

Impressions of the Planning Institute of Australia National Congress at Adelaide 1-3 April 2003



Adelaide central city from Colonel Light's Vision lookout at North Adelaide

I was privileged to attend the Planning Institute of Australia National Congress in Adelaide in early April. Not only was it a memorable planning gathering, but also a home coming to the City, over which I flew endless training missions as a RAAF pilot on Orion patrol aircraft out of Edinburgh RAAF Base, and where I undertook the Master's Degree which launched me unexpectedly into an environmental planning career.



Adelaide North Terrace looking west from University

So it was with a sense of great expectation to rub shoulders with over 700 delegates, including about 200 younger planners, in the Adelaide Convention Centre. There was also the fun of being a tourist in a green city with lots of old building character – to me a mini Melbourne without the crush of people and traffic. There was none of the frenetic building activity of the Gold Coast evident by cranes on the central city skyline.

The theme of the Congress was *Leading with Diversity* with sub-themes on urban and suburban design, sustainability in all its flavours, metropolitan strategic planning, community participation, transport, law and governance, economic development and planning assistance overseas.

The keynote speakers – Brian Howe (Melb Uni Centre for Public Policy), Prof Ruth Fincher (Melb Uni) and Prof Tim Flannery (SA Museum) focused on making places more inclusive, diverse and sustainable, but cautioned that in the uncertainty of the Knowledge economy, the “middle suburbs” are missing out. Brian was an exceptionally inspiring planning advocate, after his years in the Federal Labour governments championing regional planning and Better Cities programs [from which the Gold Coast has benefited].

Ruth Fincher introduced a useful term - *conviviality*, which denotes the informal social interaction in a neighbourhood community and is a measure of community well-being. It is facilitated by a variety of spatial enclosures for casual encounters – which could mean anything from a gazebo to a gay bar! She entreated us to start “planning” by considering people and their activities, rather than at housing, transport and separation of activities.

Tim Flannery used an interesting analogy of cities as a *human feedlot* to examine our lack of sustainability, where food, water, power are all delivered and wastes removed. Cities reduce the “human challenge of living” and lead to wastage, obesity and laziness. He would have us walking, growing our own food and collecting own water to overcome both wastefulness and laziness, before we become an endangered species.

We were also treated to strategic planning within metropolitan urban/constraint/containment boundaries [shades of the Iraqi war!]. The key elements for strategic planning success according to Lincoln Hawkins [ACT Planning Executive Director] are:

- Vision;
- Sustainability;
- a Catalyst to unite the community; and
- Partnership and innovation in implementation.

However, a vision once formed could become a “trophy”, which then acts as a constraint, or be used as a “passport” to a better future. The new Canberra catalyst is the bushfire devastation. Of course the Gold Coast catalyst has been the amalgamation, as well as IPA and now the drought. Adversity brings unity! Cathy Wilkinson, the Melbourne 2030 Strategic Plan project Director, noted that 90% of strategies don’t get implemented and she considered that implementation is the key to success – needing bipartisan support; multi-year objectives with 10 yr rolling infrastructure plans; and a *cultural* change in the form and function of the city, which takes time.

To add some balance, Adam Spencer the Triple J host and maths PhD – a self-confessed un-planned person – entertained us with how everything seems to work out OK anyway as a matter of destiny at the personal level, especially if you ride a bike. His vision is a safe cycling community with financial incentives and bike friendly facilities.

Many of the parallel sessions felt like preaching to the converted, or enduring a rerun of university lectures on planning principles. However the CD papers will be useful to

those interested in the details. One notable study is the City of Tea Tree Gully Community Needs Study and Strategy Action Plan - especially aimed at coping with an ageing population of Baby Boomers like myself, who currently refuse to think or act old, and need stimulating and satisfying activities into our autumn years [without the need for viagra]. This is clearly relevant to our retirement region. The study is available on their Council website – www.teatreegully.sa.gov.au

I was personally interested in the overseas planning assistance in nations such as PNG, East Timor, Philippines and elsewhere - often by individual planners. Queenslanders have been prominent in this field and the Strategic Urban Plan study for Dili in East Timor by Hassell members won the President's National Award for Planning Excellence.

An enlightening trip on the O-bahn took me to Golden Grove – the epitome of early Delfin new urbanism planning. The older area is actually a combination of cul-de-sacs and connected roads, with a delightful park setting.



I was impressed with the treatment of the heads of cul-de-sacs in connected parkways. A few locals walking their dogs volunteered very positive attitudes to the layouts.



The O-bahn needs its own trackway to guide the buses travelling at 100 kmph, so cannot co-locate within road pavements as a normal buslane or tramway can do. However the flexibility of continuing the trip to dispersed locations at the end of the line, or from intermediate interchanges, is very convenient. The Tea Tree Gully route utilises the

River Torrens valley and is a pleasant 20 minute trip. The articulated buses carry about 66 seated passengers, as well as having standing capacity.



In summary it was an adventure well worth making - even for the shopping in Rundle Mall and the tram ride to Glenelg. The next national event is *Planning on the Edge* in Hobart in February 2004.



Glenelg beachfront

Adelaide Rundle St
Mall central section