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URBAN GROWTH MANAGEMENT

EXPERIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE IMPLICATIONS ON A SMALLER SCALE FOR NEW ZEALAND.

URBAN GROWTH DRIVERS AND PROBLEMS

According to "The Geography of Nowhere"[1], 80% of everything ever built in America has been built in the last 50 years. Most of it is urban development. And they haven't stopped yet.

In the United States, the land areas of large metropolitan communities are expanding at nearly twice their population growth rates. Housing, industrial and commercial services are spreading into the countryside, and the American penchant for low density living continues unabated, if not exacerbated. In a way, urban expansion is almost a self sustaining economy in its own right.

There are powerful cultural and market forces, not to mention government policies, which help propel this outward drive. Modern telecommunications, cheap transport, housing mortgage tax write off provisions, and the "American Dream" of a spacious house on a spacious lot are major drivers. So, too, are the lower infrastructure costs for new development on greenfields sites (compared to big reinvestment in old, decaying downtown systems and the clean up of contaminated urban land at the centres of many cities). Added to this is a wish to move to areas where minority groups and those in poverty do not live, and which are considered to be safer.

These drivers do not always result just in urban fringe growth. Sometimes urban growth leaps well over city boundaries to colonise previously outlying rural communities and also scenic areas hundreds of miles away. Meanwhile, in the centres of some metro areas, urban decay is spreading from poor neighbourhoods in central cities into the older, outer-ring suburbs. These "once were fringe" areas now have to find new ways to redevelop their physical, social and economic environments.

JURISDICTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

American urban growth poses big problems and, for the most part, the responses to these are pretty much ad hoc. US local government is hugely fragmented to say the least – for example, Chicago has 265 local authorities, not counting Milwaukee over the state line. On top of this, one needs to add the authorities which provide transport, water, and waste management infrastructure, plus the various state and federal jurisdictions which deal with pollution, water allocation, and natural resource management. There is no RMA which ties land use, water, and pollution management together.

Many of the local authorities are in competition with one another for the new development dollar, especially where it might bring high value residential and commercial land and hence provide a lucrative source for property tax revenue. This competition adds to the problems of urban growth. It encourages the tendency to sprawl.

Jurisdictional fragmentation and competition are usually the reason why growth and redevelopment decisions are often independent and even contradictory. The result is the worst of all worlds: unpredictable, sprawling urban expansion and under-used and often decaying areas in many cities and even city centres. It is therefore no surprise that sprawl is now seen as the number one urban problem in the US.

THE RESPONSE

The response to this problem is the emergence and, in some cases, reemergence of regional scale solutions. Metro regional authorities can not only link city centres with city fringes, they can also plan for and manage the provision of key urban infrastructure.

Only two metropolitan areas (Minneapolis St Paul, Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon) have formal, authoritative metro regional agencies designed and empowered to manage growth and development. But a number of other places, notably Seattle, Washington, and San Diego, California, have formal, supervisory authorities which have been established because of a strongly perceived need to manage growth. And, in many areas, there are now ad hoc, but still relatively ineffective, regional coordinating authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings I took from visiting Minneapolis St Paul, Portland, and Seattle were not so much about good urban design or innovative transport solutions. And I didn't conclude that higher density development is better than lower density: both have their place. Rather, the important findings concerned *the need for effective metro scale regional strategies and ways to make them work*. The way strategies are developed is in many ways more important than the detail of the urban design or other ideas which they incorporate. Here are some of my findings:

Metro scale regional authorities are the best way to develop regional growth management strategies. Especially where such authorities have some formal powers and resources, they provide an effective way of developing and, especially, helping implement strategies for development. The benefits of metro scale management are seen in better quality environments, more accessible urban areas, and often less costly infrastructure. Managing urban growth also helps protect key environmental areas (both within and outside urban areas);

Metro scale planning needs to be comprehensive – that is, it should encompass environmental, social and economic dimensions. Typically, metro strategies deal with:

- environmental quality (preserving natural and valued environments within and outside urban areas, environmental quality standards for air and water, and urban amenity and recreation needs);
- land supply, and directions and areas for present and future urban development;
- housing, including affordable housing;
- economic development and especially employment and its spatial distribution;
- the coordination and management of major urban infrastructure such as transport (public transit, roading, airports and ports), water supply and sewerage.

Metro authorities use incentives to stimulate and shape markets. Metro scale regulatory powers are still necessary but usually kept in reserve. Providing design ideas and services and, especially, either providing or subsidising new forms of housing, transport, and development is a common practice. The US experience is that markets tend to be conservative and do not innovate by themselves. Once new forms (such as higher density, multi-use developments) are successfully launched, though, markets quickly pick them up;

Managing land supply is critical. This is done by ensuring land available for development reflects the grain and direction of the market, and provides choice, whilst still shaping but not squeezing development too tightly;

Managing public transit and roading systems together is vital. Roads are a key shaper of urban form. This is especially so because of cheap car travel costs. Although public transit is growing again in the US, it is still a very small component of overall trips – typically 4-8% of all urban trips. Home – work trips are the biggest users of public transport where penetration levels can reach 40% for trips to viable downtown centres. Nevertheless, unless other things (like the marginal costs of car travel) change radically, urban and transport planning must continue to assume large proportions of car travel;

The key to successful strategies is that they are not prescriptive; instead they set out criteria which are interpreted, applied and implemented by local government and the private sector. Land use and development controls are the business of local government; infrastructure planning and provision is usually a metropolitan authority function, although special authorities often manage infrastructure. Electricity, gas, and telecommunications do not usually need to be managed by metro strategies, although they find such strategies useful for their own planning;

A critical ingredient in a successful strategy is that it is built politically from the bottom up and technically from the top down. The bottom up approach involves genuinely searching for community views and, ideally, consensus on development choices and directions. The top down bit involves providing good political leadership and listening skills. It also involves articulating ideas and subsequently a clear vision and direction. It must be supported by professional analysis (based on good information and careful monitoring) of urban trends and the impacts of various options.

Metro strategies fail when they become technocratic and directive. Things fall apart when metro authorities start directing and controlling development and imposing their ideas without seeking cross-sectoral political mandates and without communicating with and involving affected communities and local government.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW ZEALAND

What does any of this mean for New Zealand? Obviously, there are big differences between us and them. Our population and growth pressures are orders of magnitude less than those in the US, but there are parallels in the drivers of urban growth and the consequences of disjointed urban management. Metro Auckland and, for that matter, a large part of the North Island north of Taupo, faces much the same pressures and potential problems as does urban US.

Metro scale strategic planning is worth considering here, and in fact we have a proto example in the Auckland Growth Forum. The Forum's approach is similar to that adopted by successful metro regional authorities in the US. It has some way to go yet, though, because successful metro scale planning isn't just in the ideas, it's in their implementation. Nevertheless, the Auckland model is a new, consensual way to do things and it is building its ideas with the involvement and commitment of local government.

Other urban centres should keep a close eye on the Auckland experience. It may pave the way to a new and more effective way of managing urban development.

The reality of metro regional scale strategies approaches is not on a piece of paper, but in the usually cooperative processes which work within the frameworks they set. And it is these processes which bring local government, communities of various sorts (spatial and interest based ones), infrastructure providers and the private sector together. These processes, and the ideas and commitments stemming from them, provide the glue that makes the strategy real. In the US, zoning and other regulatory processes are used to underpin and help realise the strategy. But they are only part of, and by no means the dominant part, the tool box of policy measures used.

Overall, we probably put too much effort into regulatory land use controls and too little into wider, strategic work. Participatory regulatory systems like the RMA can end up being the depository for community problems that might better have been dealt with through other, wider strategic processes. Perhaps we should look at changing the regulatory/strategic balance.

Given the critical relationship between public transport and roading, it makes sense to plan and manage these together. This is especially important in managing big, growing metropolitan areas. Indeed, transport planning in the US doesn't just stop at roading and public transport; it also includes airports and ports. After all, these big facilities have enormous effects on metro urban economies and on their environments.

Rather than leaving transport planning predominantly to individual transport providers, and having the current regional transport planning systems only consider strategic issues and plan for public transport (as is currently proposed), perhaps we should strengthen regional transport planning to set explicit strategic directions for all land transport infrastructure and systems, and also extend it to include ports and airports.

In the US there are two important concepts called *concurrency* and *consistency*. Effectively they mean that big infrastructure should be built and available for development when development happens, (ie development and infrastructure are concurrent one with another); and that policies among different authorities are consistent – that is, the same rules of infrastructure provision apply everywhere in the urban metropolitan environment. Further, big infrastructure provision is tied to and linked with urban growth directions and limits. And rules prohibit development without appropriate infrastructure.

This is perhaps worth formalising here, too, especially if it reduces overall costs. Again, and as with transport, it means a more formal and integrated connection between metro urban strategies and major infrastructure providers.

Metro urban management in the US tries to cover the whole urban environment and system. It is thus social, economic, and environmental planning. But, as practiced and as is evolving in the US, it is not prescriptive, technically based, direct, and control planning. It is in many ways a blend of metro scale information and community ideas to form strategies which, in turn, rely on local communities and private sector commitment to be defined and realised.

This strategic planning is not limited to simply minimising adverse effects (though this is

part of it); it is concerned with establishing and implementing creative, responsive and dynamic visions and directions for urban development. But it also involves local government working to help influence market direction and consumer tastes by providing incentives such as tax relief and subsidies and leading by example in areas such as providing new forms of housing and related amenities. Above all, though, it means that local government needs to see multi dimensional strategic planning as a core function.

This, in turn, means that local government isn't simply a service provider to the community and its planning isn't simply about service provision; it means that local government's raison d'etre is planning for and with the community. To do this, it has to have and to communicate visions and goals and strategies. These have to evolve from communities, not be imposed on them. And local government then has to work with communities, infrastructure providers, and private sector developers to make these strategies happen.

This isn't unknown in New Zealand and, indeed, some authorities in the Auckland area and elsewhere do this now and do it well. But perhaps this notion should be elevated more explicitly and become the core of the concept of local democracy.

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In the new year, the Ministry for the Environment will be publishing his account of urban growth management in the US. This article is a summary of some of the ideas he formed after visiting the US. The Ministry is interested in furthering discussion on urban management issues such as those in this article. The views in this article are those of the author and do not represent Government policy.

REFERENCES

[1] *The Geography of Nowhere: the rise and decline of America's man made landscape*, JH Kunstler, 1993 ISBN 0671707744.

BOOK REVIEW: THE EVALUATION IMAGE OF THE CITY

Jack L Nasar, The Evaluative Image of the City, *1998, pp 182, Sage Publications Inc, London, ISBN 0-8039-5448-4 pbk. [price available from the publisher].*

This book examines city appearance and suggests methods that allow citizens to improve the visual character of their community. As such it builds on the work of Kevin Lynch (*The Image of the City*, 1960). It also offers guidelines for design and is easily legible for professionals (architects, planners, urban designers, and allied disciplines) and laypersons alike. The volume is well organised, and is comprised of seven chapters, an appendix, detailed references and an index.

The format and the typography of the book are excellent. The illustrations, plates, tables and maps are appropriately located in the text and are instrumental to the comprehension of the content. Quite commendably it contains enough citations to respectable writing by prominent scholars in the fields of architecture, urban design, urban planning, environmental psychology, and environment-behaviour studies.

In this prolific discourse, Nasar has built a strong case for an evaluative image of the city. He explains: "The evaluative image represents a psychological construct that involves subjective assessments of feelings about the environment" (p. 25). By assessing evaluative images, one can draw the evaluative map, revealing agreement on likability, and suggest ways to improve the appearance of the city. He has exemplified the need to involve and assimilate the community evaluation of the cityscape in the planning and design process. This is justifiable, as recent studies have established that design professionals do not share the values of the public and therefore do not deliver those values in plans and designs. He subsequently shows how the appearance of a city affects environmental cognition, environmental assessment and action. His thesis is not inconsistent with other substantial established facts. It is in agreement with the finding that no evidence has been advanced to prove any causality between the environment and human overt behaviour. However, it has been established that the environment can be supportive or act as catalysts to certain behaviour.

Chapters 1 and 2, in particular, attempt to establish that preferences are a researchable topic. The author critically and succinctly reviews past research undertaken in the field of built environment.

He builds on how people understand their cities through imageability or legibility. He links this idea on mental maps to psychological theory, methods, and findings established in recent studies by prominent scholars. He then focuses on meaning, which has been judged as impractical to study in previous research (p. 9).

Chapters 3 and 4 basically entail research design, fieldwork, data analysis, presentation and findings. The inferences are consistent and in-tune with background laid in chapters 1 and 2.

Chapters 5 to 7 include the evaluation of the efficacy of the research method applied in the study, examination of other aspects of the evaluative image, and planning guidelines.

It is apparent that the study is timely by filling gaps in the existing knowledge, adding to the sum total of what is known. It also contributes to new approaches based on primary and secondary sources. This book is complementary to other well-published texts based on research findings in the field of urban planning and design.

This textbook, therefore, is handy to practitioners involved in modelling the built environment. The designers and planners are challenged to be more pragmatic and involve thorough empirical studies in the planning process. They should come up with evaluative maps, which would provide information useful for planning the future appearance of cities. This approach would subsequently serve as a way to involve people in decisions that affect them. It would also provide elected officials with safe (ie. popular) actions to take.

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