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2018

# Planning the post-political city: exploring public participation in the contemporary Australian city

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## Publication Details

Legacy, C., Cook, N., Rogers, D. & Ruming, K. (2018). Planning the post-political city: exploring public participation in the contemporary Australian city. *Geographical Research*, 56 (2), 176-180.

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# Planning the post-political city: exploring public participation in the contemporary Australian city

## **Abstract**

This special section examines the possibility of meaningful debate and contestation over urban decisions and futures in politically constrained contexts. In doing so, it moves with the post-political times: critically examining the proliferation of deliberative mechanisms; identifying the informal assemblages of diverse actors taking on new roles in urban socio-spatial justice; and illuminating the spaces where informal and formal planning processes meet. These questions are particularly pertinent for understanding the processes shaping Australian cities and public participation today.

## **Keywords**

planning, city, contemporary, participation, public, exploring, city;, post-political, australian

## **Disciplines**

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Publication Details**

Legacy, C., Cook, N., Rogers, D. & Ruming, K. (2018). Planning the post-political city: exploring public participation in the contemporary Australian city. *Geographical Research*, 56 (2), 176-180.

## **Planning the post-political city: exploring public participation in the contemporary Australian city**

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### **Cities and the public**

What scope is there for genuine debate over the future of Australian cities? A burgeoning body of research gathered under the rubric of the 'post-political city' is questioning whether and how meaningful debate about the future of cities can occur in liberal democracies like Australia. Situated within wider debates about the quality of politics in contemporary decision-making practices, post-political theorists caution that consensus-based planning in particular limits policy, action and debate around the social and environmental injustices taking shape in cities. The work of Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005), Jacques Rancière (1998) and Slavoj Žižek (1999) have set the tone for this late twentieth century post-foundationalist philosophy, highlighting the costs of consensus politics and suggesting that liberal democracies have entered a phase of post-democratization; the latter described by Swyngedouw (2011) as the disappearance of the political as a structuring agent in society. Some of the earliest urban scholars to engage with this post-foundationalist thinking align the post-political city with the influence of neoliberalism on public participation and urban governance, and thereby revealed the many ways that public opinion was solicited and aggregated to the detriment of nurturing political diversity and meaningful debate (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2014; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010).

In Australian cities, urban planning over the past thirty years has increasingly aligned with the principles of neoliberalism (see Gleeson & Low, 2000). This has occurred almost in parallel with movements away from expert-led planning towards consensus modalities of collaborative planning and decision-making, which were inspired by theories of communicative rationality (Innes, 1995). These shifts precipitated concerns that the new practices in consensus-based planning could not fully accommodate diverse subjectivities nor address the power-asymmetries that were reinforced through neoliberal planning (Purcell, 2009). Recognising these limits, Allmendinger and Haughton (2012) argue that privileging consensus-building without critically reflecting on its relationship to public protest (when it occurs) may prevent us from seeing the different ways consensus-building seeks to continuously displace conflict in planning.

Post-political theorists claim that the formal, state-created processes and spaces for participation increasingly offer no grounds for actual public debate, nor offer legitimate spaces for contestation (Metzger *et al.*, 2015; Purcell, 2009; Swygendouw, 2009; Ranciere, 1998). As a result, debates about the future of the Australian city are not limited to official planning fora but instead extend beyond state-mandated participatory planning to include public-created spaces. We content it is in these spaces where the negative impacts of planning are politicised.

### **The post-political Australian City**

In recent years Australian cities have witnessed large-scale resident-led political campaigns targeting what they see as growing injustices in the urban landscape. Under the pressure of neoliberalism, urban planning processes have de-centred social equity and environmental sustainability by privileging economic rationality, competition and privatisation. The resistance campaigns against the selloff of public housing in Millers Point and The Rocks in Sydney (Cook 2018, this issue), the construction of toll-roads in Brisbane and more recently in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth have exposed the impact of these decisions on the people of these cities. Like the resistance campaigns of the 1970s, including the now famous Green Bans resistance in Sydney (Cook, 2018) and the anti-freeway campaigns in Melbourne (Legacy, 2018, this issue), contemporary resistance campaigns are also motivated by the mantra that cities are for people and not solely for producing profit. But the campaigns of today also galvanise against – be that directly or perhaps more subtly - the impacts of unfettered neoliberalisation of cities and its governance, and the loss of public control of the city and its processes.

This is not to suggest that city planning has abandoned efforts to engage the public in the planning of their neighbourhoods, municipalities and metropolitan regions. On the contrary, there has been a litany of ‘best practice’ engagement techniques applied by all tiers of government to enable public participation over the past two decades. Early efforts by governments in Western Australian in the early 2000s to design large-town hall meetings around the principles of deliberative democracy (Perth), through to more recent examples of citizen jury processes as part of city budgeting exercises (Canada Bay; City of Melbourne) or in the development of a long-term infrastructure strategy (Infrastructure Victoria) have demonstrated a level of preparedness to engage the public. This is a considerable shift from the primacy of the expert-led, technocratic plans of the twentieth century towards a comparatively more inclusive approach to planning today. However, the substantive focus of these processes, as they are designed, prohibit the questioning of who ultimately wins and who will lose in a given instance of planning; there are few places for these kinds of questions to be asked (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2018, this issue). Nor do these processes allow fundamental questions to be asked about the trajectory of cities, who gets what infrastructure, what form the development will take, how it will be funded, when and where it will be provided. It is these questions that attract opposition campaigns and in somewhat rarer instances, resistance movements, as their negative externalities and lost opportunities costs reveal themselves over time.

It is notable that as these shifts towards intergenerational inequity, intense speculative development and so-called ‘social cleansing’ in diverse neighbourhoods occur, strategies of consultation have proliferated (Darcy & Rogers, 2014). These formal, deliberative approaches to consultation have not disrupted the processes or policies that underpin intergenerational inequity, speculative development nor ‘social cleansing’. For example, the compact city has remained a planning

orthodoxy across a succession of metropolitan strategic planning documents in Australian capital cities, but with very little questioning of who benefits from this urban form, and who and what is lost. It is in this context that numerous scholars have declared a “crisis of participatory planning”, suggesting that urban politics has rendered public participation in urban planning void of critical substance and influence (Legacy, 2016; Legacy & van den Nouwelant, 2015; Monno & Khakee: 2012, Darcy & Rogers; 2014; Ruming, 2014a, 2014b). There has been a production of a ‘consensus politics’- both through deliberative planning approaches and among the organisations and institutions of liberal democracies - that evades confrontational and challenging public discourse about the way the urban is constituted and re-created, for whom and by whom. Instead, the formal, often state-led processes of city planning set out clearly defined sites for public engagement within which ‘participation’ might occur, and which may limit broader expressions of engaged citizenship.

Despite limited conditions for formal public participation, agonistic traditions of democratic participation - including urban protest and activism – continue to punctuate planning decisions through informal, collective, grassroots action or through focused sometimes site-specific oppositional campaigns (Iveson 2014). Outside of the formal decision-making arenas urban residents are establishing new spaces to pursue their politics (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2018). Beyond the street protests, blockades and social media campaigns conflict is expressed through the social patterns and population structures forming a central element of urban (political) change in Australia. This change can be observed through the techniques and strategies through which residents, non-experts and communities orient planning and political processes to locally desired outcomes (Ruming *et al.*, 2012; Cook *at el.*, 2013).

Recognising the resurgence of liberal and market values in Australian cities, this Special Issue examines the possibility of meaningful debate and contestation over urban decisions and futures in politically constrained contexts. In doing so, it moves with the post-political times: critically examining the proliferation of deliberative mechanisms; identifying the informal assemblages of diverse actors that are taking on new roles in urban socio-spatial justice; and illuminating the spaces where informal and formal planning processes meet. These questions are particularly pertinent in understanding the processes shaping Australian cities and public participation today.

### **Public participation in the post-political Australian city: A new research agenda**

Metzger *et al.* (2015) and Rancière (1998) ask in what ways is public participation in planning ‘political’ and how can resident action be used to counter these post-political tendencies? One of the challenges faced by all political and social movements is the question of their effectiveness over time: whether they ‘make a difference’ and if they do become popular, whether they become diluted and compromised? Rather than present informal action as an either or proposition, the papers in this Special Issue highlight the importance of asking how informal action reshapes and challenges the boundaries of what is possible in the post-political city. How does informal planning action render new trajectories and pathways of urban development both open and more visible? What organisations, practices and resources exist within the city through which a new politics can be advanced? Another related question concerns the universality of informal planning movements: how representative are these groups of the city more broadly? While this is an important question to ask of any political organisation, the difficulty of expressing an alternate viewpoint in a post-political context suggests the question is not ‘how many people are represented here’, but ‘what is being

said'? Perhaps, in the end, the most important feature of informal planning movements is not their size, but their unique capacity to articulate urban futures that embrace a philosophy of equity within uncertain social and environmental futures. To these ends, the question of what can be learnt from the experimental and visionary nature of urban planning movements and contemporary political movements is a scholarly question whose time has come.

The opening paper by Kristian Ruming examines the political struggle surrounding a large urban regeneration project in Newcastle, New South Wales. By tracing efforts by state planning agencies to generate consensus about the need for inner city regeneration, he examines how these efforts were destabilised by resident activists who mobilised an alternative urban vision; thereby revealing consensus around need for regeneration as opposed to consensus around the (material) form of regeneration. Ruming's paper illustrates how opponent's efforts to destabilise consensus claims made by the state can reconfigure the future city. Examples of urban residents stepping outside the formalised practices of public consultation to protest like in the case in Newcastle have become almost common practice in the area of transport infrastructure planning in Australian cities.

Crystal Legacy's analyses the establishment of Infrastructure Victoria to provide an empirical account of how infrastructure planning responds to public mobilisation in transport over time. Drawing together literature on transport politics and post-politics she examines the relationship between public protest and the formal practices of engagement, and concludes that, in sitting in relation to each other, they produce ever more savvy ways in which dissensus and consensus processes co-create each other.

Andrew Butt and Elizabeth Taylor show that public participation can also be interventionist. While exercised outside of the public submission, exhibition and strategic plan-making processes, these resistance efforts find their motivation from seeking to change planning outcomes, if not urban practices more broadly. Focusing on the urban fringe they investigate conflict surrounding the establishment of intensive "broiler" poultry production in peri-urban Melbourne. Here Butt and Taylor mobilise Mouffe's problematisation of the negotiation of antagonism and Rancière's notion of the risk of a false consensus democracy to highlight critical issues of participatory planning. They argue that despite an apparent consensus around the agricultural identity of peri-urban regions and the presence of a code-based planning system, alternative politics emerge in response to changing understandings of place, the status of peri-urban regions and ethical issues associated with intensive farming.

The papers assembled in this special issue throw new light on the under analysed elements of post-political theory- including the unchartered geographies of agonism and activism through which the alternative planning pathways discussed by Butt and Taylor emerge. To this end, Cameron McAuliffe and Dallas Rogers respond to Mouffe's call to move beyond a limited consensus politics, which serves to re-enforce post-political processes and perpetuate the urban agenda of an entrenched urban elite. They test Mouffe's theory empirically to see if the transition from antagonism to agonism is possible in Sydney. Mouffe contends that traditional antagonisms between "enemies" need to be moderated to a more mutual "adversarial" position, and McAuliffe and Rogers deploy these ideas to investigate how resident groups and urban alliances engage with the post-political city, in the face of reconfigured urban governance and regulatory frameworks.

The resident-led processes discussed by Ruming and Legacy show an appetite in the public to engage questions that planning has foreclosed from public view, namely, what is the future of the city and what interventions and urban governance arrangements are necessary to ensure that this future remains in public ownership? This question forms the focus of Heather MacDonald's paper which asks the question "has planning been de-democratised in Sydney?" In this article MacDonald confronts the ongoing reconfiguration of urban governance and regulatory frameworks outlined in the paper by McAuliffe and Rogers. MacDonald argues that recent NSW government efforts at planning reform, council amalgamation and the introduction of a new metropolitan commission emerge as an (evolving) neoliberal effort to streamline development and de-democratise planning. Yet such efforts are contested by some urban residents and the final impact of these initiatives, in terms of development approval and economic performance, remain uncertain. The capacity of state planning agencies to secure a form of consensus, via reformed planning frameworks, emerges as inherently unstable.

Turning our theoretical attention to how urban residents act and engage 'politically' in the city, Nicole Cook examines the implicit invitation in post-political theory to engage with the agency of bodies and buildings in the city highlighting the new lines of inquiry and analysis that this influence opens up in the post-political context. Developed through a comparative study of social movement and activism in Millers Point, Sydney, in the 1970s and 2010s, this paper addresses a significant gap in existing post-political analysis by drawing it into dialogue with assemblage and Deleuzian scholarship. In doing so, Cook shifts the focus of political geography and critical planning studies beyond social actors, to investigate the wider set of political alliances and agencies which configure urban politics.

This collection of papers raises new questions for the study of politics and public participation in the Australian city. These papers extend the post-political research through an engagement with the Australian urban context – one where planning authorities struggle against powerful national logics of property speculation and accumulation, yet find support from social and political movements for more democratic planning policies and practices.

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