

The threat to town planning

By PETER SAMUEL

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So it is not only the builders' laborers with their black bans or the mums chaining themselves to trees in front of bulldozers or little old ladies refusing to move for the wreckers in what has been called the "politics of the snarl," who are challenging the planners. One of the brightest people in the planning business in Australia recently opened a seminar by saying that the town planning schemes presented to the public in recent years were mostly sheer deception.

Town planning is being challenged as never before. The paradox is that the business is booming. Big and costly planning exercises are under way in most of the nation's major cities; planning agencies are getting larger budgets and a small covey of consulting firms are doing well; the planners get a sympathetic press that politicians can only envy; and students flock to the planning schools to get their diplomas and degrees in town and regional planning in record numbers.

The political climate is becoming more favorable too. Among Liberals an old ideological antagonism to town planning has over the years, faded almost right away. In addition there is the prospect of a federal Labor government where positive support for planning is based in ideology.

Moreover, there are some positive achievements that town planners can point to in more defensive moments. There are still tens of thousands of houses without mains sewage but at least the new housing in most of our capital cities is being erected on land with proper drains and paved roads out the front; the motor car is being coped with somewhat better in pioneer suburbia with provision for future free-ways, parking spaces in front of shops; there are minimal standards of open space; and at the metropolitan level there are the first signs of co-ordination of the previously independent and often



conflicting activities of the vast state government departments, commissions and authorities.

Yet limited achievements serve to highlight what remains to be done. There is no sign that the grand strategic plans that are the current fad for structuring the growth of our cities will be realised. Multi-million dollar transportation studies seem more designed by the transport planners to make themselves money and the politicians to buy themselves time to avoid facing hard decisions than as practical contributions to better metropolitan movement. There is no real sign that town planning is making any impact on the problems of congestion or lengthening work journeys, let alone starting to contribute in even the slightest way to dampening the spiral of higher land and housing costs. And down at the local street level, town planning is not providing any defence for cottage suburbia against the onslaught of flats and home units. The terrace houses of Paddington and Carlton are being saved, not thanks to any planners but because of the vigorous political activity of local residents.

The most striking indictment of the local town planners — whether practising in planning agencies or researching and teaching in universities — is that they have contributed so little of value to the improvement of the state of the art. All the recent innovative activity in urban affairs has come from people who have avoided the local planning schools. The most successful planning consultant — George Clarke — who has established a successful practice of his own and spawned a school of rival consulting firms, is an American-educated planner quite out of sympathy with anything done in Australian town planning schools. The dominant intellectual personality at most planning or urban affairs seminars is a mathematician and economist, John Paterson. The only book worth reading on the future of Australian cities is by

an historian and political philosopher, Hugh Stretton. Engineer-economists such as Pat Troy and Nicholas Clark have spearheaded most of the important work on the relationship of transport to city growth and planning. And if you are looking for ideas about how we can make better use of suburban land, reducing costs, relating houses to one another better, rationalising road layouts and providing common land through the design technique of 'clustering' the person to talk to is David Yenken, a Melbourne builder with no formal planning education (but a degree in classics).

By comparison with these bright people, the products of Australia's town planning schools seem a bunch of mediocrities with apparently little to contribute to solving the problems of our cities. They are at least starting to become aware of their huge problem. Planning education, its future form and content are the subject of serious debate in the planning schools, and the professional association — the Australian Institute of Planners — is currently preparing a major report on the subject. Universities are among the most conservative institutions at the best of times but the town planning schools are more rigid and ossified than most other faculties. Founded mostly in the 1950s on an English model as offshoots of architecture faculties, most have had the same departmental head for over ten years. With the exception of Hobart the nine planning schools of Australia offer almost identical types of courses, which have remained remarkably unchanged over the years, unresponsive to major advances in associated disciplines.

At the regional level the so-called town planners are mixing it with engineers, accountants and professional bureaucrats, coping with pressure groups, politicians and journalists and engaging in all the political infighting and intrigue that are inevitably required in attempting to manage such a complex entity as a modern democratic city.

At this level a city is largely unplanable. The old idea of a "master plan" for a large city is dead because no one can possibly predict the results of rapidly changing economic and social facts and their complex interactions. The town planners tentatively realise this and so they are more modest in their language and their efforts than previously. They produce "outlines" rather than "plans" and "strategies" and "structures" rather than "blueprints" for the city of the future.

There are planners who will support the view that the town planning schools should be closed down and the attempt to make town planning into a distinct profession abandoned. This apparently drastic suggestion is not necessarily negative. Out of the present activity of planning it might be possible to develop two distinct professions — urban management and civic design. When you analyse what town planners do it turns out that they operate at one of two levels: they are involved in large regional planning organisations which try to co-ordinate other large urban agencies or they are involved in designing groups of buildings in larger architects' offices or in administering statutory plans at the town hall.

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the planners are having in imposing the corridor-wedge form which has succeeded the greenbelt of the fifties because the future of regional-level town planning is heavily dependent on this. The story makes sad reading. In Perth where the idea was first applied in Australia it is under very heavy challenge and it appears the new W.A. government will abandon it. In Canberra too, the planners' linear structure seems unlikely to be achieved because it requires acquisition of land across the border in New South Wales, something the politicians seem disinclined to help with. In Sydney, the first corridor — out west through Blacktown and Penrith towards the Blue Mountains — is such a bleak stretch of pioneer housing commission suburbia that it is something the planners prefer not to talk about. The bold northern corridor along the Newcastle expressway through Gosford and Wyong that the planners proposed as an alternative to a continued, expensive sprawl of the North Shore into the Warringah shire remains mere planners' whimsy.

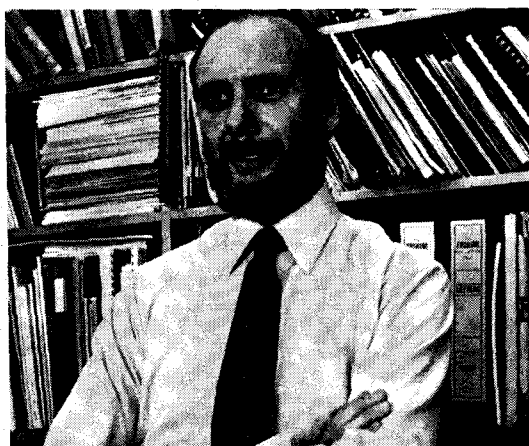
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The Railways Department take the opposite view. They in their perversity deny "country benefits" by preventing the local people from commuting on nearly-deserted, fast country express trains to the city that pass through Campbelltown and instead make them take the suburban trains that produce a 95-minute strap-hanging, stop-start journey through about 25 suburban stations.

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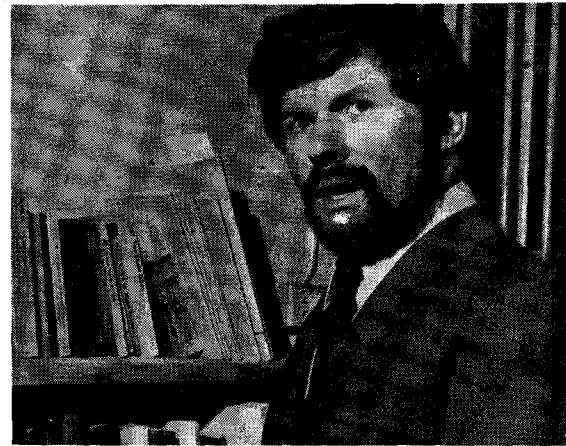
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JOHN PATERSON, mathematician and economist, planning consultant: "We must accept that the future is unforeseeable. Any plan based on specific predictions about the future will inevitably fail. It is only necessary to establish goals and to devise a mechanism by which each development may be appraised individually in terms of its contribution to the achievement of those goals."

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The remark has been made that Sydney and Melbourne fit into Karl Witfogel's model of the "oriental despotism" since the real rulers are the people who control the water and the drains. In Sydney they say that the Water Board is these days working very much more to the planners' plans — if it is as slow as an oriental bureaucracy — which gives them a better chance of eventual realisation. In Melbourne hydraulic power is even more directly wielded on behalf of the planners, since the planning is done by a water board, writ larger — the Board of Works.

But Melbourne's planners have drawn nine corridors as if they can outdo Sydney by force of numbers. At least four have little chance of realisation since they are favored neither by residents nor by businessmen and most of the others are not corridors in the real sense of the planning term since they involve filling in most of the open space between the existing fingers of urban development. So they are not really trying in Melbourne despite the impressive colored maps.

Most town-planning becomes an attempt to protect vested interests against change. The planners have a vague idea of serving what they call "the public interest" and fighting for posterity, and no doubt they are often sincerely trying to serve some such worthy end. The public interest is mostly an elusive concept, often a euphemism for private interests or whimsies or prejudices, so that hardly gives the town planners much independent sense of direction, or independent legitimacy. In any case posterity does not pay current rates or taxes, and the people who do will, through their elected representatives, give the orders on important planning decisions.

The planners will find a more useful role if they cease their futile attempts to foresee an unforeseeable future and become more modest urban managers and overseers. They can perform a useful role if they give up their efforts at crystal-ball gazing about the city in the year 2000, (or even 1985, another popular date), and concentrate on the here and now of co-ordinating the present activities of the various public authorities.

Such urban managers need to be trained in public administration, public accounting, operations research and economics. Most of the traditional town planning they learn is quite irrelevant to problems of a metropolis. Traditional town planning schools deriving from architecture faculties naturally put major emphasis on aesthetics and the detailed design of the built environment. These schools should train people

called "civic designers" who are specialists in the important if more mundane business of arranging buildings so that they work in relation to one another — at the scale of the street, the city plaza, the regional shopping centre, the suburban neighborhood. At this scale there is a clear, defined job to be done with no need for the planners' work to be mere pipedreaming. At this scale there are very real, definable design problems to be solved so that cities can be made more convenient and efficient places in which to live. The aesthetic concepts of traditional town planning — of vistas, and senses of place and enclosure — also become relevant again. But the proper place for the education of these planners is back in the architecture faculties from where town planning sprung.

A lot of very important design thinking is to be done in the municipal offices where building and siting and subdivisional regulations are framed and administered. If some of the money and brainpower that are spent on highly dubious metropolitan transport studies (all based on simple-minded projections of existing conditions, however sophisticated their mathematics and computer programming) was devoted to the design of the real fabric of the city — its houses, flats, shops and offices and how their interrelationship is regulated — then we might all get better value from what goes on in the name of city planning.

Why do houses have to be sited 25 feet from a kerb, three feet from a side boundary, with a minimum lot size of a fifth of an acre? Why is a building in the centre of a city acceptable if its floor-space is no more than 12 times its groundsite area but unacceptable if more? There are more direct ways of determining the quality of the urban environment than these largely arbitrary and negative standards set by municipal authorities.

An interesting new approach is to scrap most of the present indirect and negative complex of municipal regulations and to institute a "goal achievement system." The community through government would specify its environmental goals in a positive manner in terms of traffic movement, preservation of historical buildings, noise and pollution levels and sunlighting. These would be explicitly quantified and computers used to do the hackwork of estimating how each development proposal could be expected to affect the achievement of the positive environmental goals that had been set. Designers would be free of the present largely arbitrary negative design constraints of building 'envelopes' and able to innovate more effectively; the community would be able to specify its

environmental objectives more precisely; the municipal planners would be able to give not only 'yes' or 'no' but 'if' responses to development proposals — specifying for example: "If you increase your retail space relative to your office space by 20 percent, then your proposal becomes compatible with acceptable peak pedestrian flows in the street outside and, since already acceptable in all other respects, approval could be given."

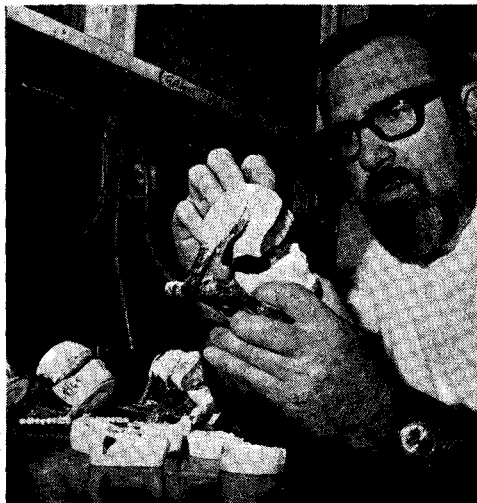
Because his training is so broad and general the conventional planner is currently incapable of conceiving how modern information systems and data processing can be harnessed like this to get direct answers to questions about the environmental impact of one development on another. He sticks to the old, largely arbitrary codes he knows. Unless he starts to make the effort to catch up he will be done out of his job by those who do have the expertise and so become a victim of technological change.

THE LAW

Down on their uppers

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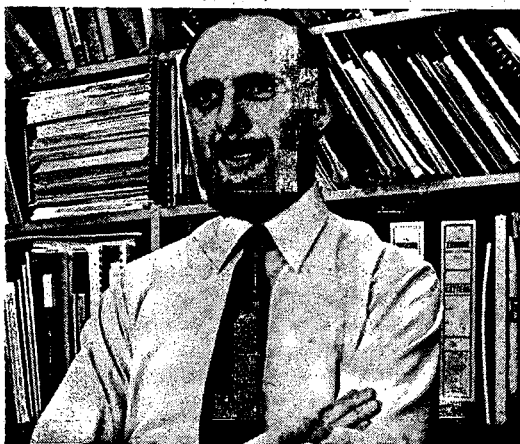
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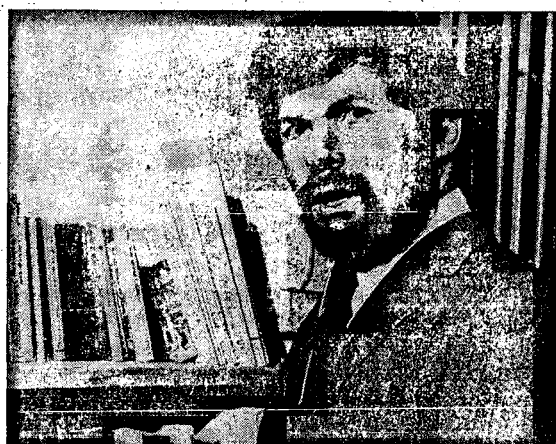
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