

## **READING SYDNEY REGIONAL PLANNING THROUGH THE LIFE OF NORMAN WEEKES**

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In 1929, planner, architect and engineer Norman Weekes predicted the rise of new settlements to accommodate what we today call 'sea change' lifestyles. In fifty years, he said:

'the futile effort to combine a home life reminiscent of agricultural pursuits with the city dwelling where men foregather for industrial pursuits will be gone. Instead, realising the futility and stimulated by the stern necessity of relaxation from the fevered rush of modern occupation, man irrespective of grade or class, will have his home and bring up his family in the natural and more appropriate atmosphere of the country residence'.<sup>1</sup>

At that time, he said, people would live and work for three days and nights per week in the city, accommodated in a serviced apartment adjacent to their workplace, and spend the remainder of the week in places like the Blue Mountains or Hawkesbury River region, where they would enjoy recreational pursuits and country living.

Weekes' forecast was not completely accurate, particularly with regard to timing, but he did manage to capture the lifestyle of some high-income sea changers described in Burnley and Murphy's recent book on the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Several of Weekes' other predictions were accurate, and with a planning career in NSW that stretched from the 1920s to the 1970s, he lived long enough to see many of them fulfilled. Given that Weekes' career encompassed the period in which metropolitan planning was implemented for the Sydney region and extended into the perimetropolitan areas of Gosford and Wyong, an analysis of his role in planning for the greater Sydney region would seem a timely contribution to the sea change, and planning biography, literature.

When Weekes arrived in Sydney in 1923 following his appointment as City Surveyor for the Sydney City Council, he already possessed qualifications and experience gained in the UK and US. Born in Staffordshire in 1884, Weekes trained in mechanical and civil engineering and architecture prior to World War One.<sup>3</sup> When he returned from war duties in 1919, Weekes studied civic design at the University of Liverpool under Patrick Abercrombie and then spent a year in the US obtaining experience with landscape engineer Charles Wellford Leavitt. He returned to the UK to work for the Borough of Rochdale, and in 1922 responded to the call for applications for the position in Sydney.<sup>4</sup> Weekes subsequently embarked on his Australian career, and the following brief outline covers the interwar and post-war periods of Sydney's development, and focuses on Weekes' largely overlooked contribution to planning for the greater Sydney region.<sup>5</sup>

## **Regional Planning Ideas in Inter-War Sydney**

With the passage of the *Local Government Act* and its local planning provisions in 1919, and then a boom in development and motor vehicle use, regional planning ideas became particularly relevant for Sydney in the twenties. In 1922, the NSW Institute of Architects with the Town Planning Association established a citizen's organisation, the Sydney Regional Plan Convention (SRPC), to develop a regional plan for Sydney. The plan was to be prepared following a comprehensive survey of the Sydney region, identify zones or districts for different land uses, and propose traffic arteries to connect the districts and relieve city traffic congestion.<sup>6</sup> The SRPC finished up at the end of 1925, with no immediate response to its regional planning ideas by Government. Two years later, the Bavin Government made a pre-election promise to introduce a regionalized form of local government in Sydney through a Greater Sydney Bill, but facing conflict from local councillors, never introduced the necessary legislation.<sup>7</sup>

When Weekes arrived in Sydney, he promptly became a member of the SRPC Executive.<sup>8</sup> When his proposals to the Sydney City Council to reform the Surveyor's department and implement a major roads program were not fully supported by the conflict-ridden Council, Weekes resigned and took up the role of Director of the SRPC in 1925.<sup>9</sup> He wrote articles for *The Home* advocating regional planning to help relieve Sydney's traffic congestion, made submissions to Government conferences and gave public lectures on the issue.<sup>10</sup> Even after the SRPC's demise, Weekes continued to publicly advocate regional planning while he established his private architectural and planning practice. In 1927, for example, in response to the Bavin Government's promise, he proposed a Greater Sydney area bounded by the Hawkesbury, Nepean and Port Hacking rivers, and renewed the call for body that would coordinate infrastructure across the region.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1930s, after Sydney's expansion had slowed, the new Labor Government attempted to introduce regional planning in Sydney. Local Government Minister McKell engaged Weekes to assist him in preparatory drafting of a Greater Sydney Bill, as well as parliamentary liaison, research on municipal boundaries, and examining economic costs of the proposal. The 1931 Bill provided for a Greater Sydney Council responsible for 'regional' functions in the whole of the County of Cumberland, including infrastructure provision and preparation of a regional plan, and proposed reducing the number of municipalities in Sydney by uniting areas that had a community of interests.<sup>12</sup> However members of parliament were unable to reach agreement on amendments, and the Bill was never passed. The continued Depression generally turned attention from planning Sydney's development to ensuring adequate housing. Weekes left private practice to work as a planning specialist in the Department of Works and Local Government (DWLG), and became a technical adviser to the Stevens Government's new Housing Improvement Board. The key recommendation of the 1938 report of the Board was the establishment of a major housing development program, but the report also renewed the call for planning by a Greater Sydney Council or similar body.

The interwar debates about regional planning for Greater Sydney never encompassed the Central Coast areas of Erina, Woy Woy and Gosford north of the Hawkesbury River. However, the Central Coast was already affected by its proximity to Sydney's growing population. Land speculation and tourism in the area dated from around the

turn of the century, but in the twenties received a major boost, affecting coastal beach resorts like Avoca and also Woy Woy, where poorly drained land was subdivided, infrastructure provision was inadequate, and inexpensive holiday and other dwellings were constructed.<sup>13</sup> During the Depression, Sydney bushwalking groups and the local Department of Lands surveyor started planning for future walking and scenic tourism land-uses in the area. The Federation of Bushwalking Clubs worked with district surveyor Mr Barrie to establish Bouddi Natural Park on the northern side of Broken Bay in 1935, and the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council submitted a map of a proposed Patonga –Kariong National Park to the Lands Department in 1935. Around 2000 acres of land within the mapped area were dedicated for recreational use and flora protection in 1936, apparently the result of Lands Department work already underway.<sup>14</sup> However, further land-use reservations could not proceed because insufficient survey work had been undertaken by the Department at that time.

### **Metropolitan Plans for Post-War Sydney**

The McKell Labor Government was elected in NSW during the war, and in 1945, it amended the *Local Government Act* to enable preparation of a regional plan for the Sydney metropolitan area and comprehensive local plans for local government areas. The Sydney plan was to cover the County of Cumberland and be prepared by a newly established Cumberland County Council (CCC) and advice on plans was to be provided to the Minister by a Town and Country Planning Advisory Committee (TACPAC). Meanwhile, Weekes had spent most of the war in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. He had volunteered for the Royal Australian Air Force Reserve in 1941 and been sent to Malaya to work on administration and special duties. He contacted his former employer William McKell on his return in late 1945. McKell persuaded him to take on the position of senior town planner in the Department of Local Government (DLG), responsible for administering the Government's new planning legislation. Weekes' early work there included preparing maps and schedules for the 1947 legislation that addressed the outstanding part of the Greater Sydney issue, rationalising local government areas in the Sydney region.

Weekes also provided advice on the new draft Cumberland planning scheme. It had been prepared using the survey-before-plan method, and it provided for a County population of 2.2 million by 1972, and incorporated a green belt of open space, and by way of infrastructure, included an arterial road plan for Sydney. Amongst other matters, Weekes advised that while the CCC had prepared a comprehensive survey, the plan was deficient in not showing all the infrastructure required by its land –use proposals, such as water, sewerage and waste disposal, arguing that:

‘it is the very purpose of a regional planning scheme to investigate and in particular to co-ordinate these major public services, in conjunction with the authorities concerned’.<sup>15</sup>

The draft plan prompted nearly 3500 objections, Weekes heard and advised on a range of the complaints, and then worked on the 1951 legislation that prescribed the plan. During this time, he also advised the Public Service Board that local planning in the state could not proceed in an effective manner unless he could be provided with staff to prepare base maps needed by councils and to assist council planners in their relations with a public increasingly opposed to planning.<sup>16</sup> In 1954, Weekes left the

Department and he took up work as a planning and design consultant. From 1955 to 1961, this included acting as a commissioner on interim development appeals, hearing thousands of objections to new planning schemes across the State.

On the Central Coast, local political disputes and the McKell Government's desire for more economical and effective local areas led to boundary changes and the establishment of the Gosford and Wyong Shires in 1947. In 1954, the population of Gosford Shire was around 25,000, areas outside the Gosford township still lacked infrastructure such as reticulated water and speculative subdivisions were still being allowed on unsuitable land.<sup>17</sup> Henry Wardlaw was engaged in 1954 to prepare a local plan for Gosford, however the need to prepare base maps delayed its completion for several years. Meanwhile, National Trust members in Sydney formed the Hawkesbury Scenic Preservation Council (HSPC) to press for national parks around Patonga-Kariong and in areas suggested by Mr Barrie further to the west of Mangrove Creek, and the recently formed Gosford District Fauna and Flora Preservation Society convened a conference to coordinate Patonga-Kariong conservation proposals.<sup>18</sup> In 1959, the groups were rewarded with the declaration of the Brisbane Waters National Park, but the 'Dharug' area further west was yet to be reserved.

The same year, the Gosford planning scheme was placed on public exhibition. The plan recognised the importance of the scenic amenity of the Shire and included reservations of strategic areas of coastal and foreshore land. It aimed to cater for a resident population of 73,000 in 1973 and provide land for the next 15 years compatible with the Shire's functions as a primary production area, holiday area, place for retirement and a recognised dormitory area for Sydney. Most of the new development was to take place in the existing centres of Woy Woy, Avoca-Terrigal and Gosford, but provisions allowing construction of rural dwellings on existing allotments in non-urban zones were reasonably generous. The same year, construction of the Mooney Mooney Creek dam commenced to provide water to developed parts of the Shire. However, the planning scheme's restrictions caused conflict within the elected Council and between some of the staff, and Gosford's senior planner resigned in 1959 for a position with the CCC.<sup>19</sup> The less experienced planner that Council appointed to replace Wardlaw was to provide advice on the hundreds of objections to the scheme that were lodged.

By this time, population, land and infrastructure problems in Sydney were prompting a rethink about planning for urban expansion. New legislation was passed, establishing the State Planning Authority (SPA) in 1964 to replace the CCC. The new body was directly responsible to a Minister, had access to government revenue, and given extensive land acquisition and development powers.<sup>20</sup> In 1968, the SPA's Sydney Region Outline Plan (SROP) was prepared for a larger Sydney region that encompassed the Central Coast, Blue Mountains and Shires of Wollondilly and Camden, and it aimed to accommodate around 5 million people by 2001, with some 500,000 of the new residents planned for Gosford and Wyong Shires. Sydney's expansion was to be broken by corridors of open space that included national parks, extend along major infrastructure corridors, and proceed with better coordinated land release and infrastructure provision. The plan noted that Gosford however was outside the area served by Sydney's water supply authority, and had no ready source of water for large-scale urban development. While these changes to Sydney's planning were taking place in the sixties, Weekes wrote up his reflections on new planning

arrangements, continued private work with his clients, and also acted as a planning consultant in the Shire of Gosford.

In 1960, the DLG reviewed Gosford Shire's accounts, and became concerned about Council amendments to its exhibited planning ordinance, allowing more speculative subdivision of non-urban land, apparently to increase income from rates.<sup>21</sup> The DLG directed the Council to abide by its exhibited plan and issued a report that was highly critical of Council's administration, including its tendering process for the Mooney Mooney Creek dam. In 1961 the Minister dismissed Gosford Shire Council and appointed Harry Dane as administrator.<sup>22</sup> Dane appointed Weekes as a town planning consultant in 1962, and by the end of the year, Weekes submitted a rationalised version of the original scheme to the DLG for consideration. The TACPAC suggested a number of amendments to the plan, and most of the issues were resolved at a meeting in 1963, including acquisition by Gosford of some expensive parcels of scenic land at Killcare Heights near Bouddi. However the DLG planners insisted on tightening the scheme's provisions for construction of dwellings on non-urban allotments, despite Weekes' advice that significant Shire funding would subsequently be required to compensate affected landowners, who would be paying rates on non-productive parcels of land.<sup>23</sup> The Gosford planning scheme was amended as directed by the Department, re-exhibited under new State planning laws, objections were received and Weekes prepared advice on objections to the scheme for the DLG.

Meanwhile, Weekes had become interested in the proposal for a national park in the western part of the Shire. He visited the area with members of the National Trust, contacted the relevant authorities, and liaised with the Trust on reservation procedures.<sup>24</sup> When Dane and Weekes finished up with the election of a new Gosford Council in December 1965, the first stage of the Mooney Mooney Creek dam scheme had been completed, many more roads in the area were sealed, and Gosford's planning scheme ordinance and advice had been submitted to the new SPA for approval.<sup>25</sup> The following year, the Dharug National Park was announced, to conserve bushland and provide 'a buffer to the expanding metropolis of Sydney'.<sup>26</sup> Finally, in 1968, after SROP had been released by the Government, the Gosford planning scheme was gazetted – with an increased population projection. The following year, the Shire of Gosford won the A. R. Bluett memorial award for greatest relative progress in municipal affairs. In 1972, not long after penning his last thoughts on town planning, Weekes passed away in his home in Sydney.

### **Weekes' End-of-Career Reflections on Planning**

Near the end of his career, and influenced by his experience in Gosford, Weekes' major concern was that the new centralised system for planning and development in NSW was too remote from the people it was supposed to serve. In 1965, he wrote of the 'present almost evil manifestation of planning', where disputes over planning had led 'to the expedient of centralised direction, amounting to dictation'.<sup>27</sup> He said that there was now a widespread opposition to planning, caused partly by State government relations with local councils who were subjected to 'inexplicable edicts issued from an ivory tower of centralisation'.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the broader public, he wrote that in a democracy like Australia, people were accustomed to individual expression of opinions and rights, and had not been prepared to quietly accept development codes that were thrust upon them.

The solution, he wrote, lay in what he called 'public relations'. He said that elected local governments needed to be given back their authority in local planning, and central planning authorities needed to work closely with them to demonstrate that model schemes were worthwhile and capable of being practically applied. With regard to the public, he said there needed to be 'mutual understanding between the Planners and the Planned-for', and that 'town planning personnel in contact with the public should be in the relation of its servant, not its master'.<sup>29</sup> Weekes essentially advocated enhanced liaison between State and local governments, and between planners and the public, to seek mutually acceptable planning outcomes. This view was consistent with Weekes long-held understanding of cities as the materialisation of the thoughts and activities of the people living in them, and that understanding and cooperating with the public were necessities in the planning of future development.

Weekes' writings also express an appreciation of the importance of place in planning. Although a commonplace view now, Weekes understood that planning needed to be coordinated with 'the natural resources and terrain', and he was opposed to town planning idealism in the past that he said had given rise to 'chessboard planning, regardless of physical contours'.<sup>30</sup> Weekes work in Sydney and Gosford consistently demonstrated an awareness of the importance of the physical environment to planning, for example in relation to water supply and drainage patterns, and he was a consistent advocate of the coordinated provision of the physical infrastructure necessary for successful urban development. As infrastructure coordination improved in the sixties, his work and writings suggest a greater concern for conservation of the local physical environment, for example, his support for Dharuk national park, and his call in his last notes on town planning for planning education that would equip students with 'ecological competence'.<sup>31</sup>

Weekes' advocacy in the sixties, however, of the importance of understanding local communities and environments, and local input and responsibility, did not suggest an abandonment of his early commitment to planning and infrastructure coordination at the regional level. It was in line with his long-term support for regional planning in the tradition of Patrick Geddes, that is, planning based on knowledge of an area's particular 'work, folk and place', and the factors and underlying ideas that have and would continue to influence an area's evolution over time.

## **Conclusion**

Weekes' views, in his time, were at the leading edge of planning debate. His reflections and concerns may now appear unremarkable, but primarily because they have been incorporated into planning discourse and, to an extent, planning practice. The NSW Government's current Central Coast planning strategy for example, now an important adjunct to Sydney's metropolitan planning, was prepared using public liaison and participation processes, says it recognises and seeks to retain the 'unique character' and special identity of the central coast, and proposes achieving the strategy's objectives 'in partnership with local government and the community'.<sup>32</sup> The plan notes that the area's coastal and bushland environment, around half of which is now incorporated into national parks, is essential to the region's residential attractiveness and economy, and notes that physical infrastructure issues, particularly water supply, must be addressed with assistance from the State government if further

major development is to proceed. The widespread acceptance of the views Weekes espoused – in public and to planning policymakers – is a mark of his influence on planning in NSW. However even Nigel Ashton, who disagreed with Weekes over the planning of Gosford, acknowledged the role Weekes played in shaping his thinking on planning.<sup>33</sup>

Weekes himself never fully embraced the sea change lifestyle he predicted and evident today in places like the central coast, although he did own a rural property. When Weekes' career slowed in the sixties, he sold up his rural and suburban homes, and moved to an apartment in inner suburban Edgecliff where he installed the latest features for modern living. In so doing, Weekes pointed the way to today's higher density city living by 'empty nesters' and others. This is an important parallel trend to the current sea change phenomenon, but one that unfortunately lies outside the scope of this paper.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Freestone, 'The Sydney Regional Plan Convention: A 1920s experiment in metropolitan planning', *Australian Planner*, vol. 3, 1989, pp. 7-13;

<sup>7</sup> Ashton, p.56.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Reorganisation Council's Scheme Useless', *Sydney Morning Herald* 12 November 1924.

<sup>10</sup> N. Weekes, 'Traffic and the Motorist', *The Home*, 1 April 1925, pp.25-29.

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