



# Inner South Canberra Community Council

**Public Forum 28 May 2024  
7.00 pm Eastlake Football Club**

## **IBETTER RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT – building & landscape design for climatic & social resilience**

### **Meeting Record**

#### **1. Welcome:** Colin Walters, Chair ISCCC

The Chair thanked everyone for coming including those on Zoom. He acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land and introduced Richard Johnston, President of KBRG who will chair the meeting. Richard is a retired architect and planner, having joined NCDC in 1980 and retiring as Senior Executive ACTPLA in 2006. He was the principal author of ISCCC's 'Inner South Canberra District Planning Strategy 2021.

Richard thanked MLAs Minister Vassarotti and Jo Clay and election candidates for coming and introduced Michael Neustein who had been working on planning in Sydney and was on-line from Sydney.

There were a total of 55 participants including 15 online.

#### **2. [NSW Planning System](#)**

Michael Neustein, BArch MCom Life Fellow RAlA Hon FAIUS RPIA (Fellow)

Director, City Planning Works

Chairman, Australian Institute of Urban Studies (NSW Division)

Michael was keen to reform the NSW planning system which had been labelled the worst planning system in Australia. The NSW government aimed to fix housing supply with the result that the focus had gone off liveability and community involvement and become much more top-down. A medium density development was taking on average 144 days to approve.

Michael had worked with prominent lawyer/planner John Mant on a new planning and development control Act for NSW – the Better Places Act. John was Gough Whitlam's Principal Private Secretary in November 1975. He died in 2021 aged 84. Michael was carrying on his vision.

The Apartment Design Guidelines were numerical e.g. 70% of apartments must receive 2 hours sunlight on 21<sup>st</sup> June. Michael wanted more emphasis on quality assessment. NSW had a single digital database of every allotment which allowed for place-based planning, including the effects of climate change. E.g. setbacks could be based on slope, because the elevation of each corner of the allotment was known. An individual could ask: "What can I do on my land?" and get an answer in one document. Currently there were complex, multi-layered documents.

The aim should be to increase density where people wanted to live and define Precincts. Planning should be precinct oriented to take account of differences e.g. Bondi Junction is very different to its surrounding suburbs.

An example of the top-down approach was a government requirement for increased density within 800m of each railway station, which the government claimed would result in 100,000 new dwellings. The government architect picked projects to foster. However, there was a socio/economic divide through Sydney (refer Alan Kohler's Quarterly Essay) and the government architect's picks are above the line. One example was a block of luxury apartments selling for \$7million per apartment and \$14million for the penthouse. The strategy should offer increased density for affordable housing, but if a DA exceeded the height limit, it was difficult to get local council approval.



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**Question:** Richard Johnston. What about community concerns with removing the metrics. ACT Planning now had outcomes statements which were not clear.

**Answer:** Metrics could be a problem whereas guidelines were flexible. The aim should be to have developers and consultants working with the local councils rather than against each other.

### 3. Panel discussion with examples of past, recent and proposed Canberra projects:

Richard introduced the following panelists:

**Eric Martin AM** Master(Built Environment) BArch(Hons) Life Fellow RAIA  
Managing Director, Eric Martin & Associates Architects

Eric took up the position of Canberra Manager and Director of Cox Group (architects) in 1981 before establishing his own practice in 1998, offering particular expertise in architectural conservation, heritage and disability access.

**Mervyn Dorrrough** BLandArch

Retired Director, Redbox Design Group

Mervyn worked with Harry Howard in Sydney on the design of the National Gallery Sculpture Garden before moving to Canberra in 1980 for landscaping of the New Parliament House. He has been involved in many other significant projects including at New Acton and Kingston Foreshores

The third panellist, **Shannon Battisson** LFRAIA was unfortunately unwell with Covid and sent her apologies.

[Richard spoke to his presentation.](#)

### Q and A Discussion – Chair Colin Walters

**Q:** Given developments you have shown us require large blocks, how good is the government’s plan to build a second dwelling on one block?

**Richard Johnston:** The government has lost the plot. We need to densify so we don’t keep spreading but doing so through individual blocks is unlikely to achieve much improvement. We should do apartments properly.

**Mervyn Dorrrough:** It probably won’t make much difference. There used to be a requirement that incorporated existing trees. A second house loses trees; not many survive.

**Michael Neustein:** Sydney allows two dwellings on blocks greater than 400sqm. Part of the problem is Australian’s love of cars and preference for basement parking.

**Q:** I live in Griffith which was nice and leafy. The idea of large second dwellings is green washing. Older cities overseas maintain their heritage.

**Eric Martin:** Griffith is a garden city suburb, sustainable but not necessarily heritage. Compare with Gungahlin and look at long-term sustainability.

**Q:** The new planning system is outcomes based and the LA committee made 50 recommendations about it. Is there any mechanism to assess how well it is working?

**Richard Johnston:** I can’t see anything in the new plan that will give confidence. There is nothing about medium density. The Housing Design Guide has lots of aspirational statements but no idea how to get there. Minister Steel



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has announced there will be a new guideline for the “missing middle” but why not improve the existing Guide? – it’s 100 pages of waffle.

**Colin Walters:** The 2021 census shows 60% of dwellings in the Inner South are apartments/town houses, so there is no “missing middle” in our area.

**Minister Vassarotti:** The LA committee was chaired by Green MLA Jo Clay and made 100 amendments to the design guides. There will be a review in 3 years. The Greens are currently negotiating resources e.g. for a Rapid Response Team and have pushed hard on the core focus of how to ensure balance. There is a new Urban Tree Act.

**Q:** Knockdown rebuilds lose established gardens with large trees, but we need to maintain trees. There are 3 new huge houses near me, one with space for 12 cars. The new houses have no eaves on the north or west so will require more air conditioning.

**Michael Neustein:** We have the same problem in Sydney. The Local Council mandated 30% tree canopy and there are tree preservation orders.

**Colin Walters:** Huge houses mean the whole block is excavated. I’ve seen a tree on the edge which had lost half its roots. This is a global warming and heat island issue.

**Q:** I live in the heritage area in Griffith. Walking around it along Flinders Way I can see houses where the heritage is not preserve, so how much harder is it to preserve non-heritage areas.

**Eric Martin:** Heritage is really important. The approach is inconsistent, so we need to strengthen the whole process.

**Mervyn Dorrrough:** We do have tree protection, but smaller blocks lead to fewer trees, so we need large street trees. Currently there are restrictions due to a concern about maintenance issues. So we don’t get big enough street trees.

**Comment from Ian Elsum, Curtin Residents Association:** The government’s primary focus is on heights and number of dwellings. They need to interact with the community, so we get a meeting of the two perspectives.

**Q:** I live on a 700sqm block which has a 23% tree canopy. There is no space for more tree, but on hot days it is 10deg cooler to sit under the pergola.

**Colini Walters:** I think the 30% target for tree canopy cover across the urban area by 2045 is unrealistic..

**Richard Johnston:** The target is in the Living Infrastructure Plan but not reflected in the planning policy. E.g. Planning for Eastlake has The Causeway changed to a mixed development zone but there is nothing that requires trees.

**Q:** Money speaks and we need to use this to control development. Can we look overseas for innovation e.g. green cover can be put on roofs and walls. Example- Milan. Canberra is the capital of Australia. Let’s bring back pride in our capital.

**Colini Walters:** Beatrice Bodart-Bailey’s presentation at the last ISCCC forum gave a number of examples of good overseas practice in greening urban areas, and can be viewed on the ISCCC website. Trees are best at counteracting the urban heat island effect.

**Michael Neustein:** Work has been done in NSW on this e.g. apartment design guidelines.

**Mervyn Dorrrough:** Canberra is a special city so we should strive hard to make landscape important. We need a vision about what it will look like in 20 or 30 years. We can do better than Gungahlin. The problem is to work out how to put the dwelling numbers in while preserving trees.

**Eric Martin:** On Northbourne Ave, the lack of landscaping is putting increasing pressure on Haig Park, which is not good.



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#### 4. **Wrap-up** Colin Walters

This being an election year the ISCCC is holding two Meet the Candidates Forums, with one for each electorate as two cover Inner South Canberra:

- 24<sup>th</sup> September at Yarralumla PS for Murrumbidgee
- 30<sup>th</sup> September here at Eastlake for Kurrajong.

Many thanks to all speakers for an interesting discussion. Special thanks to David Johnstone for making the hybrid meeting possible technically, Richard Johnston for planning and arranging the content of the forum, and to Kathie Potts, other Committee members and the Eastlakes Football club for their assistance.