

**EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE URBAN FORM
THROUGH “RADICAL” DEVELOPMENT:
case studies and issues from South East Queensland**

John Byrne
Consultant Adviser in Urban Design, Planning and Housing
Byrne Urban Design
and
Adjunct Professor in Urban Design
Queensland University of Technology

By world terms, the major cities of the Australian state of Queensland are not large. In the Australian context, Queensland’s urban centres are more regionally spread and the South East Queensland region fast growing. That region contains the third largest state capital city, Brisbane, and the governance of the regional population includes five of the seven largest civic administrations in the nation.

The paper explores a number of recent planning, governance and development issues, with some emphasis upon the urban planning and design of centres, that might be of interest to the making of small cities elsewhere.

It does so principally through reference to case studies:

- a radical mixed-use inner-urban renewal project by the public housing agency and an urban university,
- the contrasts in approach of two new major teaching hospitals, each with transport-rich locations, and
- a social sustainability tool dealing with crime prevention through design.

It assumes the importance for sustainability of public institutions in major centres and, in exploring the “radical” qualities within the case studies, suggests:

- the importance of organisational structure and culture,
- the critical role of individuals and especially champions,
- the impact of risk averse practice and content-free managerialism,
- the importance and cross-field usefulness of exemplars,
- the importance of a willingness to define best practice sustainable outcomes as much as ways of achieving them, and therefore
- the need for governance structures and professional skills to permit and implement best practice.

In a world context, the major cities and towns of the Australian state of Queensland are not large. In the Australian context, Queensland has a greater range of “small centres”, its urban centres are more regionally spread and the South East Queensland region fast growing. That “SEQ Region” contains the third largest state capital city, Brisbane, and the governance of the regional population includes five of the seven largest civic administrations in the nation, ranging from populations of some 300,00 to over a million.

In this setting, the sustainable management of urban growth has assumed political importance. The paper explores therefore some of the significant planning, governance and development issues that have arisen in the last decade, with some emphasis upon the urban planning and design of centres.

The regional planning process has seen what seems to be a growing understanding of the global importance of sustainable urban development and there have been continuing attempts to frame regional and city planning systems to facilitate best practice outcomes. Much has been achieved but city-making and management involves people and people structures and so we have seen

- changing attitudes as to what constitutes best practice urban design and planning,
- evolving bureaucratic structures and agencies,
- differences of bureaucratic opinion as to the importance and role of major public institutions in urban centres, and
- the seeming challenge to the exploration of radical innovative responses from a preoccupation with risk management and perhaps the traditional structure of government.

There is a need to continue to look to do things better... but is better only to be achieved by the new? Everything that is new is not necessarily radical and vice versa. “Radical” is a comparative term and implies perhaps difference: difference just from current practice or from acceptable mainstream values or difference that is more than just marginal, that is significant in its degree of difference? In some arenas it seems to imply a worrying level of risk. Since city-making is inherently political in that it allocates resources, costs and benefits, it’s not necessarily a good strategy to go around proposing “radical” ideas.

But “innovative”? That’s apparently different. The notion of “innovation” in development is much promoted, conferences are held and professional planning bodies often have it as a criterion for awards. It underpins the development and marketing of so many products in a consumer society. Yet, while it is assumed in many, perhaps most, circles to be a good thing

in principle, it is resisted by others. In city development, those distrusting or opposing include not only communities resisting immediate change from outside that is seen as threatening but also groups or interests comfortable with or grounded in conventional practice or the established order of things. Since city-making affects powerful vested interests, from major entities to the micro living patterns of communities, this is understandable, particularly in a world so rapidly changing,

At the same time, not all innovation is an improvement and not all conventional practice unhelpful or unsustainable. Urban planning and design in Australia has seen in recent decades the realisation that the traditional grid-like neighbourhood structures created in the car-free colonial world of the 19th century actually work better in dealing with contemporary issues than the “tree-like” neighbourhoods created in the 1960s to 1980s to manage, it was thought, the impacts of massive increases in private car ownership. That realisation is reflected in substantial ongoing gentrification of the inner areas of all the major colonial-era capital cities.

Equally, there are drives “back” towards traditional mainstreets and challenges to the post-war suburban retail mega-boxes. There are strong explorations of denser urban housing forms by the more affluent in spite of the pervasive and perhaps prevailing media-driven community view that Australia has a limitless supply of land for the low-density suburban growth of its cities. There is a widespread exploration of mixed-use precincts. Some have characterised these shifts in approach as almost a move back towards Australia’s European heritage from its post-war flirtation with the North American. But, in the context of this post-war pre-occupation with cars and space, and the high levels of affluence and ownership that were possible, these moves are characterised by some as “radical”.

There are indeed differences of opinion, or slower rates of recognition of changing strategies, and they exist within government and powerful institutions, as the first case study suggests.

THE KELVIN GROVE URBAN VILLAGE

This is a 17 hectare brownfield renewal project 2 kilometres from the heart of the Brisbane City Centre. Partly on former Army land and partly on sites assembled by the adjacent university (plus a few by the public housing agency), it is by Australian standards a radical urban venture.



Figure 1: Kelvin Grove Urban Village, 2kms from city centre

Why radical? Well....

- its urban form is mainstreet-based (at its conception in the late 1990s, this still made it surprisingly different from the approach of other post-war Queensland projects);
- it is delivering a mixture of urban uses that is quite unusual:
- it is a unique development partnership of a public housing agency and an urban public university;
- it seeks to use the marketplace to deliver on strong public / community policy agenda, especially urban housing, and
- it explores the concept of “university as the heart of a neighbourhood”.

The most obvious difference to the casual visitor is the mix:

- roughly half is public university, in a series of buildings scattered along the mainstreet or defining new public parks, and
- the other half is a mixture of retail, residential, commercial, recreational, start-up creative industry and high school facilities developed on different sites by a range of private developers, a not-for-profit housing company and the state education authority.

Conceived in the late 1990s, in broad terms the university is frequently mixed with the other uses and is an expression of the educational and global view of the Queensland University of Technology. Staff, students and researchers use the public realm of the public streets and parks as the “smart community territory” of the place. Indeed along the mainstreet are major scientific research centres and the QUT Creative Industries precinct. And they use the retail and community facilities offered by others.

Central to the public housing agency’s agenda, the housing ranges from large to small, owned to rented, aimed at rich to subsidised poor, at young to old. It is scattered among other uses

and in low/medium to higher rise forms. The subsidised components (four different and scattered rental projects by the award-winning Brisbane Housing Company) represent no more than a quarter of the ultimate neighbourhood. The remaining majority are by private developers in a competitive marketplace.



Figure 2. Kelvin Grove Urban Village: a mix of uses

This overt and confident exploration, arguably demonstration, of social mix in inner urban housing was in response to continuing NIMBY mind-sets among the private development sector, in spite of the housing agency’s successful widespread experience since the early 1990s. Unlike perhaps some cities in other places, the major Australian cities have not seen the post-war brownfield poverty donut left by the middle classes fleeing to the suburbs. Instead, some of the middle classes and the outright wealthy have, from at least the 1960s, begun more and more to take over the inner urban areas of these colonial cities. The issue of gentrification and its impact upon social sustainability is significant. Seeking to persuade others in state and local government to introduce social and affordable mix policies, the housing agency sought to demonstrate yet again the acceptability of including lower-income housing within market-oriented projects. Forming a partnership with a university was its radical strategy.

In the context of many “university cities and towns” overseas, a collection of tertiary educational facilities in the midst of an urban neighbourhood is hardly radical and their major contribution to vital places has been commented upon by many. That contribution is usually

social, cultural, economic and environmental. To the casual European visitor, the KGVU might not seem radical unless they knew that post-war university development in Australia has been characterised mainly by:

- an array of new stand alone suburban campuses, seemingly located and designed to be almost as isolated from neighbours as possible,
- some existing inner urban (usually colonial era) institutions “muscling” their way into adjoining neighbourhoods seemingly without any mandate to respect them or contribute to their amenity and well-being, and
- some established city or city-edge campuses, constrained from growing outwards by other institutions or formal public realm, choosing to go upwards or starting to establish small “off-campus” outposts.

In the first of these, it is as if a simplistic facilities management mind-set dominated. What was “important” presumably was having enough land to cater for any possible expansion need and to locate campus built form as far from possible external demands or influences so expansion in any direction was possible. Control was everything.

In the evolving thinking of the late 20th century about the creative global economy, processes of innovation, allocation of resources and sustainable development, this has been turning out to be a poor strategy. It is much easier to argue for the public investments in universities (arguably competing for funding with other community responsibilities) to be located and designed where they can

- be well served by and in turn enhance public transport systems connecting their clientele;
- be served by support facilities that also draw upon the trade of other groupings;
- be close to other public and private institutions with which they might develop functional relationships;
- be normal enough to attract private investment (with safer exit strategies);
- allow easy part-time student and staff involvement; and
- be close to supportive affordable housing.

The same strategic arguments could be made for privately-funded universities.



Figure 3: Kelvin Grove Urban Village circa 2009

In this context, the Kelvin Grove Urban Village was a radical demonstration in the last decade of this evolving thinking. Convincing all in government of the concept was not as immediately easy as one might have thought, perhaps because there were no obvious local exemplars. There was at times a surprising concern by some that “we don’t have the skills to do these things or it’s not our business”. The prevailing tertiary sector mind-set was that universities were on large separate campuses. Quietly criticised by other “university players”, and the cause for the shaking of heads by some in industry, here was an established city university using a new master-planned neighbourhood to reach out to the real community and in a way that gave it far less control than the risk-averse management of the suburban campus. And it was invited to do this in partnership by a housing agency wanting to use the university’s presence in the new neighbourhood to promote social sustainability through attracting housing mix. It was a radical initiative in the Australian university sector and a concept that broke through the silo walls, integrating housing equity, creative economy, urban design and environmental agenda, with different champions for different parts. It was also a radical strategy within the state government sector in Queensland, raising for some the proper role of public sector agencies. In real ways, that it was conceived and happened reflected the particular leaderships of state agency and public university.

We can debate its first decade and identify opportunities taken or missed .. but so well has it been developing in the main that the “KGVU”...”the Urban Village” ... is now part of the language of city development in government and industry in Queensland (and, to the extent it is known elsewhere, in other parts of Australia). Its philosophy and the support it has given locally to the implementation of evolving global thinking especially the integration of major educational institutions within mixed-use urban precincts can be seen, for example, a decade later in

- urban design studies seeking to enhance the “smart community precinct” qualities of areas around the three largest university-linked hospitals,

- proposals to develop a new university / town centre linkage in the growth corridor of a regional city,
- planning to develop new residential neighbourhoods around an existing regional city campus and link residents and university through a mixed-use mainstreet-based interface, and
- contemplation of how to implement equivalent strategic thinking at a more local level in master-planned community development.

Again, “radical” is a relative term and so the Urban Village has helped “de-radicalise” its successors. It has won many awards from industry and the professions. Yet by no means are all convinced and some universities continue to pursue or maintain a more isolated campus model, perhaps believing that the costs of this disadvantage will be carried by other parts of the community.

And some public agencies seem still committed to a rather isolationist approach ...which brings us to the second case study.

TWO NEW URBAN HOSPITALS

Major hospitals are clearly important places of intense human activity in our urban structure. They are concentrations of economic, social and environmental impact and output that are arguably far more important than many retail-focussed centres that have for too long been seen as the determining nodal points of our metropolitan areas. Seeing them for what they are is helping to re-frame centres thinking and arguably move it from a preoccupation with retail hierarchy towards a place-specific network of different concentrations: places of intensity delivering mixtures or intensities of shopping, employment, educational, health, recreation, culture ... judged by their scale, nature, intensity and relationship to others and not jemmied into a theoretical single-use hierarchical framework.

Just as universities might be seen as urban centres or as major components in higher-order mixed-use precincts, so also should major hospitals, for all the same sorts of reasons.

The history of Queensland (perhaps Australian) public hospital development might be seen as similar to the universities. In the post-war era, major new hospitals were located on available large suburban sites as isolated entities probably without much regard for any relationship to public transport or other other institutions. Carparking for private cars was probably paramount. Other institutions were probably irrelevant. The strategy for locating and

designing hospitals placed little or no emphasis upon a “town centre” concept and the planning system colluded in this.

There are a number of private hospitals of considerable size located historically in inner urban areas and they too look as if they have behaved like the inner urban universities: looking for incremental creep into adjacent residential areas.

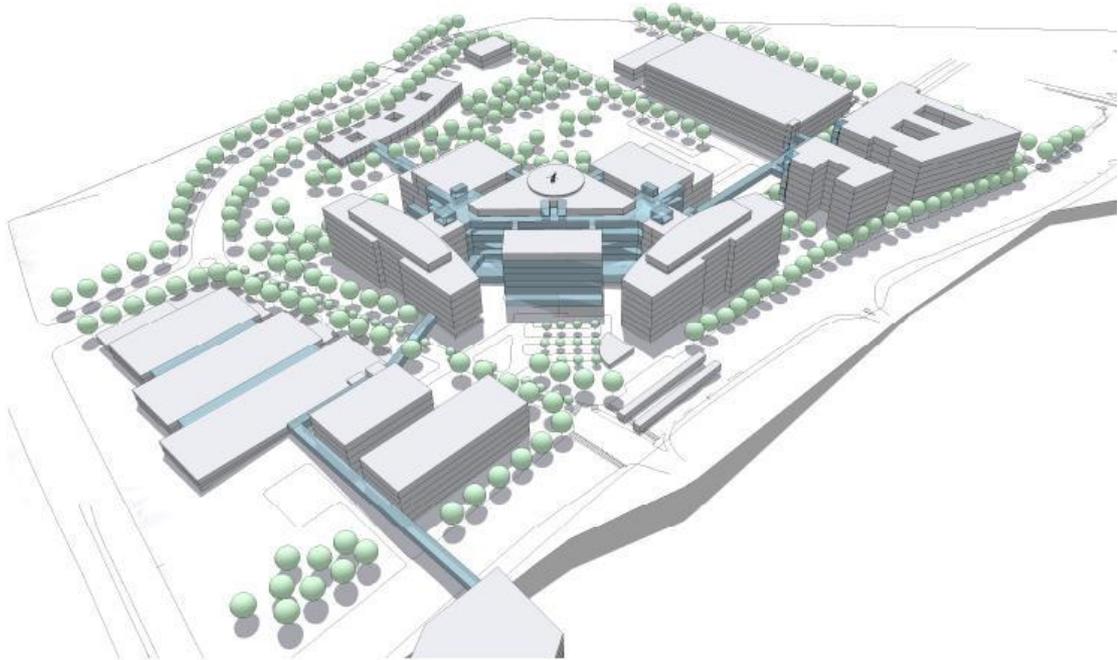


Figure 4. Gold Coast University Hospital: early concepts

So two current substantial public hospital initiatives in South East Queensland provide insights:

- one is a very large new general hospital on a large greenfield site, directly opposite an existing suburban Gold Coast university campus while
- the second is a large new children’s hospital immediately abutting a large existing private (children’s and general) hospital on a highly constrained site in an inner urban area of Brisbane.

Both are publicly funded projects by and for the state government. Each will doubtless be technically sophisticated deliverers of health care. Each will doubtless be fine examples of strong hospital architecture.

In their relationship to the larger world, each will have access to strong public transport. An exciting project is moving to deliver a major light rail rapid transit corridor along the Gold Coast and its initial northern end will stop in the boulevard immediately between hospital and university. The inner Brisbane project is adjacent to a busy station as part of a successful urban busway system (already strongly serving the precinct of and around the private hospital, with the station embedded in the built form) and a short walk to an existing (soon to be enhanced) railway station.

Yet, although each is the product of the same public agency and at the same time, there are seemingly significant differences. The Gold Coast hospital, with arguably substantial flexibility of siting and design, nevertheless in its early conceptual planning seemed:

- to distance itself from the proposed LRT,
- to get closer instead to proposed multi-storey carparking,
- to fail energetically to activate the public realm between tram stop and hospital,
- to fail to make possible other supportive developments which might have given activity and substance to the area around the tram station, in a TOD mind-set, and
- to fail to be able to reach out to a suggested “smart precinct” nearby.



Figure 5. Gold Coast University Hospital recent imagery

There may have been practical reasons ... and it may all have changed ... but the early symbolisms were powerful and the “non town centre” mind-set seemingly clear. It was also not the case that the adjacent university was urging the hospital to engage in town-centre-making through detailed urban design for it too seemed committed to maintaining its existing introverted campus approach.

On the other hand, the Inner Brisbane project, evolving in parallel, with “every metre precious” on its highly restricted infill site, reached out as much as possible in its early planning and design to the transport stops and the pedestrian public realm between and in

the process to the other “innovation precinct” institutions in the larger neighbourhood. The new hospital seems set to significantly knit together and enhance the functioning and amenity of the whole transport-oriented urban precinct.



Figure 6. Queensland Children's Hospital – the civic edge

The contrasts were strong. Maybe the “generous greenfield versus tight infill” difference changed client mind-sets dramatically. Maybe there wasn't a singular policy position in the health agency to direct on such matters. Maybe the different individual bureaucrats had strong powers of decision-making that could resist or embrace the seemingly consistent advice or urging of transport and planning agencies. Maybe the structure of Westminster-style government was unhelpful in achieving integrated decision-making.

Maybe the language is at fault. For urban planners and designers, “strategic master planning” probably involves the structure of cities and how major bits, like hospitals, fit within them and contribute to sustainable outcomes across the board. For hospital planners and executives, the same term might mean the relative allocation of beds to different specialist areas. Perhaps the “smart precinct” urban design analyses going on elsewhere

around the state's two biggest public hospitals (each in a dense inner urban context) will have knowledge or cultural change benefits for the health system beyond the immediate?

How indeed do the hospital executives get to understand the complex messages about city-making that, whether they realise or not, they are involved in? How are they to be persuaded to maximise the contribution their place will make to the greater good, beyond pure healthcare? For them, designing the new hospital deliberately to engage with (maybe rely upon?) a range of other public and private activities through "soft edges" must seem risky, complicated, limiting on future options and more ... unless the hospital function is understood in its integrating urban role. For those overwhelmingly guided by a risk management mind-set, the soft edge objective might seem unacceptable. Yet, in the changing global economy, fiercer competition for funding, galloping healthcare costs, not to mention changing healthcare paradigms, the greater risks from not doing so are arguably increasingly obvious.

Maybe the benefits of content-free managerialism, especially if the bureaucratic silos are hard-edged, are sometimes outweighed by key decision-makers needing to know enough to know what to do, what advice to give the politicians. So, when "radical" new strategies are proposed, maybe it's not surprising that they conclude the safest thing is not to go with the new but stick to previous approaches.

Of course, like universities, there are seriously important examples around the world of major hospitals embedded tightly in mixed-use urban precincts. But do they invite envy for that embedding or pity? Is there not a common thread here for new university and hospital precincts to be either

- embedded into existing mixed-use urban precincts or
- required to create their own new mixed-use precincts?

There would seem to be many mutual advantages for hospitals and cities.

The intense tight fraught-with-design-challenges children's hospital initiative was doubtless "radical" in the prevailing context of the public health agency: why take on such a challenge? Yet it was certainly not radical for the urban design and transport planning agencies on the outside who looked on at their "failure" with the other parallel project with a shaking of the heads. This is not about architectural or landscape design ... I confidently expect both will win professional design awards but about urban design, city-making, sustainable urban form. It is about the essential goals of the brief. It is about organisational silos.

So in part the second case study is about the central role of prevailing cultures, acceptable practice, structures of decision-making and their response to “radical” steps towards more sustainable urban form.

In part the issue is being clear about what exactly is the sustainable outcome that is sought and not necessarily the detailed strategy as to how it must physically be achieved. Which leads to the final case study.

CRIME PREVENTION BY DESIGN GUIDELINES

The idea of CPTED is probably well known and it is increasingly a term found unchallenged in city planning documents in Queensland and elsewhere in Australia and New Zealand. Fortunately, so many of the practical strategies that are advanced for delivering safer crime-free environments through the thoughtful design and management of the urban realm are consistent with widely-held views as to what represents “best practice urban design” (perhaps not all that surprising given their common ancestry in Jane Jacobs).

As the author I am biased, but nevertheless suggest the recent publication *Crime Prevention through Environmental Design: Guidelines for Queensland: Part A: Essential features of safer places (2007)* makes a useful contribution (and arguably an important one in the Australian context).

In particular, it tries

- to reach out to the different parts of the city-making professions and industry by talking their talk about things they deal with and do routinely;
- to engage other groups like students by being accessible.....graphically, stylistically, structurally, humourously;
- to deal with things both practical and philosophical; and
- to introduce new material that locates the CPTED body of practice as part of a moving community context.

Yes, there are appropriate principles and performance criteria or strategies but it is fundamentally interested in what is being sought here ... safer environments ... rather than detailed hard-line technical design strategies. It tries to lead industry and others to challenge some conventional development and design practices without explicitly saying “they’re wrong and you should do this instead”. It is therefore much more performance-oriented than technically prescriptive.

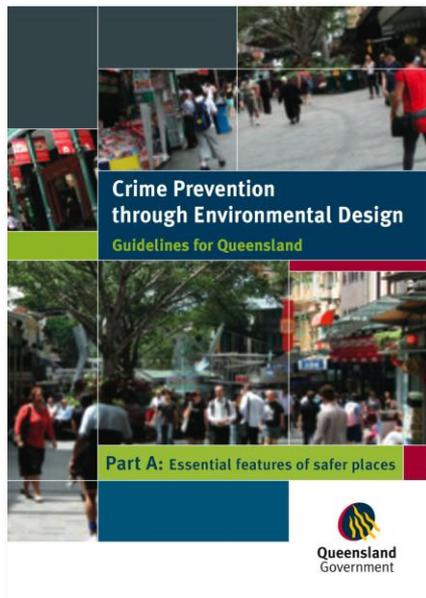


Figure 7. Queensland Government CPTED guidelines

In the context of planning systems in Australia, this tends again to the “radical” where a combination of resource limitations, allocation of skill sets and micro structures of decision-making in planning authorities, faced with articulate legal challenge and powerful interests and more, seem to have encouraged systems to be overly prescriptive. For many in a democratic community, appropriate certainty in some things is desirable. And CPTED is about personal (and property) safety or security. Surely both are important and beyond reproach.

But I suggest the widespread acceptance of CPTED in planning that has occurred here has two real benefits. Firstly it helps to advance what I think is better urban design practice for how can you call environments that don't deliver safety “well designed”? But, almost more importantly, it has the potential radically to undermine the technically prescriptive approach and generate a broader more sophisticated one.

We can, for example, debate whether attempts, like those of Abraham Maslow, both to describe and to give a sense of hierarchy to different fundamental human needs should or can be improved. I think such ventures are important for the development of built form strategies to support, let alone enhance, our pursuit of social sustainability through urban environments that support human well-being and growth. This must be about open-mindedness, acute observation, the sharing of experience as to practice, the development of appropriate questions or criteria and more. It must be about an open-ness to radical evaluation and challenge in the pursuit of radically holistic answers.

This is challenging but essential for I fear we have gone (in the planning and housing scene I inhabit) too little as yet along the path of understanding what is the nature of a truly supportive urban environment. Instead, the systems I know focus mainly on shopping lists of social infrastructure ... infrastructure that is of course important but by no means a sufficient, let alone the whole, answer.

It is challenging but not depressing for I am excited by what I understand (looking in from its edges) to be the evolving body of neuro-scientific knowledge about the evolutionary needs of people and the ways individuals and communities work. As I see it, for example, we may well be able to defend some urban relationships and outcomes that, in our intuition or “heart”, we think are important qualities against the legal critique of “mere opinion”. Just as “best practice urban design” is a meaningful and useable evaluation tool, so also might other allegedly “fuzzy” objectives become so.

And so the chink in the armour of technical prescription that I think CPTED radically represents is important.

IN CONCLUSION

This discussion has not been about defining in detail “Sustainable Urban Form” but instead about some issues raised by various Queensland initiatives that have been called “radical”.

Underpinning the comments have been assumptions about sustainable urban form such as

- major institutions like hospitals and universities should be significant parts of mixed-use centres, either existing or new, and
- there is, and must be, significant alignment of CPTED principles and best practice urban form.

But city-making is a process, involving government, the community, the professions, the development industry and others and so issues of decision-making, prevailing culture and organisational structures are fundamental to the pursuit of more sustainable urban form.

Among many that might have been considered, three Queensland case studies have been touched on:

- the Kelvin Grove Urban Village,
- two major public hospitals at the Gold Coast and in Inner Brisbane, and
- the government’s CPTED Guidelines.

Each in its own way was seen as radical or has the potential to be radical.

The issues that they raise are relevant to city-making at most scales for they are about attitude and process, especially relating to radical proposals.

During the discussion it has been suggested that:

- radical is a relative term;
- radical and innovative are not the same;
- radical might include going back to previous strategies;
- the culture and structure of agencies is critical;
- the structure of government may get in the way of better outcomes;
- minimising perceived risk is a major driver that can prevent better outcomes;
- individuals are important and champions very important;
- content-free managerialism might make decision-making efficient and defensible ... but wrong;
- precedents and exemplars are important, often critically so;
- exemplars in one field might unexpectedly allow challenge to practice in others;
- defining goals is often more important than defining solutions; and
- there is a long way to go in some areas.

I would also assert that the case studies demonstrate the responsibility and intellectual capital of public agencies to participate strongly and, if necessary, lead the pursuit of more sustainable cities.

Much good work has been achieved in Queensland in recent decades and some of that in our terms was radical. The thread of this paper is perhaps that even more might easily have been accomplished.

So, given these views, I believe it is even more important to understand the barriers to "radical" strategies, in government and outside, and to work with them, around or through them, as an important step towards pursuing more sustainable urban form. Only then can we hope successfully and practically to frame and implement the strategies we need with the urgency the challenges facing us deserve.

