

# Planning policy directions in NSW: Learning from Australian and International experiences

A Report on the Planning Policy Workshop at the University of Western Sydney July 12, 2011

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**The Planning system in NSW has been in a flux for over a decade. Numerous changes were made to the planning system to enhance simplicity, efficiency and speed. Many years of neo-liberal inspired planning reforms resulted in the consolidation of power at the state level and a reduction of community engagement. After several years of reforms, not only the systems remained complex, but additional problems of loss of community input in the development process arose as a major complaint.**

Planning reforms due to their perceived wrongs became a major issue in the March 2011 state election. The Liberal-National Coalition won the election promising a major overhaul of the planning system. The new government

has promised to return planning powers to local communities. Since coming into power they have embarked on repealing parts of the earlier planning reforms as short term measures and on drafting new planning law in the medium term.

The potential for dramatic changes in the way planning is conducted in NSW presents an excellent opportunity for thinking about planning policy trends locally, nationally and internationally. Realizing this, the Geography and Urban Studies (GUS) Group and the Urban Research Centre (URC) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) organized a one-day workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to generate a mutual exchange of ideas and experiences among international and local planning scholars and practitioners.

The workshop was an extension of GUS earlier research on planning reforms and its discussions with the Department of Planning and Infrastructure (DoPI). The workshop immediately followed the third World Planning Schools Congress in Perth that was attended by prominent international planning thinkers,

academics and practitioners. Making the best of this unique opportunity, the workshop organizers secured prominent international scholars in planning policy for participation. A number of planning policy practitioners and scholars from the DoPI PIA NSW and the Planning Programs at the Sydney Universities also attended the workshop.

The workshop was divided into three sessions. The morning session was dedicated to presentations and discussions by local planning experts on evolution of planning policy in NSW. The second session comprised talks from the international planning scholars. The last session synthesized the discussions of the day.

The first session started with a presentation by Prof. Peter Phibbs from the URC in which he highlighted the importance of getting the principles right at this historic time when planning law is being revised. In his presentation Dr Awais Piracha from GUS UWS explained the NSW planning reforms of the recent years and their shortcomings for the benefit of the

international scholars. He stressed the importance of better understanding of public wishes and desires from planning and getting the theoretical footings right in the new planning system. Marcus Ray from the DoPI described changes to the planning system that the new state government has initiated since coming to power in March. In broad terms these changes are about returning powers to communities and increasing transparency in development assessment. Greg Woodhams from PIA NSW stressed the need to pay more attention to strategic planning rather getting bogged down with debates on merits of individual development proposals. He also emphasised the need to align the time horizons of various plans in NSW. The last speaker in the first session was Prof. Alan Peters from the UNSW. He stressed the importance of use of ICT for availability of fast, simple and easily available information to land holders on what they could or could not do with their land.

In the post lunch session four prominent international planning scholars from the USA, Brazil, Korea and Canada shared their experiences and views on planning policy and its future directions. Prof. John Landis from the University of Pennsylvania discussed 30 international success stories in planning. It is his view that planning literature is replete with discussion on planning failures. He believes we need to talk more about success stories of planning. He shared his thoughts on what makes planning successful. Dr. Sergio Moraes from the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina,

Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil described the current Brazilian urban policies' context. Prof. Taeho Kwon of Semyung University, Korea presented an overview of National Development Policies in Korea. He explained the powerful role Korean National Government plays in matters related to urban planning. Assoc. Prof Ian Wight from University of Manitoba, Canada discussed the role personal ethics of planners plays in making planning policy.

In the last session of the workshop Dr Heather McDonald from the UTS presented a synthesis of the day's discussion. She summed-up the deliberations of the workshop into five themes. She identified Planning as Proactive Visioning as the first theme. Planners are forgetting the real gist of strategic planning i.e. place making. Current planners are more obsessed with analytics and less with place making which is an equally, if not more, important aspect of strategic planning. Planning as Problem Solving was the second theme. Mindless cycles of changes to planning system undermine the predictability aspect of planning. A volatile planning policy environment leads to planning's inability to solve real problems. Increasing Spatial Inequality, the third theme, points out that planners are forgetting the ideology of social equality. Sydney is not harbour-side only. Planners must strive to avoid spatial segregation. Heather's fourth theme was Challenges of Democratization. Public participation should not be "over-informing" and "over-consulting". Participation has to be specific and

focused on bigger developments (people seem to be concerned more with the neighbours' windows than the city tunnel). The fifth and the last theme identified from the workshop discussions was Institutional Arrangements for Planning. It is important to get institutional arrangement right so that there are good champions for the good plans ■

Below: Participants at the Workshop

