



A response to the

# **Better Apartments**

*A Discussion Paper, May 2015*

Submission prepared by

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*Australian Institute of Landscape Architects*

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# 1. Introduction

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) is the peak body for the landscape architecture profession in Australia. Representing over 2000 members, we champion a landscape of livability and quality design for our streetscapes, public open spaces, stronger communities and greater environmental stewardship. Our members include both Landscape Architects and Urban Designers, who are experienced designers of apartment developments from small to large scale, as well as being owners, tenants, neighbours and visitors. We have therefore considered all issues in the Discussion Paper.

AILA believes there has been a long-term systemic failure in the planning system in ensuring the delivery of quality of apartments in Melbourne and elsewhere in Victoria. We note Sydney's statement as part of their review and relaunch of SEPP65 that they aim to have the best apartments in the world. Due to the scale of apartment development in Victoria and Melbourne in particular, we believe this issue is a matter of common concern and city competitiveness.

AILA supports a higher density city, but one that is cleverly planned, sustainable in the long term and continues to match increases in population densities with the infrastructure that is needed to support people to live full lives. As design practitioners focused on the 'long view', we are concerned with ensuring our city retains its image and its well-recognised standards of livability. With this in mind, we believe that our transition toward a medium to high density future needs to be fully supported by sustained and deliberate investment in the green infrastructure of our city at every scale – the large parks and natural landscapes, public streets and urban spaces, the communal rooftop and the private balcony. The City of Melbourne's Urban Forest Strategy clearly states the case about why we need to proactively respond to climate change, population growth and urban heating, through inclusion of significant green infrastructure.

As a general note in addition to our detailed comments below, AILA strongly believes that the new apartment guidelines should stipulate the requirement for the engagement of a registered architect and registered landscape architect for the full design and documentation of all apartment developments.

We acknowledge and thank the State Government for formally investigating the issue of 'Better Apartments' and for providing this exciting opportunity to provide comment. The introduction of new apartment standards is essential for a growing city with a community that is increasingly embracing higher density living. The new standards are an essential tool in ensure Melbourne retains its reputation as being one of the worlds most livable cities.



*Artistic Representation of Melbourne's Future Urban Forest  
(Anton Malishev)*



*Park-playground interface to apartments, Melbourne. Landscape Architecture by GBLA (photo credit GBLA)*

## 2. Response to Discussion Paper Questions

AILA provides the following response to the **Better Apartments - A Discussion Paper** (Department of Environment, Land, Water & planning, May 2015). We have responded to some of the introductory passages and to each question posed within the 14 issues.

### 2.1 Chapter 2 - Purpose, Sub-heading 'Scope' (Page 7)

*“This discussion paper focuses on how we can ensure the spaces within an apartment matches peoples’ needs and expectations during different phases of their lives”*

AILA agrees with the principle that people have different expectations and needs throughout their lives, and these need to be matched with external factors as well as the spaces within an apartment.

These include an apartment building’s private open space, the way in which it engages with its immediate neighbourhood and city character, sense of place & identity, and local amenity (such as open space).

*“Consider other issues that affect amenity for those living in apartment buildings.”*

AILA specifically draws attention to the issue of provision of access to private, semi-private and public open space that:

- provides respite from the more enclosed sedentary style of living within apartments
- provides opportunities for increased social connectivity
- provides outlook from an apartment’s livable rooms so that residents may form a connection to their ‘place’ in the neighbourhood/wider city and with natural processes (ie. time of day, season, weather), which has measurable benefits to health and wellbeing
- provides adequate internal and external space for service functions such as storage, clothes drying, waste collection

*“Contextual factors also impact on the amenity of apartment residents, such as ‘what is next door to the apartment building?’ and ‘how does this development impact on the public realm?’ These are important considerations that often have implications for the internal amenity of apartments but they are not the primary focus of this discussion paper.”*

AILA strongly disagrees with excluding contextual factors from the primary focus of this discussion paper. The way in which a building engages with the public realm is critical to amenity and should form a primary part of the current focus. Furthermore, there is growing community concern regarding the impacts on the public realm caused by apartment development. AILA recommends the development of guidelines and funding mechanisms to ensure the creation of great neighbourhoods within areas undergoing urban renewal.



*Green wall at Triptych Apartments, Melbourne by Patio Landscape Architecture & Design with Fytogreen (photo credit: Fytogreen)*

## **2.2 Chapter 2 - Purpose, Sub-heading 'Implementation: getting the tools right' (Page 7-8)**

- ***What is the most appropriate implementation tool(s) for the Victorian context?***
- ***What are the strengths and limitations of the various approaches?***

AILA encourages innovative design solutions that provide appropriate outcomes for the range of people who live in apartments at various phases of their lives. We believe a combination of regulatory-based and performance-based mechanisms is required for the delivery of quality apartment design, supported by the opportunity for peer review. We do not believe a market-based approach is strong enough on its own to deliver excellent design outcomes, especially in times of constrained supply.

Regulated minimum standards provide certainty, but should be able to be challenged through design review (eg. by the OVGAs Design Review Panel or local government design review panels), to enable creative solutions to constrained sites and adaptive re-use. The OVGAs and local government design review panels have proven to be effective processes to ensure design quality. Such processes are being embraced overseas and around Australia and AILA would support stronger integration of these panels within the Victorian planning system. Design review should be multi-disciplinary in its approach to ensure well-considered outcomes are achieved.

Performance-based guidelines are often open to subjective interpretation and mundane design outcomes. Any performance-based standard must be rigorously defensible and must be measurable to avoid erosion over time by differing legal interpretation at VCAT.

AILA supports incentives for good design to avoid stagnation in innovation, which may include tangible building modifications and intangible benefits such as

expediting the approval process.

We also believe that building consumer awareness of what they are buying is essential; it is another way to assist the market to deliver what consumers want.

## **2.3 Chapter 3 - Apartments and growth, Sub-heading 'Inner and middle ring suburbs - apartment demand (Page 11)**

***“Increasingly, apartments are being built in the city’s middle ring suburbs. This includes areas where before 2010 there were very few apartments such as Preston (where there are now around 1,000 apartments), Doncaster (970 apartments), Coburg (650 apartments) and Box Hill (630 apartments). Industry sources suggest the number of apartments marketed and built in Melbourne’s middle ring is set to grow substantially.”***

AILA supports the increased diversity and choice apartment living provides to our city. However, to protect our renowned livability, healthy environment and strong infrastructure base, particular attention is required for apartment design and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

This will require the involvement of professionals who have an excellent understanding of the whole and integrated processes involved in city building, including:

- Amenity is seen by the community as having been eroded by recent developments the middle ring suburbs: Height, scale, over-shadowing, transport congestion, and access to existing open space assets.
- Interface issues between new apartment developments and existing detached residential precincts will require particular attention to protect existing amenity and values.

## 2.4 Issue 1: Daylight

- *What spaces within apartments are the most important in terms of access to daylight?*
- *Do you think daylight should be required in secondary spaces such as corridors and bathrooms?*

AILA believes access to daylight is an important consideration for apartment design and all principle rooms (living, dining, kitchen, bedrooms). All habitable rooms should be designed to ensure they are directly impacted by daylight. AILA believes that daylight (and natural ventilation) should be required in secondary spaces such as studies and bathrooms.

We believe it is essential for common corridors to have access to natural light, to allow people to orient inside the building. Common foyers and corridors are an important part of the experience of coming home and should be carefully designed. In addition to the benefits stated in the Paper, daylight provides a sense of where we are in our 'place': the time of day, seasons, weather. This subconscious aspect of our lives is considered to play a big part in our sense of belonging, comfort, health, and well-being.

Daylight is considered by AILA to be tied in with Issue 4: Outlook. There is a large body of transferable evidence from the health and education sectors regarding the importance and impact of natural light and outlook to green space on mental health and physical well-being. For example, studies of hospitals which have positioned patient rooms with access to natural light and outlook to a green space show evidence of people getting better faster.

## 2.5 Issue 2: Sunlight

- *Should there be rules to ensure a majority of apartments receive sunlight?*
- *Are there other options that can provide for thermal comfort?*

AILA believes that there should be guidelines to ensure a majority of apartments receive adequate sunlight for health and psychological wellbeing. AILA acknowledges that south-facing apartments can be desirable – eg. to take advantage of a view, or to create a continuous street wall – and that guidelines should be developed to suggest options for alternate access to sunlight (eg. light wells, recesses in the façade, projecting bay windows, high ceilings).

AILA believes all apartments should have the ability to control their access to sunlight.

Sunlight should be treated as a valuable natural resource and should be harnessed where possible to provide passive heating during colder months.



*Freshwater Place, Southbank -  
Landscape Architecture by  
Lawrence Blyton Landscape Architects  
(photo credit: Chris Beck)*

## 2.6 Issue 3: Space

- ***Do we need to set minimum apartment sizes in Victoria?***
- ***Do we need to increase minimum ceiling heights for apartments in Victoria?***
- ***Should larger developments be required to include different types of apartments catering to different types of households?***

AILA believes in a diversity of apartment sizes and typologies to match people's needs and expectations during different phases of their lives. AILA welcomes innovative design solutions that make the most of available space to create livable, usable and comfortable living areas. We encourage flexible floor plans that allow for new room typologies to be created – eg. sliding screens that can open or close a bedroom from a living space. However, AILA believes that there is an inherent minimum area required to properly accommodate basic living activities and to ensure proper access for people of all abilities. These include, but are not limited to:

- Fitting a standard queen-sized bed (or double/single-sized bed in student accommodation)
- Fitting a table or bench or similar that seats two or more people for meals
- The distance between kitchen cabinetry and other cabinetry or wall or other to safely manoeuvre around and have full use of cupboards and built in appliances
- A minimum area to shower or bathe in
- Adequate storage

We therefore believe that minimum apartment sizes should be set for each traditional typology (3+ bed, 2 bed, 1 bed, studio, etc.), and that discretion be applied where variation is offset by other benefits, or entirely new typologies are proposed.

Included in this is a recommendation for a minimum main balcony size and shape to enable outdoor living opportunities that are considered an integral part of our lifestyle – eg. comfortable seating around an outdoor table (the number of seats relevant to apartment size), space for a small barbeque, potted plants/productive vegetation, and associated equipment storage. We suggest long, thin balconies do not support their use by occupants. Consideration should also be given to materiality and high quality detailing.

We encourage creative solutions where indoor-outdoor spaces may be better integrated to allow for greater functionality (eg. winter gardens).

New rules should be introduced to ensure developers and agents have a duty of disclosure regarding apartment sizes and dimensions. This issue is particularly important for off-the-plan sales.



*One Central Park (NSW).  
Landscape Architecture by Oculus and Aspect Studios  
(photo credit: Simon Wood)*

## 2.7 Issue 4: Outlook

- *What are the essential qualities of a good outlook?*
- *Should living spaces be treated differently to other spaces within an apartment in regard to outlook?*

AILA's definition of outlook is broad and includes tangible and intangible components. These items are essential to our connection to our environment, our identity and our sense of belonging to a 'place'. Empirical evidence exists to link positive outlook to 'green space' with improved mental health.

Tangible items might include trees in an adjoining park or open space corridor, distant views of the city or surrounding neighbourhood, or an interesting architectural feature.

Intangible items might include changing light conditions, the rain, and the wind moving the trees.

Outlook is also an important consideration for enabling passive surveillance of nearby open spaces (CPTED principles), thereby contributing to safer neighbourhoods where there is less likelihood of anti-social behaviour.

AILA believes all principle rooms have equal importance in regard to a good outlook. Contemporary living habitats are not restricted to traditional notions of room function, and AILA believes this is particularly relevant to apartment living which is generally more compact and encourages frequent and multi-use of all principle rooms.

## 2.8 Issue 5: Natural Ventilation

- *How can access to fresh air in an apartment be improved?*

AILA believes access to fresh air can be improved by cross-ventilating apartments, which may be achieved through various massing typologies, the installation of louvres between apartments and common property access ways (where apartments are dual fronted), and the installation of louvres between 'in-board' bedrooms and bathrooms. We also believe all common property corridors should be naturally ventilated to the maximum number of floors possible, and may be via design features such as operable windows, louvres, grills, or other similar structure.

Guidance on the benefits of including interior planting and the role it plays in improving indoor air quality should also form part of the guidelines.

## 2.9 Issue 6: Noise

- *Are you aware of any major issues relating to noise transfer between apartments?*
- *What are the main sources of noise that can impact apartment occupants?*

AILA notes that noise from common outdoor dining, entertaining, and play areas may be a potential source of undesirable noise, particularly in courtyards that are narrow lightwells. Noise may also be an issue from balcony to balcony/apartment. Guidelines should be developed to mitigate noise concerns but inclusion of communal open space that encourages positive social interaction should always be promoted. Noise mitigation may be appropriately managed through a combination of building management (eg. setting opening hours of an outdoor bar/cinema), and physical separation through careful site planning and structural/architectural design. AILA also encourages opportunities for social interaction from balcony to balcony, and that this may be balanced with the desire for privacy through design features such as sliding screens.

## 2.10 Issue 7: Outdoor Space

- *What types of shared outdoor spaces do you think apartment developments should provide? (e.g. play spaces, roof terraces, productive gardens, swimming pools)*
- *Should all apartments have balconies?*
- *Is the size of a balcony important to you?*
- *Is it acceptable for air conditioning units to be located on apartment balconies?*

AILA considers the inclusion of outdoor space as a very important component of apartment design that can contribute to the overall success of this type of residential typology.

A variety of outdoor spaces should be provided in apartment development for the benefit of a range of people: singles, couples, families, and guests. As such, AILA recommends that a registered landscape architect be involved in the preliminary site planning and design of apartments to ensure adequate provision is made for usable outdoor spaces, through to detailed design and construction.

AILA recommends a hierarchy of outdoor spaces be provided for in apartment design, appropriate to the size, nature and location of the development. This can include private open space areas (balconies, terraces), semi-private courtyards, semi-public plazas and access ways that are connected to the public realm and fully public plazas and access ways. It is important that a range of activities be provided for in these outdoor spaces, so they need to be adaptable, flexible and well-sited to ensure maximum benefit for all stakeholders. These activities may include, but are not limited to, play spaces, dining, cinema, food growing,

clothes drying, and exercise (traditional equipment and space for meditative activities).

Some outdoor spaces within apartment development sites should be considered as part of the wider community asset, so that all local residents and visitors can access it. This may include ground floor walkways, plazas and gardens, and may also include mid-level terraces and rooftops. New models of ownership and maintenance responsibility may be required to facilitate this. This is of particular application in areas experiencing significant population growth and where there has been inadequate provision of new public open space and inadequate public realm upgrades (eg. Forest Hill, South Yarra, and Southbank).

AILA supports a review and possible increase of the open space contribution required for apartment developments, with an emphasis on providing high quality, flexible and adaptable outdoor spaces in the immediate streetscape and/or neighbourhood for the social and recreational benefit of apartment residents (as well as visitors and those residents who already live in the area).

Balconies are considered to be an important component of apartment design in that they provide opportunities for access to daylight, sunlight, natural ventilation as well as social interaction and passive surveillance. AILA recommends a minimum size balcony size and shape to enable outdoor living opportunities that are considered an integral part of our lifestyle – eg. comfortable seating for two to four people around an outdoor table, space for a small barbeque, potted plants/productive vegetation, and associated equipment storage (See also Issue 3: Space).

Air conditioning units on balconies are unsightly and negate open space benefits. AILA supports locating air conditioning units elsewhere.

AILA recommends that Issue 7: Outdoor Space and Issue 9: Landscape be integrated to ensure a thorough and holistic approach is given to the relationship between indoor and outdoor living.

### 2.11 Issue 8: Adaptability

- *Should buildings be designed to be adaptable in future?*
- *Should certain floors be designed for a variety of uses?*
- *What are the important features of adaptable buildings?*

AILA believes buildings should be designed to be adaptable in the future. This may include:

- A partial or full re-fitting of the building to a mixed use, commercial, or other use
- Conversion of carparking areas to new apartments and/or other communal facilities (this makes floor to ceiling heights an important design consideration)
- Up-grading of carparking areas to include electric charging stations
- The ability for two adjacent apartments to be combined at a later date.

AILA believes it should be mandated that for developments of a certain size, a percentage of their roof must be able to be retro-fitted with an extensive and/or intensive green roof.

AILA believes that all new developments regardless of size should be adaptable to incorporate new technologies in regard to utility supply.

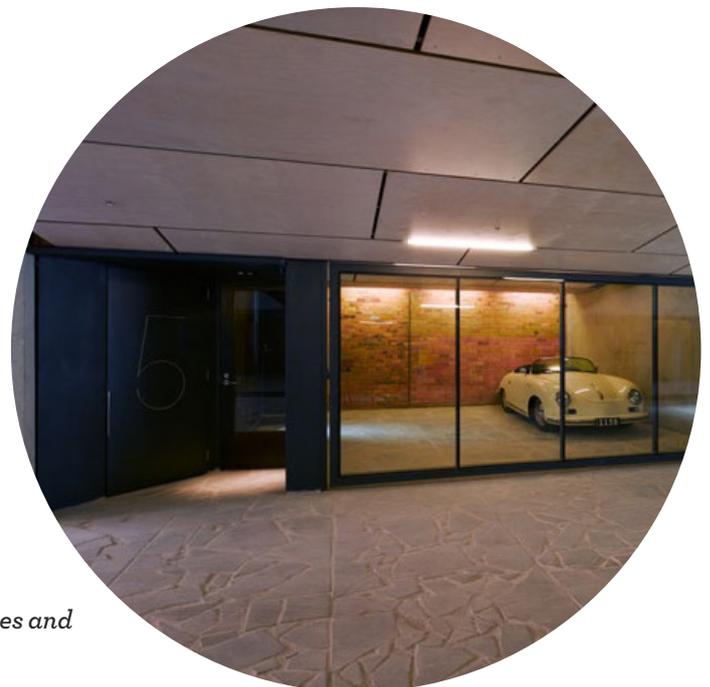
### 2.12 Issue 9: Landscape

- *Should all apartments require some form of landscaped area?*
- *Should this vary for low, medium or high rise buildings?*

AILA believes all apartment developments over a certain scale require well-designed communal landscaped area(s); the extent of which should be determined proportional to the development's size and density. Well-designed communal spaces add significant value to the amenity of apartments. If they are to be successful, they must have a great microclimate, be sheltered from wind, have adequate access to sunlight, be structurally supported to allow adequate soil volumes, and include functional communal facilities.

AILA recommends a registered landscape architect be engaged at the outset of apartment design (and through to full documentation) to ensure the architectural and engineering design incorporates appropriately supported and meaningful landscaped spaces. Furthermore, poorly designed landscapes by inappropriately qualified professionals are a major issue encountered by many Owners' Corporations. Good design and construction can avoid expensive repairs.

We suggest that all horizontal planes should be considered as opportunities for communal spaces, whether now or future-proofed to allow for later conversion by an Owners Corporation.



*Garages at 32 Kerr Street, Fitzroy can be converted to offices and workshops. Architecture by NMBW for Colin Montaldo (Photo credit: Colin Montaldo)*

We suggest that vertical planes and voids may be appropriate for additional landscape opportunities in developments small and large, but should not be considered an equal replacement for horizontal planes as they do not provide the same open space benefits.

Where it is desirable for a building to have setbacks to the street and side boundaries, it is strongly preferable that areas of natural ground (not over basement) be retained for the establishment of canopy trees. Additional landscape opportunities on mid-level terraces and rooftops should be considered.

Where it is desirable for a building to form part of a continuous street wall and the development is of a certain size, the building design should allow for the establishment of landscaped areas on mid-level terraces and rooftops. Deeper soil areas should be coordinated with the structural design to enable medium sized trees to be incorporated.

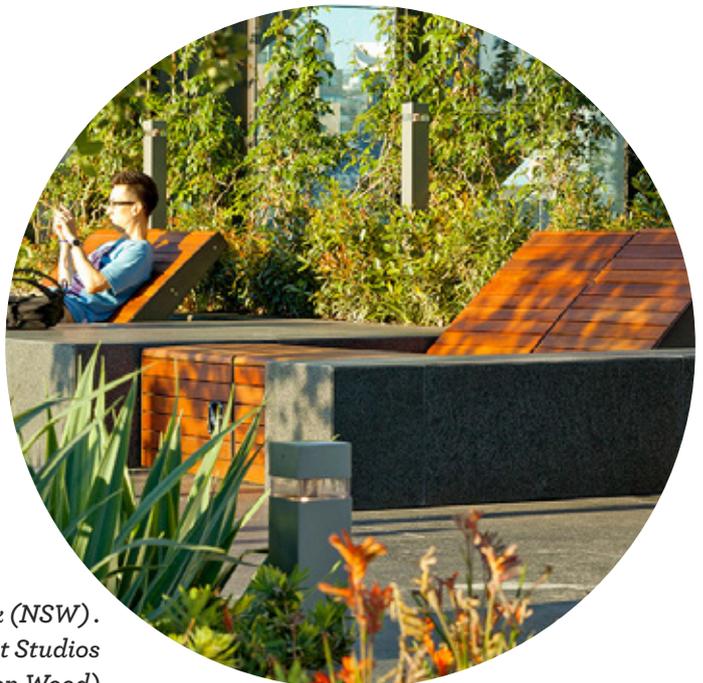
The role of rooftop gardens in temperature control of internal spaces, and reduction in the use of fossil fuels required for heating and cooling should be recognised and the opportunities for 'living architecture', such as green walls and roofs, maximised.

Opportunities for productive gardens should be maximised. Benefits include food production and improved health including mental health.

AILA supports the retention of existing established trees that make a significant contribution to the existing streetscape. When assessing the significance of an existing tree, consideration should be given to the lifespan of the tree. Trees with an expected lifespan of less than 20 years should be considered for removal where a suitable offset within the local area can be achieved (such as a financial contribution to create a new or enhance an existing open space).

AILA recommends a change in requirements for ground water permeability. AILA supports increased value being placed on the requirement for developments to have a component of 'natural ground'. In addition AILA would support the removal of 'permeable paving' as an effective means of achieving site permeability as it is rarely maintained to a standard for it to be effective. The integration of water sensitive design (such as water tanks) can also provide broader benefits for water catchments, water quality and water consumption, which if included in a development should allow for a reduction in requirements for site permeability.

AILA supports a review and possible increase of the open space contribution required for apartment developments, with an emphasis on providing high quality, flexible and adaptable outdoor spaces in the immediate streetscape and/or neighbourhood for the social and recreational benefit of apartment residents (as well as visitors and those residents who already live in the area). The current mechanism for funding open space and public realm improvements associated with apartment developments are inadequate. Many of the developer contribution and planning tools used in greenfield growth areas could be applied to renewal precincts to achieve improved community benefits.



*One Central Park (NSW).  
Landscape Architecture by Oculus and Aspect Studios  
(photo credit: Simon Wood)*

### 2.13 Issue 10: Universal Design

- *Should all apartments, or a percentage of apartments, be designed for everyone, regardless of age or ability?*

AILA believes that all apartments should be designed for everyone, regardless of age or ability. This may either be up-front or the ability to be retrofitted later to allow for aging in place and should a person lose an ability.

AILA acknowledges that in some instances a ‘walk-up’ only multi-storey building may be justifiable. In the absence of a lift, the ground floor apartments should still serve the needs of wheelchair users.

AILA strongly believes that allowing apartments to be adaptable to changing circumstances need not be onerous, and that it is closely tied to minimum floor areas for each traditional apartment typology. New apartment typologies are encouraged to encourage creative solutions to all-abilities access and future adaptability.

### 2.14 Issue 11: Energy and Resources

- *What environmental issues are important to residents?*
- *Should every apartment have individual metering of their utilities (e.g. gas, electricity, water)?*
- *Should all apartments be required to meet a minimum industry standard in addition to the building regulations?*

AILA believes sustainable utility supply, energy reduction, potable water reduction, access to the NBN network, and the ability to recycle (including compost and water) are the key environmental and resource issues important to residents.

We believe every apartment should have individual metering of their utilities to encourage ownership and reward for sustainable use.

We believe all apartments should be required to meet a minimum industry standard and this should be incorporated into the building regulations.

### 2.15 Issue 12: Waste

- *How should waste be collected from apartment buildings?*
- *Should sorting facilities be provided for recycling and where?*

AILA believes sorting facilities should be provided for recycling. Consideration of waste storage and disposal (including recycling) should be addressed as part of building design at the planning stage. Poor resolution of these issues can result in expensive retrofitting of buildings or waste facilities inappropriately occupying public spaces, especially during times of collection.

Disposal and sorting areas must be provided in a convenient location close to a frequently used path of travel, which may include the building and garage entries, lift and stair cores, and the mail collection point. Strong consideration should be given to including a second disposal chute next to the standard rubbish chute on each floor for recyclables. Compost collection and use should be encouraged on balconies via the free provision of compact units (eg. ‘bokashi buckets’) and via a central collection point for use in private common garden areas and/or adjacent public open space. This should be similarly located close to frequently used paths of travel, with due consideration to the management and convenience of transferring compost to garden areas without unduly impacting the amenity of lobbies and other entries.

### 2.16 Issue 13: Car Parking

- *How important is a car space in an apartment?*
- *Can alternatives to car parking provision offer improved solutions? If so, what?*

AILA believes car spaces are not required for each apartment in a development that has, or likely to have within a set timeframe, adequate access to public transportation, and good access to services.

Poorly designed car parking facilities can significantly impact the public realm. Where possible, single entries should be provided to car parking, parking areas should be concealed behind active building frontages, and mechanical ventilation should be located away from public areas.

Improved solutions include:

- Increasing the number of car share vehicles within private carparks and on public streets
- Minimum two bicycle parks per bedroom (allowing for couples to live in a one bedroom), located in convenient and secure areas
- Convenient and secure areas for scooters and motorcycles
- Generous facilities for bicycle repair
- Facilities for electric charging

Car parking is considered by AILA to be tied in with Issue 8: Adaptability.

### 2.17 Issue 14: Entry and Circulation

- *Should designated areas be provided for on-site loading?*
- *Should apartment building lobbies be clearly visible from the street?*
- *Should internal corridors have views out and provide daylight?*

AILA believes designated areas should be provided for on-site loading.

We believe how building entries meet the street is very important; good entrances and a high quality public realm (including street trees) make for a better street. Building entrances should be clearly visible from the street or side laneway via signage and night lighting. Where building entries open directly on to a mixed use/commercial street or laneway, the character of the lobby and its extent of frontage should be adjusted to suit the overall experience and rhythm of that street or laneway.



*St. John's Place, North Melbourne -  
Landscape Architecture by Tract Consultants  
(photo credit: Tract Consultants)*



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