

NEW IDEAS OF PLANNING: THE FIRST NATIONAL WORKSHOP ON PLANNING THEORY

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“Planning as Strategic Choice”

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Theory in Practice

I must begin by identifying the author of this paper unashamedly as a practitioner of nearly twenty-five years, rather than an academic, but nevertheless one who has always had a fascination for the theory of planning, and found it useful continually in shaping the approach that I have taken to my work. My experience has been that the planning theory that I became aware of first as a student, has been perhaps the most enduring aspect of what I began to learn at University, and I therefore strongly support the inclusion of significant elements of planning theory (and by this I mean the theory of planning) in all planning courses.

1.2 Influences

I think I was lucky in the influences in my education as a planner. First, I was one of the early draft of planning students taught by Lewis Keeble at University of Queensland, who was straight out of the Survey, Analysis, Plan, Implement school of English Post-war planning, blueprint to the core, sceptical of social scientists who couldn't really tell planners what they should be doing to build better cities, and likewise of public consultation, which would probably only lead away from the best end physical state. We nevertheless first had a very good dose, enthusiastically delivered, of how to prepare the physical plan for a town. In third year, Michael Fagence introduced us to the two texts that had been published the year before by Pergamon, "Planning Theory", and "Readings in Planning Theory", and a new world opened up, that emphasised the process of planning, along with its physical products. At about that time, I also became aware of Friend & Jessop's work in Coventry, in their book "Local Government and Strategic Choice: An Operational Research Approach to the Process of Public Planning". When I later studied Government at UQ, I found a range of literature that reinforced the perspectives gained from Faludi and Friend & Jessop, generally, that planning is a political / administrative activity that must, among other things, be viewed in that context. Finally, both Faludi and Friend, this time with Hickling, were kind enough to produce new books in 1987, which took some of these ideas further, and consolidated the views and/or prejudices that I have developed about the theory of planning.

1.3 The "I-word"

Part of my enthusiasm for planning theory, of the kind that I will discuss in this paper, is that it provides planners with an explanation for what they do, that is much more satisfactory than the belief systems that I have found that most carry around with them. My work colleagues have occasionally indulged me by allowing themselves to be "tested" with questionnaires, which I have used to see what they think about physical planning. Generally, I find through this, and generally having rubbed shoulders with planners for a long time, that planners tend to be a bit hung up about plans. They tend to use the "I-

word” – implementation. They tend to think that when a plan has been prepared, then it should be “implemented”. This paper is intended to provide a path to salvation and happiness for planners. Good planning does not necessarily equate to whether the plan has been properly implemented.

2.0 Planning as Strategic Choice

2.1 Planning Under Pressure

A critical feature of planning activity, providing the title to the 1987 Friend and Hickling book, “Planning Under Pressure: The Strategic Choice Approach”, is that there is always a tension in planning decision-making, between reducing uncertainty about the planning decisions that need to be made, so that we can make a better decision, and taking the decision, so that the good consequences of commitment may flow. This applies, whether we are engaged in making a plan, or making a decision about a development proposal, an “operational decision”. Three types of uncertainty are identified, Uncertainty about the Environment in which we are operating (UE), including how it will behave in the future, Uncertainty about Values (UV), and Uncertainty about Related Decision Fields (UR). In each case there are ways to reduce uncertainty, so that a better decision can be made, but each comes at a cost, in terms of time and resources. UE can be reduced by carrying out more research about the nature of the environment, whether it be economic studies, traffic modelling, land use surveys, demographic studies or whatever else is relevant to the issue. UV can be reduced by surveying the community, talking the politicians, or consulting the community. UR can be reduced by consulting those making decisions in related fields, such as government departments, private developers, landowners, and other “stakeholders”, about their plans. However much reduction of uncertainty that is undertaken, however, it will only result in a better decision, not the perfect solution. Against this, there is the imperative to get the decision made sooner rather than later, and without the expenditure of further resources. Get the new Plan out, so that everyone can proceed with greater confidence and a more co-ordinated understanding about how various factors relate to each other. Make the decision now, because the statutory time limit is about to expire, and so that beneficial development can proceed. Planning is “a process of decision-making under uncertainty, in that choices are repeatedly made between alternative courses of action, with only an inadequate picture of their implications.... a process of strategic choice” (Friend & Jessop, 1969, 97)

2.2 The Role of Plans

The Strategic Choice approach to planning relies on getting plans into perspective.

Fundamentally, plans are never good enough. The planners that prepared them have imperfect knowledge of all the relevant factors, including the way that the environment will perform in the future. At any rate, the plans are prepared with limited resources, and usually less than can be brought to bear on a problem at a time when an investment decision is nearer. Plans are based on assumptions about how decision-makers over whom the planner does not have control will behave in the future – even those decision-makers may not know, if they are consulted. Values about particular issues may change over time, leading to different perspectives as to how to balance those issues, when a development decision needs to be made. It is irrational to place too much weight on the value of plans.

That is not to say, however, that plans are not useful. Firstly, they provide a way of examining how a complex range of issues relate to each other, and therefore a better basis for making an operational decision than if that process has not been undertaken.

Secondly, the process of preparing plans involves consultation with the community and other stakeholders, including government agencies whose actions may not be fully under the control of the planning agency, and therefore represent a consensus, or at least an accepted balance of interests, that has been arrived at after a structured process. Accordingly, plans have a status as a common understanding, at a point, of how a future settlement pattern should be arranged, that should be set aside only with due regard to the possible adverse consequence of damaging stakeholder confidence.

Thirdly, plans have the potential to be visionary, and to show a desirable way forward, in relation to possibly a complex array of interacting issues. Plans may therefore become rallying points, serving as a basis for common understanding of a better future.

Conclusions

1. When dealing with plans, have regard to the limitations of the way that they were prepared. "Plans do not necessarily embody higher wisdom; they are mere aids for improving decisions by putting them in a wider context" (Faludi, 1987, 216)
2. Make plans that are robust and flexible, whose provisions are specific only to the degree that is warranted by their level of underlying certainty, with respect to the issues that are addressed – this may vary within a plan across a range of different issues.

2.3 A Decision-Centred View of Environmental Planning

Faludi identifies (ibid, 3-4) only "three real advances" in planning theory, in the period 1973-1987, namely:-

1. The work of the IOR School, that of Friend & Jessop and their followers, who developed the Strategic Choice approach to planning;
2. The distinction drawn between operational and planning (plan-making) decisions; and
3. That the rational planning model should be viewed not as a prescription for how to act in planning, but rather as a "rule for testing decisions".

He argues that just as much emphasis needs to be placed on the process of operational decision-making (including development assessment, development control), as there is on plan-making. "...the very term implementation – suggesting a spurious *a priori* claim of plans that they should be followed – has been banned in this work. It has been replaced by the notion of an ongoing stream of operational decisions. The reason why plans are made is to improve the taking of these decisions" (ibid, 216). This sentiment is echoed by others. "Long range planning means evaluating immediate decisions with regard to long run consequences, rather than constructing grand plans of big models." (Lee, 1973, quoted in Faludi, ibid, 91). "...the term planning (refers)..generally to this more loosely defined process of *choosing strategically*, in which the activities of making plans, decisions

and policies can come together in quite subtle and dynamic ways.” (Friend & Hickling, 1987, 5)

From the context in which planning takes place, characterised as decision-making in the face of uncertainty, Faludi postulates four “golden rules” (op.cit., 1987, 210):-

- ◇ 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!

3.0 Some Related Concepts

3.1 Planning for Future Flexibility

The tension between the desire for commitment and the desire to reduce uncertainty, may be reflected in the nature of planning decisions that are taken.

A good decision will commit only as far as necessary.

A feature of good planning decision-making is to maximise future flexibility:-

- ◇ maintaining future flexibility in plans;
- ◇ maintaining future flexibility in operational decisions;
- ◇ precautionary principle.

It is intrinsically desirable to maintain opportunities for future choices – that is, to maintain future flexibility - because the future is unknown, and the knowledge on which we base our present decisions is imperfect

The order of commitment, in time and detail, should be related to the level of certainty about the system (or the part which is the focus of action) and the way it will change.

3.2 Planning as a Political Activity

Planning should be conceived as a political activity connected with the management of land use, subject to the same influences, system relationships and intrigues as other political activities that expend public resources and exercise controls, to promote a particular outcome. Land use planning strategies should be developed having regard to the powers and resources of the agencies that will administer the implementation of the strategies, and the interests of community groups and other stakeholders who will be affected. The limited potential to co-ordinate government agencies who answer to separate ministers in a Cabinet system of government, in the interests of some superior land use planning outcome that has nothing to do with the core responsibilities of that agency, is a political reality sometimes overlooked by practising planners. The activity of planning needs to be conceived in the context of its particular institutional and cultural setting (UR in terms of the strategic choice model proposed by Friend & Jessop).

3.3 Implications for Organisations

Because of the nature of the planning process, planning organisations need to develop the following features:

- ◇ necessary powers to control land use and adverse consequences;
- ◇ capacity to reduce UE - ways to reduce uncertainty about the environment through research programmes and research units;
- ◇ capacity to reduce UV - ways to determine values -
 - standing committees;
 - consulting stakeholders, including the community;
- ◇ capacity to reduce UR - liaison and co-ordination mechanisms;
- ◇ mechanisms and divisions to formulate and adopt plans and strategies.

3.4 Implications for the Planner

Because of the nature of the planning process, the good planning all-rounder should possess the following skills:-

- ◇ Substantive knowledge and skills
- ◇ Procedural knowledge and skills
- ◇ Advocacy
- ◇ Negotiation
- ◇ Integrative/Design skills

The good news is, however, that planners should not be as concerned with whether or not the plan is being implemented, but rather whether a good planning outcome has been achieved on the ground. In the end, the issue is whether we have been able to facilitate a better City Plan, rather than whether the plan we had this year was particularly elegant, and whether it was followed to the letter. Of course, good plans should result in better decisions, they should help community understanding of inter-related issues, and they may serve as a platform for better plans and decisions in the future, including through developing the “planning culture” of the environment to which they apply. A Strategic Choice theory of planning should enable planners to:-

- ◇ Avoid feeling that they have let the side down when they have recommended approval of a development that represents a good planning outcome, even if it was inconsistent with the Plan; and
- ◇ Allow the planner to accept the political and economic realities of the planning context as an inevitable part of the activity of planning, even though continuing to battle for better environmental outcomes, and to influence that context.

4.0 QUEENSLAND PLANNING SYSTEM IS CONGRUENT WITH STRATEGIC CHOICE

4.1 Local Government (Planning and Environment) Act

The Local Government (Planning and Environment) Act formed the basis of the Queensland planning system. It set up processes for the adoption of plans, and the processing of development applications. In each of these processes, it provided for consultation with government agencies and the general public. Even though the basis of the system was a zoning system whose antecedents lay with the British 1932 Act, the institution of developer initiated re-zonings led to a very different, and more responsive beast than the parent, which was oriented to implementing the zoning plan. By 1981, the P&E Act required the Council, in considering a developer initiated re-zoning proposal, to take into account, among other things, the Strategic Plan and the provisions of a Development Control Plan. Therefore, the Plan did not have a mandatory effect on planning decisions. In due course, the Act was changed so that the proposal could not be approved where in conflict with the Strategic Plan or a Development Control Plan, and “there are not sufficient grounds to justify approving the application despite the conflict”. This was judged not to have made much difference, at law. Still then, the effect of plans was not mandatory in development assessment.

4.2 Integrated Planning Act

The much heralded Integrated Planning Act, which commenced in 1997, in its explanation, sought to move the paradigm towards plan-led decision-making. However the rhetoric was different from the execution. Whilst a decision under the Act must:-

- ◇ Advance the purpose of the Act, to promote ecologically sustainable development (s.1.2.2); and
 - ◇ Not compromise the achievement of the desired environmental outcomes for the planning scheme area (s.3.5.14[2(a)]);
- each of which tests amount to generally expressed planning principles,
- ◇ A decision must not conflict with the planning scheme, unless there are sufficient planning grounds to justify the decision (s.3.5.14[2(b)]);
 - ◇ A decision may conflict with an applicable code if there are sufficient grounds to justify the decision (s.3.5.13[1]); and
 - ◇ A preliminary approval granted may override the local planning instrument (the Plan) (s.3.1.6).

Thus, while there are tests to discourage flagrant disregard for the Plan, the Plan does not have a mandatory effect on development assessment decisions.

5.0 MAROOCHYDORE TOWN CENTRE: A CASE STUDY

5.1 Context for a Centre Development Plan

In 1996, our firm led a team that was commissioned to prepare a development strategy for Maroochydore Town Centre, the proposed key regional centre for the Sunshine Coast, the most rapidly growing population area of South-East Queensland. We perceived that the town centre involved a highly changeable environment which would evolve over a long period, influenced by the actions of many players. The situation was characterised by a very high level of uncertainty.

Uncertainty in relation to the working environment

Preparation of the Maroochydore Centre Development Plan was conducted in a context of limited knowledge and limited means to improve knowledge at that point, and at any rate an inability to predict far into the future the workings and needs of a dynamic town centre environment. Whilst traffic and transport modelling had been undertaken to a certain degree, future demands that could emerge as the centre evolved could not be predicted accurately. The dynamic nature of retailing, and the future role that Maroochydore may play in a regional pattern of centres could be anticipated with little confidence. The degree to which the market would acknowledge and act on opportunities to develop business and administration at Maroochydore remains to be seen, in the evolving Informational Age, where the attraction of Maroochydore to accommodate new forms of employment is practically impossible to predict. The way that these future demands will impact on the property market, and a form of development that will prove economically attractive is likewise uncertain.

Uncertainty in relation to values

Whilst a range of public consultation processes was undertaken to establish community preferences in relation to the development of the town centre, these values may be expected to shift as the centre develops further and public perceptions of it change. It must be expected that a future generation of town centre users will have somewhat different demands for its qualities and facilities, from those of present day users.

Uncertainty in relation to related decision fields

Because of the range of stakeholders in the future development of the town centre, the evolution of the town centre may be characterised as a complex of connected decisions by many different players. Government departments such as Department of Main Roads, Queensland Rail and Department of Education, as well as state agencies with needs for office space within the region, lie beyond the control of local government. The aspirations of the major private landholders are important factors in

determining the development outcome of the town centre, notwithstanding that land use is subject to planning control. In many cases, the availability of key land parcels will be important to the town centre development process (for example, Horton Park Golf Course land, Maroochydore State School site). Decisions by private developers to proceed with development likewise affect the structure of the town centre that will evolve. Even the future decisions of the Council on important issues such as the location, timing and extent of relocation into the town centre cannot at this point be committed, relying on future decision processes not controlled by the Council's planners, nor able to be prescribed in any statutory plan.

Conclusion. Given the high level of uncertainty involved, a planning strategy for Maroochydore town centre should not be too prescriptive. Whilst a plan could be devised to point to an optimum range of services and facilities and a preferred physical configuration of a centre, it would be futile and dangerous to attempt to set such a plan down as a 'blueprint' for future development. Not only is the development of those services and facilities dependent on the will of numerous decision makers working to their own corporate plans and strategies, over time the requirements of the centre will evolve as a result of changing community needs, trends in consumption and service delivery, new possibilities in the layout and form of development, new design ideas, and other changes which cannot possibly be foreseen at the time of preparing the plan. For these reasons, a 'blue-print' plan could in a very short time become obsolete and/or stunt the growth of the centre.

On the other hand, given the importance of the town centre to the community it serves, there is a need for planners to set down some definite guidance for the development of the centre, in order to promote the achievement of desirable outcomes. In Maroochydore's case this need is particularly urgent, as a number of major players are taking important steps towards development.

5.2 The Planning Approach

Taking into account these factors, the planning strategy needed to be structured so as to achieve the following ends:-

- ◇ Embody a vision that would serve to establish important elements of town centre form and structure, a response to the setting's attractive environmental features, regional context and physical development opportunities;
- ◇ Develop in some detail pictures of possible physical outcomes that would inform future decisions makers of the way that different town centre elements could be co-ordinated to achieve a satisfactory town centre structure, consistent with the vision;
- ◇ Set up suitable mechanisms to allow the development of the centre to be coordinated and controlled, that were at the same time robust and protective of the desired vision, while allowing flexibility for the operation of the town centre development process over time;

- ◇ Identify actions which could be undertaken within a relatively short time frame to assist the town centre development process in desired directions;
- ◇ Provide a vision for a town centre that could serve as a point of discussion and mutual agreement between different stakeholders, and a basis for further planning work, whether by way of more detailed investigation and determination of planning strategy or adjustment as circumstances change.

5.3 The Centre Development Plan

A comprehensive planning study was embarked upon to identify the requirements of a regional centre at Maroochydore and, taking into account constraints and opportunities inherent in the existing pattern of development, to consider how the centre could grow over the next 30 years to meet these requirements.

Key issues which were a focus of the study included:

- ◇ the desirable location of a railway station within the town centre;
- ◇ appropriate distribution and intensity of town centre and centre-related land uses;
- ◇ provision of adequate opportunities to encourage local economic development;
- ◇ design strategies to improve the urban environment, including achieving better pedestrian integration of existing and future town centre elements; and
- ◇ ensuring that the future town centre takes advantage of the water elements of Maroochydore, and that a regional centre is developed that reflects the Sunshine Coast's relaxed, outdoor-oriented lifestyle.

One of the most critical variables in the future development of Maroochydore town centre is the extension of a railway line to serve the centre. At this stage, no funds have been committed to a railway line to serve the coastal strip. A station location and line routing into the centre would be dependent to some extent on available funds, detailed engineering investigations, and a long and politically volatile process of land resumptions. The matter is also subject to the possibility of an alternative mode of transit to trains being adopted.

It was imprudent at this stage for the Centre Development Plan to adopt a strict railway routing and station location and to structure the rest of the town centre around this, on the basis of rudimentary investigations and with the possibility that it may never go ahead. On the other hand, a major transit connection to an interchange at the heart of the centre is crucial to the centre's accessibility, and in turn its function and vitality; so any plan for the centre should make provision for a transit corridor and interchange.

Likewise, the Plan could not rely on the early availability of the Maroochydore State School site or land forming part of the Horton Park Golf Course, whose close

proximity to the town centre core and relatively low utilisation, suggest that ultimately they are important options for town centre expansion.

Given the uncertainties surrounding a railway and other aspects of future development of the centre, in preparing the Plan it was sought to find an appropriate balance between providing firm strategic direction for now, and flexibility to adapt the plan to suit future circumstances.

The output of the study was not a statutory development control document but a report which sets out a planning strategy in the following four parts:

- Element 1. Vision Statement and Objectives
- Element 2. Town Centre Development Scenarios and Townscape Concepts
- Element 3. Development Guidelines
- Element 4. Action Plan

Element 1. Vision Statement and Objectives

This part describes a durable vision for the centre incorporating fundamental principles to guide its long term development, confined to those elements that could at this point be set down with some certainty.

It paints a picture of the desired future shape and functions of the centre. In terms of the centre's physical composition, it describes the types of services and facilities which should locate there and general parameters for their spatial arrangement in relation to one another.

It is sufficiently general to accommodate different land use mixes and spatial arrangements. For example, in respect of the railway corridor reference is made to the centre being served by a fast and frequent public transport system, with a route which facilitates a station location as close as possible to the core of the town centre. The vision does not pinpoint a route or station location.

At the same time, some specific elements which could and should be accommodated no matter what overall shape the centre ultimately takes are set down, such as an integrated open space and pedestrian system along Cornmeal Creek which runs through the area, and connects with Cottontree Esplanade and other potential future open space elements along the Maroochy River.

The vision and objectives will serve as a baseline indicator of what is planned for the centre which will assist investors and developers in the early stages of devising a development proposal and will form the foundation of more detailed planning and development assessment by Council.

The vision and objectives are expressed by means of text and diagrams

Element 2 Town Centre Development Scenarios and Townscape Concepts

This part presents scenarios of how the centre could develop, consistent with the Vision and in more detail. This second part of the Strategy includes one preferred and two alternative structural layouts of major land uses, and a series of building and landscape design concepts for particular parts of the centre. Altogether, the scenarios and concepts set out only a few different ways that the centre might evolve over time. They are useful “pictures” for now, to test development proposals, but they are not a blueprint for the eventual shape of the centre. The scenarios incorporate four alternatives for the rail/transport interchange, for example, the location for which can only be finalised after further investigation and negotiation. The development scenarios also inform the development guidelines.

The town centre development scenarios and townscape concepts are expressed by means of maps, diagrams, sketches and text.

Element 3 Development Guidelines

A framework of guidelines, controls and performance criteria were provided, to be used to assess development proposals in the short term. These provisions were eventually incorporated into the 2000 Maroochy Planning Scheme, to provide the development assessment framework.

The guidelines were intended to guide landowners and Council in designing and assessing development proposals in the town centre. They were not intended to be comprehensive or refer to all forms and aspects of development. Rather, they were to guide development which is particularly important to the achievement of the overall vision (such as major elements of open space, pedestrian and vehicular networks, maximum height of buildings in the core and frame areas, streetscape design along primary frontages and in ‘gateway’ locations, public access to river/creekside areas, and generalised land use types and density).

Whilst some important decisions about development of the town centre have yet to be taken (for example, the location of the railway station), the development approval process can not be stalled while these matters are resolved. The guidelines set out in this part of the CDP enable Council to continue with its day to day administrative functions of assessing development applications and other opportunities as they come in. Nevertheless, the guidelines were to ensure that options were preserved for the railway station, by including ‘holding pattern’ controls in one or two precincts which restrict development until the final location of the railway station is resolved, and other guidelines which describe preferred development depending on where the railway station is located, to ensure that an adequate amount of land is available for office development at transit-supportive densities and locations.

The development guidelines are expressed by means of Precinct Maps, text and sketch illustrations of preferred development elements.

Element 4 Action Plan

There were a number of initiatives which Council could pursue which could facilitate the development of the town centre according to the preferred plan. 46 recommendations were set out in this part of the strategy for action now. The Action Plan is in two parts:-

- ◇ the first part comprised items connected to townscape and infrastructure expenditure, liaison and lobbying, traffic management, changes to planning documents, infrastructure planning and town centre management, which the public could and should be made aware of;
- ◇ the second part comprised items of a confidential nature, presented for Council's consideration only, addressing location of Council offices, development feasibility studies, and land acquisition.

Each recommended action was attributed a priority rating as to when it should be undertaken. Apart from changes to the planning documents, the actions were effected outside the statutory development control process. They nevertheless represent tangible and immediate tasks to lead the centre's development in the desired direction and, hopefully influence the decision-makers external to the statutory planning process. Such initiatives are equally as important as development control in the implementation of the Plan.

Key actions include pedestrian paths and crossings and streetscape improvements in the central Horton Parade / Ocean Street / Duporth Avenue, lobbying of government departments to locate key office functions and services within the town centre and to provide a rail service with an interchange in the preferred location, further studies (for example in relation to traffic, urban design, local transit systems, and the feasibility of public multi-storey car parks), establishment of a town centre management group involving Council and other stakeholders, preparation of a statutory development control plan, strategic land acquisitions, and relocation of Council offices.

Following on from the Plan, Council was to embark on preparation of an Employment Strategy and Business Plan.

The Action Plan is expressed as tabulated recommendations, with three tiers of priority. Townscape and infrastructure actions are cross referenced to the maps, diagrams and sketches of the Development Scenarios and Townscape Concepts part.

5.4 Conclusion

The Maroochydore Centre Development Strategy, as presented to the Council, was an attempt to develop a Plan for a highly dynamic and complex planning context, which was responsive for competing demands for vision, certainty, flexibility and robustness. It sought to provide certainty and guidance on matters that were durable and where a clear vision was required. It sought to provide, through the development scenarios, illustrations of how different factors interacted, that would inform the community and stakeholders, but which were not intended to be blueprints of what would in fact occur. It included a development assessment framework that was flexible and suited to short term needs, and it included recommendations for action now, to advance the Plan's objectives. Driving the formulation of the strategy was a belief that there were many possible, desirable outcomes, and that the Plan was just one step along a path that would include changing circumstances, more research, progressive commitment by the various players (including catalytic activity by the planning agency), and more plan-making. The format of the Plan arose from the perspectives of the theory of Strategic Choice.

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