

Western Sydney Parklands: Creating Coherency from Diversity in a Greenway Corridor

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Abstract

The Western Sydney Parklands (WSP) is a significant greenway corridor of some 5280 ha, extending 27 km from north to south, located 35 km west of the Sydney CBD. It is a corridor replete with opportunities, but also presenting many challenges to its future development and ongoing management, in particular, balancing the public's interest to gain access to the corridor for recreation with broader conservation concerns to enhance its ecological integrity. This paper charts the evolution of the WSP throughout its history, and explores how the WSP in combination with the M7 motorway has evolved since 1968, focusing on shifts over time in planning policy objectives from growth controlling greenbelt concepts to the emergence of a greenway corridor approach that meets the objectives of sustainable metropolitan development. This is the first step in a much bigger research project which is reconsidering planning approaches to open space planning in metropolitan Sydney over the past 60 years.

Introduction

Australia is one of the most urbanized countries in the world with over 90 percent of its population living in cities and towns, albeit at comparatively low residential densities. This urbanization is projected to grow over the next generation with an emphasis on increased densities of residential and commercial development. The preservation and provision of green space within this urban context is critical for continued ecological, social and economic health of Australia. Australian cities are not short on green space, indeed many of Australia's capital cities boast abundant access to waterfront locations and concentrations of bushland reserves within metropolitan boundaries. Instead, current concerns in Australia about urban green space are focused on issues of equitable access and appropriate programming, particularly the need to balance ecological concerns with social and economic demands.

In planning parlance, the term 'greenway' is not widely used in Australia, but several variations of the concept are evident. The best known project exemplifying the greenway concept is the River Torrens Linear Park (RTLTP) in Adelaide, South Australia. The RTLTP is significant for two reasons: as a greenway, it is an Australian benchmark example of the transformative power of the rediscovery and integration of environmental, recreational, and cultural resources in an urban context; secondly, its success emanates largely from, and thus demonstrates the critical role of, consistent community engagement through a long-term, staged consultation and implementation process (Mugavin, 2004).

Of the many variations of linear parks in Australia, few are of the same scale and scope as the River Torrens, but they do reflect key greenway concepts, patterns and processes. As population growth continues to exert pressure on the natural, cultural and recreation resources of Australian cities, greenway variants will continue to emerge, highlighting the need for expanded scholarship that investigates approaches to their planning, design and implementation of greenways in the Australian context.

Currently, Australia's largest and most complex greenway variation is a corridor approximately 35 km west of the Sydney CBD, which contains the Western Sydney Parklands and the M7 motorway. Opened in 2004 and 2005, respectively, and located side by side in a corridor approximately 27 km long and an average of 1 km wide, the WSP is the largest contiguous landholding in the Southern Hemisphere—some 5280 hectares—while the M7 Motorway is Sydney's longest stretch of freeway. It is a corridor replete with opportunities, but also presenting many challenges to its future successful development and ongoing management.

Background/Literature Review

Greenways and their variants are key elements in contemporary sustainable urban design strategies around the world. This global interest reflects the increasing importance of urban planning strategies that integrate natural resource protection with provision of recreational and functional facilities. Indeed, green spaces generally are increasingly valued as part of a network or system of urban green space, with their benefits often framed in terms of the green infrastructure of the grey urban environment (Fields 2009, Beatley 2000, Benedict and McMahon 2006). As the concept of ecosystem services—where a financial value is attached to 'green' services such as the mitigation of water and air pollution—is more widely adopted, it is likely to result in continued integration of open space, and particularly greenways, into sustainable urban planning and design strategies. This is particularly true where and when the mitigating effects of healthy ecosystems on the impacts of climate change are established clearly. Additionally, as metropolitan planners increasingly subscribe to the conceptual link between greenways, urban form, reduced energy consumption, and a healthy citizenry, planning strategies will feature denser development patterns, more walkable and bicycle-friendly streets, served by public transport, linked with greenspaces, etc. These goals for shaping better city form can be achieved through a holistic greenway approach to planning and implementation that generates coherence and connectivity (Taylor et al 1995, p63; Fields 2009).

Scholarly investigations have revealed several attributes required for successful greenway planning and implementation. Across the literature, these generally include four key factors: 1) clear and varied objectives, 2) a legible and meaningful context (including response to natural and cultural factors), 3) effective institutional structures, and 4) public involvement and use (Ahern, 1995, Taylor 2004, Erickson 2006, Fields 2009).

Prospects for implementation improve when greenway objectives offer multiple benefits and are integrated into broader urban planning strategies (Ahern, 2006, pp. 37, 47). Erickson's survey of three North American metropolitan regions—Portland, Toronto and Chattanooga—identified different but equally successful examples of how greenways can assist urban growth management, natural resource protection, economic development and urban revitalization (Erickson 2006, pp. 214-216). Thus, greenway success typically draws on a meaningful response to local context and local aspirations and challenges.

It is equally important that greenways clearly relate to surrounding urban context. The iconic example of this is Olmsted's Emerald Necklace, where the Muddy River and Fens on Boston's perimeter became conduits of pedestrian and vehicular circulation through the city, and between city and suburbs. This correlation of natural and urban form improves permeability of the city and promotes a higher degree of connectivity and movement. Fundamentally, of course, it also protects the natural resources and thereby subtly cultivates awareness of the urban context, while also contributing to a sense of place and heightened degree of legibility.

Context also concerns the scale, form and function of greenways. Ecological outcomes improve as the scale of corridors and networks increases, but large-scale greenways typically face complex, sometimes disjointed, institutional arrangements. Tensions can arise from inter-governmental competition for jurisdiction and governance, especially between state and local government. Thus social and political outcomes of large scale greenways are less clear.

Erickson's investigation of greenway implementation revealed there is no standard approach to the governance of greenways; instead institutional structure is as diverse as greenway type, scale and context. Implementation and management of greenways occurs primarily at the local and regional level, and only occasionally with involvement from state and federal government (Erickson, 2006). Change over time of institutional structure is typical, and effective governance does not necessarily require the creation of a new agency. The private nonprofit sector has played a strong role in greenway advocacy, planning and implementation, and many examples of greenways are born out of regional scale grassroots efforts (Erickson 2006, p. 220).

Finally, community consultation is critical to successful implementation of greenways. Indeed many greenways originate from community initiatives. When greenway planning is instigated by government agencies, the allocation of open space can be intensely and politically divisive, especially in the absence of coalition/advocacy groups, and where it is perceived to erode economic return on investments (see Fields 2009). On the other hand, long term, responsive and inclusive consultation around greenway planning abates rifts, creates social capital, and ultimately facilitates greenway implementation (Fields, 2009; Mugavin 2004).

Goals and Objectives

This paper explores how the WSP/M7 corridor has evolved since 1968, focusing on shifts over time in planning policy objectives from growth controlling greenbelt concepts to the emergence of a greenway corridor approach that meets the objectives of sustainable metropolitan development. Specifically, we test the four key success factors for greenway planning and implementation, as discussed previously, against a major emerging corridor in Western Sydney to assess initial approaches to the planning and management of this land.

Method

As a starting point, a brief history of open space planning for the Sydney metropolitan area is reviewed to discern whether or not greenway principles are applicable to and/or have contributed to the development of this significant landholding. This work represents the first step in a much larger research project that will map and assess the approach to open space planning in New South Wales over time; an analysis that has to date not been done elsewhere.

Background

Both the WSP and the M7 evolved out of a 1968 strategic plan for metropolitan Sydney, the Sydney Region Outline Plan (SROP), which eschewed a post-WWII Green Belt scheme for a more flexible and efficient approach to managing urban growth. Also referred to as the ‘Corridor Plan,’ the SROP proposed channeling growth along existing transport corridors, and reserving extensive linear areas along waterways and ridges for open space systems and undetermined ‘special uses’ (NSW State Planning Authority, 1968). The State Planning Authority quickly hybridized both types of green space and nominated seven “special use and open space corridors”. The largest of these was in essence a new ‘belt’ of open space just west of the former green belt, which today comprises the WSP and the M7 Motorway (Evans 2008).

The corridor plan remains the framework for metropolitan Sydney’s urban growth. The current strategic plan, issued in 2005 by the NSW State Planning agency, and known as the *City of Cities* plan, has extended and strengthened the SROP by deploying growth corridors as links between a constellation of small cities and associated growth centres.

While it is one of the largest open space landholdings in Australia, it is fair to say that the WSP/M7 corridor is Australia’s least known greenway and does not register strongly in people’s mental maps of western Sydney. Within the corridor, the strongest organizing landscape elements are its ecological core consisting of endangered Cumberland Plain bushland and cleared agricultural lands (which comprise part of the cultural landscape of the area’s post-colonial era); a prominent

ridge line in the southern sector of the corridor and the M7 motorway which defines its most of its western perimeter. The corridor contains a diversity of pre-existing land uses, including a city farm; Prospect Reservoir, historically a main source of Sydney's water supply; market gardens; landfill and brick making industries; and several venues developed for the 2000 Olympic Games. The corridor is intersected in all directions by major roads, water supply, and energy infrastructure.

The following discussion evaluates the WSP/M7 corridor against the four keys to success, as revealed in the literature: clear objectives, context and scale, institutional structures and community consultation.

Discussion and Findings

Objectives: The planning objectives for this corridor have evolved greatly since 1968 and generally have been integrated into broader urban planning strategies. Shifting from a means to control urban growth and accommodate services required to sustain the future urban populations, in the current strategic plan for Sydney, *City of Cities*, the corridor is conceived as a north-south link between two major growth centres; still providing for transport with a focus on the open space resource required to meet the needs of a projected 250,000 new residents.

Land acquisition in the corridor began in the early 1970s and continues today, however, there was a long delay in committing to specific functions or land uses for within it. The strongest basis for development was a vague concept of this corridor containing a portion of a future transport grid; 'transport' was broadly interpreted to include the movement of water, electricity and goods. In fact, this did not take shape until the late 1990s. In the interim, parcels within the corridor were redeveloped, largely in response to funding made available for major events, such as the Australian Bicentennial in 1988 and the Sydney Olympics in 2000. In recent years, a vision has emerged largely in response to the approval of the M7 motorway in the corridor which was perceived as a threat to natural and cultural resources. As result, today, land uses within the WSP are diverse and represent oftentimes conflicting social and ecological values.

Context, scale and form: The WSP/M7 corridor is located at the urban/suburban/rural fringe of greater Sydney. When set out over forty years ago, the corridor occupied a broad swath of rural land uses. Today it sits like an island in the geographic heart of the metropolitan region, between suburban development to the east and small rural land holdings to the west, its ridge line providing subtle relief from suburbs pressing the edges. The scale of the corridor was intended to accommodate utilitarian functions of a large city; over time, it has presented an opportunity for ecosystem regeneration within the core of the corridor containing remnant "threatened" and/or "endangered" vegetation communities (URS 2004). In contrast to the diverse program of land uses and resulting fragmentation, the regenerated ecological core within the corridor provides the strongest element of coherence, but it is also quite vulnerable. The corridor is now defined (as much) by

this ecological core, and its periphery, including the M7, and is permeated with bush regeneration efforts to bolster fragile biodiversity of the region.

The irregular form of the corridor boundaries responds to the historic patterns of land holding and roads, rather than physiographic features. While the corridor traces segments of a creek, and portions of a ridge line, it captures neither in its entirety, and contains only a few imageable and highly localized landforms. The ridgeline, intended to buffer urban development, provides a strong visual backdrop to the surrounding development, but only from discrete locations. Perhaps the most important function of the corridor, but also its least legible, is the fact that it traces an important watershed boundary. This generally weak legibility of landform, in combination with the extraordinary amount of area covered, all contribute to its lack of imageability in people's minds and, hence, low level of relationship to its urban context.

Institutional Arrangements: Unlike most of Erickson's case studies, strategic planning for the WSP corridor and associated land acquisition has taken place at the state government level. Three local government councils have also played an important role in managing specific areas of the corridor. The State's National Parks and Wildlife Service oversaw much of the land, and the corridor is administered by the state-legislated WSP Trust, a body responsible for the management of the Parklands, managing leases, design and planning, with a mandate to be self-funding.

Initial management planning for the WSP (URS Australia 2003) and the current, state-legislated management by the WSP Trust, have established a "top-down" approach to the corridor. The Western Sydney Parklands, on the other hand, may be a case study that illustrates a heavily top-down planning model, driven by political expediency and a concern to keep the planning process at a high level. In this instance, there was a concern to avoid raising public expectations about a major new public parklands before the ongoing management structure was in place and issues such as financial resourcing were clarified. This leads to the final success factor: community consultation.

Community consultation: To date, there has been little if any, direct engagement with the diverse social communities of Western Sydney, particularly in contrast to other planning projects of regional significance which are mandated to include community consultation in the planning process. On the other hand, it is difficult to identify grass-roots, local advocacy groups who might potentially become involved in the shaping of the WSP. While there are a few local bushland regeneration projects and tree-planting programs, participants retain a localised interest in their specific activities and find it difficult to relate to the scale of the Parklands. Along the length of the corridor and from one side of it to the other, there is no coherent regional community framework that works to coalesce local sentiments about the Parklands. This was evident in recent research in the Parklands that sought "to identify issues of important to people in Western Sydney in relation to open space and to reveal shared community values that might guide the evolution of the

parklands” (Corkery and Marshall 2009, p45). The findings of a major survey recently carried out at venues in the Western Sydney found that respondents had little recognition of the WSP as an entity. People were familiar with individual venues within the Parklands, but were not aware they were within the boundaries of the WSP corridor.

Conclusions

Throughout most of the strategic planning for the corridor, as its name indicates, these lands have been conceived of as ‘parklands’. It is possible that a shift in thinking of this corridor as a ‘parklands’—with all the preconceived ideas attached to that word—to thinking of it as a ‘greenway’ would prompt decisionmakers to consider it differently, that is, as a significant component of the overall landscape structure of the city; the “green infrastructure” of Western Sydney. So rather than thinking about it as an urban park, with all the attendant features and functions related to social and recreational activities, thinking of it as a greenway that may still provides for social/recreational/cultural needs while being less developed, might suggest a different management approach.

This shift in perspective might put more emphasis on the dual concepts of coherence and connectivity, which can be interpreted and mapped in multiple ways. Viewing the corridor as a mosaic of landscape types and patterns, reveals a potentially coherent corridor for the protection and enhancement of ecological systems. If the management regime adheres to the objective of keeping human activities out of the central spine, for example, with the increased interest/concern in the relationship between environmental/ecological health and human health/well being it would seem this would be an acceptable goal to aspire to. This planning objective would embrace the inclusion physical movement infrastructure, ie M7, pedestrian and cycle path; entry points and accessibility into the corridor on foot or in vehicles to increase access; design of new facilities that increase visual coherence/sightlines throughout a diversity of landscape character types; programmed activities within the parklands that respond to shared community values for access to open space and related activities, cultural dimensions of landscape.

Ecological cohesion and physical connectivity needs to be matched by social cohesion, an objective that can be realized through attending to community consultation. It is time for the WSP Trust to be inviting community engagement with the Parklands in a genuine manner. This can be achieved through, for example:

- programming and marketing/branding to bring people to the park for shared activities; see www.westernsydneyparklands.com.au
- building a strong sense of place at key points throughout the Parklands;
- supporting bush regeneration and tree planting programs;
- awareness raising to assist the development of people’s “mental maps” of the corridor.

Sydney and the state of New South Wales are at a critical juncture in the establishment of this open space system, and keeping the key success factors for greenway corridors at the forefront of their efforts could ensure its long term benefit to this metropolitan region.

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