

Why does NSW Government no longer care about community values?

The growing protests in Sydney about NSW Planning and large infrastructure projects indicate how Britain's Neoliberalism, embedded in the UK planning since the 1980s, is now the planning strategy in NSW State Government in 2016.

As we struggle to save our precious heritage of the 1860s avenue of Moreton Bay figs and wonder why this particular form of Light Rail and its route was selected, it may be worth understanding how this came about.

What is Neoliberalism and what are the potential political, cultural and social impacts on our society?

First, it is based on the politics of a liberal democracy, where individuals have the right to pursue a good life; second its services are delivered by the market. In terms of our everyday life, it is characterised by the following:

- *Culture* – Neoliberalism has little to say about the cultural conditions of society as its ideology is derived from economics; hence the **lack of interest in the heritage fabric of our city**.
- *Social values* – Neoliberalism reflects the social values of a service-based economy; hence the **lack of concern about existing communities and their values**.
- *Economic values* – Neoliberalism is based on the economic conditions of a market based-economy involving the private sector; hence **the overriding focus on efficient delivery of projects on time and on budget by the private sector**.

The political strategy of neoliberalism **favours capital over public benefit**. Previously the city development was determined by city planners who respected community values and followed well established planning processes.

Now large-scale urban projects replace statutory planning as the main form of city development. This includes the provision of urban infrastructure and amenities required by service **sectors to enhance the competitiveness of cities**. In this climate, neoliberal policies **constrain democratic participation by removing opportunities to protest**.

Some Background

Neoliberalism in urban planning emerged with the abandoned docks of London where the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, introduced Development Corporations and Enterprise Zones in 1979 as a way to revitalise former port and industrial areas.



A community in transition: regeneration on the Isle of Dogs in the late 1980's



Tooley Street before redevelopment

Source: www.lddc-history.org.uk



From dereliction to corporate high-rise (photo: H. Armstrong, 1986)

Redevelopment was to be encouraged by the removal of certain taxes including freedom from local rates for 10 years, and by relaxing the application of certain statutory or administrative controls. Enterprise Zones, much like NSW Government's 'Special Projects – Infrastructure' and Sydney 'Growth Centres', were also able to suppress public opinion.

Enterprise Zones did not require strategic plans; power lay solely with the Development Corporations, who, if planning applications complied with their "vision" for the area, would automatically be given development permission and encouraged to "fast-track" their projects. **Much of the planning for Sydney's Light Rail followed this model.**

Thus Neoliberalism is simply the process of restructuring the relationships between the public, private and community sectors in order to rationalise and **promote a 'growth-first'** approach to urban change including **place branding**, marketing, promotion and competition.

In Sydney, such large scale urban projects, such as Barangaroo, the Bays Precinct, Green Square, the Light Rail Project and Westconnex can be summarised as:

- Mere copies of 'global cities';
- Having minimal commitment to socially-just policies, instead focused on profitability and competitiveness;

- Operating within business-oriented modes of governance that lack accountability and exclude public participation;
- Similar in built form irrespective of culture and location of the host city;
- Lacking the layering of old and new, small and big;
- Containing lifeless, predictable and controllable public spaces;
- Indifferent to specificities and uniqueness of context.

Source: www.planning.org.au/documents/item/5004

The Festival of Urbanism held at Sydney University in October to November 2014 also characterised these Zones as featuring:

- Corporate-style advisory boards replacing community-based consultative groups
- Limited investment in social infrastructure
- Developers as stakeholders in major public infrastructure projects associated with rezoning for high density developments
- Limited public review of such public infrastructure projects
- Private sector involvement in financing and operating the infrastructure
- Privatisation of public spaces (shopping centres and city centre plazas, pavements and urban parks)

How could infrastructure projects such as the Light Rail and WestConnex have been planned better?

Ian Wright and Susan Cleary of ***Planning Government Infrastructure and Environment*** suggest that urban planning in the current Neoliberal Era should observe the following principles:

- Decision making and knowledge skill must be independent from politics
 - Collaborative planning – to identify societal interests and involve the public
 - Comprehensive evidence based planning – to demonstrate to politicians the costs and benefits of their policies
 - Planners must assert their professional right to contradict the public and politicians
- www.planning.org.au/documents/item/5004

Some thoughts

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