

Why Sydney needs a second airport

In the last edition of *Architecture Bulletin*, Bob Meyer wrote about Sydney as an airport city.

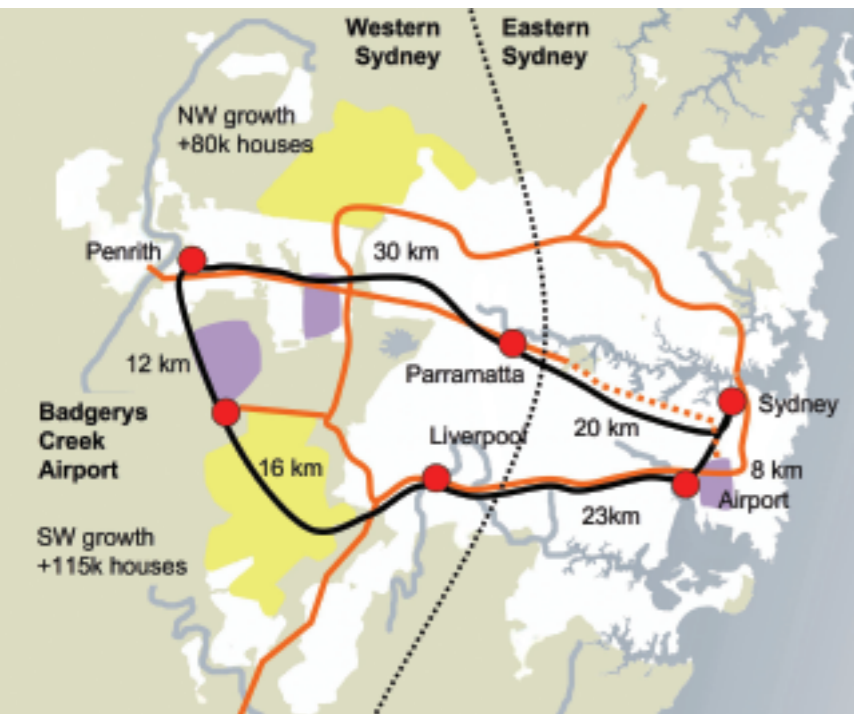
Rod Simpson agrees and disagrees.

Here's his alternative.

Time to speak again about the unspeakable.

Bob Meyer is right in saying there isn't much discussion in the 2006 Metropolitan Strategy about the importance of the airport to the structure of Sydney. This is simply because it is politically too hot.

Rational planning for Sydney is continually disrupted by parochial, factional and vested interests. The whole city, and consequently the state's and nation's competitiveness and efficiency suffer as a result. Without planning and intervention, the market prevails, and the market is blind to social consequences.



The social consequences for western Sydney are a lower number of jobs per household. This translates into car dependency (to get to where the jobs are) with households in western Sydney spending twice the proportion of household income on transport than in the inner suburbs.

This imbalance is recognised in the Metropolitan Strategy that sets a target of 500,000 extra jobs for western Sydney (including Parramatta) by 2031. This is a very ambitious target, but important and appropriate if we are concerned about social equity across the city. Even this ambitious projection anticipates a drop from 1.15 jobs per dwelling to 0.91 in the area where there is likely to be the greatest need for jobs (where there is a high proportion of households with dependents).

The State Plan translates this rather obtusely as 'more jobs closer to home'. The question is, what can the government do about it? Well, not much.

The only trump cards the Government has are infrastructure projects, and in terms of adjusting the economic geography of the city, the only trump card that counts is the location of the major airport. I don't disagree with Bob's assertion that airports are major drivers of economic activity and major determinants of the spatial structure of cities. But I do think further consolidation at Kingsford Smith Airport (KSA) and the surrounding area is misguided because it fails to play the airport trump card well. Not only that, the more it is consolidated the less chance of creating another hub elsewhere. Once played, the trump can't be withdrawn.

The problem with Sydney is that its geography is truly unique. We can't simply transpose patterns from overseas. We blithely say 'we are the most urbanised nation on earth' but what that actually means is that there is no economic hinterland or network of inland cities like North America. Consider the dense motorway network of Europe or look at what's within 100km of Hong Kong, Shanghai and London.

My point is this, polycentric cities in Europe or North America rely on the outer centres being on the way to something else, another big centre not too far away. At 1,000km to the south, Melbourne doesn't really work for Liverpool, and Lithgow or Katoomba won't make Penrith buzz.

But the concept of a polycentric city is at the heart of the Metropolitan Strategy. It is the primary spatial device to achieve a more equitable distribution of jobs and services, to improve travel patterns and public transport mode share, and to create and reinforce local identity.

But simply increasing density in these centres as proposed by the six regional city plans (Gosford, Wollongong and Newcastle make up the six) is not likely to attract investment. These plans are based not so much on 'build it and they will come' as much as 'zone it and they will build'. This has never been an effective tactic because it ignores the fundamental driver of urban intensification, which is jobs and economic opportunity, which in turn are largely dependent on infrastructure investment.

So, we have to create another centre of gravity for the city.

The only conceivable, possibly viable piece of infrastructure that would have enough impact is an international airport. Really ... 'it's time!' The new federal government should look again at a second airport at Badgerys Creek.

The airport should be the international airport, not the domestic hub. It should be surrounded by the freight and logistics hub that Bob Meyer talks about, and linked to the M7 and the 'western Sydney employment hub' at the junction of the M7 and M4. But the city centre will always be the centre. Higher order business services will always remain in the City of Sydney with some outposts in the other three regional cities.

More speculatively, and not necessarily, the airport could be served by a very high speed rail link that would connect Central (housing a relocated convention and exhibition centre in State Rail airspace) to KSA (5 minutes) on to Liverpool (15 minutes) then Badgerys Creek (5 minutes), possibly to Penrith (5 minutes), then Parramatta (15 minutes); and back to Central (12 minutes).

You might well ask where the train line could go? Why not take out the middle two lanes on the M5 and M4? After all they won't be needed when everyone is travelling by local public transport

to the regional cities instead of sitting in the peak hour carpark. Road alignments designed for cars at 110kph aren't that much different than for trains at 200kph. In the east, tie it in with the M4 east tunnel extension and in the southwest, tie it in with the SW rail line. Then we have:

- Badgerys Creek Airport to Central via Penrith and Parramatta 32 minutes.
- Badgerys Creek Airport to Central via Liverpool, 25 minutes.

For international travellers, does an extra 25 minutes travel to the city really matter? Who gives a damn after an eight-hour flight? The extra 20 minutes could easily be clawed back by further efficiency in the entry and exit procedures (while on the topic, why couldn't we have city check-in at Central and KSA, as in Hong Kong, up to 24 hours prior?).

This will also free up a fair bit of the existing 700ha or so of industrial land around KSA and Botany Bay for higher density mixed use.

If Badgerys Creek is not built, further upgrading and concentration around the existing airport will put almost unbearable additional pressure on an already congested, impassable and increasingly unliveable corridor. I obviously disagree with Bob on this point – I see such intensification more as a threat than an opportunity.

Intensification will not only have significant environmental, noise and traffic impacts but will also require substantial improvements

to infrastructure that is likely to be as expensive as building a new airport and fast rail link without any of the strategic advantages of creating a polycentric city.

I am not saying, however, that the expansion on the fringe in the NW and SW growth sectors, rather than further intensification of the existing urban area, is the most sustainable or economically competitive direction for the city. Nor am I saying a second airport at Badgerys is the answer. I am saying that we should be looking at the city at this scale, doing the analysis and transcending the bickering.

I am suggesting that if the NW and SW sectors are going to go ahead and we want to have jobs out west then the second airport at Badgerys Creek is just about the only city-transforming bit of infrastructure that could do it.

Due to the NSW Government's complete disinterest in city strategic planning and their ideological commitment to privatisation, and the contractual incompetence of the previous Federal Government (effectively giving Sydney Airports Corporation a veto over a second airport), we are not discussing one of the major issues and potentials for Sydney.

The new Federal Government should be giving us that chance.

Wake up Sydney, we are being duded.

Rod Simpson, simpson + wilson architecture + urban design