

URBAN CONSOLIDATION : A PRELIMINARY APPRAISAL OF
ITS POTENTIAL FOR DEALING WITH STRATEGIC TRANSPORT
ISSUES

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ABSTRACT: *Urban consolidation is a radical policy for redirecting future growth in households from low density peripheral locations to medium density housing in middle ring suburbs. It offers transport benefits to households who divert, but its strategic significance is likely to be small in the light of expectations of reduced population growth. In addition, its implementation would be constrained by the resistance of local government in middle ring suburbs and by consumer preference for a detached house and garden. It is argued that urban consolidation is symptomatic of a tendency toward achieving radical change by focussing on future growth. However, the major transport task now concerns the urban fabric.*

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In January of this year the Sydney Morning Herald (5/1/79) described the outer western suburbs of Sydney as a dumping ground for the city's rapidly expanding population. The paper commented that mass housing developments had left communities to fend for themselves without adequate amenities, industries or services. The social toll of this policy, the editorialist concluded, has been incalculable.

Most of the problems posed by rapid peripheral development have long been acknowledged by those concerned with urban policy and captured in that appropriate epithet, 'urban sprawl'. To a large extent, the focus of urban policy in the pre-Borrie era has been on grappling with expectations of unprecedented growth. The problems of the existing urban fabric tended to take the backseat - indeed to become the benchmark of acceptability - while resources were marshalled to accommodate population growth which, in 1968, was expected to expand in the Sydney region by 103% up to the year 2000 (PEC, 1968).

In recent times a radical policy for dealing with Sydney's growing periphery which goes by the impressive name of urban consolidation has been urged in some quarters. Although a form of urban consolidation was adopted in the County of Cumberland Planning Scheme prepared in 1951, the policy had been all but forgotten following preparation of the Outline Plan in 1968.

Urban consolidation in its newest manifestation proposes to redirect future growth in households from new outer suburbs to existing developed ones. By capitalising on spare services capacity available in middle ring areas, the policy aims to avoid the high travel costs and heavy investment in services customarily associated with peripheral developments.

The strategy to achieve this consolidation of the existing urban fabric is to increase housing densities in established middle ring suburbs by constructing town houses on vacant sites or redeveloping old houses on large sites. The policy has particular relevance for transport planners because it seeks to more directly locate housing in proximity to existing employment concentrations, rather than the more usual reverse strategy of employment chasing after expanding populations on the periphery.

In addition, it has been argued that urban consolidation can provide a "balance between housing, employment, community facilities and services", as well as a "better utilisation of scarce urban resources". (Rannard, 1978, 3) Other metropolitan benefits attributed to urban consolidation which are pertinent to the transport field include the prospect of shorter average trip distances and a change in mode split toward greater transit use.

Claims such as these suggest that urban consolidation is a policy which ought to be considered very seriously by those of us concerned with transport. It is certainly being considered in other quarters, the Sydney Sun for instance reporting that the NSW Minister for Planning and Environment is examining the policy. Urban consolidation has also been discussed in the current Outline Plan Review (PEC, 1977) and was adopted by the NSW ALP in its Urban Development Platform in 1978.

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However despite the attractiveness of the policy's radical prescription, a number of questions can be raised about both its relevance and the likelihood of its implementation.

Of prime importance is the fact that urban consolidation is a decidedly marginal policy. In the gloom following the issue of the successive Borrie reports, there are in fact likely to be a greatly diminished number of future households for a policy of urban consolidation to divert from the periphery. The Outline Plan Review (PEC, 1978), for instance, estimates that 185,000 households will settle at the periphery on the current trend over the period 1976-2001, or a paltry annual average of 7,400.

The Review also projects that the population of Sydney will grow by only 23% over this period, to 3.8 million by 2001. What this means is that 81% of the population number currently expected for 2001 already existed in Sydney in 1976. Turning to more reliable census counts, it can be seen that the Sydney Region's population increased by only 4% over 1971-76. (ABS, 1971, 1976)

These indications of future growth are a far cry from the 103% population increase to year 2000 projected by the Outline Plan in 1968 (PEC, 1968) or the 4.9 million population by the turn of the century projected by the Planning and Environment Commission in 1973 (PEC, 1973). It is also apparent that the 12% population growth rate counted over 1966-71 has not been sustained. Put in this perspective, urban consolidation can at best have only a marginal impact on the major issues of long average trip distances, exhaust emissions and inefficient use of resources which presently confront the metropolis.

It is appropriate at this point to observe a tendency to focus on growth which characterises some other radical urban policies besides urban consolidation. Despite the daunting task that past expectations of massive growth posed for urban managers, they did seem to enthuse many with hope of providing workforce/employment balance and shorter work trip distances in satellite suburbs. Others saw the possibility of building at higher residential densities in new peripheral areas and indeed, given the prospect of 103% growth, implementation of such policies would have affected a substantial proportion of the city's population by the turn of the century.

The 'change by growth' syndrome can also be seen to have seduced governments into financing redistributive urban policies on the expectation of high population growth rates expanding finances. After all, the future is relatively flexible compared to the intractable present. But now, urban managers will be increasingly called upon to improve the situation of the existing urban fabric, which is a domain that unfortunately is not as readily amenable to radical change. It could fairly be said that urban consolidation has arrived too late to make a really dramatic impact on the shape of the metropolis.

On the other hand the policy of urban consolidation could have less ambitious but nevertheless worthwhile benefits for households which do divert and could assist in staying further worsening of conditions in areas such as Sydney's outer western and south western regions. A study undertaken in Adelaide in 1973 (Pak-Poy, 1973) found that the cost of commuting capitalised over 10 years was between 2.6-4.7 times higher for three peripheral areas studied compared to an inner city location.

Though urban consolidation proposes diversion to middle ring suburbs (research on which has been neglected in the squeeze between inner and outer suburbs), this finding does give a prima facie indication of the relative benefits to households of a more accessible location.

The size of savings to the community however - which would also include savings in services and facilities - depends on the scale of diversions. A number of factors intercede here to suggest that urban consolidation would be a difficult policy to implement.

One obstacle would be the likelihood of opposition to multi-unit construction on the part of residents and Councils in middle ring suburbs. Archer has reported (1978, 7) that 17 Councils in Sydney and 21 in Melbourne say

that their new codes and measures would both reduce the number of units that could be built on a given site (thereby increasing the land cost per unit) and increase the development cost per unit

He also notes that from mid 1974 to mid 1978, the average cost of multi-unit dwellings in Sydney rose by 37% as a consequence, while the average cost of detached houses commenced fell by 2%.

Local government in NSW has extensive powers to delay or prevent implementation of projects which otherwise conform with planning and development guidelines. (Davis, 1978) Although urban consolidation offers the prospect of a larger tax base, Councils may use these powers to frustrate town house projects and may work against the introduction of uniform building codes which would assist in making this dwelling type more price attractive.

If as Painter says (1974, 346), local councils are preoccupied with seeking to "protect or enhance the amenity of their neighbourhoods", or if as Rattray and Sinclair believe (1978, 42), they rarely interpret "their interests as coinciding with broader metropolitan objectives", then the possibility of urban consolidation being implemented on a significant scale is greatly diminished, unless major legislative changes are put in train.

Another obstacle to urban consolidation is the issue of consumer preference for a detached house and garden versus a multi unit dwelling. A recent survey (P.A. Consulting, 1978, 9) for the Committee of Inquiry into Housing Costs reports that 84% of Sydney respondents want a house rather than a unit, which by now is a quite familiar finding. Actually, there is already a large amount of medium density housing in Sydney, such dwelling types accounting for 44% of the housing stock in 1971 and 36% of commencements in 1975-76 and 1976-77. However the majority of this is rental housing, as indicated by the finding of a Cities Commission survey (1975, 30) that 60% of respondents in the dominant walk-up-flat form of medium density housing are renters. By contrast however, the major form of tenure in peripheral areas is owner occupation.

The difficult task of urban consolidation then, is to attract owner-occupiers to medium density housing. It seems reasonable to accept that town houses would prove more acceptable than walk-up-flats, although it is unlikely that lower income households presently locating in cheap housing on the western periphery would have the option of the salubrious settings which surround town house developments on Sydney's lower north shore. It should also be noted that town houses presently constitute only about 2% of medium density dwellings in Sydney and that the Cities Commission survey (1975, 24)

reported 48% of town house respondents had definite expectations of moving at some time in the future (37% within 5 years) and of these, 59% expected to move from their town house to a detached dwelling.

While there is undoubtedly some scope for households such as those who have passed beyond the child rearing stage to be attracted to town houses, the issue of housing preference is likely to be a decisive factor severely limiting the success of a policy of urban consolidation.

An alternative strategy for implementing urban consolidation might be to ignore the private sector and concentrate on the NSW Housing Commission and the Land Commission. The former has constructed an average of 1,450 dwellings per year in the Sydney region (excluding Gosford/Wyong) over the last seven years and at current rates of Federal government funding can be expected to complete about 1,400 dwellings per year on Sydney's periphery in the immediate future. The Land Commission has extensive land holdings in peripheral areas and should be able to sell an average of 2,100 homesites over the next three years. If these conservative rates (the Housing Commission built 2,550 dwellings in the Sydney region in 1971-72!) were maintained, these bodies together would be responsible for 47% of the annual average of 7,400 houses estimated to be constructed on the periphery by the Outline Plan Review over 1976-2001 (PEC, 1978).

This estimate is hardly insignificant given that the customers of these Commission's are among those who would most feel the benefits of savings in travel costs. However the likelihood of these bodies moving to significantly alter their current policy would be retarded by their view that development costs are higher in middle ring suburbs compared to outer locations. There might also be some political and bureaucratic resistance to consequent reduced output levels or to the possibility that urban consolidation could lead to a lesser role for either one, or both, of the Commissions. Another difficulty would be resident opposition to large scale tract developments if the Housing Commission were to pursue this strategy in order to justify acquisition costs.

In addition, it is by no means certain that the customers of these bodies would welcome a town house in a middle ring suburb. A series of surveys of five Housing Commission developments (H.C., 1975-78) on the west and south west periphery of Sydney found that between 34.8%-41.8% of wage earners surveyed at the time of taking up occupancy worked in the Parramatta and Liverpool areas. Further, between 44%-72% of households came from detached dwellings and 40.4%-52.5% resided in the Parramatta/Liverpool areas immediately prior to taking up occupancy of their Housing Commission dwelling. These people seem unlikely to willingly forgo a detached house in exchange for very small travel savings, if any.

Given the obstacles discussed above, it is difficult to believe that urban consolidation would have significant metropolitan-scale implications. Indeed, one of the problems in attempting a modelling exercise would be the sensitivity of the procedure to detecting the strategic transport implications of, say, diversion of 740 households per year, or 10% of the projected annual average growth rate over 1976-2001.

An indication, at least, of the potential strategic transport implications can be gained by considering possible employment projections for Sydney (UTSG, 1978) which are based on continuation of the trend population distribution. Continuation of the trend for C.B.D. employment to remain static and for growth to occur in sub-regional centres is estimated to increase the average non-manufacturing metropolitan trip length (by destination) from 13.8 kms in 1976 to 14.3 kms in 1991. On the other hand, a strategy which concentrated non-manufacturing employment growth in the C.B.D. would yield a corresponding 1991 trip length of 14.5 kms. The difference in mode split between these two strategies is of the order of 1%.

While the latter strategy is not directly comparable to an urban consolidation policy in that it adopts the trend population distribution, the comparison suggests that the relatively low rate of population growth expected over 1976-91 will have the effect of minimising the strategic transport implications of urban consolidation. It is of course likely that these will be rendered more marginal by the sorts of obstacles to full implementation of the policy which have been discussed above.

Turning to the operational implications for those who do divert, it should be noted that blue collar average trip lengths may actually show no change for divertees if manufacturing employment continues to divert to the periphery. For instance, the ABS employment survey shows that manufacturing jobs declined in the Central Sydney Statistical Subdivision from 152,000 in 1969/70 to 106,000 in 1975/76 (ABS, 69/70, 75/76). In the City of Sydney LGA, manufacturing jobs dropped from 65,880 in 1961 (when they were 19% of the city's total), to 52,800 in 1971 (when they were 13% of the City's total). While a proportion of this loss is attributable to a generalised decline in manufacturing employment, the outer LGA's of Sutherland, Bankstown, Holroyd, Fairfield, Liverpool, Penrith, Blacktown and Warringah together experienced growth of 22,082 manufacturing jobs between 1966-71. (SATS, 1974)

Some shift towards transit and perhaps reduced rates of car ownership by divertees can be expected to occur in the longer term but the likely scale of diversions makes these possibilities rather insignificant in the metropolitan context. A more important implication is the likelihood of localised parking problems in middle ring suburbs. These could occur, even with the limited scale of diversions envisaged here, if the availability of vacant land, planning constraints, receptive Councils or the attraction of sites close to major public transport routes leads to concentrated town house development in particular localities.

To conclude, the most important benefits of urban consolidation will accrue to those households who do divert, and will principally manifest in terms of reduced trip distances for work and recreational purposes and the greater number of work opportunities (particularly for public transport dependent female workers) which become available. In addition, the very young age structure presently exhibited in peripheral areas indicates that children will be prime beneficiaries of greater public transport availability.

Urban consolidation also promises a number of non-transport benefits. Hard evidence is scanty, but preliminary advice from relevant departments indicates that spare capacity in telephone, electricity, water and sewerage infrastructure (but probably not in stormwater drainage) which exists in middle ring suburbs will enable savings in the provision of new infrastructure on the periphery. Various innovative programmes in education and welfare have generally taken up spare capacity in such services, but it may nevertheless be cheaper to build additions than to provide new services. The policy could also make a valuable contribution to the housing market by extending the choices of those who prefer a location with high accessibility.

The unfortunate fact however is that urban consolidation must be implemented despite major obstacles and in any case addresses the wrong problem in this era of subdued population forecasts. Low growth projections in fact offer the opportunity for employment, services and community facilities to catch up in peripheral areas. The Westmead and Mt. Druitt hospital projects and the recent establishment of radio station 2WS in the western region suggest a start on this 'catching up' process is already occurring.

For urban policy-makers in the fourth quarter of this century, the real task is to set about changing the existing bricks and mortar which have already produced average journey to work trip distances of the order of 13 kilometres in length. The need for radical policies remains as pressing as ever, but the simplistic tendency to make their implementation subject to growth becomes more irrelevant with each successive downgrading of population forecasts.

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