

Integrating Logics in Strategic Spatial Planning: A case study of the Melbourne Urban Growth Boundary

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Introduction

Planning is a complex endeavour involving competing objectives and interests. This research aims to expose some of the higher tier thinking that goes into strategic choices. Through analysis of Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) as a case study, the research aims to explore how narrative frames influence the integration of social, environmental and economic objectives (or logics) in strategic spatial planning. As components of what is normally defined as urban sustainability, these 'three pillars' are considered alongside other aspects of equity, needs and environmental limits.

This case study analysis explores policy processes including that which produced *Melbourne 2030* (Department of Infrastructure, 2002), bringing the UGB into Melbourne's strategic planning lexicon. Changing its location around five times in its first decade of existence, and despite the presence of policy and regulatory control measures, the continued expansion of the UGB provides a useful illustration of the ways strategic planning is influenced by complex institutional and governance settings, and pressures of urbanization.

A blistering critique (McLoughlin, 1992), reiterated decades later suggesting the "effective abandonment of the UGB" amounted to "serious failure" (Buxton, Goodman, & Moloney, 2016, p.91), points to a persistent lack of awareness of private sector dominance in planning, city dynamics and research insights, appropriate controls and tools, and awareness of citizen needs, interests and desires.

In exploring the intersection between different stakeholder objectives and logics, this research poses a central question: "*Why did the UGB change so much within the first decade of its establishment?*" Supporting research questions focus on how different logics are articulated at critical decision points in contemporary strategic planning process, at which point logics take shape, whose logics are prioritized, and ultimately what is good and bad about this story? (with reference to normative values of planning and urban sustainability).

Conceptual Framework

My research seeks to understand how we can improve the integration of urban sustainability principles in strategic decision making. It focusses on the effects of the dominant growth-dependent paradigm, through a deep dive into a case study (the Urban Growth Boundary of Melbourne) that exposes the quest for balancing

competing objectives – the ‘holy grail’ for planners (McLoughlin, 1992). Planners face challenges of navigating uncertainty, acknowledging and negotiating value judgements, and uneven power across stakeholders as expressed at key decision points.

Analysis of ‘higher tier’ beliefs, values, perspectives held by institutions as part of frame-reflective policy inquiry, is seen as an area policy makers are assumed to explore (Schön & Rein, 1994), though doubt exists whether they actually do (Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Hillier 1999). In the face of unsustainable directions of society at large (UNEP, 2021), reviewing the role of higher tier planning decisions lends an urgency to frame-reflective policy inquiry. Such higher tier decisions in the strategic planning process can contribute to urban sustainability, or conversely can have maladaptive outcomes (James, 2015). This research explores previous contended decisions, with a view to avoiding such potential maladaptive outcomes in future decisions.

Methodology / Methods

In the spirit of Flyvberg’s deep dive into a case study (1998), I am reviewing the Melbourne UGB and those involved with its establishment and alteration to explore how frames are articulated through implicit and explicitly stated values, behaviours (as identifiable) and ideals, rendering assumptions and logics more visible, as the units of analysis.

My analysis undertakes a macro-lens review of urban consolidation policy and the use of UGB in conjunction with other policy initiatives aimed at promotion of sustainable urban form and containment of urban sprawl. The policy and regulatory review is supported by interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in the last 2-3 decades of spatial planning process for Melbourne, to provide a meso/micro-level analysis. The field work and semi-structured interviews are still underway. The research triangulates stakeholder views against frames evident in the policy and regulatory review, to build on academic thought and practice, to understand how the UGB was navigated over the decade or so of intense population and urban change.

Early Insights

Content analysis of various policy documents provides an insight into the nature of the frames and dominant narrative in high-level strategic planning choices. Early findings suggest the strong sustainability narrative established in *Melbourne 2030* ran in parallel with a diversity of contradictory rationales being offered to explain boundary changes over time. These include achieving a compact city, of 20-minute neighbourhoods, access to employment opportunities, rebalance of population into regions (long term), environmental protection, housing affordability, limiting pressure on land prices, and working within boundaries formed by major infrastructure.

Stakeholders also have widely differing views, and some rationales for change are not found in public-facing documents.

Relevance and Contribution

This study explores the perspectives, nature of the debates, discussions and dialogue that contributed to the aforementioned “serious failure”. It examines the tension between financial and economic pressures, social and environmental values and objectives, and inter-action of these logics in strategic planning practice. The use of frame analysis (Schön & Rein, 1994) to understand potentially competing perspectives provides an opportunity to explore pragmatic approaches to planning.

References

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