



What is Neighbourhood Character?

July 2009



SUMMARY

Neighbourhood character is the qualitative interplay of built form, vegetation and topographic characteristics, in both the private and public domains that make one place different from another.

- Planning Schemes require that new residential development must respect the existing neighbourhood character or contribute to the preferred neighbourhood character of an area.
- The review of the Neighbourhood Character Strategy will focus on the physical elements of neighbourhood character that are capable of being directly influenced by the Planning Scheme mainly through ResCode. Other characteristics such as access to public open space, traffic, noise and type of activity cannot be directly influenced by planning provisions in ResCode.
- The primary tool for managing future residential development is ResCode provisions which are set by State Government. There is some scope for Councils to have local policy and variations to the planning provisions but these are only possible if they're not in conflict with the Victoria Planning Provisions primary role – which is to give scope for some unit development on the average sized residential property.
- Neighbourhood character is not about:
 - Imposing specific design styles.
 - The amenity of adjoining properties. (overlooking, overshadowing)
 - Density controls.Although, guidelines or controls may influence elements of residential development
- The following principles form the basis for this review:
 1. The values of the local community are part of determining the appropriate response to neighbourhood character.
 2. The planning system is specifically concerned with managing the physical evidence of character and related social impacts.
 3. All areas have a character that can be described, evaluated and, in many cases, improved.
 4. Character is about the interrelationships between various elements of an area.
 5. State and Council policies provide the rationale for decisions about whether to protect, change or improve the neighbourhood character.
 6. Neighbourhood character descriptions and evaluations should focus on the preferred future character of an area.
 7. New residential development must provide a site analysis and design response whether or not a detailed character study has been undertaken.
 8. Character and heritage share many attributes, but there are important differences between the two concepts.
 9. There are differences between neighbourhood character and amenity.

- Banyule's landscape and built form has been categorised into five 'Character Area Types'. The Character Area types are:
 - Garden Suburban
 - Garden Court
 - Bush Garden
 - Semi Bush
 - Bush Woodland



1. Introduction

New residential development is managed by the implementation of planning policies and provisions included in the Banyule Planning Scheme. The suite of controls that can be included in the Banyule Planning Scheme are contained in the Victorian Planning Provisions (VPPs) set by State Government.

New residential development has the potential to impact on the existing neighbourhood character in Banyule. Managing development through the planning system aims to reduce this impact. The Planning Scheme states that new residential development must respect the existing neighbourhood character or contribute to the preferred neighbourhood character of an area.

This document has been prepared to define aspects of neighbourhood character that are relevant to planning schemes and therefore relevant to the review of the Neighbourhood Character Strategy.

2. Defining Neighbourhood Character

People have widely differing meanings to the term 'neighbourhood character'. For many, character is about the people who live in the area; for others it is the features of the area, such as closeness to shops or transport, how much open space or traffic there is. For others it also includes the smells, sounds and colours they experience in their neighbourhood.

As this project will recommend planning scheme policies and controls, we have no choice but to focus on the physical aspects of character that are capable of being directly described by the Planning Scheme. Fundamentally we are aiming to answer the question: How the buildings 'sit' in their landscape or streetscape? Buildings, vegetation and topographical characteristics are the main physical parts of neighbourhood character addressed in the VPPs and will therefore be the focus of this project.

A definition of 'neighbourhood character' used by the State Government working party into neighbourhood character that met in 1999 is:

Neighbourhood character is the qualitative interplay of built form, vegetation and topographic characteristics, in both the private and public domains that make one place different from another.

This is not particularly easy to understand and needs some explanation.

- 'Qualitative interplay' means the way that the main characteristics of an area's character combine to produce a particular visual sense of place. Some characteristics are more important than others in creating this distinctive character.

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- The visual character of buildings and their gardens (private domain) cannot be separated from the character of the street (public domain) in which they sit. For example, in some landscape-dominated areas on the City's urban fringe, natural bush vegetation flows across private property and public domain alike, only stopping at the edge of the roadway. Clearing all the trees on a private allotment would completely change the character of this type of area. So would the construction of kerb, channel and footpath, or planting of street trees of an incompatible species or in a formal pattern.

Aspects of Neighbourhood Character

The important question in considering each potential component of character is: how relevant is this to the purpose of this project? **In recommending planning policy and controls for implementation through the planning scheme, the focus of the study needs to be on physical aspects that are mentioned in the ResCode provisions.**

ResCode is the 'statutory code' for residential development and is set by State Government. Only a small number of ResCode provisions can be varied by Council. Any local variation must not conflict with the VPPs primary role which is to give scope for some unit development on the average sized residential property.

The physical aspects that contribute to neighbourhood character include:

- Trees and vegetation e.g. the amount and type of vegetation, size of rear gardens and private open space, street trees, canopy trees in rear yards, other front garden vegetation, public reserves forming a backdrop.
- Buildings e.g. height, mass, siting on plot, site coverage, distance from street (front setback), spaces around buildings, architectural style, materials, colours, porches and verandahs.
- Streets e.g. street pattern, width, pavements, road reserves, street trees, formality of street (or otherwise).
- Front fences e.g. height, style, material, colour.
- Topographical e.g. hills, valleys, rivers, creeks.
- Views e.g. to valleys, to ridgelines, to important landmarks.

Other Character Aspects

People often include amenity issues such as access to open space, traffic, noise, type of activity and demographic characteristics as important characteristics of their neighbourhood. All of these can be argued to be an essential part of an area's character.



Many of these other character aspects can be addressed through other mechanisms such as social development strategies, traffic management plans, community plan, regeneration plans or public awareness campaigns that are outside the scope of the Planning Scheme.

Neighbourhood Character is Not

Neighbourhood character is not about imposing specific design styles. Neither the VPP's nor the building codes allow this to happen. The only exception to this is if the building has notable heritage significance. Neighbourhood character is about recognising the distinctive characteristics of different areas, and their relationship to topography and vegetation. Getting this right is the best way of maintaining and enhancing the sense of place of the City's residential areas.

Nor is neighbourhood character about the amenity of adjoining properties as such, although it has implications for these issues. For example, guidelines with regard to maintaining the rhythm of dwelling spacing in a character precinct or streetscape, may require that new buildings should be setback from both side boundaries. This may reduce the amount or number of buildings that can be accommodated on a site, and may also reduce potential amenity impacts from overlooking and overshadowing of adjoining properties. Site coverage and front setback controls may also have a similar effect in some instances. These are secondary outcomes of the neighbourhood character guidelines, and while not the primary intent, may reduce community concerns about other aspects of new development.

Nor is character about density controls. ResCode makes no provision for density controls, and it is considered that any policy that proposed density maximums or medium density housing saturation levels would not be supported by the State Government. ResCode has more extensive provisions relating to amenity issues, which are often at the heart of the density issues.

3. Neighbourhood Character Principles

The following principles of neighbourhood character form the basis of the work to be done for the review project. The principles are:

Principle 1 - Community Values

The community should be involved in identifying the neighbourhood character measures appropriate to their area. Professionals assist in developing and translating these ideas into techniques to manage design.

Principle 2 - Physical Focus

Character, in its broadest sense, can include environmental, social and economic factors, but the planning system is specifically concerned with managing the physical evidence of character and related social impacts. Character is not



concerned only with the private domain, as much of neighbourhood character is manifested in the public street space. However, some character issues are related to social outcomes or impacts e.g. the height of front fences is a town planning issue with character implications that may be physical (does a high fence contribute positively to the 'look' of the area?) and social (how do high fences affect social interaction?).

Principle 3 - Special Qualities of an Area

All areas have a character that can be described, evaluated and, in many cases, improved. The aim in placing greater priority on character is to improve the quality of the environment in residential areas, not just in retaining or improving a few select 'special' areas that already have high amenity values. For this reason, a neighbourhood character is equally relevant everywhere. Planning controls should aim to protect identified distinctive and valued elements.

Principle 4 - Interaction between Elements of Character

Character is about the interrelationships between various elements of an area, and so cannot be described or evaluated by considering individual elements in isolation. Design responses need to consider the whole picture of a neighbourhood, rather than focussing upon one or two elements of the building form or siting.

Principle 5 - Neighbourhood Character and Other Planning Policies

State and Council policies provide the rationale for decisions about whether to protect, change or improve the neighbourhood character of an area. Area-specific controls should be developed in the light of these strategic directions. For example, the Banyule Housing Strategy, the Municipal Strategic Statement and the activity centre structure plans provide local planning policy direction.

Principle 6 - Desired Future Character

Descriptions of existing characteristics are an important part of the process of identifying the 'starting point', but the desired character needs to be evaluated and considered in the context of other policy priorities. It may be that some areas should be encouraged to develop a new character, just as there may be some areas where critical elements need to be protected or reflected in all new development.

Principle 7 - Site Analysis

A site analysis and design response is a mandatory requirement of ResCode (Clause 54 and Clause 55) when a planning application is submitted for a residential development. This is necessary whether or not a neighbourhood character strategy has been undertaken.

Principle 8 - Character and Heritage

Character and heritage share many attributes, but there are important differences between the two concepts. Character studies evaluate the significance of built form, vegetation and topographical qualities, with reference to styles and ages where relevant, whereas heritage studies evaluate cultural heritage significance, with some reference to built form, vegetation and topographical qualities.

Principle 9 - Character and Amenity

The difference between neighbourhood character and amenity must be recognised. Character and amenity are terms often used interchangeably, but in ResCode factors like visual and acoustic privacy and overshadowing should continue to be treated as issues separate to neighbourhood character.

4. Neighbourhood Character Types

The existing Neighbourhood Character Study identifies areas of similar neighbourhood character, called Character Areas. The City's landscape and built form has been categorised into five 'Character Area types', taking into account factors such as topography, vegetation, street and subdivision pattern, era, style, scale and intensity of development. The Character Area types are:

- Garden Suburban
- Garden Court
- Bush Garden
- Semi Bush
- Bush Woodland

Each of these Character Area Types is described below.

- *Garden Suburban*

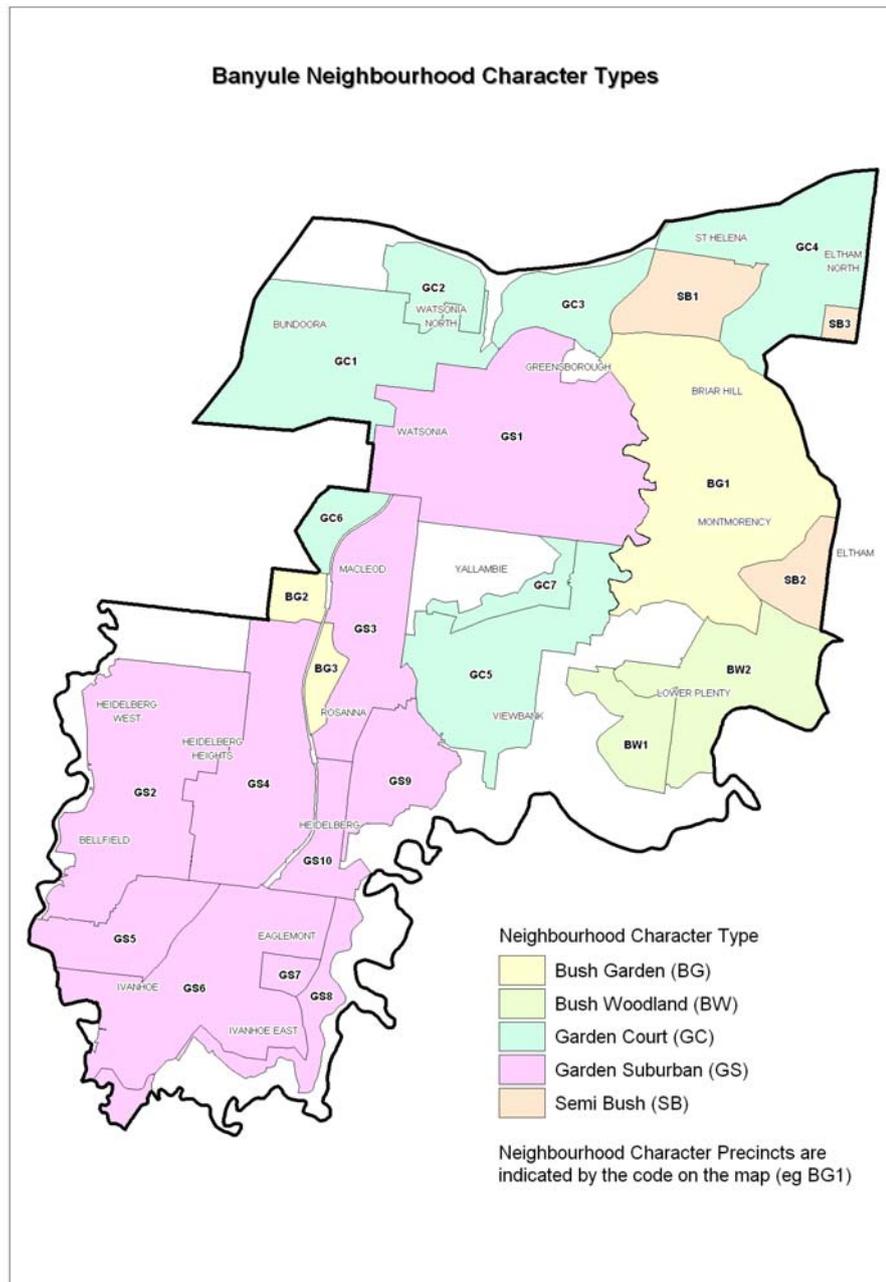
Spacious and leafy character in generally formal street settings with space around and between dwellings. A relatively wide and open street space and garden style vegetation, often mature and exotic, in both the private and public domain, creating an attractive, tree-dominated landscape setting in some streets.

Most important characteristics: The scale, siting and style of the dwellings, and the vegetation and topography of their settings.

- *Garden Court*

Curvilinear and cul-de-sac street pattern, low scale, generally brick dwellings dominated by a low-pitched tile roof, set in spacious often informal garden settings, with a mix of native and exotic plantings.

Most important characteristics: The mature native vegetation setting in most of these streets.



- *Bush Garden*

Stands of substantial native trees provide the backdrop for the mainly post war detached dwellings in their mature garden settings.

Most important characteristics: the canopy of indigenous and other native trees. Trees and other vegetation dominate the street scene and many longer distance views. Dwellings sit beneath the tree canopy, with established gardens.



- *Semi Bush*

Representative of the highly valued native vegetation-dominated residential environments found in some of the hillier north eastern and eastern parts of the metropolitan area, epitomised in the popular imagination by 'Eltham' or 'Bellbird'. These areas are becoming scarcer as they succumb to vegetation clearance and more intense development.

Most important characteristics: The canopy of indigenous trees and abundant vegetation. Trees and other vegetation dominate the street scene and many longer distant views.

- *Bush Woodland*

Retain much of their rural, undeveloped character, with significant indigenous vegetation, a farmland landscape character, meandering or straight country roads without made kerbs, and various dwelling styles.

Most important characteristics: The dominant landscape setting of rolling hills and the Yarra River flood plain, together with remnant indigenous vegetation.

In the existing Neighbourhood Character Strategy, each Character Area has been divided into a number of smaller precincts, which delineate areas with common characteristics. Through this project, the existing precinct areas will be reviewed to ensure they align with the proposed design responses and subsequent changes to the Planning Scheme. At the moment we have a number of precincts where the design responses are the same. This work may result in a reduced number of precincts.

Areas with New and Changing Character

Some areas are subject to redevelopment, or have aspects of their character that are a cause of strong concern by local people, warranting change to the physical fabric. In both these instances, the appropriate planning strategy may well be to try to improve the character of the area by changing it. Achieving a measured and consistent change in the development character of an area requires a sound approach to planning.



Further Reading

Banyule Housing Strategy, March 2009

Council has prepared a local housing strategy with the community and housing industry stakeholders. The strategy was adopted by Council on 16 March 2009.

www.banyule.vic.gov.au/housingstrategy

Banyule Neighbourhood Character Strategy, March 1999

The existing Neighbourhood Character Strategy and other information can be found on Banyule Council website at

<http://www.banyule.vic.gov.au/Page.aspx?ID=158>

All State Government practice notes and the Banyule Planning Scheme can be found on the Department of Planning and Community Development website

www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/planning.

General Practice Note – Understanding Neighbourhood Character, December 2001

This General Practice Note provides guidance for applicants, the community and responsible authorities about:

- understanding what is meant by neighbourhood character
- preparing or assessing a proposed residential development so that it meets the neighbourhood character requirements of the residential development provisions in planning schemes.

VPP Practice Note – Using the Neighbourhood Character Provisions in Planning Schemes, July 2004

This VPP practice note provides guidance to planning authorities about how to plan for neighbourhood character and how to apply neighbourhood character provisions when preparing amendments to planning schemes.

VPP Practice Note – Understanding the residential development standards, June 2004

This VPP practice note is an illustrative guide to the application of 14 residential development standards in Clauses 54 and 55 of all planning schemes in Victoria. Its purpose is to ensure a common interpretation and consistent application of the 14 standards.



General Practice Note – Assessing an application for a dwelling in a residential zone, December 2001

All planning schemes in Victoria contain residential development provisions to achieve locally responsive residential development. The provisions apply to the construction or extension of one or more dwellings on a lot and to the subdivision of land in residential zones. This general practice note gives guidance to responsible authorities assessing a planning application for one or more dwellings on a lot.

Clause 54 and 55 Banyule Planning Scheme (part of ResCode)

Clauses 54 and 55 include residential development standards for assessing applications. These are the main elements that can be influenced by the appropriate planning controls. Neighbourhood character is the starting point for assessing all residential development applications under these Clauses.



Glossary

Planning Scheme	A Planning Scheme is a legal instrument that sets out the provisions for land use, development, and protection. The function of a Planning Scheme is to facilitate fair, orderly, economic and sustainable use of land - by providing for the individual needs of an area. Victoria has 81 planning scheme areas, and thus has 81 Planning Schemes - one for each of the 78 Victorian municipalities, and one for each of the 3 Victorian special planning areas (<i>Alpine Resorts, Port of Melbourne, and French and Sandstone Island</i>).
ResCode	ResCode is a residential design code introduced by the Bracks (ALP) government, in Victoria, Australia in 2001. It applies to all land zoned for residential use across Victoria and covers buildings up to three storeys in height - taller buildings are covered by different policies.
Victoria Planning Provision	The VPP is a state-wide reference document or template from which planning schemes are sourced and constructed. The VPP is a comprehensive set of standard planning provisions and provides a standard format for all Victorian planning schemes. It provides the framework, standard provisions and State planning policy.