



Shaping the ideal city

How do we wish to live? It's a key question for a House of Representatives inquiry into sustainable cities. Valerie Brown considers the issues and outlines a framework for shaping the ideal city.

The city is the core of the Australian way of life. We flock to the beaches and are proud of the outback; but over three-quarters of us live in the cities. The other quarter of the population supports them. Humans have always shaped their social and natural environments through the ways they live. In every era, they have learnt to manage the changes they themselves have made, for their own survival. What is new is that the city has become the unit for both causing and responding to major global, as well as local, change; and the inhabitants want far more than mere survival. As 21st century citizens we seek a humane, just and sustainable future.

From the ancient Egyptians' worship of the life-giving Nile, and the druids' incantations for the seasons to continue, we moved on, to using our technology to shape a city almost any way we chose. This power has proved a two-edged sword. We must now reduce the heavy impact of life in cities on the long-term sustainability of the planet and revisit the ground rules for how we want to live. In 2003, the predicted temperature rise from global warming hit the world's most beautiful city, Paris, and 10,000 people died; the predicted sea rise claimed its first Pacific atoll.

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The thirty-year window of time to respond to the changes before disaster hits is documented in a combined report of the World Bank, United Nations and World Resources Institute, appropriately called *The Fraying Web*. The House of Representatives Environment Committee inquiry into sustainable cities has the potential to be the most important inquiry this century, with its terms of reference including a 'blueprint' for the decision-making process for ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement, and collaboration in bringing about urban development reform.

We are facing the age-old question: "How shall we live?" The answer does not lie in fixing this or stopping that. Nor does it lie only in the impact of cities on the physical environment. The task is to re-consider the whole pattern and rhythm of how a city works, plays, crosses generations, and houses its communities. As we move into the future we have to decide what to keep and what to leave behind. Utopias have become unfashionable, but it is utopian thinking that we need now.

Among the sad tales about cities and violence, cities and their harsh environmental impact, and cities as concrete jungles, it is easy to forget that Thomas Moore's original fifteenth century Utopia was a practical design for an ideal city.

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We now have the chance to think again about what has made the cities we already have great places to live in, and to build on that for a sustainable, health-giving, just and peaceful future.

There are classic jokes about Australian cities: 'In Perth they ask where did you come from; in Adelaide, what church do you belong to; in Melbourne, what school did you go to; in Sydney, how much money are you making; and in Brisbane, what beer do you drink?' There is no doubt about the vibrant sense of place and the diverse sources of community pride in our cities. There is no doubt, either, about the sincerity of the much-maligned local government sector in wanting to make cities better places to live. Healthy cities, sustainable cities, whole-of-community planning, place management, and consultations to determine community preferred futures are only a few of the many community-based sustainability action programs with utopian goals.

In 1990 the Local Sustainability Project published some rankings of amalgamated quality of life indicators for cities, linking socio-economic differentials and level of environmental health risk. We were inundated with requests from city planning officials about how such indicators could be woven into city planning and monitoring. Since then, compiling indicators of the good life in cities has become a growth industry. Early arguments about the choice between physical or social indicators have been



largely resolved. Cities such as Western Sydney and Newcastle in Australia; Seattle and Pittsburgh in the USA; and Hamilton in Canada annually prepare integrated goals and measures for the interactions between their people and place. The community has no difficulty in declaring its vision, if asked. However, there is considerable doubt whether that vision is ever applied in the necessary practical decision-making.

The concept of sustainability is still emerging from the mist. Can we say that we have a practical working agenda for government, specialist agencies and communities to follow? To some extent, yes. We know how to develop joint sustainability indicators as a basis for their collaboration. In addition, there are three well-established avenues of response to sustainability pressures, and



The future shape of Australia lies in the decisions being made in its cities.

five key modes of decision-making in play. The difficulty is that they are treated separately. The resulting fragmentation cancels out their effectiveness. Worse, far from collaborating, the different decision-making sectors and response strategies compete with each other in the same organisation and in the same place. The solution is not another new agenda, but integration of the current ones.

The three different, but not incompatible, sustainability agendas can be described as Sustainability Reform, Repair, and Wait-and-see. They run in parallel in most city administrations and in many community organisations, generating divisions between departments, and sometimes within them, on which route to take. The most recent moves lie in the reform category. Whole-of-city

sustainability strategies combine a social reform agenda with a concern for the state of the physical environment. Typically, they link local government and community in partnerships for action. Such strategies are in place in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, and in preparation in Sydney.

The older agenda of sustainable development, reconciling the aims of economic growth and environmental conservation, emerged as a strong influence with the World Commission on Environment and Development Report in 1987. This has mainly been translated into a reduce-and-repair-the-damage agenda. Not surprisingly, this has been the agenda most readily adopted at the city level, since city governments have always been charged with maintenance tasks.

The third sustainability agenda derives from a not-yet-proven, or the wait-and-see, approach to sustainability goals. This agenda is frequently linked to scepticism of the global predictions, and/or a conviction that technological changes will continue to resolve the issues. However, it can also be a factor of applying the precautionary principle: do no harm. Wait-and-see can lead to increase in ill-considered inner-city density and urban redevelopment programs, difficult to reverse. On the other hand, it can lead to waiting for the results of comprehensive collaboration and worldwide review of the options.

Decisions on sustainability issues require more than mere consultation between community, specialist advisers, and government: the traditional decision-making sectors in civic affairs. These three decision-making modes are more often in conflict than agreement. They argue from widely diverse but equally valid evidence bases, and choose different but equally effective response strategies. The collaboration required to pull in the same direction needs far more than listening to each other, although that is at least a start. It requires respect for each others' capacity to deal with issues within their own sectors, and a willingness to take part in whole-of-community collaboration.

As an example, here is a sample story of a city with a polluted river, lake or beach (or any familiar Australian sustainability issue). *The local community want the polluted area cleaned and maintained to a pristine state, for the sake of their recreation and their health: a reform*

agenda that they may not realise requires changes in their own social behaviours as well as technical solutions. Expert advice agrees that there is the technical capacity to repair the damage, but differs widely on the value and costs of various clean-up regimes. Government is conscious of the needs of the local industry, the major local employer and ratepayer, and would prefer to wait-and-see whether cleaner industrial processes can



solve the problem by themselves. Meanwhile, the quality of life and the quality of the environment in the city continue to drop. Local individual leadership seeking collaboration does exist, as do holistic ideas of how to focus on a common goal. However, traditional consultation processes are based on opposition and debate, not on collaboration and dialogue, and ignore these contributions. The impasse can continue for years.

In any one city, working towards sustainability requires collaborative decision-making to be attached to some action (see Figure 1). First, there needs to be a combined and agreed decision on the city sustainability goals, *what should be*. Next comes a review of the current condition of people and place from each of the five perspectives: a comprehensive set of measures of *what is*. Once the goals are agreed, and the needs are known, then the reform agenda seeks to identify the potential for the most innovative and effective strategies: *what could be*. It is at this stage that the measures of the priority goals are translated into a holistic suite of headline indicators of what could be, one that the full set of collaborators can equally follow.

Matching actions test the potential in practice, monitoring each step in order to find out *what can be*. This seems to be a missing step in the history of sustainable cities projects, where it is often found that there is a mass of documents, and even firm regulations, but the step to action is the missing link. Evaluation of the action and its outcomes is a crucial learning step for all five of the key

decision-making sectors, individual change agents, the local communities, specialist advisers, governments and a shared holistic focus.

The Decision-into-Practice framework in Figure 1 has been developed with Australian councils and community groups in collaborative projects with the Local Sustainability Project over the past five years. The four steps of the D4-P4 cycle actually form a learning spiral, since the goals and the people and place will change in each cycle of collaboration, as sectors learn from each other. At the completion of one project, a Local Restructure Plan, which usually receives 2 to 300 objections, received 6. In another, the process unearthed a road on the drawing board that would have divided the town in two. The collaborative

The future shape of Australia, and of its planet, lies in the decisions being made in its cities. Their richness and diversity are matters for national pride. In the short time, by northern hemisphere standards, they have had to develop strong relationships between people and place, their sense of identity and hope for the future is remarkable.

The issues for achieving sustainability of what is socially valued and physically necessary in our cities lie in the capacity for utopian thinking. This does not mean hoping for the impossible, but accessing the synergy that emerges from collaboration between those who live in a city, when they work towards a shared vision of an exciting, innovative and sustainable future. ■

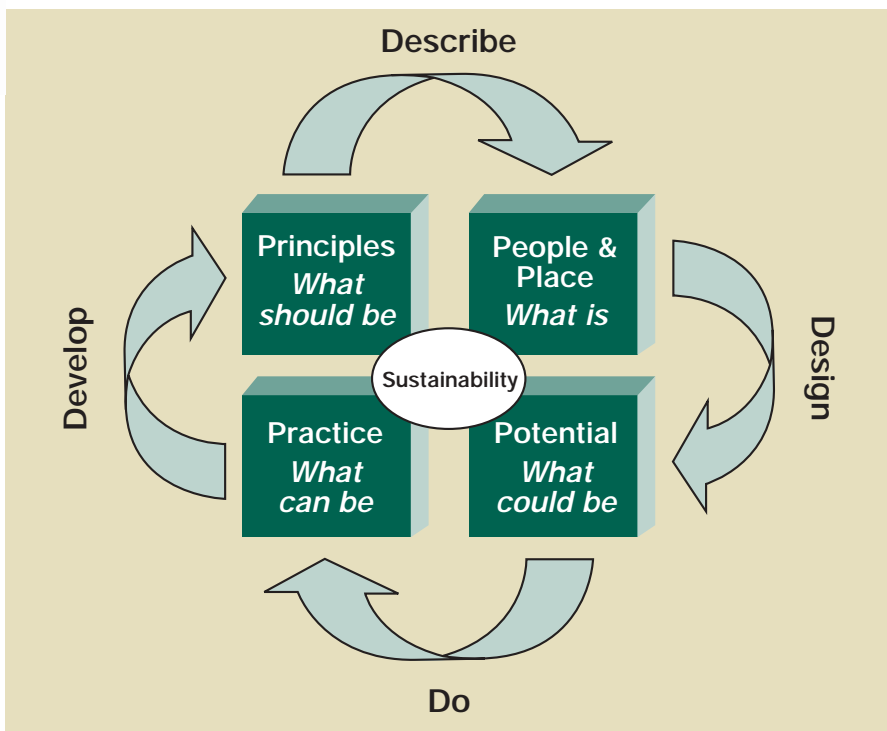


Figure 1. Integrative Decision-making for Sustainable Cities: D4-P4 Decision-in-Action Framework

process resulted in a by-pass road, to everyone's satisfaction. Collaboration on local sustainability goals is possible.

Collaboration is possible, but it requires commitment, resources, time and the appropriate processes for those people in that place. Examples of literally thousands of collaborative processes in which cities worldwide have matched their local visions with their local needs and resources can be found on the Internet. Examples are at Sustainabilityindicators@yahoo.com and www.sustainability.org.au and www.earthcharter.org

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For more information on the House of Representatives Environment Committee inquiry into sustainable cities visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/environ or email environment.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4580.