (including Glen Ora Pty Ltd) while somehow also addressing the ecological issues (Star Weekly 7 March, 2017). For now, at least, both the Glen Ora Supreme Court attempt and the VPA funding appear to be the latest in decades of seemingly absurd misadventures to bring the Solomon Heights zombie subdivision ‘to life’.

This paper brings to the fore two additional ‘zombie’ subdivisions in Melbourne and surrounds: the Cemetery and Anglers Estate in Hastings, located on the eastern aspect of the Mornington Peninsula, and the Burns Road Estate, in the middle-ring south-western suburb of Altona. Both are subject not only to planning controls supportive of nearby noxious or dangerous industry, but also – as this paper asserts – the absence of both a fiscal basis for their acquisition and a municipal directive to guide their resolution. These idiosyncratic sites are examined as examples of ‘interstitial spaces’ (Phelps and Silva, 2018), whose underdevelopment is revealing of the specific logics and oversights of prevailing speculative urban growth models. They function as sometimes absurd counterpoints to modern planning systems’ aspirations to order and promote development within defined boundaries.

**Bringing the dead to life: elaborating on the Zombie subdivision**

*Defining the ‘zombie’*

Clear definitions of ‘zombie’ subdivisions, as they have been referred to, are few and far between. The single recent major study devoted to them defines ‘zombie’ subdivisions as ‘once-promising projects’ now ‘distressed’, with the fulfilment of plans or visions for the site effectively stalled (Holway, Elliot and Trentadue, 2014). They are defined by inaction: ‘begun but left unfinished’ (Holway, Elliot and Trentadue, 2014, pp. 5). Holway, Elliot and Trentadue (2014, pp. 5) acknowledge two key drivers of zombification. Development may be paused by an economic downturn, rendering it a temporary issue; it may be resumed pending appropriate conditions. Alternatively, land may be subdivided in a ‘premature’ fashion, and its subsequent dormancy result in the obsolescence of the site. Zombie subdivisions might be considered as specific instances of a more general feature, namely the un/under-developed fragments or ‘interstitial spaces’ (Phelps and Silva, 2018). These spaces are found outside the downtowns and throughout the remainder of the fabrics of major cities. As a specific instance of interstitial spaces, their relative underdevelopment reveals failed logics of development spanning the range from the simple to the very complex.

This phenomenon of ‘the living dead of the real estate market’ finds association with early (pre-sub-prime mortgage bust) 21st century examples of profligate development (Holway, Elliot and Trentadue, 2014). Kitchin et al (2014, pp. 1070) refer to Ireland’s ghost estates as “‘new ruins’ created through twenty-first century capitalism”, not dissimilar to obsolete spaces resulting from ‘defunct’ economic activity, termed ‘drosscapes’ by Berger (2007). Yet, as illustrated in previous analysis of the Solomon Heights site, the phenomenon can be traced much further back. Something of the longer history of the zombie subdivision is present in the understated language of planning, zoning and subdivision law which speaks instead of ‘old and inappropriate’ subdivisions. Indeed, Reps (1959) spoke of the general lack of subdivision control existing in the United States in the early post war years. Recently Laitos and Martin (2015, pp. 318) have returned to the subject observing how a problem of control continues to exist.

In their purest sense of being victims—not of planning regulations necessarily, but rather, the mathematics of financing excessive private sector speculation on land—zombie subdivisions have also been referred to in the US as ‘alligators’. The term depicts the tendency of ‘developers to divide their lots into many more subdivisions than they ever develop’. The problem in these instances is that ‘an alligator “eats” equity because it lives on a diet of principal, interest, and property tax payments but does not produce income’ (West and Dickinson quoted in Hayden, 2004, pp. 18). Here again, zombie subdivisions have a longer history than is commonly appreciated, since the expressions ‘up to one’s ears in alligators’ and ‘blue sky’ real estate deals dating from the early 1900s have been used to depict real estate ventures so ‘visionary’ that there is nothing in them except ‘blue sky and hot air’ (Hayden, 2004, pp. 18). For those subdivisions where developers retain an interest but are ostensibly inactive, the problem has been that the private ownership of land often means that local governments are reluctant to intervene (Laitos and Martin, 2015). Where subdivisions no longer have any developer interest attached to them (given category 3 above) there is the further problem that banks and other financial institutions that retain ownership after foreclosure are often very reluctant to commit further investment to bring forth development (Laitos and Martin, 2015, pp. 324).
The terming of a subdivision as ‘old and inappropriate’ perhaps understates the nature and complexity of the zombie subdivision; their undesirability from the perspectives of planning authorities can cast them as unwanted land uses, or LULUs (Heiman, 2010). This phenomenon, as it has been invoked across City and Shire councils in Victoria, speaks to the desire to consolidate small and odd-shaped lots into larger lots more suitable for more exclusive forms of development: in the instance of Solomon Heights, this renegotiation lent itself to a proposal by Glen Ora Estates to develop an office-warehouse precinct (Glen Ora Estates, 2016b). Barely hinted at here are the more vexed problems of conditions that can exist as a result of major property busts, and even the more generalised problems that attend speculative development and planning permissions granted in the context of liberal land and property markets. Broadly, three types of zombie subdivision could be said to exist: where (1) the landowner or developer is actively managing or completing a development; (2) where the developer remains but here is little or no on-site activity, and; (3) properties have been totally abandoned or vacated due to foreclosure. It is categories (2) and (3) that periodically pose the biggest problems as a result of property busts, and that are not easily resolved by local governments.

The extent of the problem: Australia and beyond

The quantitative significance of zombie subdivisions in any given nation or locality can often only be guessed at. There is evidence from the United States that zombie subdivisions can be an acute and quantitatively very significant problem. Laitos and Martin (2015) cite figures of 4,000 abandoned lots in Mesa County and of 7,000 vacant lots in Teton County of just 8,800 residents. A casual inspection of the periodic subdivision restructuring plans or overlays undertaken by local authorities across Victoria reveal that the numbers of old and inappropriate subdivisions vary from 134 in the Yarra Ranges Restructure Plan for Old and Inappropriate Subdivisions of 2015, to 29 in the Pyrenees Shire Restructure Plan of 2013, to 21 in South Gippsland Shire Council’s 2017 Restructure Plan, to just 4 in Colac Otway Shire Restructure Plan of 2012. Cardinia Shire Council, as one example of the typical municipal approach, utilises restructure overlays to consolidate smaller allotments into larger configurations more suited to peri-urban development (2002, pp. 1). Their successful restructuring may mask any signifiers of their presence: those subdivisions identified within this paper were located utilising cadastral mapping techniques, with marked streets and lots otherwise not visible in satellite imagery beyond the presence of dirt tracks which vaguely skirt those formally demarcated. It must be acknowledged that, in many instances, such subdivisions are managed and restructured appropriately by local government. In the context of Melbourne and surrounds such sites and uncommon and idiosyncratic in the context of the overall scale of suburban growth; but yet observable in sufficient numbers to reveal broader dynamics of both historically attempted development and its contemporary attempted control.

Approaches to restructuring can be sensitive to existing rights and multi-tiered, making for (eventually) some resolution: Wellington Shire Council exemplifies this. The region of Ninety Mile Beach had received inappropriate treatment from post-war speculation, resulting in its subdivision into 11,800 ‘urban sized lots’ for vacation homes (Wellington Shire Council, 2018). Some subdivision patterns proved more appropriate than others, allowing development subject to permit conditions: in the estates Golden Beach and The Honeysuckles, landholders were permitted to develop a lot following its consolidation with an additional three lots; this was entirely prohibited in 2011, but granted existing use rights to those already in possession of homes. In what the municipality termed the ‘Between Settlements Area’, lots could not be developed whatsoever, yet remained under splintered private ownership. A Voluntary Assistance Scheme was introduced in 2011 with State government support, allowing landholders to transfer their land to Council ownership and subsequently absolve themselves of municipal rates and charges accrued on the land. This scheme saw almost 1500 lots voluntarily transferred to the municipality. In 2016, the Shire voted to compulsorily acquire land from 430 owners where allotments had been sold in a location where erosion, poor soil, flooding, and quality native vegetation were identified (Wellington Shire Council, 2018). The municipality is now in possession of in excess of 80% of the inappropriate allotments identified in the ‘Between Settlements Area.’

The Summerlands subdivision in Phillip Island, Victoria, provides another example of a successful acquisition and restructuring program undertaken where a development was identified as problematic and inappropriate. The land was initially subdivided in the 1920s into 900 allotments intended for holiday residences (Pepper, 2018). Development began in the immediate post-war era yet the locality uncomfortably shared its site with little penguins who sought refuge in the sand dunes and scrub, placing them at significant risk from vehicles, pets, and development. Significant concerns were raised by local conservation and tourism groups which spurred on a 1985 State government decision to purchase the entirety of the estate. Strong State government guidance, in conjunction with $25 million dollars of
funding, allowed the entirety of the Summerlands Estate to be purchased from private landholders over the course of twenty-five years (Clarke, 2007). The buy-back of the Estate reached completion in 2010 (Tract, 2014). The examples of Summerlands and the Ninety Mile Beach estates indicate the capacity of well-funded, focused, and context-sensitive planning interventions by both State and municipal governments to achieve comparatively equitable acquisition outcomes, resolving planning and property tensions around obsolete and inappropriate subdivisions.

**A framework for the issue: leapfrogs and growth machines**

Zombie subdivisions exemplify more complex oversights in planning and politics, with absent or competing landowning and developer interests on the urban fringe. These produce what Hebert (1986, pp. 141) terms a 'transitional zone’ or what urban morphologists have typically termed the ‘urban fringe belt’, typically produced as development ‘leapfrogs’ certain parcels of land which can remain un/under developed for extensive periods of time and be scattered throughout the city fabric (Whitehand and Morton, 2004). Here, the zombie subdivision in many respects appears as something of modern urban planning’s shadow ‘other’: sometimes chaotic, irrational or absurd counterpoints to modern urban planning systems’ intentions to thoroughly order and promote development within defined boundaries. Not least here is the problem that plans and zoning and subdivision regulations rarely can be perfectly matched to local conditions, such that planners continue to approve subdivisions suited to extant but old or out-of-date plans and regulations. This lag between plan and zoning ordinance preparation and subdivision approval produces a reluctance on the part of local governments to pressure banks or developers to complete subdivisions for fear of being sued for faulty planning in the first place (Laitos and Martin, 2015, pp. 324). Moreover, the resolution of the old and inappropriate subdivisions is hampered in places like the United States by state laws which typically only serve to protect lenders from liability in the event of foreclosure (Laitos and Martin, 2015, pp. 333). In this sense, as Laitos and Martin (2015, pp. 335) state, ‘preventing future zombie subdivisions is a significant challenge as many local governments do not have the proper legal authority to enact zoning ordinances that might foreclose their re-emergence during boom times’. Zombie subdivisions are a more important and integral feature of the modern city than is commonly understood, with corresponding ramifications for urban theory. The zombie subdivision reveals itself as something counter to the inexorability of the city growth machine described by Molotch (1976). They may be revealing of the important fissures that can exist within blocks of local elites, extending into ambivalence on the part of the media considered so important to sustaining discourses of the importance of land development to urban fortunes. In some key instances they may be large enough or sufficiently well-located sites to reveal the fundamental inability of parties to agree, even when significant money is to be made on growth in the form of land development. Indeed, they may reflect the complex debates not only about what type of growth (low-road, high-road), but also the distribution of public and private expenditures and benefits needed for and derived from land development that have long been at the heart of urban planning.

**Localising the zombie: Melbourne, Australia**

In the context of Melbourne and Australia, the term ‘old and inappropriate’ both defines and characterises many ‘zombie subdivisions’ with long histories of un/under-development. The term ‘old and inappropriate’ was introduced to statutory planning documentation in the 1970s in the context of escalating metropolitan strategic planning projects and systems-based thinking (Mees, 2003; McLoughlin, 1992). In this period Melbourne planning documents increasingly articulated aspirations to control and coordinate patterns of urban development. Un/under-developed subdivisions from before formalised strategic town planning converged with these strategic plans (for example, Melbourne’s growth corridor and green wedge strategy) in ways that further atrophied the site’s political and economic trajectories. Plans were introduced to ‘restructure’ ‘old and inappropriate’ (‘unplanned’) subdivision patterns to fit new strategic planning aspirations, including to protect landscapes in the Dandenong Ranges (Matthews 2013); or to avoid conflicting land uses and environmental threats (Forbes, 2009). While having some take-up, the labyrinthine inertia that settled over sites like Solomon Heights creates something of a shadow ‘other’ to planning narratives of order and control in its relations to forces of development.

What follows is an investigation of two scenarios in 20th century Melbourne and its periphery leading to impasses in the land development process. In every case are multiple land owners who have either entered into contracts without properly investigating the legalities of building or otherwise ‘improving’ land, or who have done so expecting an overturn of existing zoning in their favour. That is to say, some have entered into ownership arrangements of zombie sites with their ‘eyes open’, and some have not. Almost all, it would seem, are hopeful of renegotiating the zoning scenario ‘zombifying’ their property.
Cemetery and Anglers Estates, Hastings

The Cemetery and Anglers Estates on the outskirts of Hastings, Victoria, are together an example of a zombie subdivision with development potential bound by industrial practices. The township of Hastings is located on the Western Port Bay aspect of the Mornington Peninsula, approximately sixty kilometers south-east of the Melbourne central business district. The bay and its associated region have long accommodated industrial activity, since the production of potassium ash in the 1840s (Patterson, 2014, pp. 8). The depth of the bay, albeit disputed as a ‘deep water port’ in recent years, contributed to its early designation as an industrial area as this allowed for the establishment of deep water jetties (Victorian National Parks Association, 2014, pp. 13; Preserve Western Port Action Group, 2018, pp. 3). This ease of designation, in conjunction with relative isolation from urbanised areas and proximity to the Gippsland gas basin, fostered a clustering of heavy industries within this locality (Shapiro and Connell, 1975, pp. 4). In this sense, early landholders may have had an inkling of the industrial development that would come to typify the area; likewise, recent landholders in the Estates may have entered into purchasing agreements with their ‘eyes open,’ to draw upon an aforementioned phrasing.

![Figure 1. Location of Cemetery and Anglers Estates, Hastings](source: MapshareVic, 2019.)

By the mid-1970s, Long Island Point, adjacent to the Hastings foreshore, had come to accommodate a large steel rolling mill operated by Lysaght-BHP, an Esso-BHP fractionation plant and loading terminal, as well as a number of petroleum and crude oil tank farms (Wilkinson, 1983, pp. 216-7). Nearby Crib Point hosted a BP oil refinery, tank farm, terminal, and deep-water wharf, operating between 1966 and 1985 (Bildan, 1985, pp. 25). BP chose Crib Point on a basis not dissimilar to that which justified the industrial development of Hastings by BHP and its subsidiaries. Echoing this, locational decision-making was predicated upon the ability of the bay to accommodate ‘ships of deep draught,’ and that heavy industrial activity could take place ‘with no disruption to existing primary or secondary industry’ whilst maintaining access to metropolitan Melbourne (Rimmer, 1967, pp. 304). The intensification of industry in the post-war period had significant implications for the natural landscape, resulting in the reclamation of bayside land for the development of ports, warranting its designation as a RAMSAR wetland in 1982 (Kellogg Brown & Root, 2010, pp. 33). The locality is seemingly caught between its suitability for heavy industry and a desirable natural setting conducive to recreation and leisure.

In this setting, the Cemetery and Anglers Estates exemplify a zombie subdivision where residential development of a site was precluded by the proximity of heavy industry (Westernport Regional Planning and Coordination Committee, 1996, pp. 7). The two estates are adjacent to each other. The Anglers Estate was subdivided and advertised in 1960, when sale of unserviced allotments in an
underdeveloped estate was the norm; in certain respects this was not dissimilar to speculation-driven suburban estate development seen in Melbourne’s boom residential periods throughout the 1880s and 1920s (Cannon, 2013). Where it may have differed, however, was in the urgency with which subdivisions like Anglers Estate were sold. As the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works’ role as planning authority for ‘Greater’ Melbourne took hold, the requirements for vendors to provide infrastructure services for such estates became necessary. Anglers Estate’s 230 lots were advertised creatively as ‘waterfront’ sites ‘only minutes from the modern shopping centre at Hastings,’ allowing for ‘wonderful fishing’ and ‘glorious inlet views’ (The Age 28 May 1960, pp. 40). The land was zoned ‘Residential A’ then altered to ‘Marine Service Industry Purposes’ in late 1979, and by 1980, ‘Conservation Policy Area—Class B’ (State Government of Victoria, 1980, pp. 911). The improbably titled Cemetery Estate—logical in a locational sense, but unlikely to inspire comfort—contained a further 160 residential lots, with a total of 390 allotments between the two Estates (Westernport Regional Planning and Coordination Committee, 1996).

The risk posed by nearby industrial activities contributed to a later assessment that residential development was unviable, and industrial operations could take place albeit in a highly limited capacity: the Westernport Regional Planning and Coordination Committee (1996, pp. 70) posited that the westernmost aspect of the estate could host industrial development where the number of employees did not exceed 11.9 persons per hectare. A document published by the WRPCC in 1994, the Western Port Coastal Villages Strategy, reinforced the need to rezone the land for ‘Port Related uses,’ and subsequently restructure and consolidate allotments to allow for this (Dee, 1994). This was necessitated as the intended use of the Estates for residential development resulted in relatively small lot sizes not conducive to any other mode of development (WRPCC, 1994, pp. 34). This is invariably a difficult process, requiring close cooperation between private owners, local and state government, and private business interests and involving myriad inequities (Matthews, 2013). State government intervention was identified as an integral aspect of this and serves as an instance of thematic repetition amongst such subdivisions. In the absence of a purchaser for the land, historic development inactivity and fragmented ownership problematise the acquisition and sale of the land as a clear value cannot be arrived at to satisfy provisions for government land acquisition (WRPCC, 1994, 104). However, this process was resolved, in part, at Hastings: Minister for Planning Robert Maclellan stated in March 1997 that the State government had purchased lots and transferred ownership to the Mornington Shire Council, ‘to look after as a gift from the state government’ (State Government of Victoria, 1997, pp. 64). In an unexpected side-effect of zombification, the establishment of a buffer surrounding the ESSO gas refraction plant was eased through the abandonment of the estate: the firm has been able to purchase 141 undeveloped allotments for this purpose (WRPCC, 1996, pp. 10).

Of the remaining lots, 194 remained under private ownership in 1996. The site received media attention in 2015, when it was noted that the Shire of Mornington had acquired 106 lots in the estate, in part a consequence of State government intervention (Morton, 2015). Presently, 143 sites remain under private ownership, with all but six sites unoccupied; it is unknown whether residents of the six remaining households possess any existing use rights over the land. A site visit conducted by two contributing authors in January 2019 saw a small number of homes in situ. Whilst many demonstrated signs of abandonment (Figs 2, 3), with fly-tipping, overgrown gardens and rusting vehicles, a small number of households showed signs of life, with parked cars and new water tanks. This visit additionally revealed the presence of a boat engineering firm, Crib Point Engineering, permitted to operate in the southernmost aspect of the site, abutting the foreshore. The use of land for this purpose is deemed suitable by the municipality, and an appropriate model for development in the Cemetery and Anglers estates. However, referral authorities such as Parks Victoria hold reservations, as this capacity could be endangered by ongoing dredging within Western Port Bay (Mahon, 2014). Further still, any escalation of marine-oriented industry would necessitate dredging of mudflats which obscure access to the Hastings Channel. Although future development activity must remain auxiliary to marine and port operations, the potential to achieve such an outcome is highly constrained (Mahon, 2014). Ultimately, the overcoming of such constraints falls to appropriate guidance by the municipality and State government, which Morton (2015) assesses as utterly lacking, with ‘no planning direction from council or compensation action from the government or industry’. Most recent municipal efforts indicate an interest in restructuring the Estate albeit on an unknown timeline (Mornington Peninsula Shire, 2018, pp. 219).
Burns Road Estate, Altona

The Burns Road Estate is located in the south-western suburb of Altona, approximately 14 kilometers from the Melbourne CBD (Fig 4). The suburb of Altona was initially designated as a pastoral area in 1842 (Patterson, 2013, pp. 55). The provision of a railway line in 1888 allowed for its subdivision and subsequent development albeit limited to the area immediately abutting the bay. Burns Road Estate, like Solomon Heights, has an obscure origin: publicly available titles seem to go back only as far as 1969. The Hobsons Bay website describes it as ‘subdivided in the 1920s’ but further information is lacking; a 2012 ‘Fact Sheet’ produced by Council gives a date of 1929, which—being the onset of the Great Depression—would naturally explain lack of uptake on purchase or building; in November 2012 the local Star Weekly suggested the area was ‘zoned residential’ in 1927, an unverified date for the Shire of Altona to have introduced zoning although residential by-laws and private covenants were known to have been sporadically introduced in Melbourne municipalities at that time (Taylor & Rowley, 2017; ‘Burns Road Land Investment Turns Sour’ 2012). The Fact Sheet suggests (without comment) that 1929 is a period ‘predating the introduction of planning controls on the 1st March 1955’ long after which the estate ‘was rezoned to “Reserved Light Industrial” excluding the reserve... zoned “Public Open Space”’ (Hobsons Bay City Council 2012, pp. 1).

There is little doubt that the original vendor expected the estate to be residential. Its south-western edge is occupied by 45 smaller blocks to be used as shop sites. There are 460 larger, residential, lots making 505, currently shared between 170 owners; some own one site, whilst others own up to 88 lots (Hobsons Bay, 2019). Explaining that no ‘roads drains or other services have ever physically been created’, the Hobsons Bay site continues:

The estate has remained undeveloped for almost 100 years due to a range of complex issues, including lot size and configuration, native vegetation, and the complexities of the multiple ownerships. Achieving a realistic planning outcome for the estate is not straightforward. There are many issues facing owners and the overall estate that require resolution.
The issues at Burns Road are comparable to Solomon Heights—land dormant for close to a century, a plethora of owners with diverse expectations, and a cover of indigenous vegetation requiring protection—with, like Cemetery and Anglers, the added constraint of nearby petrochemical industries. The Truganina Explosives Reserve was established in 1901 and marks the initial presence of hazardous industry in the area (Patterson, 2013, pp. 55). Later residential development took place predominantly within the post-war era, coinciding with the development of chemical industries which remain prominent within the area today. The Altona Refinery, today operated by Exxon Mobil, was constructed in 1949 (Exxon Mobil, 2019). It is classed as a Major Hazard Facility given the volatility of the petroleum products produced. The treatment of such Facilities within the Victorian planning system imposes a number of conditions not only on the operation of such sites, but the development of surrounding land, which ensures not only public health and safety, but the continued viability of such industries (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2019). The use of the term within planning adheres to the definition of the term as outlined in the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2017 (pp. 31):

…major hazard facility means a facility— (a) at which Schedule 14 materials are present or likely to be present in a quantity exceeding their threshold quantity

Schedule 14 materials include an extensive range of processed products and compounds: these can be in the form of liquid or powder, or compressed or liquefied gasses. Such products are known to be flammable, reactive, oxidising, or corrosive, and ultimately demonstrate toxicity or significant risk to surrounding populations (State Government of Victoria, 2017, pp. 531). Associated firms within this industrial precinct include Qenos, Air Liquide, and Dow Chemical, which produce goods that fall within Schedule 14 (Chemlink, 1997). Although the Burns Road Estate predated the presence of this industrial sector in Altona, planning regulations triggered by the close proximity of chemical industries appear to be the death knell for the Estate.

Land within the Burns Road Estate is subject to Schedule 4 of the Special Use Zone in the Hobsons Bay Planning Scheme. This ensures that any land-uses which take place ‘do not prejudice the operation and expansion of the petrochemical industry,’ and minimise ‘exposure to risk to health or life of persons working in or visiting the area’ (Hobsons Bay, 2014, pp. 1). Further restrictions on the use of land within the site specify that development cannot take place unless the site is ‘comprised of a lot of at least two hectares’ (Hobsons Bay, 2014, pp. 3). Accordingly, the development of a large warehouse would be suitable so long as a restructuring of the site takes place. However, additional controls regulate the density of employees upon the site: there must be 52 square meters of floor area per employee, which serves the purpose of limiting exposure to any effects of hazardous industry. Whilst the latter limitation
may impact the type or extent of potential industrial development, the initial conditions in place—particularly the requirement of a two hectare lot—again raises the contentious point of the restructuring and consolidation of existing lots under the ownership of numerous private land-holders whose visions for the site may not necessarily align.

In 2012, a deputation of landowners, angry at the shelving of a report eight years earlier which had recommended a land-pooling scheme to create 2-hectare lots, disrupted a Hobsons Bay council meeting. In 2014, Hobsons Bay allocated $30,000 to facilitate agreement between Burns Road owners who told the Star Weekly that ‘obstacle after obstacle’ prevented them from ‘making good on their investment’ (‘Altona Council’ 2014). Owners of 47% (230 lots) of the estate had signed up to the Burns Road Land Owners Group in 2017. A Burns Road Industrial Estate Newsletter from September 2018 does little more than aspire to increase membership (‘The greater the number of lots, the greater the opportunity of creating developable parcel/s of land and unlocking the development potential of the estate.’) and await the outcomes of a biodiversity assessment. An evaluation report created by Gerard Coutts & Associates for Hobsons Bay City Council in April 2018 advocates for greater cooperation between Hobsons Bay and the Land Owners Group, undoubtedly essential for the acquisition of lots and subsequent restructuring of the Estate (pp. 13). What is perhaps most problematic—though also given the history of such estates not surprising—is the fact that real estate agents continue to offer land for sale (Fig 5) in such areas: those looking to purchase would undoubtedly do so with ‘eyes open’, anticipating a shift in planning regulations—and increased cooperation between landholders and the municipality, as well as the provision of necessary funding—in their favour.

A visit to Burns Road in June 2019 reveals a (largely) fenced block used primarily for dumping building waste and household rubbish. The land at its northern end also features an array of stone cairns, which in the absence of any further information, and befitting the ‘zombie’ characterization, might be assumed to take inspiration from cinematic horror tropes (Fig 6).

Figure 5 and 6. Burns Road Estate, Altona, featuring ‘For Sale’ signage and stone cairns.

Discussion and conclusions

Each of the zombie sites surveyed in this paper had their origins—on paper, as the property rights embodied in colonial land title systems—amidst early 20th century speculative land practices. While advertised with the creative nomenclature common to private developments of the time, in each their ambitions challenged reality for various reasons of location and timing. Sites were often sterilised through their location proximate to noxious or dangerous industry, or victims of poorly-sited speculative development.

Although a specific instance of a broader and quantitatively significant interstitial element of the fabric of many cities, zombie subdivisions are in and of themselves deserving of further investigation. They are particularly revealing of both the visionary and the regulatory interests that shape the built environment—including the built environment professions. The excessive ‘vision’ of developers can leave some subdivisions left in a limbo of the living dead. In other instances, injudicious vision may fall foul of routine regulatory impediments or be almost entirely entangled in the forms of political and regulatory sclerosis that give rise to the notion of ‘planning blight’. Zombie subdivisions are as much
products of private sector avarice and ineptitude as they are products internal to the city shaped by modern planning.

Each, over ensuing decades, converged with increasing aspirations to strategic plans and systems thinking. By the 1950s metropolitan zoning plans were introduced to Melbourne; and by 1970s, (ideas of) infrastructure coordination and efficiency. Zoning and requirements for coordinated infrastructure meant the sites became effectively ineligible for their aspired-to development. Landowners found themselves outside of planning strategies for ordering growth and for controlling non-urban areas. Time, and increasing environmental legislation, meant undisturbed vegetation on the sites took on newly protected status. While planning systems termed the sites ‘old and inappropriate’ or simply ‘unplanned’, it is revealing that whilst planning systems are marginally equipped to deal with what are characterised as site ‘complexities,’ this is fundamentally reliant upon the will and vision of local and State governments in conjunction with sufficient funding to enact acquisition ad restructuring programs. In the absence of specific funding commitments, the atrophied state of these sites reveals the fragilities of prevailing growth models. Their convoluted, somewhat absurd trajectories of underdevelopment are counterpoints both to the ambition of speculative developers and to modern planning system aspirations toward ordered and defined development.

This paper has briefly surmised the repeated planning attempts at resolving the atrophied conditions of different zombie subdivision sites around Melbourne. The stories highlight the prodigious time periods over which sometimes prime sites can remain un/underdeveloped. Paradoxically, it is often planning or an excess of planning that gives rise to the unplanned appearance of zombie subdivisions. As literal ‘gaps’, they counter Molotch’s growth machine theory—of cooperation between government and private interests as a facilitator of development—and assumed narratives of growth and development exemplifying Melbourne’s urban fringe. With strategic commitments rarely matched with regulatory or financial traction; and with fragmented ownership, and disputed land values, it has proven stubbornly difficult to ‘plan’ away old expectations.

References
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