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Abstract

The redevelopment of Melbourne’s docklands—the largest urban development project in Australia—has been the subject of various official narratives in the course of its 20-year realisation so far. Many of these have invoked aspirations—‘visions’ or imaginaries—of sustainability, including, variously, economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability. Through documentary sources used to establish these narratives, this paper tracks the changes in vision against changes in the local political-economic context and examines their effects on the ground. The paper argues that, while each vision was intended to some degree to rescue the development from the failure of the preceding one, only the most recent phase represents any deviation from neoliberal development-as-usual, and this is more to do with the intensifying criticism of the project’s failure to demonstrate any kind of sustainability than it is the implementation of an articulated aspiration.

Introduction

Melbourne Docklands is a recent addition to the global raft of waterfront development projects commenced in the late 20th century—a line-up that includes San Francisco, Boston, Toronto, London, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Barcelona, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Sydney. Many more, from Hamburg to Dubai to Rio de Janeiro, are underway. All share a lineage in the perceived necessity to compete on the urban world stage and attract investment through image-making, place-marketing and the creation of the spectacular (Harvey, 1989). Most have in common the decline of the original working port as a result of new shipping technology, the increasing potential value of undercapitalised land close to the city centre and the political imperative to make a transition from industrial to ‘post-industrial’ economy. Because docks

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and associated industrial uses and transport infrastructure are generally located on public lands, many governments saw an opportunity “to remake the relationship between city and water” (Sandercock and Dovey, 2002, p. 151). While most proponents of waterfront redevelopment understand the value of local product differentiation in an increasingly crowded and homogenised global place market, all governments, financiers and developers are risk averse and have a tendency to revert to formula.

There is a strong argument that waterfront developments are not substantially different from any other form of urban development in that “both the types of development and the forms of capital that have colonized the waterfront are common to other parts of the urban economy” (Malone, 1996, p. 2). The large size and long timeframe for these projects do distinguish them somewhat, however, as does the significant state investment necessary to, if not finance the remake entirely, at least stimulate the market to engage in what is often regarded in its early stages as a high-risk enterprise (Smith, 2002). The level of state involvement and expenditure of public funds require explanation and justification to the local populace, as well as a state-sanctioned sales pitch to prospective national and international investors. Governments therefore develop narratives for these projects that include statements of aspirations, or ‘visions’, simultaneously to legitimate the exercise to an increasingly aware electorate and to sell the city as both a unique destination and safe investment opportunity.

These narratives play an additional role. They enable a comparison of the stated objectives with the material outcomes and therefore a scrutiny of processes of governance that are rarely as directly measurable. The Melbourne docklands occupy a 220-hectare site between the city centre and the sea. Their redevelopment has taken 20 years so far and is due for completion in 2020. The narratives and aspirations for the project have changed remarkably over this period, buffeted by changing governments, economic conditions and public commentaries. Yet no matter how different the content of the successive visions, little has changed in the form, mix or use of what was actually built on the ground. The docklands redevelopment appears to be a case study of “ideal-type placeless neoliberalism” (Hackworth and Moriah, 2006, p. 510) in both process and outcomes. In both, it could be anywhere.

Formulaic approaches to urban development have long been a feature of cities, but in the late 20th century they acquired a distinctly global character. The exemplar of placeless urbanisation is the market-led redevelopment of London Docklands in Thatcher’s neoliberal Britain. With the state in the role of “patron of free enterprise” and a specially established development corporation aimed at “liberating the capitalist development process” (Barnes et al. 1996, p. 20), the Chief Executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation was able to declare: “We don’t intend to spend our time preparing planning studies. The area has suffered enough planning over the past 10 years” (1981; quoted in Carmona, 2009, p. 95). The result was a cluster of modernist corporate architecture devoted exclusively to high-end commercial and residential uses, variations on which were reproduced all over the world. When the abundant deficiencies of the approach became clear—marginalised local communities, redirection of public wealth to private interests, establishment of enclaves of privilege and inherent internal instability in the process—the formula was adapted somewhat.

Peck (2010, p. 16) argues that neoliberalism, defined by the “very unattainability of
its fundamental goal—frictionless market rule”, is characterised by failure. He argues further that its survival is premised on the tendency of neoliberalism’s “experiments” to “fail forward” in that their manifest inadequacies have—so far anyway—repeatedly animated further rounds of neoliberal invention. Devolved governance, public–private partnership, management by audit, neopaternalism … all can be seen as examples of institutional reinvention spawned as much by the limits of earlier forms of neoliberalization as by some advancing ‘logic’ (Peck, 2010, p. 7).

These rounds of neoliberal invention involve not just new models of governance, but new narratives and visions to support them. As the ideal of the free market loses credibility, and with international competitiveness remaining determinedly growth-dependent in a context of peak oil and climate change, the new formula invokes the concept of ‘sustainability’. A huge body of literature has emerged in the past decade on planning, designing and building for sustainability, with new urbanism, compact cities, smart growth and transit cities now occupying the pinnacle of international ‘best practice’. The goal of this revised neoliberalism is economic growth “that meets needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations” (WCED, 1987, p. 43).

A smaller critical literature questions the ideal of sustainability as another imaginary too easily enlisted to the project of capitalisation and commodification of land and other resources. This literature suggests that ‘sustainable development’ is an oxymoron or, more subtly, “an elusive goal as long as fundamental processes of uneven development are not brought under control” (Keil, 2007, p. 43); that is, for as long as global social and economic inequalities exist, some places and societies will profit from the unsustainable exploitation of others. Swyngedouw (2007, 2010) notes, however, the extraordinary consensus (which includes Greenpeace, the World Bank and the Pope) around the concept of sustainability and argues that the “homogenizing mantle of a populist environmental-sustainability discourse” is a triumph of neoliberal capitalism in that new eco-technologies are being developed to produce “a socio-ecological fix to make sure nothing really changes” (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 229 and p. 222). Sustainability has become an industry in which “stabilizing the climate seems to be a condition for capitalist life as we know it to continue” (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 222). Indeed, visions of sustainability can be found in any contemporary narrative accompanying a significant urban development project in the developed world.

Capitalist life ‘as we know it’ is not always ‘ideal-type’ or placeless neoliberalism, of course. Its infinite adaptability gives it an infinite array of expressions, from “unified, singular and total” to “uncentred, dispersed, plural and partial” (Gibson-Graham, 1993, p. 17). Wilson’s (2004) case for a “contingent urban neoliberalism” is founded on seeing neoliberal governance (and, we might add, all systems of governance) as constituted and reconstituted through the vagaries of the situated social hierarchies, political cultures, economic bases, and cultural understandings that create a patchwork of wildly varying governances (Wilson, 2004, p. 771).

Neoliberal ideology itself, as Peck (2010) points out, is hybrid, contested and unstable.

Do neoliberal governances vary wildly enough to enable departure from the formulaic? There is no question that very different narratives are employed in different contexts
to suggest different approaches to urban development: compare the statements of the London Docklands Development Corporation’s Chief Executive with those of the Royal Commission on the Future of Toronto’s Waterfront a decade later, which introduced “a new era of progressive, holistic, environmentally-based planning for Toronto’s waterfront and the ecosystem of which it is a part” (Laidley, 2007, p. 259). Sandercock and Dovey held the Toronto waterfront as an exemplar of sustainability on the basis that the principles for its development were “constructed in and through democratic public debate” and established as “clean, green and attractive ... usable, diverse, open and connected ... affordable and accessible to the public” (Sandercock and Dovey, 2002, p. 152). Yet Laidley (2007, p. 259) suggests that the ‘ecosystem approach’ was always deeply connected to the global imperatives of economic growth and “elite pursuit of world city status in Toronto”. Lehrer and Laidley (2008, p. 787) argue that even as the “economic revitalization” of the Toronto waterfront was presented as dependent on environmental and social sustainability, in which the “vision of revitalization ... hinges on benefits such as accessibility, sustainability, and the fostering of creativity and diversity”, socioeconomic divisions were reinforced.

Part of the problem here is that the concept of sustainability itself has many expressions: it can be used to justify a modified form of exploitation and can constitute “a progressive project that ameliorates the negative externalities of economic activity for everyone” (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007, p. 6). One person’s sustainable development can be another’s greenwash. The idea is so tied to scale, interpretation and perspective that it is meaningless without qualification. It is also evolving, as the addition of ‘cultural sustainability’ to the ‘three pillars’ of economic, environmental and social sustainability attests (Throsby, 2008).

It is possible to resolve differences in scale, interpretation and perspective by analysing a single case study over time in a single voice, thereby holding these variables constant. This paper sets out to assess the extent of deviation from formulaic neoliberal urbanisation in the one place over several political regimes with self-declared differences in approach. It does this by tracking the official narratives for the redevelopment of the Melbourne docklands against the changing governments, economic conditions and public commentaries through the course of the 20-year project to date. Through documentary sources used to establish the narratives—policy statements, public announcements, media coverage and so forth—and documentary and empirical examination of the physical outcomes, the successive visions for the redevelopment are assessed against what was actually realised.

The following story is a partial and truncated account of the Melbourne docks redevelopment. While it is useful to break the 20 years into a sequence of key phases, each should be seen as less distinct than the headings suggest. There is “a knot of forces behind any waterfront development” (Malone, 1996, p. 6) and this untangling is just one, albeit a consistent one, of many stories that could be told.

1990–99: Economic Sustainability

The Melbourne docks, located just to the west of Melbourne’s central business district (Figure 1), were the largest in Australia and one of the crucibles of the national trade union movement. Plans for their redevelopment began during the building boom that followed the global stock market crash in the late 1980s. Shipping activity was being
steadily relocated to lands closer to the mouth of the Yarra River where access was easier and land values lower, and the site was opening up for recapitalisation on a grand scale. The land was entirely state-managed and zoned industrial with massive increases in value to be achieved through rezoning alone. For the then Labor state government with a Keynesian approach to public expenditure, the potential for delivering and/or leveraging the development it wanted was enormous.

The Cain–Kirner Labor government, which had come into power in the 1980s on the crest of a movement for social and environmental justice in Victoria, developed a relatively modest narrative for the docks based on the opportunity for incremental growth, housing affordability and social diversity in the context of a growing population. It appointed a Docklands Task Force to prepare a development strategy underpinned by principles of social equity and sound environmental management. The strategy proposed heritage and height controls, public transport links, parkland, a range of housing types and a levy on developers to pay for public housing (Docklands Task Force, 1991). There was little in the narrative at this point of an international best-practice-inspired ‘vision’ of anything; this was simple left-leaning social democratic politics, albeit with a contemporary inflection in the form of an overseeing development corporation at arm’s length from the government—the Docklands Authority, established in 1991. Nevertheless, the process was “well-grounded in existing site conditions, the local community, transparent decision-making and the authority of the state” (Dovey, 2005, p. 208). Local governance was transferred from the Port of

Figure 1. City of Melbourne: Docklands and the central business district.
Melbourne Authority (the ports and shipping manager) to the Docklands Authority (the redevelopment manager) and an extensive public consultation process was underway when the government’s spending became its undoing. A looming recession, increasing public debt and the lowering of the state’s international credit rating were subjects of relentless political and media campaigns that eventually brought a landslide victory to an aggressively pro-business coalition government in 1992.

With a majority in both houses, premier Jeff Kennett embarked on a programme of economic and legislative reform as extensive as Thatcher’s in Britain. A swathe of changes was made by parliament to the state constitution (which does not legally require and did not receive the courtesy of referenda). Various ‘special acts’ and legislative amendments were introduced, unions were broken, public transport and utilities were privatised, the state planning and building systems were deregulated and urban policies were revised to encourage private-sector development and reduce public input. The Docklands Authority was “refocused” from “manag[ing] development of Melbourne Docklands on behalf of the Victorian State Government” to “undertaking development in partnership with the private sector” (Docklands Authority, 2000, p. 72; 2002, p. 10), with all transactions protected by ‘commercial-in-confidence’ provisions.

The waterfront was to be transformed from working docks into a new city precinct: Melbourne Docklands. The Kennett government narrative was deeply influenced by the exemplar of London Docklands. With a clear focus on giving the market free rein—“You’re the ones with the ideas”, Kennett’s minister for planning told assembled developers at a business-leaders’ forum—regulation was minimal. The Docklands Authority answered solely to the state and planning approvals were given directly by the minister. The City of Melbourne, the central city council that governed the central business district and surrounding residential districts, had no role at Docklands, and a special act of parliament minimised public participation in its planning. With recourse to the brief recession, Kennett emphasised that there would be no government subsidy: the Docklands redevelopment would be determined and driven by the marketplace. Developers would pay for everything: roads, trams, sewerage and even public art. “We didn’t want to create an orchid”, the minister for planning said later. “It was about proving it can be done successfully, not proving that you can subsidise it to make it successful” (quoted in Millar, 2006a, p. 1).

This was a vision of the sustainability of the free market and Docklands was its test. The site was divided into seven large parcels and put out to tender. The Docklands Authority 1993 annual report predicted that work would begin within months. Yet the market was cautious: no-one moved first. By 1996 nothing had happened. One by one, preferred bidders either walked away from the project or were rejected for not offering enough for their share of infrastructure. Successful bids collapsed at six of the seven precincts. Quietly conceding that vision as illusory, Kennett abandoned the no-spend policy and found AUD61 million to build the first state-funded stimulus, a football stadium. The minister admitted that the government was “lashing around” for something, anything, to kick-start the Docklands (quoted in Millar, 2006a, p. 1).

The narrative shifted to one of economic sustainability, in which the project would fully recover the government expenditure over time, and from overseas investors, ensuring that it would still be delivered “at no cost to the public purse” as promised in the Docklands Authority’s mission statement (Docklands Authority, 1995, n.p.).
Along with the stadium (with naming rights for sale) came a state-funded street extension, a bridge over the railway lines and substantial associated infrastructure. Construction began on an arterial thoroughfare, Wurundjeri Way (named after local Indigenous people who were otherwise completely unacknowledged in the development) and the costs of decontaminating large tracts of land were discreetly picked up. Design guidelines were prepared but flexible: a developer proposal for the world’s tallest tower (at 560 metres in 1998) was approved in a precinct with a suggested height limit of 35 metres (Long, 1998). ‘Give the architects their head’ was the design philosophy and ‘design excellence’ would follow. In place of the vision of the free market came another: Melbourne Docklands would become a magnet for international investment and “catapult Melbourne onto the international stage” (Kennett, quoted in Millar, 2001).

Contracts began to be signed, based on staged payments on completion of works at prices set at the commencement of the process; that is, before the value of the rezoning was realised. (In a court case brought much later by two of the developers against the state government, it was revealed that land was sold at, in some instances, less than 100th of its value at the time: “Prime waterfront land … sold so cheaply it was almost given away” (Johanson, 2012a)). By the end of the 1990s, it was estimated that the redevelopment had cost Victorian taxpayers AUD470 million (RMIT Business School; quoted in Millar, 2006a, p. 1). There were no plans for social housing, no community services or cultural facilities, little in the way of environmental initiatives and, it must be said, not much promise of imminent ‘design excellence’.

The Kennett government’s hubris began to enter popular and media narratives as inexorably as the Cain–Kirner government’s ‘economic mismanagement’ had a decade earlier. Critical commentary was intensifying, not just in response to Docklands but to Kennett’s approach to planning and community politics in general and, in late 1999, his government was narrowly voted out of office. The incoming Labor government under premier Steve Bracks introduced a new tone to state politics: this government would “listen to the community” and provide “a sensible balance” in planning (quoted in Victorian Department of Infrastructure, 1999, p. 11). The narrative was one of transformation, and sustainability was the vehicle: Docklands would become a demonstration of “best practice ecologically sustainable design” (Docklands Authority, 2000, p. 68). The new focus was on “accessibility for a full range of people” with “a diversity of uses and activities” (p. 66). Key design principles included “for all people and their needs”, “focused on the public realm”, “ecologically sustainable” and “creative and innovative” (Docklands Authority, 2000, p. 66). A state-funded film and television studio was proposed and conspicuous large artworks (funded by a 1 per cent developer levy initiated in 1991 and maintained by Kennett in the spirit of low government expenditure, if not quite market freedom) began to appear in the corporate and public domains.

2000–05: Environmental and Social Sustainability

With the state economic growth rate strong, due in no small part to the Kennett government’s creation of a positive investment environment, the new inclusive narrative took flight. Always committed to “economic vitality” and “attractive and sustainable returns on investment” (Docklands Authority, 2000, p. 66), it had the central object of creating “a place for everyone”
Employing visions of environmental and social sustainability that were already common internationally, this narrative arrived on the tail of almost a decade of what we could call ‘ideal-type’ neoliberal governance in Victoria, just as ‘New Labour’ surfaced in Britain after 17 years of Thatcher and Major, and Clinton’s ‘third way’ in the US after 12 years of Reagan and Bush Snr. The language of ‘reinventing government’ is characteristic of these new Labour and Democratic regimes, with the adjustment from failed free-market rule to the new ‘sustainable’ consensus to be enabled by “public–private partnerships and other market-oriented responses to urban problems” (Lees et al., 2008, pp. 183–184).

When Victorian Labor took power in 1999, Melbourne Docklands had been under development for a decade. The infrastructure was in place but little else was built. How did the visions of environmental and social sustainability in the new narrative affect the next phase of its realisation? Most important to the Bracks government was a commitment to transparency in decision-making. Revised literature from the Docklands Authority named and carried photographs of its senior managers and board members, with flow charts clearly outlining the bid assessment process and the “probit and ethical standards” employed in the assessments (Docklands Authority, 2000, p. 73; 2002, p. 61). An Ecologically Sustainable Development Guide for developers was prepared which set new standards and the criteria for the Green Buildings Council of Australia (GBCA). Developers were encouraged to “develop character in their precincts drawing on cultural and historical influences such as the maritime and transport-related uses of the site” (Docklands Authority, 2002, p. 13). Overall, the intent was to create, maintain and communicate Melbourne Docklands as a development project of ecologically sustainable excellence, demonstrating environmental leadership and commercial viability to the market (Docklands Authority, 2002, p. 64).

The contractual obligations established under Kennett were maintained. More infrastructure works were provided, including two new road extensions over the railway lines connecting Docklands to the city centre. The first completed buildings were on the north wharf in the precinct of NewQuay (Figure 2), which the design guidelines recommended be low-rise. Built by local firm MAB, they were 80 metres high (66 metres higher than the suggested 14 metres) and in winter cast the northern promenade into shade.

In 2001, Lend Lease, a local developer with an international portfolio, was awarded development rights for the prized Victoria Harbour precinct (Figure 3). The managing director said:

We will … work with the Victorian Government towards achieving a triple bottom line outcome for Victoria Harbour. This means a development approach aimed at environmental sustainability, social responsibility and economic viability (Lend Lease, 2001, p. 2).

The CEO of Lend Lease’s construction arm added: “We view Victoria Harbour’s redevelopment as an important opportunity to demonstrate international leadership in sustainable urban developments” (Lend Lease, 2001, p. 2). The minister for major projects at the time said: “We believe that Victoria Harbour will become the social and civic heart of Docklands” (Government of Victoria, 2001, p. 1).

In 2002, ING Real Estate Developments was awarded the second-largest precinct,
Figure 2. The north wharf precinct of NewQuay (2010). Photo: author.

Figure 3. Melbourne Docklands precincts. Lend Lease’s Victoria Harbour precinct forms the south side of the harbour.
‘Waterfront City’ (Figure 3, top left). ING had a strong track record of building social housing in The Netherlands and ecological sustainability was part of its tender. “Our green credentials will be indisputable; we aim to set a standard”, said ING Real Estate’s Australian managing director (quoted in Neales, 2005, p. 233). The winning bid was announced as a “world-class public entertainment and retail precinct at Melbourne Docklands” (Government of Victoria, 2002a, p. 1). Premier Bracks declared the project was “aiming to achieve a Docklands Authority Award of Excellence in Ecological Sustainable Development, the highest level possible under the Docklands Authority ESD Guide” (Government of Victoria, 2002a, p. 1). The minister for planning said that the project included a residential component and that “the developer had agreed to work with Government to incorporate affordable housing” (Government of Victoria, 2002a, p. 2).

Features of the ESD Guide began to appear—natural lighting; using space for cooling, fresh air circulation and ventilation; river cooling and underfloor air conditioning; solar power and storm water collection. Parkland captures rainwater from a 7-hectare catchment in a series of wetlands, which is stored and used for irrigation. While routine in parts of Europe, these initiatives constituted an advance in Australia. It was observed at the time that the developers with experience of working in Europe inspired and exceeded the standards of the ESD Guide; nevertheless, the environmental sustainability objectives at Docklands were to some degree delivered: 52 per cent of commercial floor space met GBCA star ratings.

By 2003, more than 3000 apartments had been built and all were well above the median price for inner-city apartments; Lend Lease’s project director publicly estimated that households needed close to twice the average household wage to buy into Docklands. By then an economic downturn and ‘oversupply’ in the apartment market were beginning to bring prices down. Lend Lease teamed up with a non-profit housing association to apply to the state government for social housing subsidies. ING Real Estate offered a model of ‘key worker housing’ in which lower-income workers could buy into Waterfront City’s apartment complexes, premised again on government finance. These approaches were supported by the CEO of the Docklands Authority: “The next step is to have some financial structures that allow lower levels of affordability [sic] to occur” (quoted in Millar, 2003).

An editorial in The Age newspaper—the metropolitan daily broadsheet which maintained a watchful commentary on the Docklands redevelopment—made a succinct analysis

Sceptics query whether Docklands’ newfound interest in affordability is driven by altruism or a desire to harness public funds to prop up Docklands housing in a softening inner-city apartment market. … While social housing is now embraced by developers and the authority alike, it would be wrong to conclude that Docklands is about to turn into a commune for starving artists. Lend Lease is talking about just 100 of 2100 apartments for social housing. ING has in mind about 50 of its 490 dwellings. There are still no guarantees that even this modest level of low-cost housing will be realised. Both proposals depend on State Government assistance (Millar, 2003).

The injection of government funds was not immediately forthcoming. The impact of the downturn was showing in other sectors and the government was embarrassed by reports from the Real Estate Institute of Victoria that the first resales of Docklands apartments were not reaching their original
By 2004, property advisors were recommending against investment properties at Docklands.

Witness the May resale of a Docklands apartment for $715,000 against a purchase price of about $900,000 in late 2000—a loss of about 20 per cent excluding costs (Wakelin, 2004, p. 3).

It was around this time that the proposal for the world’s tallest building quietly disappeared; instead, the uncommitted precinct of Batman’s Hill was divided into 15 small parcels and sold separately. The consequences of the concerted stimulation of real estate development as the “centrepiece of the city’s productive economy” (Smith, 2002, p. 443) were beginning to be felt. Property at Docklands was overpriced and the state economy was slowing. Bracks’ conservative treasurer, who from the beginning of the Labor government had committed to minimum AUD100 million annual surpluses (Government of Victoria, 2002b) began to tighten the streams of finance. The Docklands Authority was merged with the Victorian public land corporation to become VicUrban, “the State Government’s sustainable urban development agency”. Yet the environmentally sustainable vision for Docklands had only partly been delivered, the socially sustainable imaginary was fragile and even its economic sustainability was in question. What to do?

2005–09: The ‘Creative City’

In 2005, a lavish, full-colour, hard-bound 300-page coffee-table book was produced by VicUrban to detail the “creation of a waterfront spectacular. An urban oasis. A modern marvel”.

Australia’s most ambitious urban renewal project. It has involved the transformation of an industrial wasteland into one of the most stunning city waterfront precincts in the world today. This book with stunning photography is a comprehensive look at how this urban wonder came to life (Keeney, 2005, cover).

With a foreword by none other than Richard Florida, the book’s editorial board was made up of VicUrban and government officers, many of whom wrote chapters. The prevailing narrative was captured by the then-minister for the environment.

The success of Docklands is all about public spaces; it’s about people visiting, working and living in Docklands, linked by great public spaces on seven kilometres of Melbourne’s new waterfront. Docklands’ ESD Guide has firmly established this newest precinct of Melbourne as a leader in sustainability (Thwaites; quoted in Keeney, 2005, p. 242).

The language was effusive.

Docklands is a mammoth urban development. … The result of a flexible planning framework, inspired by guiding principles, it has created a Melbourne jewel (Cornell, 2005, p. 32).

Docklands is an innovative and vibrant mini-city… set to become a waterfront centrepiece for an international city—one that showcases its architecture, celebrates its diversity and pays tribute to its heritage. Docklands will become another world-class asset for marvellous Melbourne (Keeney, 2005, p. 137).

Florida wrote.

I wouldn’t be at all surprised to see Melbourne emerge as one of the defining global creative centres of the 21st century—and that transformation will be made possible in large part by the creative spirit that the Docklands reconstruction both embodies and enables (Florida, 2005, p. 9).
Here was another narrative again, with the vision of the ‘creative city’ as global a concept as the socially, environmentally and economically sustainable visions before it (Porter and Shaw, 2009). This new aspiration for Docklands seemed to require a belittling of the qualities of the old city centre.

What is at issue is how the new, glitzy, blue-glass and mixed-use Melbourne will reshape or replace ‘Marvellous Melbourne’—that confined, lane-crossed central city, self-anointed cultural capital (Cornell, 2005, p. 37).

Here is an eight-storey glass-and-metal creation in bright colours, its open plan, sweeping gallery spaces and network of suspended walkways encourage social interaction and a sense of freedom. The inhabitants have left behind their office in the city—an upright, dim, uptight series of piled boxes, the 20th century office paradigm—for a new dimension. Happiness is visible and ties are not being worn (Keeney, 2005, p. 14).

These Florida-esque projections, peppered with “fearlessness” and “audacity” (Keeney, 2005, p. 14), had little substance. Docklands displayed none of the features that Florida himself stipulates as essential to any ‘creative city’—i.e. fine grain, ‘urban grit’, diversity, authenticity, quality of place: “altogether a lot of active, exciting, creative endeavours” (Florida, 2002, p. 232). It remained even further from the imaginary of a ‘creative city’ than it did from environmental and social sustainability. Beyond the partial ESD initiatives and small quantities of social housing planned, Melbourne Docklands had become an expensive commercial and residential area made up of poorly connected high-rise buildings on massive podiums. The spaces between the buildings were large and unresolved. There were few small street frontages. The too-large public spaces allowed for little other than controlled consumption, patrolled by private security guards. There were no low-cost start-up or cultural spaces, no civic centre, no ‘heart’, no ambiguous or in-between spaces, no surprises. The docks’ political history had been obliterated. Despite the government’s encouragements, the maritime references were confined to the National Australia Bank building colours suggesting shipping containers (Figure 4) and the occasional anchor and brightly coloured yacht. Notwithstanding the unreliable sale prices, the median rent for Docklands apartments was twice the Melbourne median. All up, the redevelopment at that point was estimated to have a market value of AUD10 billion (Millar, 2006a, p. 1).

Never in Docklands’ history had the narrative been so disconnected from the reality. Soon after the release of VicUrban’s promotional book, Leon van Schaik, professor of architecture at RMIT University and generally regarded as Melbourne’s high priest of design, released his own book *Design City Melbourne*. He proposed that Melbourne in the first decade of the 21st century is to the world what Barcelona was in the 1980s and the Dutch Randstat was in the 1990s: “from time to time we, the international community of designers, become aware that one or other city is ‘hot’” (van Schaik, 2006, p. 8). No stranger to local boosterism himself, van Schaik showcased the work of 23 Melbourne architects in his full-colour, hard-bound 288-page coffee-table book. Melbourne Docklands was notable by its absence.

Public disaffection with Docklands was reaching such a point that *The Age* ran a deeply critical cover feature. Politicians, planners, academics and architects, the latter being famously reluctant to criticise their peers, were more than willing to comment. Van Schaik led the charge: “Melbourne Docklands is a badly-missed opportunity. It’s all corporate homogeneity, lacking in
grit... just the usual, run-of-the-mill, second-rate modernism” (quoted in Millar, 2006a, p. 1). Swinburne University professor of housing Terry Burke agreed: “They should blow it up and start again”; and RMIT University housing researcher Tony Dalton added “You’ve got to have buckets of money to live there, and that’s a tragedy. It should have been a suburb where a whole load of people can live and work” (quoted in Millar, 2006a, p. 1). Burke echoed the sentiments of many when he observed that “the lack of social mix at Docklands will be a problem in the long run”; and social justice campaigner Mary Crooks concurred: “It’s disappointing because it could have been an incredibly large jewel in Melbourne’s crown and I think it’s less than that, much less than that” (quoted in Millar, 2006a, p. 1). Crooks argued that the lack of affordability prevents the social and cultural diversity that is evident elsewhere in Melbourne. The feature concluded with the observation that the effect of Docklands’ market-driven planning is that only cashed-up apartment buyers and renters and major commercial tenants are welcome. More than half of Docklands residents have a median income of more than $1000 a week. Only 12 per cent of Melburnians earn that much.... The majority of developers, builders, architects, entrepreneurs, small businesses, artists and lower-income residents are excluded, and the architecture, urban design and social mix reflect this (Millar, 2006a, p. 6).

A few months after The Age feature and van Schaik’s book release, Lend Lease announced that it would devote one-third of a 12-level apartment block to affordable accommodation. With a significant public contribution, 50 units would be provided. Of these, eight would be traditional public housing and 42 would be filled by low- to middle-income people working in and around Docklands.3 ING confirmed that it too was committed to providing key worker housing. The government

Figure 4. The central Harbour Esplanade and the National Australia Bank building (2010). Photo: author.
confirmed its financial support. After all the years of negotiations, the announce-
ments came just in time for the November 2006 state election.

Labor lost seats but was re-elected and Bracks’ treasurer, John Brumby, took over as premier soon afterwards. In a transition from the ‘new Labor’ ethos of the Bracks government to a more business-oriented approach, Brumby’s trademark was conser-
vative economic management. Brumby’s personal narrative for Docklands resurrected the Kennett government’s narrative of full cost recovery.

Docklands is the largest public–private part-
nership in Australia, with $3.5 billion com-
pleted or in construction and $4 billion committed in development agreements. On completion, it will have been fully funded by the private sector after repaying the State Government’s investment in the infrastruc-
ture. Docklands is an exciting mix of residen-
tial, business and commercial, with a thriving food, wine, entertainment and arts culture (Brumby; quoted in Keeney, 2005, p. 167).

By 2008, VicUrban estimated the entire development to be worth AUD12 billion. It had 3300 apartments, 6000 residents, 15 000 workers and 400 000 square metres of commercial space. Of upwards of 40 new buildings, 11 were green-star-rated environ-
mentally sustainable buildings. There were 57 social housing units. The social housing is in Victoria Harbour and rented to “low to medium income service workers” (Lend Lease, 2009, p. 11). The eight public housing units had disappeared. The total govern-
ment contribution to Melbourne Docklands was unknown (and will probably remain that way. The financial arrangements have not been audited by a public authority since 2002).6

Popular critical commentary grew. The former state architect attributed Docklands’ “failure” to the design being left to develope-
ners (Shaw, 2009). The Lord Mayor of Melbourne said he was “very worried about Docklands” as “at the micro level it doesn’t work”, and stressed an urgency to bring life to the place: “Within a decade it will be fin-
ished, and to go back and to try and re-
engineer it is much more difficult, and much more costly than building community as we go” (quoted in Dowling and Lahey, 2009). High-profile Sydney-based architect and commentator Elizabeth Farrelly con-
tributed to the debate.

It’s an old truism that most of Melbourne’s notable architecture can be taken in with a jog down the Swanston Street–St Kilda Road spine and a loop around the grid, and although now you have to add a trek over the hill to Docklands, this is mainly to satisfy yourself that no, Melbourne’s newest pre-
cinct still can’t channel the charm or chutz-
pah of Melbourne proper. Even Melbourne, it seems, cannot replicate the network of intact laneways and top-lit arcades that Sydneysiders have so long envied. … The same architecture en plein air at Docklands or Southbank comes across as overworked and overexposed. Vegas in daylight…. The public, it seems, agree. Even as Melbourne’s gridded heart pumps with life, Docklands is deserted. You’re lucky to catch a lone iPhoner Googling his connectivity from a waterside bench. Has Melbourne experimen-
ted just a touch too boldly this time? Or has it broken its own rule, taking its cues not from its own vibrant city grid but from Sydney’s acknowledged failures at Darling Harbour and King Street Wharf? (Farrelly, 2010).

Into the midst of the intensifying critique came the global financial crisis. Although it did not hit Australia as heavily as North America or Europe, it did affect a number of developers reliant on globalised finance.
It is worth noting that, had the Kennett government’s plan to attract overseas finance to Docklands succeeded, the impact of the market collapse and likely government bailout would have been much more significant. However, luckily for John Brumby, most of the financiers, developers and anchor tenants at Docklands were Australian companies (and, as critics of the purported economic benefits to the state allege, probably would have invested elsewhere in Melbourne anyway, if they weren’t simply moving to Docklands from the CBD, as several corporate headquarters and government departments did). Nevertheless, by 2010, the next phase of construction had stalled.

Australian banks and governments were relatively well-insulated from the global financial crisis and a robust federal economic stimulus package kept the economy afloat. The state government budget retained its surplus (even while schools and hospitals complained of underfunding and the public housing waiting-list lengthened). The slowdown brought an opportunity for Docklands. The sustained critiques of the lifelessness and exclusiveness of the redevelopment had become a powerful strand in the public narrative. Once again a Labor state government had the capacity and incentive to exercise some leverage over the undeveloped parts of Docklands.

2010: Social and Cultural Sustainability

In 2010, marking the halfway point of the building phase of Docklands (completion is due in 2020), the Brumby government transferred planning powers for the developed parts to the City of Melbourne. The hand-over was the first in a series of amendments “to enable the planning responsibility to progressively transfer to the Melbourne city council as development in Docklands is completed”. While this applied to the developed precincts only, the spaces between the buildings and many vacancies contained possibilities for planning intervention. The introduction of local planning control meant public participation and a wider range of ideas in the process.

In a late 2010 election, the state government changed again, back to a conservative coalition but with an urban politics barely distinguishable from its predecessor. Melbourne city council retained control of the developed parts of Docklands. It has a homelessness framework and a social and affordable housing strategy, an urban design strategy and a reasonable record on the use and care of the city centre’s heritage and laneways. At a meeting of the council’s Docklands committee, the CEO of VicUrban pronounced: “Everyone in this room will acknowledge it hasn’t worked, for various reasons”. He continued

The first decade has very much been about putting in those large blocks of infrastructure and some of the large buildings, and the second decade is much more about the people (quoted in Perkins and Dowling, 2011).

Melbourne city council and VicUrban initiated a series of ‘place-making’ seminars in which the “development, finance and community sectors” were invited to participate in a “critical conversation” about Docklands. Among others, the following objectives were developed: affordable housing, incubators for start-up businesses, creative spaces, recognition of Indigenous heritage, community facilities and “diverse, comfortable and active public spaces”. A further 85 key worker units began construction. A section of Batman’s Hill that had not been sold was designated a ‘community hub’ and a library and community centre were planned. Affordable student
housing was proposed and a community garden. The city’s ‘creative spaces’ programme, which derives from a ‘housing the arts’ initiative, focused on low-cost studio space and began exploring mixed-use working complexes for low and non-profit activities in and around Docklands (City of Melbourne, 2011a). In a briefing note to the director of city design at the City of Melbourne, the creative spaces manager wrote

While public art has been a priority for Docklands since its inception … work spaces such as artist studios, affordable office spaces and rehearsal rooms were not part of the plan. Affordability is a major challenge for artists, cultural organisations and social enterprises wishing to work in the area. … [The proposed facility] will be divided amongst the functions of library, small not for profit arts organisations, artists studios and live/work spaces. … Tenants will include diverse ethnic groups who are socially inclusive, environmentally aware, and creative (City of Melbourne, 4 June 2010).

An “arts and cultural projects” funding scheme was announced, encouraging reflections on “sustainability, cultural diversity and multicultural identity” at Docklands (City of Melbourne, 2011b). The director of city design suggested that the council could “unpack and rebuild some of the city’s heritage freight sheds, now in storage” (quoted in Munro, 2012). Lend Lease’s revised development plan for the remainder of the Victoria Harbour precinct included “re-ordering the street hierarchy to establish a network of avenues, streets and lanes” and “providing ‘meaningful places’” (Lend Lease, 2010, pp. 10–11). It proposed the retention of unlisted heritage structures for adaptive re-use to “celebrate the maritime history” (p. 25) and offered community facilities which would be designed “to be socially inclusive, considering the needs of all members of the community including minority groups, people with disabilities, very young people and the elderly” (p. 41). Overall, the developer said, Victoria Harbour would contain “moments of interest and surprise” (p. 71).

After more than a decade of persistent public criticism and with the direct influence of Melbourne city council, yet another narrative for Docklands emerged: the ‘second decade’—getting it right—with references to cultural and social as well as environmental and economic sustainability. For the first time, the prospect of some local character at Docklands offered a degree of differentiation from the placeless urbanisation formulae that had dominated the development since its conception. Once again The Age captured the prevailing public narrative

It was to be that rare opportunity that most cities never have … the chance ‘many cities can only dream about’, declared the Docklands strategic planning framework [in 1989]. … But two decades later not only had Docklands failed to fulfill that dream, the yet-to-be completed precinct had been ruled a soulless, dispiriting, windswept failure, its waterfront dominated by soaring towers. Today, however, the focus has shifted to how—or whether—the project may be redeemed over its second decade of development (Munro, 2012).

Can this last phase be said to represent a deviation from neoliberal development-as-usual? Do neoliberal governances vary wildly enough to enable departure from the formulaic, such that the interventions into Docklands since 2010 can be included in neoliberalism’s hybrid embrace, or should this most recent phase be considered a different mode of governance?

Conclusion

The Melbourne docks redevelopment has been the subject of various narratives for
two decades. It began with a simple social democratic ideal of modestly planned, incremental growth intended to accommodate an increasing population. This was quickly replaced by the vision of a free-market remake in which the entire project would be planned, designed and funded by the private sector with no financial assistance from the state. The first approach did not get a chance to work; the second failed spectacularly. It was an important experiment of Australia’s first neoliberal government which, taking its cues from Thatcher’s Britain, embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at liberating the market in many aspects of urban management. Melbourne Docklands was a very public and measurable test of the approach: the project required an official narrative to explain the state’s involvement in this classic case of ‘roll-out neoliberalism’ in which a new mode of governance—a development corporation working ‘in partnership’ with the private sector, exclusion of local government and public input—was constructed (Peck and Tickell, 2002, p. 37). This narrative, and all those that followed it, allowed direct comparison of what was intended with what, literally, was realised on the ground.

That the imaginary of the fully free market burst is unsurprising—Peck (2010) is not the first to argue that neoliberalism is characterised by failure. More interesting is the evidence the subsequent narratives provide for the proposition that neoliberalism fails forward, spurring new rounds of neoliberal invention. A regime of concerted state support for market rule was established through substantial stimulatory funding, on the premise that all public expenditure would be completely recouped, particularly in light of the opportunity cost of selling the land at well below actual value.

In the early 2000s, a narrative of inclusivity was introduced by a new Labor government, according with the global consensus of the time. This too was a neoliberal reinvention, with visions of environmental and social sustainability designed to attract popular support while delivering economic growth as usual through a reframed public–private partnership. In fact, the tokenistic efforts to introduce environmental sustainability into Docklands indicate just how unprepared governments are in Australia to require even innocuous concessions from the private sector. In the face of growing public criticism of the lack of any kind of sustainability at Docklands, a ‘creative city’ vision was employed to cloak the project but it was already too exposed. It is worth noting just how little traction the ‘creative city’ imaginary had: the boosterist rhetoric was so far removed from the reality of Docklands that few if any were persuaded, and that particular invention has since disappeared from public discourse.

The most recent narrative of redemption, with visions of economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability, is more complex. Its realisation involves a process of in-filling, taking advantage of Docklands’ failings and global market failure to establish new land uses that may simultaneously deliver public benefit and rescue the redevelopment. The approach is opportunistic, making use of the economic slowdown to introduce forms and practices into the Docklands that until then were excluded, through a more participatory process than was previously the case. It requires social housing and affordable work and community spaces, a fine grain and a human scale, and recognition of the area’s Indigenous and multicultural and industrial heritages.
This is not to say that, in aiming for a more accessible and equitable place, the recent approach will not increase the exchange value of the existing commercial and residential buildings. To the extent that its visions are realised, they will have been judged as in no way detracting from the capacity for the existing developers and owners to capitalise on their assets. The ‘humanising’ of Docklands with greater emphasis on use value will undoubtedly increase demand for residential and commercial space. By departing in this small way from the formulaic approaches of the previous narratives, this approach distinguishes Docklands not just from its past but from other waterfront projects. An element of local differentiation will only boost Docklands’ economic sustainability.

When tracked against the changing local and global political-economic contexts, the changing narratives for Docklands can indeed be seen as repeated instances of neoliberalism “variously failing and flailing forward” (Peck, 2010, p. 7) with each new round intended to rescue the overall approach without really changing anything on the ground. The most recent phase, however, instigated by trenchant public critique and the consequent introduction of Melbourne city council into the process, contains a deeper response to the lack of any kind of sustainability at Docklands, including that of the neoliberal project itself. The narrative of redemption does not attempt to redeem neoliberal urbanisation. It involves a quite different kind of intervention in Docklands, with state expenditure in the public interest, regulating land uses and design, and keeping some land out of the market. This is not neoliberal business-as-usual, nor is it in support of the free market. Hybrid and partial neoliberal governance may be, but if anything can rescue Melbourne Docklands two decades in, it won’t be a new round of neoliberal invention. If the most recent approach at Docklands succeeds in its attempt to make the area even remotely sustainable in economic, environmental, social and cultural terms, this will be something else.

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Notes

2. See note 1.
4. See note 1.

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