

# Planning the post-political city: exploring public participation in the contemporary Australian city

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## Abstract

This special section examines the possibility of meaningful debate and contestation over urban decisions and futures in politically constrained contexts. In doing so, it moves with the post-political times: critically examining the proliferation of deliberative mechanisms; identifying the informal assemblages of diverse actors taking on new roles in urban socio-spatial justice; and illuminating the spaces where informal and formal planning processes meet. These questions are particularly pertinent for understanding the processes shaping Australian cities and public participation today.

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## Cities and the public

What scope is there for genuine debate over the future of Australian cities? A burgeoning body of research gathered under the rubric of the “post-political city” is prompting the question of whether and how meaningful debate about the future of cities can occur in liberal democracies such as Australia. Situated within wider debates about the quality of politics in contemporary decision-making practices, post-political theorists caution that consensus-based planning in particular limits policy, action, and debate about the social and environmental injustices taking shape in cities. Works by Mouffe (2000, 2005), Rancière (1998), and Žižek (1999) have set the tone for this late twentieth century post-foundationalist philosophy, highlighting the costs of consensus politics and suggesting that liberal democracies have entered a phase of post-democratisation; the latter described by Swyngedouw (2011) as the disappearance of the political as a structuring agent in

society. Some of the first urban scholars to engage with this post-foundationalist thinking aligned the post-political city with the influence of neoliberalism on public participation and urban governance and thereby revealed the many ways in which public opinion was solicited and aggregated to the detriment of practices that would nurture political diversity and meaningful debate (Osterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2014).

In Australian cities, urban planning over the past 30 years has increasingly aligned with the principles of neoliberalism (Gleeson & Low, 2000). This alignment has occurred almost in parallel with movements away from expert-led planning towards consensual collaborative planning and decision-making inspired by theories of communicative rationality (Innes, 1995). These shifts precipitated concerns that new practices in consensus-based planning could not fully accommodate diverse subjectivities, nor address the power asymmetries that were reinforced through

neoliberal planning (Purcell, 2009). Recognising these limits, Allmendinger and Haughton (2012) have argued that privileging consensus-building without critically reflecting on its relationship to public protest (when it occurs) may prevent us from seeing the different ways consensus-building seeks to continuously displace conflict in planning.

Post-political theorists claim that formal, state-created processes and spaces for participation increasingly offer no grounds for actual public debate, nor legitimate spaces for contestation (Metzger, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2015; Purcell, 2009; Rancière, 1998; Swyngedouw, 2009). As a result, debates about the future of the Australian city are not limited to official planning fora but instead extend beyond state-mandated participatory planning to include public-created spaces. We contend that in these spaces, the negative impacts of planning are politicised.

### **The post-political Australian city**

In recent years, Australian cities have witnessed large-scale resident-led political campaigns targeting what those residents see as growing injustices in urban landscapes. Distorted by the pressure of neoliberalism, urban planning processes have decentred social equity and environmental sustainability by privileging economic rationality, competition, and privatisation. The construction of toll roads in Brisbane and more recently in Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth has exposed the impact of these decisions on people. Present resistance campaigns are motivated by the mantra that cities are for people and not solely for producing profit, mirroring others from the 1970s, including the now famous Green Bans resistance in Sydney (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998) and the anti-freeway campaigns in Melbourne (Legacy, this issue). But, directly or subtly, present campaigns galvanise against both the impacts of unfettered neoliberalisation of cities and its governance, and the loss of public control of the city and its processes.

This observation is not intended to suggest that city planners have abandoned efforts to engage the public in planning their neighbourhoods, municipalities, and metropolitan regions. On the contrary, there have been many “best practice” engagement techniques applied by those working in all tiers of government to enable public participation over the past two decades: the Western Australian Government’s attempts in the early 2000s to design large-town hall meetings based

on the principles of deliberative democracy (Perth), or attempts to engage citizen jury processes in city budgeting exercises (Canada Bay; City of Melbourne) or to develop a long-term infrastructure strategy (Infrastructure Victoria). This is a considerable shift from the primacy of the expert-led, technocratic plans of the twentieth century to a comparatively more inclusive approach to planning now. Nevertheless, there is a perception that there are few opportunities to ask fundamental questions about the future of cities, or the allocation of resources, or the distribution of goods and services. It is such questions that attract opposition campaigns and movements, especially when they remain unanswered, or when prompted because negative externalities and lost opportunity costs reveal themselves over time.

It is notable that as these shifts precipitate greater levels of intergenerational inequity, intense speculative development, and social cleansing in diverse neighbourhoods, consultation strategies have proliferated and failed (Darcy & Rogers, 2014). For example, the compact city has remained a planning orthodoxy across a succession of metropolitan strategic planning documents in Australian capital cities but with very little understanding of who benefits from this urban form and who and what is lost. It is in this context that numerous scholars have declared a ‘crisis of participatory planning’ in which this mode of engagement is rendered void of critical substance and influence (Darcy & Rogers, 2014; Legacy, 2016; Legacy & van den Nouwelant, 2015; Monno & Khakee, 2012, Ruming, 2014a, 2014b). A “consensus politics” generated in deliberative planning approaches and among the organisations and institutions of liberal democracies actually evades confrontational and challenging public discourses about how the city is constituted and re-created, for whom, and by whom. Instead, formal state-led processes of city planning set out clearly defined sites for public engagement within which “participation” might occur, and these may limit broader expressions of engaged citizenship.

Despite limited conditions for formal public participation, agonistic traditions of democratic participation—including urban protest and activism—continue to punctuate planning decisions through informal, collective, grassroots action or through focused, sometimes site-specific, oppositional campaigns (Iveson, 2014). Outside formal decision-making arenas, urban residents are establishing new spaces to pursue their politics (McAuliffe & Rogers, this issue). Beyond street

protests, blockades, and social media campaigns, conflict is expressed in the social patterns and population structures forming a central element of urban (political) change in Australia. This change can be observed by reference to the techniques and strategies by which residents, non-experts, and communities orient planning and political processes to locally desired outcomes (Cook *et al.*, 2013; Ruming, Houston, & Amati, 2012).

Recognising the resurgence of liberal and market values in Australian cities, this special section examines the possibility of meaningful debate and contestation over urban decisions and futures in politically constrained contexts. In doing so, it moves with the post-political times: critically examining the proliferation of deliberative mechanisms; identifying the informal assemblages of diverse actors that are taking on new roles in urban socio-spatial justice; and illuminating the spaces where informal and formal planning processes meet. These questions are particularly pertinent in understanding the processes shaping Australian cities and public participation today.

### **Public participation in the post-political Australian city: a new research agenda**

Metzger *et al.* (2015) and Rancière (1998) ask, respectively, in what ways is public participation in planning “political” and how can resident action be used to counter these post-political tendencies? One of the challenges faced by the advocates of all political and social movements is the question of their effectiveness over time: whether they “make a difference” and, if they do become popular, whether they become diluted and compromised? Rather than present informal action as an either/or proposition, the papers in this special section highlight the importance of asking how informal action reshapes and challenges the boundaries of what is possible in the post-political city. How does informal planning action render new trajectories and pathways of urban development both open and more visible? What organisations, practices, and resources exist in cities through which a new politics can be advanced? How representative are these groups of the city more broadly? Is it the case that the question is not ‘how many people are represented here’, but ‘what is being said’? Perhaps, in the end, the most important feature of informal planning movements is not their size, but their unique capacity to articulate urban futures that embrace a philosophy of equity within uncertain social and environmental futures. To these

ends, the question of what can be learnt from the experimental and visionary nature of urban planning movements and contemporary political movements is a scholarly question whose time has come.

The opening paper by Kristian Ruming examines the political struggle characterising a large urban regeneration project in Newcastle, New South Wales. Tracing efforts by state planning agencies to generate consensus about the need for inner city regeneration, Ruming asks how these efforts were destabilised by resident activists who mobilised an alternative urban vision. His work reveals the emergence of consensus about the need for regeneration as opposed to consensus around the (material) form of regeneration. The paper illustrates how opponents’ efforts to destabilise consensus claims made by the state can reconfigure the future city. Examples of where urban residents have stepped outside the formalised practices of public consultation to protest, as in the case in Newcastle, have become common practice in transport infrastructure planning in Australian cities.

Crystal Legacy then analyses the establishment of Infrastructure Victoria, providing an empirical account of how infrastructure planning responds to public mobilisation in transport over time. Drawing together literature on transport politics and post-politics, she examines the relationship between public protest and the formal practices of engagement and concludes that, in sitting in relation to each other, they produce ever more savvy ways in which dissensus and consensus processes co-create each other.

Andrew Butt and Elizabeth Taylor show that public participation can also be interventionist. While exercised outside of public submission, exhibition, and strategic plan-making processes, these resistance efforts are motivated by people seeking to change planning outcomes, if not urban practices more broadly. Focusing on the urban fringe, they investigate the conflict that characterised the establishment of intensive “broiler” poultry production in peri-urban Melbourne. Here, Butt and Taylor mobilise Mouffe’s problematisation of the negotiation of antagonism and Rancière’s ideas about the risk of a false consensus democracy to highlight critical issues of participatory planning. They argue that alternative politics emerges in response to changing understanding of place, the status of peri-urban regions, and ethical issues associated with intensive farming, despite an apparent consensus around the agricultural identity

of peri-urban regions and the presence of a code-based planning system.

The papers assembled in this special section throw new light on the under-analysed elements of post-political theory—including the uncharted geographies of agonism and activism through which the alternative planning pathways discussed by Butt and Taylor emerge. To this end, Cameron McAuliffe and Dallas Rogers respond to Mouffe's call to move beyond a limited consensus politics, which serves to re-enforce post-political processes and perpetuate the urban agenda of an entrenched urban elite. They test Mouffe's theory empirically to see if the transition from antagonism to agonism is possible in Sydney. Mouffe contends that traditional antagonisms between "enemies" need to be moderated to a more mutual "adversarial" position, and McAuliffe and Rogers deploy these ideas to investigate how resident groups and urban alliances engage with the post-political city, in the face of reconfigured urban governance and regulatory frameworks.

The resident-led processes discussed by Ruming and Legacy show that there is an appetite among people to ask questions that planning has foreclosed from public view—namely, what is the future of the city and what interventions and urban governance arrangements are necessary to ensure that this future remains in public ownership? This question forms the focus of Heather MacDonald's question 'has planning been de-democratised in Sydney?' In her paper, MacDonald confronts the ongoing reconfiguration of urban governance and regulatory frameworks outlined in the paper by McAuliffe and Rogers. MacDonald argues that recent attempts by the New South Wales Government at planning reform, council amalgamation, and the advent of a new metropolitan commission emerge as an (evolving) neoliberal effort to streamline development and de-democratise planning. Yet such efforts are contested by some urban residents, and the impacts of these initiatives remain uncertain, at least in terms of development approval and economic performance. The capacity of state planning agencies to secure consensus using reformed planning frameworks emerges as inherently unstable.

In short, this collection of papers raises new questions for the study of politics and public participation in the Australian city. The papers extend post-political research by engaging with Australian urban contexts where planning authorities struggle against powerful national logics of property speculation and accumulation yet find

support from social and political movements for more democratic planning policies and practices.

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