

# Can Australian cities learn from a 'Great Planning Success'?

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**Abstract:** Since Ebenezer Howard published "Garden Cities of Tomorrow", planners have promoted self-containment of travel, and mode shift to public transport. Unfortunately, most of these attempts have failed. The history of planning is littered with what Peter Hall has called "Great Planning Disasters."

In recent years, Vancouver has attracted attention from a range of urban commentators: in 2005, The Economist christened it "the world's most livable city". But in July 2006, Statistics Canada released an assessment that should have attracted even more attention, particularly from planners. Over the period 1992 to 2005, Vancouver was the only Canadian city in which the time taken by the average resident to get to and from work declined. In other cities journey times increased markedly, even though none of them experienced such rapid population growth as Vancouver.

Significantly, this period corresponds to that covered by the Livable Region Strategic Plan, which was adopted in 1993 and promotes self-containment plus mode shift away from the automobile. Since Vancouver built no new major roads during this period, the improvements in trip times show that the plans succeeded: at last, a city has achieved the "holy grail" of planning!

This paper draws out the lessons for Australasian cities from the Vancouver success story, by examining the policies and actions taken in the areas of transport, urban consolidation and development regulation. On each of these issues, Vancouver's approach is crucially different from those of Australasian cities: our failure to make the "hard decisions" taken by Vancouver explains why we have not been able to replicate its success.

## INTRODUCTION: HAPPY BIRTHDAY?

The *Melbourne 2030* metropolitan strategy will have celebrated its fifth birthday by the time of the 2007 State of Australian Cities conference. The celebrations will be low-key to say the least. The Planning Minister who launched *Melbourne 2030* won't be at the party: she was unceremoniously demoted and has retired from politics, with the strategy blamed for her demise. The Department of Sustainability and Environment, which is responsible for *Melbourne 2030*, hardly mentions it at all, preferring to concentrate on 'good news' topics like water conservation. *Melbourne 2030* may be shaping up to be another 'great planning disaster' (cf. Hall, 1980).

The Victorian government has announced an 'audit' of the strategy, to be carried out in private by a hand-picked committee that 'is not required to undertake public hearings, but may initiate meetings it deems necessary' (Victorian Government, 2007). The audit is not to consider 'fundamental changes' to the strategy; nor is it to consider the extent to which the State Government has acted on the impressive-sounding statements in the original strategy, for example those about sustainable transport. There is no reference to the ambitious mode shift target announced in the original strategy, which was to lift the share of trips made by public transport from the current figure of 9 per cent of motorised trips (or around 7 per cent of total trips) to 20 per cent, by 2020.

This ham-fisted exercise should be compared with what *Melbourne 2030* stated was going to happen (Victoria, 2002, p. 164):

*Melbourne 2030* must be assessed against new or emerging trends. Minor changes to it may occur at any time, while formal reviews – with full community involvement – will be carried out at five-year intervals to assimilate these minor changes and assess whether major change is needed.

The reason for this attempt to prevent any real analysis of the outcomes is that it is widely agreed that the strategy has failed to make any progress in achieving the urban sustainability goals that were so widely trumpeted at its launch. What a contrast to the confidence with which *Melbourne 2030* was launched in October 2002. Bureaucrats, ministers, planners and academics queued to laud the strategy: 'a better plan than we have seen for at least thirty years'; 'the outcome... surely can be judged as grounded in reality'; 'the strong public ownership of the strategy may yet prove a decisive advantage in both plan implementation and plan coherence over time'. *Melbourne 2030* went on to inspire progeny in Canberra, Brisbane and Sydney.

What has gone wrong? What lessons can planners draw from all this?

## METROPOLITAN PLANNING IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

In order to answer these questions, we need first to decide what it is that we are talking about. Tony Powell (2003), who headed the National Capital Development Commission from 1974 to 1985, claims there has been 'a marked decline in the effectiveness of town planning Australia-wide' since the 1970s. In place of 'real' plans like the NCDC's 1984 *Metropolitan Canberra: Policy Plan, Development Plan*, we now have 'semblant town planning' – 'that is, a process which has the semblance of town planning without the substance. A type of "Clayton's town planning" as it were.'<sup>1</sup> What are the signs of Clayton's town planning? According to Powell, they are 'advocacy, broadly expressed vision statements and policy directives to local government, rather than... fiscal and coordinated infrastructure plans.'

Compare Powell's analysis with Mark Spiller's (2005) defence of *Melbourne 2030*. 'The fact is that Melbourne 2030 only addresses a small part of the trinity of good regional policy. It supplies the vision, and the complementary land use regulation measures, that's all... I can see no value in criticizing the M2030 policy itself if the government fails to deliver on [implementation] reforms and resource commitments.'

So it's official, from a former national president of the Planning Institute of Australia no less: metropolitan strategy is about 'vision' and land use regulation and no more. Implementation is something quite separate, attempted by planners only in 'centrally planned economies where edicts are handed down by some faceless committee for uncompromising compliance by all government agencies' (Spiller, 2005). So to aspire to anything more than 'Clayton's planning' is to be a Stalinist.

## MEANWHILE, IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

In July 2006, Statistics Canada released a report that was largely ignored by urban planners, but should have had them jumping for joy. Since Ebenezer Howard launched the whole enterprise of metropolitan planning (at least in the English-speaking world) with his *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, 'self-containment' has been planning's holy grail. But as Peter Hall points out in *Cities of Tomorrow*, not only is self-containment very difficult to achieve, it also runs counter to another cherished planning ideal, namely shifting travel away from the automobile to more environmentally friendly modes, such as public transport and walking.

The NCDC's famous 'Y-Plan' for Canberra was based on the ideal of self-containment. The most powerful planning agency in the world sought to reduce travel distances by balancing population, employment and retailing in each of Canberra's 'towns', but failed. Canberra's residents used the high-speed freeways the NCDC built to link the towns to generate higher rates of travel than those in larger Australian cities that had not been planned for self-containment (Mees, 2001).

It appeared that planners across the world had been unable to achieve the twin objectives of self-containment and mode shift, and so the task must be impossible. Hence the importance of the Statistics Canada report, which set out the results of journey-to-work surveys conducted across the nation in 1992, 1998 and 2005. These surveys showed that, as a result of longer distances and increased congestion, the time taken for the average journey to work increased everywhere – except in Vancouver: see Table 1.

Vancouver was the only Canadian city in which the time taken for the average work journey declined between 1992 and 2005, even though it had the fastest rate of population growth over this period. Vancouver built no major new roads between 1992 and 2005, and traffic congestion increased as it did everywhere else in Canada, so travel times should have increased had everything else remained constant. What seems to have happened is that slower road speeds were outweighed by shorter journeys arising from increases in self-containment, plus improvements in the speed of public transport.

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton's, a non-alcoholic liquor, was launched in the 1980s as 'the drink you have when you're not having a drink.'

**Table 1. Average travel time for making the round trip between home and workplace is increasing**

	1992	1998	2005
		Minutes	
<b>Canada total</b>	54	59	63
<b>Regions</b>			
Atlantic	39	50	51
Quebec	52	57	63
Ontario	59	63	68
Prairies	45	53	57
British Columbia	59	61	60
<b>Census metropolitan areas</b>			
Toronto	68	76	79
Montreal	62	65	76
Vancouver	70	68	67
Ottawa-Gatineau	57	62	65
Calgary	52	64	66
Edmonton	50	58	62
Autre RMR/AR	44	50	53
Non RMR/Rural	44	50	54

(Source: Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 15; table 1.)

Although the Statistics Canada survey did not measure changes in mode share (the relevant data from the 2006 census will not be released until next year), the regional planning authority conducts regular travel surveys (results taken from Al-Dubikhi, 2007, p. 157), which showed that between 1994 and 2004 there were modest increases in the share of trips made on foot (from 12.7 to 13.0 per cent) and by public transport (from 10.2 to 10.8 per cent; or from 12 to 13 per cent of motorised trips) and a corresponding small decline (from 76.2 to 75.2 per cent) in the automobile mode share. So improvements in self-containment were achieved along with mode shift.

While it is often argued that continued construction of major new roads is necessary to make a city attractive for investors, it is worth noting that Vancouver has topped the 'most livable city' rankings awarded by the Economist Intelligence Unit and Mercer Human Resources Consulting, scoring considerably above Melbourne, which used to boast about winning awards of this kind. Although the methodology for the 'most livable' rankings is open to serious question, the fact that Vancouver consistently scores so well suggests that its transport and planning policies are unlikely to be scaring businesses away.

## **EXPLAINING VANCOUVER'S SUCCESS**

What makes Vancouver's experience so remarkable is that the period covered by the Statistics Canada survey corresponds to the life of the *Livable Region Strategic Plan* and its accompanying *Transport 2021* strategy, both of which were released in 1993. A city that planned for the 'holy grail' of self-containment plus mode shift has actually achieved it, albeit modestly. Perhaps Vancouver is a planning success, even if not yet a great one.

Vancouver has attracted a good deal of attention from architects and urban designers across the English-speaking world, particularly the United States, as a model of successful city planning. Most of this attention has focussed on the inner city, and on the quality and quantity of high-rise residential construction. John Punter's *The Vancouver Achievement* (2003) and Lance Berelowitz's *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination* (2005) are both examples of this approach.

The problem with focussing on high-rise inner-city housing is that the main high-rise areas adjacent to the CBD, West End and False Creek, house less than 4 per cent of the regional population, and are

unlikely to be responsible for more than a small share of the transport changes discussed above. A broader analysis of transport and land use policies across the whole Vancouver region is required to explain these trends.

This is particularly the case for Australian observers seeking lessons, since the inner-city high-rise boom that surprises US observers is familiar to Australian urbanists. The difference here is that inner city redevelopment has not produced either reductions in journey-to-work times or mode shift away from the automobile. The following discussion will attempt to draw out the lessons for Australian urban planners, using Melbourne for comparison with Vancouver.

## **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN VANCOUVER AND AUSTRALIAN CITIES**

Some of the differences noted by American observers to Vancouver would not surprise Australians, thanks to a common colonial history. The Constitutions of Canada and its provinces, and Australia and its states, are similar (except that Canadian provinces, like Queensland, do not have Upper Houses). Planning in both polities is unaffected by the constraints US courts have derived from that country's constitution, and states and provinces are similarly free to deal with local government, which is their 'creature' and lacks constitutional protection. There are even parallels in institutional histories: the Greater Vancouver Regional District came into being for similar reasons to the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works, and gradually extended its reach from water supply and sewerage to include urban planning.

Vancouver and Australian cities have seen similar trends in urban development as well: a long-standing preference for dispersed development characterised by detached housing, with a more recent shift to inner city gentrification and accompanying demand for higher-density dwelling forms. Vancouver's overall urban density (see Mees, 2000 for definition) is similar to Melbourne's and Sydney's: Vancouver's density at the 2006 census was 17.2 persons per hectare (calculated from population table for urban area of Vancouver, at [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)), compared with 2001 figures of 15.2 for Melbourne and 20.8 for Sydney (ABS 2001 urban area density figures, taken from [www.demographia.com](http://www.demographia.com)).

Hardly surprisingly, then, the key challenges identified by urban planners are similar in both places: restraining urban sprawl, combating long travel times and shifting travel to more sustainable modes. In Melbourne and Vancouver, these concerns, and the policies advanced in response, are frequently stated in virtually identical terms. For example, *Melbourne 2030* designates a series of 'major activity centres', while the *Livable Region Plan* has 'major centres'; at the opposite end of the scale are 'local activity centres' in Melbourne and 'local centres' in Vancouver.

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VANCOUVER AND MELBOURNE**

### ***Planning documentation***

The first difference to strike an observer lies in the documents recording the metropolitan plans of Melbourne and Vancouver. The *Melbourne 2030* report gives the appearance of having been produced by public relations professionals, rather than planners (as in fact it was – see Mees, 2003): colour photos of smiling, happy people on virtually every page, but usually with little relation to the accompanying text; equally warm and soothing language (e.g. 'Direction 5: A great place to be'); very little data or detail about what is actually supposed to happen in the areas of transport or land use planning; and even less detail about how the decisions were made and who made them.

By contrast, the series of documents reporting the *Livable Region Strategy* contains nothing in full colour, fewer soothing blandishments and more factual data. Photographs are used sparingly, and those that do appear are directly related to the content. The overall impression is much closer to that of the former NCDC's *Metropolitan Canberra* report. Perhaps most significantly, the Vancouver reports document in considerable detail the process employed to reach the key decisions on transport and land use, the research on which those decisions were based and who was involved at each stage of the process. It is hard to avoid the conclusion even at this early stage that Vancouver's regional planners have 'nothing to hide', in contrast with their Melbourne counterparts.

As indicated in the previous section, when one turns to the issues covered by the two cities' plans there is considerable overlap – hardly surprisingly, given that regional planning is essentially about the distribution of residential and commercial land uses, and the transport systems that connect them. But there are significant differences.

## **Transport**

The most striking difference lies in the area of transport. Vancouver's *Livable Region Strategy* was released together with *Transport 2021*, reflecting the fact that both processes and plans were tightly integrated. The land-use and transport strategies were prepared alongside one another and are expressly designed to support each other. So, for example, *Transport 2021* rejected a series of proposals from the Provincial highways agency for major new roads, because they would promote car use, long-distance travel and urban dispersal, and thus 'work against the proposed land-use objectives and the pro-transit orientation of the GVRD Livable Region Strategy which the transport plan is intended to reinforce' (GVRD, 1993a, p. 57).

In Melbourne, by contrast, transport decision-making was largely detached from the *Melbourne 2030* process, which confined itself to the recording of aspirational statements about the need for better public transport, and for a mode shift away from the car. Road planning by the State road agency, VicRoads, has not been affected by *Melbourne 2030* at all, and the city is currently in the midst of the largest program of freeway and tollway planning and construction in its history. Nobody has apparently felt any obligation to explain how this is consistent with goals like reducing the car's share of travel, or halting urban dispersal.

Public transport supporters were placated with a promise to prepare separate 'bus, train and tram plans' (Victoria, 2002, p. 149). Although the idea of separate mode-specific plans showed how little those responsible understood the need for public transport to operate as a multi-modal network (HiTrans, 2005), the bus, train and tram plans were not released in any event. Instead, in 2004 the transport ministry released *Linking Melbourne*, a policy statement confirming that Melbourne will see no significant rail expansions for at least a decade. The government responded to public disquiet – which was by now beginning to include supporters of *Melbourne 2030* who realised that they had been hoodwinked by the document's pro-public transport rhetoric – by releasing in 2006 a new document called *Meeting Our Transport Challenges*, which reiterated the (non-) content of *Linking Melbourne*, but with higher production values.

## **Residential development**

Planners in both cities support the long-standing ideal of a clear boundary between the city and the countryside: *Melbourne 2030* has an 'urban growth boundary'; Vancouver achieves the same result in reverse, with a 'green zone' that is protected from development. However, what goes on inside the two cities' growth boundaries is quite different.

Residential development within Melbourne's growth boundary is in effect a free-for-all. Local councils have very limited zoning powers, as a result of 'reforms' in the 1990s that replaced prescriptive controls with 'policy statements'. These vague policies, which in reality control nothing, function in concert with an appeal system in which the planning division of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal has unlimited powers to review council decisions on permit applications on their merits, without any requirement to show that the council erred in any way. The result in practice has been extensively analysed by Buxton et al (2005), Goodman & Coote (2007) and Buxton & Scheurer (2007), who report that residential development is taking the form that would occur if there were no planning controls at all: car-based low-density sprawl at the fringes, and uncoordinated, developer-led apartments in the city centre. Because decades of propaganda in favour of a vaguely-defined concept of 'urban consolidation' have created a strong bias in favour of apartment development, the proliferation of inner-city apartments has been interpreted by some planners and architects as proof that 'sustainability' is being achieved, despite the fact that residents of these apartments actually have higher per capita car ownership and energy consumption than the residents of separate houses.

Residential development in Vancouver is much more closely regulated than in Melbourne, and contrary to the impression gained from slide-shows of inner city apartments, high-rise developments in the inner city are less favoured than in Melbourne. As Punter (2003) and Berelowitz (2005) explain, the City of Vancouver tightly controls apartment developments through a discretionary zoning system. Under this system relatively low densities are permitted 'as of right', but developments at higher densities can be allowed under a system in which no 'merit' appeals are permitted. Vancouver planners agree when questioned that the entire system would collapse if anything like the Victorian appeals system was introduced. The City uses this system to confine high-rises to limited areas, to ensure they respect neighbourhood plans and to achieve outcomes such as provision for families with children, mandatory shares of affordable housing and so on.

What Punter and Berelowitz do not discuss is the way the City's system fits into the regional context. Suburban municipalities are beginning to use their strong regulatory powers to change the form of residential growth in fringe areas, to create higher overall densities and strongly transit-supportive patterns (Condon, 2006). The *Livable Region Strategic Plan* guides this process, with some results that may seem odd to Australians. For example, a major feature of the plan has been a reduction in the amount of inner-city land on which apartments can be built, in favour of 'ground-oriented housing': medium-density, family-friendly forms such as terraces (GVRD 1993b, p. 19). The reasons for this change are firstly to promote social mix by permitting families with children to live in the inner city, and secondly to create human-scale, walking-friendly neighbourhoods.

## **Results**

The combined results of the transport and land-use planning policy differences between Melbourne and Vancouver have been that Vancouver has 'consolidated' more than Melbourne (overall urban densities are rising), while preserving the low-rise character of most of its neighbourhoods, and reducing average trip lengths and shifting some travel to public transport and walking. And while *Melbourne 2030* has in only a short time become possibly the least popular State government policy in any area, the longer-standing *Livable Region Strategic Plan* appears to retain widespread support. So perhaps Vancouver does deserve to be considered a 'great' planning success after all.

## **EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES**

Vancouver provides an excellent example of what Powell calls 'real town planning'; conversely, Melbourne exemplifies the key features of 'Clayton's town planning.' But, contra Spiller, Vancouver is not a centrally-planned economy in which plans are dictated from upon high (like Canberra under the NDCD, perhaps?); rather, it is an exemplar of open, democratic, participatory planning. Melbourne is the city where planning consists of edicts handed down by faceless committees – although it is elected local councils and local communities who are required to comply, not government departments.

So what Vancouver shows is that 'real town planning' can be carried out in an open, participatory way. Melbourne (and in this respect I would argue the same for other Australian cities) illustrates the maxim Bent Flyvbjerg (1998, p. 37) takes from Nietzsche: 'power makes stupid'. In Vancouver, the open and democratic process forces planners to rigorously justify the logic of their proposals to gain support for them; in Melbourne, the secretive process and 'spin' ensure that planning proposals have not been properly tested or even thought through before release. So participation helps ensure that planning policies are soundly-based in Vancouver, while secrecy and spin in Melbourne produce incoherent and politically unpopular policies.

The question which logically arises at this point is why Vancouver has a planning culture characterised by participation and analytical rigour – or perhaps why Australian cities do not. This could be the subject of a separate paper (and hopefully will in due course), but I believe the following factors are worth considering in this context:

- Australian planners, or at least their professional associations, apparently no longer aspire to this kind of planning, as exemplified in Spiller's defence of *Melbourne 2030*.
- It is not clear that Australian planning academics as a body aspire to change the situation either, as evidenced by the largely uncritical reception given to *Melbourne 2030* by academic commentators in Victoria and other states.
- The Vancouver development control system, which incidentally is similar to that recommended by Powell (2006) for Australian cities, gives lawyers and quasi-legal dispute resolution almost no role at all; this appears to leave planners free, compared with their Australian counterparts, to concentrate on planning.
- Vancouver has an efficient, publicly-run public transport system, in comparison with Melbourne's balkanised, privatised shambles; this seems to make it easier to take public transport seriously as an alternative to the car.
- Urban and transport planning in Vancouver is primarily the responsibility of local and regional governments; although the Province does interfere, especially under conservative governments, it generally respects these bodies. The contrast with Australia in this area could not be greater.

• A final significant factor is the retention in Vancouver of a regional planning agency, the GVRD, in contrast to Melbourne, where the regional agency, the MMBW, was abolished in the 1980s and its powers transferred to the state government. Although the transfer of responsibility for Melbourne's metropolitan planning to the state was intended to increase accountability, it seems to have achieved the opposite outcome. Vancouver's experience suggests that the best approach might have been to reform the regional agency to make it more accountable.

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