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# THE RENAISSANCE OF POST-WAR METROPOLITAN PLANNING IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA 1949-1954

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This paper examines the context to the preparation of Melbourne's first statutory metropolitan planning scheme in 1954. Metropolitan planning initiatives in Australia before World War Two were few and far between. The agency officially charged with devising, promoting and implementing a new regional-scale planning scheme in 1949 was the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW). Three themes structure the discussion. One is the avowed openness to international ideas and expertise which flavoured the appointment of the first chief metropolitan planner although it was ultimately a local professional who was chosen. Two is the disavowal of a visionary planning approach in favour of a more politically-pragmatic and business-like incrementalism. Three is the endeavour to secure broad citizen acceptance of the proposals highlighted by a series of major public exhibitions in late 1943 and early 1954. The paper revisits these and other key events in the narrative to establish metropolitan planning oversight on a secure footing in Melbourne. The campaign proved successful. The MMBW was confirmed as Melbourne's regional planning authority in December 1954, thenceforth permitting regional planning to be woven into the bureaucratic machinery of state government. From that point, planning debate shifted decisively from a general one of whether or not to plan to the more substantive issues of plan implementation.

## Keywords

metropolitan planning, internationalism, pragmatism, exhibitionism, Melbourne

## How to Cite

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we briefly review the progress towards the formal solution of the 1954 metropolitan plan for Melbourne. We focus on three issues: the different international influences that held sway and influenced the content and style of planning; the government's careful re-casting of planning as a pragmatic discipline; and the concerted public relations campaign to convince the public of the need for planning. In this way, planning was accepted as a state responsibility and metropolitan planning firmly entrenched by the mid-1950s.

## BACKGROUND

As the Second World War drew to a close Australia embraced the need for town planning. Decades of pre-war propaganda that underscored inadequate infrastructure, lack of environmental protection, deficiencies in the provision of open space, speculatively-driven suburban land subdivision, and housing shortages bore fruit in a raft of British-influenced town and country planning legislation in most Australian States in 1944-1955.

Melbourne, the capital of the state of Victoria, followed this trend and like all the state capital cities (with the exception of Brisbane) had to contend with a jigsaw of local authorities defying metropolitan oversight. A pre-war, US-inspired, Metropolitan Town Planning Commission had advised the state government on a range of proposals including residential, business and open space land use zonings but this initiative had been terminated with the onset of the Great Depression. The post-war reconstruction era successfully revived the arguments for more planning and the first comprehensive town planning legislation was introduced in 1944 to provide for preparation of local authority planning schemes oversighted by a new state-agency, the Town and Country Planning Board. In 1949 new legislation installed the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) as the authority to prepare a metropolitan-wide planning scheme. In 1954 the MMBW, which was a legacy public utility for water and sewerage from the 1890s, was confirmed as the "continuing" planning body for Melbourne.<sup>1</sup>

In the development of this combined solution of statewide legislation, a metropolitan plan for Melbourne and the decision to make the MMBW the planning authority, the Victorian Government took a variety of measures to shape the content and public reaction to planning. Australia was a site of overlapping influence during the reconstruction era with both US and UK styles of planning making impacts. In addition, planning was being newly shaped as a discipline, distinguishing itself from architecture and engineering and striving for public and professional legitimacy.

The planning strategy around which this paper revolves has been described and analysed by various commentators.<sup>2</sup> It was prepared for a future population of 2,500,000 people contained within an urban footprint of about 700km<sup>2</sup>. The chief planner E.F. Borrie in his Introduction to the two-volume report explained that the study which took several years to appear was "based on a sound factual survey, has been formulated with high ideals of community needs and civic development, and ... has been modified having regard to economic and practical difficulties to present what we firmly believe to be a sound and practicable basis for the guidance of the future civic development and improvement of Melbourne."<sup>3</sup> The report's summary identifies the key problems and policy responses. Of the "many" problems uncovered through civic surveys, the main ones were listed as: low-density sprawl; decline in the liveability of the inner city; need for industrial area planning; congestion in and around the CBD; broader constraints on the movements of people and goods; lack of sites for community facilities; lack of recreation areas; and concern with protection from the effects of aerial warfare. Six key principles were enunciated: (i) limitation of the urban area; (ii) zoning of specific areas for various community purposes; (iii) decentralisation within the urban area of industry and commerce; (iv) provision for an adequate road communication system; (v) reservation of adequate areas for all community needs; and (vi) preservation of existing opportunities for civic improvement.<sup>4</sup> The plan was a product of its times, going as far as gesturing to the moral panic of the cold war era. Dispersal was a major theme, and the overall accent was on efficiency rather than equity. The strategy was generally well received. The influence of overseas planning and development ideas, particularly from the US, has already been noted.<sup>5</sup>

## CONTENDING WITH INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

The willingness of Melbourne planning advocates to look abroad for inspiration and exemplars was already established from the earliest years of the organised town planning movement from the 1910s. In the post-war years the international influences impinging on planning continued. The English influence over Melbourne's planning was bolstered by visits from the legendary Patrick Abercrombie in 1948 and William Holford in 1951 who had succeeded Abercrombie as Professor of Town Planning at University College London and was technical advisor to the English Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Holford reiterated the need for steadfastness in applying the plan, but his comparison to the situation in London was couched in visionary terms, recommending to his audience that they should follow the lead of London, which had set its eyes on an ideal city. Holford also reinforced the importance of winning over the public: "selling town planning to the people is undoubtedly the State's biggest and most important public relations job to date."<sup>6</sup> Neil Abercrombie, Patrick's son, who had worked as a planner in Australia since the late 1940s opined that it was necessary to "launch the whole project in a blaze of brilliance and publicity calculated to stimulate the interest of even the most morbidly dull individual."<sup>7</sup>

The recruitment of the MMBW's first metropolitan chief planner in 1949-50 was also international in flavour even though the successful applicant was already on staff. At their first meeting to appoint a planner on 15 December 1949 the Board's selection committee resolved that the Chief Planner position should be advertised widely. Advertisements were to be placed throughout Australasia, Great Britain, Canada, USA and South Africa for application to close 31 March 1950. Overseas applications were to be lodged with the Agent General in London with a view to review by Patrick Abercrombie.<sup>8</sup> The Secretary of the Town and Country Planning Board forwarded letters from English architects L. Griffiths and P.C. Chapman who were thinking of migrating and might be of use.<sup>9</sup>

In April 1950 the MMBW Chairman, J.C. Jessop, wrote to the Committee setting out Abercrombie's comments on the six overseas applicants that he had picked out as the best, as well as another late applicant. The Chairman of the committee was to check with further referees supplied by Abercrombie as to the qualities of the seven applicants, with a view to arranging interviews.<sup>10</sup> Applications for the Chief Planner position were received from F. Roland, M.W. Wallach and W.H. Hollis of New York. The Minister of Housing also contacted the Committee to notify he had received a letter from the Trade Commission Service in London recommending the architect-planner G.A. Crockett.

Despite having had success in attracting international interest in the position, the Planning Committee decided that "the appointment of a Chief Planner come from local applicants and a consultant be appointed from overseas" (this latter idea was shelved). The MMBW Chairman advised that he had been doing his own investigations of overseas applicants and it seems as a result recommended "the committee consider the question of selecting an applicant from the Australian list for appointment." Outwardly the Board was keen to underscore the international dimension to their recruitment campaign but on 23 May 1950 the decision was made to appoint E.F. Borrie, the MMBW's Chief Engineer of Sewerage. According to the *MMBW Officers' Journal*, Borrie was selected "from among a large field of both local and overseas candidates for the position of Chief Planner."<sup>11</sup>

Borrie, an internal and organic appointment, was nonetheless a conduit of international influences. In 1937 he was sent overseas "to study and report on sewerage systems in Britain, America, France, Germany and other countries." During the war he was also director of Engineering at the Allied Works Council.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent to his appointment he spent six months in Europe, Britain and the United States in 1952, leaving in April and returning on 5 October "studying latest town-planning ideas in the larger cities of Europe, Britain and the United States."<sup>13</sup> His report from this study tour dealt primarily with the provision of more highways, bridges and roundabouts to solve the traffic problems of the city. The local broadsheet, *The Argus* reported with approval that "Borrie is no armchair planner. He has been around seeing what other cities can do – particularly in the USA – and he talks in a business-like way."<sup>14</sup> Borrie reported that "active town planning overseas had brought about:

Better road communications, more efficient public transport, good city parking areas, and rebuilding of sub-standard areas.”<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly, Melbourne’s problems were being seen as akin to those of West Coast American cities, particularly Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Charles Bennett, the Director of a recently expanded City Planning Department at the City of Los Angeles who visited for a fortnight in 1953 was given a warm reception.<sup>17</sup> The visit, organised by the Town and Country Planning Association (T&CPA) and sponsored by the Myer Foundation, had an agenda to “awaken public interest in planning generally, and meet both professional and voluntary planners”.<sup>18</sup> Bennett made several addresses and his visit specifically helped focus “public attention” on the forthcoming metropolitan plan as a “vital planning event in the history of the State”.<sup>19</sup> He addressed a combined meeting of the Australian Planning Institute Melbourne Division and the T&CPA at Kelvin Hall in the city on 11 August 1953.<sup>20</sup> He spoke at the August general meeting of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects under the title “Planning is for the People”. He praised the plan for its sound research and for its good zoning pattern “designed for the convenience, comfort and efficiency of the people”, and describing its highway plan as “first class”. Overall he emphasised the link between planning, efficient city operation and successful business, a link which found a receptive audience in Melbourne.<sup>21</sup>

As part of the public relations campaign surrounding his visit, Bennett was photographed with Borrie atop a CBD building opining on the need for a proper civic centre.<sup>22</sup> He was invited to address an MMBW Board meeting on 11 August 1953. During his visit Bennett was also given an official reception by the Melbourne City Council, where he produced something of a manifesto on pragmatic planning. Planning “aimed primarily at preventing greedy individuals of the present generation from cluttering up a city’s future with bottle-necks, blighted areas, industry remote from housing and other faults which already annoyed and impoverished the modern citizen.”<sup>23</sup> Bennett explained how the problem of sprawl had been addressed in LA using zones in an article he wrote for the *Australian Municipal Journal*.<sup>24</sup> Entitled “Melbourne Plan Sensible, Practical”, the emphasis on sensible and practical planning arrangements was a major ideological theme of the period to which we now turn.

## PLANNING MOVES FROM A VISIONARY TO A PRAGMATIC FOCUS

The disavowal of visionary planning by Bennett appealed to the instincts of E. F. Borrie and the MMBW. A number of planning commentators in Australia in the early post-war period had regretted the fact that they did not have the *tabula rasa* occasioned by German bombs upon which to play out their schemes.<sup>25</sup> A wartime Australian Army Education Service text described the expansive possibilities for rebuilding Coventry: “The destruction ... has given English townplanners a marvellous opportunity to build a new city.”<sup>26</sup> The Melbourne approach proved more gradualist. Borrie observed that “During recent discussion in England, a senior planning official informed me that in the immediate post war enthusiasm for planning, which was fostered by the realisation of the opportunities presented by war damage, economists had expressed the view that redevelopment throughout the country was possible in 25 years. It has now been realised that ... this is not practicable and the very necessary improvements in the conditions of living in the larger towns must be achieved more gradually.”<sup>27</sup>

Such attitudes had roots earlier in the century. Even in the 1920s there had been indications of a turn to pragmatic planning, particularly in the US. In a 1927 article on town planning in America, F.E. Dixon wrote of the principle which drove the Chicago Plan Commission. “City planning is held to be the job of the whole community”.<sup>28</sup> The Metropolitan Town Planning Commission had certainly adopted a pragmatic approach and that culture still resonated into the 1950s. The problems which Sydney was having at that time in implementing its visionary green belt in the image of Abercrombie’s for London were also keenly observed. Borrie moved plan terminology away from the British green belt concept towards a more neutral “Rural Zone”.

The pragmatic turn was taken up with particular gusto in the early 1950s. In an article in the *Australian Municipal Journal* in 1951 titled 'Town Planning Notions of the Western World', L.T Frazer, Deputy City Engineer in the City of Melbourne, explained the rationale for pragmatic as against visionary planning. "A controversial point among planners is that idealistic plans do more harm than good. In England, during the latter part of the war and subsequently, many ideal plans and planning schemes were produced in the heat and enthusiasm of the moment. Generally nothing physical has been done because the plans were too ambitious and beyond economic possibilities. The testing time has come out in council meetings when it has been found that the arguments put forward for the radical changes recommended in the plans do not withstand hard technical scrutiny or financial accounting."<sup>29</sup>

A speech from the Archbishop of York, a noted town planning and housing reformer, was reprinted in the *Australian Municipal Journal*. He spoke of a new reaction against the visionary planning of the immediate post-war period. "There has been a reaction from the splendid plans drawn up for the rebuilding of our cities. Great work was done by those who prepared these schemes; they gave visions as to what the city might be. But their cost was ignored. They were often the expression of ideals rather than of practical schemes which could be effected. The result has been irritation and impatience over schemes which would cost far more the heavily-burdened tax and rate-payers could afford."<sup>30</sup> Thus not only is the visionary scheme undemocratic, it also cannot be effected.

In 1952 a reviewer of Brown and Sherrard's new Australian text *Town and Country Planning* started by addressing the problem of visionary planning. "There is much popular misconception in regard to town and country planning [...] Unfortunately, this misconception extends to many Parliamentarians and Municipal Councillors, who are inclined to regard the subject as the unpractical idealism of dreamers. This attitude has been unfortunately fostered by some utopian but unobtainable plans that were prepared by early enthusiasts who, in their zeal for perfection, overlooked the economic and practical considerations."<sup>31</sup> The same year J.C. Jessop, Chairman of the MMBW, reiterated similar sentiments to ground the MMBW's approach. Rejecting the perception of the planner as a "dreamy-eyed, long-haired individual who spends most of his time living above the clouds", he defined the planning mission as "an organized effort to apply common sense to ensure that a community will enjoy all the modern amenities at the lowest possible economic cost". Far from being locked away and drawing "pretty pictures", the planners' task was to explain proposals to the public and in that way they "will accept all that is involved in town planning."<sup>32</sup> The MMBW's promotional activity is taken up as a third strand of the Melbourne story below.

## ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

The alignment and depiction of planning as a pragmatic exercise was further projected through a range of promotional activities to sell the new plan including public lectures, radio talks, print publicity, coverage in the popular media and a major public exhibition. The organisation and staging of the exhibition brought together several years' work "by the town planning staff of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works"<sup>33</sup> during a week-long "premiere" in which town planners, economists, architects, engineers and sociologists showed the public what they will gain from the plan. This was a calculated effort to bring the public on board as Borrie described in arguing for a more aggressive press approach. "What some of these good folk have perhaps overlooked is the importance of timing. The policy we have been following is a calculated policy and will, I believe, bring the most effective results."<sup>34</sup>

The exhibition was opened by the Minister of Public Works, the Hon. S. Merrifield, MLA in the Palmer Hall of the Melbourne Public Library on Monday 16 November 1953.<sup>35</sup> A second showing was arranged at the National Gallery in February 1954 and another at Myers in April of the same year. On the first weekend, the MMBW officers expected 10,000 visitors to pass through the exhibition, along with showing of the colour film 'Planning

Melbourne's Future'.<sup>36</sup> By Saturday 28 November, the day before the end of the exhibition, more than 25,000 visitors had seen the exhibition.<sup>37</sup> When the exhibition closed on the Sunday, more than 30,000 had visited. A guestbook at the exhibition reflected a positive impression overall: "It seems to be entirely practical, and my only criticism is that I should like to see it brought into force much sooner." (Mrs G. Coalstad, Heidelberg) Mr Borrie said the "there was a much greater understanding and appreciation of town planning today than in 1929, when Melbourne last had a plan, which was pigeon holed. The reason was that city problems today were more acute and more obvious, and much nearer to the people".

## CONCLUSION

Australian governments followed a global trend of entrenching planning using legislation during the early post-War period<sup>38</sup>. On the surface, governments in the UK and Australia enthusiastically endorsed planning as a means of "winning the peace". Yet, governments were aware that legislation was not enough to ensure a well-planned future. Instead, the focus turned to knowledge exchange through international means, tempering the visionary nature of planning to avoid it being seen as utopian, and rolling out a concerted public relations campaign<sup>39</sup>.

Melbourne illustrates this trend well with the additional complexity of being a site of waxing and waning influence from both US and UK styles of planning. Melbourne is also unique in Australia for the government's commitment to allow planning responsibility to rest with an extant metropolitan utility, the Board of Works. While this ensured that planning sat within the heart of expert-driven organization dedicated to urban management it also meant that planning had to carve an intellectual and professional space in an organisation dominated by engineering concerns. The 1954 metropolitan plan itself, while a cautious trend-tidying template, represented a landmark in Melbourne's planning history and secured a permanent state-endorsed metropolitan planning apparatus.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributor(s)

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## Endnotes

- 1 Argus, 12 November 1954 p.5.
- 2 See for example Dingle and Rasmussen, *Vital Connections*; Logan, *Urban and Regional Planning in Victoria*; McLoughlin, *Planning Melbourne's Future*.
- 3 MMBW, Introduction, p. 2.
- 4 MMBW, Summary, p. 3
- 5 Grubb, "The 1954 Melbourne and Metropolitan Planning Scheme."
- 6 Argus, 23 August 1951 p.2.
- 7 N. Abercrombie, "The Plan for Melbourne, *The RVIA Bulletin*, October-November 1953, p.9.
- 8 VPRS 8609, Consignment P11, Unit 1, Minute Book No.1 Town Planning Committee Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Meeting 15 December 1949, p.1.
- 9 VPRS 8609, Consignment P11, Unit 1, Minute Book No.1 Town Planning Committee Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Meeting 24 February 1950, p.11.
- 10 VPRS 8609, Consignment P11, Unit 1, Minute Book No.1 Town Planning Committee Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Meeting 21 April 1950, p.14.
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- 16 Argus, 1 August 1953 p.2.
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- 24 'Melbourne Plan Sensible, Practical Says Charles Bennett', *Australian Municipal Journal*, 20 September 1953, Vol.33 No.619, p.58.
- 25 Mills, "Refabricating the Towers," pp.45-46.
- 26 'This Housing Problem Part II: How shall we tackle it?', Australian Army Education Service, c1945, Chapter IV How the rest of the world tackles it. What We've Done so far. p.13.
- 27 Borrie, "Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme Administrative and Planning Problems." p.13.
- 28 Dixon, "Town Planning in America".
- 29 Frazer, "Town Planning Notions of the Western World," p.521.
- 30 Archbishop of York, "Town Planning in England," p.344.
- 31 *Australian Municipal Journal*. (1952). Book review: *Town and Country Planning* - Brown and Sherrard. *Australian Municipal Journal*, 31(599), p.366.
- 32 Jessop, "Official Opening of the Congress."
- 33 Argus, 9 July 1952 p.2.
- 34 Dingle and Rasmussen, *Vital Connections*: p.236. Borrie, "Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme Administrative and Planning Problems," p.8.
- 35 'Now or Never', *Australian Municipal Journal*, 20 November 1953, Vo.33 No.621, p.153.
- 36 Argus, 21 November 1953 p.4.
- 37 Argus, 28 November 1953 p.6.
- 38 Lubbock, "1947 and all that."
- 39 Amati and Freestone, "All of London's a stage"; Amati and Freestone, "Trans-national promotion of British and American planning practice in the 1940s."