

# Simpler, Faster, Cheaper - Australia's Urban Aspirations and the Planning Reform Agenda

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## Abstract

Urban policy and reform are high on the political agenda at all levels of Australian government. Capital city planning frameworks must deliver globally competitive regions which are “*productive, sustainable, liveable and socially inclusive and are well placed to meet future challenges and growth*” (Department of Infrastructure and Transport, 2011), while at the same time responding to ongoing pressure for efficiency-based administrative reforms (COAG Reform Council, 2011). In contrast to the ambitious strategic objectives, reform agendas largely focus on productivity gains which are perceived might flow from deregulation. This disconnect implies significant potential conflict between the ambitious strategic plans and the regulatory processes on which they depend for implementation. The demands on strategic planning continue to expand while the means of delivery are diminishing.

In this paper we examine this tension with reference to the alignment, or misalignment, of urban policy aspirations and reform to regulatory systems and processes. We focus on a sample of metropolitan strategic plans (for Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth) and corresponding state planning reform agendas, considering both the substantive underlying objectives as well as the delivery mechanisms for implementation. We use content analysis techniques to establish and compare the overt and underlying thematic claims and concerns of both sets of documents. The analysis will show that many of the reforms potentially undermine wider objectives for city liveability, environmental resilience and social inclusion. We also demonstrate a growing trend of policy transfer between jurisdictions, evident in both the aesthetic and semantic content of metropolitan plans and the reform directions pursued.

## Introduction

The characterisation of planning as a set of burdensome bureaucratic requirements which hamper development and restrict growth is one frequently expressed by the development industry and with widespread traction in public discourse and even within government circles. It is often posited that planning processes have become too cumbersome, lack certainty, add costs to development applications which stifle economic activity and exacerbate housing unaffordability. Responding to global and national economic challenges as well as local pressures and interests, various Australian state authorities have embarked upon ambitious planning reform agendas to amend their regulatory and assessment systems (Gurran, 2011; Ruming, 2011a; b; Searle & Bunker, 2010a; 2010b; Piracha, 2010). The common narrative and key objective of these reform agendas has been to ‘cut red tape’ (Ruming et al, 2012).

Simultaneously however, the demands on planning have expanded. There are a multitude of imperatives to which city planning must respond in an increasingly urbanised world. Australian cities are faced with multiple challenges around growing populations, transport and logistical requirements, environmental imperatives and threats to social equity and cohesion. Planners must attempt to devise strategies that increase efficiencies, promote liveability, embrace community concerns over change and offer environmental protection. New metropolitan plans are generally intended to promote economic prosperity, manage growth, protect environmental sustainability and provide direction for future development in the face of rapid population growth and increased globalisation. But can

Australian planning systems become simpler, faster, and cheaper and still deliver on these expanded goals?

Planning systems in Australia are in a constant state of change and evolution (Hamnett and Freestone, 2000; Gleeson and Low, 2000). Major structural changes to the planning system tend to occur when there is a change in government (Ruming et al, 2012) or in times of crisis (e.g. the global financial crisis). This has certainly been the case over the last five or so years where a number of states have elected conservative governments: Western Australia (2008, 2013), Victoria (2010), New South Wales (2011) and Queensland (2012). It was also the case during the early 2000s when state governments were all Labor-controlled (Bunker, 2009). In each of these states the newly elected governments immediately set about reviewing and reforming their statutory planning frameworks, metropolitan strategic plans and/or primary planning legislation. Each state proclaimed that the planning systems they had inherited from the previous state Labor governments were over-regulated and bedevilled with inefficient decision-making structures that were inhibiting economic growth and precluding the delivery of key policy objectives – most notably, housing supply and affordability (Gurran, 2011; Ruming, 2011a; 2011b; Searle & Bunker, 2010a; 2010b; Piracha, 2010).

Despite this convergence in the direction, visions and aims/objectives of the strategic planning frameworks in WA, Victoria, NSW and elsewhere there appears to be a strategic policy disconnect between the statutory planning systems and metropolitan planning strategies. Contemporary metropolitan plans might be seen as ‘visioning instruments’ that depict an idealised urban future premised on a series of key principles and aspirations that are difficult, if not impossible, to oppose. Simultaneously the various reforms to the statutory planning system - new legislation (NSW and Victoria), the ‘depoliticisation’ of planning decision-making via the creation of ‘independent panels’ (WA) and the centralisation of decision-making in relation to state significant projects (NSW, WA and Victoria) – all form part of a ‘rolling back’ of planning regulation (Thornley, 1991; Peck and Tickell, 2002). This represents a specific challenge to the policy visions and aspirations contained in metropolitan strategies. The ability of metropolitan strategies to be implemented depends upon the existence of firm planning legislation (for instance, local zoning provisions and development controls) however these planning tools are either being streamlined, ‘hived off’ and even dismantled. In other words, the visions presented in metropolitan plans run the risk of being perceived as political rhetoric and nothing more than ‘planning brochures’.

### **Australian Metropolitan Strategic Planning**

At their most simplistic metropolitan plans are ‘a strategic plan for managing change in urban regions’ (Gleeson et al., 2004). Most Australian cities have broad, metropolitan-wide planning strategies that operate as the framework for local government planning schemes (Gurran, 2011; Bunker & Searle, 2009; Gleeson et al. 2004). Nevertheless, political support for strategic planning has ebbed-and-flowed; with strategic metropolitan planning often low on the agenda for some state governments.

In an era where Australia’s capital cities are increasingly facing challenges associated with population growth, infrastructure shortfalls, environmental challenges (particularly climate change) and globalisation, the past decade has been characterised by a flurry of new strategic spatial plans. These plans have sought to manage Australian cities and mobilise a future vision of the city as both an environmentally sustainable and economically productive and competitive spatial system. This flurry of activity has been described as indicative of a ‘revival’ of strategic planning and an (re)assertion of a new role in sustainable environmental management and economic growth, despite the influence of neo-liberalism in Australian urban planning (McGuirk, 2005).

This ‘revival’ of strategic planning in Australia commenced in the early 2000s. This period witnessed a flurry of ‘new’ strategic metropolitan plans produced by recently elected and/or re-elected Labor state governments: *Melbourne 2030: Planning for Sustainable Growth* (2002); *Network City: Community Planning Strategy for Perth and Peel* (WA Government 2004); *City of Cities: A Plan for Sydney’s*

*Future* (NSW Government, 2005); *South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005-2026* (Queensland Government, 2005); and *Planning Strategy for Metropolitan Adelaide* (SA Government, 2006)

This revival was stimulated, amongst other things, by a renewed political interest and desire to reform and reinvigorate state planning systems and a need to react to the ‘public outcry among the public and developers (in particular) about the lack of purpose and certainty in the direction of metropolitan growth and change’ (Searle and Bunker, 2010b p. 166). In addition to the development of metropolitan plans, state governments during this period (2000-2008) also introduced, at different times, state strategic plans and/or infrastructure strategies thus signalling the emergence of what might be termed **integrated multi-scalar strategic planning**. For Bunker (2011), the major discursive themes emergent in metropolitan plans during the first decade of the 2000s included:

- *Multiplicity of planning documents* (the fact that important planning instruments lay outside the metropolitan plan);
- *Centralisation* (the process by which the state removed authority from local government);
- *Sustainability* (planning as a response to growing environmental crisis);
- *Promoting economic development and enhancing competitiveness* (especially a longing for ‘global city’ status’);
- *Infrastructure provision* (as a means for shaping the structure of the city); and
- *The compact city* (as an idealised urban structure).

Appearing at the beginning of the documents, often repeated through summaries and introductions by Ministers and Premiers, urban visions are the broadest representation of urban futures for each city – grand narratives or discourses (McCallum & Hopkins, 2011). Adopting a more cynical position, Sandercock and Friedmann (2000, p. 530) argue that:

A so-called metropolitan strategy is first and foremost a political, rather than a planning, document... It sets out a new government’s long-term vision, intentions and proposals for action.

In the Australian context this certainly appears to be the case with new metropolitan strategic planning documents and policy reforms being produced in either the lead up to an election or, more commonly, after a new government has been elected as they attempt to translate their urban vision to the electorate. In an effort to demonstrate their (re)commitment to planning being a democratically-informed practice informed by strategic thinking and a strategic policy orientation and infrastructure a series of policy documents and draft metropolitan strategies have been released for public and stakeholder comment by the state government in WA (WA Government 2009a, 2009b 2009c, 2010; 2013); Victoria (Victorian Planning System Ministerial Advisory Committee, 2011, State Government Victoria 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) and NSW (NSW Government 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Although the planning systems in these three states are somewhat different from one another a common political rhetoric, policy discourse and aesthetic and set of policy objectives are detectable through all of these documents (Ruming et al, 2012; 2013) – see Table 1.

**Table 1: Capital City Metropolitan Plans: Visions and Key Objectives**

Strategy	Vision	Key Principles/Directions/Objectives
<b>PERTH</b>	<i>‘By 2031, Perth and Peel people will have created a world class liveable city: green, vibrant, more compact and accessible with a unique</i>	1. Liveable city 2. Prosperous city 3. Accessible city 4. Sustainable city

	<i>sense of place</i> '.	5. Responsible city
<p><b>MELBOURNE</b></p> 	<p><i>'The strategy's 40-year timeframe will provide opportunities to create a more productive, prosperous and liveable Melbourne'.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A distinctive city</li> <li>2. A globally connected/competitive city</li> <li>3. Social &amp; economic participation</li> <li>4. Strong communities</li> <li>5. Environmental resilience</li> <li>6. Polycentric city linked to regional cities</li> <li>7. living locally – a '20 minute' city</li> <li>8. Infrastructure investment</li> <li>9. Leadership &amp; partnership</li> </ol>
<p><b>SYDNEY</b></p> 	<p><i>'Sydney in 2031 will be one of the world's most dynamic and successful cities. Its strong economy and healthy environment will make it one of the most desirable places to live in the world'.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Balanced growth</li> <li>2. A liveable city</li> <li>3. Productive &amp; Prosperous city</li> <li>4. Healthy &amp; resilient environment</li> <li>5. Accessible &amp; Connected city</li> </ol>

In his review of metropolitan strategies, Bunker (2011) suggests that the similarities observed between metropolitan plans of the early and mid-2000s was very much a product of the uniform political landscape at the state level. With the recent transition to Liberal governments in WA, Victoria, NSW and Queensland, similarities might be expected between current state metropolitan strategies (and planning reforms). Whilst there might be slight variations in metropolitan visions promoted or aspired to between Liberal and Labor state governments realistically there is limited scope (or political desire) to reframe spatial urban visions given the path dependent nature of Australian metropolitan planning (Bunker 2012).

There is, a ubiquitous, generic and spatially displaced urban future promoted across Australian cities via their metropolitan plans. Despite subtle variations the plans promote a generic understanding of how cities should operate – a vision that pays little recognition of the complex and dynamic socio-spatial, historical, economic, political and physical specificities of each city. No doubt these visions display signs of planning practice group-think, plan mimicry and policy transfer. Six strategic themes are emergent between the visions for Sydney, Melbourne and Perth (and indeed as Ruming et al. 2013 show, to the other plans pertaining to the remaining Australian capitals). In all cases the visions outlined here are supported and further promoted via the principles/directions of objectives of the plans:

- **Accessibility:** ‘*accessible*’ used in Sydney, Perth, **Compact urban form:** ‘*compact and networked*’ used in Sydney and Perth; ‘*existing urban footprint*’ used in Sydney; ‘*compact city*’ as an objective in Melbourne.
- **Lifestyle/Liveable:** ‘*jobs, homes and lifestyle*’ used in Sydney; ‘*liveable and attractive*’ used in Melbourne; ‘*accessible*’ and ‘*vibrant*’ used in Perth; ‘*affordable*’ and ‘*liveable*’ used in SEQ; ‘*liveable and affordable*’ used in Darwin; ‘*liveable*’ used in Hobart.
- **Prosperity/Economic growth:** ‘*prosperous*’ used in Melbourne.; ‘*prosperous*’ an objective in Perth; ‘*growing Sydney’s economy*’ an objective in Sydney;
- **Global aspirations:** ‘*world class*’ used in Perth; global comparisons used in Melbourne [‘*one of the most ... in the world*’]; and ‘*global city*’ heavily promoted in the current Sydney Discussion Paper.
- **Environmental consideration:** ‘*green*’ used in Perth; ‘*existing urban footprint*’ used in Sydney; ‘*a green city*’ and ‘*sustainability*’ and ‘*resistance to climate change*’ are objectives in Melbourne.

There are multiple ways in which these key themes can be combined (and indeed the order of the themes is one point of difference between the plans). It is no coincidence that the urban visions traced here are reflected in the Objective of the Federal Government’s National Urban Policy, as discussed further below:

*To ensure that Australian Cities are globally competitive, productive, sustainable, liveable and socially inclusive and are well placed to meet future challenges and growth* (COAG Reform Council, 2012).

The question is whether these aspirations have any meaning in practice.

### **Planning System Reviews and Regulatory Reform**

The election victory of then leader of the ALP, Kevin Rudd, in 2007 marked the beginning of a ‘new era’ in federal government interest and intervention in Australia’s cities and their planning. The federal government’s previous forays into this policy domain have been few and far between - the Building Better Cities Program in the early 1990s and the creation of the Department of Urban and Regional Development under Gough Whitlam in the mid-1970s (Bunker and Ruming, 2010). The current wave of ‘renewed’ involvement in metropolitan Australia and urban policy by the federal government reflects an exercise in stealth meta-strategic policy (re)framing of the ‘metropolitan problem’ as a national policy concern and not an individual state matter.

Relatedly, in an effort to shape and influence both thinking and action in relation to strategic planning at the metropolitan scale, the federal government has engaged in agenda-setting politics via: the provision of funding for major state-based infrastructure projects; the release of four *State of Australian Cities* reports since 2010 (Major Cities Unit, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013); the development of a non-statutory *National Urban Policy* (Department of Infrastructure and Transport, 2011) and benchmarking the health and well-being of state planning systems via national reviews of state planning systems (COAG Reform Council, 2012).

These policy developments are part of a longer term COAG strategic policy agenda arising from the ongoing implementation of Australia’s former *National Competition Policy*, which was succeeded by Australia’s *National Reform Agenda* in 2006 (National Competition Council, 2011). The Productivity Commission (2011) was subsequently tasked with reviewing Australia’s planning and development control frameworks. Consistent with this agenda, the COAG Business Regulation and Competition Working Group was also developing a process for reviewing the efficiency and performance of state and local planning systems (see Table 2). In short, these various reviews amount to a mix of meta-strategic political and policy rethinking.

Table 2: National Reviews of Planning Systems and Performance

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Report(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>
Productivity Commission	<i>Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Planning, Zoning and Development Assessments</i>	2011
COAG Reform Council	<i>Review of Capital City Strategic Planning Systems; Report to the Council of Australian Government</i>	2011
Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council: COAG Business Regulation and Competition Working Group	<i>First National Report on Development Assessment Performance 2008/09</i>	2011

These various national reviews of the Australian planning system have been significantly underpinned by the views of the Development Assessment Forum (DAF), a national coalition of commonwealth and state government and the development industry, the latter having been somewhat influential in setting policy direction in this forum. Ultimately, the DAF (2005) has promulgated a model of simplified and nationally consistent planning and development assessment across Australia, arguing that this is needed in order to provide greater certainty and clarity for developers and investors and to ensure that economic growth is sustained. Although planning reform interventions across state jurisdictions share similar objectives and nomenclature, the prospects of a nationally harmonised planning system within Australia remain remote; even when state and federal governments are politically aligned.

One of the most interesting processes in relation to understanding and comparing metropolitan plans and state level reforms over the time period reported in this paper, relates to the review of capital city planning systems. Preceding this review, National Objectives and Criteria for Future Planning of Capital Cities (Table 3) were declared as a framework for evaluating the value, success and relevance of individual metropolitan plans.

**Table 3: National Objective and Criteria for Future Planning of Capital Cities**

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**OBJECTIVE**

*To ensure Australian cities are globally competitive, productive, sustainable, liveable and socially inclusive and are well placed to meet future challenges and growth.*

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**CRITERIA**

Capital city strategic planning systems should:

1. be integrated: -
    - a. across functions
    - b. across government agencies;
  2. provide for a consistent hierarchy of future oriented and publicly available plans;
  3. provide for nationally-significant economic infrastructure (both new and upgrade of existing);
  4. address nationally-significant policy issues;
  5. consider and strengthen the networks between capital cities and major regional centres, and other important domestic and international connections;
  6. provide for planned, sequenced and evidence-based land release and an appropriate balance of infill and greenfields development;
  7. clearly identify priorities for investment and policy effort by governments, and provide an effective framework for private sector investment and innovation;
  8. encourage world-class urban design and architecture; and
  9. provide effective implementation arrangements and supporting mechanisms.
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Source: adapted from COAG Reform Council (2012)

Moreover, these criteria were used to mediate federal funding to the states for major city-based infrastructure projects. In this sense the Objectives and Criteria come to embody an implied consensual strategic vision of how Australian cities should be structured and how they should function. This form of federal intervention might be viewed as a form of stealth 'state-craft' (Thatcher, 2003). As each state seeks to maintain federal funding commitments such 'state-craft' potentially works against the development of unique, context specific and responsive local strategic planning frameworks.

### **Benchmarking Strategic Planning Systems**

The COAG Reform Council's (2012) *Review of Capital City Strategic Planning Systems* used the National Criteria as the means of evaluating the strategic planning framework in each state. On its release the report prompted a flurry of national media reports which ranked the strategies and was used by some to either champion and/or denigrate individual planning systems. The national broadcaster, ABC News (2012), interpreted the findings of the Reform Council as follows:

A review of capital city planning strategies has delivered a scathing report into national infrastructure, finding none of Australia's cities fully meet the targets set by federal and state leaders. [...] Melbourne came in for the greatest criticism in the report. Transport and freight were identified as the worst pressure points [...] Adelaide received high praise for the city's Integrated Design Commission. [...] The review is critical of Sydney's drive towards "densification", and warns a delicate balancing act will need to be stuck between affordability, growth, productivity and sustainability. [...] While the Queensland government's cooperation with its federal counterparts was praised, the report found the state missed the mark on accountability and performance management, an issue that could cause headaches for the newly-elected Campbell Newman LNP government.

Media coverage and political boosterism aside, the release of this report represents an important moment in the history of metropolitan planning in Australia, as it, for the first time, seeks to compare and assess the strategicness of individual strategies against a single vision of effective metropolitan strategic planning. The key findings of the report vis-à-vis Perth, Melbourne and Sydney are outlined below in Table 4. In an effort to calculate an overall average score for each city the various qualitative assessment descriptors were assigned an ordinal value ranging from 0-3 (where 0 = lowest value and 3 = highest value). All criteria were treated the same and thus weighted equally. Hence, Partially consistent = 1; Largely consistent = 2; and Consistent = 3. Descriptors subject to 'reform pending' were given an additional +0.5/-0.5

Based on this simple formula, it can be seen that Perth's planning system is the 'best' performing one. However, this needs to be treated with some caution given that the WA government have been in power longer and their reforms have been in place relatively longer; the metropolitan strategies and reforms in NSW and Victoria are at an embryonic stage. Moreover, the review of the planning system adopted in NSW and Victoria have been more comprehensive in the sense that both governments established a panel of experts to conduct a holistic examination of the legal, institutional, policy, procedural and zoning frameworks that define both planning systems. And, both reviews have entailed extensive consultation and participation – although there are some concerns that whilst the review panels might be listening to people they are not necessarily hearing what people are saying.

**Table 4: National Review of Capital City Strategic Planning Systems**

Criteria	Perth	Score	Melbourne	Score	Sydney	Score
<i>Integration</i>	LC	2	PC	1	PC (rp)	0.5
<i>Hierarchy of Plan</i>	C	3	PC	1	PC	1
<i>Nationally Significant Infrastructure</i>	LC	2	PC	1	PC	1
<i>Nationally Significant Policy Issue</i>	LC	2	PC	1	LC	2
<i>Capital City Networks</i>	LC	2	LC	2	LC	2
<i>Planning for Future Growth</i>	C	3	LC	2	C	3
<i>Framework for Investment/Innovation</i>	PC	2	PC	1	PC	1
<i>Urban Design &amp; Architecture</i>	PC	2	LC	2	LC	2
<i>Accountabilities/timelines/Performance measures</i>	PC (rp)	0.5	NC	0	C (rp)	2.5
<i>Intergovernmental Co-operation</i>	PC	1	LC	2	PC	1
<i>Evaluation &amp; review cycles</i>	PC (rp)	0.5	PC	1	PC	1
<i>Consultation &amp; Engagement</i>	PC	1	PC	1	PC	1

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**Average Score**

**1.75**

**1.25**

**1.5**

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C = consistent; LC = largely consistent; PC = partially consistent; NC = not consistent; rp = reform pending.  
Source: COAG (2011)

## **Why Reform the Planning System?**

In short, the common narrative and key objective of the reform agenda as it relates to statutory planning has been about 'cutting red tape' (Ruming et al, 2012). This is symbolically and literally reflected, for example, on the front cover of the Western Australian Government's (2009) consultation paper on planning reform and an earlier Government of Victoria (2006) planning reform document. This emphasis on reducing or eliminating bureaucratic inefficiencies appears to be based on the notion that statutory planning systems are more concerned with operational and procedural policy issues rather than the achievement of strategic goals.

The parallel review and development of new metropolitan planning strategies - as well as regional, and, in some instances, state planning strategies (WA Government, 2013; Government of South Australia 2010) - has been underscored by a discursive narrative, at both the state and federal government levels, that emphasizes the need for Australia's capital city regions to plan big and act big – economically, environmentally and socially - in the face of projected population growth and demographic restructuring.

These two meta-reform exercises are designed, at least theoretically, to complement one another and thus enhance the synergistic linkages between metropolitan planning strategies and statutory planning systems, so that the strategic policy visions and objectives outlined in the former can be realised. Moreover, the current wave of reforms to state planning systems are clearly part of a wider *political strategy* of each recently elected Liberal/National Party state government. It seems clear, that the political strategies and, in turn, planning reforms being rolled out across Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane are emblematic of a post-political era of neo-liberal spatial governance (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010; Haughton et al, 2013).

Although a number of authors have explored the history and trajectories of Australian metropolitan strategies, few have articulated and explored the complex and potentially contradictory relationship between strategic metropolitan planning and legislative/regulatory reforms. The latter tend to emphasise procedural and operational facets of land supply and development control, rather than strategic levers for implementation. Searle and Bunker (2010a) have noted the importance of the development control system in facilitating the implementation of metropolitan strategies; however, more work is required to determine how procedural planning reforms might support the delivery of higher order environmental or societal objectives. In terms of planning reforms a level of demonstrated synergy, if not repetition in the design and implementation of reform interventions is also apparent. However, while there might be an alignment in the objectives of regulatory reform across Australian states, the extent to which these reforms align with the objectives of strategic planning policy is questionable.

## **Australian Planning Reform**

As already noted, the past decade has seen significant reforms to the legislative and regulatory frameworks surrounding planning and development across Australia (Table 5). Despite different legislative foundations and histories, the process of planning reform across the states has been characterised by significant level of consistency in objectives and structures of reform. At their most broad the reforms address perceived complexity, unnecessary bureaucracy, and time delays in planning processes (Gurran et al., 2009). Searle and Bunker (2010a) claim that recent reform to the

development control systems across Australia have sought to 1) generate/promote economic development and 2) reduce the scope for local opposition to, primarily, urban consolidation.

**Table 5: Australian planning reform 2005-2012**

<i>Jurisdiction</i>	<i>Key Reform Documents</i>	<i>Date</i>
ACT	Introduction to Planning System Reform	2008
	Planning and Development Act	2007
NSW	A New Planning System for NSW: Green Paper	2012
	Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment Bill	2008
	Improving the NSW Planning System	2007
NT	Planning Act	2007
QLD	Sustainable Planning Act	2009
	Planning for a Prosperous Queensland	2007
SA	Better Planning, Better Future	2008
	Think, Design, Deliver	2013
TAS	Review of the Planning System of Tasmania Final Steering Committee Report	2009
VIC	Reformed Zones for Victoria: a discussion paper on reforming Victoria's planning zones	2012
	Planning & Environment Act 1987 Review Discussion Paper	2009
	Making Local Policy Stronger	2007
	Cutting red tape in planning	2006
WA	Building a Better Planning System / Planning Makes it Happen	2009
	Planning and Development Act	2005

Source: adapted from Gurrán (2011)

A number of authors have suggested that the reforms represent a response to a growing neoliberalisation of the planning process as the planning system is repositioned as a facilitator of private enterprise, now the sector with increased responsibility for delivering much of the urban spatial vision promoted by metropolitan strategies (Gurran, 2011, Steele and Ruming, 2012, Gleeson and Low, 2000).

Even where planning systems are demonstrably inefficient, procedural change itself can have unpredictable effects, as the process becomes more complex with a resultant loss of certainty or institutional knowledge which facilitates a level of efficiency (i.e. the fact that applicants/developers know how to work the system) (Ruming, 2009; Steele and Ruming, 2012). The emphasis on efficiency also potentially downplays other aspects central to the functioning of cities as often presented through metropolitan plans: such as environmental sustainability, climate resilience, public transport provision, physical and social infrastructure, and the preservation of productive agricultural lands. Interestingly the current attempts at reform in South Australia appear to be addressing both substantive strategic issues - urban renewal and design - as well as improvements to process; integration, participation and efficiencies (Government of South Australia, 2013).

### Planning Reform in NSW, WA and Victoria

The legislative and regulatory frameworks in each of the three case study states have undergone significant restructuring in recent years. Table 6 below provides a summary of the headline reforms that have been undertaken in these states in recent years.

**Table 6: Key planning reform directions, selected Australian states, 2006-2012**

	Title	Red tape removal	Faster plan making	Faster assessment	Plan templates	Zone reform	Cod-ification	Panels
<b>NSW</b>	<i>A New Planning System for NSW Planning Green Paper 2012</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Vic</b>	<i>Cutting red tape in planning 2006</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	
	<i>Reformed Zones for Victoria 2012</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	
<b>WA</b>	<i>Planning Makes it Happen; a Blueprint for Planning Reform 2009</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓

NSW has experienced two recent rounds of reform – one under the previous Labor government and one under the current Coalition government. Reforms initiated under the Labor government sought to standardize, simplify and speed up the planning system through changes to planning instruments and through the introduction of ‘independent’ assessment structures (the *Planning Assessment Commission* (PAC) and *Joint Regional Planning Panels* (JRPPs)). A controversial change to the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) was introduced in 2005, granting the Minister for Planning virtually unilateral approval authority over public and private projects meeting criteria for state significance (NSW DoP, 2008). Broader reforms as well as many of the individual components were challenged from both public (i.e. local government) and private (i.e. developers and consultants) sectors. Challenge centred on concerns that the reforms worked to increase the complexity of the assessment and development process, and reduce transparency, rather than increasing efficiency and certainty (Ruming, 2011a; 2011b; 2012; Piracha, 2010).

The most recent round of planning system reforms in NSW was initiated in the period following the 2011 state election. In the lead-up to the election the Liberal-National Coalition campaigned strongly on planning system reform, mobilising inefficiencies in the system as well as concerns over corruption of due process as central election platforms. Planning reform was a central objective of the new government’s *100 day action plan* (NSW Government, 2011). Initiating a full planning system review was identified as an early priority for the new government, which intervened quickly with largely symbolic amendments to excise the controversial Part 3a of the *EP&A Act* (although in practice the key changes were to nomenclature and the level of ministerial involvement in final determinations of state significant projects). Commitment to a completely new planning system and legislation was announced in mid-2011, and a Green Paper (*A New Planning System for NSW*) released in July 2012. However, since this time piecemeal reforms to the current Act have continued, with the latest amendments severely curtailing local council provisions contained in Development Control Plans (Parrino and Morphett, 2012).

Significant reforms have also occurred in Western Australia, which undertook a total overhaul of its planning system in 2005 resulting in the implementation of a new planning Act. This was followed in 2008 by another comprehensive overhaul of the planning system which promoted standardisation in process which required all local authorities to rewrite their planning schemes. The planning reform agenda was continued in 2009 with the release of *Planning Makes It Happen: a blue print for planning reform* (WAPC, 2009). As the name suggests, *Planning Makes It Happen* sought to reform the planning system to facilitate and respond to rapid economic and population growth. The planning system was positioned as essential to the maintenance of the economic competitiveness of Western Australia, as well as a means of distributing economic prosperity through the safeguarding of urban amenity and sustainability. In responding to the national reform agenda, the reforms saw the introduction of *Development Assessment Panels* (DAPs), the establishment of regional planning committees and a review of the functions of the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC). A process of streamlining planning and development assessment was also implemented.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) set up to review the Victorian planning system has put forward a number of significant reform ideas and proposals designed to enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the statutory planning framework (VPSMAC, 2011). In broad terms, the MAC has suggested a raft of changes need to be implemented across 4 key areas: institutional leadership within the planning system; architecture and structure of the planning system; administration of the planning system; and processes within the planning system. The MAC has raised a number of ideas/questions about the roles, responsibilities and inter-relationships between the key institutions and actors – e.g. Planning Minister, state planning department, local government, planning tribunal, planning panels, referral authorities – that make up the planning system. It suggested, for example, the role of the Planning Minister needs to be more clearly defined and s/he should not be involved in day-to-day planning decision-making. The structure and management of the state planning department needs to be reviewed with its policy focus becoming more strategic. Local councils should

play a key role in setting strategic goals and objectives and should have the ability to delegate decision-making to other bodies. In terms of demonstrating strategic spatial planning policy leadership that MAC has indicated that a state strategy – *A Vision for Victoria* – ‘linking planning, population and infrastructure’ is needed and that all other plans/strategies – metropolitan and regional planning strategies and local government planning schemes – need to be spatially represented and aligned. The MAC appears to be supporting the notion that there is a need to minimise the politics and politicking between inter-governance that often characterises planning systems with multiple governance layers. Additionally, the MAC has endorsed the widely held belief that the Planning and Environment Act 1987 is out of date and a new act is needed. This would constitute a major strategic overhaul of strategic planning in Victoria, given the significance of law in Australian planning systems. Given the political leanings of the current government one can only imagine that any new Act would be structured in such a way to facilitate economic investment over all other planning concerns. The MAC also identified that whilst the Victorian Planning Provisions (VPPs) which provides the framework for standardised town planning schemes is essentially seen as a good thing, questions about their efficiency and effectiveness loom somewhat large.

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of current planning changes in Victoria is that significant changes to statutory planning system, and in particular the zones, have occurred during the long process of producing the forthcoming new Plan for Melbourne. These changes, such as allowing major retail developments in areas where they were previously prohibited, will prevent the implementation of wider strategies around urban form, such as the long held centres policy which has been part of almost all planning strategies for Melbourne since the first plan in 1954 (MMBW 1953). This lack of coordination between strategic goal setting and statutory means of implementation could well mean that the vision in the forthcoming plan is unable to be realised.

## **Conclusions**

The urban visions proposed in current state government strategic plans may be desirable but unattainable, as the infrastructure required for implementation is being undermined by parallel reforms to the statutory planning framework in WA, Victoria and NSW. The objective of these planning reforms does not appear to be about realising the visions outlined in metropolitan plans. Rather, the strategic objective seems to be more about ‘cutting red tape’ in order to stimulate development investment so that a greater volume of planning and development outputs can be delivered. The strategic metropolitan plans might be an astute manifestation of political rhetoric, while planning reform agendas represent stealth political strategising.

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