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# How to Make Plans

## A Preliminary Manifesto

*Jeff Humphreys*

Humphreys Reynolds Perkins Planning Consultants

### Introduction

#### Background

The last five years in Queensland have been spent reworking the plans and processes of the planning system, an enormously consuming process, the rewards of which have yet to be demonstrated.

During this time, in plan-making, little effort has been expended on the content and strategic approach of the planning documents that have been produced. Rather, the emphasis has been placed instead on how to structure the documents to meet the requirements of the Act.

#### The Paper

When we think about the planner's toolkit, plan-making is one of the two compartments in the toolbox (the other compartment variously labelled as project design, development assessment, or operational planning). Whilst the old plan-making compartment has been re-shaped for IPA, we haven't spent much time lately on examining whether this part of the toolbox also should be modernized or re-thought.

This paper is reflective and philosophical. It draws from planning theory, and proposes a framework for thinking about how to make plans. It suggests, on a preliminary basis, a direction for trialling a new approach to plan-making in Queensland, which would fit into IPA (and any other legislative system), but which would more squarely address the complex of issues that arise, when planners start to make plans. It attempts to explain how to respond practically to the demand for performance-based planning, in a context which also requires administrative efficiency and

certainty.

The first part of the paper examines the context and issues for plan-making. It discusses the nature of planning, the Integrated Planning Act and what it means, provides a brief history of plan-making, and summarises the issues and challenges.

The second part of the paper attempts to chart a way forward. It proposes, first, a model based on identifying four elements or aspects of good, integrated plan-making; and secondly, makes some recommendations about the relationship between plan-making and IDAS, under the Integrated Planning Act.

### The Nature of Planning

#### Two Major Planning Activities

The activities of planners, and the planning process, can be generally categorised into two parts, plan-making (including planning research and policy development) and operational planning (including project design and development assessment). Typically, the planning functions of responsible authorities are organised into departments which reflect this categorisation, "forward planning" and "development assessment", although planners may also be involved in other operational activities (such as planning and executing special projects).

#### Focus of Planning

The focus of planning is the physical environment, and in particular, the form and impacts of human settlements. Whilst some planners get involved in activities beyond that

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realm, and techniques and perspectives of planning may be relevant working in those areas, most planners are involved with planning the physical form of human settlements.

Of course, that is not to say that planners are focused only on the amenity or functional workings of the physical environment – they are also interested in the relationship of the physical environment with the society and cultures that it accommodates, with its economy, and with its bio-physical setting.

### **Action-Oriented and Visionary**

Planning is action-oriented; it is about promoting a better future. Planning is not merely observing the workings of human settlements. That distinguishes planning as a discipline from geography and sociology, for example, even though it may draw upon the resources of those disciplines.

Planning is also about making visions for the future, based on understanding, and then working out how to move towards those imagined better futures. Planning, as practised, cannot be justified merely on the basis of preventing bad outcomes. It is more than simply ensuring that new buildings are set back a suitable distance from site boundaries, and other requirements these days found in the acceptable solutions of codes.

Finally, planning is not merely a public sector activity. It also includes planning and actions of the private sector in the environment, and the participation of the community.

## **The Integrated Planning Act**

### **What Does Integrated Planning Mean?**

To understand what integrated planning might mean, under the Integrated Planning Act, the stated purpose of the Act is helpful:

*“... to seek to achieve ecological sustainability by—*

- (a) coordinating and integrating planning at the local, regional and State levels; and*
- (b) managing the process by which development occurs; and*
- (c) managing the effects of development*

*on the environment (including managing the use of premises).”*

Furthermore:

*“Ecological sustainability” is a balance that integrates—*

- (a) protection of ecological processes and natural systems at local, regional, State and wider levels; and*
- (b) economic development; and*
- (c) maintenance of the cultural, economic, physical and social wellbeing of people and communities.’*

### **Integrated Activities of Planning Agencies**

These statements show that one of the qualities of integrated planning, as espoused by the Integrated Planning Act, involves the co-ordination of the activities of different agencies that have planning powers and/or operational functions that affect the physical environment. This means co-ordinating the planning of local governments with that of State and Commonwealth government instrumentalities.

### **A Balance that Integrates...**

The Act also embraces the notion that ecological sustainability will be promoted where a balance is struck which takes into account the bio-physical, economic and social dimensions of the environment. This means that integrated planning must engage with the environmental discourse, the social discourse and the economic discourse, relating to the physical environment.

### **Integrated Planning Process**

Whilst the “Purpose” mentions both the planning of public agencies, and managing the development process, it is not so clear here that these processes are to be integrated. When we go to Chapter 3, however, we find various prescriptions that require, in managing decisions about the environment (that is, operational planning), that the planning instruments have to be taken into account in decisions, and that these must be made so as not to conflict with planning instruments, unless there are sufficient planning grounds to justify the decision. (s.3.5.13-14) This important exception suggests, first, that thinking

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about “planning” doesn’t stop after the plan has been made, and secondly, that at the operational planning stage, decisions can be made that complement, even override, the planning instruments which have previously been devised.

Whilst Chapter 2 deals with plan-making, and Chapter 3 with operational planning or IDAS, the two are connected, and not necessarily in a one-way sense.

In some of the pre-cursors of the IPA, what is now Chapter 2 was called “Plan-Making” and “Planning Schemes”. Now it is called “Planning”. This is not really satisfactory, because planning is not only about making plans, it also refers to the process dealt with in Chapter 3. Integrated planning includes not only making plans, but revisiting the issues considered in plan-making when making decisions about particular development proposals. Planning is properly conceived as an ongoing interaction between the two processes, with each feeding into the other.

This paper is focused on the plan-making part of planning, but thinking about it as part of an integrated planning process, where good outcomes are achieved when plan-making and operational planning can be integrated seamlessly to account for the interests of the plan-making agencies, the operational actors who are executing development, and other environmental stakeholders.

## **A Brief History of Plan-Making**

### **Geddes, Keeble and Blueprint Planning**

Initially, town planning was conceived as a process whereby the omniscient planner carried out numerous appropriate surveys, analysed the results, retreated to his garret to prepare the plan, and delivered the plan to an expectant and appreciative audience, who were then to get on with implementing it.

Usually, these plans were wrought in exquisite detail, so as to properly illustrate what the guru had in mind.

This concept of the planning process can be considered to have dominated planning thought to the post-war era. In this context, the term “implementation” acquired great currency, which has been hard to shake to this day.

However, beginning in the sixties, perhaps, it became more apparent that this concept of planning was flawed, because plans are prepared on the basis of limited research, undertaken with necessarily limited resources. The planning agency has limited control over the activities of other actors in the development process, including other government agencies, and limited resources to implement the plan. Plans take a long time to implement, and during that time, values and circumstances change, so that the physical situation and ideas upon which the plan was based become out of date, reducing the relevance of the plan.

So, the blueprint planning approach rightly lost favour.

### **Strategic Land Use Planning**

The response was to move towards less detailed, less prescriptive plans, in the form of more generally drawn spatial plans, accompanied by verbal expressions of principles and policies. This approach allowed greater flexibility in moving towards desired environmental outcomes. By the seventies, broadly drawn strategic land use plans for large areas, and more detailed local plans for smaller areas, formed the basis for planning in UK, adopted in Queensland by the eighties.

In more recent years, since the mid-eighties, spatial plans and objectives have been supplemented by performance-based codes for development. This may generally be considered to describe current approaches to plan-making.

### **Charrettes**

An interesting and instructive plan-making phenomenon emerged in Australia during the early nineties, labelled the charrette process. Complementing the New Urbanism movement, it essentially involved doing some background research, getting as big as possible a range of stakeholders together in one place to discuss the future of a particular planning setting, on-the-spot specialists in every known relevant field, and a collection of urban designers to come up with designs for the subject environment. The return of blueprint planning!

Three observations about charrettes.

1. The valid impetus for charrettes arose partly

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from a perception that current plan-making practices do not describe visionary “plans” about the future – people do not really understand what these plans mean, because they are too general, and it is hard to work out how a complex of policies and standards is really going to be manifest in a particular situation. Charrettes result in a relatively easily understood picture.

2. The outcomes from the charrette process suffer from exactly the same shortcomings as the blueprint plans of old – just because the charrettes may have involved relatively wide consultation and quite thorough research, not all the future stakeholders are in the room, and circumstances are going to change over time, in ways that will reduce the validity of the Plan, especially if the setting is complex and has a long development timeframe.
3. Nevertheless, charrettes are useful, as long as the product is put in its right perspective: it is a worthy investigation of the issues that affect the future development of a setting, and an imagining of alternative scenarios. However, it is not **the Plan**, it is a **scenario** of future desirable development. Often the outputs have been expressed with emphasis on a preferred scenario, whereas it would have been more useful to present a range of acceptable or desirable scenarios. That way, the whole plan does not fall over if one future actor makes a critical decision inconsistent with the Plan.

## The Challenges

### Major Issues for Plan-Making

In drafting plans, of different types, the planner is always confronted with issues relating to the balance to be achieved between flexibility and certainty, in a context where the knowledge base, community values and stakeholders are changing and will continue to change, over time. Can plans be prepared in a way that more adequately responds to these issues, so that the major outcomes sought remain clear and robust, while there is appropriate flexibility to adapt to changes in the decision environment over time? How do planners adequately supply imaginative and

understandable visions of the future, in a context which is riddled with uncertainty?

Three types of uncertainty affecting planning have been identified: uncertainty about the existing **environment** and how it will behave in the future; uncertainty about **related decision fields**, public and private, beyond the control of the planning agency; and uncertainty about **values**, now and in the future.

For example, even if the local government as planning authority seeks the advice of the Department of Transport about the location of a future transport corridor, that agency may not be ready to commit to a particular route. The actors in the agency now will change before that decision is made. Technology may change before the decision is made, so that a route chosen now may become obsolete. The local politics may change, to affect the choice.

Apart from seeking to manage uncertainty in plan-making, two other issues are:

- Effectively communicating ideas with stakeholders – as mentioned before, general plans and principles may not adequately describe the range of possible scenarios; and
- Obtaining suitable authorisation of plans – the plan-making process needs to get suitable, informed sign-off from relevant stakeholders, including the community.

Finally, it should be remembered that the resources that can be applied to planning are often much greater at the point nearest when development is about to be undertaken – opportunities to engage the operational players in planning should be seized as relatively cost-effective.

On this topic, one commentator concluded:

- Plan as little as possible!
- Plan as late as possible!
- Wherever possible let others do their own planning!
- Plan operational decisions as far as possible!<sup>1</sup>

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## The Main Focus for Attention

For these reasons, the area which requires the greatest attention in the plan-making process is the gap between the broadly expressed visions and statements of principle, and the operational decision. Look at the City Centre Local Plan for Brisbane, for example, addressing the most complex urban environment in the State. Where is the vision for the city centre, evident in these plans?

Plan-making needs to get more into exploring the land use scenarios that arise from broadly expressed statements of principle, in a particular physical setting. The last five years have been spent re-working the broad principles, without doing much additional work trying to understand the realistic physical options that will be available, consistent with those principles.

At the same time, opportunities to engage operational actors in strategic planning should not be squandered. Mechanisms must be employed which allow developers to plan large scale proposals, so as to embody suitable levels of commitment, communication and uncertainty in the approvals they obtain.

## The Way Forward

### Introduction

This paper in some ways is about trying to get some of the old planning ideas about physical planning back into the planning process. When people think about “town planning”, the visions that come to mind are of Colonel Light’s Adelaide, Burley Griffin’s Canberra, and the Paris of La Nôtre and Von Haussman. That kind of visionary thinking need not be absent from the complex and more democratic planning environment of Queensland. However, it will require greater efforts in that direction, than recently applied.

To move in this direction, plan-making can be conceived as having four elements, as follows.

### Four Elements of Plan Making

The four elements of plan-making, to respond to modern needs, are:

1. Vision
2. Scenarios

3. Development Controls

4. Action Plan

The **Vision** can be both broad and detailed. However, its essential characteristic is that there is a high degree of commitment to it in every respect – in other words, it is robust and durable. There is no need to articulate the vision in detail (especially spatially), if it is likely that the vision can be achieved in a number of effective ways.

The critical new concept to think about and experiment with is the concept of **Scenarios**. First, scenarios complement the Vision by exploring and illustrating in detail how the vision may be achieved in a particular physical setting. They are intended to help stakeholders to understand and imagine the physical form of the future. Secondly, it is not necessary to commit to one scenario. In fact, it is more communicative to identify a range of scenarios that could be acceptable. It may be best not to choose a preferred scenario, as things may happen which prevent that scenario eventuating, and another outcome may be nearly as good in moving towards the Vision. One of the potential difficulties associated with scenarios is getting the community and other stakeholders (for example, the Council) to accept and understand a range of possible physical outcomes. People may prefer instinctively to deal with one purportedly certain outcome, than to try to understand the implications of a range of possibilities. On the other hand, having a range of possible outcomes may reduce the feelings of disappointment when the first proposed scenario is in fact modified because of changing circumstances.

The function of **Development Controls** or regulations, is to prevent outcomes that would diminish the achievement of the Vision. The development control system establishes the outer bounds of parameters of development.

The **Action Plan** is a set of actions, which may include projects and strategies, which the planning agency can take to move towards the Vision. It is one thing to have a plan, or a development control framework, but what can be done in the short term to move ahead? Examples of items that can be included in an Action Plan include:

- a plan of streetscape improvements to revitalize a town centre;
- setting up a co-ordinating committee to explore how to achieve a major transport initiative;
- recommendations for strategic land acquisitions, or for negotiations with a particular landholder;
- amendments to the Corporate Plan with respect to management or spending in the planning area.

In terms of the forms of local planning instruments currently emerging under the IPA, the Vision typically would contain desired environmental outcomes, and the performance criteria of codes. In some cases, it might be inferred to include the Areas / Zones / Precincts of the planning scheme maps, and others of the scheme maps. The Development Controls are largely found in the scheme maps, where they act in concert with the acceptable solutions of codes, which in turn may be complemented by policies. Action Plans lie outside the local planning instrument, in separate reports, some of which may be confidential. Scenarios have been little employed, and probably discouraged by those who control such things, and promote the idea of the local planning instrument as a piece of legislation. However, conceptually, the Scenarios could be treated as “acceptable solutions” of codes that deal with preferred forms of development, perhaps.

The exploration of possible scenarios of development has been discouraged in recent times, where the obsession has been with meeting the requirements for expression of DEO's, identification of Areas / Zones / Precincts, and performance codes.

### **Integrated Planning: Planning from Both Ends**

Whilst the addition of development scenarios to plans made under Chapter 2 is an important focus for future planning activity, especially in complex planning environments, there is also considerable opportunity for scenarios to be prepared by developers, private and public, as part of achieving approvals under Chapter 3. In many

cases, with large projects, the developer does not know at the outset the form that development will ultimately take, in any detail, especially with respect to later stages of the project. The provisions of IDAS which provide for preliminary approvals create an opportunity for Visions to be expressed, complemented by Scenarios which explore possible outcomes under that Vision. Contemporary practice (indeed extending back for many years) often involves preliminary approval applications (previously rezoning applications) for land use entitlements shown on a broadly expressed Plan of Development, but accompanied by a more detailed “notional concept plan” of how development might proceed under those entitlements. The possibility of requiring illustration of a range of scenarios in those situations would often provide a better understanding of what in fact is being approved.

Getting some more sophisticated “plan-making” into the IDAS process will result in better planning overall, as it will harness the resources of development actors to complement the relatively meagre resources available to the planning agency, to undertake plan-making. That is why the provisions and scope of Section 3.1.6 of IPA about preliminary approvals, is so critical.

### **Conclusion**

Conceiving of plan-making as a process of four elements, as discussed, may achieve a more visionary, better-informed planning process. Some more experimentation is required, to understand whether the adoption of such an approach would lead to better planning.

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<sup>1</sup> Faludi (1987) p.210

