

Planning in One City

J. Brian McLoughlin, Shaping Melbourne's Future: Town Planning, the State and Civil Society, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992

Reviewed by Tony Sorensen

This is an important book for urban planners and public policy analysts alike. The late Brian McLoughlin, who was Professor of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Melbourne, provides us with one of the few detailed evaluations of urban planning's achievements and the reasons behind its successes and failures. The author examines how and why planners' goals and objectives, ideas and knowledge, *modus operandi* and legal sanctions have influenced Melbourne's changing physical, economic and social structure over the last 50 years.

Despite the focus on just one city, this task is ambitious. Cities are shaped by a vast number of dynamic and often elusive forces whose complex web of inter-relationships is barely understood. Such factors as technological innovation, changing lifestyle preferences, fluctuating attitudes towards environmental conservation, and the ageing of the population are largely independent of government *fiat*. Yet governments do strongly influence the form and structure of urban development, though their role is far from monolithic. Numerous departments within and across all tiers are directly interested in various aspects of urban form (planning, housing, environment, transport, health, education), as are a range of infrastructure-supplying agencies concerned with such matters as power, telecommunications, transit, ports and airports, sewerage, and water. Indirectly, just about everything that government does affects the structure of cities. Not surprisingly, government has great difficulty in coordinating its urban management activities.

On top of all this, urban development is also the artefact of countless private investment decisions made by vast numbers of individuals and organisations. Private strategies often conflict with each other and with third parties. Thus cities become a battleground over which powerful interest groups fight for privilege, the *status quo*, or economic and social gain. Urban planning sets up legal mechanisms that interest groups try to capture for their own benefit. Hence the so-called 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) syndrome.

The situation is complicated even further by two somewhat contradictory circumstances. On the one hand, urban form often serves cultural, aesthetic, political, historical and sentimental ends; part of the urban planning task is therefore conservative and backward looking. On the other hand, it is about inventing the future over some of the longest time horizons confronting government: 20 years or more. Perhaps, then, town planning is the ultimate 'wicked problem' in which a constellation of often unbridled forces and conflicting requirements tends to dominate the relatively feeble efforts of town planners. Changing urban form thus reflects primarily the balance of political power between a mass of conflicting protagonists.

McLoughlin acknowledges all of this in the first two parts of his book. Part One presents Melbourne's urban history and the other systematically analyses the forces at work. The former is a crucial part of the exercise because it describes and explains the metaphorical stage on which urban development in the post-war period was acted out. Past development exerts considerable influence over present options on account of its comparative longevity and rigidity. Part Two canvasses the wide array of causal factors outlined above.

The final, and perhaps most interesting, part contrasts Melbourne's development with what the planners intended. The author identifies three distinct planning tasks: long-term and synoptic metropolitan development strategy; sub-regional development strategy (or meso-planning); and local environmental planning. The first was the least successful, in McLoughlin's view because of a mixture of factors including the autonomy of infrastructure servicing agencies, the preferences of households, and the power of finance capital, all of whose actions tend to deviate from planners' neat preconceptions. The author rightly explains this behaviour in terms of the superior political and economic power of the quango or private sector *vis-à-vis* the urban planner. But he downplays another more important issue. Very simply, metropolitan planning, which usually takes a long-term perspective, is intrinsically maladaptive, on two main counts. First, we cannot forecast accurately the nature of economy and society over five years, yet alone 20. Second, plan formulation is often a lengthy consultative process. Metropolitan plans will therefore tend to be overtaken rapidly by changing lifestyle preferences or by events in the commercial sector. Paradoxically, however, metropolitan planning has the capacity to save governments millions of dollars through the coordination of public works. It is a pity, then, that the author fails to consider what kind of metropolitan planning might maximise its benefits and minimise its defects.

McLoughlin thinks the relative success of local planning arises from its control by local councils. These bodies are responsive to the needs of local residents, which enables them to fend off unwanted development. This effectively endorses NIMBY attitudes which, though defensible in some respects, create problems that the author underestimates. While the exercise of local democracy should be applauded, it also retards the adaptation of cities to changing development opportunities or may simply transfer problems from one locality to another or from the articulate and well-funded to the less so.

Although Brian McLoughlin fails to consider fully the implications of his findings for the future development of both the ends and the means of land-use planning, his book abounds in richly detailed investigations and perceptive observations of planning's accomplishments, or lack of them, and the reasons for those outcomes. It can be highly recommended.

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