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Big city solutions

There are lessons to be learnt in New York's transport infrastructure history, writes **Chris Hale**

AUSTRALIAN cities are attempting to deal with ongoing population growth, increasing demands for infrastructure and a need for improved planning.

Experts in urban planning often suggest we look around for "best practice" examples of enlightened urban development and design.

Cities in Europe feature prominently on the list of useful reference points — notable for their architectural quality and emphasis on human-oriented design approaches. Others point to US cities, with economic, demographic and planning profiles that resemble Australian cities at least superficially.

In Australia, we often reject mega-cities such as New York, London and Tokyo as useful points of comparison because they are considered to be a "different category". Perhaps we should reassess the validity of this dictum as we search for workable solutions to our infrastructure and development challenges.

New York provides an interesting case study. A review of the Big Apple's urban history provides some important lessons. The first significant and relevant period of development is the early 20th century.

From 1890 to 1920, New York's five boroughs

(Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island) grew from 2.5 million inhabitants to 5.6 million.

As the Jazz Age began, New York accommodated population and economic growth through construction of a well-designed commuter rail and subway system.

The subway program delivered on its aims of housing improvement through focused rail-oriented development. It allowed the creation of Harlem, West Brooklyn and other locations as viable dormitory suburbs of reasonable density — which provided a quantum leap in the standard of housing enjoyed by working and middle-class New Yorkers. It also underpinned the establishment of Midtown and Lower Manhattan as the world's central business district. The legacy of the subway expansion program continues today in the form of an extensive, efficient and popular, if slightly crusty, underground system. Its positive impact on New York's economy, urban fabric and environment is indisputable, while the practical support it has provided to society, arts and culture is beyond calculation.

During the middle 20th century, a different path was pursued — and this era is equally instructive as we develop and grow our own cities. City plan-

ners sought to modernise the metropolis through significant expansion of the road, bridge and freeway network.

Quality of life continues to be challenged to this day by the decisions of the mid-20th century — which led to traffic congestion, noise and air pollution problems. Despite mass-

ive spending on roads, and under-investment in public transport during the corresponding period, well over 80 per cent of commuters to Manhattan business districts continue to choose the subway or other public transport.

Australian cities, facing up to long term growth and development, would be well-served in observing and remembering the lessons of 20th century development in America's premier city. Current conditions also require that we observe the new and innovative steps being taken in New York towards building a better city for the 21st century.

Congestion pricing has emerged as the latest hot topic in the papers and among locals.

Mayor Bloomberg is searching for a planning, financial and environmental legacy on which to base a tilt at the presidency.

He launched a brazen attempt to ram through a congestion pricing policy. The proposal to apply for federal transport funding on the basis of a congestion-charging initiative, modelled on

London's successful approach, fell short of the deadline.

State legislators complained that he had failed to communicate and consult. And then — in

something of a miracle — an after-the-deadline deal emerged to pursue a detailed study of an approach that combines congestion charging and public transport funding as a viable future option. Presumably, state powerbrokers only had to look out the window into one of their car-choked East-West streets or North-South avenues to be reminded of the urgent need for change.

This looming third wave of transport reorganisation for New York City should also be keenly observed by planners, transport experts and state and local governments in Australia.

Manhattan and its surrounding boroughs represent urban laboratories in which many of the fundamental economic, environmental and social challenges of city life are concentrated and crystallised.

Heavy rail investment presents itself as a tested and proven approach that continues to find favour with commuters everywhere. Its positive legacy on urban form and property markets is clearly evident in Australia and elsewhere.

Congestion pricing now offers



itself as a workable economic mechanism for the funding and delivery of improved traffic conditions and public transport service.

A combination of congestion pricing policy and improved public transport is emerging as the key response available to Australian cities in their pursuit of better design outcomes and improved quality of life.

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