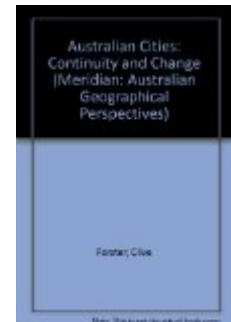


Clive Forster. *Australian Cities: Continuity and Change*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995. 153 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-553565-5.



Reviewed by Seamus O'Hanlon

Published on H-Urban (August, 2000)

Reviewing geographer Clive Forster's book about continuity and change in Australian cities five years after it was first published, and six years after it was written, emphasises just how apt his choice of sub-title was. In many cases, Australian urban policy has moved on from the debates of the mid-1990s, but in too many parts of our cities we are still dealing with the legacies of decisions taken (or not taken) years or even decades ago. Urban policy underwent rapid change in the mid- and late-1990s, mostly in response to the demands of local ideology and international capital, and in Sydney's case, the biggest postmodern event of them all, the Olympic Games. From the vantage point of 2000, it is odd to now look back at Forster's final chapter and recall fondly the period of the federal government's early 1990s Better Cities Program as a time of optimism and concern about our urban environments. This now seems like a long time ago.

This book is part of a series of short monographs initiated by the Australian Institute of Geographers aimed at university students. The series is designed to cover various aspects of "the

geographical issues and problems of Australia and its region or to present an Australian perspective on global processes" (p. v). The book is written in a lively style that avoids unnecessary jargon but doesn't oversimplify or retreat from complex issues. Mostly based on secondary sources, it does what it sets out to do by providing an overview of Australia's urban development and a broad-ranging discussion of the continuities and changes over two hundred-plus years. Like most broad-ranging Australian books, its main focus is the two major capitals, Sydney and Melbourne, although perhaps reflecting the author's geographical biases, his hometown Adelaide with its unique past and perilous present and future, is frequently discussed.

After a short introduction, a chapter entitled "Foundations" discusses urban development from European invasion in 1788 until the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972. Whitlam's was the first Federal government to overtly concern itself with urban issues, and also the first to recognise that the quality of the urban environment was a social justice issue that needed to be

tackled at a national rather than state level. Chapter Two, "Cities in Transition" is a discussion of urban issues over the last twenty-five years as cities, governments, and populations have attempted to cope with the problems associated with the end of the long postwar boom and the transition to a post-industrial economy. It also looks at the development of new urban forms, including the sprawling low-density cities of the north, whose economies are devoted to entertainment and leisure. Chapter Three, "Employment and Urban Structure" is concerned with old and new employment patterns and problems of locational employment disadvantage, especially in cities with poor public transport provision. Chapter Four, "Housing Questions" examines changing patterns of household character and tenure patterns, while Chapter Five, "The residential mosaic," looks at gentrification and displacement, as well as the development of the Australian version of multiculturalism that has seen Melbourne and Sydney emerge as two of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. This is followed by a chapter on "Governing the cities," and a short final chapter that speculates on future urban issues, including environmental sustainability, urban consolidation, and social justice and equity considerations.

The book is written from a progressive viewpoint that values social justice and equity. It is perhaps this emphasis that has dated the book so quickly. Sadly, in the 1990s most state and federal governments turned their backs on these ideas and looked to the market for solutions to urban and social ills. In my own city, Melbourne, the 1990s saw a radically free market government embark on a policy of privatisation of assets and functions - including residential planning approvals - as well as an attempt to reorient the local economy towards tourism and tertiary industry. A huge casino was built with private money, but its license fee and taxation revenues paid for a series of spectacular public monuments, including new museums, new or upgraded art galleries, a new indoor sports centre, and an exhibition

centre said to be the biggest in Australia. The government also allowed private developers to build and operate a new tollway and embarked upon a Thatcherite attempt to privatise the redevelopment of the docklands area, beginning with a private sports stadium. In Sydney the Olympic timetable has seen massive development pressure, and except for the immediate environs of the main facilities area, little of this seems to have been coordinated or carried out with an eye for anything but short term profit. Forster touches on these social and economic changes, but perhaps reflecting the rapidity of change nowadays, most of these events occurred after his book was finished.

Although at first glance this may seem to be a problem, it may well turn out to be one of the book's greatest legacies. If read widely enough by current and future students of the urban condition, this book may serve as a guide to how our cities can be made to work, and especially because of its knowledge of the past, may show students that market outcomes are not always the most rational solutions to our problems. Future generations may read this book and see how things can be and were done differently. They may point an accusing finger at our generation, which ignored the past and seems destined to relive its mistakes. I highly recommend this book as a good introductory text that should be popular with students and others interested in Australian urban issues.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Seamus O'Hanlon. Review of Forster, Clive. *Australian Cities: Continuity and Change*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4454>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.