

## Book Review

### Instruments of Planning: Tensions and Challenges for More Equitable and Sustainable Cities

Rebecca Leshinsky and Crystal Legacy (eds).

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This collected volume is mainly focused upon the Australian situation, with some international examples too. The main question that the book seeks to answer is, 'how do planners seek to achieve a more equitable and sustainable approach to planning?' To cover this brief the book is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the challenges and barriers to achieving change: but the opportunities available too. The second part is concerned with strategies for change, the third part, instruments to implement change, and the final part illustrates the role of technology in facilitating the planning process and policy achievement.

It must be said from the outset that much is taken as 'given' or 'obvious' in this book in terms of background context. There is no indication in the introduction of which particular groups are in need of a more equitable approach to planning, and the usual suspects of gender, age, ethnicity and social class only appear in passing in subsequent chapters, within the context of wider policy discussions. Likewise it is initially unclear quite what sort of sustainability agenda the editors have in mind and what spatial localities they are targeting.

However, one gleans, as one reads, that much of the book is concerned with the environmental problems inherent in the low density suburban form of development that engulfs most Australian cities. It appears that an emphasis upon 'densification' of the residential suburbs is the preferred strategy. This is to be achieved by retro-fitting the suburbs to achieve higher densities, with an emphasis upon medium rise development, the provision of a greater range of local facilities within neighbourhood centres, and investment in public transport infrastructure. However, the general public in Australia are not known to be in favour of increased densification, valuing the space and privacy which is part and parcel of low density, low rise housing. Indeed, it is acknowledged that the imagined freedom of lots of space is fundamental to the Australian way of life. Unfortunately the likely resistance from the community to the ideas underlying this this book are not adequately addressed by the contributors.

As a general observation, some really interesting spatial planning examples in the book are often buried within a vast amount of literature review material and allusion to esoteric planning theories, and lots of 'name dropping' (but not necessarily of the right names...). Much of the conceptual and literature review material seems rather dated,

and geographically inappropriate to the Australian situation. These 'scholarly' components are perhaps included to add gravitas and intellectual status to the book. But frequently they seem superfluous and second-hand, and sit uneasily with the expected emphasis upon practical 'instruments of planning' in implementing policy change. There is very little mention at all of the equality and diversity agenda and related texts that are so relevant to creating inclusive cities, and which are widely available in the Antipodes (Reeves, 2004).

The chapters are quite disparate in content and vary considerably in style, quality and timbre: some are very relevant and others read like a PhD dissertation that requires pruning. In particular one feels a jarring between those chapters that are concerned with planning law, the property market and technological approaches to planning, and those that take a more abstract, detached 'academic' approach to planning. In fact the importance of understanding the limitations of the planning system and planning law *vis à vis* the powers of the omnipresent private property market is a key theme in several of the chapters. This could have been more explicitly developed throughout the book, which would help to bind its different parts together more.

The four parts of the book comprise 16 chapters, with chapter 1, written by the editors, providing the overall introduction and chapters' structure summary. There are 24 contributors, mainly, but not exclusively, Australian. Reading their mini-cvs, their expertise includes planning law, finance, housing, sustainability, urban design, architecture, smart cities, transport, and new technical (computer) tools in planning. Significantly the line-up appears somewhat weak in relation to the social aspects of planning, especially in respect of diversity and demographic issues, although the ever-elastic, ambiguous term 'community' is used frequently within the book.

Part 1 entitled 'Planning Challenges in a Context of Discontinuous Growth' comprises three chapters, but confusingly, each 'part' is prefaced by a substantial introduction (which is not indexed as a separate chapter). Chapter 2 (the first chapter in Part 1) is entitled 'Towards Equitable Intensification: Restricting developer gain and compensating planning costs' and focuses upon the question of urban intensification in Sydney's low-density residential areas. A sense of *déjà vu* sets in as this chapter reminds me so much of the old debates over compensation and betterment within the UK planning system and indeed CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) (Greed and Johnson, 2014: 38, 46) is mentioned in passing. Soon it becomes clear that 'equitable' does not mean anything to do with social 'equality' but rather a more equally distributed approach to spreading both the losses and gains arising from the planning system among different property stakeholders. Chapter 3, entitled 'Freedom's Prospect: Rethinking red and green tape reform as a planning instrument', in spite of its witty title, is a more convoluted chapter, dwelling on the neo-liberal approach to planning and making comparisons with EU bureaucracy and the situation in North America, and concluding with a short discussion of the situation in Queensland. Chapter 4 is mainly concerned with public consultation issues, and uses Melbourne for illustrative purposes (although unfortunately the title of the map in Figure 4.1 does not include the magic word 'Melbourne') and it is generally rather confusing as to what and where the discussion is about. Whilst the word community is used frequently there is no acknowledgment of the flawed nature of much public participation because 'the community' is not a unitary group, but contains different sectors with diverse needs.

Part II is concerned with 'Designing Strategies for Change', but the word 'design' is misleading as the chapters are mainly about applying different procedural tools within the planning system, with examples in Chapter 5 from both Vancouver and Melbourne, and chapter 6 covering ways of achieving affordable housing provision with reference to London, San Francisco, South Australia and Canberra. Chapter 7 is concerned with

Social Impact Assessment (SIA), but the background and definitions of SIA in Australia are not clearly explained, especially as to what 'social' factors or sectors are taken into account, nor quite what the enabling legislation is. But one gleaned from reading the chapter that SIA is not to do with the diversity and equality issues that would be recognised under UK equality legislation. Rather, as attested by the list of SIA categories shown in Table 7.1 (page 98), they include liquor licensing, gaming and gambling, as well as brothels and sex shops, albeit gender equality is also briefly listed alongside, whereas age, ethnicity, disability and other familiar diversity issues are not. Chapter 8, entitled somewhat confusingly 'Design-Led Approaches for Enabling Collective Imagining of Sustainable Urban Futures', comes across as somewhat academically-remote and hypothetical, although a few brief 'artistic' examples are given from Italy, and just one Arts Project, Groundswell, from Australia.

Part III, entitled 'Instruments to Implement Change', is a much more nitty-gritty part of the book, with Chapter 9 entitled 'Codes of Mapping', dealing with practical zoning and procedural issues at suburban neighbourhood level, within the Victorian planning system (that is in the state, not the Dickensian era!). Chapter 10 is quite fascinating, dealing with 'transferable development credits', waxing lyrical on what in the UK and USA would be respectively called planning gain and zoning bonusing, with particular reference to the effects and implications for the property market. Chapter 11, on managing urban intensification through conservation covenants, effectively suggests using private land law (that is real property law) solutions to strengthen the inadequate planning system, by means of using restrictive covenants, trust agreements and easements to facilitate environmental protection and thus increased sustainability. Chapter 12 is concerned with regenerating cities and in particular using 'grey field' land to intensify development densities. Grey field land may be defined as under-utilised, under-capitalised areas of suburban land, often in run down, ageing suburbs, where the population has moved on to more modern outer suburban locations (quite different from brownfield sites, which are generally redundant industrial sites).

The last part of the book, IV, is entitled 'Technology in Planning: Supporting urban policy and decision-making'. Chapter 13 discusses the role of technology in planning and the computer-based methodologies suggested also give me a sense of déjà vu, this time recalling 1960s systems planning approaches (Greed and Johnson, 2014: 154-162), albeit with much faster and complex technologies today. Chapter 14 returns to the issue of grey field sites, and suggests means of involving the community in developing design solutions for such areas using the new technology. Computer models and visual representations of schemes are shown, and Figure 14.10 even shows a photograph of a 3D printer, printing a 3D model of a medium-rise housing scheme. Is such a printer so remarkable as to merit a special photograph, or is it prematurely ageing the book? But is such technological change really likely to increase public involvement or, as in the 1960s, will it further marginalise the social aspects of planning and human needs in general?

Chapter 15, still on technology in planning, discusses the Hedonic Price Model (HPM) as an information tool in assessing the monetary 'value' of community facilities in housing areas, with examples taken from the city of Vienna and also the Netherlands. I find this chapter absolutely bewildering, and barely connected to the rest of the chapters, and wonder why such a monetarist and mathematical approach is even needed when assessing human needs. But then neo-liberal governments 'know the price of everything and the value of nothing'. The final chapter, 16, by the editors, discusses the tensions and challenges in creating planning instruments which help to achieve more equitable and sustainable cities, with a useful table (16.1) summarising different planning instruments, and concludes with a call for further research in this field.

To conclude, I found the book disappointing, my expectations being raised by the rather misleading title, not least because of the lack of attention to the 'equitable' side of planning policy, but also because the book comprises a large and rather unwieldy set of chapters (and cast of contributors). It covers a varied set of topics which do not quite gel together, written in a variety of styles and of variable quality. There is inadequate explanation of legislation or geographical location, and vagueness as to detail, just when one needs more information. On the other hand there are masses of unnecessary literature review material, some of it quite dated, that could have been jettisoned. Also I was never sure whether the book is 'really' meant to be primarily about Australia, or is trying (as in some chapters) to give a global perspective, by including international examples. The book needs a stronger overall focus and some clearer linked themes to draw the chapters together. In terms of likely audience, different parts of the book will appeal to different types of readership, for example planning lawyers, computer technology types, and property and housing specialists will all find items of interest to them. But I am not convinced that spatial planners, those concerned with mainstreaming equality into planning, and those already well informed on sustainability issues will find the book has any new policy implications for them.

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