

Bridging NEB principles and medium density housing in Melbourne

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Abstract 20th century Australia experienced unprecedented migration and urban growth. Much of this occurred in suburban sprawl and single-family dwellings – however alongside this were a number of notable experiments in density – particularly in the inner city. This housing stock includes a range of European and Bauhaus inspired apartment typologies– including a great diversity of urban forms and layouts – often family oriented, and context responsive low rise. Colloquially these became known as ‘six-packs’. Predominant in immigrant areas established by Mediterranean migrants, and reminiscent of southern European volumetrics they typically consist of 4-8 apartments, across 3 stories, brick or concrete construction. A mixture of rental and owner tenures with a strata arrangement and body corporate management. Internal proportions are at times generous – a typology often with 3-bedrooms, and higher ceilings than new developments, often located on generous blocks. The stock is culturally iconic, important in the affordability mix, and in significant decline, at times maligned or in disrepair. Often located in inner city suburbs that have experienced significant growth and development in recent years, amidst rapid financialisation and price inflation. As such ‘six-packs’ have become a key form of affordable dwelling – but are under significant development pressure in the context of land scarcity, and urban development pressures. They are also under significant pressure due to block size in the context of pressures to move to denser cities, and walkable neighbourhoods. Many of these pressures bought into reality by planning and urban development approaches inspired by success across the Mediterranean and Europe – such as in Barcelona’s super blocks – yet fostering forms of density that perhaps do not inspire the kinds of socially oriented layouts, and context responsive volumetrics that the six-pack epitomises, and that reflects its conceptual origins in the European city. There is much to be learned from the quiet successes of the ‘six-pack’. There are significant questions about the social, and environmental implications of replacing them with higher density and potentially poorer quality design and layout. We know little about opportunities to retrofit, preserve, or develop further these iconic and disappearing typologies in Melbourne. We value them little as they fall through the cracks of our heritage controls. This paper outlines the results of an initial exploration (through narrative, literature, policy, and photographic modes of analysis), the lessons that might be drawn from: a) the experiences of redevelopment of older low rise apartments in a series of Mediterranean contexts where the original Bauhaus was influential, as well as b) the extent to which the frameworks of the New European Bauhaus framework might be made relevant to an antipodean policy approach.