THE AGE

The bold proposal to turn Docklands back 100 years

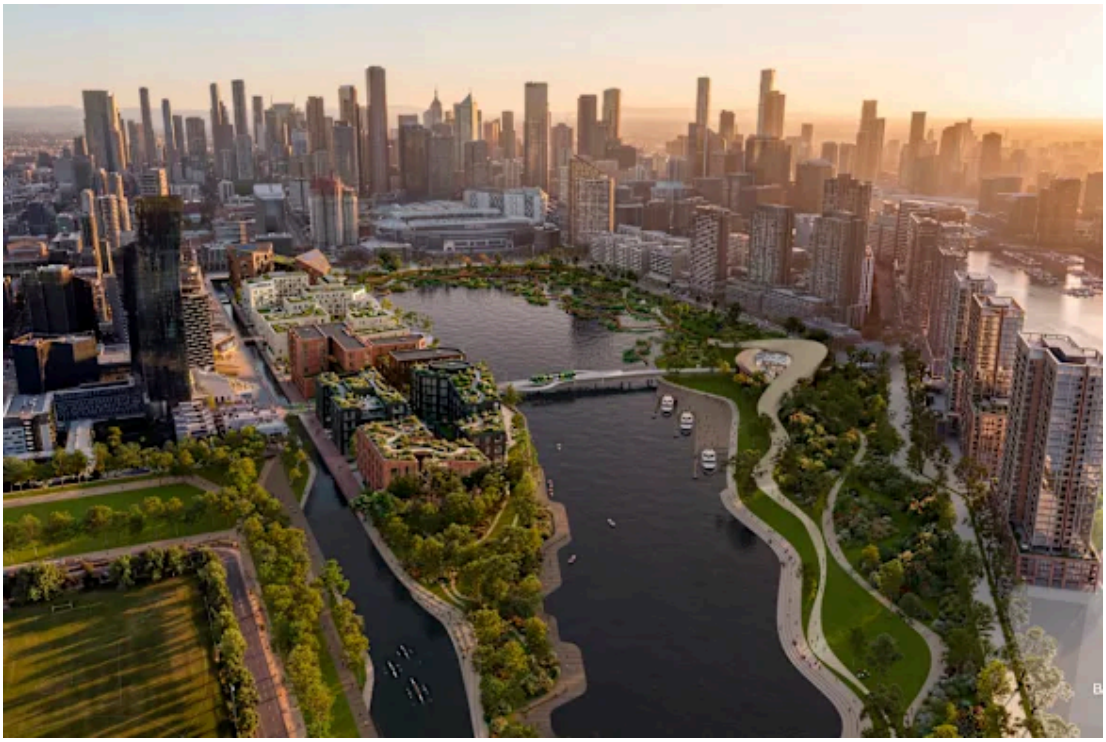


Cara Waters

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Land would be reclaimed from Docklands' Victoria Harbour for housing under a new plan to double the suburb's population and reimagine it as a wetland oasis.

Architecture firm Bates Smart worked with Deakin University on the ambitious proposal to return parts of the area to its natural state and combat the area's windswept wide boulevards.



Artist's render of the reimagined Docklands with reclaimed land, mid-rise housing and a wetlands park area.
BATES SMART AND DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Bates Smart director Julian Anderson said Docklands struggled as an area because of the lack of density in the suburb, which the City of Melbourne estimates has a population of 19,139.

"The streets are too wide, it's quite windswept," he said. "There isn't enough activity, which I think is in part due to lack of residential property there."

Anderson said Docklands is too dominated by office skyscrapers and if there was double the population there would be much better amenity, encouraging more food and retail.

Their plan would see 2000 new homes built along with 36 hectares of parkland on the reclaimed land.

“It wouldn’t be high rise; it’d be mid and low rise in order not to compromise the amenity of those existing properties around the Docklands,” Anderson said. “It would be an amazing place to live, and certainly something that other countries around the world are doing.”

Anderson pointed to Denmark, the Netherlands and Singapore as examples of countries that were already using reclaimed land.
“Denmark has just completed a project where they’ve reclaimed 300,000 square metres of water land and turning that into a wetland and park, and the Dutch have been doing that for over 1000 years,” he said.

Anderson said throughout Melbourne’s history, its parks had set it apart from other cities in Australia, but most were created in the 19th century and there had not been a new significant inner-city park in the last 100 years.

“We could return some of the Docklands to its original natural state,” he said. “First Nations history tells us that this was a very significant meeting place for community because it was at the confluence of the Maribyrnong and the harbour, and it was originally wetlands or a marsh so we could recreate that on the southern side of Victoria Harbour.”

Deakin has a Docklands campus and called in Bates Smart to help explore ways of improving the area.
The plan also sets out improved public transport, linking existing tram routes along Docklands Drive to those along Collins Street via a new tram, car and pedestrian bridge at the western end of the harbour.

“Imagine being able to live in North Melbourne, catch the tram into Collins Street,” Anderson said. “The trams at the moment just stop in the Docklands and they don’t connect across. I think public transport’s a missed opportunity there as well.”



Artist's render of the proposed new parkland and wetlands in the Docklands. BATES SMART AND DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Construction of a fish market, similar to the one in Sydney, could also serve as an attraction for tourists and residents under the project idea.

Lord Mayor Nick Reece pledged to build a seafood precinct in the Docklands in his election campaign two years ago.

"Docklands is our waterfront gateway to the city and we welcome any proposal that explores its potential to add vibrancy, connection and activation," Reece said.

Reece said the suburb had a lot of potential still to be realised and the proposal for a new 36-hectare park was certainly worth exploring in detail.

"This is the sort of creative thinking we should be embracing to look beyond the traditional idea of open space in a city," he said.



Photo: MATT GOLDING

Jamal Hakim, co-president of Docklands residents group Community 3008, was more critical of the proposal.

"There is traffic congestion, so putting another 2,000 homes in is not going to help," he said.

"Taking over part of the water to build apartments is not the answer for a neighbourhood that has already increased in size since its beginnings."

Hakim said Community 3008 supported Docklands being greener and having more wetlands but would be concerned about reclaiming parts of Victoria Harbour.

He said the waterfront area was deteriorating, with sections already closed, and there was still no high school for the suburb.

"We don't have a shortage of visions or architectural drawings: what we have a shortage of is delivery in the Docklands," he said. "We need not just grand visions but to fix some of the basic infrastructure that is falling apart."

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