PIPE DREAMS AND IDEOLOGUES: VALUES AND PLANNING

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Strategies in all Australian cities are trying to facilitate urban centres that are dense and mixed in their uses. The clash of values over these plans is discussed through an analysis of a recent critique by Recsei from Save Our Suburbs. The paper suggests there are seven fears that lie behind such views.

Tony Recsei's article 'Pipe dreams: the shortcomings of ideologically based planning'[1] reveals some ideological positions that cannot be left without comment. Tony makes a plea for more rational planning but throughout his analysis there are clear perspectives that are framed not by numbers and technical detail, but by values. As the spokesperson for Save Our Suburbs (SOS), Tony is not just presenting his views. His frame for the world is obviously suburban but, unlike many Australian suburban dwellers, the worldview he expresses seems to be full of fear that a more urban life will destroy us in Australia. Values are inherently part of all planning, and it is important to see how every plan and policy expresses a set of values.[2] However, to call those with more urban values 'ideologues', and their hopes 'pipedreams', is to invite a response.

This article will outline the values I believe are being expressed by Recsei and the SOS, and address them from my perspective using numbers and arguments as he has. I am familiar with all the current strategic plans that have been developed for Australian cities and was involved in three of them. In all of them a case is made for more development in focussed centres. My value frame supports this. I believe there is an important and growing role for urban centres in our cities, especially in the suburbs. Suburbs are the most dominant form in our cities and will remain so. But higher density centres in our cities will be important for the future of the whole city, including the suburbs, as outlined below.

Value frames in planning are always being interpreted and synthesized into workable plans. However, 'ideologues' are those who have exclusive views that will not allow for other values to be integrated — they are all or nothing. In the debate over our cities I would suggest that the arguments of the SOS increasingly lay them open to the charge of being 'ideologues', as they seem to want to prevent any development at all of such activity centres. It is suburbs or nothing.

Not only would I suggest that centres are critical to how a city and its suburbs work sustainably, but in lifestyle terms there is a market for such urban living. Indeed, in Melbourne a recent survey by SGS[3] showed the extent of this market. They examined six local government areas in the east of Melbourne (where most of the SOS activity in that city seems to be targeted). They found that 34 per cent of owner occupier households intended to move over the next ten years, of these 23 per cent were looking for medium or high density accommodation, and of these 26 per cent were interested in living in a 'transit city'. Renter households were even more mobile with 56 per cent wanting to move in the next decade, 45 per cent wanted to rent medium or high density accommodation, and of these 38 per cent were interested in living

in a 'transit city'. In this part of leafy Melbourne, this represents around 17,200 households wanting to buy higher density options and around 21,700 households wanting to rent in a higher density option. Giving such people the chance to live in a more urban way is a major part of the current plans in Australian cities. The SGS survey concluded:

> The planning challenge is to provide choice in the housing market that allows some of this latent demand to be realized through the development of quality medium to high density apartments in activity centres. [The] Melbourne 2030 [Report] addresses this challenge; it provides a strategic framework for planners, developers and Councils to provide more opportunities in the housing market.[4]

However, the SOS appear to want to prevent anyone from having this opportunity on moral grounds.

The values that lie behind this planning perspective can be gleaned from Recsei's paper. Seven values seem to be guiding this view of Australian cities, all of which appear to be based on fear.

1. FEAR OF DENSITY

'On an increasingly overcrowded planet adequate space is becoming a rare commodity'.[5]

Fear of density is fundamental to the SOS position. It sees nothing good about it at all. This has been a long tradition, particularly in Anglo-Saxon planning circles where, from the nineteenth century, the British Town and Country Planning Association motto was 'nothing gained by overcrowding'. The evidence that density is the cause of social, health and environmental problems and that space will solve everything, is very shaky.[6] This stance came from a pastoral reaction to the squalor of crowded tenements in industrial England. The garden suburb was the result and most of Australian urban history has been influenced by this value.

It is entirely understandable to want to escape the problems of the industrial city; however, many dense cities, including much of Australia's inner city, have directly addressed the squalor of industrial tenements without necessarily building low density. When some residents from the Australian suburbs experience this they see that a more urban lifestyle is not necessarily so bad after all. Indeed, they find they have better access to many urban opportunities that they value. Thus a denser kind of housing opportunity is seen not as 'overcrowding', but as increasing their opportunities in life. Rather than fearing such urban settings, these residents then welcome them.

The proportion who choose this option in Australian cities has been growing, especially amongst younger people and some empty nesters. The growth rates in this group in the central cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Perth are more than eight per cent.[7] For SOS, people who chose denser housing are seen to be misguided, rather than having different values; they should be stopped by not allowing the denser kinds of options. Recsei says, 'forcing more and more of these families to live in confined group housing is likely to be bitterly resented'.[8] The inner city in Australia does not seem to be having that problem. Real estate values would suggest that inner-city living is highly sought after rather than being a lifestyle that is 'forced' upon those who take it up.

There is a growing political problem in Australian middle and outer suburbs related to the lack of jobs (especially in the new economy) and lack of urban services compared to the inner areas. This

can be seen statistically but is not generally seen to be related to density. However, every urban service depends on the number of people who can access it; this is basic to economics. Certain minimum numbers are needed or else services just don't work.[9] Hence, in order to try and bring more jobs and services to middle and outer suburbs, planners have tried to promote urban centres where the potential urban activity is sufficient for them to be viable. Hence 'activity centres' or 'transit cities' have been planned specifically to enhance the opportunities in the suburbs without causing density to be arbitrarily spread throughout the suburbs. Such centres will also provide opportunities for some people to live a more urban lifestyle; those who will move there will more than likely be people from nearby suburbs wishing to live in the area they know but who no longer want a large house and block. SOS would prevent such opportunities as they fear the density.

2. FEAR OF STALINIST-STYLE GOVERNMENT

'[Planning departments have been] forcing local authorities…to accept higher densities, irrespective of the desires and aspirations of local communities…'.[10]

Recsei's article and much of the polemic from SOS expresses the fear of government imposing density on them or anywhere. The examples Recsei gives are often from Stalinist regimes such as in Moscow and East Germany where multi storey flats were forced on people and '20 to a flat was not uncommon'.[11] Planners in Australia are seen to be imposing this 'doctrine' of density upon us. The occasional greedy developer is also seen as an object to be feared. The sense that there may in fact be a market for denser urban living is never discussed. It is all imposed.

There are two reasons for the growth in the market for denser urban living. One is the sheer attraction of living in amongst urban activity where the urban spaces are good. As Richard Rogers says, 'High densities are good. The secret is to make the public realm attractive and serving the community's needs'.[12] The second reason is the Marchetti Principle which suggests we only have roughly an hour a day in our travel time budgets before we begin to get very agitated about our transport.[13] This means that endlessly spreading suburbs begin to cause more and more 'bitter resentment' until people relocate somewhere closer to their major activities. All Australian cities have reached this limit; the lower the density, the sooner the limit is reached. The drive to redevelop is coming from a strong market force of households that have found that the far fringes of our cities have not adequately provided for them.

In Melbourne, by 2030, there will be two million households; if the SGS survey[14] were extended to the whole region there would be around 110,000 households who want to buy a higher density option and around 150,000 households who want to rent a higher density option. This is likely to be an underestimate as it is based on the six local government areas in the leafy eastern suburbs. It does not, however, indicate a dominant market (only 13 per cent), simply a significant one. SOS would want it abolished altogether. Should planners say this market is just an ideological aberration? Is it to be feared as an obsession imposed on us by a few Stalinist planners?

3. FEAR OF CONGESTION.

'In Australia as density increases so does congestion'.[15]

Recsei suggests that the driving motivation behind urban consolidation is to

reduce traffic congestion. That has never been a claim I have made nor is it one of the rationales behind any of the strategic plans currently in the planning systems of Australian cities. There is a goal that overall car use (measured as Vehicle Kilometres Travelled, VKT) should decline as a city consolidates compared to a city that is allowed to sprawl. Data presented below suggest this decline is likely.

Most Australian cities have found increasing public transport patronage wherever consolidation occurs near good transit services, but not if the services are inadequate. Thus congestion may well increase if density increases but, if density is built around a quality public transport system, it will also reduce car use overall. Subiaco Station in Perth increased patronage by 100 per cent when Subi-Centro urban village was opened. The Subi-Centro urban village saved the Perth region around half the VKT compared to putting this development on the fringe.[16] Subiaco's centre has been given a huge economic boost. It is now a very popular destination; thus it has probably also increased in congestion. But this is not the issue.

Traffic congestion needs to be addressed directly on a regional basis as London did with its congestion tax; this acts directly and indirectly as the money is recycled into better public transport services. The London tax is an example of a policy used in a higher density city (42 people per hectare) that tackled congestion. There are numerous other low density cities, especially in the US that are paralysed by traffic congestion. For example, Atlanta has a density of nine people per hectare and some of the worst traffic congestion in America, merely because it has virtually no public transport and some of the worst examples of scattered sprawling development. But the main problem in Atlanta is that it has a VKT per capita nearly eight times as high as London's. In transport energy terms this works out to more than 100 GJ/person compared to 12 GJ/person in London, with all its implications for oil consumption, greenhouse gases, emissions, accidents and car dependent poverty. It is also possible to see that if you measure traffic congestion as minutes of delay per kilometre (as does Recsei) then Atlanta may well look better as it has so many more kilometres of travel. What should we be fearing — congestion or excessive kilometres of travel due to car dependence?

If reducing traffic congestion is seen to be the main focus of planning then it is also important to show that the solution of extra freeways is not a solution. SOS generally seems to be in favour of extra road capacity. The Texas Transportation Institute has made numerous studies of what road building does to traffic. An analysis of 68 cities in the US between 1982 and 1997 shows that those cities that were aggressive in expanding their road networks fared no better in reducing rush hour congestion than those cities that did the least to add new road space. (They actually did worse.)[17] There is growing acceptance in the UK, USA and Australia that it isn't possible for cities to build their way out of traffic congestion through road construction.[18]

The reason for this is simple: one lane of traffic on a freeway takes just 2,500 people an hour at capacity. This capacity is rapidly filled as generally the attraction of a free run attracts a lot more people than that. A rail line can carry 50,000 people per hour and thus is far more spatially efficient in a city. However, as Tony Recsei points out, you can't build train lines linking everywhere to everywhere.

Thus train lines need to go down main corridors and into centres. This is the chief value that public transport provides — it enables a centre to be built without massive requirements for bitumen roads and parking. For example, if Sydney CBD removed its trains, it would require 65 new lanes of freeway and 782 ha of car park. This would not be possible and hence the CBD would scatter and all the economies of scale and density from this global city centre would be lost. Similar surprising numbers can be worked out on each major city centre.

These centres are where the economy is based and especially where new economy jobs are found. They are where an increasing proportion of people seeking higher density accommodation want to be located (and where planners think density should be encouraged). They also tend to be more congested with traffic. Perhaps the important correlation is between wealth (or wealth-creating urban activity) and traffic congestion. For many people the trade-off is worth it. Fremantle is popular, so it is congested. I remember when Fremantle was not congested and was in severe economic decline. I know which city I prefer.

4. FEAR OF POVERTY

'[P]overty…is frequently correlated with high density living'.[19]

Fear of poverty seems to be deeply embedded in SOS thinking. This is a reasonable fear when one looks at 1960s public housing flats in the UK in particular, but also in Australian cities, especially Melbourne and Sydney. However, public housing agencies haven't built such places for a long time; indeed they generally build lower density than the market these days. Most medium and high density housing is built by the private market and increasingly this caters for the higher end of incomes. As much as anything, this is due to preferred locations.

Table 1 shows data on Melbourne that indicate the core and inner areas are higher density and wealthier than the middle, outer and especially the fringe areas. The differences in travel patterns are also very marked with the wealthy having far less car use (almost half), three times the use of public transport and more than three times the amount of walking compared to people living in the outer/fringe areas. The outer/fringe areas use more than five times the transport energy use of the Melbourne core (which at five GJ/person is less than in most European cities). There are reports of households in outer areas having up to 40 per cent of their household income going

Table 1: Trends across the Melbourne region showing wealth, density and transport

	Core	Inner	Middle	Outer/Fringe
Per cent Household Income>$70k	12	11	10	6
Activity Intensity(people and jobs/ha)	104	58	30	20
Car trips per person/day	2.12	2.52	2.86	3.92
Public Transport trips per person/day	0.66	0.46	0.29	0.21
Walk/Bike trips per person/day	2.62	1.61	1.08	0.81
Transport energy per person (GJ/cap)	5	12	17	28

Sources: P. Newman and J. Kenworthy, 'Melbourne in an international comparison of urban transport systems: 'marvellous' or mediocre', Paper for Melbourne Metropolitan Strategy, Department of Sustainability and Natural Resources, Melbourne, 2002; P. Newman, and J. Kenworthy, 'Urban design to reduce automobile dependence in centres', *Opolis*, in press, 2005; and L. Chandra, 'Modelling the impact of urban form and transport provision on transport-related greenhouse gas emissions', Masters Thesis, Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy, Murdoch University, 2005

on transport. There appears to be a social justice rationale here for increasing the opportunities for people in middle, outer and fringe areas through centres that offer density (and its associated amenity and services) and ensuring they have better transport options. This is not about housing poverty, rather about reducing car-dependent poverty.

5. FEAR OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

'Public transport travels linearly whereas cities are two dimensional'.[20]

Suburbs in Australia are in general heavily car dependent. Thus there is a strong motivation for Save Our Suburbs to rationalise that cars are essential and public transport will never work. Data to prove this invariably uses trips rather than distances travelled; for example in Sydney, despite all their problems with trains, on each day the average Sydney-sider travels one kilometre in a train or bus and five kilometres in a car, though in trips this difference is much less. When the extent of public transport's contribution is understood it is possible to see why the entire city jams up if something prevents the public transport system from working. Cars certainly have become almost essential for many people's transport needs but the city would die if it was given over entirely to this. That is why there are currently 100 rail projects in US cities as they try to reclaim their futures from the terrors of traffic and car dependence.

The social justice case for public transport hardly needs stating. Car-less households are around 20 per cent of all households, even in highly car dependent outer suburbs. Likewise the environmental and health benefits from people walking, cycling and using public transport are substantial and obvious. However, the economic benefits of sustainable transport are not often seen and are part of why the SOS fear public transport (the public deficit involved in taxpayers' subsidies for public transport is seen to be a drain on their personal budgets at times). Yet our data on 100 cities show that public transport-oriented cities, especially rail-based cities, are considerably better off economically than car dependent cities.[21] Those cities that have invested in public transport, use around five to eight per cent of their wealth in transport, whereas those cities which are car dependent use 12-15 per cent or more. Rail-based cities are 40 per cent wealthier than non-rail cities in the 100 city comparison. Despite the upfront capital costs for a city, the building of quality public transport systems will benefit the whole city.

These distinctions are now becoming evident within our cities: the wealthy are locating where they have plenty of transport options and use only a small fraction of their income on transport, and the poor are locating in car-dependent areas with only expensive car-dependent transport options. This, for me, is one of the most significant reasons for building transformative new transit infrastructure and developing centres around it. The suburbs will then be provided with a strong link to the rest of the city and will have a nearby centre where local jobs and services can be easily reached and where some may want to live.

This is the main rationale behind the rebuilt and extended $2 billion rail network in Perth which has grown in 20 years to be a world class system of 280 kilometres of urban rail and 72 stations.[22] The Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Strategy that accompanies the Network City metropolitan strategy is the basis for building 'Subi-Centro' centres around many of these railway stations.

The new Sydney Metropolitan Strategy has outlined a grand vision for a new $8 billion fast rail that will link the North West and South West new Land Release Areas with the 'global arc' of new economy jobs and the city centre. Accessible public transport is the basis for creating new and revamped centres all along the new line. The big winners will be the nearby suburbs that will have fast and attractive links for many of their journeys. Similar but less visionary projects are planned in each Australian city, all of which want to link their public transport investment with TOD centres.

A growing rationale for such a strategy is the shrinking global supply of oil. Oil production is predicted to peak this decade (if it has not already).[23] and Australian and US cities are the most vulnerable to this. If we do not provide the middle and outer suburbs with quality transit and effective centres, then they will suffer the most.

Since we produced our famous (or infamous) graph linking transport energy with urban density[24] there have been a number of claims that the link is statistically invalid[25] and statistically valid,[26] and more recently that it 'may not necessarily hold at the local level within an individual city'.[27] The figures below show Melbourne and Sydney's transport energy use per person versus activity intensity (people and jobs per hectare) with and without their CBD LGAs.

These figures are from a study by Chandra[28] and they reveal that the intensity of urban activity closely relates to the level of transport energy use (56 per cent of the variance was explained by activity intensity in Melbourne and 71 per cent in Sydney which has higher extremes of density). However, the degree of access to transit is even better able to explain the link to transport energy in Melbourne (variance of 61 per cent), though it is slightly less in Sydney (58 per cent). The reality is that these two variables are closely linked. The more people there are who have access to good public transport (the denser they are around the service), the less the city uses cars and hence transport energy is reduced. Similar findings are shown in Holtzclaw[29] on San Francisco and Naess[30] on Scandinavia.

SOS appear to fear public transport. One of the reasons is the often stated risks of travelling on it (despite public transport being much safer than a car), but I suspect another reason is that, if public transport is improved, then it may bring with it more density. Thus we are brought back to the underlying fear of the urban centre.

6. FEAR OF URBAN CENTRES

'[I]t is not clear how high-density centres will make much difference'.[31]

The evidence provided so far is that centres of more intense urban activity will reduce car dependence through their ability to shorten distances of travel and their ability to make public transport more viable. Such centres need to have a minimum of around 10,000 people and jobs within a radius of one kilometre, a reasonable walking distance for most people. This means 35 people and jobs per hectare.[32] Cities that have taken this pathway are seeing their benefits, especially those that have built dense mixed-use centres in middle and outer areas (as well as the easier ones in older areas). Case studies are presented in Newman and Kenworthy.[33] Vancouver has made a very clear strategy to go down this path and are now showing reductions in VKT and even car ownership. Generally car ownership is not how car dependence is measured. This is because many people who move to less car-dependent locations will still want cars for some purposes but are

Figure 1: Activity intensity and transport energy, Sydney

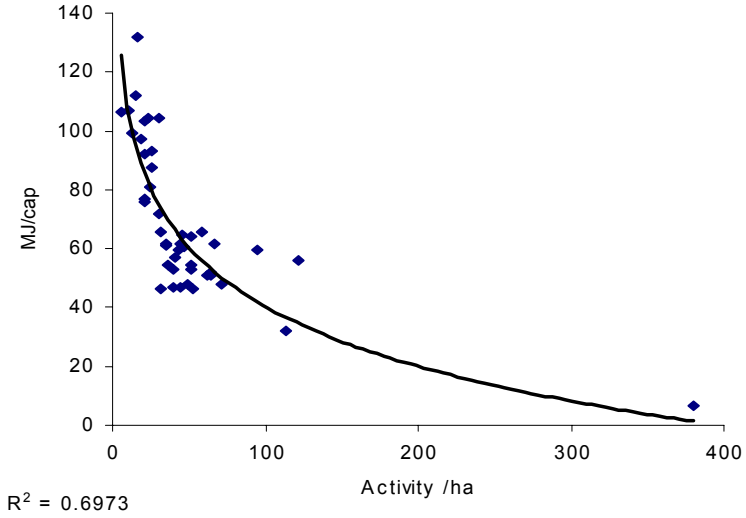


Figure 2: Activity intensity and transport energy, Sydney suburban areas

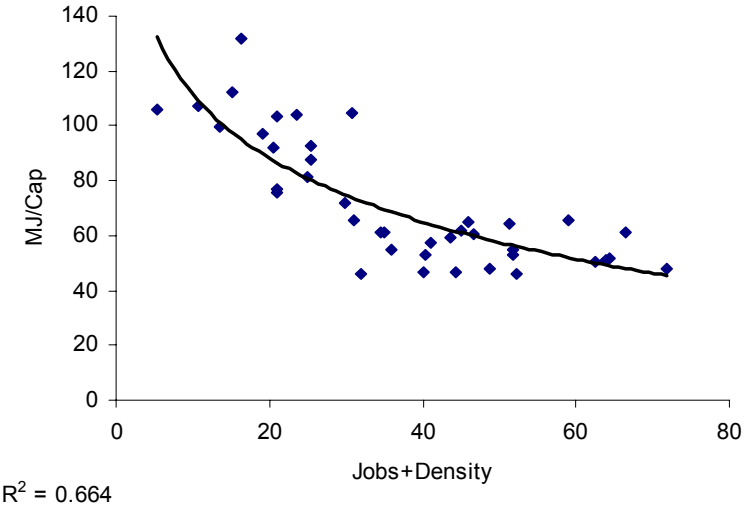


Figure 3: Activity intensity and transport energy, Melbourne

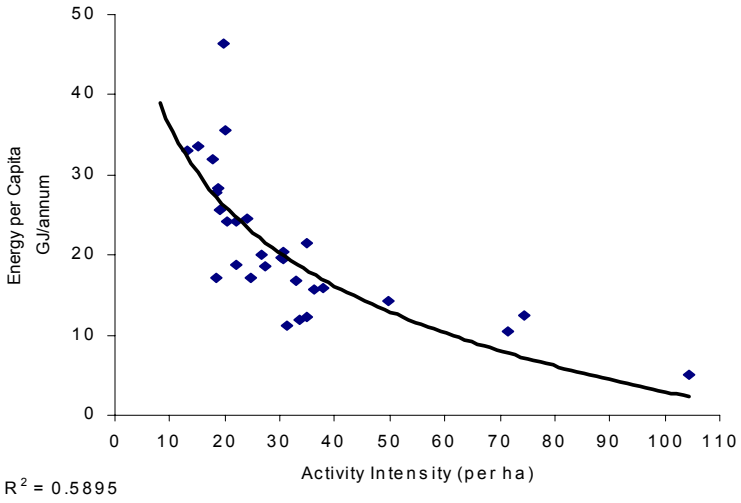
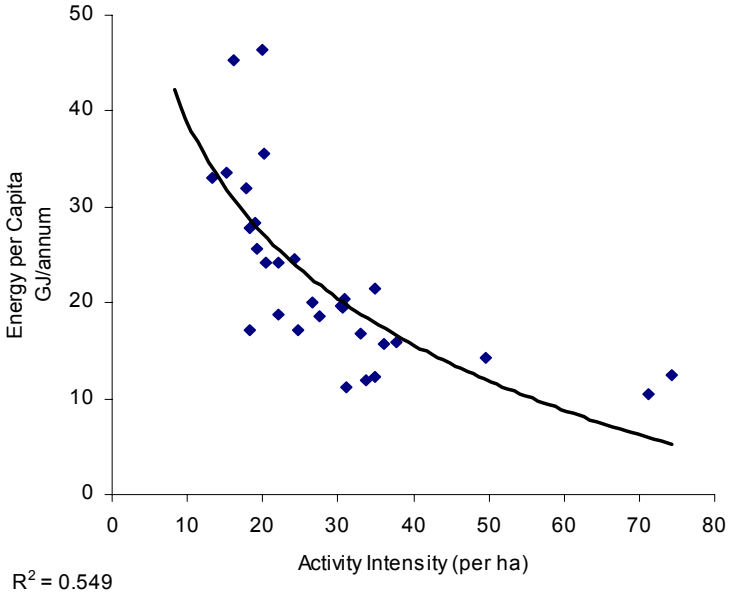


Figure 4: Activity intensity and transport energy, Melbourne suburban areas



nonetheless attracted to having more options for walking, cycling and transit.

TODs in the US are now attracting considerable attention.[34] 103 TODs in the US have been studied by Renne[35] and found to have three times the share of transit commuting than the rest of the areas in the cities studied. Most importantly these TOD have increased their usage of public transport by 11 per cent over the past 30 years while the rest of the city areas declined on average by 63 per cent. TODs also show about 3.5 times more walking and cycling than the rest of the city areas and these rates of walking and cycling have declined much less over the past three decades. These findings were unrelated to socio-economic or ethnic factors. The results show that centres work.

Activity centres are important not just because they make transport more sustainable but because they are critical to the wider sustainability agenda. They are the engines of the new economy. Their density and mixed use is closely associated with their ability to provide amenity and services.[36] Centres are also important for social capital, just as suburbs themselves are (as Recsei shows), but with different roles and networks; thus suburbs and centres are socially dependent on each other. Centres provide opportunities for diverse housing not available in the suburbs. They are environmentally important as they prevent the drive outwards into bush and farm from getting out of control, and they can be the harbingers of new eco-friendly technologies in water, energy and waste, and in access to quality public spaces, including public open space.

In the US these centres are the focus of the New Urbanism and they are mostly being built in middle and outer suburban areas.[37] In Europe there is a new emphasis on centres in middle and outer suburbs as the revitalisation of the old centres has generally been completed and now Europeans too see the need for reurbanising centres in the suburbs.[38] European planners see multiple sustainability advantages in focusing development in new eco-oriented centres in the suburbs.

These sustainability issues are not taken seriously by Recsei and SOS who prefer to neglect the land, energy and water requirements of continued sprawl and just concentrate on the benefits of leafy suburbs such as cooling a city. The vast majority of Australian leafy suburbs will not be touched by the focus on activity centres. They will, however, be part of a far more sustainable city if these activity centres are built. This is the vision of the sustainable city in the metropolitan strategies of Australian cities as we enter a new planning era. Sustainability cannot be dismissed so lightly. It may be seen in future as a pipe dream. If that happens, it will more than likely have been abandoned because of the politics of fear.

7. FEAR OF IMMIGRANTS

'[T]he whole basis of policies that impose population growth pressures should be questioned…The Commonwealth Government cannot just assume that the States can forever shoehorn immigrants into existing communities'.[39]

Underlying much of the discussion on how we plan Australian cities is the fear of immigration and population pressures. These are often seen as the main cause of the problems we face. This is not a new fear in Australia, despite our record as a nation that welcomed outsiders and created a vibrant society from our differences.

Population is a complex topic in urban sustainability. By 2050 global population is likely to have stabilised, though cities

are likely to keep growing at a slower pace for a longer period. Many European cities have already stopped growing and some in Australia have been static for a long time. Some inland towns are in decline. Yet there seems to be little difference between the growth rate of cities and their performance in sustainability. The various sustainability issues to do with water, energy, public transport, jobs and community are not solved unless cities actually change their technology, their institutions and their lifestyles. Population can exacerbate problems but it can also facilitate changes due to the opportunities provided in population growth. So, whether we have immigration or not, we have to get on with the job.

Planners don't create population pressures. They respond to them and use them to deal with the issues that are at hand. In Australian cities the next phase of population growth will be used to help us make more sustainable cities, especially through the development of new centres and better public transport.

The Recsei response to population pressures is to put people out in the regions in model eco-cities and provide 'very fast transport',[40] linking them 'like beads on a string'.[41] An element of this approach exists in all of the new metropolitan strategies. They are all trying to enable nearby regional centres to work as well as metropolitan centres. The strategies all recognise the importance of transport links and are trying to create fast transit as well as the freeways that presently link such places. Melbourne's new fast regional rail is built around this principle. Recsei suggests that, 'strenuous efforts be made to locate work, education, shopping, sporting and recreational facilities within easy reach of the residential precincts'.[42] It is good to see a positive contribution from SOS on how to plan such regions around our big cities and the need for government intervention. It seems these planners won't be Stalinist. However, the idea that such centres should be in our cities is vehemently opposed.

CONCLUSIONS

Values are an inescapable part of all planning. In this analysis I have suggested that the SOS approach to planning is full of fear — about density, Stalinist-style governments, congestion, public transport, centres and immigrants. Fundamental to such fear is the fear of change. There is much to admire in any group that is prepared to stand up for a significant Australian institution like the leafy suburbs. I was part of a similar group that fought to retain the heritage of Fremantle. The difference was that our group was also in favour of development and change in order to preserve the fundamental character of the area. No suburb or urban area can be snap frozen for long. The character of any place must be constantly renewed. The importance of dense, mixed-use urban centres in the suburbs is that they will provide a service for the leafy areas and provide a significantly better public transport link to the rest of the city. This cannot be underestimated in its importance for sustainability.

The new 21st century planning strategies across all Australian cities are attempting to create these opportunities for renewal. This is their vision. It may become a pipedream but it is important to give it a try. It will be necessary to face up to the fear expressed by groups such as SOS to ensure that a more hopeful urban future can be created. Fear is a great motivator but a poor basis for decisions.

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