

Meet the man with a plan

When it comes to the future of Melbourne, Karl Fender has plenty of eureka moments



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There's some big questions on the minds of those in control of Melbourne's future. The "metron city" that sprang from an illegal settlement of sheep farmers in 1833 is having something of an identity crisis as it comes of age. Yes she's still marvellous, more than ever, but questions are being asked and in one way or another they are all variations on "Where do from here?" After 175 years and a rate of progress that seems constantly stuck on fast forward, Melbourne is taking some valuable time to reflect on where it is going. Conversations about sustainability, population growth, aging infrastructure and a property market low on affordability are heard in packed and tardy train carriages, back-silly cabs and on talkback radio all over town.

Is it too late to stop Melbourne from becoming a victim of its own success? And what might future Melbourne look like? Karl Fender of Fender Katsalidis Architects, the firm whose vision for Melbourne reached higher than any other in the form of a gold topped tower by the Yarra, has a thing or two to say on the subject.

"It's very much on the minds of architects, urban designers and planners," he says about the future of urban planning. "We will definitely see some major restructuring of our cities... I think there is a tremendous amount of discussion, both within the community and politically, about how to deal with it and a number of initiatives that need to be further investigated and put into practice."

"It's more than just Melbourne at \$5 billion, I think we've got to be looking into the far future and say 'well what about future communities in a hundred years, how are they going to cope? What about renewable resources? What happens when we don't have any resources?'"

But it's hard enough to imagine Melbourne in 20 years from now, let alone a hundred, a fact Fender concedes.

"Well, would you have imagined Docklands 20 years ago? Not really - 20 years ago, this city stopped at 5.8kppm. It was a business centre, not a community centre. Twenty years ago, the Docklands were obsolete, they were post-industrial Footscray. This city has come so far in 20 years."

But an architect's job is not to look to the past. Fender has his feet firmly set in the future and a few weeks ago he saw Fender Katsalidis' latest solution to Melbourne's housing shortage take form at a speed that defies the established logistics of construction.

United Building is the brainchild of Fender's



The United Building being put together in Albert Park, VIC

design partner Nicola Katsalidis, who teamed up with Hickey Developments to market the concept into the United Building brand. It is a unique method of construction that could lead to the industry changing forever. The concept is simple, walls, and takes the modular design of high-rise apartment buildings to its next logical step. Instead of a block of apartments slowly taking shape over months, even years, United Building claims to reduce construction speed by up to 50 per cent. It does this by completing most of the construction far from the site in a

factory in the industrial suburb of Brooklyn. The apartments are built at the factory at the same time as the foundation work is being completed onsite. Once completed, the apartments are transported fully constructed to the site by truck, where they are craned and dropped into place like an oversized Lego brick. Using this method, 64 apartments can be installed (as opposed to built onsite) in just 10 days.

The first United Building project is called Little Hero (a nod to the Fender Katsalidis designed Hero building in Russell Street) and the

final apartments were lifted into place last week. "It's amazing to watch," he says.

Fender says the potential for United Building's construction method is widespread. "There's a lot of interest in the industry, both from developers and other architects, to analyse this construction system and it's really more about how much the factory can produce. There's a number of projects awaiting this approach. Being steel and bolted, it's highly sustainable. It's a third of the weight of doing it in concrete and there is less embodied energy, less travel time, less construction time and very high levels of thermal insulation and acoustic separation between apartments."

The sustainability factor harks back to Fender's point about dwindling resources. Little Hero could be the first "recyclable" building. "You can take it [apart] in pieces and reuse the steel for other things. In 500 years, when the cars have become the mines of the future, well, you can actually do that." Let it never be said Fender is not a forward-thinker.

When it comes to how Melbourneans should be living in the future, Fender, despite being a public proponent of high-rise living, says a holistic approach should be taken that accepts that everybody's needs and wants are different, and that what may suit a suburban family will not so well work out in the inner-city.

"Toss your Little Heros in the city to multi-centred concepts, to the Bob Adams. There's density on our transport corridors - I think it's got to happen in a whole number of different ways. You don't have to go building Eyreton all over town, but what you do have to do is keep your mind open to new housing typologies that use less land, and in doing so give greater community facilities. Whether it's at the CBD or out in the urban growth zones, because the idea of building houses clock-by-clock and going on and on forever is just not sustainable."

To Fender, the outer-suburban lifestyle is "anonymous" and a competition for size, space and anxiety where "sweet the neighbour shall meet". He believes this creates stress.

"But, if you could more efficiently utilise the land, so that people have adequate and terrific facilities in their homes, when done, then you create the potential for community infrastructure, which then brightens the sense of community and sustainability."

But he admits it's no easy task designing architecture that pleases everybody. It's possibly one of the most subjective crafts there is and has the potential to bitterly divide many (see Docklands and Federation Square).

Fender says the key is to not try to please all, but adopt a more holistic approach that balances the needs of a city pushed to its limits with the lifestyle aspirations of its population. No easy task, but now that Fender has taken his seat as president of Australian Institute of Architects, it is one he will no doubt have to get used to. **B**