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# Planning: feet first

- a radical change to how we plan our cities and towns

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## Introduction

The main theme of this Congress is ‘*impacts*’. As planners and designers, we certainly make significant impacts on people and the environment they inhabit. Over the past four decades, we have facilitated radical change particularly in how people access their everyday activities. The result has been a dominance of the private vehicle over nearly all other considerations. This approach is simply not sustainable.

Alongside the obvious life concerns, there are three imperatives which will determine our future: population growth; infrastructure provision; and sustainability. Traditional approaches to planning and designing our cities are, demonstrably, not dealing well with these challenges.

My approach to these issues is from the point of view of a practitioner, rather than as an academic. The key points in this paper will be highlighted using examples rather than comprehensive analytical assessment. The issues addressed apply to both macro and micro planning and design - to metropolitan strategies, as well as to little, but important, details.

I will lead to the conclusion that planning and urban design approaches and techniques need to radically change – if we are to achieve a sustainable future.

My presentation today has five parts:

- An observation of where we are now
- A vision for a more sustainable future
- Challenges and impediments which need to be addressed
- Actions required now
- Some images to stimulate our thinking about the change of approach needed.

## 1. Where we are now?

It takes courage and honesty to really evaluate where we are at, particularly when it is clear that we have to take at least some responsibility for getting us here.

We have much planning achievement to be proud of, but can we afford to be self-satisfied and complacent? I don't think so. With a general increase in affluence, there have been radical changes in our cities, towns and regions over the past 50 years, but they are increasingly unsustainable, increasingly inefficient, increasingly inequitable and, in many instances, increasingly dangerous and ugly. Traditional planning processes and actions have proven inadequate for the task. This observation is neither alarmist, nor negative. Think about some of the things we have come to accept.

For example, we currently train our children to be car-dependent, with negative implications for their health and safety, and the future liveability and viability of our cities and towns. Now how bad is that?

Our professional education has taught us to start at the macro and work down to the micro. So, on the virgin sheet of white paper, we first draw the main roads to define activity areas, then other roads, and only then do we start and think about cyclists and pedestrians. Invariably, the perceived requirements of vehicles dominate.

In planning for the future, it is tempting to resort to the tried, but not trusted, technique of forecasting. It is strange, isn't it, just how often we planners question forecasting, yet at the same time rely on its results to justify our policies and actions. A useful test is to apply forecasting assumptions in the short-term, say five years, look at the results, and then apply the same assumptions for the medium-term, say 10 years. Again, look at the results, and then apply the same assumptions for the long-term, say 25-30 years. If the results look ridiculous, then perhaps it is necessary to question the sustainability of the initial assumptions – even for the short-term.

## 2. A vision for a more sustainable future

We have many icons which reflect how we and others see our culture. In a sense, cities are the most dramatic expression of our culture. Australia (and I presume New Zealand, also) is grappling with the exciting challenge of defining its identity in the new millennium. That Australian identity will embrace genuine reconciliation amongst its people, a democratic republic, mutually satisfying world-order alliances, and a sustainable environment and economy.

The nature of work, family and household structure, ageing, religion and spiritual beliefs, community spirit and volunteering have all changed radically. We need a vision which has a better understanding of the implications of the cultural and social changes for our cities and regions - and increased planning and design skills to match.

There is an interesting nexus between globalisation and sense of place. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century understandings of democracy and accountability are inadequate for the future, where globalisation has created unique challenges for governance. There is clear evidence of a swing away from the extreme ideologies of the 1980s and 1990s (for example so-called *economic rationalism*, and *competition, -at-all-costs*), as people rediscover the importance of local communities, local identity and sense of place.

The planning profession has been found somewhat wanting in the face of this change. Two changes are vital:

- Education and skill development which can analyse benefits and disbenefits where dynamic, diverse and widely dispersed effects of decisions are expected
- Better informed and re-empowered local communities, so that they can responsibly play a key role in planning decision-making.

### **The sustainability imperative**

Australia is dragging the chain on sustainability – badly. The weak responses to the Kyoto Protocol is an embarrassment to any travelling Australian. It is not all doom and gloom, but don't let's kid ourselves: the rhetoric is strong, but achievements are decidedly tentative. Delaying action until more detailed data is available is not an acceptable course. The economic, ecological, environmental and social impacts can already be readily seen, and basic analysis can usually indicate whether our policies and actions are likely to produce better or worse solutions. There are many precedents available for sustainable practices and a few people are making valiant efforts, but skill levels, and commitment, have a long way to go.

To a large degree, the planning profession is under an illusion that it is doing sustainable things. But how effective are they? Two matters are vital for the sustainable future of Australia:

- Rectifying the salinity which now affects the productivity of a substantial and increasing part of the country
- Reducing Greenhouse emissions produced by energy generation and private vehicular transport.

### **Walkability**

As well as its affect on sustainability, a much greater emphasis on walkability in our cities and towns is needed to address the access and mobility needs of an aging population. The self-defeating obsession with vehicular traffic growth needs to be redressed. Achieving walkability requires a *cultural* change, not just technical differences. Safety, attractiveness, and convenience of access and movement have to be looked at in a different way.

If the level of skill and resources currently applied to road and vehicle planning was applied to pedestrian access and public transport, our urban areas could be transformed. The British Government has recently produced a policy for pedestrians. Whether it will be effective remains to be seen. But do our governments even have such a policy?

Planning and designing for walkability requires change at the macro level, but also in the details, for example pedestrian-oriented access maps, pedestrian 'traffic light' settings, and kerbs and drainage pits. Place-making and place-management should embrace walkability as a first and fundamental principle.

### **Adequate and appropriate infrastructure**

Infrastructure doesn't just mean roads. It also needs to include human services. Consistent with the overall theme of this paper, the infrastructure for pedestrians should be the first consideration. That requires not only a different approach, but also a different skill base. The flurry to public and private partnerships for infrastructure requires clear goals, but also the ability to facilitate (and enforce where necessary) responsible and effective provision of all community infrastructure. We still have some way to go.

Two changes are vital:

- Planners need to greatly increase the emphasis on *access*, rather than *transport*, and apply a degree of planning skill and discipline to walking, cycling and public transport that is usually only achieved by the road builders. Land use/transport integration is a great concept, but the gulf between the rhetoric and the reality is increasing, frequently because of administrative and operational inadequacies, not technology or economics.
- Effective interdisciplinary education, and practice, is crucial. We are still producing engineers who do engineering, planners who do planning, architects who do architecture, welfare workers who do welfare – with little emphasis on the integrative skills which are vital to achieving effective and efficient development and management of infrastructure.

### **Land use/transport integration**

There are popular policy approaches that try to ensure '*competition*' between transport modes, or '*balance*' transport modes. But this is economic rationalism and competition ideology gone mad. No longer can there be a simplistic debate about private *versus* public transport. Nor is it simply a matter of getting people out of their cars. The essence of effective land use/transport integration is '*optimising*' accessibility to activities for all people.

Optimising accessibility goes well beyond the physical changes of traffic calming, the siren calls for higher densities, the preachings of New Urbanism, and the hopes for Transit Orientated Design. All of these 'new' approaches are, in practice, still predicated on a dominance of the vehicle over the pedestrian. Achieving walkability is the next big *cultural* change required, and it will have to be a radical change, a new way of thinking.

Forecasting is a very limited planning tool – and frequently simply provides self-fulfilling prophecies for trend lines. This is particularly the case in current transport planning. So I prefer approaches such as *Backcasting* and *Chaos Theory*. They, demonstrably, are much better descriptors of the way our environments work, and much better tools for achieving visions for the future. My approach has evolved from Keeble through McLoughlan to Gleik.

### **Child-friendly planning and design**

We profess love and care for our children – but does our planning and urban design produce child-friendly environments. Sometimes, maybe, but more the exception than the rule, and often as an afterthought, if at all. Do we even know what the criteria are?

The public realm is not just a utilitarian space. It is also the place where children have the opportunity to learn about themselves, other people, about community - on their path to becoming engaged and responsible adults. The book by Henry Lennard and Suzanne Crowhurst-Lennard of the Making Cities Livable group is a good starting point. It's called '*The forgotten child – cities for the well-being of children*', and can be located on their website

### **Nature of the planning task**

The changing nature of the planning task is important. Many people presumed that changing the structure and name of RAPI would be controversial – particularly removing the 'Royal' prefix. But that proved not to be the case. There was very strong support. However, perhaps of more significance is the word *planning* itself. It often causes confusion. We planners know what we mean, don't we? But do the general public understand our role - beyond their specific, and often negative, experiences with planning machinery, sometimes called statutory planning?

Two changes are vital:

- Preoccupation with the machinery of planning should be replaced with a performance-based approach, where the primary focus is on the positive products of planning. Efficient and effect machinery should only be used as a tool, not and end in itself.
- The 'Planning Institutes' needs to become more relevant and effective, taking a stronger community lead and creatively addressing the key relevant issues.

### 3. Challenges and impediments which need to be addressed

Here, I provide only a general checklist. Challenges and impediments are frequently place-specific, so I will leave you to fill in the examples, and use your creative skills to come up with effective approaches. The key challenges and impediments are:

- Complacency - *she'll be right mate*. Well the indications are it won't be right – unless we do something radically different. Many problems develop because of inaction, rather than action.
- Professional and institutional inertia – It is a lot easier to just let things roll along in the way they have always been done. Our professional and departmental silos are still standing upright, with few windows in them. For example, why is the potential of solar energy taking so long to emerge?
- The complexity of planning and design has increased significantly – there is insufficient understanding to address the challenge, by professionals and the community.
- Insufficient skills – the rapidly changing nature of the planning challenge has not been adequately anticipated by our education system, and appropriate skills are in short supply
- Inappropriate allocation of resources – failure to use holistic whole-of-life costing leads to sub-optimal solutions. Consider the advances in some other areas eg the relationships between everyday life style and health in relation to smoking; water supply and demand management; the ozone layer and CFCs. Consider the differing approaches to the real costs of traffic safety, safety belts, drink/drive laws, and the alarming 4WD accident research.

### 4. Action required now to achieve a sustainable future

Despite absence from the recent Australian Federal Election agenda, the future of our cities and towns is central to our future. The US East Coast experience last September, and ever-spreading ripples in its wake, serves to demonstrate how we have taken our eyes off the ball and, despite the rhetoric, how vulnerable our culture is. But battenning down the hatches, through defensiveness and aggressiveness will not save us. We need to be creative and proactive across many fronts – including planning and design.

The challenges must be addressed holistically, and the priorities must change. Functionality, aesthetics, safety, sustainability and viability are each important, but a holistic understanding of '*place making*' and '*place management*' is now recognised as being absolutely central to the planning task. Innovation in process and practice are vital to turning the rhetoric into reality.

Dominance of planning and design for motor vehicles over four decades has been pervasive and radical - some people have come to believe there is no other way. This paper contends that understanding walkability is the next big *cultural* change required by planning and urban design professionals - if we are to achieve the triple-bottom-line quality of life that we frequently profess. There are some hopeful signs.

- Some Local Councils are providing extensive pathway networks and designs which specifically and effectively cater for pedestrians and cyclists, and sometimes engineers are designing details (roundabouts, kerbs, pedestrian light settings, etc) that are pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly
- The Draft Strategy for Central Region and Metropolitan Melbourne (currently being produced by the Victoria's Department of Infrastructure) sets a target of 20% trips by public transport, and recognises the importance of planning and designing for pedestrians. That's a good start, but the proof of the pudding will be in the successful implementation. Watch this space.
- A UNESCO funded centre at Monash University is teaching engineers about effective urban design. In the UK, the Urban Design Alliance and Institution of Civil engineers have produced some interesting ideas about Home Zones, where the pedestrian is important again.
- A recent RAPI policy notes that Australia is somewhat out of step with many OECD countries who are adopting national frameworks for urban and regional development. The RAPI '*Liveable Communities*' agenda sets out a critical umbrella approach to achieving better places for people and the environment. See the RAPI website for more details.
- The Australian Property Council's research and advocacy on the 'Design Dividend' raises interesting facts.

### Some key questions

To conclude, I pose three questions, some qualified answers – and some suggested actions.

- *Is the planning profession up to it?* I believe it is, but only if it can fully embrace the radical changes needed. More of the same, or timid improvements, will not make the grade.
- *What are the implications of failure?* The profession will become less and less relevant, skills and morale will decrease in a spiral, and the whole world will be worse off. This should be seen as a statement of humility, not arrogance.
- *What you can do?* It is not going to get better unless you make it better. Please consider how you can be part of this radical change approach.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are no simple answers for the complex challenge of the tasks ahead, there are positive things we can do. They include:

- Planners, and Planning Institutes, must be outward looking and inclusive – if only in order to be relevant.
- As planners with some pretensions, we need to ensure that our knowledge is adequate for the task. That will frequently require sufficient humility to listen closely to the people who will be affected by our decisions – before we make the decisions.
- Our actions need to be suitably skilled, and radical – in order to meet the radically changing circumstances. Planning in the rear view mirror is not a pretty sight.

We should not balk at naming names: Let us showcase both the *HI* projects (*Heaven Inspired*, examples where excellence has been aspired to and achieved, and *LO* projects (*Lost Opportunities*, examples where mediocrity has been accepted and excused).

Ask yourself some questions:

- Does your latest project really improve the urban environment, and make it more sustainable?
- Does it make the experience for people better or worse?
- Is it pedestrian-friendly? (if in doubt, ask a pedestrian)
- Is it child-friendly? (if in doubt, ask a child).

It is our professional responsibility to expect planning and urban design excellence, and to reject mediocrity. Our clarity and honesty, about both, will help us achieve these goals.

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### **NOTES FOR SESSION CHAIRPERSON'S INTRODUCTION**

Bill Chandler has formal training in architecture, town and regional planning, and engineering. He is a Life Fellow of PIA (RAPI), and has been a Planning Consultant for 35 years working across the breadth of Australia, in the UK, and South East Asia, with the private sector, all levels of government, institutions, and the community.

Bill has specialised in land use/transport integration, and integrated urban design and art, and has managed a wide range of interdisciplinary projects. His work embraces macro- and micro-scale planning and design

Bill is Principal of Chandler Consulting Services Pty Ltd. For twenty years he was a member of the innovative Loder and Bayly consultancy, and for six years held senior positions with the Melbourne Docklands Authority. He is co-ordinator and convening editor of Australian *Urban Design Forum*, and an active participant in his local community.