

*Planning has gone too far
– it's time to actually do something!*

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ABSTRACT

The history of cities embraces a richness of stories about people gathering together - to live, to socialise, and to trade. The history of city planning embraces a mixed bag of visions, values, rhetoric, success and failure. The 20th century saw the rise of city planning as a profession – building on the pragmatic requirements of health, well-being and commerce as burgeoning populations and industry reshaped the city form. But all is not well. The good intentions of the paper plans found only limited success in reality – and we are left with unsustainable agglomerations in the face of a global financial crisis and dramatic climate change.

This presentation will emphasize the glaringly obvious – the need to ensure that well thought-out plans are actually implemented. It will focus on what is needed to make the Victorian Government policy statements in *Melbourne@5Million* and the *Victorian Transport Plan* a sustainable reality for the 21st Century. It will address the pentagonal bottom line required for any successful urban analysis: *physical; cultural/spiritual; economic; social governance; and the change dynamic*.

The author will draw specifically on his extensive experience in interdisciplinary teams, and use current projects as case studies to illustrate the issues and conclusions.

KEYWORDS: urban, planning, governance, design, implementation

1. INTRODUCTION

My intention with this presentation is to address things that really matter, coloured by the things that we actually do on a daily basis. It will include stories, questions, and challenges. It is underpinned by pentagonal bottom line thinking, and has five steps.

2. So, where are we?

First, a word of warning: I am a sceptical optimist. I trust for the best, but insist on asking questions. So, don't be depressed by what I am about to say. Consider what we can creatively do to improve the situation.

Most of us spend our time studiously doing what we think needs to be done on small scale projects. No harm in that, but...there is an elephant in the room that will completely swamp any good we might be doing. It used to be called globalisation, but that turned out to be just a new form of colonialism. The colonists this time were corporations, but the negative effects have been the same: short-sighted economic goals; all care, no responsibility. This is the end of what we imagined to be 'democracy', it has transcended nation states, and it is, perhaps, the end of party politics in their current form.

There are recurring big picture themes when we consider planning:

2.1 Population

The Club of Rome, in the 1960s/70s were spot on about the problems of exponential growth, even if their modelling was a little out in its timing. As for Australia's population growth: 22 million today, 35 million predicted by 2050, maybe much higher?

2.2 Global Financial Crisis

In Australia, you might well ask - '*what Global Financial Crisis?*' In the past three months, the house prices in my suburb have risen 25%. That should make me very happy, but it doesn't. It simply means my kids can't afford to buy a house. There is a broader concern: The way free enterprise governments have taken on the characteristics of command economies is astounding, but it has led to the moral hazard where the people and processes that created this GFC now know they will be bailed out if the problem they create is big enough. All care, maybe, but certainly no responsibility. We are very slow learners.

2.3 Climate change and water

Two statements:

Firstly, *Climate change is a reality!* To deny it is an absolute nonsense. In geophysical terms, we are in the anthropocene, where people have the ability to dramatically change the entire planet – for better or, more likely, for worse. Hands up those who believe climate change is a serious issue. Hands up those who believe that human actions are a significant cause of climate change.

Let me quote: '*The climate science is so clear, the need for international co-operation so obvious that we should not be squabbling over who pays for it.*' Now that's not the quote of a rabid greeny. Be surprised! It was the British PM Margaret Thatcher in 1990!

If ever you needed evidence that the adversarial two-party political system is both anachronistic and unable to meet the current challenges, consider the recent scathing, if polite, comments by Professor Ross Garnaut about the appallingly superficial climate change debate. Governance is not meant to be like a football match. You wouldn't buy a used car from either of the parties who seem to have forgotten that climate change is *the* issue, not a sideshow to providing subsidies to polluters. And 350ppm CO₂ is the target, not more.

Secondly, *We have large quantities of water*. In Australia, the way we manage water is more an issue than the actual quantity we have. Per head of population we are very well off for water availability. But can you imagine a bigger management stuff up than the way we have handled, and are handling, the Murray/Darling Basin? So much for planning!

2.4 Energy and pollution

We already heavily subsidise dirty energy producers and big energy users. The current debate by the two major political parties, who are supposedly looking after Australia's interests, essentially centres around how much bigger this damaging subsidy should be. And in Victoria we are both encouraging more local dirty coal use, and sending it offshore – with 'Alice in Wonderland' mantras about the promise of 'green' coal and 'jobs, jobs, jobs'.

2.5 Access and transport

More directly specific to our interest in cities, we are badly policy-conflicted in how our cities should grow. On the one hand we preach intensification and sustainability. On the other hand we expand the sprawl, knowing full well that these areas will offer cheaper house and land packages – but with no effective public transport, and an unsustainable community development model. We know stuff, but we are slow learners!

3. How did we get here?

Let's skip the millions of years during which the environment that sustains us developed. Let's skip the 40,000+ years that the indigenous people on whose land we meet, lived sustainably. Let's skip the industrial revolution that set us on a path of carbon dependency. Let's skip the social revolutions that continue to shape the world we live in. Let's skip urbanisation of the 19th and 20th century, and move to the uber-urbanisation that is the challenge of this generation.

After that rhetorical build up, indeed, all I can do in this short presentation is offer you four references:

Believing Cassandra: an optimist looks at a pessimist's world. Alan AtKisson. 1990.

A useful look back 40 years on the Club of Rome's warnings about our future.

Australia 2050: an examination of the condition, outlook, and options for the first half of the 21st century. Future Directions International. 2007.

Solid going, but if you are serious about planning, it's well worth a scan.

Welcome to the Urban Revolution – how cities are changing the world. Jeb Brugmann. 2009.

This includes a challenge to Australia to take a lead in planning and building cities

Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics, Jane Jacobs 1992. Something to reflect on. More on Jane Jacobs later.

4. Where do we want to be?

You can make your own list here. But for me it is best summed up in a small number of important values. Our cities should be:

- Sustainable
- Productive
- Equitable
- Well designed
- Safe

Other important factors are food security, and health and well-being.

5. What are we actually doing?

Planning, planning, and more planning. And now Kevin Rudd has announced that, belated, the Federal Government is to get into the planning game again too. His attention is welcome, but a number of critical questions need to be addressed. The city planning skill base at Federal level reduced dramatically toward zero during the Howard era. How will this be rebuilt in a manner which doesn't simply become another layer of democracy? Will it be holistic planning, to ensure that overarching imperatives/goals/policies such as sustainability and living affordability be achieved, or will it revert to the more normal departmental silo approach to dishing out money?

Our current practice is to follow strategic planning with development control, sometimes erroneously referred to as 'statutory planning'. Instead, we need to first focus on implementation tactics.

About the last decade of Federal Government involvement in cities, a cynic might say: *don't plan, then failure comes as a complete surprise!* But I am a sceptic, not a cynic, so I observe that planning is important but we have our heads in the sand about the importance of implementation – of actually doing something.

There are exceptions. For example: the Geelong waterfront.

Another example of success is the increasing use of public transport - despite the limited services and the lack of investment over many years.

And there are many relevant examples elsewhere if we have any pretensions at world's best practice

But consider the slow or non-implementation of other planned projects

A polycentric model based on high service public transport was implied in the 1929 and 1954 metropolitan plans for Melbourne, but the dominant action has been to continue the fringe sprawl. In 1960, Myer Chadstone opened, but not on a rail line. The proposed District Centres of 1985 morphed unfulfilled into metropolitan strategies in the 1990s, and morphed again into Transit Cities in 2002. Again unfulfilled, in 2008 they morphed into Central Activities Districts (a program I am currently working on with DPCD) but, with more than \$400m already committed, they still have a long way to go to reach their potential.

Despite the significant increase in proposed funding for public transport, current funding is mostly backlog eg South Morang, where the service is years away, and major development has already occurred. So much for the promises in many plans and election campaigns. We don't build roads after the people move in, so why do we approve fringe subdivisions without adequate public transport and community services? When will the Ringwood/Dandenong/Frankston rail service be realised to satisfactorily link three of the Central Activities Districts?

6. What needs to be done?

The title of this paper does not imply that we just do *anything*. Quite the reverse.

The task we have is threefold:

6.1 Apply the blowtorch of commonsense to urban myths

For professionals and citizens alike, we need a return to frank and fearless advice, advocacy, and courage. US President Obama is actively 'calling people' for their shallow short term thinking - and their lies. It's time to deal with our urban myths and mantras:

- *more land supply = cheaper housing:* But not more affordable living
- *future-proofing (as in a desal factory) = no risk:* Very costly and unsustainable alternative
- *more roads = no congestion:* Let's get serious about reducing the need to travel, and providing effective public transport services. The 'smart bus' is not an adequate solution.
- *low density and cars = people's choice and higher density = high rise building and slums of the future.* Short sighted marketing of the so called 'Australian Dream' is not sustainable, and has serious social implications.
- *jobs, jobs, jobs:* Employment is very important, but it has become a mantra with little rational economic analysis to underpin it.

6.2 Apply rational economics to choices and actions

How many times do you hear both government and business say '*it's a good idea, but it's not yet financially viable*'? For example: there is no rail public transport to Tullamarine airport, but a massive and counter-productive increase in car parking.

But it sometimes it works the other way. The decision to build a desal factory at Kilcunda was an outrageous and secret reversal of water management policy, selecting the highest cost option, with a discredited commercial-in-confidence excuse for secrecy. In both cases, the economic analysis and conclusion was less than rational.

Jane Jacobs had no professional training in city planning, but relied on her observations, common sense, and humility to understand the way cities work and don't work. Some say she revolutionized the urban planning profession. Really? Have you read any of her writings? One wonders whether our PM and Premiers have read any of Jane Jacobs, and whether our current agencies have learnt the lessons.

Jacobs, who died a couple of years ago, approached cities as living beings and ecosystems:

- She advocated mixed-use urban development – the integration of different building types and uses, old and new, with a diversity leading to community vitality and economic viability.
- She pursued bottom-up community planning, maintaining that local expertise is usually better suited to guiding community development, because government policies are usually inconsistent with real-life communities.
- She maintained that higher densities are more capable of supporting more vibrant communities, and diverse local economies are more creative and resilient than large highly specialised economies.

More recently, James Cameron, a dynamic Anglo-Australian businessman, founder of a unique British financial house that specialises in investing in companies that combat global warming, says, quote

"One of my difficulties is that Australian business people that call themselves business leaders are simply protecting the status quo and protecting the value they have in the high-carbon economy. They do this as if there are no alternatives, as if they can't afford to make the change. I don't think that is leadership, that is cowardly."

‘The market’ is not an amorphous stand-alone entity, it is an ideological construct, a complex mix of how individuals and corporations and the wider community and government interact. There are complex double standards regarding responsible interaction with market processes. We need to actively engage with the investors, the financiers and the developers to address the real challenges by transforming competing interests into common purpose.

Consider the Sigmoid Curve. It shows that every growth curve will eventually plateau unless you interrupt its cycle, a bit like riding a breaking wave. It may seem counter-intuitive, but the optimal time to interrupt is before it reaches its peak, and change cycles are getting shorter, so the need to creatively interrupt becomes more urgent.

Currently our governance processes are failing badly – they are not up to meeting the challenges. There are exceptions, but local government is frequently indulgent and moribund. State governments and the Federal Government and their agencies are continuing the curve of ‘traditional big engineering’, big business, and mega dollars of ‘the stimulus’ funding to address urban issues. Much of it is short-sighted (eg housing affordability and sustainability are hardly on the agenda in the stimulus allocations). In some instances they may be successful, but the narrow approach frequently overlooks and overrides the better value of low tech, low carbon, more affordable and locally-based community initiatives. It is time to lead on a new trajectory.

6.3 Use urban design as a creative facilitation tool

Urban design is a practical way of approaching planning and development.

Start with the pedestrian environment, not the road grid. Focus on localisation and the diversity of the activity interfaces – not just the weekly shopping. Then work upwards in scale. Otherwise you will end up with unsustainable engineering solutions. As Joni Mitchell observed,

*'Don't you know it always goes,
that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone
they paved paradise and put up a parking lot'.*

Just in case you are wavering on whether to become a creative professional activist, remember that Jane Jacobs was charged with riot and criminal mischief for disrupting a public meeting on the controversial Lower Manhattan Expressway. She said *'The inference seems to be that anybody who criticizes a state program is going to get it in the neck.'* It is time we showed something of both her commonsense and her courage.

Thank you.

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