Cities and Suburbs in the Obama era

Review of:

Urban Policy in the Time of Obama

James DeFilipis (ed)

University of Minnesota Press

Minneapolis

346 pages

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and

The Suburban Remix: Creating the Next Generation of Urban Places

James Beske & David Nixon (eds)

Island Press

Washington DC

307 pages

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As an undergraduate student of town and country planning in London in the second half of the 1970s, I occasionally demonstrated against what were seen at the time as the oppressive and reactionary urban policies of the Callaghan Labour government, little knowing that these would soon be as nothing compared to the systematic and sustained assault on the poor, the working class and the institutions of local democracy initiated by the Thatcher government and its successors, both Labour and Conservative. Which just goes to show that things can sometimes get worse, no matter how bad they might seem at the time. For example, the election of Donald Trump and his inauguration as the 45th President of the United States of America on January 20th, 2017 marked the end of the 'Time of Obama'. One year earlier a collection of sixteen essays (plus an introduction, conclusion and afterword) on national urban policy in the USA, edited by James DeFilippis was published because, as he puts it in his introduction, 'The past eight years **should** have been a remarkable time for American urban policy' (p.1, emphasis added), but 'There has been nothing in the Obama administration's urban policy to stir the blood' (p.8). We can only imagine how the disappointments expressed by this collection of scholars and analysts have broadened and deepened in the years since the book's publication. In 2013, when most of the contributors came together at sessions of the Urban Affairs Association in San Francisco, Donald Trump's political ambitions were neither clear nor treated with any seriousness. But, the ensuing book is very good at tracing the history of 'national urban policy' initiatives in the USA.

The book is organised into four sections: the first covering the history of national urban policy initiatives in the USA; the second exploring the urban impacts of nominally aspatial policies; the third looking at explicit place-based policies; and the final section looking forward to what a more progressive urban policy regime might look like. The chapters all focus on national policy initiatives and many will be of interest to Australian readers because they deal with policies that are sometimes mooted for here: social impact bonds and 'pay for success' contracts (Lake); localised anti-poverty programs (Khare); housing finance innovations (Bratt and Immergluck); and immigration integration programs (Brenner). However, I found Silver's historical account of urban policy development in section one to be especially valuable. Beginning with Keynesian era policies designed to address housing unaffordability through the Federal National Mortgage Association (eventually known as Fannie Mae), through Kennedy's House and Home Finance Agency to Johnson's Model Cities program. It is worth noting that the principle of 'maximum feasible participation' enshrined in the programs typical of the end of this period prompted Sherry Arnstein's seminal concept of ladders of participation. Silver also introduces the concept of 'stealth urban policy' to describe how national policy measures and funding programs can have significant urban impacts even if they are not labelled explicitly as such. DeFilippis' introductory essay is also enlightening, and Cedric Johnson's Afterword offers an excellent account of how Obama combined a liberal stance on multi-culturalism while remaining committed to the rollback of public services and a reliance on market mechanisms to solve most social injustices, observing how 'actually existing black power has come to serve as a means of legitimating and advancing urban neoliberalism' (p305).

All the contributions to this excellent collection demonstrate a number of important observations pertinent to contemporary Australian urban policy debates. First, in federal systems there is often a marked reluctance to pursue explicit national urban policies, not least because any policy initiative with teeth would cut horizontally across departmental bailiwicks and vertically across the staunchly defended interests of other levels of government. Second, there is great scope for symbolic policies with names that suggest commitment and action (Choice Neighbourhoods, HOPE VI, Promise Zones, and Promise Communities) but which often fall prey to fiscal readjustments and damaging changes to key personnel. In Australia the suggestion of entrepreneurial action in the title of City Deals is belied by the lack of any clear and comprehensive policy framework, the absence of any significant new funds rather than re-badged existing streams of finance and the rapid turnover of Ministers in charge. Third, in the USA there has been a succession of efforts to rein in pork-barrel funding and politics, especially in cities and many national urban policy initiatives were designed with this in mind. In Australia there remains a strong whiff of the pork barrel to some major urban and indeed rural infrastructure investment and it remains to be seen whether any national government is ready to adopt a more rational and evidence-based approach to infrastructure planning and spending, perhaps in line with a national settlement strategy. Finally, in both settings there has been clear waxing and waning of interest in place-based policies, whether or not they are specifically urban in focus. There are signs of renewed interest in place rather than people-based policies in Australia and we can only hope that these are evaluated rigorously and if successful rolled out from their usually limited and experimental base.

But there are also significant differences in national political contexts that limit the scope for policy learning and transfer. The nature of racialised urban politics in the USA is clearly different to Australia, where concentrations of minority ethnic groups are insignificant in comparison with American cities. Nevertheless, there are some worrying signs of ethnic scapegoating in debates about the capacity of Australian cities to plan successfully for rapid population growth as a result of positive net migration. Despite suggestions that Australian Prime Ministers are behaving more presidentially, the capacity for and willingness of ruling parties to change their leaders serves to limit their ability and inclination to develop bold new policy initiatives in the urban sphere or any other.

If DeFilippis' book is retrospective in its analysis, the collection edited by Beske and Dixon is unashamedly forward looking. It identifies a plethora of opportunities for transforming existing suburbs into better, and somewhat confusingly more urban, places 'without damaging a single blade of grass on a single lawn' (p.2). In other words, they believe it is possible to create a new generation of mixed-use, walkable, compact and denser places where such principles have traditionally been seen as the antithesis of suburban life. To do this they argue requires a combination of civic leadership, planning and community-wide engagement – principles that would no doubt have pleased Obama's urban policy advisors – but which are hardly novel.

This broad project of retrofitting suburbia is, therefore, not new, but that does not make it (or the book) redundant. Given the incremental and relatively slow pace of change in the

built environment outside periods of war damage and reconstruction, we clearly do need to look at the adaptive capacity of the suburban landscape if we do not accept that any population growth can be accommodated only in very dense urban cores or in ever-expanding low-density suburbs. This collection provides a host of interesting case studies of how new residential forms can be encouraged in old suburban centres, alongside new workspaces and retail clusters. While these examples are all from the USA, they can serve to inform Australian debates because we are confronting the same issues. And while the book is not an overly practical manual of how to do it, it could serve to stimulate localised explorations of how what worked in Arlington, VA might or might not work in Albury or Tuggeranong.

Although not intended as a scholarly collection, the book might be better served if it had opened with a rather more rigorous exploration of the history of the suburban built form in America and the political economy of suburban development. A clear definition of what and where suburbs are and how they differ from other places within the larger metropolis remains somewhat elusive, although in claiming that 'Suburbs are not destined to suffer the fate of the suburban dream.' (p1), the editors suggest a significant distinction between suburban places and suburbanism as a way of life. This lack of specificity is not new, indeed it is becoming more commonplace as lobbyists and think tanks in Australia and the USA (eg The Suburban Alliance, Demographia, New Geography) claim the desire to live in ill-defined suburbs is both popular and 'natural' and should not be hampered by unnecessary planning restrictions.

Ultimately this is not only a collection about suburbs, it is a suburban book: optimistic in its belief in progress through good urban design; somewhat naïve in its appreciation of the economic forces shaping the production of the built environment, even suburban environments; and content to allow the accelerating inequalities and injustices prevalent in other parts of the connected metropolis to remain slightly out of focus. Nevertheless, along with the DeFilippis collection, this would sit well on the reading list of any thoughtful undergraduate or postgraduate course in comparative urban planning and reading both would represent a good investment by any reflective planning practitioner.