David L. Davidson  
Early town planning reformer and administrator

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From the late 1920s to at least the mid-1940s, David Lomas Davidson (1893-1952) was the most powerful and influential administrator in town planning in Australia. As Town Planning Commissioner for Western Australia from 1929 until his death, his job was to implement the spirit and letter of the Town Planning and Development Act 1928. Davidson’s credentials for this position were consolidated in New South Wales in the 1920s. With a professional background in surveying, he joined the Town Planning Association of NSW as a vocal advocate for planning legislation and becoming President in 1928. Davidson succeeded Sir John Sulman as Vernon Memorial Lecturer in Town Planning at Sydney University in 1929. His enthusiasm for spreading the ‘good word’ about planning as well as the application of his sound practical planning skills continued in the West from 1929 but as an administrator he proved a controversial and divisive figure. There were gains but depression, war and likely his cantankerous personality hindered his effectiveness. This paper provides a brief biographical overview of his planning work and contributions, venturing also into his personal life which proved just as tempestuous and revealing.

Keywords: David Lomas Davidson, Town Planning Commissioner of Western Australia, Town Planning Association of New South Wales, Town Planning Legislation, Perth, Sydney

Introduction

David Lomas Davidson’s planning career stretched across two states from the 1920s to the 1950s, a crucial phase in the evolution of planning from citizens’ movement to statutory force. In New South Wales (NSW) in the 1920s he was a reformer associated with the Town Planning Association (TPANSW). In Western Australia (WA) from 1929 he was the most highly ranked planning...
administrator in the country as that state’s Town Planning Commissioner. As a forceful character of some notoriety, Davidson has attracted attention (Bolton 1993; Webb 1968; Foley 1995; Freestone 2007), but there has been no considered overview of his life and times. Taking a biographical approach to planning history (Cherry 1981), our account is drawn from archival and secondary sources covering Davidson’s time in both Sydney and Perth. It commences with a brief summary of key moments in his life then looks more intensively, first, at his reforming years in Sydney followed by his administering years in Perth. The conclusion offers a preliminary assessment of his contribution to Australian planning practice.

As a backdrop to what follows, Table 1 provides a chronological summary of some key events in the life and career of David Davidson as best we can assemble the facts from public records. It was an eventful journey marked by controversy and private turmoil which he largely kept from public view. He solidified his planning credentials in NSW and in 1929 was appointed the first Town Planning Commissioner for Western Australia, retaining that position until his death. Davidson was a pragmatic planner, aligned more to the values of the city functional than the city beautiful. He defined planning as “the use of art and science to regulate and control the growth of towns and cities to establish health, create convenience, and preserve natural and [create] beauty - never omitting economic factors upon which modern progress depends” (West Australian, hereafter WA 12-9-29: 19).

**Advocating planning advocacy in Sydney 1920-1929**

Through the 1920s Davidson was as an engineer-surveyor based in Sydney, to 1924 with the Public Works Department carrying out investigations on potential hydro-electric schemes in regional NSW and then with the Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board. In connection with these duties, he began to give public talks and write for a general audience. A published treatise on the national importance of hydro-electric power as a renewable energy source promoting decentralisation captured his philosophical formula: “Knowledge is Power, Power is Civilisation and true Civilisation is Happiness” (Davidson 1923). Davidson attributed his own professional rise to childhood lessons of reading, writing and “penmanship”, singling out his various studies through correspondence courses (Daily News, hereafter DN 5-8-36: 7). This is how he qualified for membership of peak professional bodies including the British Town Planning Institute. In 1920 he was registered by the NSW Board of Surveyors. Although eligible to sit the exam, he was never formally licensed to practise in his own right even though he claimed otherwise. He did not complete his military science diploma from Sydney University or a law degree at UWA. His formal instruction in planning was confined to Sulman’s Vernon lectures. These lectures provided an accessible overview of contemporary thought (Sulman 1921), but did not constitute a professional qualification. Remarkably, Davidson’s first wife Daisy and two of their children (William and Constance) also gained town planning certificates through the same course.

**Table 1: Summary Timeline of David L. Davidson**

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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>7 July. Born Sydney to George Thom Davidson (policeman) and Florence, nee Taunton.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900s</td>
<td>Family moves to Wagga. Law clerk, draftsman, then pupillage with G. Sheppard, architect/surveyor.</td>
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1912 NSW Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board, Engineering Assistant in surveys and
construction.
1914 University of Sydney, student in Military Science
1914 11 August. Lance Sergeant in 1st Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (Tropical Unit).
Serves in survey office, Herbertshohe, German New Guinea.
Second child, William Lomas.
1915 Rabaul, New Guinea, Lieutenant.
March. Discharged from army on disability grounds.
May. Court Martial in Sydney for acquiring German medals. Acquitted.
August. NSW Public Works Department, Draftsman and Surveyor until 1917.
1916 Third child, Marjorie Ruth.
1917 Federated Malay States, Indo-China, USA as civil engineer and surveyor.
1919 Returns to Sydney. Attends John Sulman’s Vernon Memorial Lectures on Town Planning at Sydney
University. Passes with High Distinction.
Private practice with surveyor Henry Halloran.
1920 June. Registered to practise as Licensed Surveyor, but not formally Licenced under Act.
NSW Department of Public Works. Engineer Surveyor. Hydro-electricity investigations.
1923 Member, Council of the Town Planning Association of NSW (TPANSW).
1924 NSW Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board until 1929. Sewerage/drainage engineering.
1926 Vice-President, TPANSW.
1927 President, TPANSW.
1929 February. Appointed as Vernon Memorial Lecturer in Town Planning, University of Sydney.
March. Retires as President of TPANSW.
July. Appointed Town Planning Commissioner for Western Australia.
September. Takes up appointment in WA.
November. Fourth child, David Clifton, to Amy Roughley.
1930 December. Admitted to hospital for treatment of war injuries.
1931 Town Planning Lectures at University of Western Australia
President of the WA Institution of Local Government and Highway Engineers
1933 Commissioned into Militia. Lieutenant.
1934 Legally adopts his son David Clifton.
1935 2 April. Divorce granted from Daisy May.
6 July. Marries Esme Mary Powell.
1937 Receives WA Coronation Medal.
1938 Royal Commission on the Administration of Perth.
Third son, Alastair, to Esme Powell.
1939 Assault charge brought by an applicant for a subdivision.
1940 December. Transferred to Army Reserve. Involved in intelligence work.
1942 Chair of State Advisory Committee on Post-War Housing
1952 20 June. Dies aged 58 years, Subiaco from kidney disease and hypertension.
Davidson showed an early predisposition to town planning, winning a prize as a 16-year-old for a map of Wagga at the annual agricultural show (Daily Advertiser 23-8-11: 3). He claimed that his interest in planning was also advanced by survey work in the vicinity of the federal capital site for the NSW Department of Public Works in 1913 and it is likely that his pupillage as a teenager with Wagga Wagga surveyor and architect George Sheppard further piqued his interest in planning. A reported stint with Henry Halloran and particularly the patronage of Sulman opened up new perspectives beyond his day job. He also became a “dear friend” of George Taylor, founder of the TPANSW. By 1923 he was a member of the Council, by 1926 a Vice-President, and then President in 1927-29. He was active on numerous sub-committees dealing with city centre planning, parks and reserves, planning legislation, and the replanning of Dawes and Millers Points. He gave lectures on town planning in country towns while working as a hydro investigating engineer and public presentations became a staple of his advocacy for the rest of his life. His wife Daisy assisted with lantern slides in many presentations. He was also an entrant in the 1926 design competition for Hyde Park (Baker 1988).

The TPANSW was active in lobbying the state government and local authorities on a wide range of issues through reports, letter writing, petitions and deputations. The controversial siting of a Circular Quay railway station sucked up much energy in the late 1920s when Davidson became President (Freestone and Park 2009). On his election Davidson put forward three key objectives: state planning legislation; provision of parks, playgrounds and sportsgrounds; and greater coordination between government departments (TPANSW 1928). The scientific design of land subdivisions was also a major preoccupation. “No subdivision is too small to have character” (Davidson 1928). Davidson took the legislative debate into new territory with a draft bill to constitute a “Metropolitan Town and Regional Planning Commission” for Sydney (Davidson 1927). There were signs of restlessness within the Association to explore a more professional organisational model with Davidson more than happy to countenance this possibility.

Davidson represented the TPANSW on various committees and working parties. He was a judge for the 1927 NSW Tidy Towns competition but his major coup was to be appointed Sulman’s successor as the Vernon Memorial Lecturer. Davidson was preferred over other candidates including Norman Weekes and Keith Harris after the University Extension Board solicited advice from Sulman. Professor Leslie Wilkinson labelled it “an unfortunate appointment” probably in part because Davidson brought insufficient architectural expertise to the task. He retained Sulman’s basic sequence of lectures but introduced “philosophy and ethics” and a greater emphasis on survey research at various geographic scales, in keeping with the interwar planning emphasis on scientific rather than aesthetic planning (Freestone and Pullan 2015). He had already assembled over 800 lantern slides, “forming one of the most extensive and up to date collections in the Commonwealth.”

Davidson was ambitious. He had unsuccessfully applied for the position of Town Planner to the South Australian Government in 1922, and around late 1928 unsuccessfully applied for Principal Assistant Engineer in the Water Supply and Sewerage Department. But it may have been his matrimonial difficulties that also encouraged the move to the west (Bolton 1993). In late May 1929 Davidson applied for the post of Town Planning Commissioner of WA and was notified of his appointment two months later. The 20 weekly evening lectures in the Vernon series starting on 13 June 1929 were reshuffled into two lectures per evening to enable him to take up his new position. He delivered his final lecture the day before he left Sydney (DN 11-9-29: 1). Davidson’s departure
was lamented in the press as a sad comment on the lack of progress of planning in Sydney (Sydney Morning Herald, hereafter SMH 14-8-29: 14). The TPANSW held a luncheon in his honour and in response he stated that if it had not been for the Association he would never have secured his new position (Anon 1929).

Administering planning in Perth 1929-1952

Apart from advisory and promotional functions, his appointment as Town Planning Commissioner under the landmark WA Town Planning and Development Act 1928 also bestowed chairmanship of the Town Planning Board, an independent statutory authority set up by the Act to determine all land subdivision applications in WA (formerly undertaken by local governments), and to make recommendations to the Planning Minister on the approval of local government ‘town planning schemes’ and ‘town planning bylaws’ which the Act empowered them to make to control and facilitate land use and development. Under the Act, the Town Planning Commissioner in WA was appointed directly by the Governor (Cabinet) rather than to the public service. Davidson was thus in a very influential and often powerful position in Government and in the community in general, and he held arguably the most powerful planning position in any jurisdiction in Australia at the time.

In addition a Metropolitan Town Planning Commission had been established under a separate Act in 1927 based on a comparable organisation in Melbourne and was required to report with a plan for metropolitan Perth by December 1930 (extended to 31 March 1931). Davidson was not appointed a member of this Commission and although it drew on his input he was not afraid to make critical comments on its technical proficiency.

Several names had been canvassed for Town Planning Commissioner, including Fred Cook from the Melbourne Metropolitan Town Planning Commission and Reginald Hammond who had been New Zealand’s first Director of Town Planning. Davidson came to the attention of the WA Government and he duly supplied a stack of references from senior bureaucrats, politicians and professional colleagues. Among notable supporters were Earle Page, leader of the Country Party in the Commonwealth Parliament; John Garlick, Secretary of the NSW Department of Local Government; and John Butters, head of the Federal Capital Commission. The general consensus was that he was a reliable, technically proficient and resourceful individual. John Sulman stated that “his qualifications and experience should enable him to carry out the duties of the position with much advantage to the State and with credit to himself.” He officially took up his position on 11 September 1929. The Town Planning Board had its first meeting on 6 November 1929. He saw his principal task as “to give effect to the Act reasonably, to express the social and the political aspirations of the people of the State” (DN 11-9-29:1).

Town planning already had its champions in the West, with the key quartet being William Bold, Harold Boas, Carl Klem and William Saw (Newman 1996). Davidson proved an unsettling addition to the culture of the local planning movement which had evolved steadily under their leadership since the 1910s. In particular there would be incendiary clashes with Bold and Boas. Bold was the venerable Perth Town Clerk, an amateur town planning and city beautiful advocate by Davidson’s reckoning, and the enmity quickly established a state-local character (Newman 1996). Boas was an architect-planner, Chairman of the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission, long serving city councillor, and active in conservative political circles. Davidson’s power rested with his stewardship
of the Town Planning and Development Act which he described as “the watchdog and safeguard of sound local government in Western Australia” (Davidson 1932). This was quickly established as his exclusive domain and he did not take kindly to any incursions or rival threats.

Under the Act Davidson’s responsibilities in conjunction with the Board revolved around four main activities (Stead 1931; Bean 1933). First, was facilitating the gazettal of town planning schemes and by-laws by local authorities and road boards. Although the first scheme was announced in mid-1930 for Armadale-Kelmscott, this proved a long, hard grind (WA 10-7-30: 7). Second, was the approval of private subdivisions, and in his first year over 600 applications were considered. Allied to this activity were thousands of truncations of street corners for public safety. The approval process also secured dedicated parkland, open space and school sites for local communities. Third, was the preparation of plans and planning schemes for communities on Crown Land. Early approvals were secured for Wiluna, Nyabing and Augusta townships. Fourth was a wide-ranging advisory role for various state and local government bodies. On top of these tasks came a vigorous propaganda campaign, committee memberships, and extra-curricular rounds of involvement with professional organisations, giving evidence to government inquiries, and commenting on innumerable projects. The scope was large but constrained by the meagre staff and material resources made available by the WA Government.

Without missing a beat from his time in NSW, Davidson remained committed to the lecture circuit for promoting planning generally as well as particular pet projects. He wrote occasional articles in the news media and gave radio broadcasts from the 1930s. He delivered an invited series of 20 lectures on the Vernon model in the Faculty of Engineering at UWA in 1931 and subsequently in 1933 at Perth Technical College (WA 22-5-1934: 17). The first of these programs attracted many practising professionals who were or would become prominent in their fields with an average weekly attendance of nearly 60. He unsuccessfully tried to resuscitate these in 1945 and again in 1949. Davidson was also an instructor in the Malay language from 1933 at the Technical College (WA 9-2-1933:12), a role which provided useful supplementary income at a time of financial stress because of his divorce.

Davidson was active in sitting on or convening state government committees and inquiries including siting of major public buildings in Perth (1939), traffic (1943), the Swan River (1943), post-war housing (1943), selection of town hall site (1944), Fremantle Hospital (1949), and a new gaol (1950). He gave substantive evidence to select committees, royal commissions and other government inquiries, including the administration of Perth (1938), UWA’s endowment lands (1941), Kalgoorlie-Fremantle railway line (1945), municipal boundaries (1949), and the WA railways (1947). His dealings with the local town planning association and the breakaway planning institute in the early 1930s were mostly fraught because of the personality politics with Bold and Boas. An explosive meeting of the Town Planning Institute in June 1931 saw him walk out with a dispute over membership qualifications (WA 12-6-31: 20). The perceived threat to his authority posed by such a watchdog body emerged as a concern (Freestone 1982). Davidson was the foundation president of the Institution of Local Government and Highway Engineers (WA) (Sunday Times 22-3-1931: 2) and held honorary positions in a range of other organisations.

As time moved on, tensions with some local authorities and personalities increased, partly because of Davidson’s forceful character. Newspapers carried reports of his uncompromising “dictatorial”
style wielding “autocratic” powers under the 1928 Act, although they may have been to some extent doing the bidding of certain interests who did not favour the additional constraints on subdivision and development that the Act created. Governments of both colours nevertheless retained confidence in his abilities, re-appointing him several times over two decades. Implementation of the Act was recognised as “no mean undertaking, and the most critical of our citizens will no doubt readily admit that since the commencement of Mr Davidson’s period of office much good has been accomplished, and a considerable improvement of the landscape of the metropolitan area, and in certain country districts as well, can be attributed to the administration of the Town Planning Act by the Commissioner and the Town Planning Board.”

Unfortunately, Davidson’s personality often would not let him compromise on, or let go of, a matter – he always had to win the argument. He brought two defamation actions against the Daily News in 1937 and 1945 for mocking depictions of him as a grand “Pooh-Bah” eight years apart (WA 25-9-45: 3). The most problematic relationship was with the state’s major local authority and rival planning authority, Perth City Council, with which Bold and Boas were associated. Davidson’s public skirmishes with Council included new roads he considered to be dangerous and a waste of public money, the siting and design of memorials, and failure to police its own health and building by-laws resulting in unsafe and fire-hazard buildings on the one hand to slums on the other. Extraordinarily, in several instances he initiated legal action as a private individual to pursue what he saw as flagrant breaches and inaction by other responsible authorities. In 1937 he called for an independent civic commission to replace the elected council (Robertson 1970).

All of this tension culminated in a 1938 Royal Commission into the Council’s administration of health, housing, building and other administrative matters. The first witness called was Davidson who launched a damning but unsubstantiated attack of improper dealings against Boas as an alderman and architect. Boas clearly resented what he saw as Davidson’s vendetta stretching back nearly a decade and their lively exchanges at the Commission dominated media coverage. Bold was also in the line of fire. The deeper dispute throughout was Davidson’s view of planning as primarily a utilitarian activity in contrast to the more aesthetic orientation of Bold and Boas. In all some 750,000 words of evidence and “a big pile of exhibits” were assembled (WA 6-8-38: 20). When the Commissioners resurfaced after two months, Boas was eventually exonerated, Davidson castigated for acting out of “motives of ill-will,” and Bold’s Council impelled to reframe and better administer its building by-laws.

Wartime, like the Depression, was a brake on the work of the Commissioner who again was forced to administer on a shoestring budget (Foley 1995). By the early 1940s the Board had dealt with 4,050 subdivisions, 3,800 street corner truncations, and acquisition of 410 acres of land for schools, water reservoirs, and parks. Numerous country towns also benefitted from Davidson’s “specialised knowledge”. The 1940s introduced a new idealistic ethos of post-war reconstruction nationwide. In 1942-43 Davidson chaired a State Advisory Committee on Post-War Housing which made many far-reaching recommendations including construction of 20,000 houses over five years, setting minimum dwelling standards, and constructing group housing for Aboriginal and special needs populations (Davidson 1945). A major institutional change followed in the formation of a State Housing Commission to replace the Workers’ Homes Board to work within the arrangements of the 1944 Commonwealth and State Housing Agreement.
Inevitably, Davidson was caught up in dealings with the Commonwealth about postwar housing and development. This national exposure provided another forum for intemperate behaviour. In April 1943 he gave evidence to the Rural Reconstruction Commission but his dealings with the Commonwealth Housing Commission later that year descended into farcical standoff as to the powers of the Commission to compel oral testimony (Kalgoorlie Miner 25-11-43: 2). He represented WA at a Commonwealth-State Town Planning Officers Conference held in Canberra in April 1945 and chaired by H.C. Coombs, the Director-General of Post-War Reconstruction. Davidson forcefully asserted the cause of state ownership of town planning, criticised Commonwealth actions which subverted state planning legislation, and expressed opposition to any new Commonwealth bureaucracy, but was not averse to seeking a package of financial assistance including £10,000 to assist preparation expansion of post-war planning schemes and up to £900pa over 3 years for postgraduate education.

At the end of the war, the WA Government invested more resources into town planning administration. In 1945 four new permanent positions were created, the most senior of them, Town Planning Assistant and Secretary was filled by Davidson’s son William, who had been employed as a temporary draftsman since 1938. By 1951 staff increased to six permanent and four temporary positions (Foley 1995). An important task which emerged was preparation of a new metropolitan plan to update the work of the Town Planning Commission from 1930. In 1941, Davidson indicated that the Town Planning Board would soon be considering a master plan for the metropolitan area that would be submitted to local governments for consideration and acceptance. Progress was slow due to a lack of resources and the war, but in 1946 Davidson revealed work in progress on such a plan in an address to the University of WA Labour Club by presenting first details from a regional survey. Completion of his plan were said to await only decisions on a harbour development at Fremantle, a new transcontinental railway route, and a zoning plan from the City Council (WA 18-7-46: 9). The plan never eventuated. In late 1951, Albert Hawke, Leader of the Labor Opposition, was still expressing confidence in Davidson’s ability to produce a scheme (WA 6-12-51: 15). Others had lost patience including Joseph Totterdell MLA and Perth Lord Mayor from 1946. Declaring the recent history of planning in Perth as “a dismal failure”, Totterdell lampooned the so-called “master plan” as merely “four aerial photographs with a few lines on them indicating where certain industrial sites would be ... hanging in the office of the Town Planning Commissioner” (WA 7-12-51: 5). There was criticism in the press about the ineffectuality of the Board and exchanges between the Commissioner and his Minister ensued about the best strategy to respond to media “misstatements”. The Minister’s view was not to respond which compromised Davidson’s ability to defend himself.

Nonetheless, Davidson retained the confidence of the government, “fortified by favourable comments from visiting authorities” such as Sir Patrick Abercrombie in 1948 and Professor William Holford in 1951 (Bolton 1993). Despite his continued lively public persona, he had been continually reappointed as Town Planning Commissioner, for the last time on 31 January 1951 for another five year term. But change was afoot. A State Government Committee reviewing the Town Planning and Development Act was converted to a Royal Commission – with Davidson the first witness - and reported in July 1952. It recommended that the Town Planning Board be abolished and a new statewide planning authority be instituted (Foley 1995). The foundations for a fresh, new approach to planning in WA were being laid. Davidson’s critics inferred that he would not be appointable to
any new body (Gregory 2003). But the possibility passed with his death in June 1952, just one month before the Royal Commission reported.

**Conclusion**

Davidson’s planning career spanned two states evolving from advocate to regulator in bridging the proselytizing era and beginnings of institutionalisation. His reputation as a practical propagandist was honed in NSW forming an alliance with the hard-nosed George Taylor. Questions about his character and qualifications surfaced and his private life became complex but his work for the TPANSW was convincing enough for him to move west. In Western Australia he quickly assumed a position of authority and influence. But the timing could not have been worse with the US Stock Market crash the month after he arrived and then a slow recovery from the Depression checked by the outbreak of World War Two. Beyond his statutory power, resources were meagre. Davidson explained that in the first decade of the Town Planning Board no annual reports were published because of the cost (WA 24-7-39: 14). He also confronted the vested interests of powerful state agencies resistant to external coordination and was soon at loggerheads with the state’s most powerful urban authority, Perth City Council.

Comprehensive statutory planning was slow to evolve despite the pioneering 1928 Act. Even by 1956 only 25 partial schemes or zoning approvals had been approved with 17 similar proposals in course of preparation meaning just 42 local authorities (municipalities and road districts) formally implementing the Act out of a state total of 147. Not one local authority had prepared and gazetted a comprehensive town planning scheme. This 1956 assessment by Harold Boas, who suffered a poisonous relationship with Davidson for over two decades, acknowledged war, depression and other external factors for “these years of ineffectiveness” but also highlighted “a spirit of antagonism” between the Board and local authorities (Boas 1956: 10). Nevertheless Boas’ view may be unfair as evidence indicates that with his meagre resources Davidson was willing to assist local governments, sometimes almost in consulting fashion beyond the call of duty, in preparing schemes and plans, given the lack of qualified planners and limited resources of local governments.

Davidson was a determined but divisive character with a heightened sense of his own professionalism as a “trained” planner. Never afraid of a good feud, he could be truculent, polarising and even physically aggressive. He was “a man who throve on controversy” (Robertson 1970: 170) and acknowledged his own occasional intolerance (WA 24-7-39: 14). There were embarrassing public confrontations with other senior public servants (DN 2-12-47: 8). Senior politicians acknowledged his “without fear or favour” style but the targets of his criticism and legal threats struggled to see any redeeming features. He was described in Parliament as the “Clown” Planning Commissioner in 1944. By modern public sector management standards and politics, he would be unlikely to have retained his position in WA for such a long period, and he managed to suppress his complicated private life and past indiscretions from public attention.

Nevertheless, credit needs to be given where it is due. Coordinated oversight over subdivision and preparation of planning schemes prior to the release of Crown Land for urban purposes and by those local governments who had been able to prepare them for all or parts of their districts, even if limited, were timely inputs into the development process. Given a challenging external environment and hostile institutional setting, Davidson, his staff, and the Board still “achieved a considerable
amount in a relatively short space of time” (Foley 1995, 2). He was a true believer in government-led planning and his drive kept this goal alive during depression and war. He sought to facilitate visionary projects and was very hands on negotiating planning outcomes and actually doing the planning. David Davidson deserves to be recognised for his positive planning contribution, and overall, he made a difference.

References


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