'Everyone knows what a first-class town should comprise'
Grahame Shaw's ideal new town, new community milieux

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Abstract

Australian architect-planner Grahame Shaw (1928-1985) is perhaps best remembered in Melbourne as an author of the notorious 'Shaw-Davey' report (1960), which consigned 410 hectares (1000 acres) of inner-city housing for demolition purely on the basis of an apparently slapdash 'windscreen survey'. This paper examines Shaw's involvement in two important early 1960s projects for the HCV: the rollout of the new industrial town of Churchill, 160km east of Melbourne, and the creation of the new high-rise Hotham Estate, 3km from Melbourne's centre. In both projects Shaw was interested in creating social spaces for new communities and eager to synthesise a global best-practice environment for community building. He brought a strong interest in high-rise housing (using London models such as Radiation House in Neasden and the proposals for a new town at Hook) to his HCV work. This paper is therefore an examination of international influence on Australian urban design in the early 1960s; it is also a study of Shaw's particular approach. Additionally, it looks at the 2020s legacy of the Churchill and North Melbourne examples in their seventh decade.

Keywords
new towns, public housing, community planning, diffusion, high-rise housing

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a snapshot of the activities and observations undertaken by Grahame Shaw during his tenure at the Housing Commission of Victoria (hereafter referred to as HCV), Australia between 1960-66. It is not intended as biographical, though it acknowledges that Shaw is an underresearched figure within his historical period of activity, probably largely by dint of his early death (at the age of 57) and his lack of high-profile publications.

Instead, it aims to explore the role and values of this educated, experienced, young architect-planner in a responsible position in a well-resourced if controversial institution, and the tension between the politicised nature of his work and the stake he appeared to place in both received knowledge and modernist best-practice principles. It would be false to say that Shaw could have operated anywhere in the world; he is not a cipher.

However, it could be argued that, in the early 60s, he was an example of a type: the youthful and idealistic expert, battling against the inertia of the monolith within which he was only one player, albeit a key player. His perspectives and his approach thus give insight into the era(s) in which he worked.

Grahame Shaw was born in 1928 and registered as an architect in 1951, at the young age of 23. He worked and travelled in Europe in the 1950s, one of a cohort of Melbourne architects employed by the firm Riches and Blythin in London; the well-known Kemp House (1961), an 18-story mixed-use tower block in Westminster,[1] was possibly designed during his time with the firm and can be seen as key to later Melbourne work. By the end of the 1950s Shaw was firmly ensconced in the HCV, a powerful body charged not only with remedying the severe housing shortage engendered by the Great Depression and the Second World War but also with various tasks commensurate with urban renewal and, in the early 1960s, decentralisation.

This paper is an exploration of Shaw's time at the HCV – during which he obtained a Diploma in Town Planning – and the ideas he brought and promoted within the organisation, specifically relating to two sites. These were the 'Hotham Estate' (also known as 'Boundary Street') high-rise development on the north-west edge of the City of Melbourne local government area, and the new town of Hazelwood, projected population 40 000, on a greenfield site in what was known to some as Victoria's (perhaps Australia's) 'Ruhr valley'. In exploring Shaw's attitude to best-practice planning, we also discuss his approaches to one of the most controversial elements of the HCV's operations during his time there, the practice of urban reclamation and slum renewal.

THE SHAW-DAVEY WINDSCREEN SURVEY

For ten years between 2014 and 2024, a bar with an obscure name served as a popular drawcard in Carlton, three blocks from the University of Melbourne in inner Melbourne. The

Shaw-Davey Slum was a rebranded Irish pub on a major street corner, seeking to represent 'all that was good about Australia in the 1960s,' combining 'seashells and Swarovski crystals with a gold leaf floor to create an enviable and unique space. With a 1960s milk bar-inspired cocktail list and a full service dining room focusing on Australian herbs and ingredients,'[2] the venue was popular with students, white collar workers and families.

Its curious name, however, must surely have raised the eyebrows of almost every new visitor – even the rare few who understood the reference. The 'Shaw-Davey Windscreen Survey' has come to be the title given the report derived from forays undertaken by James Henry 'Harry' Davey, a former Chairman of the HCV, and Shaw as its Research (later Chief) Architect to quickly identify irredeemable inner city slums. The report highlighted 975 acres in eight inner suburbs of Melbourne in urgent need of attention to be replaced, with further areas surrounding these eight warranting intervention. The total cost of acquiring and clearing the entire area, estimated at £50,000 per acre, would amount to approximately £50,000,000.[3] These were not just in Carlton but in many quarters of what was then Australia's second-largest city but also its most ostentatiously 'Victorian' and stolidly conservative. This survey was dimly remembered, if at all, by the early 21st century. That the bar remained open under that title for almost a decade indicates that on some level, however, the concept has maintained a resonance in a suburb that formed one of many loci for showdowns between residents and would-be slum clearers. For those in the know, the name was a suitably wry nod to the gentrification Shaw and Davey could not have predicted in the heyday of the HCV 65 years ago.

The two men derived their survey from drives taken on streets of inner city areas they had already decided were of low value and ripe for renewal. They ranked them on the basis of superficial assessments of frontages. Shaw would later argue that these were merely preliminary categorisations for the purpose of more detailed evaluation, but as one critic reported in 1969, 'There is no evidence this was properly done.'[4]

It seems likely that Shaw quickly came to regret his involvement in the Shaw-Davey foray, perhaps feeling that he had been played and his reputation besmirched by what he had been led to believe would be merely the first step in a much longer process. He left the HCV in 1966, entered private practice and was, perhaps, hoping for a renewed relevance as an architect-planner when he participated in a seminar in Canberra. Here, he placed the Shaw-Davey experience in the context of prior attempts to plan or replan Melbourne going back as far as 1913. He described the 'windscreen survey' thus:

> *Classification was made from the external appearance of the house and its fences and was assessed by streets or portions of streets rather than by individual houses. The street pattern, lack of open space and general appearance of the area were also taken into account… it was often difficult to decide into which classification a particular street or part of a street should be put… it enabled a quick picture of the standard of housing over a wide area to be obtained.*[5]

The Shaw-Davey report was published appended to another, by housing minister Horace Petty, entitled *Report on Slum Reclamation and Urban Redevelopment of Melbourne Inner Suburban Areas*. It marked the beginning of the HCV's most powerful phase, during which time it (and

the conservative state government) justified its existence with reference to the pervasive slum 'menace'. Under the new renewal schemes, small landlords were paid market prices (as adjudged by the HCV) for properties, many of which were then sold on to large-scale development companies. At the same time, the HCV developed much of the land appropriated – as well as some greenfield sites previously in local or state government hands – to develop public housing. The activities of the HCV at this time, as evidenced in its work in the inner Melbourne suburb of North Melbourne, form the next section of this paper.

SHAW, THE HCV AND PUBLIC HOUSING IN NORTH MELBOURNE

Before the launch of the Shaw-Davey report, early endeavours had been progressively made by the HCV to clear and redevelop 'decadent' areas in North Melbourne identified by the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board in 1937. Molesworth Street Reclamation Area was an early postwar project containing twelve three-storey flat blocks with one hundred apartments, completed in 1955; the HCV's patented concrete wall prefabrication processes were put to use here, adapted from detached home construction to apartments for the first time.[6] Another project, known as Hotham Gardens, involved sale of 2.5 acres in O'Shanassy Street for private development, where 108 own-your-own flats were erected by private enterprise in 1958, heralding a milestone of reclamation as it signified the first instance of market involvement in subsidised urban redevelopment in Australia.[7]

The Shaw-Davey report identified 59.3 acres in North Melbourne as suitable for redevelopment. In a research essay for the University of Melbourne, written a decade later Nancye Hawkins noted that blocks had been chosen for redevelopment in North Melbourne 'based on "general obsolescence areas."'[8] Writing in the immediate aftermath of the demolitions taking place in North Melbourne, she implied that the decision to redevelop the area after compulsory purchase was based less on assessment of areas as degraded and more on its commercial value via proximity to the city centre. [9]

In the early 1960s, the HCV emphasised the need for high-density development in inner areas due to the costly acquisition of slum areas near the city centre and the need to address the housing need of an increasing population. There were growing cooperative efforts with private developers, which gave momentum to the progress of slum reclamation. The HCV aimed for balanced redevelopment, with equal parts public and private

housing to avoid overconcentration. The private redevelopment was regarded as an effective measure to tackle the slum reclamation activities. In the planning of public housing, walk-up flats were designated for families with young children, while elevator flats were considered for families with older children.[10] High-rise blocks were elevated with provision of car parks and rooftop laundries (the brainchild of Best Overend,[11] of whom more below) to maximise open space.

The HCV file on 'Multi-Storey Flats' gives extensive insight into the models used by the HCV's leading lights. Shaw, now firmly ensconced as Senior Architect, and his colleagues used reportage of international (primarily, British) projects and their own experience of local examples. Just as they travelled to Elizabeth, South Australia (see below) to comprehend the potential outcomes in Churchill, they examined high-rise housing from Sydney to contemplate their own moves in that direction. A 1962 report by Shaw in the file might well be a long essay produced during his studies for a degree in Town and Regional Planning; though ostensibly reporting on tower blocks in The Gorbals, Glasgow it also discusses work by Le Corbusier, as well as 1950s forays by the LCC such as St. Peters Hill and the Tidey St Estate; it additionally, atypically for such reports, has a list of references at the end. Another document - a four-page treatise on the advisability of high-rise housing in the inner city – is unsigned, but corrected in Shaw's distinctive hand. The author suggests that 'the continued exodus of population from the inner fringe area will only result in the American example of dying hearts to cities.'[12]

Development of high-rise housing thus proceeded apace. The Hotham Estate was not the first, but it was a very important illustration of the HCV's intent. The earliest elevator block was constructed in Boundary Road by the HCV in 1961, featuring a 20-storey tower comprising 160 two-bedroom flats with the provision of basic services, marking the commencement of true high-rise public housing in North Melbourne. The plan also included an additional nine-acre reclamation area adjacent to the building consisting of eight four-storey blocks, two three-storey blocks with a total provision of 214 flats and a shopping centre of eleven shops having six flats above them. With the advent of HCV's high-rise flat development, many residents in these high-density estates experiencing a new way of urban life. The high concentration of population had led the HCV to devote considerable efforts to providing the necessary social and recreational services to its tenants. These included open green space, shops, community rooms, kindergarten and baby health centres. In tandem with construction of multi-storey blocks, the HCV continued land acquisition in nearby Lothian Street.

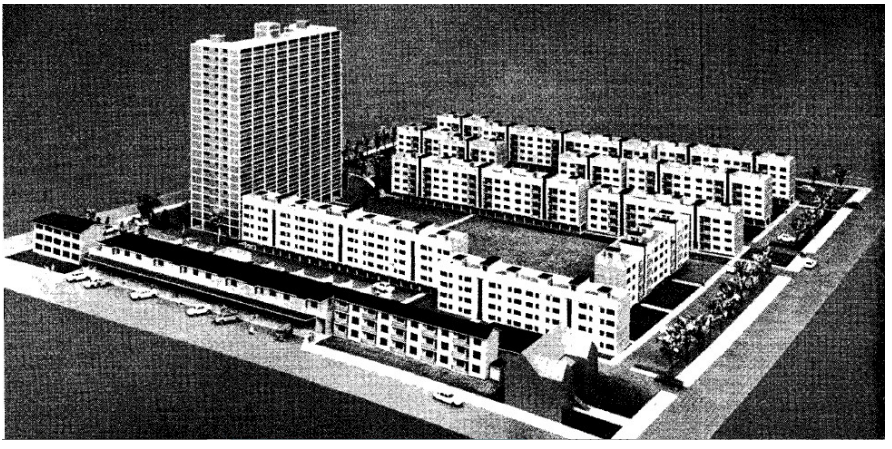

Fig. 1. Model of flat blocks located on the Boundary Road, North Melbourne Reclamation Area

In late 1964, in a letter seeking a copy of a recent Transportation Study from a Sydney agency, Shaw opined that whereas once the HCV had concentrated on 'the building of villas in outer suburban fringe areas', its activities were more recently 'indicating our return to the subject for which we are constituted, i.e. slum reclamation.'[13] But in truth the organisation was leaning in a different direction. Given the rapid pace of redevelopment, the HCV advocated for an expansion of its charter and a renaming to the Housing and Urban Development Commission in the mid-1960s, reflecting its actual role in urban renewal over the preceding three decades.[14]

Fig. 2 & 3. Shops at Melrose St, North Melbourne, with one of the HCV's large residential blocks at the rear, in 1959 and 2024

Despite being envisaged by the HCV as an economic solution to regenerate inner suburbs, the public housing high-rise provoked strong opposition from the general public and local pressure groups. High-density living was criticised as un-Australian, in contrast to the traditional suburban lifestyle, and deemed unhealthy for family life and children's growth. Stevenson et al. conducted a survey in 1964 to investigate the housing circumstances of low-income families residing in the Hotham Estate, revealing that the prevailing concern among tenants was regarding flat life as problematic for raising children, as well as discontent with high-density living due to a sense of separation from the community and a desire for a suburban way of life.[15] Described by an activist as 'fucking monster blocks,' the emergence of high-rise housing towers incurred intense public backlash, galvanising local residents into a series resident action movements.[16] For instance, between 1968 and 1971, the North Melbourne Association initiated the 'Happy Valley Campaign,' a prolonged battle concerning HCV's reclaimed Lothian Street slum area – most specifically, its shopping strip. The campaign involved petitions, drafting planning proposals to the authorities, a 'peg-out' demonstration, and collaboration with other local associations.[17] The HCV had already created another shopping area nearby – at the Hotham Estate – in a two- storey building with shops at street level and a row of flats above. Visually, with the high-rise tower behind it, the arrangement was not dissimilar to Kemp House (Figures 2 and 3).

Facing widespread opposition, the state government decided to phase out high-rise public housing as a model in urban redevelopment in Melbourne; the major period of high-rise construction did not last long after the end of the 1960s. Yet that decade also allowed the HCV to extend its operations into entirely different domains which did not involve slum clearance or renewal, but the creation of greenfield towns. In the late 1940s, a plan had briefly been in play to demolish the Latrobe Valley town of Morwell to mine the coal beneath its surface and to create a 'New Morwell' nearby. Local protest stopped this from happening, but the HCV was invited to undertake large-scale development in the area. The town of Moe, close to a major coal mine, was expanded with the addition of the large suburb of Newborough under the HCV's aegis. More importantly, the HCV was invited to apply its expertise to an entirely new town, Hazelwood.

SHAW AND CHURCHILL

Shaw obtained his Bachelor in Town and Regional Planning in 1963 (the first graduate from a new degree)[18] and his position as design and research architect at the HCV no doubt provided solid experience for his studies. This was particularly true of his time working on what was for most of its development stage known as Hazelwood (Figure 4) and later renamed Churchill in honour, of course, of Sir Winston Churchill who died close to the time of its dedication. Though the plan for Hazelwood/Churchill's town centre is typically ascribed to veteran architect Best Overend, plans from 1963 credit 'Chief Architect, Housing Commission and Best Overend' (Figure 4).[19]

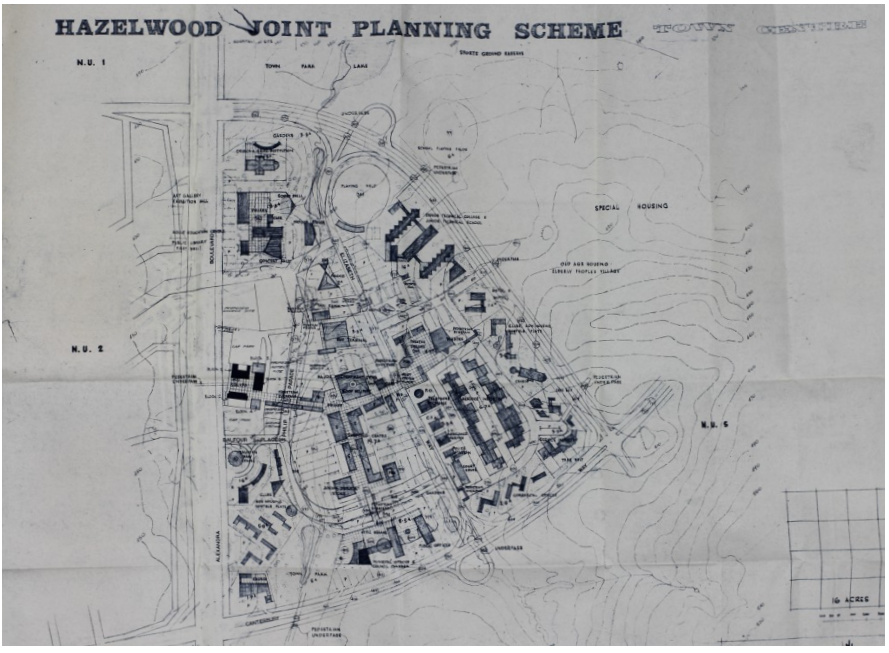

Fig. 4. Hazelwood Town Centre, 1963. The plan included elements such as high-density housing and high-rise accommodation for the elderly, as well as an extensive range of facilities designed to cater for all generations.

The need for Churchill was obviated by the construction of the Hazelwood Power Station in the Latrobe Valley, 160 km from Melbourne. The State Electricity Commission teamed with the HCV to establish what was initially conceived to be a town of 40 000 people. Chief Technical Officer for the HCV Ray Burkitt wrote in a May, 1962 memo of the project that:

> *The Commission has a unique opportunity to plan and build an ideal town at Hazelwood and, consistent with reasonable economy the motto for all concerned should be "nothing but the best." One thing is certain – Hazelwood will make the Commission's reputation – or break it.*[20]

Shaw's response echoed Burkitt's concern: 'The importance of this project to the prestige of the Commission can not be overemphasised.' He was also alive to the 'opportunity to make a worthwhile progressive contribution to Town Building'[21] that was presented.

As an architect and a planner, however, Shaw was also interested in the possibilities Hazelwood offered to subvert tradition. He suggested that two options were available in this new town: that the HCV could continue to build its typical detached suburban forms, at its previous rate or that it could undertake 'A complete re- assessment of previous H.C.V. town building.... Taking greater consideration of such factors as pedestrian and vehicle segregation, restriction of walking distances, variety of density, type of housing and accommodation.' While he may have had Kemp House in mind (and in addition he, or someone, also included a photocopy of

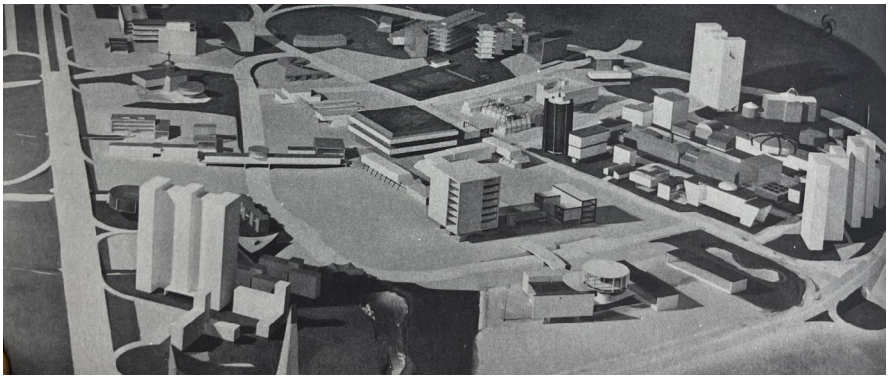

Fig. 5. Model of Hazelwood as depicted in a pamphlet entitled Preliminary Notes to accompany scale model of Hazelwood: A New Town for the Latrobe Valley.

an article on the new London high-rise building Radiation House in the HCV's Hazelwood files) he wrote that for examples of these he looked to 'the two latest British New Towns – Cumbernauld and Hook – which have been based on the experience gained over the past 15 years…' Hook was, of course, not destined to become a British New Town; its plan, conceived by Shankland and Cox under the aegis of the LCC between 1960-63 with a final population figure of 100 000 was not developed. Shaw had, however, requested a copy of the official publication on the proposal and photocopied an article from the February 1962 issue of the *RIBA Journa*l, with an extensive description of the concept and its execution, for distribution. He wrote that 'the care and detail with which the Hook plan has been prepared and the basic survey work necessary to verify intelligent guess work is immediately apparent from these papers.'[22]

While Shaw evinces an equivocal attitude in the extant documentation it seems likely – particularly through his promotion of the Hook example – that he favoured the high-density option for Hazelwood. The town's design, by 1966 when Shaw left the HCV, was a compromise. The 'town centre' owed much to British New Towns; Hazelwood included 'Special Old Age Housing' close to the centre 'within a short stroll of the Town Centre and main shops' alongside 'high density housing'(Figure 5).[23] By the end of the 1960s the development of Churchill had been curtailed, due to modifications in the energy market; one feature introduced in the 1960s as a value- add, a university campus, has become the town's biggest employer.

CONCLUSION

On leaving the HCV Shaw entered into partnership with James Earle as Earle Shaw and Partners. The firm's best-known work, the Cross Street Co-Operative Housing Development in Carlton, reflects in many respects Shaw's interest in 'places' like Hook, and his ambitions for high-rise public housing.[24]

Shaw's subsequent partnership, Grahame Shaw, Denton and Corker can be seen as the forerunner to the internationally known architecture firm of Denton, Corker, Marshall, however Shaw had moved on to Grahame Shaw and Partners.[25] This company produced Shaw's final foray into planning, an idealistic proposal known as 'Island City', a series of artificial islands in Melbourne's Port Philip Bay connected by freeway bridges, which acknowledged a conceptual debt to Craig, Zeidler and Strong's Harbor City proposal for Toronto.[26] This project did not eventuate. Shaw died young, in his early fifties, on 10 September 1985. He was not afforded the time that many of his contemporaries used to assess their own legacies.

As evidenced above, Shaw's ambitions as an architect and as a facilitator of public housing during his time at the HCV were in large part aimed at introducing density without compromising community in the projects he oversaw. While from a 2024 perspective it is hard to imagine his daily work did not require an exceptional amount of politicking both amongst his colleagues and the government they were responsible to, and to the wider community, this does not come out in Shaw's extensive notes, letters and marginalia remaining in the HCV archives. Instead it is his commitment to the application of modern methods to urban problems which emerge most prominently, and the influence he brought to bear on HCV practice in that time.

CODA: INNER CITY PUBLIC HOUSING IN MELBOURNE IN 2024

In its 70th year, the public housing constructed by the HCV has served as the foundation of a public housing system, providing shelters for (primarily) low-income households. Witnessing the ageing state of public housing nearing the end of its operational life, the Victorian government has launched a series of revitalisation initiatives

aimed at redeveloping aging public housing estates. The Public Housing Renewal Programme, initiated in 2018 with nine estates earmarked for renewal, seeks to transform aging public housing estates into vibrant and mixed- tenure neighbourhoods. A site bounded by Molesworth, Abbotsford and Haines Streets, featuring two-to-three storey walk-up housing, is identified as one of the sites for renewal due to rundown conditions and high maintenance costs. However, through a public-private partnership approach, the site is undergoing a transformation into a blend of social and private housing, with social housing accounting for only 43% of the total, signalling a declining role of the state in public housing provision.[27]

The Victorian government's decision to demolish and rebuild all 44 high-rise public housing towers marked another bold move, making it the largest urban renewal project in Australia. Since its announcement in September 2023, the plan has sparked fervent public debate concerning the future of public housing development. Critics of the proposed rebuild have decried its lack of transparency, alleging violations of tenants' human rights through displacement, and prioritisation of private sector involvement over the preservation of public housing. Despite the recent dismissal of tenants' class action, the demolition of Melbourne's public housing towers remains contentious and controversial. It is anticipated that the heated public debate will continue to persist over whether to redevelop or preserve the public housing towers.

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Figure 3 Photograph D. Nichols.
Figure 4 Hazelwood file, VPRS 1808/P0000, H14 Public Records Office of Victoria.
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