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PLANNING GOVERNANCE –
LESSONS FOR THE INTEGRATION
OF PLACEMAKING

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Introduction

Placemaking is a new profession compared to the more established sphere of planning. In Australia, planning has a long history of government-driven regulation. Therefore, if placemaking was being successfully integrated into planning governance, its expression in government planning efforts should become more apparent and sophisticated over time. Pre-existing governance systems and documents should be seen to flex to integrate placemaking theory and practice. The effort to integrate placemaking into formal planning governance systems in Australia can be verified by the large number of documents with placemaking content produced by all levels of government over the last 20 years. This chapter seeks to understand to what extent placemaking has been successfully integrated into planning governance and will consider in detail three Australian state government documents that have incorporated placemaking language, theory, and objectives. The research reveals lessons and implications for the future of placemaking practice and its growth as a profession. Recommendations for planning policy writers and placemaking practitioners are drawn from the findings and conclude the chapter.

Authors note: The author has not considered Aboriginal history in this planning research and acknowledges the complex system of relationships to land and country that have long existed between Australian First Nations people and place. Planning records did not exist in a way recognisable to British colonising forces in 1788, but this is not to say that planning was not being undertaken. See for example, Aboriginal fire management methods that are spatially and seasonally planned (Gott, 2005).

A brief history of post-colonisation planning in Australia

Planning governance in Australia is based on the British system, with New South Wales (NSW), the first Australian colony, founded under British military rule in 1788. Post-colonisation executive powers lay with the governor of the day, who would (ideally) make planning and infrastructure decisions in the best interests of the colony – the common good, the common ground, and the common place (Freestone, 1993). Through subsequent years, a
three-tier system emerged with states given primary responsibility for planning and related issues such as transport and public works. Federal intervention in city planning was not seen as necessary. The third level of local government was left out of the Australian constitution in 1901, leaving each state to determine how it would enact local government within each state parliament (Kelly, 2011).

From the early twentieth century the former colonial centres that were now state capitals experienced rapid growth. Australia adopted planning structures with broad-based government powers, again borrowed from the British. At this time, the public interests of health, efficiency, and beauty railed against toxic industrial practices and a real estate sector struggling to accommodate burgeoning populations (Toon and Falk, 2003). The planning system continued to professionalise. After World War Two, urban design (then known as civic design) emerged in recognition that good planning and land-use zones would not on their own deliver an amenable city. The increasing prevalence of the private car (and engineering responses to them) was also not helping the urban cause. The top-down command-and-control approach to planning governance naturally demanded increasingly complex state regulations and instruments to ensure equity and transparency (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2019). Adding to complexity, at various times the federal government waded in to planning governance, traditionally managed by the states. This had varying success such as the Better Cities Program of the late 1980s (Bryant, 2016). Conversely, local government in the Australian context, has continued to have limited executive planning power, other than to administrate state regulations which in some jurisdictions allows neighbourhood level planning responses.

In 2020, the planning governance systems are fundamentally the same. The Victorian state jurisdiction for example has a planning regulations document over 1,200 pages, and the guide to using the system is nearly 300 pages (Richardson, 2013). Australia has not had easily comprehendible planning governance, nor has it always been equitable, transparent, and efficient. The system is professionally overseen by planning institutes, tertiary education, and planning law, and is, by its very nature, opaque to people who are not from a planning background. Stresses are becoming apparent in planning systems and processes in response to another growth wave in Australian cities. Save Our Suburbs movements (Save Our Suburbs, n.d.), politically motivated planning interference (Bleby, 2018), and wholesale planning reform (Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure, 2020) are examples of reactions to a top-down governance system that has little room for the alternative bottom-up placemaking approaches.

The case studies

In considering the integration of placemaking into planning governance, three questions were asked of the chosen state government planning documents: what is the purpose of the document; how has place or placemaking been integrated; and to what extent, if any, does the integration of place and/or placemaking lead to better urban outcomes? Armed with the answers to these questions, the end of the chapter presents some of the dynamics that the integration of placemaking practice brings to planning governance. This is intended to lay out pathways for the next period of placemaking’s growth as a movement in Australia, (and may be of help to practitioners and policy writers in other parts of the world). It is important to note that no on-the-ground placemaking projects were studied. In the Australian context, this level of placemaking, while well established, does rely on willing stakeholders to experiment. The research questions reflect this thesis, that government support is needed to integrate placemaking practice as a standard activity in city development processes.

The Liveable Neighbourhoods Community Design Code is currently Western Australian state planning regulation. It was first trialled from 1998 and adopted as planning law in 2007 (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2009). Its geographic focus is Perth, the capital of Western Australia. The evolution of the regulation reveals how planning for place was occurring before it was formally articulated, and then how placemaking and its language became integrated as the theories and practice of placemaking grew in influence.

From the 1960s Perth housing was delivered through car-dependent living in low-density dormitory suburbs (Newman and Kenworthy, 1999). There is limited experience of ‘placeness’ as a reflection of local landscape, community, and culture; neither is there a mix of housing type, walkability, or vibrant main streets connected to public transport. By 1998, the Liveable Neighbourhoods Community Design Code (The Neighbourhood Code) had begun a trial period. Its primary purpose was ‘the design of neighbourhoods and towns that aims to achieve compact, well-defined and more sustainable urban communities’ (Western Australian Planning Commission, 1998). This purpose was in stark contrast to the government’s extant development control policies. The new focus was ‘to provide for an urban structure of walkable neighbourhoods clustering to form towns of compatible mixed uses in order to reduce car dependence for access to employment, retail and community facilities’ (Western Australian Planning Commission, 1998). Initially, the language of place and placemaking was not included, but as the regulation moved from trial to implementation to mandatory requirement, this language became integrated. This is evidence of the emergence of place in the planning governance lexicon: ‘This updated edition of Liveable Neighbourhoods also marks several significant milestones in the evolution of the WAPC’s policies for the creation of new urban places’ (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2009).

The Neighbourhood Code is placemaking as a large-scale strategy. Placemaking is implicit in its planning model of 400m and 800m walkable catchments prioritising the central place of those catchments. It valorises the centre place above its peripheral places, seeing these as vibrant urban main streets supported economically by a walkable suburban hinterland. This is a long lever: that a more sociable place will arise when a car-dependent monoculture is reduced, and walkable diversity is increased. The planning model references the new urbanist transect (Steuteville, 2018) with The Neighbourhood Code being awarded the United States-based Congress for New Urbanism Charter Award in 2001 (Congress for New Urbanism, 2001).

Significant to this study and practitioners is that placemaking can occur without the term being used. The Neighbourhood Code does not define place, sense of place, or placemaking. It leaves this up to the land developers to self-define and deliver ‘a thoughtful sense of place’ at the design or tactical level (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2009). This represents a loosening of executive power which has arguably allowed the planning and development industry to innovate and deliver a new kind of Australian urbanism, ironically in the country’s most isolated city. The success of The Neighbourhood Code can be seen in the increased quality of Perth’s suburban development during the mining boom of the 2000s, with new suburbs such as Clarkson in the north (alongside a freeway reserve train station), Ellenbrook’s various multi-award winning and evolving villages in the east, and Wellard, centred on a new train station, in the south. The maturation of these planned estates into spaces that encourage walking and a more urban sense of place is occurring (Hooper et al., 2015). This is evidence that the placemaking strategy of The Neighbourhood Code, though not explicitly named, has been successful.
When place is used for other purposes: New South Wales Government Architect, 2017, Better Placed – an integrated design policy for the built environment of New South Wales

Better Placed is current New South Wales Government policy produced by its Office of the Government Architect. While Better Placed is for the whole state, Sydney, like other Australian state capitals, contains the majority of the state’s population and economic power and is arguably Australia’s only global city.

However, the population is now centred on Parramatta, 20km to the west of central Sydney, and suburban areas have continued to grow a further 20km westward. These areas have a different sense of place to the well-known harbour topography such that the urban centres in and around eastern Sydney continue to attract people for work and housing. Grappling with population growth in established areas, the New South Wales planning system has boldly named dwelling targets for local government to meet (Visentin, 2017). This requires an increase in residential densities in highly valued places, known for their beauty and urban amenity. Planning, architecture, urban design, and placemaking are being called on to apply their expertise to this problem. Implicit here is the idea that good design can help communities to accept new and denser development. The document is reinforcing that growth is inevitable and that local places will change.

Despite its title, the document reveals it is essentially a tool for the promotion and procurement of good design. Placed in the context of the title is a play on words, where place becomes a verb, not a noun. At one level it usefully activates the idea of place — placedness — but at another level it implies that designers will be better placed as a result of the policy. Seventeen of the document’s 39 pages explain design, what designers do, and why they should be engaged. It has much in common with the earlier National Urban Design Protocol (Infrastructure Australia, 2011), which it cites as having had ‘limited impact in the NSW planning system’ (New South Wales Government Architect, 2017, p. 15). However, unlike the national protocol, Better Placed does define placemaking:

Place-making: Proposes a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. ‘Place-making’ looks at understanding the local community with the intention of creating public spaces that promote health and well-being.


While Objective 1 of the policy is Better Fit, which is defined as ‘contextual, local and of its place’, of more interest to this analysis of placemaking governance is Objective 6:

Better Value – creating and adding value. Good design generates ongoing value for people and communities and minimises costs over time. Creating shared value of place in the built environment raises standards and quality of life for users, as well as adding return on investment for industry.


This is a better definition of placemaking than the document’s own definition and more useful to the endeavour of integrating placemaking into planning governance. (Planning, after all, is about negotiating different perceptions of value between the development proponent and the stakeholders for whom the development impacts.) Less effective are the statements that go with
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this value-added objective as they do not shed light on how to go about creating shared value in a place, but instead defend high up-front construction costs in the light of lower lifetime operating costs (New South Wales Government Architect, 2017, p. 43). As valid as this may be, it echoes common sentiment that good design (vis à vis architecture) costs more. This contributes to elitist perceptions of the architecture profession. This document, of all the documents reviewed, represents the least shift in planning governance and a loosening in executive and professional power. There is mention of the importance of engaging local communities in decisions about the built environment, but it is minor (New South Wales Government Architect, 2017, p. 28). The opportunity to outline how to create shared value through placemaking practice was not taken, which is ironic given the document’s action-oriented title. It may be that bottom-up placemaking approaches represent a threat to the top-down power of those who procure architecture, and those who design and deliver buildings and public realm. This is also a recent document, so analysing its impact on integrating placemaking practice in NSW planning is not yet possible. However, given it is light on this detail, the author suspects its impact will be limited.

The place is the reason for planning: Victorian Government, 2019, Movement and Place in Victoria

The 2019 Victorian Government policy Movement and Place in Victoria (Department of Transport, 2019) is an emerging framework to integrate land use and transport. It is inspired by the United Kingdom’s Link and Place approach (Jones et al, 2008) and is being deliberately adapted to a Victorian context. The purpose of the new approach is sound – that having an efficient transport network moving large volumes of people at high speed is pointless if this network, at the outset, destroys the very same places and reasons for the movement. This is a concession by government and engineering professionals to the power of people’s connection to place.

Melbourne’s population growth is driving these shifts in thinking as the city’s pre-car movement infrastructure (tram corridors, main streets, laneways) are also some of its most valued places. The mainstreaming of place into transport planning and engineering is evident in the title and throughout the document. Evidence of the role of placemaking is harder to come by as the term itself does not appear in the document. This is an example of how the concept of place can capture imaginations, like the National Urban Design Protocol (Infrastructure Australia, 2011) and Better Placed. Place is an implicitly understood term, but the notion that making places could be gone about in a deliberate way is not understood, at least in professions that have recently adopted it, like transport planning. Even more concerning is that placemaking here is ‘reduced’ to placekeeping. Community perspectives are evoked in terms of what is existing, rather than what might be. This raises the conundrums of future or preferred neighbourhood character already extant in the Victorian planning system (Dovey et al., 2010). There are risks that place and placemaking become a proxy for protecting my place at the expense of needed urban change. For example:

The Movement and Place Framework’s common language… supports meaningful engagement between the state and local governments and stakeholders and the community. The Framework helps to improve consistency in how transport projects and plans are communicated and discussed with the community. At a time when communities are expecting a greater say in transport and infrastructure decision-making, movement and place provides opportunities to have discussions about how we can address and prioritise our future transport challenges.

(Department of Transport, 2019)
Placemaking would seem to have come full circle. Road planning was responsible for the first showdown between government engineers and placemaking, and now placemaking, or at least place, has begun trickling back across to the same profession. The increasing collaboration between, and breaking down of, professional silos is, however, a positive sign for the future of cities to be less about professional power and functional prowess and more about people’s wellbeing. The success of this document in establishing better placemaking practice cannot yet be gauged owing to the short period since its publication. As a prescriptive framework, it will need to be translated into legislation to enable development controls that protect and envision current and preferred future places. Melbourne is a city working to reduce car-dependence and has recognised the poor place outcomes that planning for the car can deliver – hence Movement and Place. The restructuring and combining of Victorian planning and transport governance and the devolution of traffic engineering voices in transport planning (Carey, 2019) could be the opportunity to empower placemaking in the way this document prescribes.

The integration of placemaking in to planning governance

The following evaluates and organises the extent to which placemaking has been successfully integrated into planning governance through two key findings drawn from the research questions. The first relates to the perceived value of placemaking and the second to whether governance delivers practice.

There is a direct relationship between a high value applied to placemaking and its successful integration into planning governance. When discussing how placemaking has been integrated into planning governance, it is useful to learn from its value, which can be implicit or explicit. Placemaking has been occurring for as long as there have been people, but it is only recently that it has become a legible and valued movement. From this perspective, the earlier Neighbourhood Code is an important demonstration of the allocation of a high value to place and placemaking, although it was not named at first. Placemaking was successfully integrated through planning legislation that implicitly, yet powerfully, focused places for people at its spatial core.

The latter case studies explicitly name the theory of placemaking, but there are varying degrees of value allocated. Better Placed, for example, poorly defines placemaking and devalues the term in that the concept appears to have been co-opted for political purposes. Placemaking has been used to defend the planning and design elite and bolster professional silos in a growing city rather than deliver the new collaborative governance which is essential to placemaking. In the case of Movement and Place, the power of place has given voice to aspirations to change planning in a genuine effort to make places in new suburbs and keep places in existing main streets. This is seen in the radical overhaul to planning governance it represents. Movement and Place implies that place is at least as valuable as movement – place is integrated as 50 per cent of the decision-making matrix in planning the future of Melbourne’s transport corridors. The case studies reflect that planning is a profession tasked with governing the tensions of city growth. They present place and placemaking as a means to manage these tensions, ranging from the defensive to the aspirational. The defensive posture aligns with a low placemaking value, and the aspirational posture aligns with a high placemaking value. By extension, a high value leads to greater potential for placemaking theory to be successfully integrated into planning governance. This is not to say that this will lead to on-the-ground placemaking practice, as evidenced by the second key finding.
Integrating the theory of place is not the same as delivering the professional practice of placemaking

Placemaking is an ongoing endeavour, so its impact on planning governance, broader professions, and the built environment will cumulatively build, or not, over time. The documents reviewed began to articulate place as a theoretical objective, but less effectively integrated actual placemaking practice to deliver on-the-ground urban outcomes. This is an important distinction. The creation of places through these documents has come about inadvertently – the permission to innovate is not the same as describing the innovation. Governments have a leadership role in the Australian development context, and certainly prescribe planning practice. It follows then, that over time governments may begin to prescribe placemaking practice as it becomes established as a profession.

The oldest document, *The Neighbourhood Code*, has evolved Perth’s suburban development with on-the-ground results of sustainable main streets, mixed and denser form, less car dependence, and more opportunity for grassroots-activated public places. *The Neighbourhood Code* was also, paradoxically, the only document that did not use the terms ‘place’ and ‘placemaking’ (in the first instance). However, by the time it was a mandatory control, the language of place and placemaking had been integrated. It would be interesting to understand more of how *The Neighbourhood Code* captured a kind of placemaking zeitgeist in the history of Western Australian planning governance. *Better Placed* and *Movement and Place* are new design and planning policies, so evaluating impact on placemaking practice and urban outcomes is difficult. In the former case, success will depend on how much New South Wales’ communities, as it states, ‘can use Better Placed to understand good design practices and how they deliver benefit to their neighbourhoods, streets, cities and towns (and) help the community to participate in the conversation about design and review processes that affect their local places’ (New South Wales Government Architect, 2017). *Movement and Place* is a policy document written as a practice framework. It brings challenges to the traffic engineering and transport planning professions to recognise placemaking as an important tool in responding to the real spatial pressures of narrow streets in the Melbourne place context. How this challenge unfolds on the ground depends on placemaking practice growing in strength and influence in planning governance, which leads to the final discussion.

Three dynamics that the integration of placemaking practice brings to planning governance

*Increased cross-sectoral collaboration*

Placemaking practitioners will by nature collaborate and avail themselves of all relevant evidence when negotiating development outcomes with planners. In the case of *The Neighbourhood Code*, a planning control, this expertise came from the economic and transport planning sectors in order to integrate sophisticated urban development practice into suburban contexts. It did this by delivering an evidence base of the power of aggregate economies in capital (retail spending) and movement (passing trade) to deliver viable centres (places). This was to challenge conservative planning views of activation potential in well-located places, as much as safeguard against optimistic views of vibrancy in poorly located places. *Movement and Place* shows evidence of the trickle of place theory across into professions parallel to planning. Therefore, as placemaking grows in influence, planning professionals will be challenged to be the collator of a more comprehensive and alternative set of data delivered by the placemaking practitioners. The delivery of
this data should therefore be organised in such a way as to be of most help to the planner, such as being sanctioned by planning statute.

The transition from planning trend to standard practice
Understanding that place and placemaking are evocative concepts, the placemaking movement would benefit from practitioners continuing to raise popular awareness and sustain the trend. However, continuing to scope, procure, and deliver placemaking projects is more important. This will challenge and hopefully change conventional planning practice as the positive evidence mounts. Given Australia’s modernist planning agenda, there is a real risk, if projects aren’t delivered, that the post-modern placemaking movement will be diluted and eventually forgotten. Placemaking will continue to be vulnerable if it does not deliver its projects through planning frameworks, strategies, and policies. Practitioners will need to make the case with the planning profession as to how placemaking is a direct influencer of quality urban outcomes. This case will need to be made differently in every planning jurisdiction as the mechanisms will vary, as per the successful Neighbourhood Code in Western Australia. Fortunately, in Australia, the opportunities to move through a challenging professional transition are being created by the ongoing reform of the various state planning systems (Department of Transport, Planning and Infrastructure, 2020).

Ensuring authentic placemaking
The token use of place and placemaking in the Better Placed document is a cautionary tale for the placemaking movement and its integration into planning practice. If the movement is to prosper and deliver better places, it should consider becoming organised in its advocacy across professions for authentic placemaking. Making cities is complex work and there are multiple professions challenged (and aroused) by the inclusiveness and innovation of placemaking, including architects and planners. There is also the problem that the term placemaker suggests practitioners ‘just make places,’ thereby becoming professionally siloed. In the author’s experience, placemaking practitioners are imperturbable when it comes to other professions being the Trojan horse in which placemaking enters through the walls of city planning. For example, urban design, architecture, economic development, transport planning, and community engagement all have a role to play. Better Placed shows that the built environment professions are capable of advocating for place and placemaking. However, this advocacy will not be consistent or authentic if the placemaking movement does not better define the full breadth of placemaking practice for the planning profession.

Conclusion
It can be seen in this survey of three slices of planning history in Australia that planning governance has, by varying degrees, begun to mainstream place and placemaking. In the highly contested space of city development, the idea of place has penetrated planning policies, strategies, and laws, and has been popularised by government codes, principles, and activities. However, integrating the practice of placemaking itself has not been as successful. The evidence points to a token understanding that making places could be gone about in a deliberate and strategic manner and that this can be enabled by good planning governance.

In conclusion, the case studies are summarised in three recommendations for placemaking practice if it is to continue to grow and be influential. The recommendations have direct
implications for planning governance and how placemaking is described in its movement from policy to effective practice. The recommendations are relevant for jurisdictions outside Australia, especially where placemaking is more nascent. First, monitor and guard the use of the terms ‘place’ and ‘placemaking’ in planning documents; be alert to place and placemaking being used inauthentically by governments, communities, and the planning and design professions, especially where they relate to protectionist agendas, in order to avoid the placemaking movement becoming ineffectual. Second, collaborate with a wide range of professionals to deliver placemaking projects; seek collaborative projects with all built environment professions and continue to deliver on-the-ground placemaking projects in order to grow the planning evidence of the benefits of placemaking. Third, integrate placemaking practice in planning frameworks; advocate for the establishment of robust bottom-up placemaking strategies within metropolitan planning systems as they are progressively overhauled in response to paradigm shifts in city-making, especially the devolution of traditional top-down power structures.

As the planet continues to urbanise, the opportunities to make better places and cities will continue to arise and at a faster rate. In Australia, the placemaking journey has only just begun – there is an eager constituency, and the planning profession is taking notice. There are currently, however, limited documented examples of how governance structures are adapting to the power of place and integrating placemaking. This chapter sets some directions for placemaking and planning practitioners everywhere who can rise to the challenge of seeing this occur in order to make places that are meaningful to people.

Bibliography


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