THE PROMISE OF THE CITY

Adventures in learning cities and higher education

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For Patrick Troy

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INVITATION TO ADVENTURE

This book began its life as a collection of adventures and misadventures in urban policy, university development, and intercultural learning in Australia and around the world. I started writing with an urge to set down key events of my working life; this included some important periods of history in major institutions not before recorded. But as I reviewed the stories, it became clear there was much more to tell—my development as a professional and as a person, the roots of my values and why, as an urban planner, activist, technocrat, university leader and consultant, some of my work came to fruition and other work failed or just faded away. For much of my career I was out my depth. I took risks, learned by doing, and was helped by friends, family and mentors along the way.

The events recounted in this book are all set in vital periods of change from the 1960s to the present day. They help us see, through my eyes and my reflections, my scrapes and near misses, the enormous social and economic changes to Australia and other countries over that time, the rise and fall of neo-liberal practices in public policy, the globalisation of economies, and the underside of the modern capitalist state.

One's values form in practice and it is not always easy to identify their origins. I grew up in Queensland as a typical baby boomer with little direction but a feeling the world was at my feet. A year at a US boarding school gave me independence and self-assurance, but it exposed me to the deep inequalities in urban life there. An unexpected dose of culture shock and friendships with people from other countries made me yearn for better understanding across borders and stoked an interest

in international affairs. A university education in urban geography and economics then strengthened my desire to understand how cities change. I wanted to get to the bottom of what had to be done to make them fairer. Around me, the war in Vietnam and the suppression of dissent in the streets of Brisbane politicised this desire, though I was not sure whether this should be through reform or radical change. I was not alone in these thoughts. The movements of the 1960s inspired a whole generation to question the decisions of our leaders.

I had a chance in Sydney of the 1970s to develop my ideas further at university and put them into practice through professional experience in planning firms and joining urban social movements of the time. The period consolidated my values, and I jumped at the opportunity to work with the Whitlam government in Canberra, and Tom Uren's new department, where social justice was driving urban and regional policies and programs. It was heady work, wielding influence way beyond my earlier expectations. But the limits put around the changes we wanted, by politics and the immovability of the structure of state, were hard to take. Sadly, much of the work of that government did not survive.

I left government after the 'constitutional coup' of 1975 to drift across Asia in a half-formed spiritual quest, then I spent the next six years in California, studying at the University of California at Berkeley. Reviewing my Australian experience in the time available at Berkeley, I thought about what it would take to be a more effective agent of change, so I joined a New Left group to test out the path of radical action.

My understanding of the need for fundamental change towards greater equality and more equal distribution of power grew during the California years, and my resolve hardened. I re-entered government in Sydney with technocratic optimism as an expert and policy executive for nearly six years during the turbulent 1980s, leading metropolitan planning and putting into place the systems for good urban growth management. This approach kept me away from statutory urban planning as far as possible. I was led by what I saw as the need for whole-of-government commitment to strategic planning and good urban management, using financial and other instruments way outside the planner's normal toolkit.

But here, too, time saw the innovations my colleagues and I made withered by neglect and political amnesia. Returning to my understanding of the role of the capitalist state, I was starting to see that a key path to reform and radical change should be on good governance, the framework around how we make decisions, whether that governance is of metropolitan areas or, as corporate governance, within organisations. I was tired of coming up against the inertia of the state in which policymakers are situated. Virtually all my friends from Berkeley were pursuing intellectual careers, shaping critical ideas. Perhaps I could push my ideas through a more academic channel too.

I was thus attracted to Melbourne into a deanship in 1988 and then other senior jobs as a university leader. Unprepared for university management at first, I ended up working at RMIT for 17 years during historic change to the sector. This period saw mass access to higher education, institutional mergers, building the framework of a new university, going through a crisis of governance, leading explosive growth in international programs and internationalisation, and starting up successful and unsuccessful offshore campuses. Starting up RMIT Vietnam was a most rewarding experience.

During much of the work I was again out of my depth, but so were many of my colleagues. The commitment to practical education of the 'working man's college'—as RMIT was traditionally known—attracted me. Its commitment to internationalisation and multicultural engagement sustained me. Working in the education sector in other countries opened my eyes to the transformation that higher education can bring to societies. I agreed with the aspiration that one of the most important ways to overcome poverty is through education.

I left RMIT in 2005 to work on advising and managing international projects where cities and education come together. I enjoyed helping others start new campuses, develop education hubs and other ventures in many countries. I was not always prepared for the task, nor the adventures I was drawn into along the way. The classic frustration of being a consultant without executive power to implement recommendations dogged me too. Whether as a practitioner of urban policy or a leader in

a university, I was always drawn to the latest methods of leadership and management. I saw myself serving up policy solutions and the technocratic means to enable leaders and mass movements to address equity, efficiency and social inclusion. On reflection, I see that some results lasted and some did not.

Honestly though, how much change can one keen professional make, even with executive authority? The question tests the power of agency and the limits of collaborative leadership. In my dissertation work at Berkeley, I started out with a fascination with the structure of the modern state, especially the 'local state' where much of the power to manage cities lies. That includes the states in Australia. Political movements, bureaucratic reform and individual leadership always come face-to-face with the seeming impossibility of changing some things. The experience of national urban policy in the Whitlam government and the US Carter administration shows that amply.

Yes, there are always limits, as I was to learn. But look closer. Nothing in governance is immutable. Regimes, constitutions, laws and practices are all socially constructed and they do not only change as a result of abstract structural forces. The state is not just a reflection of the economy and an enabler of its mode of production. It is also a mesh of contested arenas. One actor's 'not possible' can be another's opportunity. There's plenty of room for manoeuvre, and my great mentors showed me how, with vision and drive, that could be done. I wanted to be like them—brave and strong, willing to take things apart when necessary. Change is never smooth—growth and development often come through 'creative destruction'.[1]

For a time, I was fascinated with urban communications and the idea of harnessing the exploding power of technology to the betterment of cities. It was a small field of work then, huge now. It had the potential to be a career relevant for what has come about, but I am glad I didn't follow it. Policy and action trumped research and technology among my priorities during the Whitlam government. The spatial inequalities across cities, a concern of mine right through my career, stay as stark as ever. Even deeper structural inequalities in wealth and real income are laid bare in societies around the world.

It is as if I have returned to the place of the formation of my values in the 1970s, and have come to understand it for the first time.

The two major threads of my life have always been intertwined—strategic urban planning and education leadership—with education a key part of urban development. The cities and towns in which most universities are embedded provided a rich learning environment. I saw the potential of consciously planned education hubs and technology precincts. This work aligned strongly with my values, as wider access and opportunity for learning is a key pathway to a more equitable society.

The stories in this book indirectly document part of the greater societal changes of the last half-century: the long post-war boom coming to an end; government 'reinvented' by neo-liberal practices of privatisation, corporatisation and public–private partnerships; cities transformed by technology and marred by neglect and bad decisions; the old prescriptive urban planning going 'strategic' and then losing its way; universities radically restructured and internationalised; a world failing to learn across time and cultures. Much of what has been wrought by neo-liberalism has to be undone before we can progress. Reinvigorating government and empowering civil society are necessary for a more humane capitalism and a more collective economy.

Being the technocrat, knowing what should be done isn't enough. Fortune does favour the prepared mind, the person with a plan, but it also smiles on those with an appetite for risk and a good degree of determination.

And so I extend an invitation to adventure to you, the reader, in the hope that you'll join me as we explore these changing times and the ongoing promise of the city.