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# A DISTINCT ADVANTAGE

## Strategies to enhance the structure and character of metropolitan Adelaide

October 2004

A technical paper contributing to the metropolitan volume of  
the South Australian Planning Strategy









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## **Strategies to enhance the structure and character of metropolitan Adelaide**

**October 2004**

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## FOREWORD

The aim of *A Distinct Advantage* is to describe the physical elements that enrich the experience of those who visit and live in the Adelaide metropolitan area.

This report recommends ways to improve metropolitan Adelaide's structure and character through state government policies and actions.

Improving the structure and character for the metropolitan area as a whole is worthwhile because of the community and economic benefits that it offers. For Adelaideans, having an urban area that is legible, distinctive, stimulating and beautiful adds meaning and richness to life, promotes civic pride within the Adelaide community, and helps people access resources from the entire metropolitan area. These qualities also lead to greater tourism, to the attraction and retention of businesses, managers and professionals, and their expertise and capital.

Therefore, Planning SA has been guided by the following aims in undertaking this work:

- for metropolitan Adelaide to be perceived by its inhabitants and visitors alike as highly understandable, distinctive, enjoyable and environmentally sustainable, and
- through this, to maximise Adelaide's ability to attract further visitation and investment.

A summary of the key findings from this report will be incorporated in the metropolitan volume of the South Australian Planning Strategy (2004). The Planning Strategy provides direction for State Government agencies and local governments, especially through their strategy plans and Development Plans. The findings of this report will provide an overarching framework for the State and for local government in addressing issues of urban structure and character for metropolitan Adelaide.

This work will be available to foster a greater understanding among relevant decision-makers of the issues and opportunities of Adelaide's structure and character and the ways these are perceived.

Given that the structure and character of the urban area is slow to change, it is expected that the analysis of the existing character will still be largely relevant well into the future. Likewise, the ideas and recommendations for improvement should also have a similarly long relevance, although the priorities assigned to them may shift considerably.

To the knowledge of the authors, this is the first time a work of this nature has been conducted for an entire metropolitan area. We hope this work will be useful in Adelaide for decades to come, and for others conducting similar work in other cities in the future.

**Nathan Alexander**  
Project director

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Scope of this work

This report recommends ways to improve the metropolitan area's urban structure and character through state government policies and actions, in particular the metropolitan volume of the State Planning Strategy. It does this by first analysing the existing conditions in the area, and then proposing policy directions and actions. In this report, improvements to the structure and character of the metropolitan area are regarded as those that improve one or more of the following qualities:

- legibility
- distinctiveness
- enjoyability
- diversity
- environmental sustainability.

These qualities are elaborated later in this chapter.

This report concentrates on elements and patterns that are significant at a state or regional level or are prevalent at the local level – in other words, those that provide the urban area with a 'sense of place'. This is where the State Government can best play a role. In contrast, elements and patterns that are significant at a local level can be identified and implemented by local government.

The expert knowledge of Planning SA planners and designers, as well as recent market research, have been used to determine which elements and patterns are perceptually significant. These judgements have been confirmed by a reference group of prominent external planners and designers. Further market research could be undertaken to establish whether or not these initial determinations over-emphasise particular areas such as central Adelaide.

Although this report suggests possible future directions, and indicates a prioritisation for these, it does not commit the State or any other level of government to any works.

Issues that are traditionally of general urban design importance, but that are not relevant to structure and character at these large scales are not addressed in this report. An example is the degree of active frontage that residential and commercial premises provide to streets. This report is not a guide to good local urban design practice, nor is it an urban design strategy for the metropolitan area.

## 1.2 The area of interest

This report is primarily concerned with the *metropolitan area*. This is defined here as the existing contiguous *built-up area* of the metropolitan area, plus all other areas within the *Urban Containment Boundary*.

Also relevant in some instances is the area within *view* of the Adelaide Plains. This includes the area within the Urban Containment Boundary and some other areas, especially the western escarpment of the Mount Lofty Ranges. In addition, as this work is being prepared for the metropolitan section of the State Planning Strategy, the area within the *Metropolitan Planning Strategy boundary* is also relevant. This is an area bounded on the west by the Gulf St Vincent, the north by the Gawler River, the east by the Mount Lofty Ranges and to the south by the Willunga escarpment.

**Sidebar: Words for areas: their meaning in this report**

**built-up area:** land occupied by a large concentration of buildings for living and working in, plus associated open spaces such as gardens, streets, small parks and storage yards.

**urban area:** a built-up area, plus adjoining large open spaces that service the urban population, such as parklands and airports.

**metropolitan area:** The existing urban area considered as a whole.

**urban containment boundary:** The statutory limit of an *urban area* within South Australia. The Adelaide UCB contains the existing *metropolitan area*, plus some non-urban areas, which will probably become urbanised within the life of this document.

**Metropolitan Planning Strategy area:** The declared area for the application of the policies contained within the *Metropolitan Planning Strategy*.

**City of Adelaide:** The Adelaide Park Lands and the built-up areas within them, namely North and South Adelaide.

**central city:** The high activity core within South Adelaide, roughly the area bounded by the Torrens, Frome Street, Gouger Street and West Terrace. This is sometimes called the central business district, the central activities district, or 'town'.

Figure 1: [The metropolitan area, showing the built-up area, the urban area, the urban containment boundary and the Metropolitan Planning Strategy boundary](#)

Figure 2: [The City of Adelaide](#).

### 1.3 The urban qualities sought

#### Legibility

Legibility is the ease with which parts of a city can be recognised and mentally arranged into a coherent pattern, so a person can easily know where he or she is and navigate through an area. Legibility is sometimes referred to as comprehensibility or ease of understanding. A legible city is one characterised by districts, pathways and landmarks that are easily identified and grouped into an overall pattern. Even though one may be lost within a locality, a legible urban structure will allow one to easily locate oneself again.

To understand the legibility of a city, we must consider not just the city as a physical structure but the way it is perceived and interpreted by its inhabitants.

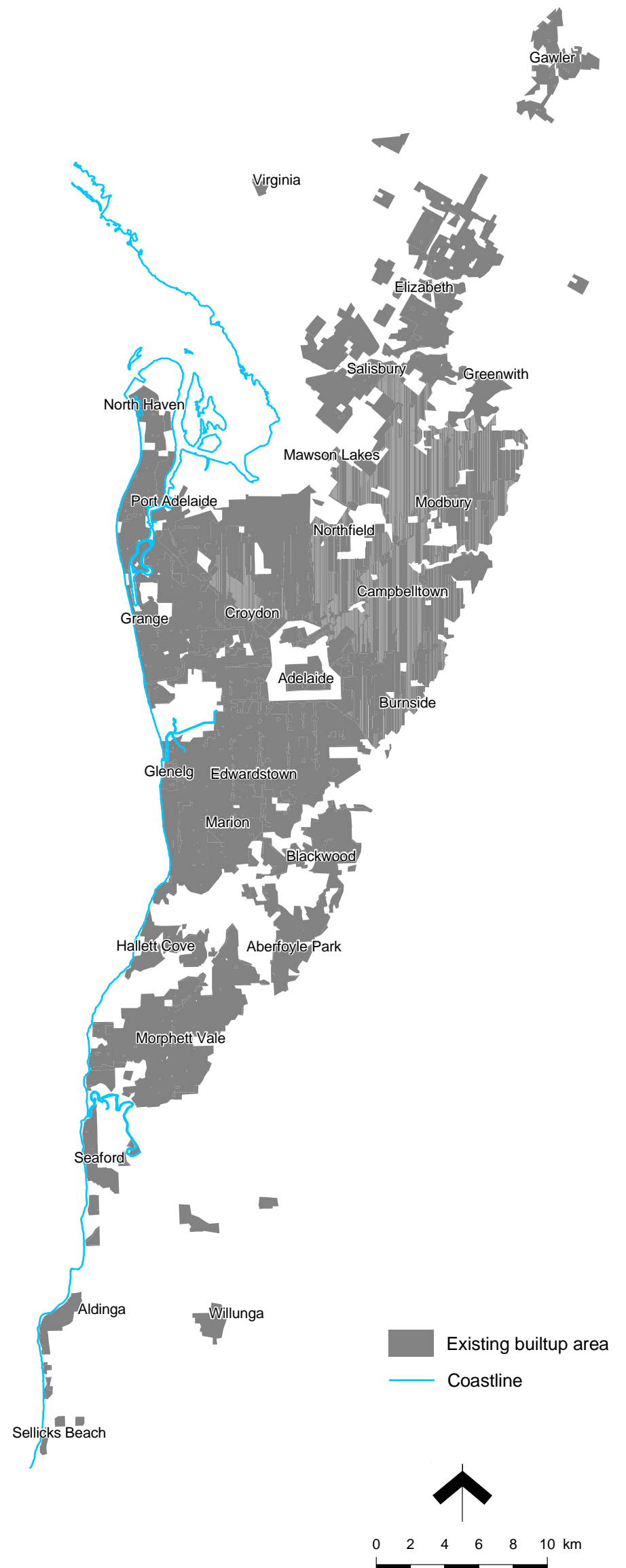
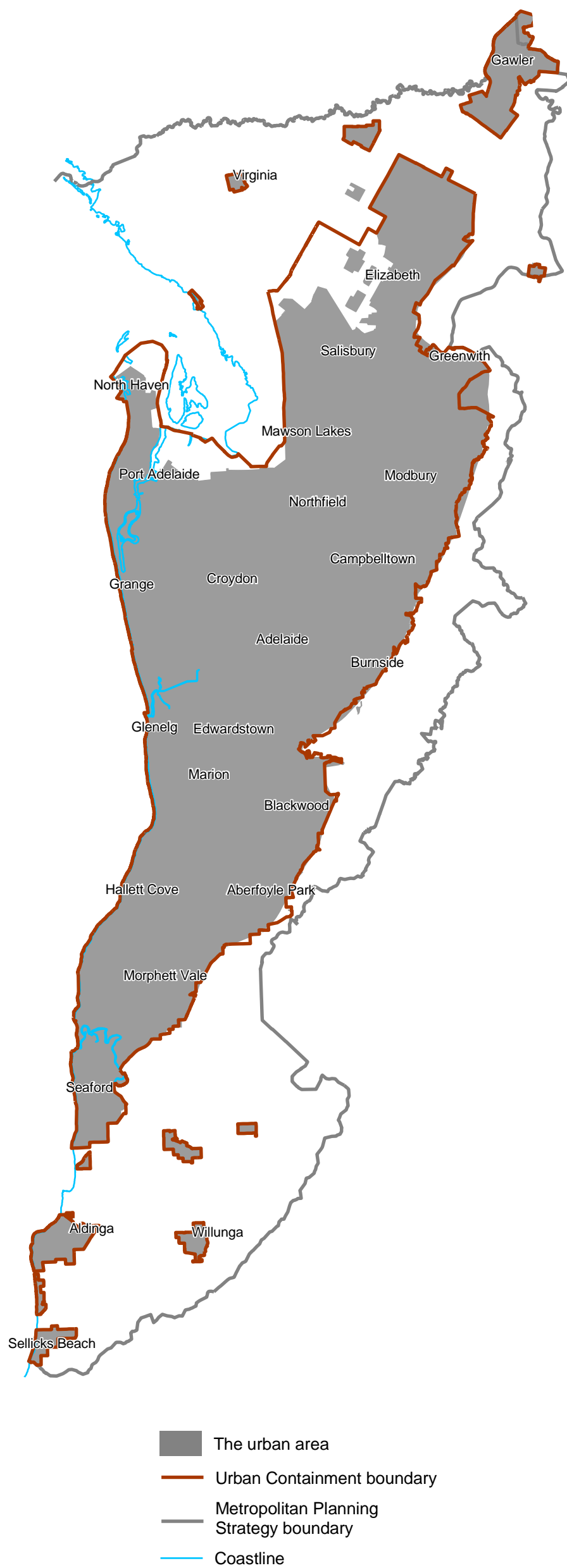
#### Distinctiveness

Distinctiveness is important to creating understandable places. A distinctive city is one where *this* place is different to *that* place. A distinctive city has a strong *sense of place*. In this work, we are interested in two scales of distinctiveness – firstly, the distinctiveness of each district in the metropolitan area, and secondly, the distinctiveness of the metropolitan area from other cities.

A legible and distinctive urban environment heightens the potential breadth and intensity of human experience. If carried out in a more vivid setting, the same daily actions can take on new and richer meaning.

#### Diversity

A diverse city provides its inhabitants and visitors with choice: of land uses, built forms, life forms, experiences, services, goods and transactions. A legible city increases choice by making the range of places more accessible. A distinctive city increases choice by making one place different from another in some way.

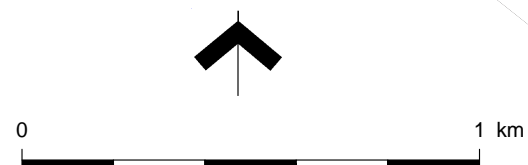


**Figure 1: The metropolitan area**





- Central city
- Urban area
- Park Lands
- River Torrens
- Arterial Road
- Street
- Rail line



**Figure 2: The City of Adelaide**

**Enjoyability**

A legible, distinct and diverse city is a good start, but a successful city also provides moments of joy and delight to its inhabitants. It is the added dimension of emotional engagement that energises a city.

**Environmental sustainability**

Urban areas consume the bulk of the resources in Australia, and the Adelaide metropolitan area is no exception. The urban form of metropolitan Adelaide affects the efficiency of resources used in the construction and maintenance of buildings, roads and other structures, and the resources used in the services and products consumed, such as travel, heating, cooling and water. This report seeks to promote new urban development, and changes to the existing fabric that will result in an efficient use of resources, and so be more environmentally sustainable.

**1.4 The need for this work**

A city is the largest cultural artefact that a community can make. It embodies in many dimensions the values and mores of that community. A city is a record of the creativity of its citizens in organising their physical environment.

Improving the structure and character for the metropolitan area as a whole is worthwhile because of the community and economic benefits that it offers. For Adelaideans, having an urban area that is legible, distinctive, stimulating and beautiful adds meaning and richness to life, promotes civic pride within the Adelaide community, and helps people access resources from the entire metropolitan area. These qualities also lead to greater tourism, to the attraction and retention of business owners, managers and professionals, and their expertise and capital. According to the recently released Draft Economic Development Plan from the Economic Development Board, 'the quality of South Australia's economic strategy and the attractiveness of our living environment are inseparable'.

The physical elements of the urban area are typically extremely long lasting, usually for more than one human generation. All but significant change is rarely noticed year by year, but more often decade by decade. Although the rate of change is slow, it can be shaped and directed, through government policies, regulations, incentives and direct involvement. This report provides directions to guide investment by the state and so shape the ongoing and incremental change that will occur.

Though very real artefacts, cities are organic, complex and the way they change is ultimately unpredictable at the small scale. They tend to evolve over time and, unlike other constructed objects, are never 'finished': the design process is open ended and its authorship belongs to numerous generations.

In that context, this report can only hope to influence some of the forces that shape the metropolitan area. Consequently, for maximum effect, this work has concentrated on a small number of opportunities for change. These opportunities are those that are most significant to the metropolitan area's structure or character, and those that are easiest for the state to significantly enhance.