

“I think planning is about chipping away at stuff”: the voices and activities of public service planners working in Melbourne

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Local government planners in Melbourne, Glasgow and Toronto work within similar institutional frameworks: that is, they enact state-derived planning legislation through state-designed planning systems at the ground level. Like other planners across the western world, with the rise of neo-liberal thinking in the 1980s and 1990s, they are subject too to New Public Management compliance at their workplaces. Since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 they have witnessed, to differing degrees, budget cut backs, job losses and more of their work being contracted out. This paper attempts to see this world from these planners' perspective. Emphasis is given to Melbourne case studies. Based on interviews conducted in 2005/6 and repeated in 2011/2, it seeks to appreciate, on the one hand, the political and economic imperatives that have driven the reforms to their respective states' planning systems, against, on the other hand, their personal histories, their professional motivations and what they consider to be their professional successes and failures. From a starting position of pessimism, one begins to appreciate how alert some of these seasoned practitioners are to the limited opportunities open to them within existing urban governance arrangements. If backed by supportive local governments and fellow professionals, they are able to point to ways of working that have resulted in demonstrably more socially sustainable outcomes within their jurisdictions, and, what in the future they hope to achieve. The question this raises is: are these more than just isolated, individual cases of public servants' resistance to more market-friendly planning systems?