

Developer and critic on common ground

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IN THE north choir aisle of London's Westminster Abbey rests a statue of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton - politician, philanthropist and slave trade abolitionist.

Sir Thomas, according to the inscription on his marble memorial, was "endued with a vigorous and capacious mind" and "dauntless courage and untiring energy".

He earned this accolade for his efforts, alongside another famous anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce, in bringing slavery to an end in the British Empire.

It's an epitaph that sits comfortably with two of Sir Thomas's Australian descendants whose long and influential careers have had a profound effect on Melbourne's built environment.

One of those, an academic, is the scourge of the development community and a harsh critic of Melbourne's urban sprawl.

The other, a fifth-generation developer and leading player in Australia's property industry, heads a multi-million dollar company with plans to house 30,000 residents in a new fringe suburb.

But despite their differences, these two men share some surprisingly similar ideas, as well as their common ancestor, Sir Thomas.

Both condemn Melbourne's ad hoc urban growth and its lack of planning foresight. Both think the Baillieu government needs to hold a planning summit to map out the city's next 50 years.

And, even though different branches of the family emigrated from England many generations ago, both share the same name: Michael Buxton.

Recently, Messrs Buxton and Buxton were invited by *The Age* to debate the future of the city, its planning successes and failures. This is part of the conversation that unfolded.

RMIT planning professor Michael Buxton, a leading expert in peri-urban (the area between the suburbs and the countryside) growth with over a decade's experience in government as a planning manager, is effusive about the city's strengths.

Melbourne's fine tradition of architect-sculpted buildings, its 1837 Robert Hoddle grid with criss-crossing wide and narrow streets, efficient transport links, and mix of housing, business and entertainment have made it a functional, liveable and diverse city - until now. "[It's] a wonderful city to a great extent because of its heritage of buildings ... people respond to that."

But, like many involved in planning for the city's future, Professor Buxton is acutely aware of the problems.

They're well documented. Melbourne's rapid expansion over the past decade has seen it grow by the equivalent of one-and-a-half times the size of Canberra.

Earlier this year, this newspaper reported that for the first time in almost 30 years, the city's population - 4,077,000 as of mid-year - was within half a million of Sydney's, and gaining.

That jump sparked a housing boom in places like Wyndham (Werribee), Melton, Whittlesea (South Morang) and Casey (Cranbourne), where five of every eight new residents settled. It stretched the city's infrastructure and services.

"That's the problem we're facing today - the government is playing catch-up because the developers are moving so quickly," says property developer and MAB Corporation co-founder Michael Buxton.

That rapid expansion - the city now stretches almost 150 kilometres - means it's almost impossible for governments to service the prohibitive costs of infrastructure, Mr Buxton says.

Once a new suburb like Toolern, is finished there is 15 year-lag before schools, sports club rooms, libraries, public transport links and other community-shaping infrastructure appear.

For governments, the ensuing congestion on roads, overcrowding on trains, trams and buses, long hospital waiting times, and housing affordability woes are electoral liabilities.

The pressure, most acutely felt on the city's fringes, prompted a backlash by developers against the "artificial" restrictions of the urban growth boundary, a key Melbourne 2030 planning policy designed to stop urban sprawl.

But there are also other issues at play, besides a lack of infrastructure, in Melbourne's newest suburbs that affect their liveability.

Housing styles are too uniform, says Professor Buxton. There's not enough of a mix of detached and semi-detached smaller housing and apartments to cater for people's different needs and incomes, he believes.

"For a long time, the mass outer-urban builders argued they weren't building anything different because they were only catering for what people wanted - and everybody wanted a detached house on a large block," Professor Buxton says. "It was a classic case of people didn't have alternatives, they didn't have choices."

And while lots sizes have shrunk rapidly as land has become more expensive, house sizes haven't. "They [developers] are not changing their housing product significantly," Buxton says. "To me, that's the worst of all possible worlds."

MAB Corporation plans to begin building Merrifield, an "integrated city" housing 30,000 people about 30 kilometres north of Melbourne's CBD in late 2012. Not surprisingly, Mr Buxton believes continued development on the fringes is inevitable.

"Our argument is, if you take the city the way it developed originally - where you have work and housing next to each other - the chances are you don't need as many cars," he says.

"You've got to develop out at Wallan, Craighburn and those places. What we should be doing is to plan it all properly at the same time and say you cannot have a residential development unless you have work [as well]."

Both suggest following the lead of Rupert Hamer and his planning minister Alan Hunt, who 40 years ago foresaw a need for regional planning authorities to develop the city's "green wedges" - farmland and open space between the endless suburbia.

They support "town nodes" outside the expanded metropolitan area, with pre-defined population size and incentives for employers to set up on location.

"There's a long tradition in Europe of regional planning around integrated work, transport, housing, [and] retailing, where people can actually live a good life and not travel huge distances to get a job," says Professor Buxton.

Since taking government, Premier Ted Baillieu and Planning Minister Matthew Guy have been quietly drawing up a "metropolitan planning policy" for Melbourne.

The minister has reshaped the development agenda by referring planning applications to a committee charged with speeding up the process, and has limited high-density development on Melbourne's transport corridors.

Mr Guy recently announced the creation of an industry advisory group to make recommendations to re-engineer Victoria's planning system.

But, argue Messrs Buxton it's not enough. "If you're going to have a long-term plan, you've got to have everyone signing up to it and stop trying to make political capital out of it," Professor Buxton states. "You've got to look at what's best for the city and the people. We lost that bi-partisanship in the mid-90s, and since then it's been a bunfight."

The director of MAB Corporation is equally forthright about the industry's failings.

"Developers are driving the style of development that is wrong for this country's future," Mr Buxton says. "It's up to the government to have a serious blueprint for what that should be."

From opposite ends of the development spectrum, they have a similar message - start planning. Or, Professor Buxton warns, "we're going to wake up in 30 years' time and look around and a lot of what makes Melbourne great will have gone".

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/business/property/developer-and-critic-on-common-ground-20110814-1isyn.html>