

Where is the Vision? Critically exploring the professional role of the Australian urban planner within a governance framework

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Abstract: Recent debates within the planning literature have highlighted that the professional role of the Australian urban planner is suffering a crisis of identity and vision (Gleeson 2003, March & Low 2007, Moran 2006, Powell 2006). In the face of 21st century sustainability imperatives such as climate change, affordable housing and water management, Australian planners emerge not as professionals at the forefront of change, but as struggling to find relevance and direction within the complexity of the contemporary governance framework. This situation has been exacerbated by institutional restructuring and reforms, diverse regulatory frameworks and increasing levels of bureaucratic minutiae (Hillier 2007). This paper critically reviews the literature related to the role of the Australian urban planner and in particular offers a socio-historical overview of five key shifts that have been identified within the Australian context. The paper concludes by highlighting four areas that warrant further investigation and scholarly attention: 1) the role of urban planners within the private sector; 2) the hybrid nature of urban planners within a governance framework; 3) re-valuing the professional role of the urban planner, particularly within the public sector; and 4) the implications of these shifts for urban planning education and practice.

Introduction

Australia is facing substantial urban development problems that require a lot more considered responses... governance issues, such as water and transport, are also fundamental town planning issues, yet the planning profession has little to say about them that is worth listening to (Powell 2006, p21).

At the turn of the 21st century the urban planning profession faces significant challenges, particularly in relation to enabling sustainability within Australian cities and regions (Freestone 2007, Gleeson et.al 2003, Williams 2007). In 2006 in a guest lecture to planning students at the University of Melbourne, Tony Powell observed that the planning profession in Australia was ill-equipped to address and meaningfully contribute to the pressing issues facing urban Australia including: urban infra-structure provision; urban consolidation; public transport, water management and housing affordability (p20). Specifically he outlined the need to re-assess and clarify the role of the professional planner due to: 1) a misguided view of the planner's role by planners themselves; and 2) misdirected education and skills development (Powell 2006, p21).

This is not the first time the need to re-think the professional role of urban planners has been highlighted. As Carolyn Whitzman (2004) pointed out in her editorial titled 'The Crisis in Planning (Don't yawn! Don't turn the page!)', the "recurrent crisis in planning is a chronic Anglo-American professional health issue that...will raise few eyebrows and...should usher in another round of breast-beating on the part of scholars" (p341). Yet this does not mean that such an endeavour is not worthwhile. The need to review and re-assess the shifting contemporary planning role and landscape should be an ongoing, reflexive process (Healey 2007). Indeed in the same editorial Whitzman goes on to call for the need to re-insert "values and ideals" (p342) within Australian planning, and argues that "both planning practice and planning education must transform themselves for the 21st century" (p342).

My aim for this paper is to critically explore the professional role of the Australian urban planner within a governance landscape. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part I offer a socio-historical review of the shifting role of the Australian planner. The second part of the paper focuses on exploring the implications of these shifts for the professional role of urban planners within a governance framework. Finally, I conclude by identifying a number of potential avenues for future inquiry for better understanding the evolving professional role of the Australian urban planner, and the implications of the changes for sustainable cities and regions.

Evolving visions - the shifting role of the Australian urban planner

To understand the emerging 21st century role of the Australian urban planner requires an overview of the socio-historical evolution of that role. A number of conceptual chronologies have been put forward in the planning literature that charts the evolution of Australian urban planning (i.e. Freestone 2007, Gleeson et. al. 2004, Hamnett & Freestone 2000, Sandercock 1998). I have drawn

on these chronologies to sketch a preliminary outline of the evolving role of the urban planner within Australia.

The limitations to linear chronologies have been outlined in the planning literature as an overly static and rigid framework (Hall 2002). However, a chronology can be useful as a means of highlighting key periods that have framed and defined the role of the planner. This chronology is not envisaged as a progressive list of roles that have existed historically and been replaced, but rather a means of understanding the concurrent multiplicity of planning roles that have emerged and continue to co-exist within the Australian context. These include: 1) the pioneering planner; 2) the visionary planner; 3) the government planner; 4) the frontier planner; and 5) the hybrid planner.

1. The pioneering planner (1788 –current)

The establishment of the British settlement of Australia in 1788 ushered in the foundations of a European vision of human-environment relationships that has arguably continued to this day. The newly colonized land was erroneously seen as unoccupied (*terra nullius*) and efforts were focussed on urbanizing and civilizing the landscape (Proudfoot 2000). This period was characterized by a type of government intervention that has been dubbed by Frawley (1994) as 'exploitative pioneering'. The focus for colonial planners was to further progress, growth and development and to contribute productively to the British Empire. Exploiting the environment to achieve an economic base for the colony led to overstocking and over clearing. This was exacerbated by the intensification of land settlement and ad hoc squatting.

By the 1850's the pressures of urban growth were beginning to be felt throughout the fledgling colony. Health and congestion dominated the agenda. The distribution of water, disposal of sewerage and the organisation of rapidly increasing numbers of people and goods through the cities were of particular concern. Significantly the formation of the Royal National Park was established at this time in 1879 albeit under a strictly preservationist agenda for recreation. The development of public policy legislation began to emerge and by the late 1880's to facilitate better services for the city through capital works (Proudfoot 2000, p18). By the end of the 1800's the ad hoc nature of development was increasingly criticised, paving the way for more formalised town plans and land use zoning. Surveyors as planners and colonial government officials dominated early planning activity amidst increasing collaboration with architects and engineers (Freestone 2007).

2. The visionary planner (1900 –current)

1901 marked the birth of the Australian federation. This coincided with the first 'Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors And Members of allied professions' to discuss the planning of a new national capital. Other significant issues covered in the congress included public concerns around transport, water supply, waste management, parks and gardens, and residential density (Freestone 2000, p27).

By 1917 the first National conference in town planning was held in Adelaide with representatives from state town planning associations, government representatives, members of the engineering and surveying professions and the general public. Christine Garnaut (2000) argues that through this and subsequent national conferences, planning was emerging as a "tool for urban reform and a set of clearly defined social, environmental and administrative goals" (p47). This was the basis of the new reform imperative that sought to "counter the detrimental effect of laissez-faire capitalism and haphazard, unchecked development on land-use, transport, housing, economic efficiency and the general well being of the metropolis and its residents" (Garnaut 2000, p46).

Despite these public visions and goals, the focus of this new nation was development-led progress but now at the national level. A number of tensions were beginning to emerge around the challenges of coordinating administration, legislation and policy in relation to strategic urban and regional planning (Hutchings 2000). The disjointed developments of government processes and the coordination of strategic urban and regional plans and regulations ushered in a new professional planning role that was distinct from the disciplines of surveying, architecture and engineering.

3. The government planner (1940 – current)

The combined impact of the 1930s Depression and the two World Wars further enhanced this public reform agenda and the growth of interventionist government planning within the Australian context in the 1940s. The focus of planners was on building a "strong post-war economy and ensuring an equitable standard of living based on secure male employment, adequate housing and well planned communities" (Howe 2000, p81). Keynesian economic strategies and a social democratic approach

underpinned the government agenda. This particular politico-economic ideology positioned the state with a positive role in the macro-economic, social and environmental management

In 1944 the Commonwealth Housing Commission argued that past national development had been largely in the hands of private enterprise and was motivated 'more by profit making than the needs of the community' (Commonwealth Housing Commission 1944, p27). Drawing on inspiration from the British model of comprehensive town and country planning, the report offered by the Housing Commission proposed state planning authorities, regional and town planning legislation at the state level and national/state planning coordination (Wright 2001, p4).

At this time the development of a more formalised planning profession emerged through planning education initiatives and a national planning institute. In 1949 a part-time postgraduate course was offered in Adelaide, a diploma course at Sydney University and a post-graduate course at Melbourne University. This fledgling planning education curriculum was taught predominantly by British expatriates (Wright 2001). By 1951 the Australian Planning Institute formed focusing on issues of accreditation and education. Most of these early planners went on to be employed by the state at either the local, state or federal level.

The 1950s are widely referred to as the golden age of rational planning when changes were slow and economic growth and social conformity was high. Faith in scientific method and rational planning strategies saw the rise of ambitious large projects designed to further promote growth and productivity such as the Snowy River Dam project. Metropolitan plans were also given greater prominence and planners within public sector were given the task of presiding over their implementation (Alexander 2000, p101). Recognition of the speed with which natural resources were being depleted prompted a 'wise-use' approach to management albeit within the state interventionist approach to planning in Australia (Frawley 1994). According to Frawley (1994, p66) "this did not fundamentally affect the dominant developmentalist ethos, but saw that development being organised through a public policy framework designed and managed by experts who increasingly tried to apply scientific and economic principles to the efficient utilisation of resources".

However, many of the ambitious visions of post-war re-construction did not unfold as planned and planning initiatives were instead stymied in disputes between government sector responsibility and through a failure to anticipate the population growth that resulted from post-war migration programs. The welfare era of 'the government as a vanguard for social change was under siege, increasingly viewed as a form of state capitalism serving the interests of urban developers at the expense of those in most need' (Howe 2000, p97). The role of the heroic planner as expert and apolitical was beginning to be more overtly challenged (Sandercock 1998). As planning became increasingly absorbed into the public bureaucracy, resistance came from two key sources: those who felt powerless in the face of top-down planning by the state and pursued a bottom-up planning agenda; and those who sought a more market-based planning approach.

4. The frontier planner (1970 – current)

The 1970s witnessed a significant rupture to the golden age of planning in Australia as economic, political and social conditions shifted. The pace of urban development and change began to accelerate. The role of the planner mushroomed as the profession moved away from the physical into the social and economic realms. Increasingly negative reactions to notions of the welfare state and the Keynesian style interventionism were beginning to emerge both from within Australia and from the broader international planning-related literature after World War II. The new mantra was that less government interventionist planning was better.

Despite these shifts the Whitlam-led Labour government came to power in 1972 on a social democratic mandate of "redistributing the benefits of economic growth and dealing with the environmental and social costs and disadvantages of growth"(Huxley 2000, p132). Significantly a Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) was also instituted at this time to facilitate the development of Australian urban and regional areas and produce urban-focussed policies at the national level. However the dismissal of the government in 1975 saw DURD dismantled as part of an emerging economic rationalist agenda of the new Liberal-National coalition government amidst an increasing economic recession.

Yet alongside attacks by neo-liberalism, the role of the urban planner was also suffering from a lack of environmental ethics and socio-political legitimacy (Gleeson 1998). New more politicized, roles for planners were advocated which stressed the distributional and ethical dimensions of planning by the state. Radical planners influenced by Marxist and post-modernist theories turned instead to a

bottom up style of planning embedded within the civil domain of the public sphere to address issues of social, cultural and environmental justice. In particular, the focus for radical planners was on reigning in the expanded role of professionals by practising outside the bureaucratic state to transform the dominant power structures creating conditions of exclusion and marginalisation. Planners, they believed, should no longer be exclusively concerned with the 'central guidance' of market forces, or planning regulation. Urban planning professionals were encouraged to be more daring and less codified (Sandercock 1998).

Many radical planners found resonance with the growing environmental movement and their negative view of the ability of the public sector to create substantive change. Indeed the continuing development ethos of the state was perceived to be one of the main proponents promoting environmental destruction, mistreatment and overuse. Through the development of environmentalism the possibilities for a more eco-centric perspective began to challenge the dominant anthropocentric progress through development ethos in western developed countries including Australia (Eckersley 1992).

During this era, the combined critiques of the planning professional significantly weakened the legitimacy of the role of urban planner, particularly within the public sector. By the end of the 1980s in Australia the critiques of the state by radical democratic and environmental interests had been selectively co-opted by the neo-liberal agenda of small government and minimal intervention to the market (Gleeson 1998). These shifts dramatically influenced the role of the professional urban planner particularly within the public sector.

5. The hybrid planner (1990 – current)

The 1990s signalled what some have argued is a crisis in Australian urban planning and in particular the role of urban planners within an agenda of sustainability (Gleeson & Low 2000, March & Low 2007, Moran 2006, Powell 2006). Indeed powerful attacks from all sides of politics have challenged the validity and legitimacy of the urban planning vision and mission. For example Alan Moran, Director of the Deregulation Unit for the Institute of Public Affairs has called planning 'a con' and 'a tragedy' largely responsible for the loss of the 'great Australian dream' (2006). While academics Alan March and Nicholas Low suggest that planners have aligned themselves with dominant bureaucratic, market and legal power structures to perpetuate "essentially undemocratic planning" (March & Low 2007, p193).

The acceleration of a government agenda of privatization since the 1990s, has witnessed the increased sale of public assets and a higher level of public goods and services contracted out to the private sector. Within this environment, the role of the urban planner has become polarised between a codified, bureaucratized activity on the one hand and an increasingly private sector role facilitating development on the other. This has been further reinforced by the increasing reduction in the scope of public planning and the influence of planners generally. In the wake of new public sector managerialism (NPSM), the role of public planning as a tool for correcting and avoiding market failure has shifted to a focus on outsourcing, privatisation and de-regulation of the planning role (Hamnett 2000).

This shift is characterised by "a belief in the superiority of the market over the state, the introduction of competition between government departments and agencies, a simultaneous process of centralisation and decentralisation, and the fragmentation of public service providers" (Dupont 2003, p16). It furthers the adoption of managerialist reforms under a micro-economic reform agenda that embraces the three E's – economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Spigelman 2001). In particular three key trends can be identified that have directly affected the role of Australian urban planners in the 21st century:

1. Attempts to slow down or reverse government growth in terms of public spending and staffing;
2. The shift towards privatization and quasi-privatization and away from core government institutions; and
3. The development of automation, particularly in information technology, in the production and distribution of public services (Hood 1991, p4).

These changes to the role of the Australian urban planner have not been uncontested within the planning literature. Counter-critiques to emerge within the Australian context have questioned the overriding focus on the "three E's" in comparison with other important values an era of sustainability such as ethics, equity and environment (Fincher 1998, Gleeson & Low 2000, Sandercock 1997, Spigelman 2001). Similarly Jean Hillier (2007) argues that these trends focussed around economic reform and NPSM "too-often reduce value to economic value, 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' to

financial cost-per-unit, and 'sustainability' to economic viability" (p22). Planners, she argues are "drowning in process with time filled generating data to fulfil performance measurement requirements and relying on checklists and templates rather than thinking through policies appropriate for the local context" (p24).

In 2007 the increasingly urgent sustainability imperatives of climate change, affordable housing and water management has put the spotlight on the role and contribution of the Australian urban planner. The predominantly negative image of urban planners has been exacerbated by what has been described as the 'toxic nature' of the urban planning workplace, coupled with a loss of faith in the integrity and efficacy of the current planning systems (Holliday 2004). Amidst the growing calls for greater professional support, mentoring and education for urban planners, lies increasing confusion around the hybrid role of the urban planner and the variety of values and ideals underpinning the multi-faceted planning mission of "changing cities and regions for the better" (Whitzman 2004, p342).

Future visions - the professional role of Australian urban planners within a governance framework

This century has ushered in new calls for the need to re-consider and re-value the professional role of the urban planner within the Australian governance context (Gleeson & Low 2000, Powell 2006, Sandercock 1998). In this context 'governance' refers to a "nexus of complex interactions, linking the spheres of the state, the economy and civil society in diverse, if typically highly uneven ways in relation to policy formation and delivery" (Healey 2007, p17). This shift represents a new range of networked practices that operate between the layers of the state, institutions and the actors in society (Hajer & Wagenaar 2003).

For planning scholars Gleeson and Low (2000), urban planning is best understood as a domain of, and approach to governance in which spatial regulation reflects the structures of legitimate authority and the competing claims of economic growth, social justice, global economic transformation and ecological sustainability. They argue that the role of professional urban planning in Australia within this governance framework, has been largely co-opted by a neo-liberal agenda and "outsourced, marketised and stripped of knowledge and confidence" (p1). In particular they observe that significant negative changes to the role of the urban planner have been largely unchallenged by the planning profession, and in some cases even actively encouraged. This they caution, raises the issue of whether the planning profession has "identified in recent times rather too closely with the development industry and its political interests, leaving the values of planning largely without the support of professional advocacy" (p205).

A more positive professional vision is offered by Australian sociologist Anna Yeatman (1998). She argues that professionals in Australia have the potential to reflect deeply held "value commitments, vision, pro-activity, strategic organisation and hard work that combine to produce possibilities for, and instances of, a democratic state administration which works on behalf of and develops a citizen-based community" (p3). In particular she highlights the work of Hager and Gonczi (1998, p12) who view the role of the professions as more than a set of narrow technical competencies, but fundamentally committed to "a conception, or more accurately an ethos, of professional education and training which develops reflective practitioners who can make a positive and creative contribution to the society in which they live".

The concept of 'a profession' has also been outlined in the planning literature recently by British academics Heather Campbell and Robert Marshall (2005). They focus on the ways in which planners construct their own professional identities and ethics in relation to planning as an activity and have identified a number of traits that commonly define a profession:

- Specialised knowledge which in its application requires a distinguishing expertise and set of skills;
- Independence of authority in transactions with clients;
- Commitment to altruistic public service; and
- Existence of an occupational (professional) association that controls entry to its ranks, exercises responsibility for the advancement of knowledge and for the training of recruits to the profession, and establishes standards of professional conduct (p192).

Campbell & Marshall (2005) argue that prior to the 1960s the planning profession and professions in general were viewed as "positive and stabilising influences in modern society" (p192). A more recent view of the professions has been that "far from pursuing an ethic of altruistic public service, they seek their own self-interest and enhance their own privilege and status through establishing

with the support of the state and exclusionary and sheltered position” (p192). Their work suggests that urban planning faces a number of challenges in regard to fulfilling the requirements of the traits of a profession outlined above.

Firstly, Campbell and Marshall (2005) point to the disagreement within planning around a “clearly recognisable set of competencies which distinguish planners from other occupational groups” (p200). Secondly, they highlight the difficulties of professional autonomy because of the close historic relationship between the public sector and the fact that many planners are still employed by the state. The lack of a clearly definable client within the public sector context also makes the planners’ professional position problematic. A third contentious topic is the commitment to altruistic service. The notion of serving the ‘public interest’ and ‘public good’ has been vigorously critiqued within a framework of diversity and difference (Fincher 1998, Sandercock 1998). Finally, the role of the professional association has also been viewed negatively as part of “a strategy to legitimate and consolidate the power of professions through monopoly and social closure” (Campbell & Marshall 2005, p206).

Many of these themes and tensions are reflected in a report released earlier this year entitled *Future Planners: Propositions for the New Age of Planning* (Bradwell et al. 2007). The report sets out a proposed vision for the role of planners in the 21st century as independent agents of public value working best within a flexible regulatory environment. Whilst the report is based in the United Kingdom and is not a formal scholarly contribution, the themes in the report provides a useful point of reference when considering the hybrid, professional role of the Australian urban planner within a governance framework.

Written in conjunction with the Royal Town Planning Institute, the *Future Planners* report argues that three key areas must be addressed if the role of the planner is to enable democratically legitimate sustainable development: 1) the need to consider the apparent loss of political and public faith in planners as deliverers of public value, 2) to re-think the current role of planners, and 3) to inform current debate concerning the future role of the planning professional (Bradwell et al. 2007, p1). The key challenges facing planners identified in the report revolve around the need for planners to respond to key changes that include: the nature of democratic legitimacy; the complexity of local/global relationships; climate change; and the rise of the private and third sectors.

The central message of the report is that public value is “no longer the sole prerogative of the state” (Bradwell et al. 2007, p9) and that there is a need for planners to reinforce their independence and to “re-assert a professional ethic of neutral expertise” (p15). Planners are encouraged to avoid being caught between the competing ideological silos of public and private interests and instead find a role as “independent arbitrators of global, national, local, individual and future values” (p15). This is not envisaged to be an exercise in major change, for which the report argues there is little appetite, but rather a shift to higher levels of autonomy for the planner and the development of mechanisms to support this (p16).

The vision offered in *Future Planners* highlights the need to enable sustainability but sees a rise in the power of the professional planner unshackled from the state. This new professional role sees planners as autonomous arbitrators balancing the competing demands of diverse sectors for sustainable outcomes. In the concluding paragraphs under the title ‘Long Live the Planner’, the report anticipates that the new millennium will mark both the demise of the overly-prescriptive plan as well as usher in new age of reign for the autonomous professional planner operating between the State and private sector.

The themes in the *Future Planners* report are provocative and politically contentious. Yet as illustrated in the brief socio-historical sketch of the role of the Australian urban planner outlined above, they have resonance within the Australian context and warrant far more rigorous debate and discussion than is currently occurring. As Robert Freestone (2007) has recently observed;

Planning is no longer the sole responsibility of government as it was a century ago, nor is it primarily pre-occupied with the by products of untrammelled growth. Rather, planning is now concerned in large measure with directly facilitating development through rapprochement with the private sector. Increasingly decentred and pulled in often contradictory directions by the demands of urban society, planning has... lost some of its original spirit, purpose and capacity to improve the quality of life (p86).

Conclusion - directions for future inquiry

The 21st century shifts to the role of the urban planner outlined in this paper, pose key challenges for urban planners not only to negotiate these tensions, but also to re-define themselves and their professional contribution within the Australian governance framework. From an almost exclusively public service bureaucratic profession in the 1950s, there has been a marked increase in the number of professional planners working in the private sector or as independent consultants contracted by the state (Holliday 2004). Whilst approximately two thirds of all professional urban planners in Australia are still employed by the public sector, few commit to the public role for the duration of their career. Many urban planners prefer instead to navigate as autonomous professionals between both the public and private realms. A hybrid, transient role for the urban planner has emerged which is not well understood.

In particular this paper has touched on four key areas that point to useful lines for more detailed future inquiry and research:

1. What is the contemporary role of urban planners working within the private sector?
2. What are the characteristics and dimensions of the increasingly hybrid role of urban planners within a governance framework?;
3. How might the professional role of the urban planner be re-valued, particularly within the public sector?
4. What are the implications of these shifts for planning education and practice for sustainable cities and regions?

For each of these questions the following sub-questions could be considered: What is known about this shift? What values, practices and macro forces are driving these changes? What are the implications of these shifts to the role of the urban planner for public goods and collective concerns? The contemporary dimensions of this evolving urban planning role has thus far received little attention within the Australian planning literature. This paper is an attempt to contribute to, and re-ignite interest in, debate around the current direction and vision of the role/s of the Australian urban planner. A desire to better understand and re-value this professional role as a constructive means of furthering sustainable cities and regions within the Australian governance framework, lies at the heart of this endeavour.

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Acknowledgements

Two anonymous referees are thanked for their constructive comments during the review process. Brendan Gleeson, Director of the Urban Research Program (Griffith University), also provided insightful comments on earlier drafts of this work.