

Professor Andrew Jakubowicz

The Politics of Space: the political dimension of control and use of urban land

## **Our City home**

Sydney is a city slowly being strangled by its mishandling of the opportunities offered by globalisation. Its public housing is archaic, its planning desultory, its transport system is in a state of nervous collapse, and its politics becomes ever more feral. The cultural diversity that was once its strong point has become soured by administrative incompetence and social prejudice. What options might an enlightened population pursue for a cosmopolitan and creative future, rather than one reeking of pollution in a stagnant wasteland of lost hopes and failing capacities? How can a different "politics of the local" in which co-operation is the keystone contribute to a better future?

Thirty years ago I arrived in Bradford in the UK, after two years of wandering across Asia and Europe. Bradford had a reputation then, and has kept it to this day, of being a tough city with deep fissures in its social fabric. Its "sink" Council housing estates such as Buttershaw, close to England's highest village, were damp-ridden and rotting concrete cell-blocks, their desperate tenants trapped in the slipstream of globalisation. These places rarely produced major players in the affairs of state yet they taught me about the courage and persistence that is required for people to make a life in a world turned against them.

Down the road – 300 km via the M1 – another group of tenants was watching their world disintegrate, their lives due to be swept away by the globalising tsunami of Thatcherite Britain. On the south side of the Thames just downstream from Waterloo bridge behind the old Oxo factory runs Coin Street. Local residents were facing a potential future in which they would be expelled to the far suburbs, their remaining networks dissolved, and their homes replaced by new offices and businesses of the neo-con revival. But that did not happen.

In a swift and machiavellian sidestep, the socialist Greater London Council ultimately sold the land over to a not for profit company (1 million pounds for 13 acres) , along with the adjacent river-side St Gabriel's wharf, and then was dissolved by Thatcher.

Over the past three decades the Coin Street Coop has prospered through its political orientation to the empowerment of tenant/owners, and the collaboration of creative professionals. What has struck me over the years as I have returned to view its development is the pride and care that the community has invested in the place. In 1984 they created the Coin Street Community Builders, which bought the freehold, and began the process. Here we have a new sort of way of doing urban housing, neither state owned nor privately exploitable. The property is vested in the common owners, who as tenants are trained into living and working together to make the community work. The planning they propel places lifestyle ahead of traffic flows, and gardens above profits. The housing cooperatives provide affordable accommodation for over 1000 low income people- from one bedroom to five bedroom flats and houses, while the community runs festivals, galleries, child care, and educational support services.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch... Sydney's Thatcherite moment is not yet over. In fact it appears to stretch interminably into a smoke-riven future, with crumbling state services run under authoritarian, isolating and punitive regimes which segregate and divide those least able to survive the metropolitan mashup; or private housing so expensive that its main value is to the banks whose profits come from those escalating prices. Hanging off the edge is that very Sydney creation, the PPP, where private stands for profit, and public stands for government, and the public are not partners.

Can these forces be addressed by the community so the trend lines slow or reverse? Is there a public desire to do so? Or is urban management simply a bureaucratic strategy to contain and control the downside of urban growth while ramping up the profitability of the upside?

Cities can be understood as systems for allocating opportunities among populations: location is thus both an expression of and a contributor to life chances. Sydney works as an allocator of those scarce resources that are crucial in determining life opportunities, and the longer term "social health" of the city and their population.

Urban analysts have pointed out these processes at work, demonstrating the intensifying "neighbourhood effect" that magnifies disadvantage and intensifies social exclusion. Given Sydney's claims to be Australia's only global city, it is logical that many of the consequences of globalisation are in evidence for the population of the city. Globalisation

essentially describes a process in which capital, culture, people and commodities circulate ever more rapidly, and do so increasingly across borders despite national government attempts at their control. In most cities and city regions affected by globalisation, particularly where there are some of the key drivers for globalisation located locally, a bimodal urban social map emerges. One part of the urban social world benefits greatly from the opportunities and returns associated with rapid growth, while another often larger but very much poorer part finds far fewer opportunities. Over time globalisation exacerbates the differences between the two city segments, pushing populations into a more bi-polar distribution, and building sedimented structures of disadvantage, with pockets of the other city remaining for a time.

### **Key factors in urban inequality in Sydney**

The factors involved in life opportunities have different weightings depending on one's point in the life cycle and one's background, particularly family financial and social capital. Broadly though we can tell quite clearly what these factors may be – income, education level and location of family of birth; one's own educational attainments and school (these are not independent variables); one's health status; one's disability status; one's fluency and literacy in English; the quality of the local environment (pollution, disease incidence, availability of transport); access to public transport; availability of private transport; and one's capacity to optimise one's position in the many market relationships that criss-cross the city.

One of the key social determinants of personal success can be found in educational attainment, itself already affected by poverty and location. Jane Jacobs and Ruth Fincher refer to analyses of these relationships as “a located politics of difference” (Jacobs and Fincher 1998:2), arguing that we need to understand the way in which differences in both identity and opportunity intertwine to pattern cities' daily interactions.

Every part of the city is variegated, but the patterns overall remain starkly clear. The “urban question” is primarily concerned with two problems for late capitalism, the problem of the circulation of capital, and the problem of the reproduction of the social relations of capitalism. Brendan Gleeson discusses a range of processes which have undermined hope for the future in and of cities, to make a case that the deterioration of cities such as

Sydney is a consequence of uncontrolled capitalist development and the abandonment by governments of concerns for the quality of social reproduction.

Thus defensive social-class clumping into tight pockets of privilege, surrounded by spreading landscapes of exclusion, marks the emerging face of the city. The burgeoning urban landscape carries with it significant dangers for children, so that family income at pregnancy is a good predictor of future well-being. Particular concerns are for those families in which there are children under five, and an unemployed single mother. This group exhibits the highest rates of poverty, and its members tend to be concentrated in public housing enclaves, now mainly on the edges of the city. These locations have the poorest infrastructure and transport, and the least well-developed public amenities. These families may also live in the pockets of decaying housing in mid-distance suburbs, where private rentals consume much of their income.

### **Major patterns in urban inequality**

The impact of globalisation has been to raise average household incomes in Sydney, but not in ways that are necessarily experienced equally. While the differences between the top decile and the bottom decile of household incomes remain quite large, the average growth in incomes over the period from 1996 to 2001 was concentrated in the second to fourth deciles – populations overwhelmingly located in the aspirational suburbs of the cities. A recent AMP-NATSEM report on wealth and income in spatial terms notes that “Growing work divides were also evident when the types of jobs held by workers living within each postcode were examined. The white collar professions have increasingly gone to the richer postcodes. For example, the proportion of employed adults holding a managerial or professional job fell in the bottom 20% of postcodes but rose strongly in the top 20% of postcodes in the five years to 2001”.

As well “polarization” in Sydney has to be considered in terms of its differential and patterned relationship to social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity, race and disability. The city can either tend to reinforce and exacerbate the disadvantage associated with these categories, or it can seek to ameliorate them. It cannot be neutral.

In summary – the disparities in life opportunities are generated by differential or restricted access to good housing, good education, good health, a clean environment, safe

neighbourhoods, good jobs, good transport, and supportive social infrastructure; they reflect cultural, economic and personal resources on which communities can draw. Some of these factors are more responsive to governmental and community strategies, though all have social dimensions. In recent years, mainstream arguments about the reduction in disparities have focused on overcoming market failure – a central assumption in the Metrostrategy launched in 2005. The Metrostrategy seeks to amplify employment prospects along the western ring road, especially for less qualified and skilled workers, and makes some reference to environmental issues. It also seeks to expand cluster cores such as Liverpool, and accepts the low to medium density model of accommodation that Australia's suburbanites apparently crave. It does not deal with public transport other than to assume the future growth in private motor vehicle use; rail and busways are planned but have already been reduced in scale as a consequence of crises in state finances. As always, state government focus has been on guaranteeing the profitability of infrastructure providers so as to sustain the growth of private/public partnerships (PPPs). The burgeoning western corridor clearly attracts warehouse and distribution functions and to that extent contributes to the availability of lower-skilled employment, but it scarcely mirrors the golden arc to the east. Indeed it cements in the distinction between a global space and local/metropolitan space, while failing to deal with the issues of class and gender that have been identified as the core issues. Similarly it fails to relate to the rapid ageing of the population, with the creation of much larger pools of both the poor and well-off elderly likely to polarize life experiences at the end of life as well as traditionally, at the beginning. The ageing of the population will add to the disability issues requiring social support. The last national government had a constellation of policies that made an impact of locationally-differentiated life opportunities. The most potent of these are likely to be those changes to industrial relations and social support payments, which particularly have worsened the situation for people with lower skills in locationally under-resourced areas. These actions will reduce household incomes amongst the most marginal families and individuals, and also thereby reduce private expenditure in the localities. With the pressures on both public housing and cheaper private rental housing keeping rents high, and rental assistance declining as people drop out of the welfare benefits net, the housing crisis in the poorer localities will increase, rather than be reduced.

In addition its heavy funding of non-government education choices is to be continued by the present government and will draw more affluent families away from the state school system, committing their children to monocultural educational environments (at exactly the

time cosmopolitan capacities are increasingly important), and pushing state schools into more of a welfare and support rather than educational role overall

My argument then is that addressing market failure is only part of the answer. Gleeson and Randolph have proposed a series of principles – fairness, balance, inclusion, partnerships – to remedy the consequences of past inaction, and to embed new strategies for the future (Gleeson and Randolph 2002). However there are serious questions as to how such principles can be put into practice in a global city where the governance is fragmented, the economic trends are increasingly bimodal, and the planning structures are subordinated to sectoral private interests and served by political agents unwilling to plan for social equity.

So back to Coin Street. It's not a panacea, but at least it suggests that there can be other ways that work better than the current mess.