

Melbourne's Development & Planning

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A review of Clive S. Beed, Melbourne's Development and Planning (Melbourne, 1981) 338 pp.

... an over-rapid expansion of extractive resources development evokes the spectre of increased urban unemployment, in increasingly neglected urban areas all of which, in some degree, are already underprovided or unevenly provided with economically efficient and socially adequate urban facilities.¹

An understanding of the basic economic forces in this society such as posed by the resources boom is surely necessary if we are to have any coherent idea of the way our cities are likely to change. Indeed, many planning proposals in Australia have often been based on what now seem quite ludicrous economic and demographic projections. For one example, given by Beed, several Board of Works projections made around 1970 envisaged an increase in employment in Melbourne's Central Business District to between 175,000 and 216,000 by 1985. In actual fact, after remaining fairly stable at about 150,000 for some years up to 1973, CBD employment has now fallen below 140,000!²

But such errors in forecasting (and their consequent constructions, such as the expensive white elephant Underground Loop) do not obviate the need for coherent analysis of likely development in Melbourne, to give a basis for planning the city. Unfortunately, while Beed's book is entitled Melbourne's Development and Planning, it in fact has very little on the 'Development' aspect. Beed concludes the book: "Much of the analysis throughout this book has been concerned with the limits to urban change set by the capitalist mode of production".³ This claim is fanciful - the book never defines what the "capitalist mode of production" is, and we get little detail on how it is shaping Melbourne's patterns. Indeed, rather than starting with the structure of production in Melbourne, the book assumes that structure as given and starts by looking at transport facilities. The 'work' to which the commuter are travelling is poorly described.

A second crucial area that needs spelling out if planning is to have any coherence is demography. Since the beginning of this century, the rate of household formation in Australia has soared, and the average number of people per household has dropped. This has largely been due to twin factors of an ageing of the population and a decline in the birthrate. In recent years, the trend has been accelerated by young people leaving their parents' home at an earlier age and setting up independent households. Data from the ANU Family Formation Project indicate that in 1970 only two out of ten young people left their parents' home before they married, while by the late 1970s this figure had climbed to six out of ten.⁴ This represents a massive increase in demand for new housing, and new types of housing. Similar demands have come from those involved in marriage breakdowns and single parents.

Such concerns however are not detailed in the book. Indeed, talking of an important shift in housing demand, from single to multiple family households (and not mentioning non-family households) Beed comments "The reasons for this change are

not material here".⁵ On the contrary, such reasons are very material, and a vital part of any predictions of future housing demand and development.

In these two critical areas then, this book fails to tell us about the forces underlying Melbourne's development in the 1970s.⁶ Its treatment of the second part of the title, 'Melbourne's Planning', is very much better. There is however some confusion generally over what planning means or what it should do. N. Lobley, speaking for the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce, criticised a MMBW statement in 1971 envisaging further suburbanisation, because it did not support the CBD sufficiently. In his view "this is not planning. It merely accelerates trends whether these trends are desirable or not. Planning implies a deliberate change or modification of trends."⁷

Lobley obviously represented vested interests. So too did State Planning Minister Alan Hunt when he stated in 1974 "the Government, however, envisaged its prime role as supporting the activities of private enterprise

rather than acting as a developer in competition with the private sector".⁸

Beed's own preference for what planning should be is evident in his recommendations for transport planning:

An overriding objective for urban transport and land use systems should be to generate the maximum of access benefits at lowest cost. The other equally important objective is to ensure a wide social and geographic distribution of the net profits.⁹

Such equity considerations have not generally predominated in Australian town planning. The work of Leonie Sandercock¹⁰ and others has shown how the jealous profit-seeking of land owners, as well as the technocratic assumptions of the planning movement itself, have hamstrung any development of democratic social planning.

But if the idea of equity has historically had short shrift, it is the central theme of this book. As his quote shows, Beed is concerned that all share in the benefits of the city. In following this goal, he is remarkably fair-minded in his treatment of the material he covers. In Chapters 2 and 3 for example, on urban transport, there is a full discussion of the costs of the different forms of urban transport, followed by detailed and informative accounts of various attempts to solve some of the problems involved. Several experiments in improving public transport are outlined, and their implications for future planning well spelt out. Chapter 4, on urban pollution, similarly summarises good studies, both Australian and international, on pollution, indicating, among other things, that socialist countries have much more stringent anti-pollution laws than we enjoy.¹¹



The next three chapters, on suburbanisation, the production of new urban land, and the patterns of the inner suburbs, give impressive descriptions of the development of Melbourne since the 1960s. The costs of putting such a great emphasis on the private car are well outlined, although the benefits are perhaps downplayed.¹² Chapter 7, on the inner city, summarises the suburbanisation of workplaces in the 1960s and 1970s, and looks at various ways the drift could be countered. Since the market is likely only to reinforce suburbanisation, planning here is treated as a matter of "deliberate public policy" to reverse trends.¹³

Beed's last chapter, "A Strategy of Desirable Policies", brings together his concerns with equity and a humane city with the existing problems facing Melbourne. While he is very critical of MMBW planning in the 1970s, his own option is very close to the recently announced MMBW 1981 guidelines. These envisage a number of urban nodes, with higher population and housing densities encouraged around major suburban centres. The idea, as Beed outlines well, is to provide a mix of housing, more suitable for the newer household groups than the nuclear family house on a fifth-acre block. Such nodes would provide both a good range of services themselves and rapid and easy transport access to the central city.

In arguing this, Beed's even-handed approach is evident again. He considers housing demand from different groups, and tries to accommodate both new and more traditional housing preferences. However, as Beed himself says in conclusion, "Urban planning in Australia has been susceptible to urban social protest, but more so to the needs of capitalism".¹⁴ Beed's own role as a social protestor, through this book, provides us with detailed and thorough information on various planning topics and options. The ill-specified economic and demographic changes being wrought by Australian capitalism however seem certain to continue to dominate Melbourne's development.

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FOOTNOTES

1. AIUS, Urban Strategies for Australia: Managing the Eighties (Canberra, 1980) p. 2.
2. Beed, p. 259.
3. Ibid., p. 305.
4. Cited by Adele Horin "Sex and the Single Life", National Times, April 12 to 18, 1981, p. 32.

5. Beed, p. 186.
6. For an attempt to relate these economic and demographic changes to the Melbourne housing market of the last few years see Tony Ward, "Why house prices won't boom here", Age, Friday 17.7.81.
7. Cited by Beed, p. 261.
8. Cited by Beed, p. 167.
9. Ibid., pp. 49-50.
10. Cf. Leonie Sandercock, Cities for Sale (Melbourne, 1977) and The Land Scandal (Melbourne, 1979).
11. Beed, p. 100.
12. Hugh Stretton, for one, has argued that the much-maligned fifth-acre block provides a considerable range of leisure opportunities for suburbanites. Cf. Tim Rowse, "Heaven and a Hills Hoist: Australian Critics on Suburbia", Meanjin, 37, 1978, pp. 3-13.
13. Beed, p. 245.
14. Ibid., p. 306.

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