

# The Victorian Planning System: Practice, Problems and Prospects

Stephen Rowley MPIA

My book, *The Victorian Planning System: Practice, Problems and Prospects* which is now available from Federation Press, is intended both as an introduction to, and critique of, the Victorian Planning System. While an entirely new book, it is intended partly as a successor to Des Eccles and Tannetje Bryant's classic *Statutory Planning in Victoria*, which was also from Federation Press and appeared in four editions between 1991 and 2011.

The early chapters of the new book are intended as an accessible introduction to the system, aimed at both budding urban planners and also members of the wider public who may need such a guide, including developers, building designers, objectors, and councillors. In framing this material I have drawn on my experience teaching statutory planning at RMIT over recent years, which has made me conscious of the need to gain an overview of the system before diving into detail. The book therefore starts with a summary of the system's different parts and players before expanding on details of processes such as planning permit applications, appeals, and planning scheme amendments.

Similarly, I have saved discussion of various particular complications and special cases – such as covenants, code assessment, environmental impact assessment, and decision-making principles such as the National Trust principle and the relevance of economic and social effects – until after the basics have been established.

In choosing topics to cover, I have particularly concentrated on areas I felt were not well covered in other standard sources such as *Using Victoria's Planning System*. The book therefore spends time on common points of confusion such as secondary consent, the functioning of ResCode objectives and standards, and VicSmart. Similarly, a priority was covering significant recent debates such as the rollout of new zones in 2013/14, and the role of sustainable building design in the planning system.

A major theme of the book is that planners need to stop thinking in terms of a divide between statutory and strategic

planning. I argue that it is vital to break down the perceived division between plan-making/policy roles, and the frequently-derided regulatory aspects of planning. Planning strategies that are not accompanied by a sophisticated and resolved regulatory expression are doomed to fail.

The discussion of the operation of the system in the latter parts of the book is therefore structured around discussion of various urban policy challenges, including activity centre planning, housing supply, heritage, and environmental issues. In each case, I have focussed on regulatory design as the point of interface between traditional statutory and strategic roles. How do planning schemes inform decision-making and policy outcomes in these areas?

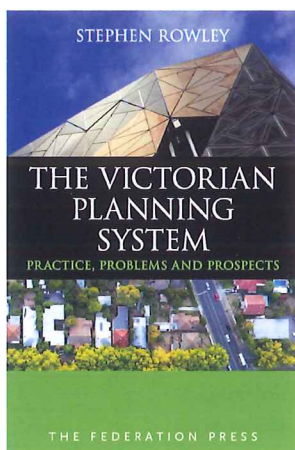
To help answer that question I have also included a detailed discussion of system design, aiming to more precisely define the options available in designing planning controls. Too often, the discussion in Victorian has focussed on simplistic dichotomies such as a perceived choice between performance-based vs prescriptive controls. I argue that we need to more precisely define our terms in such discussions, and get better at matching our tools to our policy dilemmas.

The discussion in the latter sections of the book therefore turns to the theme of 'prospects', considering where the Victorian system has fallen short of its aims and suggesting ways

forward. In doing so, I argue for an incremental response: I believe that the VPP system presents a very sound foundation and has enormous strengths that are sometimes under-recognised. At the same, however, I think certain problems with the core system have been understated in previous rounds of reform, and that some previous reform efforts have been misdirected.

I therefore close the book with some specific suggestions about how the current system could be improved. With signs from the government that we may see significant reform in the next 12 to 18 months from their 'Smart Planning' program, I hope the book can contribute to ongoing discussion about how the planning system can better achieve its goals. ●

**Stephen Rowley is a planning consultant (as RCI Planning) and Lecturer in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University. A launch for *The Victorian Planning System: Practice, Problems and Prospects* will be held at RMIT on 17 March 2017. See <http://bit.ly/2lJ4Kod> for details and registration.**



## “The MOST important urban planning book of our time”

Problogic in Pantheos says “I realize that the title of this post is a bold and perhaps controversial statement to make, but I truly believe that the definitive and thought-provoking publication by Salvatore Settis entitled, *If Venice Dies*, is the most important urban planning book published to date in the 21st Century. Why do I think this? For one, like several other definitive planning books (think *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs), it is NOT written by a planner, but instead by someone from outside the profession looking inward — Mr. Settis is an archaeologist and an art historian. Secondly, the topic is timely and universal — Venice's current situation is a microcosm of issues, problems, difficulties, and debates taking place in historical and destination cities around the globe. As a professional urban planner who has been working in the trenches for nearly 30 years, *If Venice Dies* spoke to me like few other planning books ever have — to my heart. It will remain a permanent part of my personal library and I highly recommend it be included in yours too. Ciao!” ●

<https://panethos.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/the-most-important-urban-planning-book-of-our-time/>

