Melbourne: Visions of a Sustainable City

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With more than 54% of the world population now living in cities, and with that number expected to grow to 66% by 2050, re-evaluating our approach to urban development is vital if we are to realize any of the principal goals set out by the SDSN. To achieve this, one must first ask themselves, what makes a sustainable city? First and foremost, it should be able to move, feed, house and foster positive relationships between its inhabitants in a way that is inclusive and sustainable in nature. Infrastructure planning and implementation strikes at the heart of this issue, and presents an area where great strides can be made, particularly in the city of Melbourne.

Before addressing Melbourne's historically dominant transportation and infrastructure ideology, it may be useful to first reflect on where these ideas originated. In many ways Detroit is the template for modern day suburbia and infrastructure policy. This was a city that boomed off the back of automotive industry in the mid 20th century, up the point where its urban development began to be defined and influenced by the automotive industry. The urban decay that followed, may have visually manifest itself in houses and suburbs falling to rubble, but its roots lay in its failure to provide successful models of transport, housing development, and civil cohesion. This highlights the fact that in developing a city to cater only for car travel is to invite trouble. Such a move generates a disconnection between city inhabitants, invariably encourages inequality, and invites for urban development that neglects any notion of sustainable responsibility.

In many ways, Melbourne's growth over the past half century has been influenced by cities such as Detroit. In this sense, Melbourne has become a city of extremely low urban density and low public transport. Because of our forced reliance on cars, the problems associated with them, such as congestion and pollution, are significant. However, to limit such a reading to pollution and congestion would be to neglect the social pitfalls that have resulted from the growth of an otherwise affluent city. In fact, 70% of Melbournians have access to only 20% of public transport, while the 30% that live in the inner city have access to 80%. It should come as no surprise that the areas with the highest need for public transport are found on the fringe of Melbourne - victims of a growth pattern that serves those with the deepest pockets and marginalises those at greatest risk of mortgage, petrol and inflation changes.

In the search for truly inclusive economic growth, the problems are to be found folded into the very fabric of our urban development. In order to meet the SDSN's target for sustainable infrastructure, we must use this analysis as an opportunity to pivot towards new agendas - implementing infrastructure projects that serve society at large and promoting urban growth patterns that aims to make the most of available resources.