



- Document title: Hallmark events as an excuse for autocracy in urban planning: a case history of Sydney's Monorail.
- Author/s: Ross Thorne and Margaret Munro-Clark.
- Summary / abstract: The Sydney monorail is the result of a series of autocratic, and even irrational decisions by the government of New South Wales. The paper examines the monorail project in the light of a commitment of planning democracy and environment protection enshrined in various state laws. The discussion raises a number of issues, in particular, the vulnerability of laws incorporating participatory procedures and environmental safeguards to being set aside, either by ministerial fiat or by special legislation; the ease with which public discussion or evaluation of planning decisions can be disabled by the denial of essential information (e.g. in this case, by the government's refusal to release the environmental impact statement and other documents); criteria for the validity of research claiming to measure public opinion; and the disparity between the level of public anxiety that surrounds environmental impact issues and the weight given to them in public decision-making.
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INTRODUCTION

Hallmark sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the Grand Prix have been sought after by cities, largely because of the prestige, publicity and economic benefit believed to flow from them to the city and population (see Hiller, 1989; Burns and Mules, 1989; and Hall and Selwood, 1989). The most recent process for deciding upon a venue for the Olympic Games (of 1992), finalised in 1987, showed that such bids are increasingly becoming tests of public relations strength, in which elaborate audio-visual presentations support the cases made by high-level official city lobbyists.

It appears that it is from an increase in tourism that the major economic benefit is anticipated, and that this is expected to continue after the initial impetus provided by the event, albeit at a somewhat reduced level. It seems the expectation is that the event will put the city 'on the map'.

Historical milestones become hallmark events for whole countries rather than cities. Examples of such milestones are the Festival of Britain, 1951, celebrating, in a symbolic way, the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (and the supremacy of industrialisation in Victorian Britain); the Bicentenary of USA as an independent country, 1776-1976; and the Bicentenary of white settlement of Australia, 1788-1988.

Major sporting hallmark events, such as Olympic and Commonwealth Games, have frequently presented a reason for supplying the host city with new sporting facilities; in addition, they have sometimes required the upgrading of public transport, and the provision of new housing that will remain after its temporary use by the athletes during their brief stay.

World Fairs and Expositions usually provide temporary exhibition space on large tracts of land, with the occasional permanent building being constructed as a legacy of the event (e.g. The Royal Festival Hall, London, for the Festival of Britain, Southbank Exhibition; 'Habitat' building for Expo '67, Montreal). However, the International Building Exhibition, 'Interbau', in Berlin resulted in the construction of a considerable number of permanent buildings on a large area of land (e.g. Interbau, 1957).

Historical milestone events have tended to place a greater emphasis on ephemera such as temporary street decorations, elaborate parades, pageants and fireworks, and such things have been a prominent

feature of the celebration of the Australian Bicentenary. However, in a gesture towards social awareness, it has been government policy to channel much of the money available to celebrate the occasion into 'lasting' projects across the country, for example, new highways, restoration of historic buildings, documentation of history, new cultural and sporting facilities, etc.

Common to all of the types of hallmark events so far mentioned is a political/planning decision to use land, construct buildings and provide other facilities or infrastructure, such as a transport system, that will change or disrupt the existing environment either temporarily or permanently. And once the decision is made there follows a commitment to completing these facilities on time for the event.

Some questions that flow from these decisions are: 'What environmental and social impacts will these facilities/infrastructures create?'; 'Should the community be consulted on the design/layout of the facilities, etc.?'; 'What form of community participation should be undertaken during the lead-up to hallmark events, given that this time comes to be experienced as a count-down interval?'

In contrast to large-scale planning decisions – such as providing a major airport (1), urban renewal (2), major rehousing or new housing projects (3), where either the local or affected community have not been consulted or their solicited opinions have been ignored – the smaller scale planning decisions associated with most hallmark events seem seldom to have created concern; or at least such concern has not been widely reported in the literature on participation and community action until recently (in particular, within Syme et al, 1989).

Hiller (1989) has described how, for the most part, the lead up to Calgary Winter Olympics (1988) was sensitively handled, and its acceptability monitored through annual surveys of resident views in 1983, 1984 and 1985; in the other hand Butler and Grigg (1989) have shown that in the bid by London, Ontario, for the 1991 Pan-American Games the public was virtually left out of the process, being neither informed nor consulted. In becoming the venue for the 1987 America's Cup Challenge, the small city of Fremantle, Western Australia (which hosted the yachts, the crews, the tourists and the media) was in a somewhat different position from the former two cities, in the event was not one that had been (or could be) bid for by the city. Newman (1989) has shown how the city attempted, within the time constraints, to be sensitive to community opinion, both through surveys and through the planning guidelines that had been developed prior to its being known that the America's Cup Challenge would be held in Fremantle. Calgary and Fremantle were alike in showing a general sensitivity to the community, but perhaps a more important common factor was that a number of the facilities to be built had already been acknowledged as being needed by the communities. It only required that windfall of money to be achieved.

This paper concerns the planning of facilities intended to mark the Bicentenary of Australia (and in particular, that of the City of Sydney in the State of New South Wales, where the first white settlement occurred in 1788). While two or three of the planned facilities may be regarded as meeting an existing 'need', it is with the selection of a particular mode of transport to serve these facilities

that we shall be mainly concerned. This political decision took place against a background of public controversy and involved both the withholding of information from the community and a denial of consultation with the community, not only about the transport facility itself but also about the whole project. This might not seem very unusual, but it took place under a government whose own recent legislation explicitly enshrined community participation and provided for the dissemination of information through the publication of environmental impact statements. For this reason it seems to merit analysis. The paper takes the form of a case history. It begins with a theoretical statement about public participation in planning, briefly describes the relevant legislation, and then goes on to outline the ways in which this was over-ridden in the planning of the Bicentennial Project itself and, especially, of the contentious 'people-mover' introduced to provide access to it. Attention is directed in particular to the use of the public opinion surveys conducted after-the-decision, as a means of providing a facade of community acceptance for the transport portion of the project. The whole project is referred to as the Darling Harbour Redevelopment Project (which cost is in excess of \$500 million, Australian currency). The transport facility is known as the Sydney Monorail.

Citizen-participation and the Darling Harbour project

Since the 1960s the topic of citizen-participation in planning and environmental decisions has generated a substantial body of literature. From this it is possible to derive an analytical framework, based on a set of criteria in relation to which any given case of participatory decision-making can be classified. This has the advantage of making it possible to compare quite diverse kinds of participatory procedures by reference to reasonably clear and objective criteria. Here it is not possible, for reasons of space, to do more than list the most important dimensions or factors:

- (1) competence to decide – the distinction between value judgements and purely technical judgements;
- (2) the quality of the information to which the citizen participants have access;
- (3) the representativeness of the citizen participants;
- (4) the level in the decision-making process at which the citizen participants are involved (ranging from the pre-formulation stage of policy development to plan implementation);
- (5) the degree of power to influence decisions which is vested in the citizen participants, and
- (6) the kinds of actual procedures used to achieve citizen input into, and involvement in, the decision-making process.

In addressing the issue of public participation in the Sydney monorail decision, this paper will focus on (a) the grounds relied upon by the government in setting aside legal requirements for participation, and (b) the quality of the evidence used in inferring majority public support for the monorail, including that gathered in a survey, belatedly commissioned by the government itself. In the course of the discussion, reference will be made to the issues listed above.

While the use of explicit evaluative criteria is conducive to objectivity and comparability in participation

case studies, it cannot of course, make them 'value-free'. Indeed such analyses can be taken to assume that at least some degree of citizen participation in public decision-making is good in principle, thus justifying the development of a clear basis for classifying and measuring various instances of it. Moreover, advocacy of some particular level or type of participation over another (say, one in which the citizens are well informed and reasonably representative, to one in which they are not), necessarily involves an appeal, whether explicit or implicit, to some context of values.

Given that the focus of this paper is upon the question of citizen participation in a particular state-level planning process, the relevant context of values here may be defined by the elected government's own assertions of principle and intention in this regard. Of particular relevance here are the 'principal objectives' of the New South Wales Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, 1979 and its associated Acts, as outlined by the Government in introducing this widely praised and welcomed legislation (Landa, 1979).

Among its other 'primary objectives,' the bill was intended 'to provide an opportunity for public involvement in the planning process,' 'to provide a system for the assessment of the environmental impacts of proposals that would significantly affect the environment' and (strikingly, in the present context) to ensure that 'the state is principally concerned with matters of policy and objectives rather than matters of detailed land-use.' Moreover, under the Act any member of the public was given legal standing to appeal to the Land and Environment Court against a development consent.

Commenting, in his second reading speech, on the intention to increase opportunities for community involvement in environmental planning and assessment, the then Minister for Planning and Environment acknowledged that this would be difficult in the case of controversial decisions, but added that:

'the plan preparation process and procedures (incorporated in the Act) are designed to ensure that decisions are made with full knowledge of the consequences and with an openness to community opinion' (Landa, 1979: 3353).

It is instructive to compare the government's actual handling of public participation in controversial planning decisions with that foreshadowed in the Act. While the Monorail Project illustrates some fairly general features of the government's mode of proceeding, it also reflects the influence of a hallmark event. This is because the monorail is linked, both administratively and physically, with the State's major Bicentennial project, the Darling Harbour Redevelopment Project. The monorail provides a means of access to Darling Harbour, and for administrative convenience it has been placed under the aegis of the authority set up to plan and oversee the construction of the Darling Harbour Project (although the monorail itself is being funded, designed and constructed by a private commercial enterprise).

In discussing issues raised by the monorail project, it will thus be necessary to refer to the Acts of

Parliament which first set up and later amended the operation of the Darling Harbour Authority. These are the New Darling Harbour Authority Act (1984), the Darling Harbour Authority (Amendment) Bill (1985), and the Darling Harbour Authority (Further Amendment) Bill (1985) – the last placing the monorail under the jurisdiction of the Authority. These Acts, together with events that have occurred during the process of developing the two projects will be discussed in the light of the overall environmental policies of the New South Wales government, established in law in late 1979.

The Darling Harbour bicentennial redevelopment

The Darling Harbour site

Darling Harbour is an arm of Sydney Harbour running north-south, being parallel and adjacent to, and immediately west of, the Central Business District. Reclamation has reduced the water and wetland area by more than fifty per cent over the 200-year history of the city.

The fifty hectare site, on reclaimed land, was formerly a rail-and-road clearance point for shipping (before the advent of container vessels). It was occupied mainly by large sheds and some wharves, while on the eastern edge of the site there was a small built-up area devoted to light industry. This latter was incorporated into the site of the Darling Harbour Project, all the buildings being demolished to make way for it. A 'feature' which mars the otherwise flat site is a high 'multi-spaghetti' expressway, dividing the main development area from the water's edge.

The Darling Harbour Authority

In presenting the New Darling Harbour Authority Bill (1984) to the N.S.W. Legislative Council, the Minister for Transport and Vice-President of the Executive Council noted that the area to be developed would be 'the focal point of the bicentenary celebrations for New South Wales', providing facilities 'fit for Sydney as the premier city of the Pacific basin', and taking 'its place alongside the Opera House, The Rocks, Ayers Rock and the Great Barrier Reef as a prime overseas (sic) tourist destination point' (Unsworth, 1984, p.1485).

The authority's objects were ... 'to promote, encourage, facilitate, carry out and control the development of land within the development area.' To achieve this control, it provided for 'the suspension of eight statutes in relation to land within the development area' (p.1488). These eight statutes include the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, the Land and Environment Court Act and the Heritage Act. An important provision of the first-named was that which conferred 'equal opportunity on all members of the community to *participate in decision-making* under the new legislation concerning:

- (1) the contents of environmental studies;
- (2) the aims and objectives to be adopted by draft planning instruments;
- (3) the contents of draft planning instruments;
- (4) development applications requiring prior publicity before determination;
- (5) development applications for designated developments;
- (6) environmental impact statements prepared and published in accordance with part V of the

Environmental Planning and Assessment Bill.' (Author's italics)

In addition, as has already been noted, 'objectors to applications for designated development can appeal to the Land and Environment Court against the grant of development consent, and any members of the public is given legal standing to bring proceedings in that court to enforce compliance with the new planning laws and to remedy any breaches of these laws' (Landa, 1979: 3352).

Two years after the enactment of this historic environmental legislation, the Premier of N.S.W. was to extol the premier position held by that state for its participatory policies. On 18th March, 1982, the Premier assured those interested 'that the Government is, and always has been, determined to continue to give an opportunity for public participation which makes the planning and environment legislation in this state a model that other states could well follow' (Lange, 1985: 10556). From the outset, however, the Government has reserved to itself an important escape route from the controls imposed by the Act. This is to be found in Section 191, which gives the Minister for Environment and Planning the right to 'call in' a development application and make the final decision – one that cannot in any way be legally questioned (4).

In the case of the Darling Harbour Project, what 'matters of significance for state or regional planning' were deemed significant enough to justify removal of all of the avenues of participation listed in the Act (other than a provision for exhibition of any draft plan to allow submissions to be made to the Authority)?

It has been suggested above that reasons are to be found in a sense of the project's urgency, given the desire to ensure its completion by the Bicentennial date. Yet, when presenting the Darling Harbour Authority Bill the Minister for Transport said in his second reading speech: 'In conclusion, I should emphasize a most important aspect of the great Darling Harbour project, and that is that this is a project without a deadline It is not by its very nature the sort of project that has to be completed, in its entirety, by any imperatively fixed date There will be no rush to complete it' (Unsworth, 1984: 1488).

After commenting that this was unlike other projects in 'which for either political economic, or historical reasons, deadlines and datelines had to be set and met', he went on to add that 'a project of this grandeur is not meant to be completed by some arbitrary date, such as 26th January, 1988' [the bicentennial date of white settlement of Sydney and Australia] (Unsworth, 1984, p.1489).

Yet, after the same bill had been introduced into the Legislative Assembly in the previous month (April 1984) the N.S.W. Premier, commenting on the preclusion of the Sydney City Council from the planning process, noted:

'It means we are determined to have this done – to see it finished – and we're not going to be frustrated by legal technicalities.'

‘This is a national project, it’s something for Australia, and we cannot have local government aldermen or anyone else frustrating our intentions to achieve one of the great features of 1988.’ (*The Australian*, 2.5.84, p.13)

The Darling Harbour Project

The main elements of the project noted in the second reading speech were ‘the Sydney Exhibition Centre, a new urban harbourside park and foreshore promenade, a major sculpture or architectural symbol in Darling Harbour to symbolise the Bicentenary, the National Maritime Museum, a Chinese landscape garden and a people-mover system throughout the area’ (Unsworth, 1984, p.1486). The sculpture or architectural symbol was an early casualty and the people-mover, as shall be explained, became the contentious monorail. Mention was also made in the speech, of a convention centre to be in the area.

The draft plan was duly exhibited, but the Planning Committee of the Sydney City Council (SCC) was highly critical of it. ‘At the local level the proposal raises major environmental and planning impacts in terms of traffic, transportation, land use, design, accessibility and social issues.’ (*Australian Financial Review*, 7.2.85)

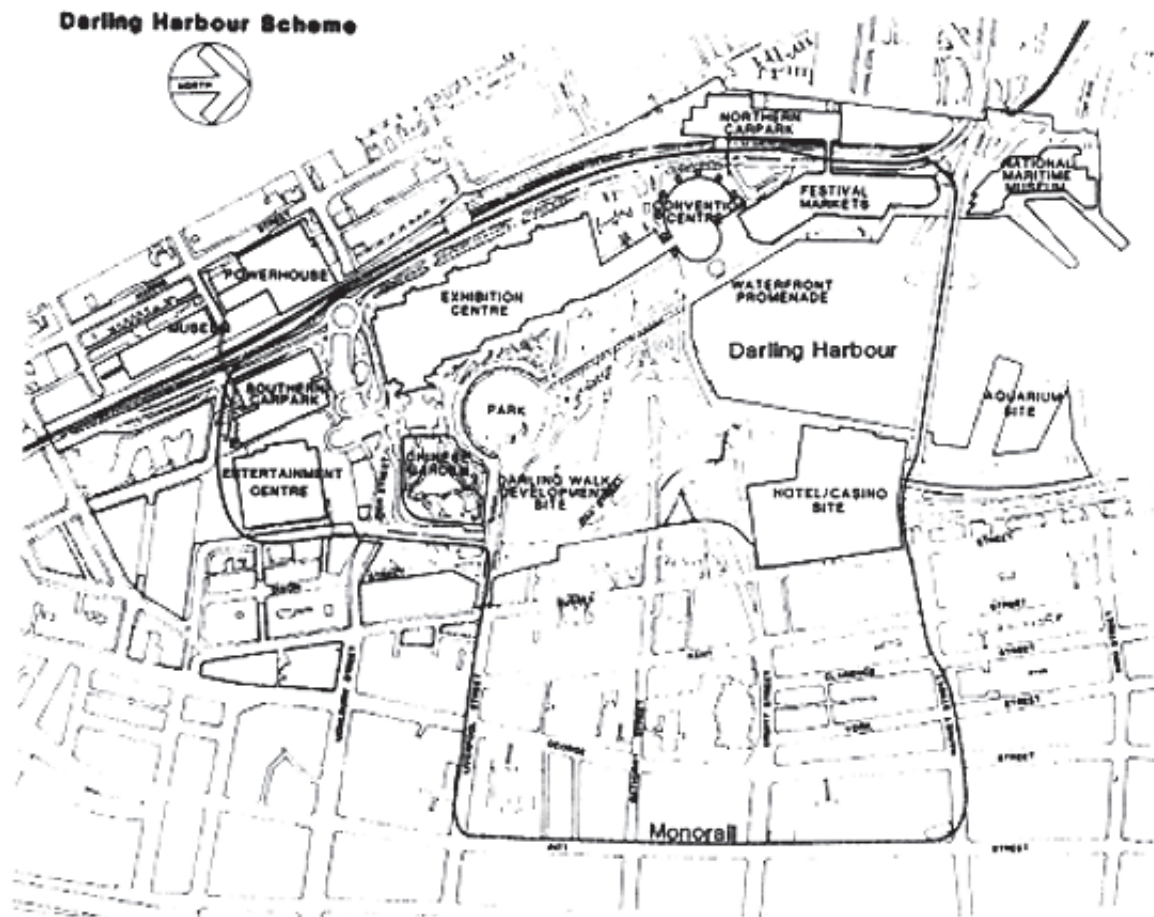
However, as it had made clear, the government was not about to be frustrated by local aldermen. It was plain that to demolish buildings, to re-align and upgrade a major city stormwater drainage system through the site, and to design and construct new buildings, all within a period of three years and four months, required a ‘superfast track’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16.2.85) (5).

In April 1985, after the enactment of the Darling Harbour (Amendment) Bill (1985), the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised its misgivings about ‘massive scale and extreme haste’. At least twice, in introducing the Bill, the Minister for Public Works had referred to completing this ‘magnificent bicentennial gift to the nation’ on time (Brereton, 1985).

Various local authorities and state government departments made a submission to the Authority in May 1985 warning against ‘hasty decisions without proper research’. The Sydney Harbour and Foreshores Committee was particularly concerned about an anticipated twenty per cent loss in water area south of Pyrmont Bridge due to additional reclamation. It called for publication of the planning objectives of the scheme which, it said, ‘had been drawn up by the State Government but kept secret’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.5.85). The president of the Planning Institute of N.S.W. also pointed to the apparent lack of adequate planning, calling particularly for a transport and traffic management plan, taking in the surrounding areas (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2.5.85) (It was not, however, until two years later, at a time when construction was well advanced, that the Darling Harbour Authority initiated a comprehensive transport investigation (including the effects of additional traffic on local residential areas) at a cost of \$200,000 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21.6.85)).

The National Trust and Heritage Council's concerns were also left out of account by the Authority until after a year had elapsed.

Around the same time the government announced that six firms had submitted proposals for a 'people-mover' to service the development, from the central business district (CBD) and existing transport services (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14.5.85). The final decision concerning the people-mover came four months later.



Plan of Sydney's central business district and the adjacent original Darling Harbour redevelopment with monorail route shown.

The monorail people-mover

The image of the Bicentenary, guiding executive members of the State Government, seems to have centred on achieving some kind of avant-garde or super-new set of artefacts which might foreshadow tomorrow's city today. This appears from references made by the minister responsible for the Darling Harbour Project to 'building for the 21st century'. Of the eight short-listed proposals for the people-mover, most involved suspension from or elevation on monorail or tracks. It seems these carried space-

age overtones. Only one light rail (tramway) system was included (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.6.85). Certainly when the monorail system was selected, with its single narrow beam and long span between rather slender columns, it was hailed by government spokesmen as being at the forefront of technology. 'Futuristic' was the term most frequently employed by the Minister for Public Works (the minister responsible for construction of the monorail). While it is true that monorails have appeared in science-fiction films, they have in fact been in existence since 1876 (Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia), and the Wuppertal Schekabahn constructed in 1901 is still operating. However, after over eighty years only another five have been built and are still operating somewhere in the world as commercial transport systems (SCAPM, 1986). (By contrast a great many more light-rail and commuter-rail systems have been constructed around the globe over the same period).

Concern and Objections

It is the monorail's intrusion into the central business district which has caused the greatest concern, particularly in relation to its adverse visual impact on the general streetscape and on specific buildings of architectural and historical significance (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13.9.85; 30.10.85; 1.11.85; 6.11.85; 11.11.85; 13.11.85). The Royal Australian Planning Institute and the National Trust are on record as opposing the monorail on its present route, and the Sydney City Council was unanimous in its opposition right from the time of its announcement. (The Council, however, has no control over the monorail's design or route, or over closure of portions of the inner city streets, either temporarily or permanently, to allow for, construction of respectively the pylons and elevated stations (which will eliminate one lane of an already narrow city street).

Given this quantity and intensity of objections, particularly from the Sydney City Council, which could bring to bear impediments to the construction of the monorail, the NSW Government introduced into Parliament the Darling Harbour Authority (Further Amendment) Bill in November 1985. The Minister for Transport, said in the Legislative Council that 'the purpose of the bill is to allow construction of the monorail *for the bicentenary* (by overriding thirteen existing laws, including those on environment and planning, heritage, traffic and fire safety, as well as the authority of the Sydney City Council) (Unsworth, 1985: 10554). (Authors' emphasis).

Whereas this Minister's earlier speeches had indicated a certain flexibility as to completion dates for the Darling Harbour Project, he now appeared to conform fully to the stance taken by the Premier and the Minister for Public Works – to the effect that there was indeed a strict deadline – one which created a climate of emergency.

The selection criteria

On (26th November, 1985) the Minister for Transport announced the 'in the final analysis the monorail was the only real choice for a new people-mover to link Darling Harbour with the centre of the city' (Unsworth, 1985, p.10554). The original brief, however, had sought only to connect Darling Harbour to the existing transport system at one or more modal points (e.g. railways stations). The monorail

does not in fact provide that immediate connection (the closest embarkation point to a railway station being one city block away) whereas other proposed systems did provide a close interchange, and, at the same time, avoided adding another element to already congested inner-city streets.

The Minister identified four basic criteria for the selection of the monorail, namely technical efficiency (capacity, speed, safety, etc.), financial considerations, speed of construction and environmental impact. While the government refused to make public not only all of the available reports on alternative systems of transport to Darling Harbour, but also the environmental impact statement for the monorail, virtually no persons (except those few in a 'task force of public servants' and the Cabinet sub-committee' that made the decision (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.11.85)) have access to relevant information upon which a truly informed discussion could be based.

Arguments put forward by objectors

It should be noted that virtually none of the monorail's opponents are or were objecting to the system, or even to its appearance, per se; and that they admit it is quite suitable for some environments – even around the Darling Harbour Project site itself. The objection is to its being placed within a particular inner-city environment, (whereas the entrepreneurs of the scheme claim it must be in that environment to be economically viable, that is, to be provided and run commercially at no cost to the government).

The broadly environmental character of arguments raised against the monorail is important in relation to the public's competence to participate appropriately in this particular decision. As we have implied



The monorail beam in front of the heritage Queen Victoria Building at George and Market streets.

above, other factors whose evaluation could be claimed to lie exclusively within the government's specific field of competence, are not in dispute.

And indeed, in denying, in the name of public interest, the public's right to participate in this decision, the government has not relied upon any appeal to the complexities of the issues involved. Rather it has relied simply upon the weighting of some factors more heavily than others: specifically, cost and speed of construction above environmental impact (at the same time, documents detailing the environmental impact of the project have been withheld from the public). In other words, the advantage of having a low cost and effective transport link to a new shopping and recreation area completed by early 1988 has been deemed to outweigh any permanent environmental damage (whether aesthetic, functional or material) which it may entail.

Now, weighting decisions are of course value judgements, not technical ones and it is precisely these which lie within the proper competence of the citizens at large.

Aesthetic judgements are of particular interest in the monorail case. In replying to criticism of the appearance of the monorail method of carriage itself (which is comparatively small at eighty centimetres deep by seventy-seven centimetres wide) the Minister for Transport observed that:

The opponents of the monorail who criticise the visual impact of the elevated monorail, seem to conveniently forget the visual impact of the overhead wires inherent in any tram system (Unsworth, 1985: 10554).

By contrast, the NSW Minister for Public Works has admitted in Parliament that the monorail is "aesthetically displeasing". Indeed he saw that as 'the only objection that any (person) could logically have to the monorail', adding that 'some people do have that (objection) and I have a great deal of respect for them' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 23.10.86) (6).

The question of the visual impact of the monorail on one route as compared with overhead tramway wires on a quite different route is clearly one that depends on people's aesthetic preferences. It is, moreover, one that readily lends itself to being tested by research, and it is not one that lies within any ministerial competence. In fact the different impacts of different visual environments could be tested for the monorail itself. Objections to it in narrow, busy, inner-city streets are supported by Japanese research (Yamada, Shinohara, Amano and Okada, 1986) which shows that some street environments are more 'vulnerable' to undesirable visual impact from elevated transport systems than others: specifically, narrow, busy streets with a highly heterogeneous visual appearance. In such contexts, it seems, the visually simple lines of an elevated rail are apparently perceived as providing a discordant, undesirable contrast (7).

The second issue, that of disabling public debate by withholding information, is of prime importance. In this case it has extended to outright secrecy surrounding documents of a class normally made public (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30.7.86; 27.9.86). It has also included the selective promulgation of

information. Thus, in discussing the final choice between a light rail tram and the monorail proposed by the TNT company, the Minister for Transport noted that one disadvantage of the tram was that it took up two lanes of road space, omitting to mention either that its route was through wide roads with low traffic-volume or that the monorail took up one lane in the narrow, high-traffic-volume streets on its route (Unsworth, 1985).

Whereas, usually, an application for a 'small private development in the CBD requires models, perspectives and photomontages to enable evaluation of its potential visual and environmental impact' (SCAPM, p.13), this has not been required for the monorail. Amidst the general dearth of information about environmental impact, the Board of Fire Commissioners and the Firemen's Union did make public their view that the monorail would be a safety risk, inhibiting access to burning buildings alongside it (*Sydney Morning Herald*), 5.7.86; 15.7.86; 11.9.86). Public resistance to the Monorail increased through 1986. Between 7,000 and 10,000 people took to the Sydney streets on Sunday 20th July 1986 to protest against it (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21.7.86). Another 2,000 assembled outside Parliament House, in the fourth protest rally of the year, on 1st October (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2.10.86).

As protest mounted, the developers, with a financial interest in the success of the Darling Harbour Project, began to 'warn' the government and the public that the monorail 'must' go ahead (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30.7.86). Some threatened to withdraw their planned investment if it did not.

Surveys and popularity polls as a mode of public participation

In the face of clear indications of public resistance, the government looked for evidence to support its earlier confident assertion that 'the overwhelming majority of people want a space-age and attractive monorail system to serve Sydney into the twenty-first century' (Unsworth, 1985: 10554).

Periodic newspaper polls tended to discourage the idea of an 'overwhelming majority' either for or against the monorail (*Sun*, 9.10.86). However, the government was inclined to grasp at straws. On 18 July 1986 The *Sydney Morning Herald* published the results of a telephone poll of 600 people across Sydney[8]. To the question 'should the monorail be built?' 46 per cent responded in the affirmative and 45 per cent in the negative (8 per cent had no opinion). Responding to these results, the minister responsible for the Darling Harbour project took the simplistic 'democratic' view according to which the one percent majority enables one to dismiss an almost equally large minority. He hailed the result 'as showing that a majority of people want the monorail, despite a concerted campaign of vilification and misrepresentation by its opponents' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.7.86).

The same lack of adequate public information about the design of the monorail, its appearance and its environmental impact, affects interpretation of this poll result as in the case of every other monorail poll or survey. All in all, the Minister's enthusiasm for these results makes a melancholy comment upon the government's approach to the gathering of public opinion in this matter.

What is perhaps more interesting in the *Herald* survey results than the even for/against voting figures, is the part played by aesthetic/environmental factors in the reasons people gave for their vote. Only seven per cent of people 'even among its supporters were prepared to say that the monorail looked good'. Instead, expressions of approval were in fairly vague, impressionistic terms. The forty-five per cent opposing the monorail, on the other hand, gave, for the most part, environmental reasons: it would be an eyesore, unsuitable for the narrow streets, out of character, etc. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 18.7.86). It is this class of values and anxieties which has been systematically slighted and held out of account by the government in relation to the monorail, despite the vigour with which they have been expressed in this case by a large sector of the public, both upon their own initiative (in the streets) and in opinion polls.

Matters were not substantially advanced by the Darling Harbour Authority's own survey later in the same year. On 21 September 1986 the results were announced of a survey on the monorail, commissioned by the Authority from the major survey-research firm McNair-Anderson (ABC National Radio News 21.9.86). This showed that 47 per cent supported the monorail, 33 per cent opposed it and 20 per cent either had no opinion or were neither for it nor against it. In announcing the results, the Minister in charge of the project said that a breakdown of the results showed that 'the vocal minority' against the monorail (33%) 'tended to have tertiary educations, thought they knew a lot about the monorail but did not ... lived on the North Shore, eastern suburbs of in inner western suburbs such as Balmain' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22.9.86). (The implication was that this large minority belonged to an educationally and economically advantaged 'smart set', whose views were unlikely to be sympathetic to the interests of ordinary people) [9].

The aim of that survey was to gauge the public's approval of the monorail, and also its understanding of both its technical and its design aspects, on the basis of a sample of 605 respondents from across Sydney. The survey interview was in three stages. Respondents were first asked if they were for or against the monorail. They were then asked five multiple-choice style questions on technical aspects of the proposal. Respondents were next asked to agree or disagree with four statements expressing negative attitudes towards the monorail. Not one of either the five questions or the four statements provided respondents with an opportunity to express an opinion about the monorail's environmental – particularly aesthetic – effects.

After the responses to these two sets of questions were recorded, specific pieces of technical information were provided about the monorail. One photomontage of the monorail focusing on the train at eye-level approaching the viewer, was also shown.

The respondents were again presented with the attitude-statements, and asked for agreement or disagreement. It was concluded that after information about the monorail was presented, agreement with the negative statements declined.

What this manoeuvre shows is that after being given selected pieces of information about the monorail, none of which concerned its aesthetic or more broadly environmental effects, people were less ready to agree with a selected set of negative statements, also none of which concerned the monorail's environmental effects. But as we have seen, it was precisely the feared environmental effects of the monorail in a particular inner-city context that were the main basis of opposition to it.

The paucity of simulated views

The one photomontage of the monorail that was shown to respondents in this study was from an angle, level with the supporting beam, which few people would experience. It induces concentration on the beam and monorail train as a thing in itself – a foregrounded 'figure' (in the language of perceptual psychology). However once the monorail is built, and becomes yet another item in the scenic milieu of the city, it will not remain the only focus of visual interest, subordinating all else as undifferentiated 'background'. It will be the overall view of buildings, streets and intersections which will be appreciated or not appreciated. When an element such as a building becomes the focus of attention, the monorail will function as a visual impediment.

The kind of simulation that could best represent this effect

would be a photograph of the facade of one of the more interesting buildings occluded by a blocked-out shape (representing the monorail and its supporting structures) [10].

It is obvious that poll results are extremely dependent on the phrasing of poll questions, with the result, as R. W. Connell noted recently, that interest groups rich enough to commission private polls can usually count on some plausible-looking results to suit them (Connell, 1987).



Monorail beam over pedestrians along Market Street.

Public opinion in a climate of ignorance

Moreover, assessment of 'public opinion' in a contrived climate of ignorance is no more than a propaganda exercise. If any weight at all is to be placed upon the corrective value of the judgement of ordinary citizens in such practical issues, it needs to be informed by an adequate knowledge of real contexts and consequences, and some basis for comparing and weighing alternatives. It is peculiarly ironic in this context that the Sydney Rocks Area should have been one of the public treasures to which a NSW State Minister proudly compared the Darling Harbour Project. This precinct of 19th century buildings was saved from government-sponsored high-rise redevelopment only by massive public protest.

In the case of the Sydney monorail, it is clear that no public input was in fact desired (either from the citizens in general or from their representatives on the Sydney City Council). Indeed the monorail had been accepted by the government before anything was made available for public comment.

The argument that there was not enough time for community participation in this part of the Darling Harbour project is simply false. The original announcement of a 'people-mover' was made in May, 1984. The proposals for it were submitted in May 1985. This provided twelve months in which to inform the public fully on the structure and design of each possible system already in existence, and of possible alternative routes, and to assess its views – at least on the level of broad orders of preference. During the four month period from submission of the proposal to acceptance by the government, follow-up surveys on the specific proposals could also have been conducted.

Conclusion

This paper has been about the question of the community involvement in decisions about the permanent buildings and infrastructure to be developed as part of a hallmark event. Hiller (1989) and Newman (1989) have shown that community participation in such large scale decision-making is possible, but only where planners and politicians have the will to consult their communities, rather than setting out to exclude them, as in the case we have discussed.

The concept of the count-down interval in 'super-fast-track' design and construction seems to freeze the authorities into inaction in anything but the design and execution. Yet, in this mode of construction, there are target dates set for the finalisation of the design of each major element. Leading up to each date there is period for information gathering and formulation of the brief or programme during which (survey) research could take place. We contend that even moderately well designed research is better than none at all (see, for example, Purcell and Thorne, 1977). Plainly, the issue is not one of time, primarily, but rather of the strength of concern for public involvement in the planning.

For those who value any degree of public participation at all in urban planning decisions, the darkest and most deceitful aspects of this case are, firstly, the disabling of public discussion by the deliberate

withholding of information, and secondly, the clear contempt shown specifically for concerns that relate to the urban environment as distinct from purely economic or technical considerations. Associated with these is the deceptive and manipulative use made of ill-designed opinion polls.

As an epilogue, it is ironic that the Labor Party in government, at the time in New South Wales was more interested in citizen input through survey research as a gauge of its election prospects (in early 1988), than as an influence on its decisions whilst in power. When survey research of the electorate revealed the extreme unpopularity of the Minister of Works in charge of the Darling Harbour project and the Sydney Monorail, he was asked by the Premier to accept a less important portfolio, at least temporarily, although he had been appointed to that one as 'the man to get things done in a hurry'. He refused and resigned from the Ministry (Sydney Morning Herald, 26.11.87.; 27.11.87.). He, like the citizens he refused to consult, proved dispensable.

A few months earlier the elected, but highly critical Sydney City Council had been dismissed and replaced by three government-appointed Commissioners. In July 1987 the Darling Harbour Project was said to be facing 'industrial hiccups' from strikers (Sydney Morning Herald, 23.10.87), but by November, during a strike by electricians, the whole Darling Harbour Project was closed down (Sydney Morning Herald, 23.10.87) and the formal opening date of January 16 was 'postponed indefinitely'. In early January 1988 the government decided to open the Darling Harbour facilities to the public one-by-one, as they were completed, the first being a park on January 16, without however the monorail being in operation. In fact not one other facility was to be available by the date of the Bicentenary hallmark event. They would open progressively from one to nine months late – the monorail having a two to three months forecast delay in commencing (Sydney Morning Herald, 12.12.87).

The monorail, as well as being overdue for completion, had overrun its budgetted cost. The contract with the government was that cost overruns would be borne by the government, i.e. the taxpayer; and so far the excess cost is fifty per cent of the original, enough in itself to have paid for the more environmentally discrete on-surface, light-rail system proposed as one of the people-movers.

Finally, we wish to emphasise that this paper has focused upon the ways in which formal participative processes and legislation, previously introduced to protect the environment, were suspended in the course of the planning, design and construction of the Darling Harbour Project and, more particularly, of the associated Sydney Monorail. (No judgement is intended upon the value to the community of the facilities made available through the Darling Harbour Project.)

Perhaps large scale hallmark event planning is best seen within the wider category of large scale planning projects from which governments expect fairly immediate political or economic benefit. Considerations of that kind are liable to weigh more with them, over the short term in which they operate, than any concern for social or environmental impact.

ADDENDUM in 2008.

To demonstrate the deceit and irrationality of the acceptance of the monorail by politicians as “the answer” to the people-mover, there was built within ten years after start of operation of the monorail, the previously politically despised mode of transport, a tramline access to Darling Harbour. Whereas the monorail did not conform to one of the criteria set down for the “people mover”, that is, to connect to an existing rail service, the tramline started at Sydney’s Central Station terminal. It travels beside the Sydney Entertainment Centre at the southern end of the Darling Harbour Development, and along the western boundary of the Development, providing access to the Darling Harbour facilities and a new casino, theatre and hotel. This could have been the sensible solution in the early 1980s, rather than the creation of an unattractive, trendy, mainly tourist, sight-seeing facility that is almost always mentioned in “visionary” plans for Sydney as the first thing to be demolished.

In cynical amusement one can see the same political trendiness in 2008, when there is mooted building of the newest thing to catch the eyes of politicians. The “answer” now is Metro style rail, with one Premier of the state announcing one line from the north-west to the south-east suburbs, and his successor announcing a short city line (of course not mentioning whether the first one is on his agenda). The NSW Government politicians realise that Perth has a Metro style semi-light rail that seems to “work”. Their ignorance of anything except worrying about staying in power eludes them for the fact that a city with about the same population as Sydney, and no more affluent – Madrid, in Spain – has both a comprehensive heavy rail system and a Metro system, plus 38 kms of light rail or tramway system in the distant south-west suburbs of the city. Madrid has been improving its networks for decades, while Sydney, by comparison, has done little. Its as if the mention of any rail-based system sends the New South Wales politicians into a defensive paroxysm of: “Not here; (uncomfortable) buses will suffice for Sydney”.

Notes

[1] E.g. for Sanrizuka [Narita] Airport, Japan, see Apter and Sawa, 1984.

[2] E.g. for urban renewal in Atlanta, Georgia; see Stone, 1976.

[3] E.g. for Birmingham, Central Berkshire, Glasgow, U.K. see respectively, Power, 1965; Short, Fleming and Witt, 1986; Jacobs, 1976.

[4] The Darling Harbour (and monorail) Project is only one of a mounting number of Sydney development cases in which, since the introduction of the Act, the government has evaded the principles enshrined in it, either by availing itself of section 101 or by introducing a special Act to achieve this purpose.

[5] Leighton Holdings were duly appointed as managing contractors to organise and administer this superfast track rather having the Authority to do the job itself (Australian Financial Review, 23.8.85).

[6] However, this respect, as we have seen, is devoid of consequences and does not extend even as far as

allowing the people in question to read the Environmental Impact Statement.

[7] It is worth noting that two of the authors of this Japanese research paper (Yamada, Shinohara, *Amono and Okada, 1986) are engineers from the Public Works Research Institute, (New Transportation Systems Division) in Japan. No similar research organisation, that assesses visual impact of new transport designs, exists in the New South Wales Public Works Department.

[8] This survey was conducted by Irving Saulwick and Associates in conjunction with Spectrum Research.

[9].Information about this survey was obtained directly by telephone from McNair-Anderson. The company was unable to provide any written report of the survey as there was not permission from the client to release it. However the company was able to provide answers to specific questions.

[10] In this context it is interesting that when a city alderman suggested that a mock-up of the stanchions and beam of the monorail be constructed in plywood in a city street so the public could see what it would be like, the idea was refused by the government as a waste of money. Yet this would have gone further than any other simulation that has been used, to inform the public of the physical impact of the monorail upon the users of affected streets.

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