The rise of cities and city planning

Recently, the demand for urban planners in Australia has been growing. In Sydney and Melbourne in particular, traffic cone-lined roads and construction cranes poking through the skyline testify to a surge in urban development. Of course, this translates to more development applications and processes and hence a burgeoning need for planners. According to John Wynn, national planning director of consultancy Urbis, “The demand for planners is as high as it’s ever been and that’s across all levels of government, planning agencies, non-planning agencies that require planners working in them; it’s also in the consulting business.”

Our CEO, David Williams, agrees. “The number of jobs we’re advertising has sky-rocketed over the past year,” he says, referring to PIA’s long-running online employment directory that lists planning jobs around the country. From the start of January to the start of July, it has advertised over 800 jobs with more than 200 in NSW and 400 in Victoria alone.

Of course, it’s not a simple matter that more development equates to more development applications to churn through. Planning controls these days have become far more complex, requiring a specialist and constantly updated knowledge of frameworks and guidelines that continue to evolve. The new Queensland Planning Act, for example – effective as of 3 July 2017 – adds a major new layer for planners in that State to factor in when conducting land use planning: does the proposal respect and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture?

Technology, too, has bolstered the importance of a planner’s role. According to David Williams, “Today’s interconnected, social media plugged-in world has fundamentally changed the way individuals engage with each other and express their views about building design, urban design and master planning. Informal and formal groups of citizens are highly active, politically and media savvy. This alters how built environment professionals need to engage in the public debate and heightens the importance of providing their pragmatic and informed opinion.”

The swell in demand for planners has even begun to be felt at the pre-career level. The University of NSW reported that enrolments in planning have increased by 115% this year. PIA NSW Executive Officer Michelle Riepsamen says that as awareness grows of the importance of urban planning, so does interest in studying and working in this field. “The need for planners and the skills that planners bring are being more valued and more recognised,” she says.

In short, as any experienced planner already knows, being a planning professional entails a lot more than just knowing your way around the relevant rules and processes. It calls for a plethora of skills, including an ability to use spatial thinking and interpret complex data; a creative and integrative approach to problem-solving, drawing on various disciplines and methods; and advanced consultation and collaboration skills – all underpinned by high levels of integrity, professionalism and a commitment to community health and wellbeing.

It’s a formidable ask, even though it’s all in a day’s work for a good planner. The problem is, how does a client or employer know whether a planner brings this suite of skills to the table? A CV or company brochure only establishes so much – soft skills in particular are difficult to ascertain through a recruitment or tendering process. Perhaps more so than most, planning is a profession in which ethics and a commitment to community health and wellbeing are as crucial as experience or expertise. An ability to converse and empathise with community members is, likewise, a must for many planning roles. Planning also combines minutiae with the big picture in ways other professions tend not to – practitioners need to be able to find needles in haystacks while seeing the forest for the trees – and this, too, is traditionally difficult to quantify.

This is where PIA’s Registered Planner program comes in.

Promoting proficiency and professionalism in planning
The unfortunate reality is that poor planning practice does occur. Urban planning is not a regulated profession and so people without formal planning qualifications, but who possess knowledge in some area that planning touches on (such as surveying or design), have been able to pass themselves off as planners. Similarly – and as in many other professions – university-qualified but unethical or low-performing planners can offer their services as consultants, putting projects at risk and delivering inferior outcomes. While this is uncommon, it does happen, and planning work is often of a long-term nature the impacts of which can last for years if not decades.

PIA’s new membership grade, Registered Planner, is a mechanism that enables high-calibre planners to demonstrate, clearly and unequivocally, that they have the competencies sought after by employers, clients and governments. Through vigorous testing and assessment, Registered Planners have been verified by their professional body to have what it takes when it comes to producing high-quality planning outcomes.

In the words of David Vaucher, a director in consulting firm Alvarez and Marsal, “When you count industry and country/state-backed credentials among your list of achievements, you present to your clients a very transparent view of your capabilities. Perhaps you may not know everything, but what you DO know is clear, and you have the weight of the regulating agencies standing behind your abilities. When you commit to earning and maintaining these certifications, you’re sending a message that you are serious about keeping up with the current best practices in your field, and that you are dedicated to keeping your technical skills sharp.”

This is of critical importance to employers and recruiters. High-performing employees produce high-quality work and enhance their organisation’s reputation – low-performing employees do the opposite. An organisation that employs Registered Planners is supporting those professionals who are genuinely committed to excellence and integrity – a commitment that will permeate back into the organisation’s culture and standards of output. Employing such planners bolsters that organisation’s credibility, not only to clients, stakeholders and the community but to other sought-after talent in the recruitment market.

As this is increasingly recognised, becoming a Registered Planner will provide a significant career boost for those looking to get ahead of the pack. As career development counsellor Heather Kimbrel says, “Not only do [certifications] show that you have the drive to stay current with industry trends, but that you are passionate enough to improve in your career now and in the future.” This is what thousands of employers and recruiters want to see – and Registered Planner finally provides the unequivocal, robust proof they are looking for.

PIA’s goal is for Registered Planners to be universally recognised in the built environment as representing the top tier of Australian planning – and hence highly sought after for their integrity and expertise. We are continuing to raise awareness of Registered Planners among planning stakeholders throughout Australia, including State, Federal and local governments, law firms, universities and the media. We are also investigating how Registered Planner can become nationally recognised as a Professional Standards Scheme under legislation.

The future is extremely exciting – for Australia’s cities and therefore for its planning profession, which will continue to grow hand-in-hand. PIA looks forward to seeing Registered Planners thrive in the future as the country’s most respected and in-demand planning professionals. Whether you’re a consultancy director or someone starting out in their career, we encourage you to consider the benefits of using or becoming a Registered Planner. Find out more at https://www.planning.org.au/registered-planner