

“THE TROUBLE WITH PLANNING”

> Mr James Durmisov

In my opinion, Queensland planners have to look at the two main problems our profession is currently facing and work to remove them, or become increasingly swamped by them. The two main problems are:

- Firstly, the shortage of experienced planners working in the area of development assessment for local authorities; and.
- Secondly, the increasingly legislative and process driven system of development assessment. These two are closely related as I shall detail below.

In local authorities, junior planners are being promoted above their capabilities and expected to fill the vacancies created by the large number of senior staff leaving councils for the private sector. These young planners are understandably nervous and frightened of “getting it wrong” and consequently they avoid decisions and go by the strict letter of policy and process as a self-protection mechanism. These young planners follow “tick and flick” assessment guides and err on the side of caution whenever they are called on to exercise even the most minor discretion. Applications are not assessed on their merits, but rather on their fit with the assessment machine. Obviously this does nothing for innovation and adaptability in the built environment. If you put bland in, you get bland out.

As well as being a function of the general youth and inexperience of the council planning officers involved in development assessment, the schemes themselves are also to blame. The IPA compliant planning schemes are over large and over complicated. All of these schemes could be pruned down to more manageable, easier to navigate and interpret documents, and still afford the same level of planning control and generate the desired developmental outcomes. When these schemes are updated and reviewed in due course, it would be nice to think that they will become smaller rather than larger, and simpler rather than more complex, but that is unlikely wishful thinking. The size and complexity of these schemes is largely the result of the historical paranoia of local government when advised that under IPA there would be no such thing as “prohibited development.” Consequently, the codes and other planning instruments are made as prescriptive as possible so as to effectively ensure certain types of development are prohibited in practice, if not in law. Another disturbing fact is that the IPA/IDAS process, generally worked far better with transitional planning schemes than with IPA compliant schemes.

We now endure local government development assessment,

which is process driven and prescriptive, in the hands of assessing officers who are inadequately skilled and experienced (and as a consequence timorous). If you are frightened you are more likely to be myopic and intransigent. If you are confident in your abilities and experience you are generally amenable to compromise and the exercising of informed discretion in decision-making. Applicants are choosing the line of least resistance and are tailoring their applications to mirror fit the planning schemes. That we operate in a post-IPA performance based planning assessment era is a cruel myth. Development assessment, and planning in general, has never been more prescriptive in Queensland.

Apart from simplifying the IPA compliant planning schemes into practical common sense documents, we need to address the skills drain of senior planners leaving councils. The conditions of work at local authorities are obviously such that many planners with more than 5 years experience leave and go to the private sector. Apart from pay and general employment conditions, there is general dissatisfaction with the type of monotonous cookie cutter development assessment process they find themselves a part of. No one wants to spend their days ticking and flicking boxes. These young planners want the opportunity to work with applicants to achieve innovative and flexible development responses that achieve the scheme’s desired planning outcomes for a site or area. These planners want to use their minds.

Obviously, these two problems with local authority development assessment in Queensland are closely interrelated. So closely interrelated that I think fixing the one is the answer to fixing the other. Open up the development assessment process so that assessing planners can use their minds and make common sense/discretionary decisions and more will stay with council in development assessment. Young planners are going to the private sector as a place where they can be actively engaged in “planning a place” in a meaningful way.

I look forward to receipt of any comments that PIA members, or others, may wish to forward to me via Queensland Planner.

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