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Planning at the University of Melbourne in the first half of the Twentieth Century

The first town planning diploma course to be offered by the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Architecture came about slowly. Its conceptual origins can be seen in initiatives dating back as far as the First World War and it came to tangible fruition from the combined interests and inputs of a range of architects, planners, engineers, geographers and other relevant professionals in the early 1950s. Key players included John Bayly, John Gawler, Niel Abercrombie, Frank Heath, Josephine Johnson, Philip Pearce and Fred Ledger. Planning students were quickly involved in community projects, for both slum areas and aspirant middle-class suburbs. Lecturers ranged from young, recent graduates such as Johnson to well-regarded senior planner-architects such as Heath and his one-time associate Ernest Fooks. Using surviving lecture schedules, slides and reportage from the 1950s and earlier, this paper examines the initial approaches taken in the early years of planning education at the University of Melbourne. Key milestones from earlier decades, the concurrence of the Housing Commission of Victoria's mid-century activities, as well as preparations for the Board of Works' 1954 Melbourne plan provide key contextual settings for the narrative. The flow of ideas between emergent post-war Melbourne, and the new planning course at the University, is highlighted.

The long road to a planning diploma

The town planning movement came to prominence as a discussion point and enthusiasm amongst both professionals and laypeople in Melbourne just prior to World War I. Even at what we would now see as an 'early' stage in the advocacy of town planning ideas, there were some (minor?) precedents – notably, the Federal Capital Congress held in the city in 1901, its papers and symposia overshadowed to considerable degree by the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York visiting to open Australia's first national parliament and declare the new Commonwealth's arrival.¹ That particular event is an anomaly even now difficult to co-opt into a narrative about the increasing interest in, and the professionalisation of, planning in Melbourne and/or Australia; its only underlying connection with subsequent developments in planning is the dominant involvement of the University of Melbourne – particularly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, its Engineering school. That Engineering fostered a Faculty of Architecture which then engendered greater study in Planning (the Faculty is now one of Architecture, Building and Planning) is attributable to a sequence of events easily tabulated to a range of activities occurring in Melbourne in the first half of the twentieth century. It speaks in part to Town/Urban Planning's diverse motivations and contributors to its core principles. The detachment of Engineering as a discipline from Planning education may be seen as a triumph of Architecture over professions such as Surveying, in a debate examined elsewhere by the present author.²

That said, the prominent early planning advocates came from a range of backgrounds emphasising the movement's portmanteau status. Espousing the achievements of Europeans in urban Australia, the eminent Melbourne Engineer James Alexander Smith noted:

Great cities have been built where the forest was. Ports have been constructed.
Roads have been formed, and the paths made smooth for posterity to follow.
Water storages, great as those of the Nile itself, have come into being.³

Yet Smith, president of Melbourne's Working Men's College, did not advocate the introduction of planning courses at that institution, despite his own professional interests and the popularity of courses in the related fields of surveying and civil engineering.

The surgeon and ophthalmologist James Barrett – a man whose strong interest in children's welfare led him to identify with the ideals of the town planning movement – had been closely connected to the University of Melbourne since the 1880s. Barrett was Vice-Patron of the lecture tour by New Zealander Charles Reade and Englishman William Davidge commencing in August 1914 which notably saw Town Planning Associations form in its wake in every major city it visited. Though Barrett was in no measure a planner, his strong influence can be felt since that time and even beyond his death in April 1945: he was an advocate for planning, public health and associated amenities such as playgrounds. From the earliest days of his involvement in the Victorian Town Planning Association and in tandem with other spheres of endeavour he campaigned vociferously for progress, including practical application of engineering technology for health (for instance, the elimination of the outhouse)⁴

reorganisation of resources for health (such as a municipal milk supply for the nutrition of children)⁵ and civic ennobling schemes such as Melbourne's War Memorial, realisation of which Barrett saw as ideally determined by publicly nominated officials.⁶ Barrett combined voluntary positions such as the presidency of the Victorian Town Planning Association and Chairmanship of the National Parks Committee, alongside professional appointments such as Chancellorship of the University of Melbourne between 1935 and 1939.⁷ Indeed, so numerous were his interests the magazine *Table Talk* joked in 1927 that he would be as keen in helming a Society for the Discouragement of the Banjo in Jazz Orchestras as any of his other enthusiasms.⁸ However, Barrett's interest in the development of town planning at tertiary level was ongoing and indeed was to be one he kept alive for decades. As early as 1920 Barrett was publicly discussing the University's interest in offering "instruction" in the emergent field⁹; other members of the VTPA such as its newly elected president E. C. Rigby were similarly keen to see "a lectureship on town-planning" established.¹⁰

Barrett's colleagues at the University were similarly enthused, and the creation of the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission under the architect Frank Stapley – a man who had held the office both of Lord Mayor of Melbourne and President of the Victorian Town Planning Association – in March 1923 quickly saw a response from the state's leading tertiary education institution. Engineer and Faculty Professor Henry Payne proposed to the University Council in July 1923 that engineering and architectural students should be offered a course in town planning "in order that they might be available to assist the Town Planning Commission":

The Faculty of Engineering wanted the Town Planning Commission to work on right lines, so that when it made recommendations to Parliament for the recognition of town planning, it would realise that there was a body which was prepared to train men in town planning, as far as it was able.

In supporting the motion, Barrett remarked that "At present the attempt to put the city in order was largely coming from people who were not trained in such work".¹¹ Payne's motion would be carried unanimously, and it was no doubt assumed by many that Town Planning would emerge as a standalone avenue of study just as the University's School of Architecture had begun its formal existence as a discrete unit apart from the Faculty of Engineering in 1911. Yet when the School of Architecture became a separate entity in 1931, town planning remained only a component of the wider architectural curriculum. Despite Payne's motion being carried unanimously by the council in 1923, it would be a quarter of a century yet before a formal qualification was offered in the field.

If we are to understand Payne's push as a serious endeavour, this and the second attempt in the late 1940s towards the establishment of town planning 'instruction' in the twentieth century might be seen as linked to two major city plan projects, themselves allied to the successful conclusion of two world wars and the concomitant understanding of social benefit and 'renewal' both concrete and societal in the aftermath of trauma. Thus, the 1923 MTPC – the most exhaustive pre-war planning inquiry undertaken for any Australian city¹² which, while it

did not result in any adopted plan nevertheless cast the shadow of planning's promise over Melbourne for the coming decades – saw the city's University accept a responsibility for the teaching of planning for a new profession. During, and immediately after, the Second World War the promise of genuine change was in the air, not least in the activation of building and housing programs after an effective suspension of all such work for up to a decade and a half. In 1943 at the opening of an exhibition on town and country planning the Vice-Chancellor John Medley invited the private endowment of a new planning department, promising any benefactor “an easy passport to immortality”.¹³ This rather flippant comment did not find any takers; the impending publication of Bunning and Gawler's *Commonwealth Housing Commission Report*¹⁴ notwithstanding, it was not, perhaps, the best time to be arguing for a long view on urban or social change. However, with a second generation of ardent planning advocates now emerging – not least the architect/planner Frank Heath and others such as his fellow architectural panel board members at the Housing Commission of Victoria, such as Best Overend – something appeared to be taking place.

The approach to the teaching of planning at the University of Melbourne would be shaped by several key local and global factors. As mentioned, the MTPC's comprehensive 1929 Report had not been implemented; an apathetic Country party government is often blamed for this inaction, though Labor was in power at the Report's publication and the Great Depression of the 1930s made implementation difficult. However, the 1929 Plan loomed large in the imaginations of advocates for decades and indeed some of its core elements proved robust (and remain so to the present day). John Gawler, a lecturer in architecture at the University from 1920, claimed to have regarded the MTPC's report “as a text book on town planning” which he “used ... at the University, and recommended ... to all my students”.¹⁵ Chairman of Victoria's Town and Country Planning Board, Gawler worked alongside other appointees such as Fred Cook and Arthur Kemsley – both former MTPC appointees – and would prove to be instrumental in advancing and formalising the teaching of planning at the University. Passage of new state planning legislation in 1944 in the wake of the final report of the Commonwealth Housing Commission (of which Gawler was a member) was yet another driver.

New blood and the establishment of the diploma

Gawler retired from the University in 1946, in large part to facilitate the appointment of the first Chair of Architecture, Brian Lewis. Lewis was a Tasmanian recruited from the University of Liverpool, where he met his wife Hilary Archer; both were prize winners in the 1931 Victory Scholarship.¹⁶ The Lewises' experience of best practice planning education at Liverpool manifested in Brian's strong support of planning education; indeed he was to become president of the Town and Country Planning Association. He always feared that in the University context that the inclusion of planning in the core curriculum might “drain resources away from Architecture.”¹⁷ This was, it would seem, less an argument for the elimination of planning from his School's core business, and more one for its separation, towards recognition.

The Lewises retained their close professional and personal connections to Britain. In 1948 Hilary had heralded the coming visit of Patrick Abercrombie to Melbourne in glowing terms; she had worked with Abercrombie on the County of London plan in 1943.¹⁸ In a public lecture at the University in October 1948, Abercrombie highlighted the utility of having a town planning department undertake research on planning standards.¹⁹ Judith Wilks, in her 1993 PhD on planning in Melbourne since the mid-twentieth century, concludes that the influence of the British TPI curriculum was unavoidable.²⁰

Just as the 1923 proposal occurred in the light of interest surrounding the MTPC's activities in Melbourne, the establishment of a postgraduate planning course at Melbourne came in the light of debate and discussion over the development of a new plan for Melbourne by the Metropolitan Board of Works, spurred on in part by machinations federally (which, ultimately, came to little). The *Melbourne Age* editorialised that the bill "to establish the Metropolitan Board as a planning authority ... is sound" and that it would be "the precursor of a new and vital programme for Melbourne and municipal development."²¹

What was taught in the initial phase?

In 1950 the Melbourne press announced that the School of Architecture would offer a postgraduate course in Town and Regional Planning through its Extension Committee.²² Architect Phillip Pearce, a partner in leading practice Bates Smart, was appointed temporary lecturer in town planning. Lewis began the new decade with a demonstration of the potential for successful synergies between town planners and architects in two student projects for the burgeoning beachside suburb of Beaumaris, initiated at the request of its Parents and Citizens' Association. The original survey form is revealing in its assumptions regarding town planning's remit and the value and agency of planners in a Melbourne context: questions involved shopping and convenience; religious practices; sporting interests; and others such as "If there was a private school in your area would your child attend?"²³ A parallel survey was announced for the working class suburb of Prahran, where students experimented with a consultative approach and residents "would tell the planners what they wanted".²⁴ Little evidence remains of the Prahran project. However, together the two suggest that Lewis saw a social survey prerogative amongst planners and, more specifically for his purpose, planning *students* in the community; and that such a survey series was applicable across class lines. Another survey from this period, and apparently used by Lewis, was the School of Agriculture's *Sociological Survey of Rural Townships*. Sample questions herein include:

Halls: List the halls in the township showing their approximate accommodation and facilities available.

Are there any groupings of the social life of the township based on (a) neighbourhood (b) nationality (c) kinship (d) religion (e) floating population (f) "upper set" (g) non-respectability (h) immorality (i) hooliganism (j) loafing (k) any other (specify).²⁵

Lewis next appointed a man who, like him, had Tasmanian roots: John Bayly was a young architecture graduate from Melbourne and became the first full-time planning lecturer.

The teaching program still relied heavily on practitioners, and Bayly remembers a team of nearly twenty part-timers: “the University didn’t pay much for occasional lecturers and we got some very keen senior people from around various branches of the Public Service and private practice in Melbourne.”²⁶ One of these between 1950 and 1953 was Frank Heath, Melbourne’s best known planning advocate and a successful architect. Heath’s archive, contained in the Blyth and Josephine Johnson collection, indicates that the man was across a number of the lectures in addition to those he personally delivered. Heath, himself a University of Melbourne architecture graduate, retained lecture schedules from the beginning of the program, and these are useful in gleaning the teaching focus. The table below, for instance, shows the first three weeks of the course beginning in late March 1950.

Partial schedule, 1950, from original typescript in B&J Johnson Papers, MS 12314Y, Box 78, State Library of Victoria.

Date	Hour	Lecturer	Subject
Monday 27/3/50	6-7	Prof Lewis	
“	7-8	Mr Heath	
Tuesday 28/3/50	6-7	Mr Darwin	Engineering in Relation to Planning
“	7-8	Mr George	Road transportation. Its part in the overall transport system
Wednesday 29/3/50	6-7	Mr Pearce	
	7-8	Professor Lewis	
Thursday 30/3/50	6-7	Mr Darwin	Rural roads in a community
	7-8	Mr Hosking	The function of sea transport & ports & harbours in Australia.
Monday 3/4/50	6-7	Professor Karmel	
	7-8	Mr Heath	
Thursday 4/4/50	6-7	Dept of Civil Aviation	The part air transport can play in Australia in relation to planning
	7-8	Mr Miller	The part played by railways in transport of goods and passengers
Wednesday 5/4/50	6-7	Mr Pearce	
	7-8	Professor Lewis	
Thursday 6/4/50	6-7	(Mr Miller) Easter Thursday	Railway requirements which must be satisfied in planning
	7-8	Mr Hosking	Requirements in relation to ports & harbours which should be satisfied in planning

Curiously, though Heath, Lewis and Pearce each gave regular lectures in the series, the titles and even the subjects of their lectures are not listed in the schedule: merely their names. Others’ lectures are detailed in the listing: in the remainder of April 1950, for instance, ‘Mr. Dempster’ gave a weekly series of lectures on the subject of ‘Tailoring the road to suit the traffic geometric design.’ Another lecture on ‘Street lighting’ is attributed only to ‘S.E.C.’ – presumably, a representative of the State Electricity Commission yet to be engaged at the time of the program’s compilation.

The flavour of the lectures might be deduced from the partial listing above, and may also be seen in, for instance, an extant lecture in the Heath papers, ‘Three-dimensional control

of Buildings in the Central Areas to Towns' by A. C. Collins, a faculty member who also represented the Town and Country Planning Board.²⁷ Somewhat bombastic and cynical, the lecture nevertheless illustrates Collins' adherence to the common post-war understanding of classic form relevant to the purposes and appropriate lifestyles of ('British' – that is to say, British Commonwealth) 'folk'. Collins' "[h]istorical references are drawn from England, but the conclusions refer to our own Australian problems."²⁸

For Collins, streetscapes and indeed whole towns were disadvantaged by the decline of localism; "business streets and central areas of most modern towns fall short of the ideal," he claimed, and continued:

Aesthetically they do not compare favourably with town-building in earlier days. Individual buildings are frequently ill-designed, and lack any sense of unity with the street as a whole. There is general incoherence of effect, compared with the medieval market-square or renaissance place.²⁹

For this decline, Collins blamed the Industrial Revolution, after which "Natural controls which had been imposed by the limitations of earlier civilisations were almost completely lost."³⁰ In this regard, Collins falls in with some of the principle themes of a lecture of Heath's, entitled 'Place-Folk-Work', advocating smaller communities and decentralisation. Having worked on plans for rural towns for over a decade, Heath was convinced that future "millions of population will not be congregated in one big city like Melbourne but will distributed in relatively small compact towns". The cause of the historic drift from the early nineteenth-century principles of community and 'folk', Collins declares, came when:

Popular education ... placed mass aesthetic opinion at the mercy of any crank who could write a book [leading to the] following of false trails by those who should have led the development of a new aesthetic, i.e. the artists, architects, teachers and writers.³¹

Collins' irritation at such processes notwithstanding, he is eager to see the city repaired, either by enlightened developers on a block-by-block basis or, alternatively, "Where derelict areas are to be demolished and redeveloped for hygienic reasons, there is a case for municipal development and ownership as a community investment."³²

It is not possible to know, of course, whether Collins' lecture is typical of those given throughout the course – many of which were likely to have been far more technical and pragmatic in nature. Nor, of course, do we know whether Collins read from his lecture verbatim or used it merely as a guide. What can be seen in the juncture of Collins' and Heath's lectures is the underlying belief in the value of smaller communities both for aesthetic, practical and, for want of a better word, 'spiritual' purposes.

Similarly, the collection of glass slides (known in some quarters as 'two by twos') retained in the University's Architecture and Planning library are only an indication of lecture content. Indeed, the slides are uncatalogued and there is no direct proof that they were used in

teaching – however, some were clearly derived from Heath’s work, and a list of slides in his papers correlate to some of those held in the collection. Others derive from the MTPC, and their route to the library collection, while it may have come via (for instance) Gawler, is unknowable.

The degree to which Heath was involved in the intellectual underpinning of the initial course is difficult to glean from this perspective, but it must be telling that Heath’s papers contain so much material from the course itself – indicating a strong, if not controlling, interest. A reading list headed ‘Theory and Practice of Planning: Recommended books for General Reading’ is included. Five titles in pencil, in Heath’s handwriting, are numbered (erroneously) 1-4: Brown and Sharrard’s *Town Planning*; Patrick Abercrombie’s *Town and Country Planning*; Thomas Sharp’s *Town Planning and Town and Countryside*; and H. Alker Tripp’s *Town Planning and Road Traffic*. These have been added to a typed list: Adams’ *Regional Plan of New York and its Environs*; *Harvard Planning Studies*; Galloway and Associates’ *Planning for America*; Adams’ *Recent Advances in Town Planning*; Hegeman’s *City Planning and Housing*; Mumford’s *Culture of Cities*; *Tennessee Valley Authority Reports*; and Le Corbusier’s *City of Tomorrow* and *La Ville Radieuse*.

Heath’s firm had a significant library; the practice had a roving eye for new opportunities and Heath was keen, too, to promote himself as an expert, staying well in the public eye in the 1940s and 1950s. One of Heath’s specialities was regional planning, developed primarily through a series of town extension schemes in rural Victoria on neighbourhood unit principles.³³ Items in the file pertaining to his university lecturing forays suggest that Heath drew on his own experience in practice (in the Latrobe Valley, Swan Hill and Seymour, to name three of many) as well as his own international travels and contacts recently made. Heath had met with Jacqueline Tyrwhitt in London in 1947 and appears to have drawn from some of her War Office Correspondence Course town planning booklets for lecture material and assessment. Heath’s own lectures, sections of which are retained in his papers, frequently refer to Tyrwhitt’s mentor Patrick Geddes, who Heath describes in one instance as “the father of town planning in England”.³⁴ Geddes’ formulation of the ‘survey’ in readiness for planning or replanning is well-known; it was not Heath, however, who prepared the untitled lecture in his collected papers (for he is referred to in the third person at the conclusion of the lecture) but an unnamed author who declares:

Tonight, I am going to speak about the survey and its practical application to planning as it is practiced in most of the British Commonwealth countries. However, as you will judge for yourselves, but for certain specific particularities mainly concerned sources of information and methods of expression, there are no important differences in the way a survey is done in other countries.³⁵

It bears repetition that it is fair to assume that Heath only collected or saved material from the course which suited his purposes and interests; however there are clear intellectual seams running through a number of the lectures.

Additionally, the Heath materials contain examples of exam or test questions; unlabelled, these may have been proposals or final assessment elicitations. They include:

Describe fully how you would proceed with the overall and detailed planning of a Region and its town or cities, clearly indicating the sequence of procedure and matters to be investigated and dealt with. Illustrate with explanatory sketches.

Discuss the various types of Passenger Transport for a city with population of (a) 1, 000, 000 and (b) 50, 000. State what you consider the most appropriate systems and give reasons for same.

What do you consider are the major defects in the development of the city and metropolis of Melbourne. How would you plan to rectify them and provide for the future. Illustrate by sketches.³⁶

In addition to the above typescript materials, some publications are also included, which may have been key to the formulation of topics; these include Benko and Lloyd's *Replanning Our Towns & Countryside*, signed by Andrew Benko on 29 April 1949, and L. B. Escritt's *R35: The Location of Trunk Roads in Urban Areas* Association for Planning and Regional Reconstruction, published in London, 1945. There is also an issue of *Current Affairs Bulletin* from July 1950, its entire content devoted to 'Why Town Planning?' by an anonymous author, almost certainly Heath. The editor notes:

The author of this *Bulletin* (who is an expert with considerable experience of town planning both in Britain and Australia) claims that, unless we start planning now for future generations, our standards of culture and even our civilisation itself will be in danger.³⁷

For Heath, the education of a new generation of post-war planners was intrinsically important to the post-war world. Heath withdrew from the University programs in 1953, for reasons unclear. His papers pertaining to the lecture schedule are, therefore, only indicative of the program's very early formative years: it is certain, however, that they are crucial to the understanding of this important period.

Planning consolidated

The pent-up demand to acquire formal planning qualifications saw an initial enrolment rush in 1950. Gawler writes in his memoir, *A Roof Over My Head*, that the new two-year "post graduate part time course ... was open to architects, engineers and surveyors and attracted students at once".³⁸ A Board of Studies in Town and Regional Planning was appointed in 1951 to oversee the course's elevation to full academic status and in the first graduation year, 1952, a total of 21 students received diplomas.

Another lecturer who worked in the school later in the decade, Josephine Johnston, found herself in the potentially awkward position of teaching professionals very senior to her, men with few formal qualifications but whose rise in the planning ranks required their "skilling up" in the University.

Niel Abercrombie was an early appointment engineered by Brian Lewis. Abercrombie was offered a half-time role as Senior Lecturer to oversee the diploma degree (Abercrombie was simultaneously a half-time appointee to the newly created planning branch of the MMBW; he shared his University position with Roy Grounds). Niel was Sir Patrick's son, known to the Lewises from their Liverpool days. He had emigrated to Australia and worked as a planner in New South Wales in the late 1940s.³⁹ Bayly recalls that Abercrombie "was a pretty good name to bring in".⁴⁰ He was a competent and good-natured administrator who kept up-to-date with new developments, for example via his "study tour" to Britain in 1952.⁴¹ However all agree (and his stark publication record attests) he was no innovator. A ready commentator on the planning of Melbourne,⁴² he did not initiate hands-on student engagement projects and nor did he research, publish or preside over any far-ranging studies or surveys. He may nonetheless have taken some satisfaction, on the eve of his departure to Hobart as Town and Country Planning Commissioner in 1954, from Danish housing expert and lawyer Eva Siesby's declaration that she was "impressed with the postgraduate training available to town planners" in Melbourne.⁴³ Abercrombie's departure for Hobart adds another Tasmanian touch to the story of Planning at the University of Melbourne, one which may offer an opportunity for future research – or may be merely another pearl on a string of coincidences.

Abercrombie was succeeded by University of Manchester graduate Frederick W. Ledger, the successful applicant from a pool of eight, a man who was to loom large in the teaching of planning at Melbourne for the next 25 years most particularly in the development of Bachelors and Masters degrees. Ledger was recruited from Manchester and took up his position in mid-1956, arguing successfully soon after his appointment for the introduction of both a full-time diploma course and an introductory course to precede it. He was appointed to the first Chair of Regional and Town Planning in 1970⁴⁴ and retired in 1981 as Emeritus Professor. During this time, of course, the staffing of the School of Regional and Town Planning (as it was known) expanded as did its extensive range of graduates and courses.

The University of Melbourne currently offers a Planning major within its Bachelor of Environments and a Master of Urban Planning (MUP) within its Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (ABP). Academic interest in planning still abides in a range of faculties and centres at Melbourne, but not unnaturally the institution's core planning academics are located within ABP. Seams of distinct 'Melbourne' character are difficult to establish: the threads prominent in 1950 – engagement with the community and interest in community development itself, for instance – are embedded in current planning program practice, but a case for the ongoing 'memory' over 65 years is tenuous. The program has been operated and populated by a diversity of men and women and, if its beginnings were (understandably, given Australia's British cultural underpinnings) European in style and focus, those origins are decreasing over time. The current flourishing of the industry accredited MUP at the university – from periods during which its future has, in truth, sometimes appeared shaky – has however been grown and sustained by passionate advocacy both by professionals of a century ago and the committed men and women who have carried out its 'instruction' for the last 65 years.

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