

John Keeney and Ola Bednarczuk look at a remarkable committee which drives urban actions and re-shapes thinking about government and private sector cooperation



Commitment to Melbourne



The extent of the Committee for Melbourne's contribution to its hometown may just be that city's best-kept secret. But no urban planner or thinker on cities should be unacquainted with this dynamic organisation – one that thrives on action and interaction to accomplish a stunning array of urban and regional goals.

Twenty-five years ago, in a period of particularly poor relations between the then Labor Government and the private sector, a small band of leading citizens kicked off an initiative that aimed to bolster Melbourne's place as a major world city. Its organisational structure and collaborative approach to solving issues and generating discussion have since inspired similar models in Australia and internationally.

The Committee was founded in 1984 by Pamela Myer Warrender, who appointed the first chairman Hugh Morgan – then Western Mining head – and assembled a number of leaders, including Gary Morgan of polling and research fame, and John Elliott of Elders IXL. Initial inspiration came from the Club of Rome, the City of Boston and a business group active with government in London. George Pappas, head of the Boston Consulting Group's office in Melbourne and current chairman, was active from the early days.

The Committee's first projects were aimed at science and technology development, arts fundraising and gaining more international air flights for Melbourne. In its early stages it may have appeared as just another motivated citizens group, but a vision for operational difference was already taking shape. Warrender recalls the group's two founding principles: "We weren't about just doing things; we wanted to make things happen. Working for any form of self-benefit was totally discouraged – this was about the whole community."

Combining power and popular voice

The Committee's goal was to combine the genuine power of government and the voice of the community into one streamlined vehicle with a single-purpose goal. This founding tradition has continued to

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the present day. The need to involve prominent individuals to whom government would listen was acknowledged from the beginning. Today there is a core staff of eight and 170 members, an eclectic group encompassing large corporates, service industry partnerships and organisations such as the Royal Botanic Gardens and the National Gallery of Victoria.

“Ideas venture capitalists” is how Janine Kirk, former executive director, describes the Committee. “The accent is on both the value of a good idea and the disciplined management of a venture capitalist. The method is that of creating strong cross partnerships, which, if done well, make the ideal team to deal with complex issues.”

Sally Capp, the current executive director, agrees that promoting effective interaction between various members of the community is key. “It’s about connecting within and across sectors and different levels of government and business,” she says. The Committee serves to generate and develop ideas, as well as demonstrate to governments what they should be doing.

This is a cornerstone of the Committee’s modus operandi – initiate, set up a team, be inclusive, and then let it move forward by itself. Its model revolves around taskforces that allow Committee members and external stakeholders to discuss and collaborate. For chairman Pappas, this is one of the most important elements of what makes the Committee work. “It provides a non-political forum where diverse ideas from a range of people and organisations can be put forward, discussed and examined to develop long-term solutions that can be implemented by the participants.”

Far-reaching initiatives

Those who have but a slight acquaintance with the organisation have been known to conclude that it is confined to arts-fundraising and other “niceties”. A list of past major accomplishments puts this view firmly to rest. For example Docklands, the nation’s largest-ever urban renewal program, which saw the reclamation of seven kilometres of public-use waterfront and a virtual alternative city centre, was initiated by the Committee. The project continues to grow. Currently around \$10 billion has been committed by private and government sources, and the master plan calls for continual development through at least 2015.

Another salient example is the creation of the United Nations (UN) Global Compact Cities Programme, now managed by the RMIT University’s Global Cities Institute. This was a first for Australia in that it comprises the only UN international secretariat—or world’s headquarter – for a UN programme. Significantly, it was the tenacity of the Committee which convinced the UN that a city-based worldwide organisation was needed in the first place. Now run by professor Paul James of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University), it advises a home-grown Melbourne methodology for tackling key city issues such as sustainability policy and urban management programs.

Another striking success was the creation of the BioMelbourne Network, founded in 2001 in response to an identified gap in expertise in biotechnology. Now with over 200 members, the BioMelbourne Network functions independently and is one of Australia’s leading biotechnology organisations. It is devoted to serving fully half of Australia’s total biotech industry for purposes of coordination of research, development of new cross-disciplinary activities and global promotion of its members. Participation in the formation of relevant government policy is ongoing.

Two new, formative programs are of special interest to the urbanist. The first addresses a huge complex of questions—how can Melbourne maintain high liveability standards with a population of five million reliably forecast to occur by 2030? At present a new taskforce, based on past work and research, is being formed under the name Shaping Melbourne.

This taskforce, Pappas says, “has attracted participation from 100 or so organisations and individuals responsible for the planning and building of Melbourne’s future built form and infrastructure”.

There are three key characteristics here representative of the Committee’s approach. First, it is an effort to work with and improve a government policy framework already set. The spirit of collaboration is high. Second, it is inclusive in that Committee members are being solicited for their views, and third, the community will also be involved.

A series of workshops devoted to environmental and sustainable practices by companies also commenced in 2009, with the goal of impacting climate change from many vantage points. These workshops offer network opportunities with



organisations such as EcoBuy, which provides practical assistance for green purchasing. Both Toyota Corporation and KPMG have delved into this activity, made practical changes, and produced case studies for wider use among other members. No doubt the workshops and seminars will evolve naturally, perhaps into a stand-alone unit, becoming yet another Committee for Melbourne-born entity that contributes to the city's quality of life.

Among the key purposes of the *Global Smart Cities* series, the sharing of information and process among cities around the world is paramount, and any city leader or concerned citizen would benefit from a closer inspection of the Committee for Melbourne. Alongside

the UN Cities Compact outreach (targeted to embrace as many as 40 cities over time) the Committee's approach has been successfully adopted in several regional cities within Victoria. This is an efficient, proven model with a sterling record of maximising private sector, community and government cooperation.

The Committee for Melbourne was the overall winner of the 2008 Fast Thinking/Open Universities Innovation Award, and also won the Social Innovation Award.

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