

Queensland in danger of losing its liveability

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The growing population centres of Queensland, Australia are nearing a car-dependant urban sprawl and are in danger of relegating the State to “an also ran” in the world’s league of great, liveable regions. One could assume the most troubling aspect of this observation is that “car fuelled sprawl” exists, and be only partially correct. The full picture is more troubling when one takes into account that sprawl exists in spite of the fact that Queensland has some of the most comprehensive, proscriptive, costly planning policies and procedures in the world. How can this be?

The answer to the question posed by the initial observation reveals the fundamental flaw with Planning, not only in Queensland, but around the world. The answer sets the stage for explaining the many paradoxes planners and politicians wrestle with daily in the struggle to balance the sometimes conflicting promises made to, and now expected by, their citizenry pertaining to quality of life and standard of living.

The answer is not an easy one to accept. Planners mean well and work hard to better the communities they are charged with nurturing. However, planning as a profession, developed fully at the dawn of a new era, one where human scale and needs succumbed to machine scale and needs. The complex and subtle forms of pre-industrial communities and the techniques and principles used in their design were not incorporated into planning knowledge. The ability to encourage results through contextually sensitive, incremental additions to urban fabric was lost to the need for standardized and rapid change. As factory automation and the required infrastructure to support it became the dominant drivers of community spatial organization, planners could do no more than keep up with trying to mitigate the often deadly results to citizens. The success of their initial efforts in reducing mortality rates and generally making cities less dangerous established the profession’s core principles and techniques. To this day planners are trained to mitigate outcomes and the blunt tool cobbled together over the years to do the job was, and still is, Euclidean zoning. In the meantime, new professions arose to accommodate the specialities required to develop the new machine scaled cities. Using Euclidean zoning as the base, these professions have become the de-facto urban designers of our time.

To fully empower the charge rightfully belonging to planners, the profession needs to do more than just mitigate outcomes, it has to also encourage results. Herein lies planning’s fundamental flaw. Euclidean zoning does not encourage the creation of the types of communities we speak about. No matter how compelling the motherhood statements of policy documents and no matter how often the citizens and politicians nod in agreement, the built form is still dictated by specialist professions in charge of promoting machine scaled development. Planners speak about mixed-use, integrated, affordable, communities, where pedestrian

activity is encouraged, and car activity discouraged, where the environment is properly managed, or preserved to enhance both the natural and human habitats. However, the results on the ground are still single use housing estates, shopping malls, office precincts, and highways cutting into both the countryside and pre war neighbourhoods. This is the real vision behind all development today. Southeast Queensland is an example, one of hundreds around the world. The debates ongoing in places such as Brisbane, the Gold Coast, and the Sunshine Coast have “the cart before the horse”. Arguing about an urban region’s “form”, or “rate of growth”, can only have meaning when everyone is in agreement with the shape and design of the fundamental building blocks that assemble to create the “form” and “growth”. This has not yet happened in Queensland, or in many other places for that matter.

An analogy would be a person wanting to plant a beautiful garden who has only seen pictures of beautiful gardens. He would not be capable of planting such a garden without first understanding the fundamentals of soil, climate, plant types, seasons, etc. The same is true of urban planning. Corridor cities, TOD’s, agricultural communities, livable neighbourhoods, eco-developments, all represent forms, like beautiful gardens, that assume a mastery of fundamental principles and techniques. More importantly, they require a mastery of quantification and analysis in order to prepare the conditions for their proper delivery. Only then can broader issues be addressed at the scale of the environment, economics and lifestyle. Only then can agreed-upon results be achieved. Without knowledge of Traditional Neighbourhood Design and the tool of Form Based Coding (Transect Coding) to establish the optimum conditions, no planning vision can find fertile ground, no matter how elaborate and agreed upon.

Using affordable housing as an example illustrates the dilemma Queensland faces. Outside the older central CBD’s and neighbourhoods of the State’s cities and towns lies a built fabric consisting entirely of conventional suburban development. This is the car-dependant sprawl that has existed since WWII, built entirely under the watch of planners and facilitated by specialists and politicians. Only recently have these same groups bemoaned the results as environmentalists and citizens began to oppose the negative impacts of this type of growth. But, car-dependant sprawl comes with its own required conditions for optimal performance, just as traditional community patterns do. In the case of sprawl, the most important principle “sprawl” is part of the name. When actions are taken to impinge on the consumption of land by development, such as urban growth boundaries, sprawl’s greatest asset, cheap affordable land, is eliminated. All other actions taken to then guide and influence the density of “sprawl” further add cost. One result is expensive housing. It really is that simple. Some will argue that it is even more expensive to build in the pre-war, already dense communities and neighbourhoods, and they are right. Not because it is necessarily the case that it “is expensive” to build there, but because the numbers of such communities and neighbourhoods are limited. It was not always so. Prior to WWII, people built and lived in building types deemed too costly to replicate by today’s suburban model and they built them to create traditional neighbourhoods, also considered a luxury

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today and highly sought after addresses by those with means. How were they able to do so in the past, when for all practical purposes they were less affluent than people today?

The answer is that high costs in these limited areas are the result of having to offset the unsustainable costs of the sprawling majority of a metropolitan area. In fact, many of the crises now faced by developed countries in terms of the environment, peak oil, and financial stress, are a result of not responsibly offsetting the costs associated with conventional, car dependant, urban sprawl. Best Practices which do not reinforce the Neighbourhood as the number one and ultimate BMP for

offsetting these costs are merely cosmetic. Until the mechanism of Form Based Coding (Transect Coding) for building pedestrian dependant neighbourhoods is as enshrined in the regulatory and development frameworks of our legal, financial and marketing systems, as they are by Euclidean Zoning for car-dependant sprawl, the built results will always fall short of planning rhetoric and important issues such as affordable housing will always remain a pipe dream.

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