

Public perceptions of planning: unpacking resident perceptions and experiences of planning systems across Australia

Kristian Ruming

kristian.ruming@mq.edu.au

The Australian planning system is in a state of unrest with each of the state planning systems implementing widespread reform programs over the past 5-10 years. Planning system reform is also being played out internationally as governments strive to deal with the perceived failings and inadequacies of planning (Campbell et al. 2014). What differentiates Australian planning system reform from that occurring elsewhere is the complexity and multiplicity of systems, agendas and instruments being implemented. Unlike some countries, the Australian planning system is not coordinated by the national government, with constitutional authority for planning resting with the states. For routine planning matters this authority is delegated to local government. Australian planning is also characterised by a combination of discretionary merit-based planning similar to the UK and increasingly a more codified land use planning model found in America.

At the centre of these reforms lie the objectives of improving efficiency of development assessment, thereby simultaneously increasing the economic performance of the property market and improving housing affordability via increased supply (Gurran and Phibbs, 2013). To these ends, the primary theme from planning system reform across Australia is the push for economic growth via so called simplification of the planning process. Often expressed as 'cutting red tape', the planning system is positioned as a barrier to the effective operation of market mechanisms responsible for delivering (primarily) urban outcomes. The second theme is the push for independence, transparency and de-politicisation. In some states, a trigger for reform has been concerns over corruption or undue influence by some development actors. A third theme has been a push for increased community participation. However, the version of community participation envisaged within the

new planning frameworks is vastly different to that available in the past. The general trend across the states is to transfer participation to broader strategic visions, thereby reducing the opportunity for local involvement at the detailed planning and development stage often managed by local councils.

Despite the push to reform Australian planning systems, a significant gap in our knowledge of the implications of planning system reform remains: the general public (those who ultimately live with the outcomes of the planning system and the urban form it promotes) is largely absent in academic and policy debates. This paper starts to fill this gap by exploring the general public's opinion and experience of the planning system across all Australian states and territories (except the ACT). The paper is based on an online survey of 4,039 people. The paper explores what the public wants from the planning system, the influence of metropolitan strategic planning on their local area/city and the processes surrounding development assessment. Importantly, the paper maps residents' desire and willingness to engage with the planning system and what point in the planning process. The paper provides a detailed analysis of the differences in expectation and experiences of the planning system based on household structure, gender, age and income. Importantly, the paper integrates the geography of planning knowledge, comparing and contrasting the opinion of residents living in the inner suburbs, middle-ring suburbs, outer-ring suburbs, regional centres/cities, and rural locations.

In exploring resident perceptions and experiences across Australian states and territories, the paper makes a significant contribution to academic knowledge around public participation in planning and urban issues more broadly. To date much of the research has tended to focus on the 'not-in-my-backyard' (NIMBY) phenomenon. While, recent research have challenged simplistic NIMBY assumptions (Ruming et al., 2013), this paper takes this analysis further by exploring the latent understanding and propensity of the public to engage in urban issues. This paper draws data from a broader public, not just residents who have a direct connection to a particular planning/development decision. This expands our knowledge about community activism by placing location-based opposition within a broader context.

Equally, the project is significant as it explores the planning system as an important point of interaction between the state and citizens.

References

Campbell, H., et al. 2014. "Is There Space for Better Planning in a Neoliberal World? Implications for Planning Practice and Theory." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 34 (1): 45–59

Gurran, N., and P. Phibbs. 2013. "Housing Supply and Urban Planning Reform: The Recent Australian Experience, 2003–2012." *International Journal of Housing Policy* 13 (4): 381–407

Ruming, K.J., Amati, M. & Houston, D. (2012) "Multiple Suburban Publics: Rethinking Community Opposition to Consolidation in Sydney" *Geographical Research*, 50, 4, 421-435.