

Market gardens and McMansions: Contesting the concept of 'growth' on Sydney's peri-urban fringe

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In the last decade or so, primarily since the Rio Earth Summit in 1995, concerns around urban sustainability have become increasingly mainstream, troubling developmentalist visions of unbounded urban growth. Environmental issues are increasingly being seen as presenting not only moral but material checks to growth, defined primarily as economic development and physical expansion of the built urban form. The demand for development to be sustainable has led to this concept increasingly being incorporated as a standard aspect of policy discourse. Through its integration into government policy, sustainability has come to be defined as the 'triple' bottom line, taking into account social and economic as well as environmental measures.

The latest plan for urban development in Sydney, the Metropolitan Strategy, claims to be a plan for a green Sydney: a sustainable Sydney. This plan aims to provide a 'vision for the city we want to live in' as Sydney expands over the next thirty years with an estimated 1.1 million new residents (Department of Planning 2005). The issue of environmental sustainability is important in shaping this vision for urban development if, as the then Minister for Primary Industries, Mr Ian MacDonald, suggested in 2005, 'the last thing we need is concrete and cement from the mountains to the sea' (NSW Legislative Council Hansard 2005). The inherent ambiguity of the concept itself, however, means that it is important to question what is being actually planned under this rubric of sustainability, and what the reality of such rhetorical assertions is.

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Sustaining Culture

Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

The South West Growth Centre near the area of Bringelly on the western fringe of Sydney provides a site through which to examine these plans for urban development. This Growth Centre is one of two Greenfield sites set to house over 300 000 people (or a city the size of Canberra) as part of the Metropolitan Strategy. People living a predominantly semi-rural lifestyle, either on large housing blocks or in agricultural practice, currently inhabit this area. This includes a resident group of market gardeners.

Eighty percent of market gardeners in the Sydney Basin are from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB), and this area is no exception, with farmers from Chinese, Lebanese, Italian, Maltese, Vietnamese and Cambodian backgrounds (Parker & Suriyabanadara 2000; Sinclair et al. 2004). The majority of these are first or second generation migrants with varying degrees of English who have used market gardening as a means to support their families and build a life for themselves in a new country.

As well as providing employment and community building among these diverse groups, Sydney Basin agriculture also generates an estimated one billion dollars a year in farmgate sales (Gillespie & Mason 2003). Once the indirect income generated by the farms is included, this figure increases to a conservative estimate of a three billion dollar contribution to the New South Wales economy (Gillespie & Mason 2003). These farms also provide ninety percent of certain lines of perishable vegetables sold at the Sydney Market, including leafy greens, mushrooms, and bean sprouts (Sinclair et al. 2004). Across the different industries, the Sydney Basin is estimated to produce at least twelve percent of New South Wales' overall agriculture and twenty percent of the state's vegetable production (Gillespie & Mason 2003). These market gardens present an intersection of issues of cultural diversity and sustainability of food supply that trouble the limited traditional notions of growth in planning for the city's future. As they are threatened by encroaching development, these market gardens provide a case study through which to examine how the vision for the growth of Sydney as a 'global city' is being articulated.



Sydney: global city

Urban planning in Sydney is shaped by the desire of both government and business bodies to maintain and consolidate Sydney's position as Australia's 'premier global city', at both a national and international level (Searle 1996; McGuirk 2004; Department of Planning 2005). This 'global' aspect of the city has primarily been articulated in academic discourses in terms of its position within a network of cities in a global economy (Sassen 2000). One implication of seeking economic competitiveness on a global cities stage is the influence of neo-liberalism in urban planning. The priorities in planning for the global city in the Metropolitan Strategy are ensuring economic growth, and housing the population of Sydney to service that growth, falling in line with this traditional conception of the global city.

In Sydney, McGuirk (2005) argues, there is a hybrid neo-liberalism at work in state-private partnerships for urban development. One such area is the master-planned estates being developed in greenfield areas. These estates are built by large development corporations, and favoured by governments as a means to order development and regulate issues like infrastructure provision for new housing. Master-planned estates come in multiple forms, but large, set-style houses that take up all or most of their blocks of land and have been dubbed, perhaps unfairly, 'McMansions', typify them (Hawley 2003; Allon 2005). The development of these housing estates on the greenfield areas is subject to criticism regarding concerns about air quality and biodiversity being neglected, as well as urban agriculture being dislocated, to speed up creation of houses (Sinclair et al. 2004; Searle 2006; Frew 2007). The multiple aspects of urban sustainability that are marginalised here in the face of planned urban development present provocative questions, for if the 'city we want to live in' constitutes more than houses, then that must be planned for. This paper focuses on one aspect disrupted by housing plans: the threat to urban agriculture, to further explore the notion of growth as it relates to Sydney's urban development for the next thirty years.



Contribution to society

Growers and their advocates see the production of fresh fruit and vegetables for the market as making a valuable contribution to the city (Bayrante et al. 2003; Gillespie & Mason 2003; Parker & Jarecki 2003; Mason 2007; Food Fairness Alliance 2008). They argue that this contribution means that farming is something that should be considered and protected in plans for urban growth such as the Metropolitan Strategy. As one of the Maltese growers stated:

All societies need to have a balanced approach. You need your parklands, you need your farmlands and you need your residential lands. And there is always going to be this competition ... [as] you've always got a whole multitude of different opinions. But over all I think there needs to be a consensus that we need good quality land to grow good quality food. So, yeah, I think the sooner people are aware of all that [the better]. I think people think 'oh yeah there is land out there, just keep going' but there is a limit to the quality land that we have at our disposal here for growing crops and the good land where the water is too. I mean you just can't move out to the middle of nowhere where there is good land but no water. (Maltese Grower 6, 2 February 2007)

The assertion of the importance of urban agriculture on Sydney's fringe links to international debates around issues such as food miles and food security, which have a substantial currency in the US, UK and Canada (Toronto Food Policy Council 1999; Smith et al. 2005; Gairdner 2006; Saunders et al. 2006; Ceres 2007). Food miles describe discourses of concern around the carbon emissions created by food transport when it travels a long distance, and loss of freshness in food for consumers (Ceres 2007). Food security ties into these debates as issues such as climate change, the war on terror and biological threats such as avian flu are seen to present an increasing threat to global food supply chains



(Toronto Food Policy Council 1999; Jones et al. 2003; *The Economist* 2006). These debates have increasing traction in Australia, especially in terms of climate change, with the most recent report from the CSIRO predicting longer periods of drought and increased rainfall on the coast and away from the inland, which currently is home to 'the food bowl' of Australia in the Murray Darling Basin (CSIRO 2004; 2007; Kelly 2007; Taylor 2007; Wiseman 2007). This potential loss of food supply from outside the city coincides with predictions of the increased footprint of Sydney over the next thirty years from forty-nine to ninety-five percent of NSW. These predictions all put increasing pressure on attention to the issue of food supply as an aspect of urban sustainability (Sydney University 2002; Department of Planning 2005). While there continue to be debates about the reality of climate change and its future implications, what has been created is described by the think-tank the Post Carbon Institute as 'the new challenge of uncertainty' (Lerch 2007). This means that, increasingly, policy makers cannot ignore the perceived threats, even if they do not have as yet conclusive scientific 'proof' that they will be realised.

Urban agriculture

Despite these arguments for the importance of urban agriculture there is a distinct silence within the Metropolitan Strategy on actual undertakings to protect, preserve or make space for agriculture in planning for the future of Sydney over the next thirty years.

Professor Ed Blakely was designated the Sustainability Commissioner for the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy. In a speech to the community in the Sydney's Future Forums, Blakely stated that the imperative was to 'grow' jobs and housing together, and so decrease impact on social sustainability, as people are closer to home (Blakely 2004). In this articulation of sustainability goals, there is still a focus on economically orientated imperatives.

An analysis of the actual City of Cities plan indicates that it does have sustainable aims and goals in more detail. These are focused on minimising the expansion of Sydney's



environmental footprint through sustainable planning decisions, protecting natural environment as Sydney grows, managing water and energy consumption and also protecting valuable agricultural and resource lands from urban growth (Department of Planning 2005). The lack of any action on this in terms of policy or planning suggests superficiality within this gesturing to sustainability in terms of urban agricultural land.

Despite its contributions to both the economy and food supply chain of the city, urban agriculture does not seem to be a part of the vision for the city, in light of this absence of concrete plans for it in official planning documents. This was, according to a senior bureaucrat within the Metropolitan Strategy, because it was in fact not a relatively significant issue for Sydney's future resource needs,

[According to a Department of Primary Industries report] we don't, NSW and the metropolitan area, don't actually need the Sydney Basin to survive ... our GDP would not be affected, you would still be able to get fruit and veg and everything else without having any agriculture in the Sydney Basin... at the end of the day if they were all relocated another 50/100 kilometres outside the metro Basin it wouldn't make any difference to production. So, in some ways, that disappeared as an argument. You don't need agricultural lands. (Metropolitan Strategy Representative, pers. comm. 15 May 2007)

The extent that it is 'needed', however, has to be considered in terms of the criteria being used to assess its importance. In going on to further discuss the debate around other potential advantages, such as aesthetic amenity, the response of the senior planner indicated that in the end the value of agricultural land to the city continues to be assessed in economic terms. She indicated that there had been a debate around questions such as:



Should you have an edge to the urban expansion? At what point do you say this landscape is so important, visually, that you shouldn't build houses on it?

But in the end,

[I]t was certainly outweighed by the other factors. It was more about the economic factors of constraining expansion, what is the economic value of the natural resources versus the economic value of urban development. Politically that was the reality, dollars came first and then the fuzzy, touchy-feely perceptions of the community, heritage and things like that came second. (Metropolitan Strategy Representative, pers. comm. 15 May 2007)

While the fundamental argument of this senior bureaucrat is that farmers could simply move, and that this would not affect the quality or quantity of food to the Sydney Markets, this rather rationalist assessment of the situation neglects, among other aspects, the more complex social and cultural structures that underpin these networks of farms.

Farming communities

Many of the NESB farmers interviewed are reluctant to move further out and start again. They have large social networks within their local areas, with many of the Chinese and Lebanese coming from the same areas in their countries of origin. For the Chinese it was predominantly the same province in China, and for many of the Lebanese it was neighbouring villages in Lebanon. For the Cambodian growers, although they did not know each other in their country of origin, as many had spent years prior to arrival in Australia in disrupted living in refugee camps, they have since built strong community networks and they rely on each other for support. They do not wish to be separated and stated that if they



had to move further than an hour or so from their homes they would return to factory work or the like, so that they wouldn't have to move (Cambodian Growers Association, pers. comm. 2 November 2007). Many of the farmers are also first generation migrants who are in their mid forties or over, and would find it easier to retire than to dislocate their lives and start again. Simply stating that these farms could be easily relocated outside the Sydney basin, using only an economic logic, ignores the social and cultural imperatives that drive the decision making of these farmers and that underpin the farming networks on the city's fringe.

Conversely, to suggest that economic imperatives do not also drive farmers' decision-making would also be missing an important part of the picture. Many of the farmers indicated that they would like to sell their land and retire when they do not want to farm any longer. The opportunity to make millions of dollars off the sale of their farm is one that they would not realise in many years of working the farm. The value many of the farmers place on their occupation however is also one that cannot be underplayed by a simple statement that people are happy to sell. The assumption that the growers alone should have to shoulder the economic burden of urban farming is not a sufficient solution to thinking about more sustainable cities and provision for sustainable food supplies. If having sustainable food supply systems is something that is valued for the city's future, then it needs to be properly incorporated into planning in terms of urban development.

Conclusion

There is a range of views of how central urban agriculture is, and will become, to sustainable food sources in Sydney. The issue is not simply one of whether there will be enough food to feed Sydney, but what kind of food, in terms of quality and freshness, will be available if imported over longer distances. This, as the work in Britain and the US suggests, is not simply a quantifiable measure, as popular perceptions of its importance are likely to be at



least as important to its place in public policy as 'hard facts'. The value of fresh local food to the city, to the kind of 'city we want to live in', is something that will have to be determined by public support for the issue.

In the migrant market gardeners that currently inhabit this urban edge space, the discourses around food sustainability intersect with issues of cultural diversity, community and local employment. The dismissive approach of those within the Metropolitan Strategy ignores the contributions that these growers make towards all three tiers of sustainability for the city— economic, social and environmental.

While it does not currently seem to 'add up' in economic rationalist terms to save this urban farmland from housing development, its loss in what is a thirty-year plan could prove more costly as time goes on.

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