

What is neighbourhood character?

Neighbourhood character is essentially the combination of the public and private realms. Every property, public place or piece of infrastructure makes a contribution, whether great or small. It is the cumulative impact of all these contributions that establishes neighbourhood character.

Designing and siting new dwellings to respect neighbourhood character is a fundamental objective of the residential development provisions in planning schemes. It is important that both the applicant and Council have a common understanding about the key features of neighbourhood character so that:

- A satisfactory neighbourhood and site description, including the identification of key features of the neighbourhood, is provided;
- The design responds to the key features identified in the neighbourhood and site description; and
- The residential development proposal respects the existing or preferred neighbourhood character and satisfies these requirements of the residential development provisions in the planning scheme.

Do all areas have neighbourhood character?

It is common for some areas to be described as having 'little or no character', and other areas as having 'lots of character'. These sorts of descriptions confuse neighbourhood character with attractiveness. All areas have a character in the same way that all people have a personality. In some areas, the character may be more obvious, more unusual or more attractive, but no area can be described as having no character. The character of all areas is to be respected.

Character is not heritage

In defining neighbourhood character, it is important to understand the differences between neighbourhood character and heritage. While all areas have a history or a heritage, not all areas are historically significant. Heritage significance is determined by recognised criteria set by Commonwealth, State and local agencies, with reference to the Burra Charter. Cultural heritage is largely embodied in the fabric and setting of a building and place. It is important to manage and retain this fabric and setting to retain the cultural significance of a place. Heritage significance can't be improved, but the fabric of a place can be improved, restored or reinterpreted. In many areas building style is important to setting the character of the area. This includes not just typical form and massing, but may also include details, materials and colours.

Neighbourhood character areas

The area of the neighbourhood provides the context for decisions about the design response. In most cases, about five sites or buildings up and down the street, across the street and behind the site in question should be sufficient to identify the features of the neighbourhood that should influence the design. However, it is necessary to look further than this, depending upon the individual circumstances of the site and the neighbourhood through a review of the respective neighbourhood character area.

Satisfying the neighbourhood character standard

What does 'respect' mean?




Respecting character does not mean preventing change. The neighbourhood character standard is not intended to result in the replication of existing building stock or to stop change. Neighbourhood character is one of many objectives that must be met. Some areas will see significant changes as a result of new social and economic conditions, changing housing preferences and explicit housing policies. In these areas, it is important that respecting character is not taken too literally, as a new character will emerge in response to these new social and economic conditions.

In simple terms, respect for the character of a neighbourhood means that the development should try to 'fit in'. Depending on the neighbourhood, there are two broad approaches to respecting character:

- Respecting the scale and form of surrounding development; and
- Respecting the architectural style of surrounding development.

Respecting neighbourhood character does not mean limiting the scope of design interpretation and innovation, or mimicry or pattern book design. Instead, it means designing the development to respond to the features and characteristics identified in the neighbourhood.

Assessment criteria – Neighbourhood character

Standard	Some design issues to be addressed
<p><i>The pattern of development of the neighbourhood</i></p> 	<p>Is the neighbourhood typical of a particular form or pattern of development? Are there any patterns in building form, height, setbacks or rhythm? How do these relate to topography, natural features and street network? Is there any pattern in relation to any particular feature or characteristic? What is the pattern of landscape and street tree planting? How do buildings and private open spaces relate to each other or to the public realm?</p>
<p><i>The built form, scale and character of surrounding development including front fencing?</i></p> 	<p>What is the predominant form of development ? Is the neighbourhood homogeneous or diverse in terms of the built form, scale and character? What sort of front fences are there? How is parking and access arranged?</p>
<p><i>Architectural features</i></p> 	<p>What architectural styles are typical in the neighbourhood? What levels of articulation and detail are typical in the neighbourhood? How do roof patterns relate to roof form?</p>
<p><i>Any other notable features or characteristics of the neighbourhood</i></p>	<p>Are there any other notable features that have not been picked up through the consideration of the above matters? Are there any street trees or vegetation that would affect the design response?</p>

Where can you get more information?

More information about the assessment of planning applications is available in Using Victoria's Planning System from the Department of Sustainability and Environment. A General Practice note is also available about:

- *Understanding neighbourhood character.*

Other helpful sites for information include:

www.bayside.vic.gov.au

www.dse.vic.gov.au