

## **The wonderful possibilities of the future: Political and administrative influences on urban planning in Greater Brisbane**

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Greater Brisbane was formed from the amalgamation of several smaller local authorities and utilities trusts in 1925. The rationality of the models of the 'city functional' and 'city efficient' approaches to town planning was an influence in the amalgamation. However, unlike the planning commission approach common in the United States at the time (and experimented with in Australia), in Brisbane town planning models and administration were embedded within a new wider new 'greater city' administration. Despite several unsuccessful attempts at developing a city-wide town plan nothing was fully legislated until 1965. The forty-year hiatus illustrates the relationship between State and local government in Queensland, the impact of external influences such as a Great Depression, as well as the impact of changing models of town planning and cultural and political models of city administration. It also shows how pragmatic town planning ideas (such as the coordination of infrastructure and land use planning) can be implemented without their fitting within a grand master plan.

## **Background**

The thesis of this paper is that there are administrative and political cultures that shape both the creation and the implementation of planning models, especially planning models that are applied to existing cities. In this case the focus is the City of Brisbane, in Queensland, Australia.

The first few decades of the 20th century were a period of great administrative, political and social change in Australia, as they were in Europe and in other countries with colonial or historical ties to Europe. The emerging ideas of urban or town planning were caught up in these changes.

There was considerable discussion of coordinated metropolitan administration and planning at the time (Hamnett and Freestone 2000). Although administrative principles and land use planning were often considered together there were really two kinds of solution being expressed: one gave emphasis to statutory and land use planning and then sought an appropriate overarching administrative structure to implement this; the other sought an appropriate administrative structure for the complexities of the metropolitan area and incorporated town planning powers within the competence of this administration. One sought a comprehensive metropolitan plan as the principal instrument, with supporting legislation, administration and resources; the other pursued the amalgamation of fragmented (local government) administrations into a single larger, better resourced and better coordinated organisation, with land use and infrastructure planning as one of its primary roles.

Examples of first approach were the unsuccessful planning commissions set up in Sydney (1922), Melbourne (1923) and Perth (1928), based on the developing planning commission model then seen in the United States (Freestone 2000). Brisbane took the second path, one that led to an amalgamated 'greater' local authority for the metropolitan area. Was it also unsuccessful? This paper argues that although — in terms of traditional town planning — success eluded Brisbane for many years, in non-traditional and pragmatic ways the approach was successful.

Brisbane's approach was the implementation of a form of the 'greater city' approach seen in Birmingham (UK), New York and elsewhere. The continuing implementation and development of this structure, and particularly of the town planning approach contained within it, did not always go smoothly. There are lessons for both city governance and town planning in the story of Greater Brisbane.

## **Administrative Context**

Before 1901 Queensland was one of six British colonies making up Australia. Local governments were created and given their powers by the colonial administrations. Brisbane was originally chartered as a City in 1859, only months before the colony of Queensland separated from that of New South Wales (Greenwood & Laverty, 1959). When Australia became a single federated country in 1901 and the former colonies became States, the new national constitution defined the relationships between the 'Commonwealth' government and the State governments (including Queensland), giving some specific powers to the national level, with the 'residual' or unspecified powers remaining with the States. Control of local government remained such a residual power, as did town planning.

Thus Queensland, as a State government, had the power to create and dissolve local governments, to give them whatever powers it chose, and to set out whatever administrative, electoral or financial structures it saw fit for all or any one of the local governments it created.

This is within an overall context where the responsibilities of all local governments in Australia differ from those of their counterparts in, say, the United States or the United Kingdom. County-level governments have been rare in Australia's history; but in any case responsibility for social housing, major roads, hospitals, public education, railways, police and emergency services and the like rests with the State governments rather than with local government. This means that many critical aspects of metropolitan planning and coordination are subject only to the vicissitudes of State government inter-departmental relationships rather than the fragmentation of local government fiefdoms.

As is the case in the other States of Australia, some aspects of Queensland's town planning are devolved to local government but under State government legislation. Local government may be legally subservient to the State, but it has considerable political clout. Thus, the creation of Greater Brisbane occurred through State government action but with active local government support.

### **'Greater Cities' in Australia**

1925 was a pivotal year for Brisbane. The Queensland *City of Brisbane Act 1924* took effect in 1925, when a new expanded (Greater) Brisbane City Council took control of all or part of 20 former local authorities (including the original, far smaller, City of Brisbane) and several utilities trusts across an area stretching ten miles from the city centre (a total of 375 square miles or 971 square kilometres). This area included the all then urbanised suburbs and much of the undeveloped surrounding land.

The amalgamation bears only superficial similarities to the annexation of suburbs by central cities in the United States. A single new Council was created out of the several that previously existed. The new Council was given expanded powers and responsibilities by the State government. No other local authorities in Queensland were given control of utilities such as tramways and electricity generation. Elections were held for all new political positions — the new Lord Mayor was the Mayor of one of the former Town Councils, not that of the old Brisbane (Greenwood & Lavery, 1959; Cole, 1984).

The political and administrative culture of the time is critical in understanding the creation of Greater Brisbane. The 'greater city' movement of the early part of the 20th century identified the need to combine the many weak and poorly financed local authorities in metropolitan areas into single 'greater' and stronger councils. The contemporary weakness of both urban and non-urban local authorities was widely recognised. As early as 1896 a Royal Commission on Local Government in Queensland recommended amalgamating many of them, referring as a model to the establishment of the London County Council (Queensland Parliament, 1896; Lavery, 1978). Lavery (1978, p. 25) argues that

'The creation of Greater Brisbane in 1925 was both a response to weaknesses inherent in the system of metropolitan government which had developed in an *ad hoc* manner during the preceding seventy years and part of a world-wide trend towards larger, more comprehensive units of local government'.

'Greater' cities were seen as more efficient and economical, better coordinated, better resourced, better equipped to borrow money, better able to use expert advice, better able to deal with city-wide problems, and better able to attract more capable Aldermen. In the 1924 Parliamentary debate over the legislation the successful examples of Greater Glasgow, Greater Birmingham and Greater London were cited (although the Parliamentary Opposition referred to the unsuccessful Royal Commission for Melbourne and a 'Greater City' for inner Sydney)(Greenwood & Lavery, 1959).

There was a strong urban reform movement in Australia in the two decades before 1925. Its proponents, who were an 'eclectic cohort of politicians, professionals, private citizens, and state and local government officials' (Garnaut 2000, p. 46) had a large and varied agenda. The mix of this agenda is clearly set out in the objects of the new Town Planning Association of Australia, started in Sydney in 1913: 'To advocate proper planning of Australian cities and towns; modern building legislation; efficient municipal government; up-to-date water, sewerage and lighting services; to watch Federal City developments, and other matters...' (Taylor 1959, p. 11). The degree of success of this reform movement was, however, at best very mixed.

Proponents of 'greater cities' were mainly also proponents of garden city ideas, civic reform and so on. They included John D. Fitzgerald and John Sulman of Sydney, and William Bold of Perth. They consisted of professionals, politicians, public servants and civic leaders. So although the pressure for a Greater Brisbane was not unique in Australia the fact that the pressure was successful was unusual. In other States, except in Newcastle, NSW, in 1938 (Cushing, 2003) and to an extent in Perth, WA (Summers 2003, Melotte, 1998) contemporary 'greater city' movements were largely unsuccessful. Local vested interests dominated. There was also little interest by other State governments. An important possible reason for this, but one that is not well explored in the literature, is the way that Australian primate capital cities dominated the demographic and economic well-being of their States at the time. State governments are not enthusiastic about creating potential public policy competitors. Queensland had, in the 1920s as is still the case today, the lowest proportion of all the mainland Australian States of its population living in its capital city. Only 28 per cent of Queensland's population lived in Brisbane in 1921, compared with around 50 per cent in the other mainland States (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Proportion of state population in capital city, 1921**

| <b>Capital city/State</b> | <b>%</b> |
|---------------------------|----------|
| Sydney/New South Wales    | 49.0     |
| Melbourne/Victoria        | 51.1     |
| Brisbane/Queensland       | 28.2     |
| Adelaide/South Australia  | 50.4     |
| Perth/Western Australia   | 46.7     |
| Hobart/Tasmania           | 24.9     |

Source: Burnley (1980), Table 5.2, citing Bunker (1965)

Local interests almost prevailed in Brisbane. The Mayor of the earlier, smaller Brisbane convened a series of conferences in 1900 to explore the possibility of a Greater Brisbane but the interest of other local governments died rapidly (Laverty, 1978). Nothing happened until the State government later intervened.

The idea of a 'greater city' was not associated only with reforming town planning movements, however. The wider ideology behind what planners call the 'city functional' or 'city efficient' movement (Freestone, 2000) also came into play. Public administration of the time was, in general, obsessed with the ideas of coordination, integration and efficiency. This emphasis existed in Queensland as elsewhere. As elsewhere it continued on through the 1930s but it took on a particular meaning allied to the role of the Premier of the State, leading amongst other things to the creation of the unique office of the Queensland Co-ordinator General of Public Works in 1938 (Minnery, 1988, 2000). As Davis (1995, p.7) puts it:

'A 1939 watercolour by Noel Lambert [titled 'Symbolic Representation of Transport and Industries in Queensland'] captures the archetypal Queensland Premier. William Forgan Smith towers over a schematic Queensland landscape in a smart suit and tie, his face expressionless. In the Premier's hands are the threads of power, reaching down to a shearer, a sleek modern train, a horseback rider, an ocean liner, a factory, the Story Bridge, the implements of agriculture, the symbols of economic development... Coordination is a simple matter of control, with a single puppeteer moving the players.'

Town planning was seen – sometimes — as a component of public sector coordination. It was 'a neutral technical activity beyond the realm of party politics...' and with an emphasis on 'comprehensiveness, co-operation and the public interest' (Freestone, 2000, p. 316). So coordination was a central concept in town planning as the town planning movement grew (Sutcliffe, 1981); but it was also central to wider developing theories of public administration and organisational management (Fayol, 1949).

So although better town planning was amongst the reasons given for the creation of Greater Brisbane, town planning ideals were clearly embedded within wider ideals of better administration and better coordination of urban services. Town planners tend to see the two as so intimately connected that town planning is perhaps given greater weight than it deserves. Thus Fletcher (1977, p. 5) says that: 'The history of Greater Brisbane and that of town planning in this city are so intricately interwoven, both prior to and following the establishment of the City of Brisbane on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1925 'that it is virtually impossible to separate the threads of their development'. The new Council's power and duty to introduce ordinances for the 'planning development and embellishment of the City' were clearly established in the *City of Brisbane Act 1924* (Fletcher, 1977, p.6); but the larger city would also have all the non-planning advantages of a 'greater city', including attracting better quality Aldermen, greater capacity to borrow money, and so on (Thoms, n.d.; Tucker, 1973, 1984). In fact the *Queensland Local Authorities Amendments Act 1923* had already given the smaller Brisbane and other local authorities across the State some town planning powers (Cox, 1968).

The Greater Brisbane amalgamation itself was implemented by the reformist Labor State government of Premier T. Ryan, first elected in 1915, in an era which gave Queensland the adult (and non-property) franchise, compulsory voting and direct election of mayors. Ryan's 1915 election platform included a promise to enlarge local governments (Cox, 1968, p. 32). The universal franchise for both State and local government elections, and the city-wide election of Mayors, remained in place through the period of Labor party domination of the State government under Premiers Ryan (1915-1919), Theodore (1919-1925), Gillies (1925) and McCormack (1925-1929). The reform of the local government election franchise (from a pluralist and property-based one to a simple adult franchise) became linked to the 'greaterisation' of Brisbane. The changes to the franchise were implemented along with the amalgamation. When the conservative Country Party led by Moore regained power in 1929 Labor's changes were overturned; then with Labor back in power in 1932 under Forgan Smith, Moore's changes were swept away again (Greenwood & Laverty, 1959).

## **The Vicissitudes of 1925 to 1965**

So in October 1925, after elections in February, the new enlarged Brisbane City Council took office with clear support from the State government. The new metropolitan structure caught the imagination of the citizens. The *Brisbane Courier*, one of the local newspapers, was enthusiastic. The new Council had full power and discretion to create its own administrative

organisation (Lavery, 1978). The new Lord Mayor was elected on a platform that included a vision for the city's future: 'What is wanted from the outset is a vision broad enough to anticipate the wonderful possibilities of the future' (Jolly, 1925). The Council also had clear powers and duties to carry out integrative, positive, effective town planning. In fact, on 6th October 1925, only five days after the Council officially came into being, it appointed W. Earle as City Planner. In 1926 a City Planner's Department was set up, and preparation of a town plan started (Fletcher, 1977).

Yet even in these early days the dichotomy between pragmatic and visionary town planning models could be seen. One half of this dichotomy led to continuing successful implementation of pragmatic improvements in Brisbane, some of which — such as controls on inappropriate land uses and on land subdivisions — are a component of town planning. The other half — an overall plan for the city, expressed through a legislated overarching town planning scheme — did not reach fruition until 1965. Even Jolly's vision for the 'wonderful possibilities of the future' was in reality for a vision of orderly development, city embellishment, effective service provision and protection of recreation and green areas. It was not of a utopian city, or a city beautiful. The planning model for Brisbane was one of achieving coherent, coordinated development of land use and infrastructure, planning that would serve the needs of Brisbane's population. It was not a vision of a utopian new settlement. In 1925 town planning ideas were clearly integrated into ideas about coordinated, integrated governance and administration.

A comprehensive 'civic survey' was started as the basis for a future zoning scheme that would — along with civic improvement projects, improved traffic systems and local projects for embellishment and beautification of the public domain — provide the basis for a 'grand design' for the next fifty years (Fletcher, 1977). Whilst this overall planning got underway, in 1927 the Council developed a set of Ordinances that controlled non-residential land uses in residential areas. The Ordinances came into effect in 1928. These were seen as the basis for interim development control. They were to remain in force, however, until 1955.

By 1928 the shadow of the Great Depression fell over the city's progress (Lavery, 1978). Then in 1931 the council's financial problems were so severe that there were large scale retrenchments and restructuring (Greenwood & Lavery, 1959). The City Planner was dismissed; and the State government retrieved the authority for completing many major construction projects. In the 1930s a Town Planning Committee was appointed and work was started on zoning plans. But the control and regulation of land uses continued under the 1928 Ordinances (Greenwood & Lavery, 1959).

The path to a legislated city plan was blocked in 1934 when the State government passed the *City of Mackay and Other Town Planning Schemes Approval Act*. It applied to all local governments across the State and identified the mandatory steps required for creating a town planning scheme. These included the need for a complete initial civic survey. Brisbane's 1928 Ordinances had no such basis and so were legally suspect (Cole, 1984).

During World War II the council focused on supporting the immediate war effort, but by the early 1940s it began to think of preparations for the post-war city (Cole, 1984). These included the production, in 1944, of a draft metropolitan town planning scheme that included a proposal for 'green belt' surrounding the city (Greenwood & Lavery, 1959; Low Choy & Gleeson, 1998). The plan was approved by Council but was not forwarded to State government for final approval — thus it had no legal basis for implementation.

Review and modification of the plan continued. A plan was exhibited by the Council in 1952 but rejected by the State government. In 1958 a Greater Brisbane Town Planning Committee was set up by the State government. The scheme developed in their name was put on public exhibition in 1961 and officially approved by State government in 1965 after the



major road planning proposals contained in it were removed (Greenwood & Laverty, 1959). It contained no proposal for a green belt.

This was the first legalised town planning scheme for the greater City of Brisbane. It had taken forty years to achieve.

In the meantime the metropolitan population had continued to expand. In the population census of 2001 the City of Brisbane covered some 1,327 square kilometres, but it contained only 888,449 people of the 1,627,537 (or 55 per cent) in the metropolitan area (Brisbane Statistical Subdivision/Brisbane Statistical Division). Brisbane is now the largest, but still only one, of 17 local authorities in the wider South East Queensland region which housed some 2,532,677 people in 2001. The functional Greater Brisbane has far outgrown the administrative and legal greater Brisbane of 1925.

## **Conclusions**

Many administrative and political cultures influenced the planning models that grew, faltered and grew again during the forty years between 1925 and 1965, including models of rational, efficient coordination and orderly growth; of control and direction of metropolitan sprawl; and of city beautification and embellishment. The political and administrative influences underpinning these planning models included the impact of planning ideas from Europe and the United States; inter-governmental relationships; the lobbying of community groups; ideologies of the roles of local government; and the impacts of particular individuals. Town planning influenced the wider administrative culture, but administrative developments effectively had a life of their own.

The historical social heritage of a place, as exemplified by its political and administrative cultures, is a powerful influence on models of city planning. It influences both the development and shape, and the implementation, of these models. The 'greaterisation' of Brisbane was assisted by the pressures and purposes of the contemporary town planning movement, but it is probable the Greater Brisbane would have come into being even without the influence of town planners.

But as the case of Brisbane's town plan shows, the land use, building and subdivision controls that existed in Brisbane from 1926, although not captured within an overall legal town plan until 1965, can exercise some guidance for the development of the city. The various proposed town plans (exhibited in 1928, 1944, and 1952) provided some overall direction for Council decision-makers even though they did not have full legal backing. So, too, did pragmatic local controls based on building and sub-division Ordinances, even though these were not set within an agreed overall planning model for the city. At this local pragmatic level the town planning embedded in the Greater Brisbane model achieved some level of success.

The model of a metropolitan-wide local authority coordinating development, infrastructure, financing and so on has been overtaken by population growth. A single big change in 1925 (with minor additions after that) was not enough to ensure metropolitan coordination into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Greater Brisbane of 1925 is now but one player (albeit the largest) in current greater South East Queensland regional planning.

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Jolly, first Lord Mayor of Greater Brisbane, *Electoral Policy Statement*, 1925