

BOOK REVIEW: THE AUSTRALIAN METROPOLIS : A PLANNING HISTORY

Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone (editors) ,2000. Routledge, London

Reviewed by Wallace van Zyl, Cape Town, South Africa

The title of this ambitious book consists of four parts and all warrant further discussion. While their understanding of history is clear, the authors' cautious view of planning emerges slowly, or is it development? The key word "metropolis" is not defined apart from reference to managing the "larger cities". Thus this review will deal with Australian city development. If we assume that history requires both Hindsight and Insight, then planning surely adds Foresight to these?

The writing by ten different experts is synoptic and chronological starting with colonial settlements. The editors' excellent Table A (p. 6) clarifies the contents by means of eras, concerns and events. Chapter titles are self-explanatory and the book is well illustrated. For example, 36 useful figures include some lesser-known plans and 10 tables are explicit. Some selected comments from another Commonwealth country in the Southern Hemisphere will follow.

The founding polar pattern of six ports (focussed on London) set the scene for future city development. Later six coastal quasi-independent states arose with their own histories and vested interests, but they duplicated one another without specialisation. A military-mercantile surveyor's grid was the typical colonial plan, but Ebenezer Howard helped Adelaide's parklands and five squares to achieve fame. Rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney became endemic.

Subsequent political and socio-economic policies seem to have stifled the development of medium-size towns. For example, the failure of "concentrated decentralisation" was due to interstate rivalry. There are no Johannesburgs or Nairobis inland, in the "empty North" strategic Darwin was an important latecomer. Surely Broken Hill, Kalgoorlie or Mt. Isa also should be mentioned?

This book shows that British influence on development has been both cultural and practical, fostering dual loyalties. Until recently weapon testing and military bases were tangible proof of the West's protective shield. However, a mixture of post-war immigrants from Europe has led to a loosening of ties. Due to the absence of a Co-ordinated population policy, most of these immigrants were left to the mercies of the free market and settled in the inner cities or on remote mines, without guidance to regional growth points.

When the Aboriginal minority are briefly discussed, they are called "indigenous people with no permanent settlement" (Proudfoot, p. 11), but they have been paternalised, assimilated and marginalised either in the Outback or in the cities. Even without permanent settlements, they seem to have been environmentally aware.

Resource exploitation based on a macho philosophy of "pioneering" feeds directly into city development. For example, the minerals of West Australia or the gas of the North are matched by the dam builders in Tasmania or the Snowy Mountains Scheme, based on TVA. The environment has also suffered from bush clearing, overgrazing and destructive agriculture, and yet the federal government blocked the formation of a National Conservation Authority.

This book discusses desirable planning images like garden cities, greenbelts, corridors and wedges. For every Mt. Druitt or Elizabeth new town, there are dozens of suburbs like Moonie Ponds made famous by satirist Barry Humphries. If garden cities came of age after World War Two (Garnault, p. 64), so did the private sector! Will the American dream of freeway, suburb and superstore, with

resulting sprawl be sustainable in the long-term in Australia or South Africa?

While zoning and subdivision sound like "development", the addition of legislative reform and better co-ordination must now suddenly become planning! Australia should beware of market-led trends disguised as urban management or slogans like "whole of government". Yes indeed, "one-man master plans" do live on under the mantle of teamwork, while public participation is seen as elusive and time-consuming. Of course, time equals money!

Until recently, powerful state bodies helped to ease the housing shortage. In South Australia, Playford's Housing Trust was a de facto planning body, while the Victorian Housing Commission transformed parts of Melbourne. In the West's retreat from public sector leadership, both of these have been weakened.

This reviewer shares Freestone's concern with placemaking in the public realm (Van Zyl, 2000). Galbraith's prophetic "private affluence and public squalor" are now echoed in privatised and internalised public space. Perhaps the new "beautility" is best exemplified by quasi-public corporate plazas and office parks functioning like islands or fortresses in the city. NIMBY and one-upmanship prevail instead of social responsibility.

Mention of Canberra's corridor plan recalls role players like the innovative National Capital Development Commission or its employees Overall and Harrison. US influence lingers on in Griffin's modified plan or Giurgola's sunken Parliament seventy years later. A minority of enlightened Federal politicians have briefly forayed into planning like Whitlam, Hawke and Keating. Few will forgive how Premier Dunstan's "model state" in South Australia was compromised.

Much clever improvisation and ad hoc, practical approach have prevailed with private developers, highway engineers and right-wing politicians dominating cities. The question is whether Western-style development really constitutes planning (Foresight). If planners are concerned with alternative futures, should they follow trends rather than strive for reform? Are we content that planners enter after all the basic decisions have already been made?

Besides greater social divisions, population change is altering the south-eastern location of Australian cities. According to Hamnett, Queensland accounted for a whopping 37% of growth from 1991 to 1996 (see Table 9.1). Thus the Surfers Paradise syndrome is spreading north to Cairns, Townsville and Rockhampton, spurred by a tourist and retirement boom, among world heritage sites!

A cryptic city summary might read as follows: Olympic "salvation" grips Sydney, Adelaide stagnates, Canberra down-sizes and Brisbane booms, but beautiful Hobart and multi-racial Darwin are only mentioned at the end in Table 10.1! To the north of Darwin lie the Asian mega-cities with their poverty. Hamnett's contrasting "compete vs sustain" will surely be tested in the future!

This welcome book provides many new insights and a good class text.

REFERENCES

Van Zyl, Wallace (2000). Transforming the Public Realm in South Africa, Proceedings, Planning History Conference, Durban (May).

Note: The reviewer lived in Australia from 1960 to 1967 and revisits often.