“I think planning is about chipping away at stuff”: the voices and activities of public service planners working in Melbourne.

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to find out what planners do and why. It begins with a review of selected UK and USA literature on the ethical dilemmas faced by practising planners. The body of the paper uses this literature’s key points as a way of further interpreting the themes drawn from transcripts of interviews with Melbourne public sector planners undertaken in late 2012. After brief consideration of state government planners, it focuses on the work of local government planners.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the values and activities of urban planners and the governance arrangements they operate within, bearing in mind the ongoing effects of the Global Financial Recession (GFC) of 2008. It is a response to a call from Davidson and Fincher in 1998 for such research in Australian urban studies, one taken up by Hillier (2002) and more recently by Steele (2009).

It draws on interviews undertaken in late 2012 with state and local government planners working in Melbourne. State government planners at the time were finalising the various statutory planning reforms of the incoming Coalition State Government, ones designed to simplify and speed up the planning application process. Curiously these reforms preceded the drafting of a new metropolitan plan to replace Melbourne 2030, an ill-fated plan formulated by the previous ALP state government. Known as Plan Melbourne, the new plan was released for a final round of comment on October 9, 2013. Local government planners meanwhile, soon to be implementing the proposed reforms, continued to address Melbourne’s continuing high growth rates, while having to face up to a new conservative government’s insistence on cuts to public spending, including planning-support budgets. They were being expected to do more with less.

The interviews were designed to let the planners speak as they wished with reference to their upbringing, their education and their personal values, their professional careers to date and what they consider to be their successes and failures.

This paper reports on the early empirical findings of wider study that includes similar interviews with equivalent planners in Glasgow and Toronto. It begins with a brief review of selected UK and USA literature on the ethical dilemmas faced by practising planners. The body of the paper uses the literature’s key points as a means of further interpreting themes already drawn from transcripts of the Melbourne interviews. Previously unnoticed nuances are revealed.

LITERATURE

There is a strong tradition of research into the values and actions of planners in the USA pioneered by Howe (1980) and taken up with gusto by Forester (1989, 1999a and b) and then Hoch (2004). In
the UK the seminal work involved Thomas and Healey (1991). More recent British research by Campbell and Marshall (2000), Lovering (2010) and Inch (2012) is of direct relevance to this research. In Australasia, there is not as strong a base to build upon. Apart from Steele (2009), the main reference appears to be Hillier (2002).

The foundational American reference is Howe (1980). More recently she has written of the importance of childhood, university and early career in shaping practitioners’ values and ethics (1994). Forester (1999b) appreciative of this, argues planners have to continuously anticipate and respond reflectively to the pressures of political power, for example, they have to reconcile their own values with those of their employers and the government of the day. This causes dilemmas of how to act. To delve further Forester asked practicing planners for their own accounts of how they respond to such dilemmas. He uses what he terms ‘critical pragmatism’ as his guide: ‘pragmatism’ being how planners actually get things done, ‘critical’ being the quality of what they do and for whom they do it. He ends by discussing how planners might avoid Hamlet-like inaction:

_Planners, then, must not only listen critically to conflicting and ambiguous claims of value, they must also shape hope by speaking to real possibilities of public action._ (p. 190)

In the UK Thomas and Healey (1991) brought together a number of planners to reflect on their practices and its dilemmas. A rich variety of issues were discussed. They draw out themes centred on ethics, legitimacy and the validation of knowledge. Healey in her introductory chapter begins by nominating five idealised roles that practitioners may take: urban development manager, public bureaucrat, policy analyst, mediator or social reformer. She then ponders whether planners are to be distinguished by what they know and do (knowledge and skills) or by the approach to what they know and do (values and ethics). She concludes that planners are better distinguished as much by their self-reflectivity as their particular knowledge and skills, to which little attention has been given. Thomas in his introductory chapter echoes Forester’s concerns: planners have to reflect on whether, through their actions, they consciously or unconsciously reinforce the position of the powerful or whether, working in a profession with social reform roots, they resist doing so, a question posed again in an Australian context in 2009 by Steele.

Thomas and Healey as editors then order the written-up reflections of the seasoned practitioners. The seasoned practitioners’ reflections form the bulk of the text.

These are followed by concluding chapters jointly authored by Healey and Thomas.

Of the practitioners they say:

..._all have moved from the simple idealism not merely of youth, but of a euphoric period in planning history_ (the post-Vietnam War rise of the feminist and green movements). _They have learned ways of adjusting to the world of practice without becoming drained of principles and values. They have moved from the safety of formal bureaucracy_ (the British Welfare State) _to more fluid institutional contexts_ (the Thatcher Government era) _which expose them to more difficult moral dilemmas. Yet they have little time and few formal opportunities to reflect on how they are coping with these dilemmas._ (Thomas and Healey, p. 125) (Author’s added comments)

Ethical issues are the dominant theme in the practitioners’ reflections. Thomas and Healey highlight two sub-themes: choosing between being value neutral or being a forceful advocacy of certain
values, and the dilemma of split loyalties and obligations to their employers and to others they seek to serve. Many choose to compartmentalise their professional and private lives while others, notably Kitchen (1991), seek to be as honest and open with all their clients as one can be while careful not to leak confidences.

These ambiguities and conflicts within UK practice were taken up a decade later by Campbell and Marshall (2000) after the election of the Blair government in the UK, one of third-way persuasion. The main question they ask is: does ‘public interest’ still have a value as a legitimating frame of reference for planners? They discuss in some detail:

- planners’ personal values (generally reflecting the majority’s middle class, Anglo-Celtic origins);
- their professional values within a neo-liberal world (for example, whether the planner’s senses of neutrality and objectivity, anchored in expert knowledge, are comprised if working in the private sector);
- their employers’ values (for example, the potential for the now dominant corporate managerial ethos to erode the planner’s autonomy);
- politicians’ values (for example, the quandary of a planner, whose advice has been rejected by local government councillors, being obliged then to represent their view at appeal);
- the public’s values (the reality of multiple publics, with planners often working on behalf of just well-resourced groups).

They conclude most UK planners have adapted to “the bureaucratic proceduralism of the managerialist conception of local government” (p.308). To avoid such a Don Watson-like fate, they suggest a rejection of the Benthamite notion of the public good – ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’ – for that of ‘shared interests’ one that transcends market processes. They argue this approach should be combined with the notion of ‘procedural public interest’ as championed by Forester, Healey and others: “planning must return to its social reform roots.” (p.310)

There are overlaps here with O’Flynn’s comparison of Australian public management paradigms(2007). She suggests that government agencies move on from New Public Management (NPM), one associated with neo-liberal thinking to Public Value Management. The latter is more process driven and emphasises building relationships over results; it moves on from a reliance on performance targets; it redefines public interest as collective in nature, as opposed to being an aggregation of individual preferences; and it goes beyond just upward accountability to multiple accountabilities, all seeking to build trust between, in this case, planners and the varied interested parties they deal with.

Lovering (2010) surveys the post-GFC planning scene in the UK. While the recession exposed many failures of neo-liberal planning it has not led, he argues, to any significant reforms. He further argues, while neo-liberals notionally abhors the ‘market distortions’ created by planning, they have found in practice that plans provide some degree of certainty for risk-averse investors, while public-private partnerships have helped secure private profits in uncertain market situations. In such situations planners have proved useful in facilitating stakeholder agreements and have been successful managers of regeneration sites. Rather than being marginalise, “the neo-liberal turn thus
reconstructed planning” (p. 239). Planners, he concludes, increasingly serve private over collective interests, to the point that planning has lost its last shreds of moral credibility.

Inch (2012) draws on Gunder and Hillier’s notion (2009) of ‘empty signifiers’ – terms favoured by planners such as sustainable development, seemingly benign and acceptable to all, but used by developers and politicians for their own purposes – and Newman’s text, Modernising Governance: New Labour, Policy and Society (2001). He specifically sets out to deconstruct the term ‘spatial planning’, the new hope of English planning in the first decade of this century. He adopts as his method, ‘interpretative policy analysis’, one that focuses attention on “the actors involved in the producing, reproducing, and transforming (the institutional frameworks they work within), the tradition of thought they draw on as they act and the ways in which they come to identify with new discourses and practices.” (p. 3) He compares and contrasts four models of change agency in planning systems including what he calls a ‘professional empowered culture’, one in which planners influence events through their professional values and their networking, with ‘target culture’, one governed by performance targets, as with NPM, in which planners are judge by their outputs, for example, the number of planning applications they complete. Within this context Inch interviewed national level planners who saw ‘spatial planning’ as giving new impetus to their flagging profession. They were planners who came through planning schools in the 1970s and who were now frustrated by the narrowness of the plan-led (rules) systems of the 1990s. ‘Spatial planning’ fitted both their and New Labour’s modernisation agenda. It was one challenged by Treasury that held fast to pursuing a simpler, so quicker system of planning approvals: a target culture. The bulk of the article centres on the different meanings attached to spatial planning by different stakeholders. While portrayed by planners as a neutral, technical, even a consensual term, it is and remains a contested term according to Inch, one interpreted differently by stakeholders more powerful than planners. As such it has been stymied in its successful implementation. It is, like other terms planners seeks to identify themselves with, an empty signifier.

This literature opens up a multitude of questions for Australasian urban planners to reflect upon, including:

- the relative importance of childhood, university and early career experiences in shaping their practitioners’ values;

- the dominance or not of “the bureaucratic proceduralism of the managerialist conception of local government”;

- spatial planning as planners’ ongoing guiding principle;

- the practitioners’ ability to anticipate and respond reflectively to the pressures of political power;

- their ability to be self-reflective, so be aware of their own values relative to their employer and developers, amongst others, and so be able to act ethically.

Attention is given to these below when interpreting the themes drawn out from the interviews.

METHODOLOGY
Interview data were collected before this review of recent literature was conducted. The questions derived from the literature, it is hoped, will draw out inferences from the interview transcripts that otherwise might not have been noticed, hence the potential value of such an approach. This methodology can be thought of as a variation on what Bryman (2008) calls ‘secondary analysis of qualitative data’, in this case a deductive reworking of interview data collected and originally interpreted inductively. In other words the interviewees were consciously given some freedom to speak as they wished about their work, from which generalisations or common themes were derived (induction); these in turn are re-examined here in light of the questions drawn from the literature review of more abstract theories that could be applied to interpret the values and actions of practising planners (deduction).

The interviews while centred on the careers of the interviewees - what they did, how they did it and why - were as open as possible. The intention was to try to listen carefully to what was being said, and not to have the interviewer’s opinions ‘distort’ what they wanted to say. This is a difficult, if not impossible task. The position taken by the interviewer on occasion was to ask the interviewee to expand on certain points, sometimes to better justify the point they were making. On occasions, the interviewer acted as devil’s advocate to further draw out the interviewee on a point they were seeking to emphasise.

Discussion lasted up to two hours. It was left to the interviewee as to how much attention would be given to their formative years, their time at university and their earlier career. More specific questions related to their current work situation and practices, what they considered to be their professional successes and failures, and their professional intentions for the future. Questions other than the first question listed in the previous section were not directly asked. The purpose here is to discover whether the later questions above, those that were not asked, can shed further light on the interview material beyond that inductively generated in terms of the themes listed below in Tables 1 and 2.

Nine interviews were conducted with state-level planners. All were or had been in senior positions in what was then named the Department of Planning and Community Development (now expanded and renamed the Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure) and related agencies. The aim was to have as wide a range of perspectives on recent and emerging thinking on the strategic planning of the Melbourne metropolis. It was a case of ringing up prospective interviewees from across the Department and its agencies and asking to be interviewed. None refused. Four were repeat interviews from 2006. One was a key author of Melbourne 2030, another, its keen internal critic and now a force behind the Coalition’s reforms. The third worked in the Department of Transport, now merged with Planning and the fourth, someone working to better tie land use and transport planning together. Of the new interviewees the fifth was close to the drafting on the new metropolitan strategy. A sixth was dealing with Infrastructure Australia, a Federal authority. Two others worked with state government’s implementation agencies: the Growth Area Authority and Places Victoria. The final interview was with a regional planner, working on companion regional plans to the metropolitan plan. This span of interviews covered most facets of metropolitan planning in Victoria.

Nine interviews were conducted with planners working at four councils, councils chosen to cover firstly, an inner city area at the edge of the expanding CBD, one also continuing to be transformed by
gentrification; secondly, a post-war industrial suburban area now replete with brownfield sites; and thirdly, a new fringe residential area. All are areas sensitive to fluctuations in the global and national economy, and so demanding of plans and planners, the planners ideally being sensitive to the economic and social impacts of such fluctuations, and with the capability of adapting to change.

Those interviewed thus are unlikely to be representative of the profession in metropolitan Melbourne as a whole. Those at state government level are or have been in influential positions, engaged in major reforms and their implementation. In terms of the profession as a whole, they collectively shape debates within the Department and so, have bureaucratic power and possibly political influence. Those at council work at interesting but demanding councils, councils likely to attract planners who like a challenge. Not all planners seek challenges.

The interviews were taped and then transcribed by the author, a laborious process but one that, based on past experience, is more likely to pick up and record more accurately the nuances and technicalities that a professional transcriber might miss. Twelve booklets of handwritten transcription was the result.

But what were all these planners saying? Were there any common themes or generalisations of interest to a wider audience – an audience of academics, planning students and politicians?

The search for emergent themes involved carefully reading of the hand-written transcripts, highlighting all points, large or small, the author thought important. The highlighted points from each interview were then rewritten out as an ever-growing list. If an identical or near identical point was made by another, rather than adding it on to the end of the list, it was tacked onto the already listed point. As Table 2 below shows, up to six interviewees made the same or near same point. Next on A3 sheets of paper seemingly like points mentioned by different interviewees were written out as clusters – one sheet for local government planners, another for state planners. Various attempts to do this were made, reshuffling possible clusters within the limits of two-dimensional sheets of paper. Names were then given to the clusters, now themes.

Many of the themes identified were unexpected suggesting the methodology has some value in capturing what the interviewees wanted to say, rather than what the interviewer might have wanted to hear.

In the next section consideration is given to themes thought important by three or more of, first, the state government planners, then, the local government planners. The aim is to let the voices of the planners come through loud and clear, largely unencumbered by the concerns raised in the Literature Review. Some space is given to dissenting voices. In the next section after that, questions derived from the literature review are asked of the themes, whether raised by one interviewee or all, to discover if less obvious but salient points need to be taken up.

**INDUCTIVELY-DERIVED THEMES AND THEIR DISCUSSION**

**Table 1: Themes discussed by three or more of the nine state government planners interviewed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five</th>
<th>More jobs in the suburbs needed</th>
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</table>
Note: italic and smaller-sized fonts are used to identify two ‘clusters’, discussed in the text.

An economic inclusiveness/agglomeration cluster highlighted in italics is the largest identified cluster (Table 1). What might this mean?

The promotion of economic inclusiveness, or its converse: seeking a reduction in social exclusion, is a major part of third way thinking, one associated with Giddens (1998), and acted upon by the Blair Government in the UK and the Bracks/Brumby Labour Government in Victoria (1999–2010). They believed that greater economic inclusion is the best way of increasing the overall economic productivity of an area. The agglomeration of commercial activity and higher density housing around transport interchanges was the foundation of *Melbourne 2030*, the spatial planning manifestation of this belief.

Now, with a new, free-market-orientated state government that considers *Melbourne 2030* to be a failed plan, it is curious as to why such third-way thinking should remain strong among the planners preparing its replacement. Perhaps this cluster of themes may reflect more Treasury’s slow realisation that such spatial planning will assisting in curtailing public expenditure given the main agglomerations are semi-formed already. Similarly, perhaps traditionally risk-averse developers and builders are beginning to realise there are profits to be made in higher density housing at activity centres as home buyers and renters seek to reduce their journey-to-work times. Alternatively, the planners, after Forester, are anticipating financial and market trends, and are seeking to maintain their influence by rebadging *Melbourne 2030*. Perhaps spatial planning, if it suits the interests of all stakeholders, is not an empty signifier after all.

The Coalition Government’s recent prioritisation of the East-West freeway link across Melbourne, however, suggests otherwise.
Indeed, do planners have a full understanding of agglomeration economics? The dissenting voice amongst the nine state planners stated:

*The way (agglomeration) is used in the planning framework here is an incomplete understanding of (a) how regions grow, and (b) the role of agglomeration in regional economic performance*

and

*agglomeration stuff is also regressive. It comes down to focus on a global elite, a knowledge-intensive service hive of workers as the primary focus of your planning policy – it is not politically smart. What politicians are interested in is talking to people in the suburbs – that is why it does not gain traction...*

If there is a second cluster, it revolves around the need for ‘new thinking’, effectively communicating the ideas so generated and having the planning tools to realise them: see the themes in smaller font size.

In fact there are possibly two sub-clusters, one tied to improving lines of communication so is more a technical or managerial concern, the other about an expansion or change of current thinking. In the quantitative scheme of things, the latter seems a relatively minor cluster but in light of the literature it is worth investigating further.

In response to whether *Melbourne 2030* represented a significant change in government thinking, the planner involved in writing *Melbourne 2030* said:

*People tell me so. It is quite surprising. Even at the level of ministers when they talk about the new Metropolitan Planning Strategy, they tend to ask: “is it better than M2030?” So if that is where the new government’s mind set is at, that is good.*

Indeed the planner close to the rewriting of the new Metropolitan Strategy said:

*Look at the first five principles in the Discussion Paper. It is triple bottom line with place distinctiveness and personal participation added... I think people, planners and those who leave to the left in Melbourne misunderstand the nature of the current government’s thinking...*

A transport planner said ‘spatial restructuring’ was now part of public service thinking:

*I now have a role in shifting the conversation.*

A planner dealing with Infrastructure Australia said:

*We should start from a settlement perspective, the way we want things, then consider infrastructure, not the other way around as now... we should be leveraging the wider benefits we want and finding the right mechanisms to do this... there is a shift starting to occur in the Department.*

Another planner dealing with brownfield sites was faced with strong developer pressure on large strategic sites at the edge of the CBD:
Like Department planners I feel I can influence the Minister’s decision so that while a tower block might get fast-track approval there will be a community centre on the ground floor and compensatory public space provision.

These comments are less about conflicts of values and loss of professional autonomy and more about how, in their different ways, all five feel they are influencing planning debates within government. They are all positive about their work and contributions. This may explain why three interviewees unexpectedly said how happy they were with their jobs.

The one dissenting voice, someone with little time for the opinions of inner-city elites, tried to puncture what he thought was planners’ sense of self-importance:

*Planners do not think through public administration ramifications and the resource allocation processes of government: they do not understand how government works*

and their faith in spatial planning:

*I think there is a strong view in planning policy you can direct and control things and I think in reality you cannot*

He suggested for confirmation of this point practising and academic planners alike should read John Paterson (2000) on his experiences as Secretary to the Department of Planning in the Kennett era (1992-99): the market rules, planners follow.

Some of the planners quoted above, he more than implies, overstate their influence on government.

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Table 2: Themes discussed by three or more of the nine local government planners interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six</th>
<th>Frustration at losing disputes with developers and others because of dated or inadequate planning controls (in turn, because of a lack of resources to update and refine these controls)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Five | The need to be a generalist, to be able to integrate a range of material/responses Growing up themselves in a new suburb (today’s new suburbs being better serviced) |}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four</th>
<th>Enjoyed geography at school The importance of teaching councillors about the wider purposes of planning Loss of desired policy integration at line manager level (difficulties in realising place-based planning) Need for the earlier provision of social infrastructure in new suburbs The importance of finding mutually acceptable accommodations with developers The need to integrate the social, strategic and statutory aspects of planning practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>The importance of building (professional) relationships to realise plan intentions The negative impacts of the Global Financial Crisis The value of neighbourhood-based planners Developers want certainty above all It is less about the merit of the planning argument, it is more about the dollars to be gained/lost The value of using council land for social purposes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Planners lack financial literacy
The benefits to the private sector of good public infrastructure
Plans are just one element of good strategic planning
Work with the state government whenever you can; disagree only when you really have to
“I chip away” (I work to accumulate a number of small but incremental gains)
The pluses and minuses of the (overseeing) Growth Area Authority in the new suburbs
Transit-Orientated-Development is good in theory but in practice it is hard to realise because of the tardy provision of the necessary public transport infrastructure

A single cluster does not stare out as was the case with the state government planners but the overall theme appears to be about striving for better or more effective practice. This relates closely to having productive professional relationships with other professions, councillors, state government and developers, and to having integrated place-based policies, so, the interviewees’ emphasis on a planner being a generalist. These last two points could be tied to their interest at school in geography, a synthesising discipline. A match between interests at school and, now twenty years later, professional work is apparent.

But none of the local government planners, unlike their state counterparts, spoke of being ‘happy’ at their work place. They gave emphasis to their frustration with what they consider to be less than ideal working relationships, processes and systems, specifically, a lack of resources to update strategic and statutory planning documentation to back their arguments in disputes with developers and at appeal hearings; line managers’ indifference to the planners’ spatial concerns; councillors’ perceived ignorance of the purposes of planning; state government interventions; and the power of developers to get what they want, planners’ positions to challenge this being further weakened by their lack of financial literacy.

For this paper what is more interesting, though difficult to quantify, is their thoughts and actions over ‘planning in the face of power’, a main theme in the Literature Review. This, as already noted, was difficult to determine from the state government planners’ transcripts directly. Many were guarded in their comments and seemingly, in Forester’s words, “comfortable with working with established power”. Discomfiture is more apparent in the local government interviews. That allowed for, the key point several made is: it is how you effectively respond to those with power—the state government, developers, even councillors in some instances—to ensure interests of others are also served.

While there was acceptance that developers generally get what they wanted, the planners’ relationship with developers was not necessarily a subservient one. More debilitating to planners was the influence the development lobby had over the State government:

Politicians need to stand up to developers otherwise plans are meaningless.

This position of relative powerlessness is given added meaning when local government planners say: “I tinker at the edges”, “I chip away at stuff”, “I take small wins here and there” and “I refuse to give away all my principles”.
DEDUCTIONS STEMMING FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW QUESTIONS

Some more direct consideration is now given to questions posed at the end of the Literature Review.

The relative importance of childhood, university and early career experiences in shaping their practitioners’ values.

As noted in Table 2, at least five of the nine interviewed spoke about growing up in what were then new suburbs in Melbourne (as did at least three state government planners), some remarking on their paucity of services relative to contemporary new suburbs. This did not make them feel unduly disadvantaged subsequently. While most aspired to now live in well-serviced neighbourhoods, either further in or further out in rural townships, the more important point to make is these formative experiences had not left them. One said these formative experiences made him fearful of the future social dysfunctionality of new suburbs he was planning. He now lived in the inner city. By contrast another child of a working class migrant who grew up in a poor outer suburbs and now works and lives close by, said she “was living the suburban dream”. While aware of the power of developers relative to planners to shape her neighbourhood, she was watching it slowly improve and felt confident that most of the services she, as a parent, would need in years to come would be accessible.

University experience was formative for many. One saying it was “the best time of my life” and a rich learning situation, one that enhanced his already well-formed commitment to social justice; another said classroom debates gave her the confidence to speak out, a main part of her job now; another, who studied some years later, found planning students lacked the passion and commitment of environment students, students he associated with more.

The bureaucratic proceduralism of the managerialist conception of local government

Statutory planners interviewed said their work was by its nature largely procedural:

There is much more scrutiny of decisions, and their justification now. When I first started you wrote a one page report, now unless you write ten pages you are not seen to be doing your job properly. As co-ordinator I have to write all the procedural manuals so I am diverted from planning practice.

Fundamental to this practice being trust relationships:

When I started here in 2004 the councillors did not have much of an interest in planning ... now we have briefing sessions... we tell them what strategy plans we need to work on and what funding we need to make sure the strategy plans come to fruition... there is more trust now in the officers.

And from another statutory planner:

(Spending)time building trust with (new) councillors... you build relationships... we set up regular neighbourhood meetings with them... they gain an understanding of the complexities of planning and how to balance policies

Once accomplished, the potential to engage in more effective planning practice was possible.
A third planner with a statutory planning background, was now responsible for managing developer contributions, a complex system of levies on developers for the timely provision of infrastructure in new suburbs. She was irked by the time it consumed but it meant, for her, vital social infrastructure was sometimes provided earlier: “I take small wins here and there”. She had a clear sense of her professional purpose, procedural complexities notwithstanding.

In short, the interviewees were not enamoured with ‘the bureaucratic proceduralism of the managerialist conception of local government’, they had more important things to do.

**Planners’ ability to be self-reflective, so be aware of their own values relative to their employer and developers, amongst others, and so be able to act ethically**

Some, not all spoke, about their values and how it motivated them as planners:

While the strategic planning team here is small it is very actively engaged with all departments across Council. We have a very strong social justice bent...

and

...through practice the social justice aspect of planning and what it can deliver has become more of a motivation.

Equally if not more interesting is:

I decided you cannot really change planning to make it more humanistic and responsive to the environment unless you get decision-making into your hands. Since working in the industry I have realised the planner has a role in taking bits of advice from all sorts of people and disciplines and trying to navigate to get a best fit outcome... that is why I have stayed in planning. I like the idea of wicked problems... There is always a way to navigate these issues, you just have to keep your head up sometimes.

But how could planners with such values act ethically in the face of power?

**The practitioners’ ability to anticipate and respond reflectively to the pressures of political power**

As regards the state government’s authority over local government:

accept you have to work within the system but be willing to use your imagination and push the boundaries of what is allowable

be ahead of the game – be ahead by selling the message, by being collaborative, by having realistic delivery models

register your complaint and move on so as to carefully pick your issues and push back hard

reduce the risk for state government by building your business case for different forms of funding

and in the absence of state government leadership on curtailing suburban sprawl, local government has to take the lead:
We realised to curtail outward growth, we need to create an incentive – to put land on the fringe into (local) government ownership. This is a worked example I want to go through with you.... (and so he does)

As regards developers, responses were less expected but fit perhaps with Forester’s notion of critical pragmatism:

planners have to understand developers’ commerciality, that being understood we say to them: this is the way we have worked this proposal out, how you can do it (our way and still make your return) so, why cannot we do it?

Indeed for another, developers are not the ‘problem’, rather it is the lack of certainty provided to them by the planning system, hence the planners’ collective frustrations with their lack of resources to be able to quickly update ever-changing state government planning regulations, and so be clear and confident in their negotiations with developers. Thus a third said, if she had the power:

Upfront delivery of infrastructure is needed in the newer developer contribution plans: hit developers when they first apply for planning permits. Lock in land areas for non-standard housing; ensure well-located land is not lost. Developers are OK with this if this gives them more certainty.

If planners and developers agree on this why is it not standard practice? One imagines the answer, from government, is the higher initial cost of buying a house at the fringe. Financial ease of access to home ownership is an Australian sacred cow.

TAKING A STEP BACK TO DRAW A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

One is drawn back to two classic texts in Australian urban studies: Sandercock’s Cities for Sale (1975) and McLoughlin’s Shaping Melbourne’s Future (1992) both in essence arguing how ineffective Melbourne’s planning systems and its planners have been in shaping this city and, in Forester’s words, its planners rarely giving its citizens any cause for hope of public action.

Many of the local government planners interviewed here grew up in Melbourne’s suburbs and probably read Sandercock and McLoughlin when at university and perhaps were dented by their pessimistic tones. Now as seasoned local government planners, while speaking of their frustrations and failures, they can point to their successes, some secured: new community hubs and public land freed up for social housing in the inner suburbs and open range parklands at the metropolis’s edge; some hoped for: greater housing diversity in post-war industrial suburbs and a new hospital as a basis for generating high skill, secure jobs in an area where there are virtually none now.

The two views are not necessarily contradictory. The local government planners know they lose more battles than they win but they persist. They chip away. They have a firm sense of who they are and what they value. In Forester’s words they might be described as critical pragmatists.

Healey (2009) has recently written about the pragmatic tradition in planning. Pragmatists react against abstract theory, both logical positivism and Marxism. They want to get away from the dualism of ‘theory-practice’. By learning from their mistakes, they seek to make better judgements. Healey tells of how Forester has added an explicit political dimension to this evolving tradition: how
practising planners must more effectively challenge the unsustainable/unfair/inefficient status quo, the 'normal'. To paraphrase Healey, the trick is how self-aware planners, in admittedly little ways, can most effectively change perceptions, understandings and modes of practice so that different outcomes are possible (p.284).

Evidently some local government planners in Melbourne can and have. There is much to learn from them.

REFERENCES


