

Introduction

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE REGIONS

Edward J. Blakely and Tony Gilmour

This book highlights how the notion of sustainability has permeated all the research and teaching activities of the Planning Research Centre and the Urban and Regional Planning program at the University of Sydney. In line with the trend in major international planning faculties in the United States, Australia and Europe, Sydney University is integrating sustainability as a core approach across specialisations.

It is, therefore, entirely fitting that the theme for this year's *Dialogues in Urban Planning* should be sustainability. The concept is taken in the most global and holistic fashion by the authors. Each of the chapters reflects how sustainability is understood by the author and the context of that term with reference to the subject matter addressed. Clearly, few ideas represent as great a challenge intellectually and practically as the notion of sustainability. In this book, the authors use the urban planning and policy paradigm to address the issues of sustainability. In some cases, authors attempt to define the term from an urban planning perspective and in others, the concepts of sustainability are incorporated in a plan or an exploration of a mechanism or means to plan.

The book is logically divided into two well integrated sections. In Part One, we look at theoretical roots and contexts for planning, starting with an interpretation by Krishna K. Shrestha and John Dee of the notion of sustainable planning as a 'wicked problem'. Surely sustainable planning is among the most wicked problems planners face since the trade-offs are so difficult to deal with and no one wants to make the necessary sacrifices, personally or collectively, to deal with such wicked problems as carbon emissions. While wealthy nations bemoan the developing world for practices that produce more carbon, no one in the developed world is suggesting we alter our lifestyles of air-conditioning and consumerism so the developed world can reach our level of income and opportunity. To illustrate the depth of a wicked problem, the authors provide not just theory but an actual case of difficult trade-offs.

The heart of wicked problems is sustainability of economic growth that consumes more natural resources and produces more carbon dioxide. The chapter by Ken Doust and John Black illustrates how these issues intersect with an examination of the forces and factors that communities must face as they produce more houses. The question is, what is the link between houses and jobs and how can a community induce the housing developer to become a job producer so that commutes to work reduce the car's domination of the suburbs. Clearly, placing jobs nearer to workers does not always ensure a one-to-one trade-off, as the authors acknowledge, but it does give workers the option to seek work closer to their homes and employers have the land and inducements to place jobs and housing closer together.

One answer to the development of sustainable planning is new forms of planning designed to consider the consequences of planning alternatives. In no area is this more sensitive than in the planning for and management of natural resources such as the Lockyer Catchment in Queensland. Krishna K. Shrestha with co-author Ashutosh Sarker offer an approach designed to prevent the destruction of the commons by using what they term 'ecosystem common-pool resource planning'. They use an illustrative case study to show how this very commonsense approach can be used to preserve and protect as well as to enhance the environment.

Sustainability in the largest sense requires an understanding of the industrial ecology that shapes regions and the world. It is industrial production that is altering the fragile global climate balance. Edward J. Blakely, Santosh Bista and Godfrey Lubulwa place the development of Sydney's economy through a set of rigorous analytical frames to provide a template for understanding how globalisation alters the opportunity structures at the community level. Regional plans must consider the differential impacts of moves to more sustainable practices on communities that previously produced regional wealth in the form of dirty producer industries, which are now viewed as social and economic 'evil'. So as we move to more environmentally friendly forms of production and consumption, we must be mindful of the new winners and losers in planning for sustainable outcomes.

Part Two translates theory into practice. Tony Gilmour offers the initial chapter in this section in which he looks at the production of social

housing by the non-profit sector, a policy tool favoured by governments to produce sustainable community outcomes. His work deals more with the arrangements of the sector as a global learning community that is transferring knowledge on housing production and sustainable building and urban planning practices across the globe. This chapter is followed by an examination of the local planning regulatory environment in Australia by Nicole Gurran and Peter Phibbs. Their work sheds light on urban planning codes and practices as mechanisms through which more sustainable outcomes can and must emerge.

Health and particularly the advances in modern public health are the reasons we have a better standard of living and longer life spans. These advances have led to the reduction of communicable diseases to a very low level in the developed world. As people live longer, they have new health threats related to the environments in which they live, the way they eat and how settlement patterns are organised. Deborah Black and John Black look at Sydney through the template of a healthy place to live and find it wanting with respect to noise and related pollutants. They use the Sydney Airport noise issue as a way to get into this larger debate on how environmental health is increasingly the major dimension of health policy rather than just the development of life-saving medicines.

Black and Black's work relates to an advanced city in the developed world. In the succeeding chapter, Rafael E. Pizarro deals with sustainability issues in one of the least advantaged countries in the world. He points out how the developing world aspires to all of the unhealthy sprawled lifestyle of the developed world. But good urban design and planning which involves local people in Third World communities, as in the case he presents in Colombia, can lead to sustainable outcomes.

One of the most perplexing aspects of advanced nation development is the increasing dependence on car transport caused by the poor planning of suburban settlements. Santosh Bista shows how this beast might be tamed though the development of bus rapid transit as an alternative to expensive and inflexible new train or tram infrastructure. Bus rapid transit is something that advanced nations can learn from the developing world where it has been practised, by necessity, for many years. Using a case study of Blacktown in south-western Sydney, this chapter shows how bus rapid transit can be planned to overlay existing urban settlement patterns in order to promote environmental sustainability.

Some cities, like San Francisco – a world leader in urban planning – have been working on various aspects of urban sustainability for several decades. Richard Hu offers an insightful analysis of the evolution of San Francisco as a sustainable city model based on a study of significant metropolitan plans. He shows that San Francisco’s coalition of government, environmental groups and businesses forged an uneasy alliance yet one that has yielded a remarkably liveable city.

In the final chapter, Edward J. Blakely offers the most challenging and sobering prospect on sustainable cities through his involvement in the re-planning of New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina. He shows the interweaving of social, economic and environmental aspirations into a single plan as the best course for a devastated city. Writing as Executive Director of Recovery for the City of New Orleans, Edward J. Blakely points out that this integrated approach to sustainability is an excellent strategy for all cities, no matter what their current status. Planning for a sustainable future avoids the Katrina-type tragedies and provides a template for recovery if a major man-made or natural disaster should arise.

Two important lessons can be derived from this book about how to build sustainable environments in both the developed and the developing world. First, as the chapters of the book show, the notion of sustainability can no longer just apply to that special subfield of planning called ‘environmental planning’. It has to permeate *all* subfields of planning including housing, economic development, transport, regional coordination and urban design as they are all concerned with the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of society. Second, the neat conceptual boundaries between ‘urban’, ‘suburban’ and ‘rural’ planning, as determined by traditional geographical domains, have all but vanished. The notion of ‘ecological footprint’, the measuring stick of humanity’s impact on planet Earth, tells us that what happens in the ‘metropolis’ deeply affects the ‘rural’ and the ‘regional’. For example, the eco-footprint of Sydney, said to be over 20 million hectares, covers an area of land far greater than the ‘real’ physical boundary of the city estimated at just over 1 million hectares. The chapters in this book reflect this new understanding of 21st century planning.