THE AUSTRALIAN METROPOLIS 2000-2015

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Planning at the metropolitan scale has been a constant in strategic visioning since the early 1900s and an ongoing focus in planning history studies. The aspirations driving broader integrated planning efforts have evolved and shifted in concert with changing economic, demographic, cultural, environmental, and technological circumstances. In the 21st century metropolitan strategies are generally recognized widely as vital coordinative, forward-looking instruments in helping to secure a range of planning goals. These include economic development, competitiveness, aligning land use and transport infrastructure, environmental sustainability, growth management, and a range of housing, health and other amenity targets consistent with the wider political consensus of neo-liberalism. This paper reviews the 21st century Australian experience against the backdrop of challenges posed for metropolitan planning authorities including employment structure and distribution, housing affordability, changing urban form, pressures for renewal, financing infrastructure, social inequality, and best-fit governance. Drawing from planning strategies prepared for the five mainland state capital cities since 2000, the paper identifies major planning trends, similarities and differences between the major cities and the differing roles of government in Australia's tripartite political system. The paper reflects on both achievements and problems in the pursuit of an increasingly complex and often competing set of near-universal aspirations for productive, sustainable, liveable and well-governed cities in the Australian context.

Keywords
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INTRODUCTION

In 2000 the authors published *The Australian Metropolis: A Planning History*, an account of the evolution of Australian metropolitan planning from the early years of colonial settlement to the 1990s.[1] By the end of the 20th century, most state governments, which had assumed the primary responsibility for instituting planning systems generally and planning the major state capital cities specifically, were pursuing strategies to make their capital city-regions more sustainable, particularly through encouraging more compact urban forms and reduction in car dependency. However a major tension was identified between the environmental concerns seen as underpinning renewed popular and political support for public planning on the one hand, and, on the other, the rise of 'market triumphalism', acknowledging the turn to light-handed neo-liberal policies preoccupied with global competitiveness. Disjunctures of growing social inequality, infrastructure deficits, and flawed governance arrangements were becoming apparent.

These issues have not disappeared and other challenges have intensified. This paper looks at what has happened to Australian metropolitan planning in the decade and a half since the book was published. Other commentators have already ventured into this territory and we draw from their theoretical, thematic and comparative research into various aspects including the infrastructure turn, neo-liberal hegemony, evolving governance arrangements and needs, and the distinctiveness of Australian approaches on the global stage.[2] The paper has several main parts. First we briefly sketch recent trends in the growth and change of Australia's cities. Secondly, we identify the metropolitan plans produced for Australia's five largest cities since 2000. The content of these plans is described and this demonstrates the substantial convergence which has occurred between objectives and urban structures sought. Third, the paper examines how successful these plans have been and, to the extent that there appears to be a gap between the aims of metropolitan plans and their achievements, considers some explanations for this, drawing in part on the substantial body of scholarship which now exists on Australian cities. Fourth, this discussion leads to reflections on the current state of metropolitan planning in the context of wider reforms to planning systems and calls for more effective metropolitan governance within Australia's multi-level federal system of government.

AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL CITIES IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

Australia's distinctive pattern of urban settlement evolving at the interface of colonial economic development and environmental constraints favouring the eastern and southern seaboards was etched early to drive the path-dependent geography still evident today (see, for example, McCarty, 1974; Maher, 1985), with a small number of coastal-based state capital cities, and with more than half of the population in the three major metropolitan areas of Greater Sydney, Greater Melbourne and the evolving conurbation of South-East Queensland (SEQ). But this scale of 'metropolitan dominance' is only the beginning of the story with policy discourse increasingly fixated more on intra-urban issues of efficiency, equity and environmental quality. The opening decade of this century saw sustained economic growth, largely as a consequence of a resource boom triggered by rising levels of industrial activity and consumption amongst Australia's largest trading partners, albeit slowed for several years by the Global Financial Crisis. Australia's population continues to expand and the current total of around 24 million is likely to double in the present century. Growth is concentrated in the larger capital cities with some recurring trends and challenges including the decline of suburban manufacturing employment and growth of new 'knowledge economy' jobs mainly in the inner cities; housing unaffordability, especially in the two largest cities of Sydney and Melbourne; the continued shift to higher density and high rise urban forms through urban renewal; growing infrastructure deficits, particularly in public transport; protecting natural environments and addressing climate change; a widening gulf in access to services and quality of life; and dysfunctionalities in metropolitan governance.

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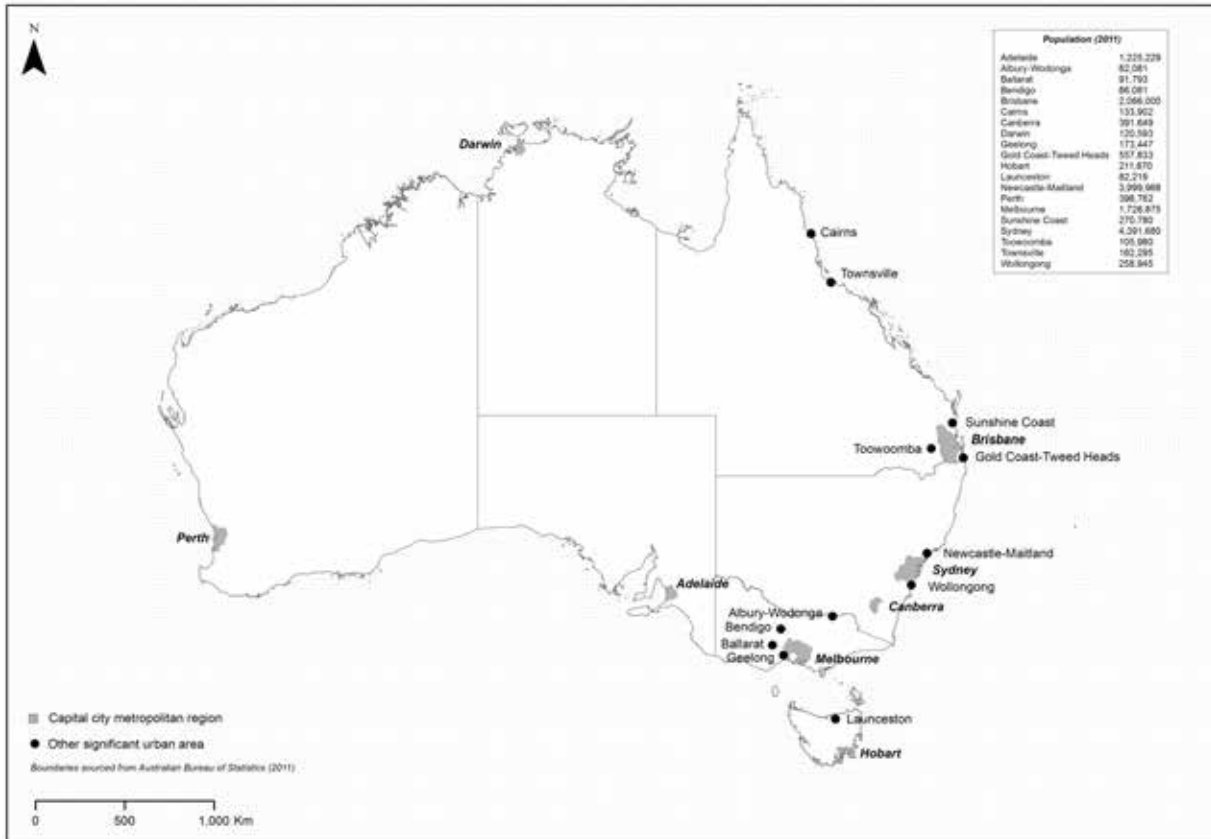THE AUSTRALIAN METROPOLIS 2000-2015

FIGURE 1 Australia's 'top 20' largest urban centres, 2011

At the time of the last national census in 2011, over 85 per cent of Australians lived in urban areas and nearly 70 per cent in the capital cities (see Figure1). The rate of population growth was high relative to most other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)countries. The fastest growing capital since 2009 has been Perth, capital of the resource rich state of Western Australia which grew by more than 3 per cent per annum over the period 2009-2014.

Despite the growth of smaller settlements in some parts of the country through migration to rural towns ('tree change') and to the coast ('sea change')(Osbaldiston, 2012) plus the influence of the resource boom on some remote mining towns), capital cities still accounted for almost 80 per cent of national population growth in 2013-2014. Immigration remains a major component of population growth - the proportion of Australia's population born overseas reached 28 per cent or 6.6 million in 2015. Multiculturalism and diversity are important characteristics of Australian society, with marked recent increases in the proportion of migrants from China and India.

Household composition and tenures have changed over the last decade and a half. Between 1994 and 2014 the proportion of Australia's population aged sixty-five years and older increased from 11.8 per cent to 14.7 per cent, while the proportion of people aged eighty-five years and older almost doubled from 1 per cent to 1.9 per cent. Nearly 70 percent of Australian households own or are purchasing their homes but houses in the major cities have become increasingly unaffordable for younger people in recent years, as demand outstrips supply, leading to continuing pressure to release more land, to increase housing densities and to reform planning systems which are held to be constraints on housing supply and on economic development more generally.

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Employment composition and distribution has continued to evolve, with continuing decline of manufacturing (including the car industry), the volatility of resource-based employment in regional areas and their multiplier impacts on the major cities, and the growth of new jobs in the emergent 'knowledge economy', highly concentrated within or close to central business districts. Metropolitan areas have assumed more polycentric forms with secondary suburban activity centres and employment zones complementing rather than challenging traditional Central Business Districts (CBDs), but only Parramatta in Sydney approaches the scale of a genuine second CBD. There is growing recognition of the complexity of labour and housing sub-markets often glossed over in broad-brush housing and employment policies. And there is still plentiful evidence of poor access to employment opportunities in outer suburban areas, with out-commuting rates and journey to work distances increasing, linked to limited public transport options.

Meanwhile concerns about sustainability remain. Climate change was defined by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2007 as 'the great moral challenge of our generation'[3]. But it slipped down the agenda of national political priorities thereafter, especially between 2013 and 2015, along with policies to encourage a shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Evidence continues to grow, nevertheless, of the vulnerability of Australian cities to climate-related events and other 'natural' disasters.

RECENT METROPOLITAN PLANS

In response to the changes summarised above, and to some extent complicit in their direction and expression, metropolitan planning authorities continued apace their plan-making processes into the 2000s and 2010s. Every mainland state capital city has been through several iterations of metropolitan plan-making (Table 1). A total of fifteen has been produced and this would be magnified if all major urban areas were factored in, namely Canberra as the national capital, Darwin as a territory capital, and Hobart as the capital of the island state of Tasmania.

What general characteristics can be identified in these Australian metropolitan plans of the early 21st century? Several observers have picked up on certain traits, including Forster who identified a 'consensus' around three main objectives in the earliest part of the period under review, namely: 'containment', 'consolidation', and 'centres'.[4] Perth's *Network City* strategy (2004) was unusual in its serious but short-lived attempt at a more communicative style of metropolitan planning discourse.[5] Searle and Bunker have characterised the dominant form of plan as a traditional, detailed spatial blueprint that they contrast to the more relational, flexible and negotiable style of plan evident in Europe, linking this to the dominance of state governments in planning, their monopoly of most physical infrastructure, their orientation towards greenfield growth and the predominantly physical means of implementation available to them.[6] These themes persist, but our initial synopsis identifies several different major traits.

The plans grow ever-ambitiously. There has been a move towards plans for extended metropolitan regions – 'Greater Adelaide', 'Greater Sydney', Perth and Peel etc. In most states the area covered by metropolitan plans has expanded to encompass the peri-urban fringe in consideration of the future expansion of the major cities and some cities[7] have experimented with the concept of setting urban growth boundaries to set limits to spread and protect environmental and agricultural zones, with mixed outcomes.[8] Commonly projected futures look ahead 10-15 years; 2031 is a common target date. By then Australia's population is projected to increase by a further 8 million people, with about three-quarters of this growth occurring in the four largest cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Adelaide is growing much more slowly and may cede its position as Australia's 5th largest city to the Gold Coast by mid-century. Plans also continue to aspire to an ambitious and seamless reconciliation of the 'triple bottom line' of economic, social and environmental goals, but with an increased emphasis on facilitating sustainable economic growth through new growth sectors such as finance and property, communications, producer services and tourism.

CITY	MAJOR PLANS	COMMENTS
Adelaide (South Australia)	Planning Strategy for Metropolitan Adelaide (2003)	
	Planning Strategy for Metropolitan Adelaide (2006)	
	30 Year Plan for Greater Adelaide (2010)	Review of 30 Year Plan under way (2015-2016); an independent State Planning Commission proposed in current draft legislation.
Brisbane/SEQ (Queensland)	SEQ Regional Plan 2005-2026 (2005)	SEQ (South East Queensland) includes the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast urban complexes
	SEQ Regional Plan 2009-2031 (2009)	Review of SEQ Regional Plan under way (2015-2016)
Melbourne (Victoria)	Melbourne 2030 (2002)	Metropolitan Planning Authority 2006.
	Melbourne 2030 – A Planning Update (2008)	
	Plan Melbourne (2014)	'Plan Melbourne Refresh' under way (2015-2016).
Perth (Western Australia)	Network City (2004)	West Australian Planning Commission an early example of a 'quango' with statewide planning oversight.
	Directions 2031 and Beyond (2010)	Formation of Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority (2011)
	Draft Perth and Peel @ 3.5 million (2015)	Released for comment in May 2015, and later, separate, 'Perth and Peel Green Growth Plan', December 2015.
Sydney (New South Wales)	Sydney - City of Cities (2005)	
	Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036 (2010)	
	A Plan for Growing Sydney (2014)	Greater Sydney Commission instituted to supervise implementation through sub-regional strategies.

TABLE 1 Summary of the principal metropolitan plans 2000-2015

Another major theme has been the importation of notions of smart growth, new urbanism, polycentricity and transit-oriented development to flavour the ideas and the language of recent metropolitan plans. Several observers have noted the convergence of recent metropolitan plans around policies based on compact mixed-use (re)development in activity centres along transport corridors. Evidence in most states points to the powerful influence of the property industry in shaping land use policy and especially in encouraging state governments to release additional land at the urban fringe, justified on the basis that a shortage of greenfield land availability is the key factor in making housing more affordable. Lobbying from the property industry has also been influential in increasing or removing height limits in some central cities.

There has been a substantial amount of investment in infrastructure projects generally, leading to the suggestion that metropolitan spatial plans have become less significant in shaping the growth of major cities than a new set of infrastructure plans and major projects.[9] While state governments have been the traditional providers of metropolitan transport and pipes-and-wires infrastructure, and retain that oversight, delivery is increasingly sourced through privatised agencies and private-public partnerships.

There is some evidence in the most recent plans of awareness, based on a growing body of urban research, of differential trends and patterns of growth within cities. More attention has been paid generally to the unequal opportunities and experiences of life in inner suburbs (more affluent, focus of jobs in the 'knowledge economy' and more likely to see substantial urban design interventions) compared to outer suburbs (affected by the decline in manufacturing employment, poor public transport and high levels of car dependency etc). The actual impact of this research on more finely-grained policies is more problematical.

Awareness of vulnerability to climate change is reflected in a greater emphasis on 'resilience' and more detailed strategies on water management, protection of native vegetation and also agricultural land. However, most responses to climate change in metropolitan plans remain based primarily on more compact cities and reduced car use.

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THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF METROPOLITAN PLANS

In reviewing the metropolitan plans to have appeared since 2000, there is an obvious paradox between their aspiration to be 'thirty year plans', containing detailed long term housing and population targets, and the frequency with which they have been revised. Shorter-term intermediate, more indicative and flexible targets would seem more appropriate. The regular appearance of revised plans also points to the (increasingly explicit) political nature of metropolitan plans and the tendency to revise (or 'refresh') them when state governments change or come under intense political pressures from the development industry, in particular. Nevertheless, several major observations derive from a broad scan of the outcomes of metropolitan plans over the period studied[10].

First, a much wider variety of dwellings is now being constructed in a wider range of locations. Building of medium-density development has increased everywhere and high-rise apartment living is now increasingly evident, not only in the largest cities but also in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane.

Second, ambitious targets for infill development have not been met, largely thanks to the continuing release of land for development at the urban fringe within generous and regularly revised urban growth boundaries.

Third, and despite a major focus on housing supply and the release of developable land, metropolitan plans have been relatively ineffective in relation to housing affordability. To quote the late Hugh Stretton on this failure of planning (and housing) policies: 'Whether for market demand or for human need, we have a serious failure of supply and no current program, public or private, to correct it'.[11]

Fourth, investment in public transport has been generally inadequate to support the aspirations for transit-oriented development. Where increases in public transport ridership have been noted, these tend to be primarily in journeys to the CBD and to/within the better served inner suburbs (the areas also where most increases in walking and cycling are observed). The failure to provide a sufficient amount of accessible and well-managed public transport has been a conspicuous obstacle to date in most major cities.

Fifth, the strategy of concentrating mixed uses and activities in a hierarchy of activity centres has been effective in a few major locations, but employment in middle and outer suburbs remains widely dispersed.[12]

Finally, there is considerable investment, particularly inner city brownfield locations, which is guided by state government economic development directives through special planning arrangements sitting outside, only lightly connected to, or otherwise needing to be retrofitted to metropolitan strategies.

Overall, despite the gains that all plans could point to across targets such as increased job-creating development, densification, open space, promotion of active transport, conservation and urban design standards, there remains a demonstrable gap between metropolitan planning proposals and reality. Forster observed in 2006 that current metropolitan planning strategies suggest 'an inflexible, over-neat vision for the future that is at odds with the picture of increasing geographical complexity that emerges from recent research on the changing internal structure of our major cities'.[13] Randolph has commented more recently that metropolitan planning remains 'bedevilled by a lack of understanding of how the cities planned actually work'.[14] There is a growing body of academic urban research which provides rich and nuanced understanding of this complexity.[15] Most evidence of plan performance derives from academic research. Yet new documents are generally released without explicit reporting of any monitoring or evaluation conducted by state planning agencies of previous plans. The disconnect between academic research and plan-making, despite the professed practitioner enthusiasm for an evidence base, relates to its inaccessibility to practitioners, lack of detailed immediacy for applied interventions, theoretical drift, lack of alignment between research need and result delivery timelines, and a competitive marketplace for policy ideas increasingly dominated by management consultants.[16]

METROPOLITAN PLANS, METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE AND PLANNING REFORM

More successful implementation of metropolitan planning objectives requires more than goodwill between stakeholders. Since the 1990s there has been support for 'whole of government' approaches to metropolitan planning and traditional state government 'silos' have been overcome to varying degrees by committees/regular meetings of senior government officers. The last few years have seen growing support for the idea that effective metropolitan planning in Australia requires more far-reaching changes to the governance arrangements for cities and for collaborative policy relationships between all levels of government: local, state and federal. There is a view that no one level of government is capable of guaranteeing delivery of various urban policy objectives but rather it is the combination of government policies acting together that best ensures successful outcomes[17] although aligning myriad objectives can be problematic.[18] There has been a call for new accountable institutions at the metropolitan scale in dialogue with local communities but capable of co-ordinating the various sectoral strategies required for implementation of urban renewal, development of sub-centres across metropolitan areas, making improvements to accessibility, and pursuing economic and labour force strategies.[19] The institution of the Metropolitan Planning Authority (2006) in Melbourne and the Greater Sydney Commission (2015) substantiate this move toward an integrative overlay of policy coordination at the state government level. Advocates of metropolitan authorities or commissions also see potential for them to draw together research on metropolitan development and to undertake the necessary finer-grained monitoring of short-term progress towards the long-term aspirations of metropolitan plans.

The Federal Government has largely steered clear of involvement in city issues for constitutional as much as ideological and financial reasons, despite adventurous engagements in the 1940s (post-war reconstruction), 1970s (the Whitlam era and the Department of Urban and Regional Development) and 1990s (Building Better Cities program). A renaissance of interest thorough the Rudd-Gillard governments (2007-2013) saw the development of a national urban policy, a new urban design protocol, and a national data monitoring focus on Australia's 'major cities'.[20] A major driving force at federal level, evident also in moves toward reforming state and local planning systems, has been the simplification and standardisation of planning regulations to remove breaks of productivity.[21] This fed into a major initiative in 2009 driven by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Reform Council towards establishing criteria for assessing the efficacy of capital city planning systems to deliver on its objective of 'globally competitive, productive, sustainable, liveable and socially inclusive cities' and thus be deserving of Commonwealth financial support. A detailed assessment of eight capital cities revealed very few instances where planning systems were fully compliant; Adelaide was the best performing metropolitan area.[22] There was a major recommendation for a better evidence base for monitoring the performance and outcomes of metropolitan plans.

The renewed interest of federal agencies in thinking about cities reflects recognition of their national role in generating Gross Domestic Product. The actual achievements to 2013 were ultimately patchy but there is renewed optimism that the Liberal-National Coalition Government under new Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (2015) will be more pro-active in supporting and promoting best-practice systemic governance, more collaborative policy between different levels of government and new mechanisms for funding urban infrastructure without major demands on the public purse while balancing development-friendly initiatives with safeguards on environmental quality.

CONCLUSIONS

Major metropolitan planning themes since 2000 have included further promotion of anti-sprawl policies of infill and redevelopment; transit-oriented development; privatisation of public infrastructure; dealing with the spatial mismatch between homes and residences; a resurgence of urban design; and addressing administrative fragmentation. State governments have deployed their executive power to drive through major redevelopment projects, with a corresponding reduction in public participation, and they are under continuing pressure to reform planning systems in order to facilitate economic growth with mixed success. The national government has latterly become re-engaged in urban development primarily as the crucial links between urban investment, infrastructure, GDP and planning systems become more evident.

All of this is being played out under the growing ascendancy of neo-liberal urban policies, favoured by Australian governments since the 1980s but thoroughly institutionalised in complex ways since the start of the new millennium.[23] This has meant largely irresistible forces to cut red tape, reduce the costs of public administration, privatize and outsource regulatory services, encourage competition, and increasingly work with market forces to achieve desired planning outcomes. This is a global phenomenon[24] and has flowed into involvement of the national government in urban questions on the understanding that 'the efficient and effective planning of our cities and towns is vital to productivity and interest'.[25]

The opening decade of the 21st century duly saw a new crop of metropolitan plans which placed a good deal of weight on the desire to facilitate economic development in an era increasingly understood as one of global competition. There was also a growing awareness of the lack of fit between the aspirations of metropolitan strategies and the means available to implement them.

In addition to an increased concern with globalisation, metropolitan plans of the early 21st century also began to engage with the task of reducing the rate of growth of greenhouse gas emissions and of adapting cities to the risks posed by climate change. Climate change became a major focus of sustainability policies and of a concern to make cities more 'resilient'. Policies to reduce car use, already linked to higher urban densities, became synonymous in most metropolitan plans with a new enthusiasm for 'transit oriented development' and resurgence of the need to structure urban growth around a hierarchy of centres.

Inevitably, tensions evident at the turn of the century between developmentalism and environmentalism have persisted, but there have also been calls for more attention to suburban residents and places outside the global cores of the major cities adversely affected by changing employment markets, more expensive housing and poor public transport.[26]

While the new metropolitan plans typically included economic, environmental and social aspirations, it has become clear to many that effective integrated planning requires more than the inclusion of what can be contradictory environmental and economic goals within the covers of a single metropolitan plan. Here is yet another iteration of the politics of planning set to influence the theory, practice and implementation of metropolitan planning in the years to come.[27]

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Image Sources

Figure 1: Map prepared by Alistair Sisson based on 2011 census data – see Hamnett and Maginn, "Australian Cities in the 21st Century: Suburbia and Beyond", p.6.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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Endnotes

1   Hamnett and Freestone, *The Australian Metropolis*.

2   See for example Bunker, Metropolitan Strategies in Australia; Dodson, "The 'Infrastructure Turn' in Australian Metropolitan Spatial Planning"; Forster, "The Challenge of Change"; Gleeson and Low, *Australian Urban Planning*; Gleeson et al, "Governance, Sustainability and Recent Australian Metropolitan Strategies"; Searle and Bunker, "Metropolitan strategic planning"; Gleeson et al, "Governance, metropolitan planning and city-building"; Bunker and Searle, "Theory and Practice in Metropolitan Strategy."

3   Quoted in Hamnett and Maginn, "Australian Cities in the 21st Century," 13.

4   Forster, "The Challenge of Change."

5   Maccallum and Hopkins, "The Changing Discourse of City Plans."

6   Searle and Bunker, "Metropolitan Strategic Planning."

7   Melbourne and Adelaide in particular

8   Buxton and Taylor, "Urban land supply, governance and the pricing of land".

9   Dodson, "The 'Infrastructure Turn' in Australian Metropolitan Spatial Planning."

10 For a fuller discussion of the achievements of recent metropolitan plans, see Hamnett and Maginn, "Australian Cities in the 21st Century: Suburbia and Beyond"; and Bunker, "How is the Compact City Faring in Australia?".

11 Stretton, *Australia Fair*, 123.

12 See for example Fagan and O'Neill, *Work, places and people in Western Sydney*, and Goodman and Moloney, "Melbourne's Activity Centre Policy".

13 Forster, "The Challenge of Change", 173.

14 Randolph, "Wither Urban Research?"

15 See the transactions of the biennial State of Australian Cities Conferences which commenced in 2003 that have been archived by Australian Policy Online. http://apo.org.au/collections/soac-conferences

16 Bunker, "Linking Urban Research with Planning Practice,"; Taylor and Hurley, "Not a Lot of People Read the Stuff,"; and Troy, "Australian Urban Research and Planning".

17 Fagan and O'Neill, *Work, places and people in Western Sydney*, 71-72.

18 Bunker, "Can We Plan Too Much?"

19 Gleeson et al, "Governance, metropolitan planning and city-building."

20 See Australian Government, *Our Cities, Our Future*.

21 See for example, Productivity Commission, *Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation*.

22 COAG Reform Council, *Review of capital city strategic planning systems*.

23 Gleeson and Low, *Australian Urban Planning*; McGuirk, "Neoliberalist Planning?"

24 Sager, "Neo-liberal urban planning policies."

25 COAG Reform Council, 1.

26 Gleeson, *Australian Heartlands;* Dodson, "Suburbia in Australian Urban Policy";

27 Low, *Planning, Politics and the State.*