

## **Issues Paper - Forum 5 Transport, Planning and the Built Environment**

Comment by John Mant

### **Issue**

***How can land-use planning and the built environment be managed more effectively to lower reliance on high emission patterns of transport behaviour?***

### **Executive Summary**

This submission argues that the current unsustainable design of Australian cities should not be assumed to be inevitable. Australian cities, especially those parts built in the last 80 years, are the product of deliberate government actions. A redesign of the manner in which governments manage the production of cities could lead to designs and redesigns that reduce the need to travel. A major improvement would be to change the primary planning instrument from a plan that seeks to separate land uses to one that encourages the creation of sustainable places.

### **Australian Cities are Not Designed but Occur by the Application of Separately Administered Standard Formula**

The production of Australian cities is efficient, but the product is not sustainable or efficient. While the market (influenced by tax and other subsidies) creates the demands for new development, the nature of the supply is strongly constrained by controls imposed by government.

Despite the roles that are played by government, it cannot be said that Australian cities are designed and built in the sense that one organization or person sets out to resolve a difficult design challenge by the application of an overall design solution and then ensures that that solution is realized. For example, there is no one part of government that is empowered to set out to design and build a new addition to a city that reduces the need for travel.

Indeed the primary demand at the core of government's control over design requires different types of urban activities – living, working, recreating, purchasing, to be kept separate from each other. That is, in effect, the main objective of urban design as it is presently practiced is to maximize the need for travel.

Suburban Australia is created by a series of separate and un-integrated decisions by separate and un-integrated organizations, where the result is essentially the product of the application of separate and un-integrated standards, each one of which is the preserve of one of the of the aforesaid organisations.

There are two main reasons for this situation:

- Guild structured governments

State and local governments essentially are structured as they were in colonial times. Each organization is the preserve of a particular profession – a ‘guild’; engineers, planners, surveyors and building inspectors. Each guild has one of the separate systems of land use controls, water and traffic engineering standards, planning (design and siting) standards, and building standards to administer.

- The structure of the separate urban industries of land subdividers, project home builders and chain retail outlets

Australia’s suburban creation industry is efficient. There are standard products that can be produced efficiently and the production processes are divided into separate self-contained steps.

As, in the main, the land is subdivided and sold before the construction of the buildings commences, efficient cash flows can be achieved. Standard land use and design and siting controls, all related to standard parcels of land, allow the efficient placing of the standard products. Architects are not really required as their skill is designing individual buildings that respond to their context – a skill seldom needed in city building as it is practiced in Australia.

Being the product of standard controls and standard designs, the cities are all essentially the same. Some say this is a product of market demands. The truth is that it is difficult for the market to produce anything as efficiently and cheaply as those standard products that Australia’s guild dominated administration facilitates and the responsive industries supply.

### The Standard Controls

- Land use zoning

The land use-zoning plan is the control mechanism that determines what land is developed and, in broad terms, how it is developed.

Although it has been strongly criticized (Jane Jacobs, 1961), land use zoning remains the primary control tool used by the public administrative body which is the province of the Planning profession. Indeed in recent years, State Governments have reinforced the dominance of land use zoning as the primary control tool for the design of cities (e.g. Kibble Report NSW 2006).

Victoria, WA and now NSW have standard land use zoning control documents that have to be used across each State. These provide for separate land use zones – residential, retail, commercial, industrial, rural, etc. Within each use category there are different intensities and the details of uses allowed within those broad categories – in the residential zones - detached houses, town houses, flats; retail zones - neighbourhood and regional shopping centres; as well as different types of industry.

The cadastral plans that identify the areas where the separate land use zones apply are coloured in different colours, with each colour denoting a separate standard land use.

So far as members of the public and, indeed, the Planning profession itself, are concerned, *the primary purpose of planning is to separate land uses, and, necessarily, thereby increase the need for travel.*

In recent years, recognizing the need to attempt to produce more areas where there is a mix of uses, planners have taken to creating 'mixed use' zones, where a mix of, say, retailing and residential uses are permitted. Also, although the primary land use permitted may be residential or retail, other associated activities might be allowed, with the consent of government – e.g., childcare premises and corner shops in residential area.

That these mechanisms are exceptions to the general rules are evident from the coloured cadastral map, which is generally presented as 'The City Plan'. There is suspicion from the public who see mixed use zones as exceptions from that which is presented by the Planning profession as presumably being 'good planning', namely, the separation of land uses. Other problems, besides public suspicion, limit their use.

- Standard land subdivision controls

Associated with the standard land use controls are standard land subdivision controls. Subdivision controls are used as a de facto use control, but it is a control that could be done away with if there were adequate controls over structures. For example, in most European cities, it is the structures and use that are controlled not the boundaries of land parcels. There is no control over subdivision. Doing away with subdivision control would reinforce the need to consider the relationships between buildings and buildings and their environment.

- Design controls from the lot boundary

In order to meet the needs of the producers of the standard urban products – project home builders, and chain retailers – the design controls associated with the standard land use controls create standard floor space and set back controls which are measured from the lot boundaries, not the surrounding environment and development. Governments recently have been developing standard design codes for standard houses on different standard lot sizes.

Standard land use controls, standard lot subdivision sizes and standard design controls measured from the lot boundary, all facilitate the easy location of standard urban products such as detached houses or retail outlets anywhere where those standard controls apply. This ensures that standard products can be erected anywhere in Australia and that no discretionary judgments have to be made on how well what is proposed fits with its natural or built environment.

In these circumstances it is difficult to design urban areas that have complex objectives such as reducing the need for travel.

- Parking controls

In keeping with the standard codes, planners and traffic engineers have developed standard parking space requirements for each of the uses nominated in the standard land use zones. Given the separated land uses, it is assumed that most of those accessing a use will do so by car. Combined with the wish of most council engineers to reduce the amount of publicly owned car parking areas and the amount of parking on street, most of the controls require all the parking spaces to be provided on site. In many areas the cheapest way to do this is using surface areas. This increases the separation of buildings ensuring that densities remain low and the provision of public transport expensive.

### The standard unsustainable city

The net effect of these separately applied standards is that urban areas consist of separated single use land uses with standard subdivisions, each parcel of which is large enough to accommodate the relevant standard product, with most sites containing an area of surface car parking to accommodate a worst case demand for car parking.

This is not a city designed to reduce trips by vehicles, promote the reduction in the need to travel, encourage walking to things close by, or provide densities that can support efficient public transport.

### What could be done?

- Restructure State and local government administrations

This would involve doing away with the basic organisational design building block based on a particular guild each of which concentrates on the production or control of standard output. Instead there should be *outcome* organizations where anyone with an appropriate qualification can be employed to be responsible for the creation of urban systems and places. Places are where the consequences of system policies finish up.

Each new development area and, indeed, each area of the existing city would be the responsibility of a Place Manager whose task it would be *to do whatever it takes* to create an urban area where, amongst other outcomes, the need to travel is reduced as far as possible.

- Integrate all regulatory systems

This would involve creating a single system for exercising such controls over development as were needed to achieve the outcomes being sought by the place managers.

- Do away with subdivision control and deal only with structures and works.

In achieving the outcomes of the place managers and system (transport and water etc outcomes officers) managers, only those things that need to be controlled should be controlled. (Outcomes managers do not have the same imperative to maintain a particular control system as does a specialist output organization, as for an outcomes officer a control system is just one means to achieve ends, rather than the reason for an organization's existence.)

For example, if the structures and works, if necessary, can be controlled, then there is no need to control subdivision.

- Exercise design controls in relation to the context, not the lot boundary

Such controls as are needed should be related to the natural and built context within which new development is to take place. This will facilitate the production of products that fit in and relate to each other. Land can be saved and mixed uses can be facilitated by good design.

- Do away with land use zoning as the primary control mechanism and replace it with controls that relate to collections of parcels, i.e., places

By relating controls to the objectives for each place – *the desired future character* - controls can be integrated into a parcel and not a land use format. While land uses can still be controlled, if the desired character objectives require the imposition of such restrictions, the starting assumption is not that a good city is one where land uses are separated.

The coloured plan is done away with and, instead, the statutory development control plan is just a series of places (collections of parcels) each with its own objectives and the minimum of controls needed to achieve those objectives. A primary objective should be to reduce the need to travel by encouraging design that achieve accessibility outcomes not by requiring trips, but by putting activities together in the first place.

- Question the need for a Planning profession

The Planning profession has been the primary guild controlling the design of Australian cities since WW11.

In fairness, the planning organizations have never had the range of powers, which the profession considered it needed to build better cities.

The reality is that the profession does not have the range of skills needed for the task and its primary mechanisms – the land use zone map and text – is the wrong tool if the creation of sustainable cities in a carbon scarce world is the objective.

Anyway, if government is to move from guild-structured organizations to outcome base organizations, generalist professions such as Planners will not be needed. Certainly an outcomes organization responsible for urban management will need people with an appreciation of urban issues and statutory control mechanisms, but these are likely to come from a range of generalists and specialist. Certainly, an urban outcomes organisation should not be limited to the members of one particular professional grouping when filling the positions of outcome managers such as Place Managers.

## **Summary**

If government is serious about reducing travel needs then a total rethink of the manner in which cities are managed needs to be undertaken.

Clearly the current design of Australian cities is unsustainable. The carefully planned cities, i.e. Canberra and Perth, are least sustainable because they generate the highest level of individual trips. Indeed they are largely unworkable without access to a motorcar.

This unsustainable design is not an accident, nor is it inevitable. What we have is all the product of deliberate government action. The redesign of government and its instruments of urban management could achieve a more sustainable result.

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