Australia's Unintended Cities: The Impact of Housing on Urban Redevelopment

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Book Reviews

Australia’s Unintended Cities: The Impact of Housing on Urban Redevelopment
Richard Tomlinson (Ed.)
Collingwood (Vic.), CSIRO, 2012, 208 pp., ISBN 978 0 6431 0377 1

Unintended Cities is a beguiling book: its premise is that Australia’s cities are constituted through the form and location of housing, and that in the absence of effective national, state or local policies directing either of these, the cities are largely the unintended outcomes of other policies. As the editor puts it: “the claim underlying this book is that these unintended consequences outweigh existing policies for housing and for the cities; in effect, Australia’s cities are not those intended . . .” (p. 3). The impressive list of contributors was asked to investigate the effects of “specific policies, governance and programs” on housing and the building of cities, to tease out what, in essence, are the key drivers.

It’s a good premise, giving rise to a great title. With the openness of one who is not familiar with Australia’s policy frameworks, Tomlinson embarks in the Introduction on a search for “the country’s housing policy” (p. 3). He takes the reader through a forensic investigation of levels of government, potentially responsible departments, piecemeal initiatives and fragmented delivery systems, before concluding that there is no coherent housing policy at any level. The prevailing national policy premise “appears to be that market-led urban development will provide the ‘cities Australians want’” (p. 5). Tomlinson observes that “It cannot be presumed that market-led development will inevitably best serve the interests of providing affordable, well-located housing, and building productive, sustainable, liveable and fair cities” (p. 9)—a view strongly supported by the following chapters, most of which conclude that the “present ‘hands-off’ approach to the role of the market in housing and city-building is problematic” (p. 5).

The editor takes this a step further, however, to suggest that the problems can be solved: through a better directed market. “While personally supportive of market-led outcomes”, says Tomlinson, somewhat unnecessarily, “the likelihood of realising intended outcomes depends on the structure of incentives and disincentives that shape private investment” (p. 5). The architects of the policies that do affect private investment decisions have apparently not understood or anticipated these effects, and at the heart of the Introduction is the argument that federal and state governments would be “more likely to achieve their policy goals if they remedied the unintended structure” (p. 9) that has set their cities off course.

This premise seems flawed. It arises from a failure to engage with the politics and conflicting ideologies in Australian national, state and local governance. There is a presumption of a universally agreed ‘good’, compounded by uncritical use of concepts.
such as ‘productive’ and ‘fair’, as though their interpretation is shared by all. Nowhere in the introductory chapter is there consideration of the question of whose intent. Tomlinson’s position is clear: those urban outcomes that are not productive, sustainable, liveable and fair are unintended—not the result of knowing decisions.

The contributors are less wide-eyed in their analyses. Several chapters on the metropolitan structure point to opposing interests and ineffective governance rather than unintended consequences. An excellent central chapter by Brendan Gleeson, Jago Dodson and Marcus Spiller argues that the successive metropolitan strategies throughout Australia that have advocated “containment, consolidation and centres” (Forster, 2006, 179) contrast starkly with “the reality of urban redevelopment and motivation” (p. 121). The reason, they observe, following Forster, is that:

this well-intentioned vision of metropolitan sustainability is contested by a range of commentators and interests who doubt its worth, its efficacy or both. It is also challenged, even negated, by the structures of our cities which remain differentiated and dispersed rather than neatly multi-nucleated. (p. 121)

They add a third failing: “there exist few comprehensive policy or program mechanisms for [its] implementation” (p. 121). That is, the abject lack of Australian metropolitan sustainability arises not from policy unwittingness, but from an abrogation of urban government, and from this comes the most powerful argument in the book.

Dodson begins in Chapter 2 with a history of Australia’s cities, from the housing problems created by industrialisation to the spread of the suburbs to the current pressures for urban consolidation. He moves into an extended critique of the assumed environmental benefits of high-rise housing, citing a number of reports that challenge the ecological fallacy (Gleeson, 2012) that increased density is necessarily more environmentally sustainable. Poor design has something to do with this, as does the fact that most new high-rise housing is concentrated in the inner city where land values are highest, attracting households with highest incomes. The greater wealth likely contributes to higher consumption levels, and Dodson shows that the uneven distribution of urban consolidation exacerbates existing inequalities. High-cost housing is being provided in the:

job-rich, accessible and well-serviced urban core in contrast to a wider dispersed suburbia where job opportunities and access to services face impediments of higher transport cost and poor public transport.... High density development, even it if were a salve for perceived urban and environmental ills—and the evidence remains ambivalent—is simply occurring in the wrong place ... (p. 29)

Dodson’s argument—that the assumption that inner-city densification produces lower per capita energy consumption has “been confounded”—is actually more asserted than supported. Gleeson’s (2012) paper in Geographical Research makes the case better, demonstrating a shining example of environmental determinism complete with a startling lack of data to support it. However, when the two pieces are read in conjunction with Gleeson et al.’s chapter in Unintended Cities, they make as persuasive a challenge to a contemporary orthodoxy as I’ve seen for some time. The clincher is the observation of the very low rate of change in the built form—a factor influenced in no small part by the incapacity or lack of desire of Australian governments to change behaviours—suggesting
that the level of change necessary for significant reductions of emissions is still a very long way off. This mix of empirical analysis and pragmatism mounts a very strong case for finding alternatives to high consuming, high-cost, high-rise development. The most viable and likely is via a polycentric, or multi-nucleate, metropolitan region with well-designed, medium-density housing—more sustainable, more affordable, and easier and quicker to provide.

The key, of course, is public transport connecting all these centres, and planning for non-residential suburban uses including large employment generators. The only way of effectively delivering this, both chapters argue, is through an effective system of dedicated metropolitan governance, which with a couple of brief exceptions, has been pointedly resisted by Australian governments of all persuasions since federation.

Terry Rawnsley and Marcus Spiller add to this case with an impressive analysis of changes in the types of employment and distribution of jobs in Melbourne. Not only are the great majority of jobs located in the areas of best access by car and public transport and areas of highest cost land—the city centre and inner south-east—but they are closest also to the majority of tertiary education opportunities. Rawnsley and Spiller argue that this is creating a powerfully divided city in terms of access to jobs, housing and education. This disadvantageous pattern of urban development may not be planned, they observe, “and its consequences may not be intended. But it is certainly not accidental” (p. 151). Once again, the case is made that good intents have existed, that Melbourne has had successive generations of plans for a poly-nucleated structure “which would see the suburban city articulated with substantially secondary employment and civic nodes, all linked by efficient road and public transport infrastructure” (p. 151). The reality, they say, is that the relentless pressure for low-density housing increasingly distant from the main concentrations is not being countered or managed. Rawnsley and Spiller attribute this in part to governments trying to solve the affordability problem, but they compare this solution to printing more money in a flagging economy. The question has to be: why have successive governments got this issue so persistently wrong?

The essential question of how housing in Australian cities came to be so unaffordable is admirably tackled in a chapter by Terry Burke, who painstakingly identifies all the main elements. They are multiple and complex, but well articulated by Burke and completely comprehensible. A set of four chapters on housing affordability presents an excellent take on national and state policies, lending practices, and the reasons for the extreme housing and wealth inequalities in Australia, supported by stunning maps and graphs and tight analyses. An answer to the question above begins to emerge. The largely middle-class beneficiaries of the tax policy of negative gearing, for example—formulated to encourage small investors to purchase rental housing—have the added benefit, by virtue of the predictably enthusiastic uptake of the incentive, of an appreciating asset. Burke is pretty clear that the problem now, apart from its complexity, is that “around any institutions grow political interests wedded to protection of that institution and the benefits to those interests, not necessarily benefits to the wider community” (p. 47). Nothing will change until we have “the ability to step back and cast a critical eye over all the elements of the system” (p. 47), and Burke is not confident that the incentive or desire for change exists.

Which brings us back to the problem of intent. It is not at all clear that everyone, or even all governments, mean the same things by productive, sustainable, liveable and fair. What kind of productive, for instance? While there is little effort being made to encourage jobs in the outer suburbs, there is enormous government emphasis on providing for the
construction industry in areas where development profits are highest. Neoliberal urbanisation is characterised by Smith (2002, p. 443) as the “centrepiece of the city’s productive economy, an end in itself, justified by appeals to jobs, taxes, and tourism ... an increasingly unassailable capital accumulation strategy for competing urban economies”. This is not the kind of productive that the contributors to this volume speak of. If there is one lack in the book it is the absence of a chapter on the political economy of inner-city high-rise development—the housing markets it caters to, the impact it has on low-density sprawl, the effect it has on global investor demand and its relation to structures of power—which would connect to many of the other chapters.

However, the chapters do speak remarkably well to each other. They are rounded off by a solid contribution on Australian planning systems that argues that planning deregulation and the continuing release of land for development on the urban fringe is in direct response to powerful property interests, and in direct conflict with the object of providing for the “public good, expressed in environmental, social or economic goals” (p. 104). The book concludes with an energy emission analysis that compiles original research and a review of existing data to conclude that, overall, medium-density dwellings do indeed perform significantly better than their low- and high-rise counterparts. The data is in—the case is made.

The selection of all the chapters, the choice of focus and arrangement is exemplary. The case they make, collectively, is for significant intervention: not only for standing back and comprehending the whole complexity of the city, but for introducing a new model of regional governance with the capacity and resources to plan and deliver what so many previous governments have failed to do. Not because they didn’t understand, but because they didn’t care to.

Tomlinson repeats at the end of his Introduction that “market-led approaches, while desirable, should occur within an explicit structure of incentives and disincentives and governance processes that will lead to the building of productive, sustainable, liveable and fair cities” (p. 15). It has to be asked, if such a structure were to be created that could lead to these outcomes, would it have been enabled by a market-led approach? I share his ends, if not his means.

This is a book prepared in haste, and sometimes it shows in the writing, the referencing and in the clearly different voices within the multiply authored chapters. There are areas of disagreement between some of the chapters that could have been made more of, and the entire thing is in need of a good edit. However, these are small issues. The book was rightly produced quickly, and crucially released just at the time of the discussion paper on Melbourne’s latest metropolitan planning strategy. It is a timely and important work that needs to be read and absorbed by everyone involved in planning in Australia. It is essential reading for politicians, policymakers, planners, scholars and anyone interested in uncovering and really coming to grips with Australia’s most intractable urban problems.

There are no simple solutions here, but Unintended Cities should give the people charged with preparing Australia’s metropolitan planning strategies pause for long and careful thought.

References

Many Australian country towns have traditionally been motored by the rural sector. As the latter has transformed and in some ways declined, the status and role of population centres have come under scrutiny. This volume is a further and overall, useful contribution to that endeavour. As with many edited volumes, it draws exclusively from conference material, in this case the Australian Country Towns Conference, Bendigo, Victoria in 2010.

The introductory chapter reacquaints the reader with the now familiar concept of the social contract, which “obligates both civil society and individuals to reciprocate such that governments ensure basic services ... and that individuals support these efforts ...” (p. 2). This is very much the conceptual framework for most of the papers that follow.

Chapter 2 deals with the task of reliving the aftermath of the Victorian Black Saturday fires of 2010. The author, Jans, was in Marysville, perhaps the worst effected location, on the day of the fires and was directly involved in the subsequent reconstruction of the community. There is a sense of incompleteness about this rather short chapter. What we learn is that there was an initial community-based planning response, with pro bono advice and leadership, in order to plan for the rebuilding of the town. This was met with obstruction from the (unspecified) authorities for reasons that are unclear to the author. What the author seems to be getting at is that there was evidence of, or some movement towards, ‘transformational leadership’ where the reciprocation approach of the social contract comes into play.

In Chapter 3, Collits turns to the perennial issue of where Australia’s growing population will be accommodated. Often, such discussions accept the idea that large cities are unable to absorb increased population indefinitely. Collits seems to accept this broad argument and advocates, again in a ‘third way’ kind of vein, that existing regional bodies such as Regional Development Australia committees be given greater political and financial power. More broadly, he argues for a statutory authority to oversee these bodies and to allocate funding.