



back

Over-development stifling seachange charm: study

THE unique charm of popular beach holiday destinations is being lost to over-development, according to a new study.

Associate Professor Ursula de Jong, a heritage expert with Deakin University's school of architecture and built environment, mapped the impacts of the "sea-change" phenomenon on small Victorian coastal towns in a three-year study.

She said results showed increasing development meant towns were losing what made them so attractive to visitors in the first place.

"This is the dilemma surrounding development: how do you get the balance right, allowing them to age gracefully, and accommodating the pressures of development?" she said.

"How far can a town be changed before it loses its identity completely?"

While the study focused on Sorrento and Queenscliff, on Port Phillip Bay, many of the conclusions could equally be applied to San Remo and Phillip Island, according to Associate Professor de Jong.

She said the study worked with visitors over several summers who complained about the lack of quality shops, the changed atmosphere, and "a sameness with other places", as well as a loss of distinctiveness as "urban apartments change the scale, character and rhythm of the main street".

She said some visitors said they would not return to these sea-change towns, and "it would be such a pity to see them become the victim of their own success".

Like in Cowes and San Remo, Associate Professor de Jong said in Sorrento much had now changed compared to its early history, with cars dominating the streetscape.

"Summer visitors fight for access, traffic and pedestrian congestion is now the norm," she said.

"Pop up shops, fast-fashion, cafes, art galleries and bric-a-

brac overwhelm the few remaining local businesses.

"Large multi-story apartment developments and subdivisions are muscling their way in."

Study findings

The study compared current maps of coastal towns with maps from 50 years ago, examining the amount of new buildings versus open space.

Associate Professor de Jong then examined the number of planning applications for residential and commercial premises and how many went to VCAT.

She followed this with focus groups of inter-generational visitors and residents.

"We asked them how they would describe the neighbourhood character, what they valued, what was threatened, why they chose to visit and how they imagined the place in the future," she said. In addition Associate Professor de Jong interviewed real estate agents, developers, town planners and councillors and then combined all the information under key issues such as neighbourhood characters, values, threats and sense of place to evaluate the effectiveness of town planning schemes.

"It's the kind of methodology that can be applied to any coastal town in Australia," she added.

The study found house sizes in sea change towns had been steadily increasing, while vegetation cover had been declining and planning appeals had risen.

Among the recommendations, Associate Professor de Jong said plot ratios (controls to relate the allowable floor area of a development to the size of the site) could be introduced by councils, used in combination with other controls such as height limits, site coverage and setbacks to prevent inappropriate massing of new developments.

She said there needed to be more clarity in planning process implementation.

Following the release of the study findings, Deakin Univer-

sity has released a booklet advising residents and shires on the ways planning processes can best serve the community.

"One of our conclusions was that there are inconsistencies in planning processes; it's not doing what people expect it to do," she said.

"So one of our recommendations is that there should be a clear vision for your community and shire, to work together and ensure the planning scheme works with that vision."

Early vision

Like Sorrento, Phillip Island and San Remo were established by early settlers who had a vision for the area as a holiday resort.

June Cutter's historical book, "Guesthouses on Phillip Island", written 30 years ago, detailed the heyday of the guesthouse era on the island – between the end of World War I and the 1960s.

There were 35 homes featured in the 170-page guide, but the large majority have been pulled down to make way for new buildings.

"As each decade passes, the beautiful little island – so beloved of so many – is gradually losing its individuality as modern development and 20th century essential needs take precedence over the quaint, homely charm and character that was Phillip Island," wrote June three decades ago.

Those homes that have vanished to history include Summerland House, Newhaven's Redcliffe House, the Isle of Wight and Broadwater.

Among the only ones still standing is Narabeen on Beach Street in Cowes and Newhaven House.

Joshua Gliddon in his book "Phillip Island: In Picture and Story", wrote that when he was Governor Victoria, the Earl of Stradbroke made the island his seaside home.

"He said: "In all my travels I have seen no beaches to compare with those of Phillip Island."