Is Strategic Planning in Sydney Becoming ‘Relational’?

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ABSTRACT: Planning theorists have increasingly argued for more ‘relational’ strategic plans that are conceptual rather than deterministic, with an emphasis on nodes and flows. Contemporary city strategies in Europe have incorporated this approach, but metropolitan strategies in Australia have remained very detailed and deterministic, reflecting historical institutional and other development circumstances. Nevertheless this situation might be changing. The NSW state government’s recent Metro2036 strategy for Sydney and Sydney City Council’s Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy for Sydney City both place relational planning features at their centre, notably the global economic corridor in the former and the five themes that constitute the Strategy Map in the latter. The paper examines the rationale and role of these relational elements in the two strategies. In particular, it investigates the advantages in these cases that a relational approach has over more blueprint-inspired designations. Finally the paper considers whether relational approaches are likely to become more common in Australian city strategies, when set against the historic ability of state governments to use their planning powers and infrastructure control to specify in detail the type, scale and location of development.

Keywords: Relational planning; Sydney; City of Sydney; Sustainable Sydney 2030; Sydney metropolitan strategy

Introduction

Strategic spatial strategies have become a more significant part of Australian planning over the last two decades. This recognises the emerging need to incorporate overarching environmentally sustainable development principles and also the contemporary need for planning to produce strategies to make cities and regions economically competitive. At the same time the need for coordinating strategies recognises that urban planning outcomes have become more dependent on a range of semi-autonomous government development corporations and businesses, and on private capital for infrastructure. Similar imperatives have generated a new generation of strategic spatial strategies in the rest of the developed world, especially in Europe.

Recent spatial strategies for Australian cities have continued to be highly prescriptive in the manner of earlier blueprint planning. In Europe, however, the form of strategic spatial plans
has become more schematic and less detailed in response to the wider range of stakeholders that need to be involved in the making and execution of spatial strategies. This new form, which emphasises relationships and flows within the region, has been termed ‘relational’ (Healey, 2007). Two recent Sydney spatial strategies – the City of Sydney 2030 strategy and the metropolitan 2036 strategy – have summary maps that evince relational elements. This paper analyses each strategy to ascertain the extent to which they indicate Australian strategic planning is moving toward a more relational spatial structure.

**Relational planning**

Since the latter part of the last century, spatial strategic plans in Europe have turned from the detailed blueprint model that was at the centre of the modern planning paradigm to a more schematic and less ‘Euclidian’ spatial representation. This new paradigm is marked by an emphasis on the depiction of nodes and of flows between nodes that denote spatial relationships of all kinds. It has been termed ‘relational planning’ by Healey (2007), planning that is ‘situated within the complex socio-spatial interactions through which life in urban areas is experienced’ (2007, p.11). Thus spatial strategies need to ‘create a nodal force in the ongoing flow of relational complexity’ (Healey, 2007, p.228). Strategies selectively focus on particular urban places and critical relationships (Healey, 2007, pp.230, 232). The static geography of blueprint plans is replaced by an emphasis on dynamics and fluidities.

Similar perspectives have been advanced by others. For example, Richardson and Jensen (2003) construct a theoretical and analytical framework to understand the ‘new set of spatial practices which shape European space based on language and ideas of polycentricity and hypermobility’ (Richardson and Jensen, 2003, p.7). Hillier (2007, p.12) sees space as not hierarchically ordered but rather ‘a rhizome of multiple connectivities’. Other writers discussing contemporary spatial planning and its context in similar terms include Albrechts et al (2003), Harding (2007), and Salet et al (2003).

The factors that have caused the construction of more schematic, flow-based relational spatial strategies are several. Firstly there is the need to frame a variety of emergent discourses. The first of these is that of sustainability. The triple bottom line elements of sustainability have often competing discourses, which necessitate spatial strategies that are generalised to avoid contradictions. The second is that of trends in urban and regional governance that involve a wider range of participants, arising in particular from government budget constraints, restructuring of welfare state organization (Albrechts et al.,
2003), and community demands for more participation in plan-making. Responses such as public-private partnerships have required more flexibility to be incorporated into strategies to allow room for a range of proposals and bargaining outcomes. A third factor has been the need for spatial strategies to place cities as globally competitive, as metropolitan areas have become the focus of attempts to capture increasingly mobile global capital and labour. This has required strategic plans to have a more generalised structure that can accommodate ad hoc new major project proposals from the private sector.

Australian metropolitan strategic plans have continued to follow the blueprint model. Searle and Bunker (2010) have suggested three reasons for this. The first is that planning and development control powers are solely vested with the states under the Australian constitution. The second is that metropolitan infrastructure is the responsibility of state agencies or is provided under conditions that are set by the states. These reasons mean that the metropolitan plans prepared by state governments can specify intended outcomes in detail because these outcomes are controlled by the state. A third factor is that, until recently, metropolitan strategies emphasised greenfield development. In such development prior planning constraints were few and strategies could therefore specify outcomes in more detail than the brownfields redevelopment, with its built environment constraints, that characterised European strategies. Even so, Australian strategic planning has not always followed the blueprint model in its entirety. The 1968 Sydney metropolitan strategy incorporated a relational framework in its principles diagram that schematically showed the region’s key future linear connections and corridor expansion paths (State Planning Authority of New South Wales, 1968). George Clarke’s Sydney City strategy of 1971 (Council of the City of Sydney, 1971) also had relational elements in its designation of activity precincts. Nevertheless, Australian planning strategies have continued to be characterised by considerable spatial detail. The rest of this paper analyses the extent to which this Australian metropolitan strategy paradigm has been replaced by relational planning in the current City of Sydney and Sydney metropolitan strategies.

**Sustainable Sydney 2030**

The strategic plan for the City of Sydney, *Sustainable Sydney 2030*, is a long term plan to bring about a sustainable future for the city. The strategy’s vision is for the city to be ‘green’ with a modest environmental impact and green with trees, parks and gardens; ‘global’ in its economy and links, and open-minded; and ‘connected’ physically by walking, cycling and
public transport, by world class telecommunications, and with connected communities via a sense of belonging. The strategy summary map (Figure 1) shows the elements of Green, Global and Connected Sydney:

1. A revitalised city centre
2. An integrated inner Sydney sustainable transport network
3. A liveable green network of green corridors and dedicated pedestrian and cycle ways
4. Activity hubs as a focus for the city’s village communities and transport
5. Transformative development and sustainable renewal, including energy and water efficient infrastructure, affordable housing, high quality public space, and access to essential transport choices.

![Figure 1. Sustainable Sydney 2030 Summary Map](Image)

The strategy supports these central elements of the vision with 10 project ideas to show how the vision could be delivered (Figure 2). The emphasis is very much on key locations and connections where future projects could transform the city into the green, global and connected Sydney vision.
The possible imperatives for or against a relational City of Sydney strategy are varied. Acting against a relational approach is the need for local strategies such as this to deliver specific Sydney metropolitan strategy targets set by the state for housing and employment. The Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy was required to provide an extra 48,000 dwellings and 97,000 jobs from 2006 to 2030 under the 2005 City of Cities metropolitan strategy. The council is also required to use a state-mandated template, which effectively produces a blueprint, in the preparation of a Local Environmental Plan that implements development goals of the Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy.

On the other hand, several factors have encouraged the adoption of a relational approach in the production of Sustainable Sydney 2030. One is the importance given to the community’s ideas for Sydney City’s future, particularly through a series of community forums held across the city during the strategy’s preparation. This importance reflects the control of the independent Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, and her group of councillors over the council, and the avowedly community-oriented platform of the Lord Mayor. The council summarised the community’s views for the city as ‘sustainable and green’, ‘affordable, inclusive and accessible’, ‘thoughtful and creative’, ‘a cultural leader and a 24 hour city’, and
Nevertheless, the strategy has also cited a variety of individual community comments in the various sectoral chapters to show that it has not over-simplified or over-generalised the community’s views. Responding to the wide range of community ideas has produced, in turn, a wide range of strategy proposals that go beyond traditional local government actions and require a partnership with the state government, in particular, to bring to fruition. Hence the strategy needs to promulgate a vision that can be acknowledged by state agencies and others needed to achieve the vision. Associated with this is the underlying sustainability rationale of the strategy that is strongly supported by the Lord Mayor’s constituency. The strategy endeavours to bring about a significant improvement in the sustainability of the city. A serious advancement of sustainability has necessitated a range of initiatives that, likewise, require a partnership with the state in particular.

In this respect, the strategy is demonstrably relational in Healey’s sense in that a principal purpose is to establish a shared vision that will guide the actions of key stakeholders with the capacity to bring about the various elements of that vision. The strategy is clear that the agenda it articulates needs to influence the activities of others, particularly state agencies, with authority over the local City area:

‘With key transport and many land use and development powers over key sites outside its control it is necessary for the City of Sydney to enter into a dialogue with other agencies in relation to sustainable development outcomes. … The City of Sydney can play a partnership and brokering role on matters of local interest and concern on which individual agencies might otherwise not have a strategic view.’ (SGS Economics and Planning, 2008, p.320)

It emphasises that the City of Sydney can facilitate partnerships to deliver large infrastructure projects, seeking finance and expertise from the private sector. It states that Sustainable Sydney 2030 can provide the strategic framework – the ‘architecture’ – for the City of Sydney’s priorities for partnership arrangements (SGS Economics and Planning, 2008, p.330). Thus the strategy maps out a vision that is intended to be shared with other stakeholders who are needed to achieve that vision, and that is intended to guide the City of Sydney itself in its partnerships with those stakeholders. In this, the strategy conforms to the rationale supporting relational planning, as discussed by Healey (2007) and others.

The strategy summary map (Figure 1) looks very much like a product of a relational planning approach. It emphasises distinct nodes: the city centre and nine village centres. The city centre is described as a heart (and shown as heart-shaped in the consultation draft), a
spatial metaphor that symbolically represents the centre’s importance, with its own set of initiatives included in the strategy. The map also emphasises connections between these nodes and also beyond the city, the latter reflecting the city’s importance to the rest of the region as a place of work and leisure. The connections on the map are those that are planned, not those existing (except for existing parts of the planned bus system), which places a focus on what new work is needed to achieve the vision of sustainability. Key sites of regeneration are also shown, in the manner of the London strategy, as the locales for housing intensification at a scale to be largely determined by further investigation. Supporting maps show major project proposals requiring state support to implement as examples of the partnership intention of the strategy, notably redeveloping Darling Harbour for housing and green space, and building over the tracks at Central Station. In short, the strategy emphasises a relational approach of new spatial directions for achieving the sustainable city vision that will require partnerships with the state, private sector and community to achieve.

The strategy has spatial detail about some connection elements. In the case of cycle routes, they reflect proposals already included in council’s planning for cycle infrastructure. Indicative routes for community-based bus routes to serve the village activity hubs and for a light rail route through the CBD are also shown, as are proposals to eliminate or underground CBD expressways and to provide an underground road connection from Darling Harbour to Botany Road. These are all proposals that would require the support of state transport agencies to bring about. While such detail has not been conceptualised as a relational planning outcome, it could be argued that in the Sydney City strategy the spatial detail for these elements empowers the strategy by demonstrating more elaborately how they support the vision. Another example of visionary detail is the inclusion of potential sites for trigeneration. This element had not been part of state-level planning for more sustainable development, involving as it does the need for detailed site-level planning, but its adoption would require the cooperation of state electricity authorities. The nomination of potential sites for trigeneration in the strategy helps to crystallise the feasibility of this system.

**Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036**

The 2010 Sydney metropolitan plan essentially revises the 2005 plan. The latter (New South Wales Government, 2005) was the most comprehensive Sydney strategy since the County of Cumberland plan of 1948. It was basically an old-style blueprint plan, with fine-grained spatial delineation of new urban development limits and structure and of planned
employment areas, and fixed targets for jobs and housing by sub-regions, major centres, and employment precincts (Bunker and Searle, 2007). Nevertheless, superimposed on the detail was a broad brush identification of three key corridors radiating out from central Sydney, plus the orbital motorway network, as the main spatial axes of the strategy. This superimposition is very much in the manner of European-style relational spatial strategies, with their emphasis on the identification of nodes and of schematic flows between them.

A major corridor element in the 2005 strategy was the Global Economic Corridor, or Global Arc. This was shown as an elongated zone between Macquarie Park north-west of the city centre to the airport and Port Botany south of the city, through ‘Global Sydney’ (Sydney and North Sydney CBDs). The Global Arc was a ‘corridor of concentrated jobs and activities’ that would ‘remain the powerhouse of Australia’s economy’ (New South Wales Government, 2005, pp.10-11). The basis of the Arc had been discourse in the 1990s that promoted the concept of Sydney as a global city (Searle, 1996). It was conceived by planner Bob Meyer, who set out the concept in a consultancy report to the state government in 1997 (Meyer, 1997, 2008). He saw that such an Arc should be the location of the majority of Sydney’s ‘global’ and higher order jobs and that this could provide guidance for strategic infrastructure decisions to support these activities, such as the (then) proposed rail line to Macquarie Park. The Arc can be seen as a ‘spatial metaphor’ (Healey, 2007, p.209), a particular form of relational planning. The multiplicity and complexity of flows and linkages in urban relational space and the problems of capturing these ‘objectively’ mean that symbolic representations such as spatial metaphors constitute subjective constructs that resonate with planners and other professionals and policy makers (Healey, 2007, pp.205-206).

The 2010 Sydney strategy takes the relational elements further (New South Wales Government, 2010). The strategy map (Figure 3) is now dominated by the depiction of major nodes and corridor flow lines between them. The main driver here is the integration into the strategy of the government’s Metropolitan Transport Plan, which had been published earlier in 2010, which was a ten year plan incorporating proposed fully-funded transport projects (NSW Government, 2010, p.1). The concept of a connected and networked multi-centred city from the 2005 strategy incorporates a more fully foreshadowed connectedness in the 2010 strategy, derived from the Transport Plan. The strategy identifies improved connectivity as critical to positioning Sydney as a globally competitive city (p.47).
Transport Plan identified a number of long term future corridors for investigation. The corridors were designated as multimodal, which introduced a degree of indeterminacy that reinforced the uncertainty of a distant time horizon and the consequent desirability of mapping them as generalised flow lines. The corridors were assessed as critical over the longer term to ensure a compact connected network city with efficient travel options. They would guide the location of transport capacity enhancements (NSW Government, 2010, p.85).

Several types of corridors are indicatively (‘relationally’) shown in the 2010 strategy (Figure 3). The first are three corridors for long term investigation in the inner and middle suburbs. These are seen as offering the opportunity to unlock urban renewal potential in established areas, and providing improved cross-regional links between employment centres and better links to major health and education precincts such as Randwick and Macquarie Park. Two indicative arrows pointing into the northern and southern edges of the urban area denote possible future very fast rail, to be investigated. This is intended to address the Strategy’s objective of strengthening Sydney’s role as a hub for NSW and Australia (NSW Government, 2010, p.48). Another indicative flow line shows a potential outer Sydney orbital corridor for major road and other infrastructure.
Figure 3. Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036
The most visually significant indicative corridor is the Global Economic Corridor. This is shown even more prominently than in the 2005 strategy. It is also now extended west from Macquarie Park to Sydney’s second regional centre, Parramatta. This reflects the offer of Commonwealth government funding to build the long-planned Epping-Parramatta rail link, a 2010 federal election promise of the Labor Party that formed a minority government following the election. The strategy states that this extended corridor can provide additional economic opportunities as the major centres of Chatswood and Macquarie Park, further east along the corridor, reach capacity (NSW Government, 2010, p.129).

The remaining schematic element of the 2010 strategy is an amorphous potential expansion of the Western Sydney Employment Area across Commonwealth land at Badgerys Creek, on the proposed second airport site that the state government has rejected. The rest of the spatial strategy is very much in the blueprint mould. Numerical housing and employment targets at sub-regional and major centre level are retained. The urban edge, containing new release areas, is shown at a high level of detail. Planned employment areas are shown in a separate map in similar spatial detail. Several types of proposed and potential transport projects are mapped as precisely as possible: heavy rail, light rail, strategic bus corridors, motorway links, and freight rail.

The new relational emphasis in the 2010 strategy reflects an altered infrastructure decision-making environment within the NSW government. In previous strategies, the Treasury was reluctant for unfunded transport projects to be shown, on the basis that a published government strategy represented a government commitment that it had an obligation to fund. The Treasury used to project funding estimates forward for 3 years only, thus limiting the inclusion of long term projects unless special funding assumptions could be developed. After considerable public criticism over a number of years of the state government’s lack of public investment in Sydney’s transport and a declining level of support for the government after the 2005 strategy, the Metropolitan Transport Plan attempted to redress this. The Plan contained projects for which the Treasury had made a 10 year funding commitment, which the 2010 Sydney strategy could thus show in detail. Longer term proposals could now also be shown in a conceptual manner, as it was clear that their inclusion was intended to suggest possibilities for which there was no implied funding allocation at this stage. At the same time, there was an increased emphasis on the need for Sydney to have better connectedness to support its global role (such as regional fast train
lines), with the strategy citing studies that made this link (Committee for Sydney, 2009; Pain, 2010). Hence the strategy needed to demonstrate how this could be achieved, including long term visionary projects that were as yet unfunded. In addition, the extension of the Global Economic Corridor drew on the success of the original designation in the 2005 strategy, which had become a central element of the discourse on global Sydney.

Nevertheless, the 2010 strategy essentially remains a blueprint plan, prescribing the urban boundary, the number of new dwellings and jobs by sub-region and centre, and the routes of the various new transport projects over the next 10 years. The state’s control over planning and over transport infrastructure decisions continue to allow it to dictate spatial strategy in some detail, unlike the more multi-party decision-making required in European cities (Searle and Bunker, 2010). The greater detail about future transport projects over 10 years in the 2010 strategy illustrates this. The state has been able to dictate the shape of transport projects by its constitutional powers and associated revenue raising capacity to determine what kind of projects should go where and when.

**Conclusion**

The two strategies analysed in this paper provide support for the arguments as to the conditions under which relational strategic planning comes about (Searle and Bunker, 2010). Following Healey (2007), relational planning is produced in situations where partnerships between different levels of government and between public and private sectors are paramount to the formulation and achievement of the strategy vision. The City of Sydney’s *Sustainable Sydney 2030* strategy maps have a number of features of relational planning, especially with their emphasis on setting out a vision for a sustainable city with indicative future projects that will require partnerships with state agencies in particular. The strategy’s summary map is presented with key relational planning signifiers of major nodes, connections and flows between them and beyond the city, and the spatial metaphor of the city heart.

On the other hand, the *Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036* continues the tradition of spatially detailed metro strategies prepared by state governments, which retain their historic control over spatial outcomes. In one sense the latest Sydney strategy extends this influence by delineating and specifying transport projects over a 10 year timeframe. Former strategies omitted significant detail on such projects because of previous NSW Treasury policies of discouraging the inclusion of projects beyond a 3 year forward budgeting horizon. However,
the 10 year timeframe has given the strategy the freedom to propose generalised transport connections beyond that time, which introduces a relational dimension. In addition, the retention and re-emphasising of the spatial metaphor of the Global Economic Corridor reinforces a suggestion that metropolitan strategy-making has started to move away from its traditional determinism and toward spatial outcomes that have more fluidity, in the relational planning mould.

References


