

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: STILL A CHALLENGE?

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In 1992 when I was teaching on the Planning masters degree at Leeds Metropolitan University in England, we held one of our annual academics meet employers meetings. At that meeting the academics introduced the revamped masters in which a new paper *Principles of sustainable development* was the first paper taught to students. One employer was quite put out by this innovation believing sustainable development was another temporary fad and was displacing more important aspects of planning education.

Fifteen years on, sustainable development is now not only a central tenet of planning education but a central tenet of planning at all levels – international, national and local – and the scepticism displayed by the employer appears misplaced. Or is it? While the rhetoric of sustainable development permeates virtually all aspects of planning, what real difference has it made?

This paper assesses whether the prominent position of sustainable development is deserved, is sustainable development providing a valuable philosophical and practical basis for planning and finally what progress that has been made towards achieving sustainable development in New Zealand.



Greening cities: Travis wetland, Christchurch.



LEFT:: Could do better?

Sustainable development an amalgamation of planning ideals

In his NZPI Presidential speech, Michael Gunder stressed the importance of “thinking today to create a better tomorrow” (*Planning Quarterly* June 2006)¹. The question for us as planners is where is the vision for creating a better tomorrow going to come from, and secondly is sustainable development that vision?

At this stage it is useful to turn briefly to planning history to see where the key ideas and visions in planning have come from in the past. Instructive in this regard is New Zealand’s Town-Planning Conference and Exhibition of 1919². At this conference, attendees reeling with the combined fallout from the 1914-1918 war and the great flu epidemic showed a determination to build a new and better country.

The conference record shows their concern for avoiding problems evident elsewhere, notably slum conditions and their recognition of the need to plan for growth. One problem discussed at the conference, for example, was the development of an integrated tramway and rail system to serve both city and countryside.

The conference viewed town planning as embracing “the whole condition of affairs connected with the life of the community”. In this regard they looked for inspiration from a range of sources, including from Ebenezer Howard³ one

of planning great visionaries with his garden city ideal. There have been other influential visionaries and other responses to crisis since 1919.

In 1938 Louis Mumford stated “Today our world faces a crisis: a crisis which if its consequences are as grave as now seems, may not be fully resolved for another century”⁴. His words bear close resemblance to those of more recent day environmentalists and sustainable development supporters such as McHarg⁵, Girardet⁶, Hough⁷, and Wackernagel and Rees⁸. Like Howard, Mumford saw good urban form as combining nature and the built environment and one which prioritised human well-being.

This focus on people centredness has been reiterated by a number of subsequent influential planning authors, Jane Jacobs⁹, Patsy Healey¹⁰, Leon Krier¹¹, and Leonie Sandercock¹². Not all of these authors have been planners but their thoughts have certainly influenced the development of planning in recent times.

Many of the ideals espoused by these authors have become accepted notions of good practice as reflected in much of the sustainable development literature.

Ideas such as vibrant, human scale cities, community participation in decision making, supporting natural environments and their attendant ecosystems and embracing the plurality of our urban areas, have been incorporated into the

sustainability rhetoric but in fact have deep roots within planning.

While its origins can be debated, there is no doubt that the notion of sustainable development has become so widespread and pervasive that planners have no choice but to engage with it. Perhaps, the popularity of sustainable development lies in the fact that it builds on traditional planning ideals. These ideals, while they may not have emanated from within planning have become central to the profession and incorporated into planner’s own views on building a better tomorrow.

In this light it is unsurprising, therefore, that the notion of sustainable development has been taken up with such support by the profession. The NZPI website, for example, has as its subtitle: “sustaining environments, engaging communities, shaping places”. It is a subtitle that sums up the key principles of planning but also accords closely with key principles of sustainable development.

A note of caution is also required, however, with sustainable development. While sustainable development is often presented as all-embracing there are in fact many core planning ideas and themes that sustainable development does not encompass. Significantly it omits recognition of the political and historical context of development and while it does engage with principles, it gives comparatively little attention to process.

From ideal to practice

The above discusses the theoretical base for sustainable development, what of the practical basis? Sustainable development as a practical basis for forward thinking planning is less attractive than its theoretical cousin. There has been remarkably little progress in real terms towards achieving a sustainable society. The United Nations Economic and Social Council was not alone when it voiced its frustration in this respect:

No major changes have occurred since UNCED (the 1992 Earth Summit) in the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production which

are putting the natural life-support systems at peril. The value systems reflected in these patterns are among the main driving forces which determine the use of natural resources (in PCE 2002).

I was in Johannesburg just prior to Rio+10 and privy to the ironic sight of major motorway developments occurring in preparation for the influx of visitors expected for the “sustainable development” conference. The conference venue was the upmarket CBD of Sandton, under the apartheid regime a predominantly “white” enclave with possibly South Africa’s highest per capita income. It was a venue that clearly indicated the gap between sustainability rhetoric and the practice.

Adjacent to Sandton lies one of South Africa’s most deprived and challenging areas, Alexandra Township, characterised by the extreme poverty, deprivation and squalour found in urban areas serving South Africa’s poor and often dispossessed residents. Alexandra was not merely neglected but consciously under-developed by the apartheid regime.

The intense problems of poverty, lack of basic infrastructure, pollution, overcrowding, poor health, unemployment and extremely poor quality housing found in Alexandra indicate the real challenges for sustainable development, especially in a divided and unequal world.

New Zealand is fortunate in that it does not experience the sheer overpowering depth of problems evident in places like Alexandra and countries like South Africa. This does not mean, however, that it can deny its international responsibilities nor ignore problems at home because they are on a smaller global scale. New Zealand attended this conference and reaffirmed its commitment to sustainable development at home with the following words by Marion Hobbs the then Minister for the Environment:

New Zealand accepts the international challenge of achieving sustainable development. In the past we have tended to take for granted that we have a clean green environment and that would

always be the case. It is now recognised that sustainable development does not just happen (NZ Govt.2002 p.2)

New Zealand’s progress

On a global scale New Zealand is by international standards economically vibrant with relatively low levels of poverty, it has a substantial agricultural base and a benign climate, it has not suffered the excesses associated with historic industrialisation in the old world or rapid industrialisation in the developing world, its multicultural population lives for the most part harmoniously and it suffers from minimal strife, and few human or natural disasters to name but some of its characteristics. If any country has the potential to lead the way in achieving sustainable development surely it is New Zealand.

In 2003 Michelle Thompson-Fawcett and I published our book *Living Space: Towards sustainable settlements in New Zealand* which brought together a range of professionals and academics whose work was relevant to the theme of sustainable settlements. The book concluded that whilst most authors suggest that “there is potential to mould a meaningful notion of sustainability in relation to New Zealand’s settlements”¹³ that most also conclude that “current practice is so inadequate that the shift to sustainability will be a long time in coming”. Where progress has been made it has tended to relate to the physical aspects of settlements rather than on the social dimensions. The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment is more forceful in its assessment of New Zealand’s achievements on the sustainability front:

Sustainable development has not progressed in New Zealand in a coordinated and meaningful fashion in the past ten years” and “successive governments have largely ignored Agenda 21 commitments made in 1992 and have not provided the leadership necessary to support and guide sustainable development in New Zealand”. (PCE, 2002, p.3)

This criticism is now five years old but it still has

validity and despite recent progress New Zealand’s take off has been excruciatingly slow.

Why has the achievement of sustainable development been difficult?

First, why has New Zealand seemingly failed to capitalise on its early start? Ironically, I would argue the RMA itself has acted to frustrate sustainable development.

Reductionist not integrative

Sustainable development is an integrative concept one that has at its forefront a concern not only for the environment but also for the human condition. While the RMA certainly prioritises the environment it does not prioritise or even address the latter in any meaningful sense. A radical overhaul of the planning system such as was seen in the RMA in 1991 leads to uncertainty and a need to bed down the new system.

Since its inception the RMA has been the subject of continued and substantive challenges even on the environmental front. Much of the planner’s attention has been forced towards conflict avoidance with litigation or fear of litigation taking up valuable planning energy. The Act has certainly contributed to a reductionist and often technocratic approach to planning. To quote Michael Gunder: “this is not an Act, environment aside, which is comprehensively concerned about planning for what New Zealander’s collectively need to do to maintain and enhance the viability of our shared communities to make a better future for everyone”.

The planning system in its current form militates against the broad scope of planning required to address sustainable development. In her article on ‘reforming planning’ published in *Planning Quarterly* in March last year Gina Sweetman identified one of the factors working against the integrative broad approach needed for sustainable development when she said “the separation of planning tasks undermines the contribution of planners in their ability to contribute to policy and regulation. Separation

undermines the effectiveness of the professional planner.¹⁴ Transport planning, biodiversity planning, housing and social development all key components of sustainable development need multifaceted, multidisciplinary approaches. The Local Government Act is a step in the right direction in this regard; however, it is still too early to assess its effectiveness in overcoming the separation identified by Sweetman and its wider contribution to sustainable development.

The wrong definition

To return to the RMA, in addition to its associated structural limitations the definition of sustainability itself has acted to limit advancement towards sustainable development. Sustainable management has a prominent position in the RMA which puts it at the centre of planning in New Zealand. Conversely, sustainable development has no such prominence.

Is the difference merely one of semantics or is it significant? I would argue that not only is it significant but the difference accounts in large part, for why New Zealand despite being ahead of the game internationally in 1991 has until recently lost touch with and fallen well behind developments elsewhere. Sustainable development is a concept that embraces the environment, economic, social and cultural elements of development, whereas “management” in the RMA context focuses on the environment, in particular on “natural and physical resources”.

This focus on management has acted to stifle initiative in New Zealand, emphasising a reactive, and possibly bureaucratic rather than progressive approach to planning and development in accord with wider social and economic development goals. Last year a new book “identified and addressed the ways in which we are failing to progress, and ... explored the options for realising empowered communities that, while dynamic interact equitably and forge a more sustainable society.”¹⁵ It challenged us to develop inspirational visions via a much wider understanding of sustainability than simply focusing on sustainable management.

Towards a grudging acceptance of sustainable development

The goal of sustainable development is a fairly recent one in New Zealand and has only really become part of central and local government rhetoric in the last five years. Indeed New Zealand’s first stab at a national sustainable development strategy came rather belatedly in 2003 with the release of *Sustainable Development for New Zealand: Programme of Action*¹⁶, and was a follow up to the government’s report to the 2002 UNCED Rio plus 10 conference. In its report to the conference the government affirmed its commitment to sustainable development as follows:

*New Zealand accepts the international challenge of achieving sustainable development. In the past we have tended to take for granted that we have a clean green environment and that would always be the case. It is now recognised that a sustainable future does not just happen.*¹⁷

Since 2000 there has been a substantial outpouring of documentation from the government as it seeks to redress its earlier apathy on the sustainable development front, documents produced include *People+Places+Spaces: A design guide for urban New Zealand*¹⁸; *Monitoring Progress towards a Sustainable New Zealand; An experimental report and analysis*¹⁹; *Urban sustainability in New Zealand: an information resource for urban practitioners*²⁰; *The National Energy strategy*²¹; *Gentle Footprints Boots’N’All*²².

However, while these documents are a welcome indication that the government is becoming more concerned about sustainable development, of interest, perhaps because of their more critical and challenging approach are some of the documents coming out of the Parliamentary Commission for the Environment. These include documents such as *Creating our Future; Sustainable development for New Zealand*²³ which was highly critical of the lack of progress towards sustainable development.

A more positive message though can be seen in *See Change* released by the Parliamentary

RIGHT: Creating vibrant cities: Dunedin’s farmer’s market; and Dunedin celebrating multiculturalism.

Commission for the Environment in 2004 which states: “We could and should be the first in the world to become a truly environmentally sustainable nation”²⁴ *See Change* points both to the unsustainable practices that lie at the heart of NZ’s dominant value systems and to stories of “real New Zealanders” working towards more sustainable lifestyles.

Elsewhere, the Parliamentary Commission for the Environment has identified six sustainability dimensions that present challenges and opportunities for New Zealand:

1. The need to move beyond environmentalism
2. Strategies that are developed remain unconnected
3. Presence of disincentives which militate against sustainable practices
4. Failure to develop sustainability indicators
5. Limited progress in the design and development of sustainable and habitable settlements
6. Sound leadership²⁵ (PCE, 2003)

Planning ahead

In recent years, then, central government has finally woken up to the fact that it cannot rest on the 1991 laurels of the RMA but needs to take action and set the direction in the form of national policy, baseline data, problem identification, allocation of resources and support for implementation. To date planners, in particular, have been exhorted to work towards sustainable development but have been left to work largely in a policy and resource vacuum.

This is especially the case as regards those “tricky” areas of sustainable development such as; the mediation between environmental protection and economic growth; supporting social and cultural development; and coordinating international policy directives with local action and resources. The six challenges identified by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment would also fall into the “tricky” basket, and it could



be argued that the factors frustrating planners wanting to promote the sustainability agenda to some extent lie outside the planner's remit.

Sustainable development does provide a sound (albeit cloudy and somewhat knotty, too) conceptual and philosophical basis for planning that builds on and enhances many of planning's key ideas. However, its achievement demands that planners move outside the traditional confines of planning.

Already many planners have made this move and some excellent work is evident and was recognised at the 2007 NZPI awards evening, with nominees and winners such as the Waitakere

central travel plan, The Living G and Yaldhurst zone concept, and the work of the Mana Whenua reference group – all of whose work visibly embodied principles of sustainable development.

While there are areas of progress there is a need for an overarching strategy at both central and local level. Sound leadership, number 6 on the Parliamentary Commission for the Environment's list, is still lacking, and there is no visionary for sustainable development. Planning needs another Ebenezer Howard or Ian McHarg. It needs another Town-Planning conference where the future direction of the country is debated and discussed, a conference where, as in

1919, politicians, engineers, architects and hopefully a much wider band of 2007 participants meet to determine the vision for New Zealand.

As the PCE in one of its more positive pronouncements states: "New Zealand has most of the ingredients to evolve its social, economic and environmental policies to deliver the qualities of life we aspire to and would wish for our children's children" (2002, p.5).

As planners we have the power and influence to be able to assist in the delivery of this quality of life. What we have yet to show is the combined commitment, leadership and vision necessary to achieve it.

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