The aim of this Guide
The aim of this guide is to help designers to understand and use Context Analysis in an informed way, build relationships between development and context, and contribute to the quality of the built environment in Mornington Peninsula.

Council’s support for contextual design
The Mornington Peninsula’s small towns and villages, leafy neighbourhoods, extensive coastlines and scenic rural landscapes all form part of its distinctive character and are highly valued by both residents and visitors alike.

The Mornington Peninsula Shire Council strives to balance development and respect for existing character, to maintain, and where possible enhance, the particular positive qualities of each place, having regard to built form, landscape, and all the other elements and relationships which together constitute “character” or the sense of place.

Like all Councils, it requires planning applications to include a site analysis and descriptive statement explaining how a proposal responds to its site and its context.

This process provides an opportunity for designers and developers to demonstrate how the project design engages with and responds to the various contexts of the Mornington Peninsula. It provides a framework for Council to engage with developers and designers to achieve outcomes that all will be proud of.

What is ‘context’?
The ‘context’ refers to the environment in which a development is located. It is the specific and immediate setting in which the development sits and with which it engages. It could be as small as a row of houses, or as large as a village centre.

As the examples at the right show, there is a long history of designers responding in thoughtful ways to the Peninsula’s built and natural environments. It is this ability and willingness to engage with the specific qualities of the site and context that has led to many examples of fine development.

A quick thought experiment shows that the context of a development gives the design its ‘meaning’: picture a glass tower block in a busy Melbourne CBD street. Now picture the same building sandwiched between timber shops in a small rural town centre. It is the same building, but in one context it ‘makes sense’. In the other, it is out of place and lacks engagement with local history, culture and environment.

"Always design a thing by considering its next larger context – a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan." Eliel Saarinen

Ranelagh Estate, Mt Eliza. Designed by Walter Burley Griffin in 1924, its integration of houses and landscape remains an inspiration.

The Mornington Peninsula has long been a venue for innovative architecture that engages with the natural environment, as in Robin Boyd’s ‘Kaye House’, 1966.

New architecture has been introduced successfully into the Peninsula’s heritage streetscapes, as in this Sorrento supermarket by RotheLowman Pty Ltd.
1 Define the Context Area and Describe what is within this area

To say that the context is the setting in which a development is located is not enough. How extensive is this setting? What is the ‘area of influence’? Is it the site, the street, the neighbourhood or the town?

1.1 The Context Area is the area that will be impacted on and by the proposed development

Developments can impact upon their setting through many factors including appearance, scale, height, setbacks, adjoining setbacks, space between buildings, landscape, overshadowing, overlooking, increases in traffic, activity, noise or odours. The setting may also impact upon the development by placing constraints on its location and scale.

1.2 The Context Area is determined by estimating the physical extent of the area upon which the development will have impacts.

Even before designing starts, it should be possible to estimate the area upon which a development will have an impact. For visual impacts, a simple method is to locate all the places from which the development will be visible. A line drawn around all the possible viewpoints defines the Visual Context Area.

Note: In some areas there may be a planning scheme overlay or character study that requires a wider area to be considered

TIP: Be careful to check for impacts other than visual that operate over long distances - and don’t forget that buildings can sometimes be seen from distant vantage points.

Consider using different maps to define different context areas (at different scales) that are relevant to particular factors, such as immediate streetscape versus long range views.

Once the Context Area is defined (through one or more maps), the features within it can be described. This is the Context Description.

1.3 The Context Description is a summary of the features of the Context Area.

The features of the Context Area must be described accurately and in detail. To do this:

1. Visit the Context Area in person.
2. Take photographs, measurements, drawings and notes.
3. Obtain survey data, Council reports and planning scheme documents.
4. Prepare the Context Description.

For many types of development there are planning scheme provisions that list the features that must be included in the context description (e.g. Clause 52.35-02, 54.01-1, 55.01-1, and Cl.56.01-1 of the Victorian Planning Provisions). For other types of development, those same planning scheme provisions provide a good checklist of primary matters of concern for a context description.
It is not enough to just describe the Context Area. The designer must **analyse** the qualities of the context to determine their implications for the design of the development.

2.1 Analysis means ‘pulling apart’ the Context Area Description to find the implications for the design

The Context Description explains the features of the Context Area. Analysis uses this information to assess the qualities of the Context Area, the ways the development will impact upon these qualities, and how the design can optimise the development’s relationship with the Context Area. The Analysis should also identify site opportunities such as valuable views, sunlight for living spaces and quality of existing vegetation.

2.2 Assess the qualities of the Context Area

When assessing the Context Area, be clear. What are the characteristics of landscape and place quality in the Context Area? Will the development interface with more than one distinct kind of context? Does the Context Area contain elements that are valuable and positive? Or is it degraded or under developed?

Example of a context with a sensitive feature - an adjacent heritage building. What are the possible impacts? How could these be managed?

To put some objectivity into this process, common urban design criteria could be used, such as:

- **Is development throughout the Context Area Consistent?**
- **Does the area have a distinct and memorable Image?**
- **Do the public spaces have a good human Scale?**
- **Are there any features of natural or cultural Significance?**

2.3 Review the likely impacts of the development upon the Context Area.

Review the requirements of the project brief. Is the nature of the development likely to result in a major impact upon the context area? Is this a negative impact? If so, can it be avoided or reduced? Does the brief need to be modified?

Review the impacts that the context may have upon the development. Are there context features that constrain the development? Will you have to modify the design to meet mandatory or desirable setback or height requirements?

2.4 Examine the implications for the design.

Be creative and flexible: is an "off the shelf" solution really the best? Could the context inspire a new, place-specific design solution? Can landscaping integrate the development into the context? Do any places or landscapes in the Context Area provide inspiration for a possible design solution?

The answers to these questions form the basis of the Design Response.
The Context Analysis reveals the implications that the qualities of the Context Area have for the design.

3.1 The Design Response is the way the designer responds to the Context Analysis.

The Design Response will vary according to the project brief, as well as the nature of the development and of the Context Area. Ask these questions:

3.2 Does the Context Area have distinctive and memorable qualities?

These deserve to be protected or enhanced; this may support an argument for a design response that is strongly consistent with the qualities of the Context Area.

*The Mornington Peninsula Planning Statement strongly emphasizes the importance of maintaining existing character – or supporting preferred future character where this is established through community consultation and expressed in an adopted local area plan.*

3.3 Does the Context Area lack distinctive qualities?

It may be enhanced by a new form of development; this may support an argument for a design response that challenges the qualities of the Context Area.

3.4 Does the context have features that would be damaged by certain kinds of development?

The design response will need to mitigate those negative impacts.

For example, from the Context Analysis the designer may discover that a noisy road has implications for an apartment development whose best views or northern aspect face that way.

The designer will have to consider whether to modify the design to move living areas away from the road, or to adopt design strategies to deal with the noise without losing the desirable orientation. In an extreme situation the designer might question if the site is appropriate for the use.

*There may be a variation within a definite range, for instance, one and two storey development, but not three or four stories. The limits to existing variation, in height, setbacks, extent and form of open space / landscaping etc. need to be considered in assessing whether a design will ‘fit’ the context.*

3.5 Multiple Contexts

Many developments will interact with more than one context. In the example above the road frontage may seem to be the critical context. But the rear of the site might face a quiet park, suggesting a very different response on that side of the development to take advantage of that context.

*TIP: It is not always appropriate to conform to the existing qualities of a Context Area. The aim is to find the optimum response – the ‘best fit’ between project and context.*
Document

4 Explain how the design of the development responds to the context

It is not enough for a designer or developer to believe they have responded to the context; the application must explain how the design of the development responds to the Context Analysis findings.

4.1 The Design Response documentation illustrates how the design responds to the context

The Design Response documentation is a summary of all of the steps in the Context Analysis. It must show that the response is a genuine result of analysis of the Context.

4.2 Define the Context Area and explain how the area was determined

Include a plan that clearly shows the boundaries of the Context Area and all the significant features of the Context Area. Explain why you have chosen this area and identify any multiple contexts which a development may interface with.

The deep balconies on this project are a response to analysis of sun angles, and also inspired by a local example.

TIP: Illustrations must show the context - not just the building - be realistic, and position the viewpoint at eye level in a location from which the development will be seen.

An illustration that effectively shows a proposed building in its streetscape context

Photographs can be used to capture the distinct personality of a context; these photos show very different characters on opposite sides of the same street.

4.3 Analyse the features of the Context Area and their implications for the development

Use photographs, drawings, and diagrams that assist in explaining the Context Area’s built form, landscape and other relevant features, and their implications on the design.

4.4 Illustrate the ways in which the design has responded to the Context Area

The documents must explain whether the design response is supportive of the existing character of the Context Area, or challenges it, and why. Perspective drawings, photomontages or other illustrations can be used to show the proposed development as it will appear within the context area.

TIP: It is important that designs which challenge the existing context character are well justified i.e. how will the quality of the area, adjoining sites, public places and streets, be impacted and improved.

This diagram shows a Context Area (red line) determined by the places from which the proposal is visible. D = Distant Views.
# The 4 Steps Checklist
for Applicants, Designers and Council Officers

## Describe

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the Context Area marked on a plan / plans, with a clearly defined boundary?</td>
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<td>Does the application explain how the Context Area has been determined?</td>
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<td>Does the Context Area include all of the places likely to be impacted upon by the development?</td>
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<td>Are the key features of the Context Area clearly identified and described?</td>
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## Analyse

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Does the application fully assess the quality and character of the Context Area and its features including vegetation?</td>
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<td>Does the analysis identify whether the development interfaces with more than one different context?</td>
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<td>Does the analysis explore the impacts the development will have upon the Context Area, positive and negative?</td>
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<td>Does the analysis identify the key context issues that the design must respond to?</td>
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## Respond and Document

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Is the Design Response clearly explained, in diagrams or illustrations as well as words?</td>
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<td>Are the Design Responses clearly linked to issues identified in the Context Analysis?</td>
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<td>If the response challenges any aspect of the existing context character, is the reason for this clearly explained?</td>
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<td>Are drawings and other documents provided that make it easy to assess whether the design response actually does what it says?</td>
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