

Sydney XXXL

by Ed Lippmann

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There is a popular saying in Idaho - a wilderness state in the US northwest, "Please don't Californicate Idaho!" The meaning is pretty obvious, please don't spoil nature with over-population and overdevelopment. We like it just the way it is so, please, please, don't tell anyone. Keep Idaho a secret. No one thought to issue the same plea: Please don't Californicate Sydney. Pity.

In 1957, Denis Winston, professor of town planning at the University of Sydney, published Sydney's great experiment on the progress made in putting the Cumberland County Plan (1951) into operation effecting 1650 square miles.

At the 1954 census the population of the county stood at 1,941, 220. In 2018 it reached 5 million, more than double on a footprint of

almost 12,400 square kilometres. Meanwhile, Government and business proudly proclaim Sydney has become a 'global city' whatever that means. No one, it seems, considers it worthwhile to ask whether Sydney is a more liveable city. Just that it is bigger, much bigger, and that is all that matters, regardless of increased congestion, transport mayhem, overcrowding, housing unaffordability, air quality, uncontrollable bushfires, smoke pollution — and certainly not the quality of life of residents. All hail 'big'.

This brings me to the book title SYDNEY XXXL (Altrim Publishers). Many readers might not get it initially, unless, like Ed's family, at one time you were in the rag trade. XXXL indicates clothing sizes and is industry shorthand for EXTRA LARGE! Lippmann makes the point, since at present any suggestion that Sydney might be too big is greeted with rancour. Sydney Morning Herald columnist, Elizabeth Farrelly, enthusiastically endorses densification from the comfort of her Waverly home. Densification is a euphemism

for congestion, inadequate infrastructure, air pollution and denaturing the city.

Population boosters who enthusiastically promote a Sydney of eight million, ignore geography. There is no more land. The market gardens, farms, orchards, reclaimed industrial sites, and contaminated swamp, have been swallowed up and re-zoned. There remains only one alternative — vertical Sydney. In 1982, Ridley Scott explored that possibility in his sci-fi movie, Blade Runner, a world not built to human scale, sad apartments where the future is style and not much else.

The promoters of a supersized Sydney forget that Sydney, unlike its rival Melbourne, is physically constrained within a sandstone girdle: The Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury, Nepean Rivers in the west, the rugged Hornsby Plateau in the north, and the Woronora Plateau to the south. It has nowhere to spread further. If grow it must, it will be compelled to follow Scott's dystopian nightmare by turning Sydney into a southern Manhattan and go vertical.



No one asks, what is the optimum size for a city? What is the most liveable size and shape that assures a good life, wide and varied employment opportunities, short commute distances on quiet, comfortable and flexible public transport, recreation near residential, access to beaches and nature reserves, and rich cultural experiences?

It isn't eight million, and not four million. We know firsthand what that feels like. I suggest two million, the size Sydney was in 1954. Australia has a dysfunctional urban profile with an absence of such middle-size cities.

Political reasons dictate population growth is confined to just a few state capitals. Australia has failed to acquire a balanced urban profile with population spread evenly across a range of liveable medium-sized regional centres such as in the USA, France, Germany and Great Britain. The iconic outback and interior of Australia is dry and empty, forcing population into a relatively few major metropolises on the coast.

Frank Sartor, former lord mayor of Sydney, remarked at the launch of Sydney XXXL that it was "a city in search of a plan." True. There have been many attempts to capture Sydney's future in a plan. None have lasted very long: greed, developers, big business and real estate interests, anyone with something to gain, undermine the public interest.

Examples abound. James Packer and his obscene tower in the harbour, had to be accommodated. His tower is now bigger, taller, even more obscene than before, any sense of proportion, of sensible scale, overruled and public parkland shredded. There have been too many plans. One good plan, followed and effectively enforced, is all that was needed.

Lippmann has eight points: freeze expansion; cap population; decentralize by making Sydney polycentric with a number of centres; higher densities with a floor space ratio of at least 6 : 1 and a maximum height of 50m; improved circulation; access to nature; equitable housing; and lastly, design excellence suggesting architects lead instead of developers dictating to government. These are modest suggestions, if unlikely to be accepted by the powers who decide policy.

The federal government's lack of population planning means that large numbers must be accommodated in a relatively few bursting capital cities while neglecting to build essential infrastructure beforehand.

Big business insists on high immigration levels because it grows the consumer base, but big business doesn't pay the cost of providing road and rail connections, additional schools, hospitals and health services. There is, instead,



PHOTOGRAPHY Jamie Davies via Unsplash

a benign neglect to build infrastructure ahead of arrivals.

Retrofitting infrastructure to existing cities is doubly expensive and destroys existing houses, nature reserves and anything that becomes an obstacle—even entire communities. Instead, the general population is burdened with the cost and made to suffer a lower quality of life. High immigration rates cannot be justified on economic grounds and the real actual cost is many more times dearer than the quoted benefit of \$35,000/person.

It's been 55 years since Tom Uren in the Whitlam government set out a responsible plan for urban growth that identified and invested in establishing regional cities outside the major metropolitan cities. Nothing similar has been attempted since. The reason is simple: The cost of accommodating each yearly influx of immigrants would necessitate building a new city the size of Newcastle or Geelong annually. Who would pay, even if suitable sites for such an ambitious urban

programme could be found having adequate water, transport connections and viable employment opportunities? This illustrates how manic and irresponsible the current high immigration levels are.

People should read Sydney XXXL. It could not be more timely. In *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford warned about the slavery of the large and predicted the outcome of the bursting container was necropolis. Sydney is bursting. We need to pause and think.

Jared Diamond gives instances of societies that have failed in collapse: *How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*. We may think we can escape, that we are privileged and ignore the bushfires, smoke haze, dwindling water storage, soil depletion, species extinction, clear warning signs of climate change at our peril. Or we can act now and limit population responsibly. We have a choice.

Sydney XXXL offers modest practical solutions that go a long way to securing a future for Sydney and for our children.