

# **CAPITAL ACCUMULATION, URBAN PLANNING, AND THE GREATER SYDNEY COMMISSION**

**Riki Scanlan**

The Greater Sydney Commission (GSC) was formed in early 2016 with the objective of resolving long-standing tensions within Sydney's urban governance. The GSC is a metropolitan planning authority, staffed by impartial experts and premised on ensuring Sydney's future is productive, liveable, and sustainable. However, the picture may not be so rosy. Was the formation of the GSC a neutral exercise in urban technocracy? Or was it a strategic intervention into the state with the objective of securing capital accumulation by creating certain capacities and structural biases within the state? This article expresses significant reservations to optimistic views on the GSC, arguing that it is no herald of public benefit in Sydney's urban governance.

The article has three sections. The first explores the motivating question: how can we best account for the formation and politics of the GSC? The answer is found in an analysis of the Sydney urban class alliance. It examines the accumulation strategy of this class alliance and why it launched a strategic intervention into Sydney's urban governance.

The second section turns to the GSC directly, asking whether it creates a different trajectory of urban governance or whether its significance rests in how it re-articulates the relations of urban statehood. The argument here is that, while the GSC is continuous with certain trends of urban governance in Sydney, its formation signals a new orientation to the urban economy. Crucial, here, is an examination of how the formation of the GSC went hand-in-hand with a rescaling of state spaces.

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The third section expands on the analysis of the GSC. Do the political balancing scales of the GSC always tip towards capital or does it operate on a give-and-take basis? The argument is that the GSC structurally privileges the interests of capital yet is obliged to manage a range of interests across different actors, spatial scales, and temporal horizons.

Two terminological issues need prior clarification. First, there is a risk in spatial analysis of fetishizing space or cities as possessing agency. For the purposes of simplicity of expression, references to 'Sydney' will mean 'Sydney's urban governance' or 'Sydney's economy.' These are distinct from Sydney's class alliance, since this denotes an agent acting upon 'Sydney,' i.e. upon Sydney's urban governance. Second, the concept of 'urban statehood' employed here refers to all those institutions that we call 'government' and the relations embedded within them. The 'urban' simply specifies those involved in urban spaces *per se*. It differs from 'urban governance,' which I use in a looser sense to refer to wider processes of governing.

### **Sydney's class alliance and accumulation strategy**

Sydney's urban governance was reshaped in 2015 through the actions of an urban class alliance, which successfully campaigned for the formation of the Greater Sydney Commission (GSC). The two central actors were the Property Council of Australia (PCA) and the Committee for Sydney (CfS). We know that these actors did, in fact, ally with each other in the campaign to form the GSC. We know that the formation of the GSC was their objective – they say so themselves (PCA 2015; CfS 2016). To situate them within a class context – it is necessary to consider whether they are representatives of fractions of capital, located within an urban class alliance and pursuing a particular accumulation strategy and hegemonic project to secure their interests.

What, then, is an urban class alliance? The concept highlights how distinct classes or fractions of classes can join forces to accomplish specific objectives that are in their interest (or at least are taken to be in their interest). The concept of a coalition of urban actors has a rich history within the tradition of urban regime theory. Harvey (1975: 126) shows how class alliances 'parallel the tendency for an urban economy to achieve what [he] calls a 'structured coherence' defined around a dominant technology of both production and consumption and a dominant set of

class relations.’ He highlights how such alliances are ‘unstable’ and how urban politics is ‘relatively autonomous,’ which captures the reality of continually diverging and converging interests over time and argues that this ‘ferment of urban politics’ functions as political innovation through chaos, like Schumpeter’s concept of ‘creative destruction’ (Harvey, 1975: 127).

This instability means an urban class alliance cannot be presumed in the sense that its formation is not guaranteed. Different classes possess different interests: income to landed property originates in rent, which draws directly on either the income to labour or capital. Different fractions of capital, too, possess different interests. For a class alliance to exist, then, there must be some general interest that overrides conflicts between particular interests (members of a class alliance can, of course, be incorrect with respect to their own interests). However, Harvey’s emphasis on instability and flux sits uneasily with how his argument rests on a correspondence between class alliance and economic technology. In this respect, my argument follows more closely Massey’s emphasis on the specificities of institutional and economic geography, where it is the *ideological* construction of London (in her case) as a global city that defends the interests of the urban and financial elite (Massey, 2007: 64-69). Harvey’s emphasis on the constraints of economic technologies remains in the picture, but no longer possesses a determining role. Instead, a wider consideration of the role of ideology, uncertainty, and strategy is adopted.

The existence of an urban class alliance is presumed only to the extent that (i) a set of actors did in fact coalesce around the objective of the formation of the GSC and (ii) that the interests of these actors can be understood with reference to their class positions and the ‘Sydney accumulation strategy.’ The argument, then, is that there was some *general interest* in the formation of the GSC that was shared across the members of the urban class alliance. These members openly declared their interest in the matter. The Property Council of Australia (PCA), just before the GSC’s formation, said that it has ‘consistently argued for a metropolitan planning authority’ (PCA 2015). The Committee for Sydney (CfS) declares that it ‘championed the establishment of the Greater Sydney Commission and was involved in planning its establishment’ (CfS n.d.) But why might we consider each organisation as representative of a fraction of capital?

As a first pass towards answering this question, we can examine the composition of both organisations. The PCA is the peak body for the property industry, representing over 2200 firms. Its objective is supporting the interests of real estate sectors. Its present tiered membership structure suggests that it privileges the interests of larger over smaller firms (PCA n.d.). The CfS, on the other hand, has a wider membership base, including corporations, government departments, local councils, NGOs, and universities. However, most of its members are large corporations, often transnational. We can deepen this argument by exploring how both organisations relate to and generate the ‘Sydney accumulation strategy,’ which reveals how the interests of both organisations are specifically *class* interests.

The concept of an ‘accumulation strategy’ provides a definite relation between state power and the market. Such a strategy is not aimed at accumulation for ‘capital in general’ (though its success relates to that objective), but instead aims at the production and stabilisation of specific means and patterns of accumulation within the economy. Stabilisation, here, does not refer to an unlimited period of economic prosperity but instead means a relatively long-lasting maintenance of the desired state of affairs. This concept is deliberately unfixed in temporal extent, since the reality of economic success or failure is contingent in nature: the collapse of a system *could* occur at any moment. In this sense, then, an accumulation strategy operates in the middle-run: somewhere between short-run movements of the market and long-run processes (where the long-run is, say, when equilibria might form).

The means by which the stabilisation of an accumulation strategy is achieved rely on the activity of the state. Aglietta (1979) widened his analysis in this way to show how capitalist society can be understood with reference to determinate modes of regulation: the means by which state power operates to sustain an accumulation strategy. We can relocate the concept of accumulation strategies from their spatial origin of national territories to urban spaces by understanding an urban economy as a set of socio-spatial relations within the urban space and the wider world (Jessop 1997). Jessop elaborates his analysis of accumulation strategies by pairing it with an analysis of hegemonic projects. The purpose of a hegemonic project is to resolve contradictions between the particular interests of classes and class fractions (Jessop 1991, 171). Crucially, he argues that this involves the assertion ‘of a general interest in the pursuit of objectives that...advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction)’

and ‘also involves the sacrifice of certain short-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction), and a flow of material concessions for other social forces mobilised behind the project.’ Accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects are non-identical but nonetheless overlap.

The *explication* of an accumulation strategy can also cross over into the terrain of a hegemonic project. This is, essentially, a variation on the theme of ‘what’s good for Ford is good for America.’ The CfS and the PCA declare ‘what’s good for us is good for Sydney’ and ‘what’s good for Sydney is good for Australia.’ There is a vein of literature on the construction of an urban spatial imaginary in Sydney, but it is largely devoid of a class-theoretical lens (McGuirk 2007; Baker and Ruming 2015). This point is the same as Massey’s: the ideological construction of London as a global city is precisely the means by which the interests of London-based capital are secured. The same goes for Sydney. Turning, then, to the Sydney economy, we need to ask two questions. What are the core features of the Sydney accumulation strategy? And what are the ‘limits to capital’? Here, we are not just interested in positive description but ideological critique: for the concept of an accumulation strategy slips between the ‘economic base’ and the *politico-strategic* means of securing a specific pattern of accumulation. In other words, we are interested not just in the ‘facts of the matter’ but also how the Sydney class alliance mobilises specific facts to advance their interests.

The accumulation strategy in Sydney depends on ‘knowledge-intensive’ sectors that offer goods and services higher in the value chain than Australia’s traditional manufacturing, agricultural, or mining industries. In turn, this reveals the dominance of certain fractions of capital: finance, property, and ‘knowledge-intensive’ fractions of capital. The Sydney accumulation strategy is structured around positioning Sydney as a ‘global city’ capable of competing on a global scale relative to firms operating within other cities. This shift occurred during ‘Australia’s New Prosperity’ of the 1990s, which was driven by ‘finance-based economic activity along Australia’s eastern seaboard, especially in the Sydney region’ (McGuirk and O’Neill 2002). Numerous authors stressed the rise of finance, property, and business services during this period (Fagan 2002; Freestone and Murphy 1998; Raskall 2002), and an earlier study identified their role in the redevelopment of Pyrmont–Ultimo (Sant and Jackson 1991). The CfS described the 2000s as Sydney’s ‘Lost Decade,’ with a slump in Sydney’s economic growth and infrastructure investment (CfS 2013a, 2015). But the trend of the 1990s has continued to the present, reinforcing

the crucial role of finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sectors, along with other knowledge-intensive sectors. Table 1 shows the relevant data in terms of the changes in spatial distribution of employment, from 1996 to 2016, across four broad ‘sectors’ of Sydney’s economy. Sydney’s move up the value chain, away from traditional manufacturing and towards advanced services, has been driven by its ability to compete high (but not low) on the value chain (SGS Economics & Planning 2016a).<sup>1</sup> This competitive advantage has been grounded on a substantial supply of high-skill or white-collar labour, lower residential and commercial rental costs, and a higher quality of life than inter-urban competitors (ibid.).

**Table 1: Employment by Industry and District in Sydney, 1996-2016 (%)**

| District              | Knowledge-Intensive |      | Health and Education |      | Population Serving |      | Industrial |      |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------|----------------------|------|--------------------|------|------------|------|
|                       | 1996                | 2016 | 1996                 | 2016 | 1996               | 2016 | 1996       | 2016 |
| <b>Central</b>        | 14.1                | 16.6 | 5.0                  | 5.5  | 9.2                | 9.5  | 8.3        | 5.5  |
| <b>North</b>          | 7.0                 | 6.8  | 3.5                  | 4.3  | 6.1                | 5.8  | 4.0        | 2.9  |
| <b>South</b>          | 2.0                 | 1.9  | 1.9                  | 2.4  | 4.1                | 3.6  | 3.6        | 2.1  |
| <b>South West</b>     | 1.4                 | 1.5  | 1.6                  | 2.2  | 3.1                | 3.3  | 3.1        | 2.7  |
| <b>West</b>           | 0.9                 | 1.0  | 1.1                  | 1.3  | 2.0                | 2.0  | 1.1        | 1.0  |
| <b>West Central</b>   | 3.5                 | 4.2  | 2.7                  | 3.4  | 5.0                | 5.7  | 5.7        | 4.7  |
| <b>Greater Sydney</b> | 28.8                | 32.1 | 15.8                 | 19.0 | 29.2               | 29.7 | 26.2       | 19.2 |

*Source:* (GSC n.d.) This table originates from the GSC Data Hub.

<sup>1</sup> Note that SGS is a frequent collaborator with both the CfS and PCA.

The CfS and PCA defend both the positioning of Sydney as crucial for the Australian economy and its advancement as a ‘globally competitive’ city. The CfS’s central objective is to achieve ‘the enhancement of the economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions that make Sydney a competitive and liveable global city’ (CfS n.d.). It highlights the importance for Australia of Sydney’s economic success and locates that success within the role of ‘key sectors’ (financial, professional, legal, ICT, media services). It therefore argued for a ‘Sydney First’ funding strategy (CfS 2014a). Other documents extend this general goal through defending the global city thesis, the centrality of knowledge-intensive industries, the importance of technological innovation for finance, and the significance of a metropolitan planning authority (CfS 2014b, 2013c, 2013b). The PCAs concerns have been more constrained in scope, focusing on the property and development industries. Nonetheless, they highlight the centrality of Sydney’s economic performance for Australia, grounding it particularly on the financial and insurance sectors and the ‘significant white collar employment growth’ (PCA 2016). The thesis of Sydney’s ‘centrality’ has *prima facie* support, with Sydney accounting for 25% of GDP and 70% of NSW GSP (ABS 2016a, 2016b). Its contribution to Australian GDP growth is estimated to be 38.6% (SGS Economics & Planning 2016b). However, the extent to which the performance of an urban or regional economy can ‘cause’ national growth is unclear. Certainly, growth may occur in an urban economy but whether it would continue to do so if there were no economic links to the rest of the nation is not demonstrated by this kind of disaggregation of growth figures. The point, however, is that this claim is a *premise* of the accumulation strategy. Its truth matters less than its acceptance by the Sydney class alliance and whether that premise can help secure its members’ interests.

It is also worth noting Sydney’s spatial centralisation of employment, particularly within the sectors associated with the Sydney class alliance. Table 1 shows that the Central / CBD district has consolidated its position as the centre of knowledge-intensive employment while the West Central/Parramatta district has emerged as a secondary business, health, and education centre, with a rise in population-serving employment associated with increased construction and provision of amenities in the district. Other areas have not seen such growth. The economic gains have been concentrated in the city CBD while places of residence have maintain a dispersed pattern (CfS and PwC 2015). This transformation of what Massey (1995) calls the ‘spatial division of labour’ is a consequence of

industrial change: the shift towards certain sectors of the economy produced a shift in the spatial distribution of labour.

However, these ‘successes’ may be threatened by structural weaknesses within this accumulation strategy. At least, the Sydney class alliance takes this to be the case. The basic interest here is to ‘turn [Sydney’s] current cyclical upswing into a structural breakthrough’ (CfS 2013a, 11) – that is, to transform short-run success into the stabilisation of the Sydney accumulation strategy. The CfS argues that in order to ‘add to the dividend,’ we must ‘end the divide’ between East and West – i.e., relax the over-concentration of high productivity sectors within the CBD regions (CfS 2014a, 20). The PCA, meanwhile, claims that Sydney’s future growth rests on ‘transform[ing] the mobility’ of labour, enabling tech and finance firms to operate more easily, and increasing the ‘efficiency’ of planning (PCA 2016). To some extent, the PCA’s views might be interpreted as opportunistic cases to achieve long-held objectives of further deregulation in development. Indeed, it argues that impeding development impedes housing supply, which is bad for everyone in Sydney – and presumably bad for profits (PCA and Deloitte Access Economics 2016). But, even if this is true, it does not rule out the PCA simultaneously maintaining that the future profitability of landed property is contingent on counteracting the spatial centralisation of globally competitive firms and high-wage employment.

In summary, there is a set of actors in Sydney’s urban politics with specific economic interests in spatially reshaping the emerging economic structure of Greater Sydney and who saw a means of accomplishing this objective in the formation of the GSC. Crucially, we can understand these actors in conjunct as an urban class alliance operating to stabilise a specific accumulation strategy through a strategic intervention in the state. The explication of their accumulation strategy discursively shaped it into a necessary objective for state policy within Sydney: failing to secure it would have been ‘irresponsible.’ This indicates a hegemonic project within Sydney’s urban politics aimed at stabilising the Sydney accumulation strategy. The result was the formation of the Greater Sydney Commission.

### **The capacities of the GSC: rescaling state spaces**

If the GSC is premised on stabilising the Sydney accumulation strategy across the middle-run, how can it accomplish this task? Answering this question proceeds in two stages. This section explores how the GSC rearticulates the relations of urban statehood while the next explores how the GSC manages contradictory interests; with both arguing how this is to the benefit of capital accumulation. The formation of the GSC is shown to be significant in so far as it reshapes the relations embedded within the institutional ensemble of the state. The theoretical resource deployed here is a spatialized strategic relational account. It posits that, while the GSC is continuous with certain trends of urban governance in Sydney, it rescales state spaces to the urban scale and signals a new state orientation to space.

First, a clarification of the analytical perspective on the state employed here. The state is treated as a simultaneous site, generator, and outcome of class struggle (Jessop 1990). It is not merely an object of struggle but is an agent of struggle. At the heart of state power are the twinned imperatives of securing both capital accumulation and social legitimation (O'Connor 1973, 6–7). We should therefore expect the state's projects and policies to strive to meet both imperatives, although we should not expect those projects or policies to adopt pre-determined forms. Crucially, we can understand O'Connor's twin imperatives as a longer-run tension upon which is mapped 'middle-run' accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects. But the fact that the state may accommodate the interests of actors other than capital does not entail that it is neutral or impartial. The apparent impartiality of the state *vis a vis* class relations is one of the hallmark characteristics of politics and the state (Wood 1981). However, as Jessop argues, the state exhibits a 'strategic selectivity' to the interests of capital in general, where the precise mechanism depends on inherited institutional forms and present class struggle (Jessop 1990). It is this structural bias of the GSC that I am concerned with revealing.

The task of analyzing particular state forms requires attention to a number of temporal horizons and to spatial scales. Neil Brenner's *New State Spaces* (2004) emphasises the latter:

[The] territorial coherence and interscalar coordination of state institutions and policies are not permanently fixed, but can be established only through the mobilisation of political strategies intended to influence the form, structure, and internal differentiation of state space (Brenner 2004, 90).

The state is therefore characterised by the historical evolution of its institutional geography through strategic contestation by social classes. The state's spatial selectivity is constituted through state spatial projects and strategies. The former are reflexively directed onto the geographies of state territoriality: the scalar arrangements of government, for example. The latter are directed upon broader socio-spatial conditions: infrastructure, for instance. Brenner (2004, 106) suggests that new state spaces that emerged throughout this process are characterised by '(a) state spatial projects oriented towards administrative differentiation and decentralisation; and (b) state spatial strategies oriented towards the differentiation of socioeconomic activities within a national territory and towards the management of scalar multiplicity.' In short: there has been a trend towards state power articulated at the urban scale for the purposes of securing accumulation and legitimation. This does not imply that other state structures have 'withered away.' Rather, the rescaling of statehood to the urban scale is a recent round of state spatial re-regulation.

In this theoretical context, we can explore how the state in Sydney exhibits strategic and spatial selectivity towards certain interests of capital and how it employs the illusion of impartiality to accomplish this goal.

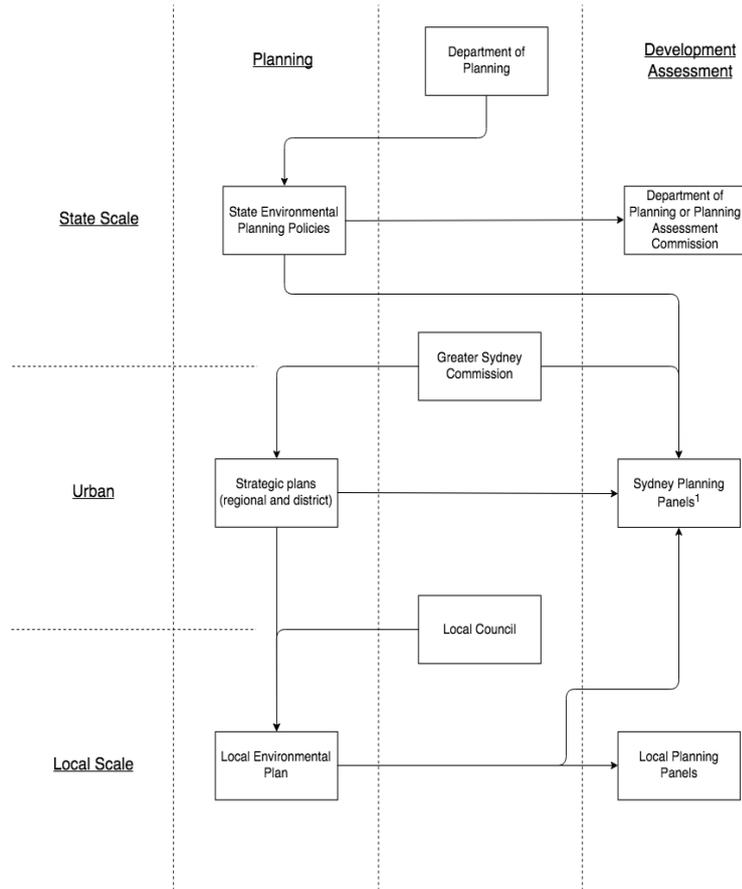
Recent decades have been marked by tendencies towards 'impartial expertise' in planning and by the centralisation of authority over urban space. The formation of the Greater Sydney Commission is continuous with both trends. The Environmental and Planning Assessment Act [1979] in the main devolved authority to local government. It initially established clear democratic accountability since authority was generally situated in the hands of local government and occasionally in the hands of the Planning Minister—both at least nominally accountable to the electorate. Since 1979, however, the state government has rolled back the authority of local government (Searle and Bunker 2010; Stilwell and Troy 2000). Concurrent with this process has been the trend towards 'impartial' and 'expert' development assessment. Joint Regional Planning Panels (JRRPs) and Independent Hearing Assessment Panels (IHAPs) are constituted by non-elected and non-partisan expert members, and they operated between the scales of local and State government. Bishop (2014) argues that these panels exemplified the trend towards centralised planning authority and a strategic privileging of expert opinion over democratic control, resulting in 'new state spaces.' She further notes that enhancing planning 'efficiency' means an increase in investment certainty and assessment speed by decreasing community participation.

Despite the various means of re-scaling planning authority away from local government, Sydney's planning regime retained an urban-scaled gap: no institution operated solely at the scale of the entire urban space. The Greater Sydney Commission filled that gap—and, in so doing, reshaped Sydney's planning regime. The significance, then, of the GSC is not the formation of new functions or roles but the reorganization of state power around a specific spatial scale and project. Figure 2 indicates the reconfiguration of the Sydney planning regime after its formation. The 'districts' of Sydney were defined by planning documents prior to the formation of the GSC. They are administrative zones that are both informed by present conditions across Sydney and future-oriented intentions for Sydney's urban development. In other words, defining administrative zones entails the production of space—specifically, in Lefebvre's (1991) terms, the abstract space of the state. In 2017, the six districts and planning panels were reconfigured into five – a move intended to harmonise with the GSC's 'Three Cities' plan (Turnbull 2016b).

But why might the creation of a specifically urban-scaled institution matter if its functions, and those of the Sydney planning regime, largely existed prior to its formation? The crucial point is not that the formation of the GSC accompanied other wide-ranging changes but that its formation rearticulates the scalar hierarchy of urban statehood. The formation of the GSC reshapes the spatial selectivity of the state to strategically privilege the interests of Sydney's urban class alliance. As argued earlier, the interests of classes and class fractions can exhibit scalar differentiation: for example, you might be interested in one thing *vis à vis* the national scale and an entirely other thing *vis à vis* the global scale. If the Sydney class alliance aims toward the stabilisation of its accumulation strategy at an urban scale, then an institution that is oriented towards space at that same scale is appreciably useful for their interests. Harvey makes a similar point:

Local jurisdictions frequently divide rather than unify the urban region, thus emphasising the segmentations rather than the tendency toward structured coherence and alliance-formation. Other means then have to be found within the higher tiers of government...to forge a ruling class alliance. (Harvey 1985, 153)

**Figure 2: Sydney Planning Regime, post-GSC**



*Notes:* 1. Arrows indicate regulatory control. The flows of authority are only indicative; more complex interrelations exist than can be usefully shown in a diagram.

2. SSPs sometimes regulate local state developments.

3. Institutions and planning instruments have multiscalar effects. These categorisations are not intended to indicate fixed scales, but reflect the dominant production of scale within the Sydney planning regime.

Harvey's argument is that class alliances will tend to form on the basis of the extant institutional geography. Sydney's planning regime exhibited precisely these 'segmentations,' yet the response was not to spatially segment the Sydney class alliance or to exclusively organise at the level of the state government. Instead, they *produced* an entirely new scale of urban governance. This production of an urban scale entails a spatial selectivity of planning and development assessment that privileges economic activity within that space and scale. There are two points to note here. First, there is a strategic exclusion of activity external to the Greater Sydney region. My study of GSC planning documents found next to no references to economic, environmental, or social activity beyond the borders of Greater Sydney, despite the always-already presence of interrelationships between administrative spatial units. This exclusion suggests that the 'global city thesis'—that urban spaces are primarily embedded in the global scale rather than the national scale—is a foundational presumption of the GSC, much as it is of the Sydney accumulation strategy. Second, there is a strategic privileging of activity within the Greater Sydney region that is configured at the urban scale. In other words, one development proposal will win out over a competing proposal if it is configured to meet urban-scaled strategic goals and the other is not (all other things being equal). Developers that wish to alter the land-use zoning of an LEP will succeed if they demonstrate that it will meet the objectives of a regional or district plan. Taken together, these two features of the GSC provide it the *capacity* to act in the interests of the core fractions of capital in Sydney.

### **The structural bias of the GSC**

Even if the GSC was formed at the behest of capital and has the capacity to act in its interests, why might we think that it would actually do so? State power is not a crude one-to-one correspondence between capital's interests and state activity. Rather, the presence of a structural bias towards the interests of capital is the issue. Structurally privileging certain interests does not entail that no acts will benefit other interests. Such benefits may accrue to other interests where they are (a) instrumental towards securing capital's interests, (b) non-conflicting with capital's interests, or (c) a result of social movements successfully applying pressure on the state. The central argument here is that the GSC's own principles (productivity,

liveability, and sustainability) subsume distributional and ecological outcomes under the objective of stabilising Sydney's accumulation strategy in the middle-run. This does not imply that the latter set of outcomes are *necessarily* subservient to capital—just that the operation of the GSC *strives* to make them subservient to accumulation. This means we should not be surprised to see the GSC sometimes act *against* the interests of capital, even against members of the Sydney urban class alliance, in the short-run. For example, rejecting short-term high-yield property development might disadvantage a developer now, but may be justified in terms of securing the prospects for future accumulation.

What of the possibility of resistance to the hegemonic project and accumulation strategy of the Sydney class alliance? The de-democratisation of the GSC is crucial here: indeed, it is a hallmark of institutionally embedded neoliberalism (Cahill 2014, 106). By operating between state and local government, the GSC is insulated from direct electoral accountability. The Sydney planning regime prior to the GSC already had this character, but the re-articulation of urban statehood with the formation of the GSC signals a more general positioning of it away from democratic engagement. For instance, local councils have often been in tension with state government ambitions, at least partly due to democratic input from local communities (Stilwell and Troy 2000). The de-democratised character of the GSC is slyly captured by one of the legislative aims of the GSC:

to assist local councils in the Greater Sydney Region... on the implementation of any plan or proposal relating to development in the Greater Sydney Region. (*Greater Sydney Commission Act 2015*)

The GSC has final authority on any such plan. There are also subtler ways by which neoliberalism is embedded within the GSC: it is not just a matter of 'rolling back' previous state forms but 'rolling out' new ones (Peck and Tickell 2002). Earlier, the trend towards 'impartial expertise' within Sydney's urban governance (Bishop 2014) was identified as a means of justifying the rescaling of state spaces in Sydney. Here, we can draw on that observation to reveal how the GSC is premised on a series of exclusions from the process of decision-making. The increased incorporation of 'impartial experts' within the planning and development systems can be understood rolling-out a new 'meta-governance' role of the GSC. In this context, 'governance' refers to a set of rules produced by a network of agents for regulating some domain (Jessop 1995; Obeng-Odoom 2012). It is distinct from 'urban statehood' to the extent that 'urban

governance’ encapsulates rule-making by a wider set of agents. In any case, this network may itself be organised according to some set of rules, where the capacity to produce and amend these rules is a ‘meta-governance’ function (Jessop 2003).

The GSC exhibits this function to the extent that its decision-making is informed by the production of advisory reports and data analysis, typically by consultancy firms. Notably, a large number of these firms have partnered in the past with the CfS and PCA to produce reports recommending particular urban policies – some of which are simply repeated in their recommendations to the GSC. Obviously, not everybody can have input into this process. The tendency towards ‘impartial expertise’ is extended here by the privileging of the apparently neutral, apparently expert advisor—whose neutrality comes from their lack of political affiliation and whose expertise is within mainstream urban economics and planning. The GSC culminates this trend within the domain of strategic planning: an independent, unelected body whose members must be ‘expert authorities.’

But urban planning and expert advice cannot escape being political. As Lefebvre (1991, 95) suggests, ‘surely it is the supreme illusion to defer to architects, urbanists, or planners as experts or supreme authorities in matters relating to space. What the ‘interested parties’ here fail to appreciate is that they are bending their demands (from below) to suit commands (from above).’ The GSC has the capacity to determine (a) what kind of advice is permitted and (b) what constitutes ‘impartiality.’ This meta-governance capacity deepens the hold of neoliberalism on the Sydney planning regime by minimising footholds for progressive alternatives. The discursive smokescreen of ‘impartial expertise’ conceals the strategic privileging of the interests of the Sydney class alliance. These institutional arrangements have a reflexive character: they strategically privilege neoliberal interests while strategically excluding alternate interests, diminishing the potential for alternative projects or visions for urban planning. The result is a system of advantage for the Sydney urban class alliance.

### *Making liveability functional for capital*

‘Liveability’ is framed through the GSC’s Liveability Framework (GSC, Department of Planning and Environment, and ARUP 2017), which sets

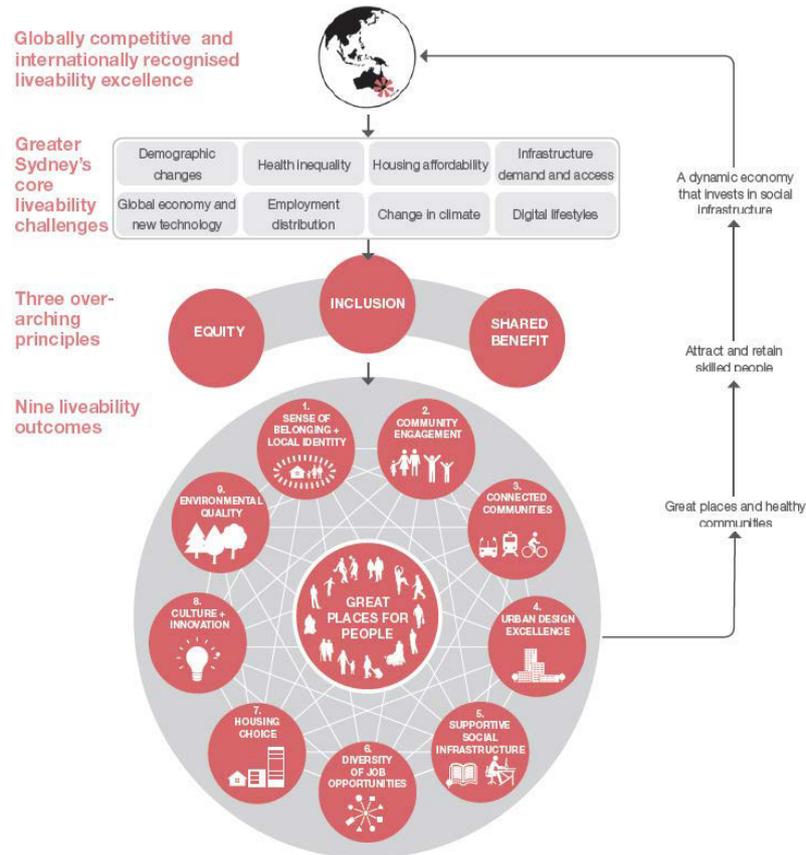
the direction for regional and district plans (see Figure 3). It structures liveability through eight challenges, three principles, and nine outcomes, which are organised in a 'virtuous cycle' where enhanced liveability leads to enhanced competitive advantage on a global scale (GSC, Department of Planning and Environment, and ARUP 2017, 16–21). Meeting liveability outcomes amounts to securing the conditions for the reproduction of labour-power, particularly the high-skill labour necessary for the fractions of capital at the core of Sydney's accumulation strategy. As the GSC notes, attracting and keeping high-skill labour requires highly liveable urban space, which makes liveability 'important for international competitiveness, particularly in the context of the growing financial and business sectors that are highly concentrated in city centres' (State of the Environment 2011 Committee 2011; quoted in: GSC, Department of Planning and Environment, and ARUP 2017). Liveability may be reinterpreted as a set of distributional outcomes limited by what is necessary to secure the reproduction of labour-power relevant to the Sydney accumulation strategy. It is in this sense that the GSC makes liveability functional for capital.

The means by which the GSC seeks to accomplish this goal are through its infrastructure coordination and planning functions (GSC 2016, 10–11). Urban space is defined, in part, by the range of the daily commute, which sets out the spatial dimension of the urban labour market and links workplaces to homes: the places of production and places of reproduction (Harvey 1985, 127–35; Smith 2010, 181–85). As discussed earlier, however, there are serious constraints on this range to the extent that there is a spatial centralisation of high-skill employment, limited intra-urban mobility, and a dispersal of residency. Investment into the urban built environment may provide a partial spatial fix to this structural tension.

The strategic plan for Sydney outlines a polycentric urban space with interconnected routes (Department of Planning and Environment 2014; GSC 2016). Strategic centres that supplement the CBD are established through transit oriented development, where transport routes intersect at the proposed economic nodes (Duarte, Barczak, and Yamawaki 2016). This development strategy is matched by a 'rationalisation' of land-use zoning with an eye towards urban-scaled effects on economic productivity. The GSC's refinement of extant strategic plans involves a 'Three Cities' model, where the object is to counteract the effect of the spatial centralisation of production and broaden Sydney's economic base. This is precisely the same goal that the CfS has sought for years (CfS 2013a,

2014a). The policy framework aims to incentivise private developers to buy land and build residential and commercial facilities in fresh spaces of Sydney. In other words, the means of implementing policy rest on producing the conditions necessary for the market to function.

**Figure 3.1: Liveability Framework: An Integrated Approach**



Source: (GSC, Department of Planning and Environment, and ARUP 2017).

As the urban space shifts to a polycentric model, we expect the urban topography of land values flattens since more places are closer to more centres (Smith 1996, 58–74; Stilwell 1992, 145–49). High land values moderate while low land values increase. Places previously unprofitable for redevelopment become profitable. Exceptionally high-yields might decline in frequency, but the overall mass of profit expands. A polycentric model is presumed possible only if the newly profitable land markets are ‘liveable places,’ since workers are assumed by the Liveability Framework to make residential and employment decisions based on more than commuting length (as per crude ‘bid-rent’ models). People care about how they live, not just where they live or how far they travel (GSC, Department of Planning and Environment, and ARUP 2017). Transit-oriented development is insufficient alone: investment in the built environment to secure at least some of the conditions for the reproduction of labour is necessary. But note that the workers involved in this process do not include all workers. The framing here is around the global economy; around attracting and retaining ‘skilled people.’ As the GSC puts it:

a focus on place is critical for the increasingly time-hungry ‘knowledge-workers’ that companies are looking to attract, who are increasingly eager to live in highly liveable urban environments close to work and amenity. (GSC, Department of Planning and Environment, and ARUP 2017).

The structural bias towards capital – specifically towards the Sydney class alliance – is evident. Flattening the topography of land values alleviates pressure on the rental costs of firms while enabling a larger and potentially more stable mass of profit. The wage component of these firms may also decline, either through a stabilisation of housing costs on the part of these ‘knowledge workers’ or through a willingness to take a lower wage in ‘highly liveable’ Sydney rather than a higher wage in a less liveable place. By framing urban planning in this way, we can understand the decision of the GSC to overturn the Parramatta City Council decision to allow super-tall towers around Parramatta Square. The GSC rejected the development on the basis that it would overshadow the square, create wind tunnels, and decrease the liveability of the working environment (Turnbull 2016a). The rejection was only possible through the scalar hierarchy of the Sydney planning regime. Moreover, the GSC’s structural bias towards capital accumulation at the urban scale and across the middle-run inoculated it from interests that emphasised the short-run yields. A shorter-run temporal

horizon would have led to the GSC approving the ‘windfall’ profits of high-rise development, at the cost of a ‘windswept’ city square.

The accumulation strategy, at the end of the day, rests on reproducing a particular fraction of labour at as cheap a cost as possible. Liveability is made functional for capital to the extent necessary to consolidate the Sydney accumulation strategy. As Smith (1996, 89) argues, ‘the so-called renaissance is advertised and sold as bringing benefits to everyone regardless of class, but available evidence suggests otherwise.’ Whereas gentrification operates at the local scale, the embedding of liveability within the accumulation process is organised at the urban scale. The GSC identifies underutilised spaces where investment in the built environment will assist in reconfiguring the range of the urban labour market and urban space in general. But constructing ‘liveable’ spaces means prioritising the needs of capital.

#### *Making sustainability functional for capital*

The environment is the third major emphasis in the triad of productivity, liveability, and sustainability. GSC planning documents reflect the potential of environmental shocks and stresses to pose problems for urban space (GSC 2016; GSC and Total Environmental Centre 2016; GSC 2017b, 2017a). Mainstream environmental economics typically poses acute and chronic environmental hazards in terms of negative externalities (Moore 2015, 101). The manifestation of these problems is specific to Sydney, but the general phenomenon of environmental degradation is global. If such negative externalities impede market functioning within cities across the world, but Sydney can effectively incorporate them within its planning framework, then the competitive advantage of the Sydney economy is enhanced. This reconstitution of GSC’s approach to ecological issues is supported by its own representations on the matter:

The completion of Barangaroo by Lend Lease as the first carbon neutral precinct of its type in the world presents a real opportunity for us to market our capacity in this area and use it as basis for a new centre of excellence of enterprises that build world’s low carbon, high efficiency buildings [sic] (Turnbull 2016b).

The GSC’s conception of sustainability also emphasises positive environmental externalities:

Sustainable natural systems provide 'ecosystem services' to the city, by providing water, absorbing and converting waste, moderating the local climate and creating attractive places and recreational spaces (GSC 2016, 12).

Finally, sustainability includes an emphasis on reproducing urban space through urban resilience, which is:

the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems within a city to survive, adapt and thrive no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shock they experience (100 Resilient Cities Project, quoted in: GSC 2017b, 30).

If capitalist society and natural ecology are mutually embedded (Moore 2015, 1–8), then state policies for sustainability means reproducing the general conditions for production. As noted in a CfS paper, Sydney's urban resilience is interpreted through 'two connected themes: what is holding back Sydney's ability to remain competitive in a global marketplace; and the disparity that exists across Sydney as a metropolitan region' (Kernaghan and Williams 2015). The authors go on to argue that the GSC produces the necessary authority at the appropriate (urban) scale to develop sustainability policies that grapple with these themes.

The GSC's framework for sustainability, however, overwhelmingly emphasises incorporating ecological outcomes within economic calculations. If the environment is primarily a source of externalities, then state policy must be oriented towards minimising negative impacts on the economy. However, the GSC's temporal horizon for securing the conditions for accumulation and legitimation focusses on middle-run concerns and is not locked in to short-run profit motives to the exclusion of all other considerations. The techniques for assessing sustainability suggest precisely these emphases:

The Panel paid attention to expressing environmental parameters in terms of economic outcomes, as well as acknowledging it is not always possible to give them a quantified value. In other words environmental values can engage in an economic discourse that should be considered just as important as more conventional commercial numbers (GSC and Total Environmental Centre 2016, 9)

Unquantifiable parameters are in the minority: across 16 sustainability categories, there are 88 quantitative metrics versus 10 qualitative metrics (GSC and Total Environmental Centre 2016). These unquantifiable metrics typically refer to aesthetic values, community perceptions, and intangible sentiments, which are assessed through qualitative surveys. The

quantification of nature emerges from the calculative impulse of the law of value, such that the accumulation process is strategically privileged in debates over ecological outcomes: ‘state- and market-led simplifications [... entrain] a range of processes aimed at standardizing and geometrically encoding and mapping natures in the interests of capital accumulation’ (Moore 2015, 216). These metrics provide a framework for assessing how ‘sustainable’ urban planning can be configured to enhance Sydney’s competitive advantage—to stabilise the Sydney accumulation strategy.

## Conclusion

The article has outlined a critique of the Greater Sydney Commission. It counters left-wing optimism with regard to the GSC, other metropolitan planning authorities, and urban policy in general. Two arguments might be adduced for this optimism. The first sees increased state regulation as antithetical to corporate interests. Since the GSC is such an increase, it must be a net good. But increased regulation is neither intrinsically progressive nor conservative: what matters is what form it takes and how it is situated within wider social relations. Second, there is a tension within left-wing urban thinking between a technocratic and democratic tradition, described by Swyngedouw (2009) as a ‘post-political condition’ (those who fall on the technocratic side no doubt mightily dispute their opposite pole receiving the accolade of democratic). In the absence of significant urban social movements in Sydney, strategies for progressive policy in the urban context gravitate towards technocratic means, leveraging expert advice in pursuit of desirable outcomes. The possibility of such action may lead to the conclusion that the GSC is politically neutral, if nonetheless technocratic.

But this article has shown that the GSC is *not* neutral. Its formation resulted from a political intervention on Sydney’s urban governance in order to secure the interests of an urban class alliance. There may be an illusion of political impartiality, but this conceals how the GSC is premised on its structural bias towards the interests of the Sydney class alliance. Indeed, the illusion is precisely what enables its power. Moreover, it is how progressives see the mirage of policy reform via technocratic means.

The entrenchment of institutional power and the de-democratisation of urban planning do not, however, mean that all is lost; game over, go home. There remains always the possibility for irruption, fracture, and

discontinuities. The stabilisation of an accumulation strategy by an urban class alliance is never guaranteed. Their theories might be wrong or their application faulty. The GSC might have been incorrectly presumed to possess capacities that it never had or might face resurgent resistance that it cannot handle. But what should be clear is that the possibilities for progressive change rest in the potential of social movements – not in technocratic tinkering.

*Riki Scanlan is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Economy, University of Sydney, and a winner of the 2017 JAPE Young Scholar's Award.*

*riki.scanlan@sydney.edu.au*

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