

Book Review – Australian Planner

Green Urbanism Down Under
Timothy Beatley (with Peter Newman)
Island Press, Washington DC
2008
ISBN 9781597264129 (paperback)
264 pp. rrp AU \$69.95

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As I sit writing this book review on a hot and unbearably humid summer's afternoon in Hangzhou - China, I occasionally glance out the window of our modern apartment building. Enjoying the luxury of air-conditioning, I stare across at countless other apartments with their own air-conditioners and wonder how much electricity and concomitant greenhouse gasses must be flowing through this mid-sized Chinese city of 6 million inhabitants.

Lying on the desk beside me is a copy of Timothy Beatley's latest book - Green Urbanism Down Under (with contributions from Peter Newman). Having just finished reading this book, I am left ruminating how its many lessons might be applied to Chinese urbanism. What makes this situation feel all the more strange though is that I am typically critical of Australian cities, believing we planners can do considerably more to combat the profligate consumption that characterises Australian urban lifestyles. Yet Beatley has opened my eyes to how we Australians might not be doing so badly after all.

This book is Beatley's latest on sustainable cities and what he terms 'green urbanism'. Unfortunately within the book he makes only passing reference to what green urbanism actually means (e.g. p. 99-100), presumably because he has spelled this out in his earlier texts (e.g. Beatley, 2000 – but see also Low et al., 2005). Green urbanism is a catch-phrase describing what many of us would call ecologically sustainable urban development or 'sustainable cities'. Green urbanism challenges the business as usual approach of designing and managing cities with alternative solutions, solutions that may rescue us from the brink of ecological collapse. These solutions include: changes to urban form (e.g. compact cities, urban villages, transit-oriented development & pedestrian-friendly streets); transport (e.g. public transit, multi-modal and integrated systems & increased bicycle use); housing (e.g. mixed use housing, adaptive-reuse of buildings); energy (e.g. renewable energy, carbon-neutral buildings, decentralised production); built environments (e.g. green buildings & brown-field conversions); governance (e.g. participatory democracy & robust planning systems); commerce (e.g. local synergies & local employment trading schemes); industry (e.g. industrial ecology and bio-mimicry) and protecting natural capital (e.g. biodiversity protection, urban forests, eco-parks, ecological restoration, day-lighting streams & green schools). Beatley explores how these and other ideas have been applied in Australian cities, reminding us that our cities hold the promise of living within our ecological limits if we can only change how we plan and develop our built environments.

Written largely for an international audience, Betley's book is a reflection upon what lessons Australian cities can offer their United States' counterparts. It is not an exhaustive study but rather represents a compendium of his visits to Sydney, Melbourne,

Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide. This is not a failing. On the contrary, Beatley makes it clear from the beginning that this book is much more about story-telling and reviews of best-practice than hard-core theory-building or elucidating ‘technical details’. More than anything, this book is a story of hope.

Divided into seven chapters covering the greening of cities, ecological assets, place-building, biodiversity protection, state and regional planning, and lessons from ‘comparative’ green urbanism, this book is filled with endearing and sometimes quirky insights into sustainability “Aussie-style”. These include Adelaide’s “solar mallees” – tree-like street art and lighting installations that generate considerably more electricity than they use (p. 19-21); the “Sustainability Street” program (ch. 4); the hairroom rooftop art in St. Kilda (p. 121) and Melbourne Docklands’ “cow up a tree” art installation (p. 126). But the book also catalogues some of the more earnest advances that Australian cities have recently made on the path to sustainability, such as Melbourne’s efforts to become carbon-neutral by 2020 (p. 10-11) and that City’s remarkable six star green building Council House 2 which “uses 85% less electricity and 72% less water than a 5-star building” (p. 44); Manly’s ethical charter (p. 14), Sydney’s amazing transit-oriented development the “Kogarah Town Square” which integrates passive solar design and generates much of its own electricity (p. 47-50); Adelaide’s ‘Thinker in Residence’ program (p. 17) and solar-powered busses (p. 31); Perth’s rail investments (p. 25-26), network city plan (p. 207-211) and dryland salinity program which includes biofuel and biomass electricity generation (p. 78-82); Fremantle’s efforts to reincorporate Aboriginal history into the City’s landmarks (p. 140-147); Newtown’s labours at heritage protection (p. 113-115) and the New South Wales BASIX green-building certification requirements

(p. 41-42) among others. Some like Water Sensitive Urban Design (p. 54-59), urban food farms (p. 109-113) or regional planning (ch 6.) might seem commonsense to many Australians and almost “old school” yet for Beatley they are extraordinary.

The book is both entertaining and educational, with interesting stories, amusing insights and for me – some stunning revelations about advances Australians are making in sustainable urbanism. Having lived and travelled in the US for a number of years, one of the highlights of the book for me was the section from pages 2 – 7 where Beatley cogently analyses the similarities and differences between Australian and US cities, an analysis that not only makes the book relevant and accessible to a US audience, but which also makes compelling arguments for how Americans can learn from Australians – and this is not jingoistic pride talking! Another must read was his overview of regional planning advances in Australia (ch. 6). And it was especially delightful to read how Beatley marvelled at the abundant wildlife in Australian cities and commended Australian planners for their efforts to conserve large swathes of urban greenspace / bushland (ch. 5). I think many of us take for granted the magic in magpie chortles, only missing them when we travel abroad.

I do have a few criticisms of this book. One is that the book is a little too biased towards Perth’s efforts and perhaps does not give other Australian cities the attention they rightly deserve – but this is largely the result of the fact that Beatley spent much of his time as a visiting scholar in Perth. It would have been nice though to have seen a bit more about other cities such as Darwin, Hobart and the Gold Coast. Another is that there is perhaps a little repetition as Beatley revisits each cities advances from different perspectives – but this was likely unavoidable. And there are some small errors and

inaccuracies such the misspelling of the Leeuwin current in Western Australia – but these are minor errors for what is a truly insightful work, and they are easily forgiven.

To close, I commend this book to anyone who is feeling a little jaded with Australian efforts at sustainability. It is well-written and is an easy read, showcasing advances that we Australians might otherwise take for granted. Suitable for a wide audience – including undergraduates, graduate students and practitioners, the book would serve as an excellent supplementary text, ‘pick-me up’ for those who have become too cynical, or as a sourcebook for practitioners looking for insights into some of the latest ideas in sustainable planning. I cannot help but wonder how Chinese planners would benefit from reading this text. Perhaps Beatley will consider making this his next project?

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References

- Beatley, T., 2000, *Green Urbanism: Learning from European Cities*, Island Press, Washington DC.
- Low, N., Gleeson, B., Green, R., and Radović, D., 2005, *The Green City: Sustainable Homes, Sustainable Suburbs*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.