

Roy Nelson

CITIES FOR THE FUTURE

An expert criticises the prevailing attitudes to transport and town planning and proposes a new approach to these problems.

IN recent years Australia awakened to the fact that something was amiss with its cities. Transportation networks were rapidly becoming acutely congested and there was a promise of worse to come. Car ownership rates were rising, public transport patronage declining, accident rates were high, delays and traffic snarls increasingly commonplace.

It was thought that the increased costs of production due to the above factors—quite apart from the lowering of the quality of life involved for the citizens—might introduce diseconomies large enough to adversely affect Australia's competitive position on the world's markets.

Forecasts of population growth were noted. City planners, transport authorities, car owners' pressure groups, and public administrators took heed of the warning signs and decided that "something must be done about the transport problem."

Attention was focused on a series of "transport studies" being executed in the USA. One after another the major cities in Australia initiated a series of so-called studies, ostensibly designed to produce a program which, if implemented, would solve their transport problems. Some of these studies are still in progress, while most of those completed are shelved and conveniently forgotten.

The aim of the studies is to design the most efficient transport network for a town plan where one has been drawn up. But two things about these town plans should be noted:

1. In no city has the state or city government either the will or capacity to actually implement the town plan.

2. The plans themselves are merely a statement of what exists, modified by forecasts of what the position will be if the present trends in growth of population, employment, etc., continue (for example the Brisbane study).

In cities where there were no town plans, those carrying out the transportation study have used their own ideas about how the city might develop, again taking existing trends as the basis, tempered by finding out what "Old Uncle Tom Cobley and all" felt about future city growth (for example the Hobart study).

The study procedure is as follows: a sample of the population is interviewed to ascertain their travel habits in relation to their various activities. Volume counts are made on roads, public transport etc. and a theoretical model of the existing situation is developed by expanding the sample survey to represent the total population.

The forecast town plan is expressed in terms of population and employment, and using the theoretical model of the existing situation the travel problems of the future town plan are worked out. A transport network is then planned to cater for the calculated volumes of travel. Theoretically the most efficient system is planned; however, this is open to question because the measure of efficiency is rarely stated clearly. In practice what happens is that empirical decisions are made, particularly in relation to public transport (trains, trams or buses) and one net-

work is proposed for development.

Several aspects of these studies are open to debate and in particular the validity of the sampling and projection techniques especially as applied to outer urban areas, could be regarded as contentious.

It is interesting to ask whether the "packaged programs" for the computers of the particular study technique applied actually do what we are told they do. Often we have little way of checking because the cities for which studies have been done do not have people experienced enough in computer operation to dissect the programs to see what they do. It would be appropriate if the consulting firm engaged in the study actually went through the steps of constructing the computer programs with a local man, or is it that they themselves do not know how to, and are just applying the packaged programs without question?

It is also interesting to speculate whether the fact that the "studies" have been done usually by an American firm as the major partner in association with an Australian firm, or by an Australian firm blindly applying American techniques, has meant that value judgments have been made on the basis of American experi-

ence which may not be valid in Australia—for example decisions on the relative significance of public and private transport.

The studies are not cheap—the Melbourne study is costing upwards of 800,000 dollars—yet cost is not the main issue here, because a proper study process would cost the same. The point is that the money is not well spent. The transport engineers, often fascinated by the complexity of their calculations, usually forget that they are building on the assumption of a town plan which, as we have shown, is a shaky one to say the least.

The town planners are accepting too much, taking too much for granted. At no point has the form of the city been examined. Twentieth century techniques and equipment are applied to examine a twentieth century problem occurring in cities and towns which have a B.C. form.

One would be entitled to ask why none of the studies have questioned the existing city form and tried to study each city to see the most economical form of development for it to follow.

There is ample evidence from Australian experience that the city with one centre is a thing of the past. The flight from the

city centres of retailing and wholesaling, the phenomenon of industrial re-location in the suburbs, removal of professional offices and some commercial offices from the city centre, indeed even the suburban development of tertiary education institutions, are all evidence of decentralisation pressures within the metropolitan frame.

Why, then, try to further centralisation by developing transport networks which force it, as most of the studies so far undertaken do?

If there were instead the aims of achieving maximum accessibility, convenience and mobility, minimising capital investment in transport networks and minimising operational costs, including time costs, while retaining the desired residential densities, very different transportation studies would be undertaken and very different results would emerge.

For too long in Australia we have toyed with "city beautiful" concepts of town planning without realising that the city is a living operational organisation.

The current technique of forecasting on the basis of existing trends is hardly planning. It is time we were more rigorously analytical, employing sociological and economic

measures as well as operational characteristics to examine our cities.

The technical skills are available, and more informed community debate is needed on the way our cities should develop in order to encourage the undertaking of the proper studies.

The problem is, however, that any proposals for change in the existing patterns of development or growth generate almost insurmountable opposition from landowners. It is almost impossible to contemplate construction of even moderate transport networks because of the resumption and legal costs involved. For example, it will cost approximately \$22 million for one and a half miles of freeway being built in Sydney, and half will be for the land.

The money currently being spent on studies producing transportation network designs, should be spent to undertake more fundamental studies in city forms and growth patterns. Not only would these produce

plans which would minimise travel while maximising accessibility, but it would provide the city government with guide lines as to how they could buy all the land, or at least the key sections, to accommodate the growth. Provision of services such as transport, water and sewerage, would then be used as tools to economically shape the city.

The areas required for expansion could be acquired by raising rate revenues to realistic higher levels than those existing, or, preferably, by government loans—after all Canberra has successfully shown that a town planned on a large scale pays handsomely. Here the government is making a large profit from re-sale at new, higher values, of land previously undeveloped for residential and other city purposes.

Neither the old property forms based on capitalist ownership, nor the existing form of centralised cities can provide the basis for development of our towns to meet modern conditions.

Letters and contributions to Australian Left Review are welcome, and should be sent to Box A 247, Sydney South Post Office.

To meet printing schedules, copy must be in the hands of the editors one month before date of issue (the first day of every second month).

Small items, and in special circumstances articles, may be accepted up to twenty days before publication date.