

Lucy Turnbull's plan for Sydney is a race to blandsville

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Global city? Everything about the term makes me mad. Of course, there's bulls--t everywhere these days – so much that the University of Washington offers an analytical course titled Calling Bulls--t. Global city-ism should occupy an entire lecture. Global city-ism is not just bulls--t. It's retrograde, boring, environment-trashing, last-century bulls--t; dull, demeaning and reductivist. Worse, it undermines the Sydney we love.



A plan for three Sydneys

Sydney will be transformed into a metropolis of three cities under the new Greater Sydney Commission draft report launched by commissioner Lucy Turnbull, Transport Minister Andrew Constance and Planning Minister Anthony Roberts.

Most of us think cities are too dull and technical to engage with. This suits the global corporates very well, much as, a century ago, it suited the local corporates to quarantine a "central business district" and send the women and children – the "fluffy slippers" – scurrying to the burbs. It suits the suits because it leaves them in charge.

But let's be clear. A city is not a product. Government is not a business, a building is not a phallic trophy and your life is not a reality show to be ranked, branded, advertised and sold into an insatiable, screen-saturated global market. It's not a competition, stupid. And thinking it is will reduce this beautiful, gnarly, textured, voluptuous and vividly particular city of ours to a bland business playpen.

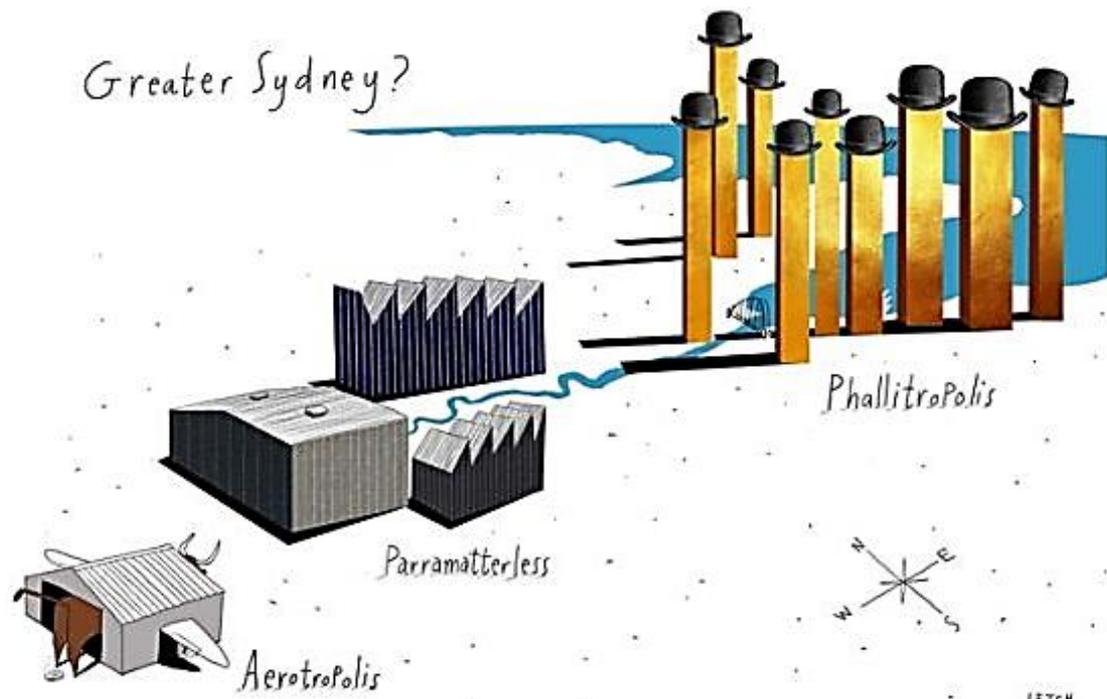


Illustration: Simon Letch

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For three decades globalisation and neo-liberalism have worked hand-in-hand to prove that planetary plunder was a noble and necessary pursuit. In that time, they have signally failed to achieve the one thing that would actually have been useful, global consensus – on anything, but especially on climate change.

Yet the idea lives on, persuading us against our judgment and experience that a city is primarily a competitor in some cosmic race to attract the so-called best and (actually almost never) brightest in a way that will magically send our economy soaring into the stratosphere, making the three-and-a-half people at the top of it incalculably rich and everyone else incalculably poorer.

Adam Smith's "invisible hand", meant to equalise supply and demand, has become a knuckledustered fist, driving inequality. And we're meant to be fine with that.

The Greater Sydney Commission's shiny new draft metropolitan plan, for example, uses the word global 111 times, about half of those twinned with the word competitiveness. In economy, security, innovation, jobs and attractiveness we must strive to be globally competitive.

The only word that appears more often is the word growth, which appears a staggering 1065 times, mostly attached to the word infrastructure.

The plan has two core ideas, if that's not too strong a word, inside hundreds of pages of motherly blather. There's the "three cities" concept – Harbour (Sydney city), River (Parramatta) and Parkland (western). And there's the linkage of "planning" with transport.



Greater Sydney Commission chief Lucy Turnbull released the draft Greater Sydney Region Plan at a media event in Sydney last month. Photo: AAP

None of it's new. The two main cities already exist while the only new one – Badgerys Creek Aerotropolis, named for some Fritz Lang fantasy – is an airport marooned sans transit link, thus contradicting Core Idea Two. It has a dotted blue line-on-a-map labelled "transit investigation 10-20 years" and a yellow puddle called "economic corridor". That's it.

Even in its own terms, it's pretty limp. Using crowd-pleasing chatter to disguise as consultative planning what's basically business-as-usual amounts to a deep betrayal of the public. There is, for example, no plan for value-capture despite the vast value uplift that has already followed the rezoning ([viz the hundreds of millions already reportedly reaped by the Medich brothers in selling part of the "aerotropolis" site to Chinese buyers](#)).

There's a vague affordable housing "target" of 5-10 per cent, but only "when viable". Hello? Affordable housing is never viable where it's needed. It can't be. That's the point. Affordable housing is a service, not a profit-centre.

Mostly, what gets the Turnbull plan excited is the "opportunity to take Sydney from a top 20 to a top 10 global city", whatever that means. "A global metropolis of three cities," Lucy Turnbull writes in her introduction to the plan. "Greater Sydney is Australia's global city ..."

Turnbull, who is not a planner, has been singing this global Sydney tune since the 1990s. As deputy mayor in 2000 she wrote that Sydney's main challenge was to establish a "dominant position on an increasingly global stage". How? Naturally, through "high economic growth", nurturing the finance industry and reducing business "constraints", particularly tax.

Self-interest? Un peu.

This is city-as-marketing-exercise, with all the blandification so implied.

Addressing the annual conference of the Chicago-based Council for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat in Sydney last week, I was struck both by the extraordinary chromosome imbalance of the audience – at least 90 per cent XY – and the competitive tone of the lexicon. It was all about the tallest, the wildest, the thinnest, the greenest, the most expensive. Even the richness of place-making was discussed primarily in terms of competing for global workers. Erectile? It was positively ejaculatory.

It's crazy at a psychological level. Why is shaping our city for foreign pleasure such a self-evident good? What makes us so forelock-tugging, so desperate to please outsiders, so needy? Can we think of no better pastime than the primate urge to compare and compete? I was reminded of the UN's new global Women Peace and Security Index, which ranks Australia 17th in the list of women's wellbeing. I mean honestly? Am I the only one who thinks competing over wellbeing is blindingly nuts?

It's crazy economically. Our desperate pursuit of global approbation has already made Sydney increasingly unaffordable for ourselves and our children. Across the world, neo-liberal deregulation has let inequality soar. This is all known and documented. Yet we continue to treat this unreciprocated "investment" – buying our dwellings, schools, infrastructure, farmland – as something for which we should be grateful. It's like telling the victim of sexual abuse to be grateful for "love".

And it's crazy in terms of place. In cities, as in people, or houses, or education systems, those with true charisma are the ones most authentically and confidently themselves.

I love skyscrapers. They're great. But remaking ourselves for market, anxiously measuring ourselves to compete like diet-obsessed teens, only takes us further from a Sydney that is deeply, gloriously, exuberantly itself.

Call bulls--t.

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