



Planning Metropolitan Australia

Margot Abord de Chatillon

Reviewed: Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone (eds.), *Planning Metropolitan Australia*, Abingdon-on-Thames/New York, Routledge, 2017.

In Planning Metropolitan Australia, Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone shed welcome light on the way Australia's rapidly growing metropolitan areas have developed over the last two decades, and the planning issues that have accompanied this growth. Margot Abord de Chatillon reviews this important work, which provides an invaluable, if sometimes disjointed, overview of the state of Australian cities.

A publication central to understanding the evolution of metropolitan Australia

Planning Metropolitan Australia is the outcome of Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone's efforts to describe in depth how Australian strategic urban planning has unfolded over the last two decades. Following the publication of their earlier book (*The Australian Metropolis: A Planning History*), which focused on Australian metropolitan areas during the 20th century, their subsequent work led to a biannual series of conferences on the "State of Australian Cities." The present book builds on these conferences to offer an updated view of how Australian cities have been contending with the associated planning issues.

With the exception of the first and last chapters, the book successively focuses on the five main metropolitan areas of Australia: Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, and South-East Queensland (centered on Brisbane), as well as on the capital city of Canberra. An overview of the demographic changes for each city is provided, along with an outline of the main social, economic and environmental issues observed in each area over the last two decades. There follows a thorough description and analysis of the strategies advocated, and sometimes implemented, by various local governments and planning organizations.

A focus on urban growth and metropolitan strategy implementation

While each chapter focuses on a different region and is written by different academics and urban planning experts (one woman and 12 men), the chapters show striking similarities when considered collectively. Challenged by stronger-than-expected growth in their urban populations, all the regions considered have had to deal with the threat of urban sprawl in a country facing increasing environmental issues and social disparities. Furthermore, in the current neoliberal trend, the traditional function of local authorities is being questioned when it comes to strategic urban planning. In every chapter, analysis of the primary metropolitan strategic plans shows that similar policies have been considered to control urban sprawl and limit greenfield development. These

policies range from the designation of an urban growth boundary, where new construction projects are discouraged, to the highlighting of existing activity centers, which must be prioritized for further urban development, as well as the promotion of transit-oriented development or of “20-minute neighbourhoods” where all activities must be accessible to urban residents with a walk or a bicycle ride shorter than 20 minutes.

Successive chapters reveal the many ways in which these “compact city” strategies lack efficiency when it comes to their implementation. A lack of integration between different levels of decision-making, the rewriting of these strategies after each local election, minimal commitment to turning strategic objectives into statutory rules, and the construction industry’s resistance to new restrictions all contribute to this highly documented implementation gap. Even the metropolitan region of South-East Queensland, praised for the exemplary nature of its strategic planning, has been criticized for failures in its practical implementation. When analyzing the outcomes of plans, the authors demonstrate that most have had only a minor influence on the location or composition of new dwellings constructed, or on the growth of urban sprawl.

A high-quality analysis let down by a lack of cohesion across chapters

Overall, this book fulfills its objective of providing a description of the state of the Australian metropolis in the late 2010s and constitutes a central contribution to Australian as well as global literature in urban studies. The context it portrays is a worrying one of urgent issues and insufficient answers, as stated by the authors themselves: “This volume offers a set of sober appraisals of the Australian metropolitan situation which contrasts with the exuberance of much international urban commentary” (p. 196).

The specificities of each city provide interesting insights into Australian urban processes. For instance, the impressive scale and speed of the growth of Melbourne and Sydney make issues of housing affordability and inequalities even more visible in these regions than in other metropolitan areas. The evolution of the Perth planning system, known for being the most centralized and statutory, towards a very market-oriented structure emphasizes the broader trend towards neoliberalism in planning, a trend which is also visible in the other metropolitan regions. Similarly, once the federal government stopped controlling decisions on the location of its offices, Canberra failed to maintain its balanced polycentric morphology. In a city that had historically been designed as an exemplary garden city and had this polycentrism embedded in its urban fabric, this is a stark illustration of the way sprawl and market forces can challenge metropolitan planning objectives.

It should be noted, however, that *Planning Metropolitan Australia* does not emphasize these specificities; instead, the processes common to all cities are described in detail in each chapter for each metropolitan area, without much integration between them. Consequently, the chapters about different cities feel somewhat redundant until the last section of the book, which offers the comprehensive synthesis the reader may be seeking. This analysis comes rather late considering the importance of the concepts tackled within the context of Australian metropolitan planning. Nevertheless, this final chapter concludes the publication with a subtle and thought-provoking discussion on social equity, diversity, environmental threats, and the concept of compact cities.

Overall, this work paints a comprehensive picture of urbanized Australia and how it has evolved in the last 20 years. By opening the way to new debates and offering new insights on many urban processes, *Planning Metropolitan Australia* is well positioned to become an urban-planning textbook and reference work, both in Australia and globally.

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