

Social Disadvantage and Planning in the Sydney Context: a Discussion Paper

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Aims and context

This discussion paper was prepared for the NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP). As such, the arguments and the suggestions are entirely the authors' and do not represent the opinions or intentions of DUAP.

The paper considers how urban planning might better respond to the problem of social disadvantage in Sydney, with a particular emphasis on western Sydney. The commission was conceived of as a "think piece" drawing upon the authors' existing knowledge of the subject matter rather than a major new empirically based investigation. The paper also draws on other completed and ongoing research by the Urban Frontiers Program on transport, housing and environmental issues in western Sydney.

The study was prepared before the public release of Plan First, the White Paper review of plan making in NSW. Although the present report was prepared without reference to, or detailed knowledge of, the content of the Plan First document, there exists a strong degree of analytical symmetry between the two papers. In particular, the Plan First vision for planning as a wholistic public endeavour that seeks better social and environmental outcomes finds strong support in the present report.

The report is organised in two main parts. The first part of the report essays a number of background concepts and themes that are important to the understanding of urban social disadvantage and policies that attempt to address this. The second part of the report outlines our proposals for a reworking of Sydney's planning framework so that it might better address the city's worsening social and environmental imbalances.

PART ONE: SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE AND PLANNING

The multiple causes and forms of social disadvantage

- Social disadvantage is not unidimensional. Straightforward, univariate analyses of disadvantage overlook its complex causes and its multiple expressions. Such analyses miss the complex relationships that cohere in forms of urban social disadvantage and thus cannot identify effective policy responses. The monitoring and analysis of disadvantage by scholars and policymakers needs to be improved.
- Disadvantage arises from a variety of causes and manifests in different social and spatial ways. It is a “joined-up” problem. The response by government and other concerned agencies to disadvantage must be in the form of “joined-up” policies.
- What stands out in the Australian context is our limited understanding of patterns of urban disadvantage and of the complex causal mechanisms – e.g., housing and employment submarkets – that generate or at least reinforce them. There is an urgent need for Australian policy makers and urban scholars to collaborate in analyses which can both improve understanding of these phenomena and generate locally appropriate policy responses.

Social disadvantage and exclusion in Sydney

- In contrast to conditions in many other developed nations, Sydney’s social problems are moderate and amenable to corrective action. But they will not always be so.
- Social disadvantage appears to be worsening in Sydney. Long evident regional differentials in income, educational attainment and employment status are widening. This is manifested in enclaves afflicted by distinct combinations of social exclusion, transport poverty, environmental blight and locational inaccessibility. These enclaves vary markedly in character. They are also strongly *dissimilar* to pockets of disadvantage in British and American cities.
- Transport poverty is a widespread problem in western Sydney. Transport poverty occurs when a household is forced to consume more travel costs than it can reasonably afford, especially costs relating to motor car ownership and usage.
- Importantly, urban disadvantage in Sydney is no longer an inner city phenomenon. And yet neither is it correct to characterise the outer and middle ring suburbs of the

major cities as universally disadvantaged. The socio-economic character of the suburbs has a much more complex geography than was the case in the past. Western Sydney contains growing pockets of relatively affluent communities.

- Social disadvantage is also not tenure dependent. While the increased targeting of public housing to those in greatest need in the past twenty years has undoubtedly led to concentrations of disadvantaged households on public housing estates in western Sydney, there are equally disadvantaged communities living in private sector housing. Many highly disadvantaged households are concentrated in the private rental stock in western Sydney, in poor quality accommodation, with little security and many paying unaffordable rents. Importantly, much urban social disadvantage in Sydney's private residential areas is incipient and invisible to policy analysts and policy makers.

Planning as governance

- Planning is an activity necessarily embedded within urban governance. Governance is the combined outcome of institutional decision making by the public, private, community and NGO sectors.
- The governance of Sydney is complex; more complex than many other global cities. Sydney's governance is constituted through a diverse set of institutional influences operating at a variety of scales. It is important to note the often-neglected influence of federal policy on Sydney.
- Given Sydney's complex and multiply constituted governance, solutions to social and other problems must necessarily involve "policy coalitions" that seek to integrate a range of institutional forces – public, private, NGO, community – at a variety of policy scales: local, regional, metropolitan, state and federal.

Social town planning

- There is a sub-discipline of social planning – "social town planning" – that has emerged within urban planning as a specialism, but it remains rather weakly developed, intellectually and professionally. Much of this social planning work focuses on issues of process and participation, and more recently, the translation of some health and safety issues to urban design. Important as they are, these do not amount to an urban planning view on social disadvantage; its causes and policy remedies.

- Social town planning is a potentially useful sub-discipline and professional specialism. There is a strong case for improving the social training of planning students in order to better realise this potential.
- There is also a looser, multidisciplinary field of “social planning” comprised largely of local and state government professionals and consultants who concern themselves with various aspects of community development.
- An important feature to note of the broad social planning field is the common, if not universal, functional separation of social and physical planning within local and state government agencies.

Urban renewal in Australia

- By international standards, Australia has a modest tradition of urban renewal. Urban renewal in Australia has largely fixed on remediation of building stock and physical infrastructure, often in surges tied to political and economic cycles.
- What is notable about the Australian urban renewal experience is the lack of attention given to middle and outer suburban communities, especially in non-public housing areas.

PART TWO: POLICY OPTIONS

Four new principles for metropolitan governance

- There is a need for a strategic vision of a fair and inclusive Sydney which develops in a much more spatially balanced way and which could be operationalised at a range of policy and program scales. Current strategic policy does not articulate this vision clearly enough. We suggest four new principles for metropolitan governance: *Fairness, inclusion, balance* and *partnership*.
- *Fairness*. This concern necessarily highlights the importance of social justice as a value and policy goal for planning. Fairness raises issues of balance and equality of opportunity; which translate directly into geographic and planning concerns.
- *Balance*. The idea of balance – of socio-economic opportunities, of access to valued cultural and environmental goods, and mobility – seems a crucial guiding value. This does not mean prescribing the detail of social and environmental balance but rather

ensuring that public and private investment is shared out to ensure equality of opportunity for all Sydney inhabitants.

- *Inclusion.* The notion of social inclusion, and the policies that are needed to engender it, will be high on the agenda of any intervention to address the problems of disadvantaged areas. There is a great deal of literature in both academia and the policy world that points to the critical importance of social inclusion and local capacity building in successful community renewal. Conventional economic development approaches to social problems may have little influence on entrenched patterns of social exclusion. Policies that aim to bring excluded communities back into the mainstream are already being piloted in New South Wales. However, the planning system itself has not yet acknowledged this as a key goal.
- *Partnership.* Recent experience has indicated that successful urban renewal and regeneration at both regional and subregional scales hinges upon the cultivation of active and innovative partnerships, especially those that involve state, private sector and community organisations in cooperative renewal endeavours. In these models, government – and the planning system – often plays its best role as a **facilitator and risk sharer**, by setting the appropriate statutory framework, passing enabling powers, as well as underwriting initiatives by providing seed core or part funding.

Restructuring a monocentric Sydney

- Despite major lasting changes to Sydney's form in recent decades, a process that continues, there remains the task of recasting the urban **structure** along fairer and more sustainable lines. Structurally, Sydney remains a highly monocentric city, at least in terms of the organisation of governance and the provision of major public, and to a lesser extent, private, facilities and environmental amenities.
- The dominance of radial transport networks and of centralised investment in urban infrastructure exacerbates the inflationary tendencies of inner city property markets, in turn heightening speculative behaviour. These features entrench economic inequalities by concentrating the capitalisation of property gain in a confined area that is owned and controlled by a small group of people. Inequalities of access also derive from this structural form: a rigid, centralised transport infrastructure cannot serve the increasingly complex and more dispersed accessibility needs of the populace.

- The social and work lives of people in suburban Sydney are becoming relatively more self-contained. Many people in Sydney, especially in the west and southwest will have either little inclination or limited means to access many of the centralised services and facilities that are accumulated around the CBD core.
- There is a strong case on both equity and efficiency grounds for decentralising social and cultural investment by state and federal governments. The market may be decentralising investment, but **managed dispersion** is needed to secure equitable and sustainable patterns of suburban development.

A need to decentralise economic development

- European analysts have advocated a model of **decentralised concentration** as a growth management goal for major cities. This model has been adopted to varying degrees at different times in Australian postwar strategic planning frameworks, for example in the “district centres” policies that featured in past growth strategy plans for Sydney and Melbourne.
- An urban structure characterised by decentralised concentration is far preferable on social equity grounds than a metropolis with a dominant CBD and unmanaged suburban dispersion. Specifically, a new **district centres** policy setting would help Sydney to evolve towards the fairer submetropolitan jobs-housing balance that is crucial to the social welfare of households with limited means, especially resources that can be devoted to meeting travel costs.
- The current metropolitan strategy, *Shaping Our Cities*, establishes the need to concentrate employment and commerce in “primary” and “major” centres. This valuable policy setting should be elevated to a higher strategic and operational status, and backed up by stronger regulatory and positive planning.
- A strengthened district centres policy for Sydney would, if vigorously pursued, yield significant social, economic and environmental benefits by better integrating and systematising investment and activities. More specifically, this integration would:
 1. harness synergies across land use (and therefore activity) sectors for local economic development;
 2. increase accessibility, reduce congestion and reinforce public transport; and
 3. provide new opportunities for the provision of public places and spaces.

- Regulations to guide new investment to district centres needs to be reinforced by a mixture of incentives (not necessarily financial) for compliance, together with other positive planning initiatives, such as land assembly programs. The NSW government is fortunate to have an effective positive planning agency, Landcom, which has the experience and skills to play such a positive planning role in a new framework of managed dispersion.

The impact of higher densities

- A social equity issue that emerges through the shift to higher residential densities is the relative provision of non-residential space, particularly those amenities important to everyday well-being, such as recreational areas, educational, health and community facilities, and other greenspace. Anecdotal evidence suggest that the ratio of residential to non-residential space may be increasing in certain localities within Sydney, raising the potential for social disadvantage issues, centring on access to valued and/or needed facilities, to emerge in the near future.
- Attention therefore needs to focus on ensuring continued and equitable access to valued recreational and other social amenities in areas experiencing growth of medium and high density housing, especially in areas that are disadvantaged or vulnerable to economic pressures.
- This will require new thinking about how to package and site non-residential uses and services in the growing medium-high density environments in middle ring Sydney. The formulaic approach that has been associated with (and largely served well) low density development needs to be rethought. There would be value in looking closely at how amenities are provided in high-medium density contexts in overseas cities.

Inclusive urban design and development

- Exclusionary residential enclaves contradict the fundamental principles of a fair, balanced and inclusive city. Moreover, they entrench patterns of exclusion and inaccessibility that raise the prospect of serious policy impacts and fiscal costs in the medium to long term for governments.

- Gated or otherwise exclusionary residential developments should be prohibited, perhaps through a new State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP). DUAP needs to work in partnership with local government to “design out” enclaves.
- There would also be social advantages in exploring ways of “opening up” semi-public spaces (e.g., shopping malls) to make them more inclusive. A governance approach is warranted, perhaps taking the form of working parties made up of community groups, government agencies and facility owners/managers to develop inclusive design and management frameworks for semi-public facilities. The needs of youth and disabled people warrant particular attention.

A culture change in local governance: subsidiarity and community stewardship

- In the European Union (EU), the principle of “subsidiarity” has been enshrined as a key ideal and practical setting for governance. Subsidiarity is simply the idea that decisions should be taken at the lowest appropriate level. The principle has long been cherished in European countries where local governments have carried significant policy functions, and importantly, have been held responsible for the state of their communities and immediate environments. This is not the case in Sydney.
- Local government **must** become a key player – if not the lead agent – in a framework for inclusive governance and renewal at the local level. In particular, there is a need to improve local government’s focus on and response to social disadvantage. There needs to be a profound cultural change in local government away from the “Triple R” (roads, rates & rubbish) approach towards a dynamic and strategic community development and enabling role.
- Local governments must feel responsible for the social, as well as environmental, health of their communities. This suggests the need for integrated policy frameworks at the local level that can monitor and shape social and environmental development. For this “local stewardship” model of governance to occur, it may be necessary for state agencies to devolve certain functions to the municipal level.
- This implies the need for **capacity building** in local government, including the Regional Organisations of Councils, to better address the questions of social change and social disadvantage.

Integrating local physical and social planning

- There is an urgent need to develop collaborative models of planning within local government so that the multiple and interlocking problems of environmental and social disadvantage might be better addressed. In practice this means encouraging, if not requiring, social and physical planning units of local government to cooperate closely in strategy making and program formulation.
- Ideally, the object would be to encourage general social-environmental planning processes, at least at the strategic level, within local government. In essence this requires a local level “whole of government” approach to integrated renewal strategies *within* local areas.
- Place management principles go some way to both recognising and addressing this issue. However, it is not clear how explicit the linkage between environmental and social planning has been in place management initiatives, although it is certainly implicit in the process. This linkage must be made an explicit requirement for councils.

‘State of the Community’ reports

- To underpin the environmental and social planning nexus, there should be regular audits of community health that have an explicit spatial character in order to identify problem areas, and importantly, signal the potential for future problems in other areas.
- Current State of the Environment reporting should be extended to **State of the Community** reporting, produced regularly (preferably at least bi-annually). State of the Community reporting could supplement and provide a stronger empirical basis for the Social Planning Reports (SPRs) that local governments are currently required to produce. State of the Community reports would be regularly produced empirical audits of social trends and could thus form the informational basis for the SPRs.
- We envisage the State of the Community reports would focus explicitly on:
 1. point (contemporary) data that would provide a “snapshot” view of the community;
 2. series data that would identify social trends, with particular attention to the different forms of social disadvantage; and
 3. spatial analysis of the geographic distribution of point and series information.

- This spatial focus would yield a stronger and clearer view of problematical trends **within** local government areas than is currently revealed in the demographic and human needs data collected for the SPRs. This mode of analysis and reporting would identify incipient pockets of disadvantage and exclusion before they hardened into forms that resisted policy solutions.
- A regular NSW State of the Community summary report would be produced, offering a powerful informational and analytical resource for strategic planning.

Local Renewal Strategies

- In those areas where disadvantage is clearly in evidence, local governments should be required to produce **Local Renewal Strategies**, which would differ from SPRs by outlining policies and programs for the rehabilitation of particular place-bounded communities. As comprehensive social-physical planning statements, this requirement could suitably be framed as a State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP). Threshold levels could be set, based upon key social and environmental indicators, as triggers for this SEPP.
- These Local Renewal Strategies could also be required to include **Affordable Housing Strategies** which would build on the initiatives currently being developed by DUAP in terms of identifying planning bonus and partnership opportunities that would bring forward affordable housing projects on the ground.
- A separate pool of government funding – a **Community Renewal Fund** – perhaps contributed to from a range of departments and provided in quantities to make a real difference, could be set aside to help local governments meet this requirement.
- This proposal would build on the already existing Urban Improvement Program (UIP), as well as reformed Area Assistance Scheme (AAS), both administered by DUAP. But we envisage a Community Renewal Fund that would have a wider remit and more resources than the UIP and more spatially targeted than the AAS.

New vehicles for local renewal

- There is also a need to develop new vehicles for local renewal, which are able to operate outside the current government framework to access resources (including

private funding) and develop innovative ways of working that government (local or above) cannot undertake or is unwilling to contemplate.

- Precedents exist elsewhere, such as the US Community Development Corporations (CDCs) that have emerged during the last twenty years as successful models for locally based regeneration. A wholistic approach to local renewal through independent agencies such as these may also overcome the problems arising from the fragmentation of existing government and NGO activity.
- Planning policies could be used to fund such renewal vehicles in Sydney, through the use of Section 94 or similar levies, especially if they were built on existing agencies. Such agencies would include the existing community based housing providers or church based organisations that are already active in delivering welfare services for government in local areas, possibly linked to the use of affordable housing development to underpin their activities.

Overcoming environmental exclusion: Local Improvement Grants

- The current UIP grants address accessibility and amenity problems which manifest at the meso scale (e.g., town centre improvement scheme). There is a need for a more closely targeted scheme – perhaps a **Local Improvement Grant** – that focused on blighted places at the immediate neighbourhood scale. This would develop on and broaden the current Main Streets initiative. Local Improvement Grants could be linked to action under Local Renewal Strategies.
- Modest sums in the range of \$30-80,000 might be offered to local governments, in partnership with matching investment by property owners, to improve local amenity. Funds would be directed towards enhancement of public spaces; the partnership of property owners would be premised on these agents agreeing to undertake some investment in their own assets. The benefits to owners would flow most directly in the enhancement to their asset values that would result. Local business could also benefit from improved attractiveness of the area to consumers.
- To achieve this will require a change of approach from many western Sydney local governments, meaning a sense of ownership of public and semi- public spaces.

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