

Australian cities: the things we don't talk about*

By John Mant

State of Australian Cities 2010.

The Commonwealth government has just released another discussion paper on Australian Cities, *State of Australian Cities 2010*.

The latest city paper is replete with all those clichéd hopes that have peppered urban policy papers for decades - integrated infrastructure planning and programming, innovative urban design, consideration of place impacts of development, healthier cities, sustainable cities, affordable housing, less car dependent, shorter trips, access to a wide range of services and facilities ...

One gets a warm glow from these documents. They don't disappoint by explaining what we really would have to do to achieve their lofty aims. To explain would be to expose the hollowness of the analysis and the solutions.

The truth is inconvenient because it is to be found within government and the way it operates. Rather than face up to it, much better to wrap the clichés around some pictures of happy citizens and pretend you are across the issues.

Integrate land use and transport planning

Every planning report I have read in my long life in the field has called for greater integration of transport and land use planning. Never has it happened on a permanent basis.

It goes to the heart of the failure of urban governance.

Guild dominated organisations

The 19th century structures of state governments do not allow for integration of professionals. Each department is the province of some particular professional grouping or *guild*. Land use planners will not lie down with transport planners. They are different breeds and the manner we employ them accentuates these differences.

I was once consulted on how we might integrate land use planners and transport planners when, for a moment, a group of each found themselves employed by the one minister and one head of department. Threatened by the higher gradings of the transport planners and their numeracy skills, the planners insisted on there being "planning work" which was to be the sole responsibility of those with a planning qualification. This of course killed any opportunity to create teams in which the members and the leaders could be from any profession. The experiment in integration came to a quick and

* First published ON LINE *opinion* - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate Posted Tuesday, 21 December 2010

inevitable end.

Each guild will fight to retain its hold over its organisational structure. Planners pretentiously consider themselves to be the only urban generalists and consequently they think they should be on top. None of the other urban professional organisations agree.

Certainly, there are some excellent “planners” who have a wide knowledge and understanding of complex urban systems and are skilled at causing things to happen, but, generally, the professionals are not selected and trained for this. Most spend their time drafting control documents or assessing how well individual developments comply with those controls. These can be highly skilled tasks, but they have little to do with managing a city.

Ask planners what they are doing and usually they say are “implementing the Planning Act”. Planning Acts are development control legislation. Administering a regulatory system does not amount to managing a city.

Planners are not able to do what is needed because, in a guild structured government such as a state or local council where every guild claims a monopoly over some specialist input and output, nobody is allowed to be responsible for a complex outcome such as a city or a place.

Strategic planning

Even the so-called strategic planning done by planners is not really strategic. Planners use a simple lineal logic to prepare a new city plan. First a population projection is selected - local politics will influence whether it is the most realistic, or the least scary, or the most hopeful. The raw numbers are converted to households. The available land is assessed and using some formula (again likely to be influenced by local politics) the households are distributed between new development areas and redevelopment areas.

The resultant zoning map of the city becomes “The City Plan”. (Thus confirming that the purpose of planning is to separate land uses.) It is usually accompanied by a list of things that the rest of government “ought” to do to achieve the high faluting aims and objectives of what is really a relatively simple, logical, exercise. Being just an *end state plan* rather than a live strategic plan designed to pursue complex outcomes over time, there are no consequences if the accompanying actions do not take place.

The plan will be a success once rezonings have been legislated, land values have changed and development has been approved. Whether or not there are public transport facilities, rural wedges, excellent urban design, parks and all the other “oughts” will not compromise the plan’s success.

The same guild structures and constraints exist in local councils, which were created in the 19th century as corporate bodies to accommodate and pay outposted guild members from a couple of state guild departments. Organisationally most councils look little different today, although the titles may have changed.

At neither level of government are the planners managing the city and its places. Essentially they are administering development controls. If the city does not meet the high hopes of the document accompanying “The City Plan”, it is the fault of those who did not do as they ought.

A 21st century urban governance

Only by fundamentally changing the current structures of state and local government can we expect to achieve the strategic management of our cities.

We need governments where there are clear responsibilities and powers to achieve complex outcomes; where specialists are there to be employed when they are needed; and where the regulatory roles are separated out as a distinct process that is fair and transparent and seen as merely one means of achieving complex ends.

Rather than being confined to one specialist solution to whatever the issue, outcome managers should be able to do whatever needs to be done to achieve strategic objectives. Outcomes rather than inputs and outputs should be funded and governments should be assessed on achieving those outcomes.

For example, there should not be a road authority with its own hypothecated budget. Rather “accessibility” (the outcome of transport and land use policies) should be funded with the accessibility outcome organisation being empowered to range over all the possible movement and land use solutions to connecting activities. The road budget should no longer be allocated to whatever moves the most cars down the arterials.

Improve public health outcomes and urban design

The latest discussion paper calls, again, for “Built environments that are designed to enable people to travel safely by walking, cycling or using public transport, and that provide access to quality open space, can help increase levels of physical activity and reduce car use. ... urban centres and neighbourhoods ... ensure they are enjoyable, encourage social interaction, and provide opportunities for a variety of activity and exercise.” And so on.

All the aspirational documents assume that in some way cities are designed, in the sense that an architect designs a building to fit into a landscape.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Architects and urban designers play little part in the design of our cities. No one person can be called “the designer”. There is no specific overall design of a new suburb. The suburban environment is the sum total of a lineal series of unintergrated stand alone decisions made by separate actors operating under separate bits of regulation.

The system is the consequence of the historical accretion of development control systems. Recently, most of these have been lumped into the “planning” legislation, but the several separate processes haven’t changed.

Nor have the roles of the separate actors whose tasks were established following the introduction of subdivision control around the beginning of the 20th century. Since that time the suburbs are unchanging apart from the detailing on the houses and the layout of roads - dead worms, grid pattern, etc.

Two basic modes of production are available - the subdivide first, build second method and the build first, subdivide second method.

The first mode necessarily results in the standard and ubiquitous “detached house” suburb; the second is used for apartments and town houses. The zoning system reinforces the division between the areas created by the one mode and those areas created by the other by calling the one zone “detached housing” and the other “medium density”. Politically, detached house zones have always been seen as normal, with the potentially better designed suburbs less acceptable.

Subdivide first, build second

The production of a detached house suburb is highly efficient. Early cash flows are produced and the repetition of standard house products ensures low cost production. No wonder this production method is able to produce so much housing space at such a low price.

The production process for detached housing is a series of self-contained steps:

The *end state* plan colours the map to denote the detached house zones, the medium/high density zones and the shopping, commercial and industrial zones. On the detached house land a standard subdivision design is laid out. Roads and services are constructed and, in the process, the land is shaped to create flat building sites ready to receive concrete slabs. Any topsoil and trees that survived the subdivision design may suffer at this point.

The now serviced, subdivided and moon-scaped lots can be sold to individual buyers whose payment provides a cash return to the land subdivider. That role is finished and the builder takes over.

The purchaser selects the desired home from the project home catalogue or display village (five out six new houses are project homes). The project home has not been designed for the site. Rather it has been designed, first, to fit on any standard parcel in any orientation and, second, to produce the maximum space at the minimum cost. The house is essentially wheeled onto the site and set down within standard set backs measured from the newly created boundaries.

Project homebuilders sell size not good environmental design.

Because each lot is dealt with as if it is an island no knowledge is needed of the context, including what might happen next door. The set backs are designed to provide a uniform streetscape and ensure a least bad relationship between neighbouring houses. In the process much land is wasted, which is

unfortunate, as, in an effort to increase densities, lot sizes have reduced while houses have increased. Backyards, usually put forward as a key virtue of detached housing, are disappearing.

Build first, subdivide second

A production process where the dwellings are designed and built before subdivision is quite different from the process where land is first subdivided.

With this process it is possible to design a building to fit into its particular environment. It is possible to design relationships between houses that do not depend on standard subdivision patterns and standard set backs. It is possible to retain trees, get aspects right and maximise the usefulness of land.

Trouble is that it costs more. In particular, generally the buildings have to be completed before a cash flow is generated.

How to get the design advantages of the second method but some of the economies of the first process.

The answer lies in having less, but more effective, controls. Since the first “town planning” legislation imposed subdivision control at the beginning of the 20th century, that has been the main planning weapon. Before a subdivision is allowed consideration has to be given to its proposed use, the density, which is determined by the lot size, and the design, determined by the set backs and heights. Subdivision control is a proxy for control over what type and where buildings are to be built.

It would be more effective and efficient to deregulate and just control buildings and services.

Control over subdivision should be abolished. Owning a parcel should not assume the right to build; only permission to construct would matter.

Deregulation would free up design, doing away with the tyranny of the lot boundary. Density would be controlled *per hectare* rather than by *minimum* lot sizes. Instead of subdivider developers first providing moonscaped standard subdivisions, building designers would be free to design in response to the environment, maximising both density and the use of land. Backyards could be restored rather than land wasted in useless setbacks and wasted verges.

Importantly rural living could be allowed without destroying rural lands. Governments have sought to restrict rural living by increasing minimum lot sizes. Rural values have increased to reflect the semi-urban value of a house lot, be it 20 or 40 hectares. Much better to use a density control and insist on concentrations of development designed for the place, with the remainder of the land parcel being retained as rural.

As well as simplifying the control system, by expanding the scope of Australia’s excellent digital land information system to add parcel formatted

development rights and consents, there would be increased simplicity and certainty. And the opportunity to create places that have been designed rather than merely zoned and reshaped to look exactly the same as every other place.

The only bit of policy work that is needed is how to enable an early cash flow for developers. This is the main stumbling block to achieving cities that have been designed rather than being the product of a series of standard formulae.

Other reforms

Many other governance reforms would be needed to achieve the lofty aims in the *Australian Cities* report.

- The zoning system delivers monopolies to retail chains, which are not interested in creating anything other than boxes surrounded by car parks. These can only be accessed by car. Only international fast food outlets can afford the monopoly rents demanded by the centre owners. They too want boxes and car parks. In these circumstances accessible 'lively' urban places cannot be created.
- The Cities report goes on about the shortage and affordability of housing at a time when new houses have never been bigger. The problem is essentially one of demand rather supply. The heavy subsidies for homeowners have distorted the urban markets. Until some balance in the subsidies is achieved there will never be affordable housing for those who are not homeowners. And housing will always out market other uses, including much of what make cities interesting.
- Australians put their capital into their house, rather than the supporting infrastructure. Other very successful cities have smaller houses and better infrastructure. We get the type of cities we pay for, which is very little. Rates should be higher (and local government more efficient) and everybody should pay land tax (c.f., Henry Review), which, to make it more palatable, could be hypothecated to support urban infrastructure and better common property. Increased outgoings would help make housing more affordable.

Conclusion

There is even more, of course. The point is, let's have some honesty in these urban reports. For years the same hopes have been stated. Nobody writes why it is that those hopes are not realised.

If we had some real analysis, we might see some real solutions.

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