A REFLECTION ON URBAN SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS RESEARCH

Invited Address by Professor Peter Newton

On the occasion of the book launch for Urban Sustainability Transitions

Wednesday 10 May, Storey Hall, RMIT University, Melbourne

I would like to thank the editors for their invitation to speak at this book launch. In this digital age I think there is still something good about the publication of a printed book.

So congratulations to all four editors involved in this project. I would like to draw particular attention to the fact that on the front cover we have 2 experienced experts joining with 2 young experts to produce this book --- really good to see.

The book that is being launched tonight needs to be one of many to appear in future that represents research that has an explicit focus on urban systems transition. This is primarily because the challenges our cities face demand transformational change - within a window of opportunity that is rapidly closing.

Australia’s cities have among the highest ecological and carbon footprints in the world as a result of how our cities have been planned, how our systems of production operate - especially in relation to energy generation and waste disposal, and how our population consumes. We have known this for decades, but are now in an era where the planetary boundaries that have delivered a stable physical environment for the evolution of human settlement as we know it now are being exceeded -- especially in relation to greenhouse gases ............... We are in unprecedented territory in terms of the challenges we face.

Many of these challenges are centred on cities – they are both villain and victim. But they could also be the white knights.

In relation to the latter, most global sustainability reports identify cities as key agents in a transition to sustainable development. In reality there is no plan b. There are now United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that are explicitly urban, and the IPCC have now recognised the central role of cities from both a climate mitigation and adaptation perspective. Our governments, however, are much slower than those in Western Europe to align with these goals.

So, how do we as urban researchers and practitioners marshall our urban research to effect positive change? Urban studies [slide] characterises what we all do – from many different disciplinary perspectives. But here’s the question: can a connection with transition studies [slide] provide a more effective framework and focus for applied urban research?

My experience from a research career in CSIRO is that it is often through a convergence in multi-disciplinary thinking that you get the innovative breakthroughs.

Urban transition studies [slide] is one such convergence and forms a focus for this book. From my perspective it has 3 core elements. The first 2 feature in this collection:

# [slide] a conceptual framework focused on the multi-level perspective (MLP)
# [slide] an action framework focused on transition management (TM)
# [slide] and to this I would add transformative capacity – the institutional, financial, human and social capital available to drive a transition
In relation to transformative capacity, those of us who have been involved in urban research for some time would have witnessed the hollowing out of capacity in governments at state and local levels during this era of neo-liberal governance. And we are suffering for it.

So, before I touch on a few topics and provocations that struck me as I read the book, let me spend a couple of minutes on a mini-tutorial on urban transitions concepts for those who may not be familiar.

[slide] First the multi-level perspective. This is focused on socio-technical innovation capable of making a positive impact if not a transition in relation to some societal set of urban problems. This is identified as the landscape level. And it is daunting.

[slide] The multi-level perspective features the logistic curve as you might expect – the symbol for innovative change. This is something imprinted on those of us who have spent time in scientific research organisations where the focus is on developing niche innovations capable of making significant impact...usually some combination of social and technological.

To get that impact, however, requires doing battle with regimes that have been built up around current products, processes and systems that tend to be resistant to change. These regimes exist in and across government, industry and community where there is considerable path dependency and nimblyism.

[slide] Having framed the problem of interest in multi-level perspective terms the question becomes -- how to become part of the solution by initiating an applied transition management project. Many academics stop at this point. But emerging Australian Research Council assessments of university performance on research are focusing on impact and engagement so priorities may change. Time will tell.

Derk Loorbach, who a number of us have worked with and who is the editor of the series in which this book is part pioneered this process. I used transition management to good effect in framing the greyfields research program begun in 2010 that has been written up in this book. Our work is now in phase 3 -- undertaking actual pilots.

[slide] Concerning transformative capacity, there are 4 principal stakeholder groups in any urban development project: state government, local government, property developers and community. Depending on the nature of the project, there are typically variations in capacity of each to embrace change and enable a positive outcome. In the context of urban transition, the question becomes one of where does the responsibility for capacity building lie?

The most significant government capacity building initiative for cities that I am familiar with goes back to the early 1990s with the $900m federally funded Building Better Cities program that incorporated all 4 stakeholder groups and delivered a new development model for brownfields. The $50m smart cities and suburbs program currently operated by the federal government tends to pale by comparison....despite the challenges of suburban greyfields regeneration.

Turning now to the book. There are 13 chapters in addition to the preface and conclusion that address the issue of urban sustainability transitions. In reading the chapters I have done a high level analysis of the contents [slide] – maybe a first for a book launch. It reveals that most of the authors have attempted to engage with transition concepts in framing their examination of a significant urban issue.
These issues range from the challenges of strategic spatial planning of fast growing cities; working with governments and utilities to embed water and nature more centrally in metro planning; examining opportunities for suburban regeneration; how to create more sustainable housing; how grass-roots movements can gain more traction and impact.....to name a few.

Each reader will find new insights and provocations in this book, as I did. Here are some examples:

First - if cities are increasingly critical to our economic, social and environmental futures, why do they have so little formal status in Australia’s federal system? The issue of metropolitan governance is a common issue and focus for several chapters. For provocative thoughts on how to achieve a political and governance transition go to chapter 3 [Brendan Gleeson].

Second - how can current strategic urban planning processes be enhanced by engaging with urban transitions concepts and methods? A number of chapters provide examples of where this has been attempted via what were called ‘boundary organisations’ [CMA, CC Alliance] or ‘foundations’ [Moreland Energy]. These novel ‘shadow processes’ and ‘transition arenas’ were able to be developed outside of [but linked to] existing government regimes --- regimes that can always attempt to quickly close down new initiatives that are not formally mandated or aligned to ‘their plan’.

In CSIRO these shadow processes were called ‘skunk works’ – but I doubt if much of that goes on these days. Universities and CRCs are perfect environments for ‘shadow processes’ and ‘transition arenas’ to incubate. For more information around this, talk with the authors of Chapters 4, 5 and 6 [Susie Moloney, Trivess Moore, Judy Bush, Lu Aye, Dominique Hes, Paul Murfitt, Karyn Bosomworth and Brian Coffey].

Third - if you have been involved with government projects that have attempted some niche innovation intervention linked to housing - such as PV, energy retrofit or modular construction - and need to better understand the transition context in which they have either succeeded or failed, have a read of chapters 1 and 7 [Ralph Horne and Trivess Moore].

Fourth - at a broader spatial scale such as precinct, suburb and city which Fjalar de Haan [Chapter 2] draws particular attention to, innovation is more complex, but pathways to transition do exist here and are the focus of chapters 8, 9, 11, 12 and 13 [Rebekah Brown, Briony Rogers, Lara Werbeloff, Tony Dalton, Andreadne Doyon and Peter Newton].

Finally there are bottom-up activities involving the urban commons and grass roots innovation. With the failure of governments to meaningfully engage with their citizens in relation to planning for urban change, more grass roots movements need to emerge, supported by innovative social media platforms. The transition towns movement is the focus here in chapter 10 [Samuel Alexander and Jonathan Rutherford].

So that’s the wrap. Where to from here....? For me it would be suggesting that there should be more focus on transition management that focuses on contemporary problems.

And it would also be around assembling research and publication around critical 21st century transition arenas. Here are just a few to consider: [slide]

Once again, to Trivess, Fjalar, Ralph and Brendan – congratulations on your efforts in assembling this important book.
A Reflection on Urban Sustainability Transitions Research on the Occasion of the Book Launch for:

**URBAN SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS:**
*Australian Cases-International Perspectives*

Professor Peter Newton
Swinburne University of Technology

@ RMIT University, 10 May 2018
Urban Sustainability Transitions Studies: an Emerging New Field?

Urban Transitions Studies:

- Conceptual/Theoretical Transition Frameworks; e.g. **Multi-Level Perspective** (MLP)
- Action Processes for (Urban) Transitions; e.g. **Transition Management** (TM)
- **Transformative Capacity** among Stakeholders for (Urban) Transition
Multi-Level Perspective – Conceptual Urban Transition Framework

Source: Adapted from Geels (2002)
Multi-Level Perspective – Conceptual Urban Transition Framework

Landscape developments
- More Compact City
- Low Carbon City
- Ecological Footprints <50% 2010 levels
- Accessible Public Transport, Jobs, Services

Socio-technical regimes
- 20th Century infrastructure systems, technologies
- Established sectoral practices, embedded relationships, interests
- Pervasive consumerist lifestyles, attitudes, social norms

Innovation niches
- Technological innovation
- Social innovation
- Failed innovation

Source: Adapted from Geels (2002)
Organisation of an Urban Transitions Process: Transition Management

Phase 1
- envisioning, opinion leaders/front-runners, strategic discussion, community engagement

Phase 2
- collective learning, monitoring
- new model/process of urban re-development
- pilot neighbourhood(s)

Phase 3
- Learning
- Transition Monitoring
- Reflexive Evaluation
- Learning Strategies
- Economic
- Social
- Technical

Phase 4
- Regional
- Arenas
- Transition Governance
- Experiments
- Policy
- Transition Coalition
- Transition Agenda

Source: Adapted from Loorbach 2007
Engagement Arenas:

1. State government (planning department, related departments and appeals tribunals etc)
2. Property development industry (for profit; not-for-profit etc)
3. Local government (council officers; elected councillors etc)
4. Local community (entire municipality; specific neighbourhoods etc)
5. Envisioning future development – major projects; planning appeals
6. Envisioning future development – individual projects (pre-planning permit discussions)
7. Community engagement: long term development strategy for municipality
8. Community engagement: long term development planning for municipality
9. Brokering precinct regeneration projects
10. Envisioning and agreeing future development strategies for municipalities and urban sub-regions

## Content Analysis of Chapters

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Total chapters: 13
Critical 21st Century Urban Sustainability Transitions

- Energy transition
- Transition to climate resilient cities
- Nature-based transition for cities
- Transition to a smart, green economy
- Transition to a light “weight” city (low urban metabolism/ecological footprint)
- Mobility transition
- Suburban-to-urban transition in built form
- Transition to sustainable consumption
- Managing demographic transitions
- Settlement transition
- Political/Governance transition
Thank You
RMIT Centre for Urban Research

Book Launch: Urban Sustainability Transitions

10 May 2018, 4.45pm to 6.30pm
Storey Hall Foyer (16.05.04), Building 16, 336–348 Swanston St, Melbourne, Vic 3000

Running Sheet

4.30pm  Speakers meet at Storey Hall, Level 05
- Please have any AV material prepared on a USB

4.45pm  Guests arrive
Refreshments served

5.00pm  MC opens event
- Acknowledgement of country
- Introduces book and editors - Ralph Horne (speaking editor), Fjalar De Hann, Trivess Moore and Brendan Gleeson
- Introduces guest speaker – Peter Newton

5.10pm  Peter Newton
- Short address on urban sustainability transitions in research

5.20    Ralph Horne
- Responds to Peter Newtons address and gives thanks on behalf of editors

5.30pm  MC closing address and thanks
- Invites guests to enjoy refreshments
- Book sales

6.30pm  Event concludes