

# If Sustainability Is Everything, Maybe It's Nothing?

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## ABSTRACT

Cities are today at the root of our ecological crisis because cities are where humans consume the environment. With global networks channelling resources, cities today consume the environment with staggering efficiency. As a result the climate is being destabilized, with possibly catastrophic long term effects. In this paper we argue that 'sustainability' has been stripped of meaning by overuse and misuse in the interests of sustaining nothing but the status quo. We explore a rationale for limiting the term 'sustainability' to the project of sustaining the planetary ecology. It must be recognised that, whilst the market and democratic politics can, if properly adjusted by planning, deliver some approximation of efficient allocation and social justice, there is no such institution that can limit the scale of the economy. Thinking out such an institution and bringing it into being is perhaps the single greatest political challenge of the twenty first century. For the rest, almost all our human institutions need to be transformed if ecological sustainability is to be assured.

## INTRODUCTION

Long ago, when planning was still an idea in good currency, American political scientist, the late Aaron Wildavsky (1973), wrote a trenchant critique with the title, 'If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing'. Wildavsky argued that the concept of planning was beset by too many mutually contradictory requirements to be operable. Therefore, he wrote, 'The injunction to plan is empty. The key terms associated with it are proverbs or platitudes. Pursue goals! Consider Alternatives! Obtain knowledge! Exercise power! Obtain consent! Or be flexible but do not alter your course. Planning stands for unresolved conflicts' (Wildavsky, 1973: 146). Though not always successfully — for all sorts of contingent reasons — planning has continued to be practised in every domain of public policy including regulation of the built environment<sup>1</sup>. But Wildavsky's point continued to disturb planning theorists and those political scientists interested in more than just describing political life. In the 1980s the sceptical Eric Reade (1982) debated planning theorist Ernest

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<sup>1</sup> Meadowcroft (1999: 36) notes: 'A wide variety of planning structures already exist in contemporary developed democracies, including the state budgetary cycle, ministry and agency centred programmes, resource and waste management strategies, land use planning, and regional development programmes'

Alexander (1981) in the pages of the *Town Planning Review*. James Meadowcroft (1999) returned to the site of controversy in a book exploring the complexities and limitations of ‘planning sustainability’.

Planning in our view is best understood as an expression of rational politics — the proposition that a democratic government can craft policy to meet broad goals serving the interests of citizens, and solve problems arising in its ‘policy environment’ (Faludi, 1973). The difficulties of achieving such a process have been well rehearsed from all major political perspectives (e.g. Rittel and Webber, 1973; Scott and Roweis, 1977; Sorensen and Day, 1981; Simmie, 1981). But rational politics remains the Grail of the Enlightenment and the unattractive alternative is traditional politics: rule by edict, hierarchy and the Book. However, each critique, like that of Wildavsky, played its part in opening the door to the exposure of every element of public policy, including those relating to the city and the environment, to a different and extremely dogmatic rationalism ‘government by the market’ (Self, 1993), or rational economics.

It appears to us that ‘sustainability’ suffers from the same syndrome that Wildavsky pointed out about planning. Australian rhetoric in policy documents tends to confirm the suspicions of Athanasiou (1998: 290) citing American environmental historian Donald Worster:

The rhetoric of ‘sustainable development’, he [Worster] argues, became popular in the mid-1980s because it was so vague, because it created an illusory world in which most everyone could make common cause without much difficulty. Capitalists and socialists, scientists and economists, impoverished masses and urban elites could now all happily march together on a straight and easy path, if they did not ask any potentially divisive questions about where they were going.

We too are sceptical, but our conclusion is somewhat different from that of Wildavsky. Both ‘planning’ and ‘sustainability’ are concepts in a rhetoric of democracy. And it is the ‘antinomies’ – the antipathies and the ambiguities – of democracy in a market capitalist society that give rise to the very real contradictions invested in both planning and sustainability (March and Low, 2005). Unlike planning, however, ‘sustainability’ refers to a very specific and urgent goal: that of transforming the economy, and therefore cities, to function within limits imposed by the natural environment. The failure of rational economics to deliver sustainability in a meaningful sense means that the Odyssean course of rational politics amongst divergent values must once again be attempted. We survey this course in the paper that follows, pointing to some of the potentially pointless divergences that would, if followed, divert democracy from the pursuit of sustainability. Our sign points towards the meaningful sustainabilities that might lure an always squabbling democracy away from its present slide towards oblivion. The survey sets out from the contemporary context of Australian planning.

## **MEANINGLESS SUSTAINABILITIES**

The concept of sustainability started out as a revolutionary idea based on the new scientific understanding that natural systems are neither entirely costless to use, nor unlimited in extent, and that they are interwoven with each other in complex ways: ‘the new science reveals a world both more complex and less tractable than the one our scientific-industrial society has traditionally assumed (Rees, 1999: 108). As Rees (1999; 102) observes, ‘There is a growing consensus that the current economic development path is itself inherently unsustainable’. Rees goes on to point out

that the idea of an *environmental* crisis ‘externalises the problem, effectively blaming it on defective ecosystems, which then need to be fixed or managed more effectively. This suggests a supply-side corrective approach which excludes any notion of constraining demand’ (*ibid*:103)

Perhaps we should reclaim that very different concept (from ‘sustainability’) that seems to sum up the *Zeitgeist* of the twentieth century: ‘transformation’ of societies and economies. As Marx and Engels intimated in the *Manifesto*, and Polanyi (1957) endorsed even more forcefully, the great transformation of the last two centuries was the project generated by certain national states of imposing a national and then global market. Today, in the iron grip of neo-liberalism, transformation has become ‘reform’ whose singular aim is sustaining the marketisation of society. In Beck’s language (1997) such ‘countermodernisation’ attempts to return society to the simplisms and dangerous certitudes – faith in *laissez-faire* – that proved so ruinous in the early era of industrial capitalism.

The neo-liberal program was based upon rebuilding a ‘growth machine’ economy that was oblivious to nature and society. The growth machine delivered sustained economic growth — growth, that is, of crude GDP. It has been sustained, as Clive Hamilton (2003), points out, by a politics which has promoted a ‘Growth Fetish’ in Australia during the past two decades. The fetish has elevated both the value of materialism and the practice of consumption towards an ascendant cultural status. The fetishisation of growth has not, however, gone unchallenged and has been resisted by the relentlessly broadening awareness of sustainability. It started to dawn on ordinary people, scientists and even a few economists that what had to be sustained, what humanity really could not do without, what we were dangerously and unwittingly transforming, was the planet’s ecology enfolding the growth economy.

Especially vulnerable, it increasingly appears, is the extraordinary global ecosystem through which water, air and carbon, the very supports and building blocks of life, are constantly cycled. We have words for parts of this eco-system: the atmosphere, the stratosphere, the tropopause, the ionosphere, the oceans, the land and the biosphere, not to mention wonders like the thermohaline conveyor and the clathrate strata (such concepts are nicely explained by Weart, 2003 in his history of the discovery of global warming, pp. 129, 185). We have no common word for the whole system. Perhaps for the moment we might borrow James Lovelock’s word ‘Gaia’ (Lovelock, 1979). The ‘climate’ describes the earthly impact of Gaia at work. Climate change is one symptom but not the essence of the problem. There is little doubt that Gaia is now being transformed through the overwhelming short-term economic success of a single sub-species: *Homo sapiens*.

The inevitable result of unconstrained growth and the source of crisis is an emerging worldwide, interdependent network of agricultural and industrial regions and cities, something like a filiated and parasitic fungus over the surface of the globe. As the work of Rees and Wackernagel (1996) has indicated, the hyper-growth of cities lies at the core of this human generated crisis for the environment. In Australia, ‘a nation of cities’, the question of urban ‘eco-cide’ is especially pressing.

The impossible reconciliation of continued hyper-growth with the dawning understanding that such growth is ultimately self-destructive leads to an increasing reliance in public policy upon the rhetoric of ‘sustainability’. Here are some examples from recent and contemporary Australian urban and metropolitan strategy documents:

The Melbourne metropolitan strategy *Melbourne 2030*: Under 'Principles' first is 'Sustainability: 'Achieving sustainability requires an integrated approach to decision-making. This means taking a long term view while ensuring that economic, social and environmental implications are considered' (p. 29).

Sydney's Discussion Paper *Planning for a Better Future* for the Sydney greater metropolitan regional strategy under the heading 'Getting The Balance Right' and subheading 'Towards a Sustainable City' proposes: 'Sustainability is about living within our means. It is about managing our consumption of resources and balancing environmental, economic and social outcomes. Sustainability means improving our quality of life without leaving a burden on future generations' (p. 10). Having stated that, the document does not offer to create a 'sustainable city'.

The Perth metropolitan strategy, *Network City* states: 'Our Vision: By 2030, Perth people will have created a world-class sustainable city; vibrant, more compact and accessible, with a unique sense of place' (p. 4).

The *Canberra Spatial Plan* instates sustainability as the underpinning principle for guiding the future of the city.

The *Planning Strategy for Metropolitan Adelaide* under the heading of Sustainable Development on page 1 says: 'The essential role of government in metropolitan Adelaide is to integrate economic, social and environmental actions and to reach outcomes that are equally beneficial and reinforcing. It is based on an understanding of the inter-relationships and dependencies between the economic realities and environmental and social imperatives — increasingly referred to as the 'triple bottom line' (p. 1).

Finally, the 2005 report of the Commonwealth parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage *Sustainable Cities* states: 'Creating sustainable cities for the future requires planned action' (para 1.3 p. 1), thus in a sentence bringing together the problematics of sustainability and planning.

It is our observation that planning practice throughout Australia, now deeply influenced by neo-liberal reform, has been forced to give precedence to any and all forms of economic growth, and to allow the short term demands registered in markets to overwhelm the public interest. The politically authored Foreword<sup>2</sup> to the 2005 *South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005-2026*, for example, lays out the Executive's priorities for planning. The plan points to the *necessity* of growth and the *contingency* of what can be rescued in its wake. It will ensure that 'this region can grow and prosper during the next 20 years whilst also preserving our uniquely beautiful environment such as our parks, scenic delights, wildlife and habitats'.

Even more crudely, the grinning Morris Iemma, newly appointed NSW Premier, in an article in *The Weekend Australian* (October 8-9) entitled 'The Business of my Government is Business' lays out the growth machine agenda in the crudest possible terms with short shrift for the environment. He states: 'Our goal is simple — as Australia's biggest international city, Sydney has to keep growing because when a city stops growing it dies ... that's why I've been an unapologetic supporter of new land releases on Sydney's outskirts that will deliver 180,000 new homes for Sydney families over

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<sup>2</sup> The Foreword is signed by the Premier, the Deputy Premier and the Lord Mayor of Brisbane.

the next 15 years ... I've put Frank Sartor [former Lord Mayor of Sydney] into the planning portfolio, he has signed off 56 local environmental plans to ensure councils can get on with the job of approving development'. Councils' job, then, is simple: 'approve development'.

This reality shows up clearly in the eager embrace by governments of the 'triple bottom line'. The concept of the 'triple bottom line' as originally conceived by John Elkington (1998) was written in the language of business in order to appeal to business. It was never meant for government. The 'bottom line' is profit that appears, hopefully, at the bottom of the balance sheet of the business corporation. Elkington invited business voluntarily to consider social and environmental values in the calculation of profit — a mild but generally laudable proposition. But it is not the function of government to make a profit. It is the function of government to govern in the public interest, to shape the market for public ends, to regulate the dynamism of capitalist enterprise so that it does not irreversibly damage the environment, and not to compete with other governments in a race to reduce the obligations that must be placed on business in order to protect society and the environment (Self, 1993; O'Connor, 1994).

As O'Connor (1994) and Dobson (1998) have argued, economic growth, social justice and environmental sustainability are thoroughly divergent ends. Martin O'Connor has cogently argued that through the rhetoric of sustainable development, nature has become capitalised — 'After all, if capital is nature and nature is capital the terms become virtually interchangeable ... the planet as a whole is our capital, which must be sustainably managed. Sadly', he continues, 'this rhetorical harmonization does not in any way guarantee the conservation of specific productive or reproductive potentialities of a society or ecosystem' (O'Connor, 1994: 132-33). What is actually being preserved through the rhetoric and practice of sustainable development is capitalism itself: 'The overriding political task faced by capital is to stave off its latent bankruptcy as a modality of social organisation, of rationality. The keynote in this task is that the populace be put to work articulating the very "values" that capitalism is placing at risk'. (O'Connor, 1994: 144). In a milder critique, Lindblom (1982) observes that today government is 'imprisoned' by the rules of operation of the market and institutional competition — a prison, one must add, largely created by the international collaborative action of governments themselves co-ordinated by the language of neo-liberalism.

There is a terrible determinism and pessimism about some of these critiques. It is as though the monster (industrial capitalism) created by the project of the 'great transformation' is now beyond control, beyond steering or planning. Yet we are aware also of the attractions of global capitalism. Unless we assume, as some do, that large sections of the world's population are duped into living in a world of pure fantasy created by a conspiracy of corporations, it would be wise to acknowledge that the spread of capitalist systems has been widely welcomed by both governments and their publics. There is a more hopeful perspective that views change of capitalism as both evolutionary and possible (Low, 2002). If socialisation is possible to protect society from the harshest impacts of markets, then so too is ecosocialisation possible to protect the environment: 'Sustainability is a global, urban project. The question "is capitalism sustainable?" is the wrong question. Capitalism can take many forms, including some that would not today be recognised by capitalists as "capitalist" but yet incorporate some form of market system' (*ibid*: 57).

While far from universal and far from sufficient, there is today enough evidence of change within urban (capitalist) systems to suggest that such hope may not be entirely vain (Low et al., 2005). The power to build the 'green city' exists in the community. Planners are important protagonists in this

struggle. Green cities are already beginning in a small way to be built — in Australia as elsewhere. Yet there is an enormous amount of sustainability rhetoric that serves only to conceal the lack of progress. Intransigent institutional barriers exist to the production of ecologically sound housing and transport (*ibid*; Low and Gleeson, 2001; Low, Gleeson and Rush, 2003) Underlying this lack of progress is the contradiction between environmental conservation and the most efficient means yet devised of human consumption of the environment for human use: capitalist markets.

The modern capitalist city is an element in a geographical system that exploits the environment for human purposes. What has to be planned is responsible use of the environment in a way that is socially just and can continue indefinitely without running down the environment's capacity to provide inputs and absorb wastes, and without destroying the complexity of life evolved over millions of years. Reading Australia's contemporary metropolitan planning documents, however, one can only conclude that planning has lost touch with reality. There is no argument in them, only slogans. There is no evidence or underlying substance, only surface. There is no implementation strategy beyond exhortation. Over the last thirty years metropolitan planning documents have become thinner, glossier and more and more like developers' advertising brochures. There is nothing behind the documents but business-as-usual. This is not real planning but junk planning.

Unlike Aaron Wildavsky who concluded that planning was 'nothing', we do not dismiss sustainability as 'nothing'. On the contrary, sustainability is perhaps the most revolutionary social idea to be discovered in three thousand years. It germinated in the twentieth century and is coming to life in the early twenty first. But it does so in harsh and largely antithetical political conditions, in a world still dominated by the Washington consensus that has hollowed out states and left nations and cities vulnerable to an increasingly damaged and angered Nature. In the terrible consequence of hurricane Katrina we observed the awful confluence of climate change with US domestic and foreign policy: a tyranny of the majority that excludes large minorities of the poor and leaves them in squalor.

In planning, itself an object of neo-liberal attack, the seedling of sustainability survives only in a genetically modified form: as a sanitised, green-washed growth that cannot infect or injure the broader growth project of neo-liberalism nor the key industrial interests it sustains. If we remove the rose coloured glasses of rhetoric, the unhappy reality is that sustainability is struggles in barren soil. What we have to do now is nurture the central idea of sustainability, and restore its meaning to those institutions and professions, including planning, that allege to protect us from the eco-cidal tendencies of capitalism. What would a more meaningful, and therefore protective, concept of sustainability entail?

## **MEANINGFUL SUSTAINABILITY**

Erstwhile World Bank economist Herman Daly (1996) distinguishes between the economic concepts of 'allocation', 'distribution' and 'scale'. *Efficient allocation* of resources (such as capital, labour and raw materials) means that just enough resources are being put into the global mix of productive activities to meet effective demand — that is what consumers can pay for and according to how they allocate their preferences for goods and services. A market system is, with reason, believed to be the most efficient way of organising allocation.

*Just distribution* refers to how wealth is shared amongst members of a population. If the distribution is severely skewed towards one section of the population, then the market will come to serve mainly

that section. Marx and his epigones thought that capitalist production overwhelmingly served the luxury tastes of the bourgeoisie. And in Marx's day he was certainly right. So also today, capitalist production overwhelmingly serves the tastes of the rich populations concentrated mainly in rich nations as a result of the legacy of colonialism and its global successor in usury. Largely because of workers' collective struggles against the effects of such a skewed distribution in the late nineteenth century, and the instability of an economy based on luxury production, the state was forced to take a hand in redistributing resources, in the interests of social justice and stability and sustaining the economy. Today societies in the Anglo mould are redistributing wealth in the opposite direction, and heading back towards the immense concentrations of wealth that formed the intergenerational bourgeois class.

Economic growth is what permits such unjust distributions because of the law of diminishing returns to wealth, the law of which it is economically heretical even to speak. Less orthodox economists do occasionally refer to this law and have even researched it (see Keen, 2001; Layard, 2005; Hamilton and Denniss, 2005.). Following sheer common sense, the law says that increasing wealth generates happiness only up to a certain point, beyond which it results in a reduction in happiness. Hamilton and Denniss (2005) go further and claim that, from a certain point, returns to wealth do not simply diminish to infinity but actually drop below to the other, unhappy, side of the graph: the Growth Fetish is lethal, 'Affluenza' a deadly virus of neo-liberalism<sup>3</sup>. Hamilton and Denniss seeks to show not only that positional goods harm nature, as do all commodities, but that they harm our human nature too, making us unhappy.

Importantly, though, whatever wealth does to people at the top of the socio-economic spectrum there is less doubt that a little extra wealth for the poor at the bottom end generates a lot of happiness, whilst further up the scale a much larger amount of wealth is required to make the rich any happier. Hence governments can offer big tax relief to the rich and small tax relief to the much more numerous poor, and not be tossed out of office.

The unjust growth path of cities so brutally demonstrated in New Orleans after Katrina, in which social advantage and disadvantage are unevenly distributed, can be tolerated politically while growth is maintained. Planning, too, is dependent on growth to resolve what are in reality profound socio-economic and spatial conflicts. These conflicts may reappear. For instance, the car dependence of Australian cities, and the uneven geographical *distribution* of car dependence, may well herald more acute socio-economic conflict as the oil price rises.

Market capitalism in its various forms is a very efficient way of generating economic growth. As long as economic growth keeps delivering a small increase in wealth at the bottom of the social heap, democracies will continue to support capitalism. The problem though is that economic growth has limits. The acknowledgment of limits to growth prompts Daly's final term which is 'scale'. A *sustainable scale* is one in which the economy functions within its natural limits. He writes: 'The

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<sup>3</sup> Plainly it is necessary to rely on some conception of collective delusion, or a hunger for the power wealth brings for its own sake, otherwise people would not keep pursuing wealth beyond that point. Some of course don't, so the delusion theory is not altogether implausible.

term “scale” is shorthand for the physical scale or size of the human presence in the ecosystem, as measured by population times per capita resource use’ (Daly, 1996: 50).

**Table 1 Economic conditions, exchanges, values and institutions**

Economic condition	Character of the exchange	Social value achieved	Political Institution
Optimal allocation	Efficient	Prosperity	Market
Optimal distribution	Just	Fairness	Democracy
Optimal scale	Sustainable	Conservation of nature	?

We arrive, then, at something like the conceptual matrix in Table 1. An optimal economic *allocation* is efficient. An optimal economic *distribution* is just. An optimal *economic scale* is sustainable. The social values to be achieved are prosperity, fairness and conservation of nature.

The political institutions humans have discovered to deliver some approximation of these values are the market, democracy and... what? The bottom right hand cell is blank for a reason. The successful institutions of the twentieth century have developed under the assumption of maximising consumption of a natural world of unlimited resources. Democracy and the market are designed for the short term: the market serves the immediate desires of present consumers; democracy vests the public with the periodic power of recall (periodic general elections). It is hard to see how it could be otherwise without vitiating the very values these institutions are designed to produce.

The seeds of an answer may emerge from a careful reassessment of the past. Lindblom (1999) points out that the capitalist world has been too quick to conclude from the collapse of the Soviet oligarchy that non-capitalist planning cannot succeed. He reminds us that capitalism learnt the protective art of large scale planning from the socialist project during the first half of the twentieth-century. Lindblom argues that there are at least three possible designs for a democratic planned economy (*ibid*: 41). Most importantly he argues that environmental planners should not simply aim directly at particular goals, but rather aim to adjust or tune the existing institutional mechanisms (whether capitalist or otherwise) that carry the burden of solving the problem. It is worth quoting at length what he has to say:

We count on the market to organise, say, research and development or investment in human resources or an international division of labour. We then move in with what we call planning to amend those aspects of the market results that we do not want. Planning of this kind is not a free-standing method of social organization or social change but a method of refining an existing method (like tuning a piano). Compared with starting from scratch, planning of this kind excuses planners from vast analytical and organisational tasks very probably beyond their competencies. Understanding this teaches a planner a very practical lesson: *one must never ask how to plan in order to organise x, but how to plan in order to alter the existing social mechanisms, whether market or not, that govern x.* (authors’ emphasis)

Perhaps then we have to amend existing institutions to prevent the negative effects of maximum consumption. Sustainability entails long term stewardship. The political world has developed no rule to guarantee sustainability; there is no form of government to prevent the economy from over-

reaching its natural limits. Our view is that, at the scale necessitated by centuries of globalisation, this rule must begin at global level and must entail some kind of judicial system with the power to exercise sanctions (Low and Gleeson, 1998 and 1999). The economy must be governed for sustainability from the globe downwards. Sustainable planning cannot exist and proceed without this. Australian planning is overshadowed and constrained by the imperatives of international economic competition amongst cities. The restraining hand of meaningful sustainability must start its work at this international scale so that the closer handiwork of urban planning can be effective.

The only automatic mechanism which Nature itself imposes to reduce the scale of the economy is starvation. Much as we might like to have a perfect balance of the three values of prosperity, fairness and conservation of nature, the political institutions devised to deliver them ensure that they conflict. The rule of democracy is that each human being counts equally, expressed in universal equal suffrage: 'one vote, one value'. The rule of the market is that each dollar owned counts, the more dollars owned, the more that can be bought. The rule of starvation is that people die when resources run out, and the poor die first. Starvation conflicts radically both with economic efficiency and fairness. Efficiency and fairness are only temporarily reconciled by growth, which conflicts with the conservation of nature in a resource-limited world.

The evidence that the economy is pressing up against its ecological limits is provided today by the appearance of climate change and the depletion of the oil resource on which so much of the world economy, both industrial and agricultural, depends. Not surprisingly the evidence for both is occasionally disputed, especially by those (who happen to be mostly geologists) either directly in the pay of or economically dependent on oil exploration and production. Since the media exist on a steady diet of emotionally charged controversy (...and how does that make you feel?), the challenges to the theory of global warming attract media attention enormously disproportionate to their scientific significance.

Following the reasoning of Daly, the term 'sustainability' applies uniquely and exclusively to the impact of the economy on the environment. The 'economy' typically describes the way humans interact with the natural environment. The words 'economic sustainability' and 'social sustainability' misrepresent the essence of the concept. The world may need to *transform* and not therefore *sustain* both society and economy in order to ensure long term survival. On the other hand, humanity is, through its societies and economies, *transforming* the environment in such a way as to endanger species survival. The environment, evolved over billions of years, needs to be *sustained*, not transformed. Therefore, what has to be *transformed* is the economy, and what has to be *sustained* is Nature.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainability is neither everything nor is it nothing. Sustainability refers to a very specific, very large scale economic project: continuously to reduce the economy's impact on the natural environment. At present urban systems are caught up in the growth machine economy. 'Economic' and 'social' sustainability are meaningless terms and tend to be 'green wash' code for sustaining powerful vested economic interests, or alternatively seeking social justice. A sustainable economy is not impossible but will be a lot different from what we have in Australia at present. 'Sustainable' cannot be applied to a single measure, a single house, a single suburb or even a single city, however much these may individually reduce the impact they have on the environment. For this reason we

prefer the term 'green' to indicate activities that demonstrably and substantially reduce impact on the environment and therefore count as small steps towards the end of a sustainable economy.

Economic literacy is at low ebb in Australian planning education and practice. Neo-liberalism would actually like to see a narrow economics enforced over planning so that it could better serve the causes of sustaining the cutthroat, beggar your neighbour economy and oiling the wheels of the urban development growth machine. Our analysis suggests a different sort of economic literacy for planning, one founded on the broader ambition to restrain, to 'green', the economy and dismantle the growth machine. Planning cannot stand aside from this great project – though its contribution is necessarily constrained by its own institutional limits. Planning can, however, intervene to restrain and transform the urban development growth machine, for example via new, well researched metropolitan strategies that pursue sustainable urban form and structure, rather than merely, market driven compaction. If planning is to be really committed to sustainability it must help to 'paint the town green'.

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