This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30050827

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 1998, University of New South Wales
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY URBAN PLANNING EXPERIENCE

Proceedings of the 8th International Planning Society Conference and
4th Australian Planning/Urban History Conference
University of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia
15-18 July 1998

Editor: Robert Freestone

JULY 1998

FACULTY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
© Contributors

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY URBAN PLANNING EXPERIENCE
Proceedings of the 8th International Planning History Society
Conference and 4th Australian Planning/Urban History
Conference, University of New South Wales,
Sydney, Australia, 15-18 July 1998

EDITED BY
Robert Freestone

PUBLISHED BY
Faculty of the Built Environment
University of New South Wales
Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia
http://wwwfbe.unsw.edu.au

PRINTED BY
Southwest Printing, Wetherill Park, NSW

JULY 1998

ISBN 0 7334 04553
Jeff Kennett's Melbourne: Postmodern city, planning and politics

Louise Johnson¹, William S. Logan¹ and Colin Long³
Deakin University, Burwood Campus, Melbourne (1)
Department of History, University of Melbourne (2)
Victoria

Jeff Kennett became the Premier of the State of Victoria in 1992 in an election that saw the Australian Labor Party opposition reduced to a powerless rump. Since then the Kennett Liberal (read 'conservative') Government claims to have led to economic recovery in Victoria and its capital, Melbourne. Many of Kennett's critics have argued that too much power is concentrated in hands of a ruthless premier; the situation is more complex and certainly paradoxical -- on many counts, he is an imaginative leader and certainly he has changed the face of Victoria, at least superficially. Kennett's policies are frequently praised as thoroughly modern -- indeed, perhaps even 'post-modern'.

This paper outlines a larger research project that sets out not only to track the shift of planning policy in Victoria under Kennett but also to canvass some of the theoretical issues that seem to flow from this. The paper's intention is to provoke; we hope to raise more questions than we answer. It commences by summarising the key characteristics of the so-called 'post-modern city', as it appears in the humanities and social science (including urban studies) literature. One of these is fragmentation -- the emergence of a loosely structured city of separate(d) communities. We argue that this fragmentation has been encouraged under Kennett by the planning process with its emphasis on 'big events' and 'major projects'. There is a political parallel in his cleaving of the usual vote patterns along 'postmodern' lines; that is, a pattern in which voters respond in much more narrowly ego-driven ways rather than along more traditional class divisions. The fragmentation of communities and the weakening of class-based electoral behaviour is effectively privatising concern for the environment. The paper concludes by highlighting another sinister parallel affecting the life of scholars and the university -- the postmodernist undermining of the development/progress meta-narrative as a fundamental construct in the social sciences and humanities and as the basis of planning and international aid interventions. We suggest that the rejection of this and other meta-narratives in favour of postmodern relativism leads to the neutering of critics. Further, without 'modernist' universal values to fall back on, such a postmodernist approach colludes with the less-than-democratic management of cities that we are seeing emerge in Jeff Kennett's Melbourne.

The postmodern city

The postmodern is a term that claims to signal a new way of organising economic activity, a new style and a crisis of representation. Each of these elements means different things for the conceptualisation and planning of cities. They will be discussed in turn.

Post-Fordism - New times for capitalism
For Frederic Jameson (1984), the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' involved the prodigious expansion of multinational finance capital into hitherto uncommodified areas of activity. This economy has also been variously described as post-industrial,
disorganised capitalism, post-Fordist. It provides the economic foundation for the postmodern city and era. Whether there is a sharp break and a substantial rejection of what went before, as the term ‘postmodern’ implies, is a subject of continuing debate – indeed the authors of this paper are divided on the point. In these various formulations, however, the focus is on the increased globalisation of corporate capital, on the way it is organised, what is produced and where. The contrast is between the mass production of standardised items by a masculine and unionised workforce and electronically mediated batch production for niche markets overseen by a flexible, multi-skilled, non-unionised and subcontracted workforce. The postmodern city is built on globalised service and finance capital and a highly differentiated workforce.

The electronics that make batch production and business services possible also allow the physical separation of production stages - so that management, design, component manufacture and assembly can be scattered across cities, regions and countries - while also supporting a whole new information technology industry and a media- and leisure-centred consumer. As a result, globally there has been a differentiation of cities into so-called ‘world cities’ and second order cities. The former (New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Singapore) house the international and regional headquarters of multinational manufacturing, trading and financial corporations as well as the many business and producer services needed by these firms - law, accountancy, advertising, freight, finance, research and development, real estate and insurance. The second order cities (Vancouver, Sydney, Osaka, Munich, Rome) compete to support the production, national marketing or co-ordination activities of international firms. Within the cities locked into this global economy there is also occurring greater social and spatial polarisation. Thus the burgeoning class of technologically literate, skilled and well-paid service workers occupy the desirable suburbs, inner city apartments and regenerated historical precincts. Their lifestyles generate demands for recreational, tourist and personal services. These symbolic analysts of the technological age are increasingly protected by elaborate security measures from the growing numbers of unemployed manufacturing workers and marginal or part time service workers - often racialised and feminised - who live in decaying inner city areas or suburbs. These dual elements of urban wealth and decay further typify the postmodern city. It is the products created by and for the new middle classes that generate the style of these cities.

Postmodern style
If the postmodern city is one of social polarisation, finance capital, manufacturing decline and service sector expansion, it is also one where spectacle and commodification are an increasingly important part of the urban economy. Thus Harvey (1989) notes how cities in the United States desperately compete against each other for new investment as well as for ways to generate and hold capital through such things as neighbourhood redevelopment, mass retailing, city festivals and spectacles. These events involve new definitions of and mobilisations of symbolic capital - around things like old houses, horse races, art shows and car races. The scale of such an exercise as well as the way in which it is done differs from the past. As cities and precincts within them compete for hypermobile capital and as the urban environment itself becomes commodified, distinctions between high art and popular culture, between shopping and recreation, tourism, residing and browsing are eroded.

The international hotel - a place which accommodates the fleeting visits of the multinational investor and manager as well as the tourist - is one site that typifies much
of the new economic and symbolic order. While the International School of modern architecture produced a global proliferation of remarkably similar steel and glass office towers, high rise housing blocks and hotels. In contrast, the Postmodern building is double coded, grounded in its locality and embellished with pastiche, metaphor, humour and whimsy (Jencks 1986). The Bonaventure Hotel has been taken as the defining architectural postmodern icon (Jameson 1984; Soja 1986, 1989; Davis 1990).

On a broader scale, the city of Los Angeles is often portrayed as the postmodern city par excellence - the model to which all other cities are aspiring and evolving. This arises primarily from the location within the city of an array of well published academics - such as Soja, Davis, Dear and Jameson - who have been critical to the creation of the postmodern urban discourse. It is ironical that within such a discourse - which has as one of its objectives the destabilising of theoretical verities - that such a place and its theorisation as postmodern has become so dominant within urban studies. Indeed the process by which the acceptance of Los Angeles as a role model is in itself worthy of study; it would tell us something about the wider process of cultural globalisation and the place in that of the public relations and media industries and of the academy. (Kennett’s link with the PR industry is noted and his attempts to ‘sell Melbourne’ are discussed below). More serious is the relatively uncritical acceptance of the Los Angeles model, such that the trends described for this city have been so readily applied to others with very different histories, demographics and political economies. There is an argument as to whether their analysis is in fact applicable to Los Angeles and, further, whether it is relevant to other cities of the world. There is no inevitable logic being marked out that means that Melbourne and Sydney are moving inexorably towards Los Angeles in form, layout, politics and economy. This is unlikely for a host of reasons. The loss of cultural identity resulting from globalisation may provoke a localist – or even ‘glocalist’ (Robertson 1995) – reaction. Moreover, not the least of reasons is the final aspect of the postmodern - the crisis of certainty in representation.

The crisis of representation
Associated with the changing economic foundations of Western societies and their cities there has also been fundamental alterations in the ways people live in and understand these places. For Wilson (1989, 1991), the contemporary city is a place of contradictions - between sameness and difference, excitement and fear, pleasure and danger - mediated and fragmented by media and computer technologies. In such a place, individuals become decentralised and disorientated yet potentially free to explore the many possibilities now open to them. For Wilson, the notion of a fixed, genderless person buffeted by structural forces is replaced by a gendered and sexualised woman who is constantly open to new identity formations and makeovers. This woman is also located in time and space such that any theorisation or representation of her has to acknowledge that fluidity and specificity. Such a view of women derives from feminism as much as from postmodernism.

Feminism was critical in exposing many of the dominant world views of the 1960s and before as partial and masculine. Subsequent work has further recognised that feminism itself was generated by particular groups - in general, white, middle class, heterosexual North American and European women - who tended to universalise their own experience while also marginalising that of others. Women of colour and from the Third World argued that not only were their voices ignored by mainstream feminism, but that in constituting the unified white Western woman as its subject and norm, their position
was rendered marginal and invisible. This deconstruction of a fixed identity - derived from an emancipatory politics - was part of the postmodern move to refigure the individual as a fragmented, discursively constituted subject.

Despite its origin in liberatory politics however, such a view of the subject has raised serious dilemmas for those long committed to a politics grounded in collective identities and agreed ethical stances. While there is ongoing debate whether a conservative politics inevitably flows from postmodern analysis, there is an argument to be made that the turn towards fractured identities and relativism has made a collective politics of resistance grounded on a unified ‘public interest’ all but impossible – both theoretically and politically. Again this does not flow inevitably from analysis of the postmodern city. On the contrary, the conceptualisation of the contemporary city in postmodern terms offers real insights.

To summarise, this paper argues that Melbourne is enmeshed within such a new globalised finance system and is restructuring away from manufacturing activity towards a service economy in which there are new classes of symbolic analysts and lower level service workers. This produces a newly polarised and increasingly fragmented city of high consuming middle class inner city dwellers and suburban regions awash with low paid, part time service workers and redundant manufacturing workers, all of whom avidly consume the recreational and commodified cultural resources of the city of spectacle. However, whether all of these economic, social and spatial changes are also predicated upon an array of new and fluid identities that deny - or render unlikely and unjustifiable - a collective sense of responsibility and action is debatable. The answer to such a question will ultimately determine the fate of the postmodern city as a civic space - one either devoted to the logic of postmodern capital or one serving all of its residents.

The circus comes to town: Special Events Melbourne

The Kennett Government’s years have been marked by enormous investment in civic building projects and a concerted effort to establish Melbourne as the ‘events’ capital of the nation. Under the grand but misleading rubric of ‘Agenda 21’, major projects like the Casino, Museum redevelopment, Federation Square and Docklands serve not only (supposedly) to boost economic activity, but also as physical manifestations of the entrepreneurial ‘can do’ state - symbols of a new dawn and a new ideology aimed at ‘cultivating an image of a certain sort of place with certain sorts of attributes’ (Kearns and Philo 1993:20-1). Complementing these physical expressions of the new Melbourne is an extensive program of major events. From fashion shows to the Grand Prix, from international rugby matches to blockbuster art exhibitions, the aim is to host at least one significant event every month of the year, thus, so the argument goes, opening opportunities for long-term business, employment and repeat visits.

These strategies are not, of course, unique to the present Victorian Government. The idea that a ‘successful, spruce downtown is a sine qua non for economic’ has become a virtual orthodoxy amongst planners, city marketers and politicians. International examples include Glasgow’s transformative efforts as the 1990 Cultural Capital of Europe, the reconstruction of Les Halles in Paris or Covent Garden in Paris, and the numerous ‘Festival Market’ or waterfront developments in US cities, such as Boston, Baltimore and New York. Other Australian cities have been busy, too, Brisbane using
its hosting of Expo in 1988 to refurbish parts of its riverfront and Sydney revamping Darling Harbour as a leisure-shopping and tourism precinct. Moreover, previous Victorian governments have also demonstrated their commitment to this orthodoxy.

But rather than seeing this merely as sibling rivalry between Australian state capitals, the underlying intention seems to be to win for Melbourne a place in the second city order of the newly-emerging global hierarchy. What may also be qualitatively different in the current Victorian case is the way in which the Kennett Government has sought to transform a whole city – or at least its central area – rather than just certain precincts, to fashion Melbourne after its own image, and to imprint its slogan – ‘on the move’ – onto the city’s physical fabric. The slogan is strangely apt for the Kennett Government, suggesting as it does a certain restless energy and action for action’s sake; it conjures up images of a kind of frontier free-market capitalism reminiscent of the city’s glorious days in the 1880s, a time also subject to sloganeering chiefly in the form of the popular descriptor ‘Marvellous Melbourne’. But portraying the city as ‘on the move’ invites the inevitable question, ‘movement to where?’. One could sometimes be forgiven for thinking that the destination is no further than the doors of Moody’s or Standard and Poors. But there are more serious and important aims, even if they are, in many ways, problematic and the strategies adopted to reach them questionable. Chiefly, the reimagining of Melbourne as a city of spectacle – in terms of its built form and its events – is designed not only to stimulate economic activity but to position it in the global competition between cities for investment and tourism. Major events and major projects are meant to be marketable symbols of a vital and wealth-creating economy.

**Fragmentation of Melbourne Politics**

Inevitably, however, such large scale restructuring of the urban fabric must excite disquiet amongst those who do not share the Government’s vision, or who have grown attached to that which already exists. Among other things, considerable disquiet exists about its relationship with the Casino’s operators and about the State’s growing reliance on revenue from gambling. Potentially more politically damaging is the burgeoning revolt in the leafier suburbs of the inner and middle rings over multi-unit development and the perceived loss of urban amenity and heritage. The Government has counter-attacked critics as being disloyal to their State and it has sought to stifle opposition to its vision and policies. This has involved attempting to close down the independent office of the Auditor-General and put pressure on the courts and legal profession. Municipal government has been totally restructured and its functions and overall character redefined, making it more like business corporations and much more clearly subservient to the wishes of the State Government. In the urban planning sphere, the Government has sought, especially through the Victoria Planning Provisions – part of the new planning framework – to shift decision-making power away from elected representatives of the community towards Council officers. Some cases are ‘called in’ by the Minister for Planning and Local Government, these often being controversial cases where developer interests have been favoured over and above those of local residents or the general public.

There are dangers for democracy and urban management in this reshaping of the decision-making scene. Ironically, the attempt to impose a unified image on the city has contributed to the fragmentation of politics and the fracturing of allegiances. Emblematic of this remarkable new trend was the conflict over the Government’s
decision to hold the Australian Formula One Grand Prix in inner suburban Albert Park. Although resistance was strong and extremely well organised, the Government pushed ahead, ignoring civil liberties and normal accountability mechanisms, and transgressing traditional class and political boundaries to mobilise considerable working class and young male support. Thus the fragmentation of Melbourne into a collection of increasingly self-absorbed communities (not necessarily geographically based) has enabled Kennett to play off one against another over issues touching on their personal interests and local amenities. Environmental politics has been effectively privatised and voting patterns appear to have shown a distinct move away from the traditional class-based division between blue collar/Labor and wealthy/conservative/Liberal.

Reclaiming the City: Dilemmas of Resistance

The neutering of critics has been noted. This includes academics in Melbourne’s seven universities, who, in previous decades, frequently took the lead in public campaigns on planning issues. Part of the neutering results from the rapid transformation of universities throughout Australia from places where public comment was encouraged and protected to businesses with efficiency performance standards, no effective tenure and subservience to government for funding. But, we argue, it also represents one impact of the postmodern questioning meta-narratives – here the undermining of the development-progress meta-narrative employed in the social sciences, including urban studies, and accepted previously as the basis of planning and international aid interventions. The appeal to universal values has now been cut away. Thus the current postmodern intellectual dominance in the universities fits in with and indeed, by weakening if not demolishing the foundation for dispassionate criticism, effectively supports the less than democratic management of cities typified Jeff Kennett’s Melbourne. This has forced some social scientists to fall back on to a ‘critical postmodernism’, which only raises more conceptual difficulties. The paper suggests that there is a need for a critical engagement with ‘postmodernism’. We conclude that there is a need to restore faith in notions such as the ‘public good’ or ‘public interest’ which, however much we recognise their frailty in conceptual terms and their exploitation in practice, remain the essential universal basis for the public allocation of resources through the planning process.

References

Robertson, Roland (1995) ‘Glocalisation: time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity’. In M.

441