

EAST LAKE

ON THE ROAD TO URBAN RENEWAL



The SCI's East Lake project aims to incorporate the activities of Fyshwick produce market sympathetically along with other light industrial operations. CSIRO, SCI



Hitting the brakes on suburban sprawl means shifting developers' focus to urban renewal, but rethinking city spaces is far from trivial. A project in Canberra's East Lake area is testing a new science-based approach.

East Lake is a short bus ride from Canberra's central business district, Civic. Close to jobs and public transport – and home to the ecologically significant Jerrabomberra Wetlands – the area has been identified as a future home for up to 9000 people.

You can imagine it is a tantalising prospect for developers. The ACT Government, however, has big plans for East Lake to become a best-practice showcase of sustainable development, and is working

with CSIRO to help realise this goal.

'Around 60 per cent of current development in the ACT is in greenfield areas, but the intent is to reduce this figure to 50 per cent,' says Paul Lewis, General Manager of Metropolitan Development and Land Supply at the ACT Planning and Land Authority.

According to Mr Lewis, the ACT can more efficiently use urban infrastructure and effectively deliver services, as well as improve the efficiency of land use and transport systems, by redeveloping under-utilised precincts such as East Lake.

'We want to make sure the decision-making processes bring key stakeholders and the broader community with us,' he says.

Urban renewal

Until the mid-1990s Australians were moving away from our inner-city suburbs in search of the suburban block with a backyard. But since then, lifestyle and urban planning decisions have attracted increased inner-city residential development and population growth.

Nonetheless, the middle and outer suburbs have continued to grow at an increasing rate, and the nation's five major cities now house 60 per cent of the population.

Capital cities are merging with surrounding urban centres as they expand, forming mega-metropolitan regions in south-east Queensland, Sydney, Port Phillip and Perth. Walter Burley Griffin's



planning legacy gave Canberra a different model, but the challenge of managing urban development is consistent across the country.

‘The attractiveness of urban renewal is that it provides an opportunity to revitalise and rejuvenate a city rather than simply adding to its fringes,’ explains Guy Barnett, an urban ecologist with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems.

‘Sites within easy reach of the CBD are the target; particularly those often-overlooked areas of our cities that suffer from declining industrial use, neglect or poor planning.’

According to Mr Barnett, the primary drivers for urban renewal are convenience and lifestyle, but there is also a

sustainability dimension based on reducing car dependency and resource consumption through higher density living.

Notable examples of urban renewal include Docklands (Melbourne), Pyrmont (Sydney) and Newstead (Brisbane). Now it’s Canberra’s turn to set the new national benchmark.

The ACT Government engaged environmental firm BioRegional to assess a range of Canberra sites (including greenfield, brownfield and redevelopment areas) as potential national showcases for sustainable development.

‘The East Lake precinct was identified as the most appropriate of a range of sites,’ says Mr Lewis. ‘It has many of the issues typically found in city environments:

An aerial view over the varied make-up of Canberra’s East Lake precinct, which includes housing, natural wetland and light industrial areas. CSIRO, SCI

low scale built form, concerned local community, high land values, mixed land uses, ageing built form, under-utilised railway facilities, wetland interface and so on.’

‘From the outset we have focused on getting the decision-making processes and approaches right, and have geared our program towards the best possible outcome in the urban environment and non-urban interface.’

Progress



East Lake's Jerrabomberra Wetlands, fed by Lake Burley Griffin, are ecologically significant and therefore an environmental centre point in new plans for the area. CSIRO, SCI

A participatory approach

More than 50 stakeholders attended focus group meetings in October and November 2007, to discuss their visions, expectations and concerns for the future of East Lake.

The meetings were just the first step in a project that partners – the ACT Government and CSIRO – hope will lay the foundation for the area's sustainable redevelopment.

It is being implemented as part of the CSIRO Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI), which brings together participants from across the public, private and civil society sectors, to work in partnership with communities on sustainability issues.

'No one organisation has all the answers when it comes to building sustainable communities,' says Sean Rooney, Director of the Sustainable Communities Initiative.

'Effective solutions lie in our ability to work together to harness knowledge, passion and resources from a diverse range of players and focus them on developing and delivering collaborative solutions.'

Talking to the people who live, work and play at East Lake has revealed a lot about the existing community and its environment, historical and cultural factors, infrastructure needs, and

the factors that will make or break a sustainable community.

Getting these stakeholders involved so early in the planning and design process is helping build broad understanding and awareness.

This approach is known as 'action research' and underpins projects in the Sustainable Communities Initiative. It recognises that scientific, engineering, business, historic and cultural knowledge are all needed to build thriving communities and that in such a complex environment, it is important to retain flexibility and adaptability to change.

Developing the design principles

The public and stakeholder forums at East Lake identified a range of issues. The key planning themes to emerge were a need to improve the connectivity and permeability of the area, while maintaining existing local icons and key community infrastructure.

Preservation of the wetlands was seen as vital, but stakeholders also highlighted opportunities for enhancement and education. Novel financing models would also be required to foster an innovation-friendly environment for investment.

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Managing such diverse considerations poses a challenge for urban planners and development professionals. But as climate change prompts governments to rethink the way they plan our cities, thoughtful responses to urban renewal, such as this one, will play a critical role in responding and adapting to inevitable change.

Taking stakeholder perspectives into account, a shared vision for East Lake is now beginning to emerge: a diverse and highly energy efficient, mixed-use and user-oriented urban environment that reflects the historic sense of place and the diverse needs of its residents and users.

● **Matthew Levinson**