



Ambiguity at the peri-urban interface in Australia

Ghazal Amirinejad*, Paul Donehue, Douglas Baker

School of Civil Engineering and Built Environment, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), 2 George Street, Brisbane, QLD 4001, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Peri-urban areas display the common trait of ambiguity, in spite their considerable variety in terms of origins, definitions, and extent. Rather than the traditional dichotomy of rural and urban that forms much of the traditional view of this aspect of the built environment, there is a complex set of land use relationships that exist, creating the fluid phenomenon of peri-urbanisation. Ambiguity is an inseparable and inevitable characteristic of the peri-urban interface with a wide variety of manifestations. This paper, set in the context of Australia, argues that it is important to understand the nature of this ambiguity in order to make informed policy decisions within the context of the peri-urban interface. In particular, it identifies specific categories of peri-urban ambiguities; those relating to definition, characteristics, typology, and policy making and implementation.

1. Introduction

For a number of decades large cities and metropolitan areas have faced issues related to urban sprawl, particularly on their fringes. This sprawl has resulted in rural land fragmentation along with a range of economic, employment, social, and cultural dependencies and issues with respect to their adjacent urban and metropolitan centres. In the 1970s this trend was identified in developed countries as being a pattern of high-density core of urban regions existing in contrast to an expanding surrounding area of low-density peripheral settlement. This process continued slowly during the 1980s, undulated in the 1990s, but now has one of the fastest growth rates among urban regions (Taylor et al., 2017; Colucci, 2017). This area with its specific features is known as the 'Peri-Urban Interface'.

This paper argues that a major factor in the challenges of research and policy-making with regard to the peri-urban phenomenon is that it contains inherent ambiguities that act to make precise definitions and policy responses to issues difficult. Investigating ambiguity of the peri-urban phenomenon with regard to its definitions, characteristics, typologies, policy-making and implementation provides a more practical analytical framework for understanding the phenomenon and the required planning structure and governance settings to manage it.

The term peri-urban interface generally describes land adjacent to an urban area with the capacity for expansion and development ('peri': around, about or beyond (Buxton et al., 2006)). Burnley and Murphy (1995a) define the peri-urban area as the edges of cities and their coherent expansion spaces that expand functionally and physically. This area may be conceptualised as a new development zone with dramatic

growth at its boundaries due to the loss of rural and urban attributes (such as agriculture and higher density residential areas). The peri-urban area amalgamates urban, rural and natural features in such a way that each feature is influenced by the other two (Allen, 2003). The social, economic, cultural and biophysical effects, along with real-estate speculation, cause a complex dynamic change in land use.

Perhaps as a consequence of this complexity, aside from observations of a general nature such as those made above, there is very little agreement amongst scholars, policy-makers, and decision-takers about even basic aspects of the peri-urban phenomenon. Peri-urban development is a form of settlement that would seem to pose a unique set of challenges in terms of describing and defining its characteristics.

Much of what is understood about the peri-urban concept is contested. This paper argues that part of the reason for this is that substantive ambiguities are not sufficiently understood and addressed in the peri-urbanisation processes. It will also be proposed that it is crucial to investigate and categorise ambiguity as a concept as it applies to these areas. Following an outline of the concept of ambiguity and its relationships with urban planning, this paper explores the dimensions of ambiguity that apply to the peri-urban interface. The ambiguity is a fundamental and inextricable part of the peri-urban phenomenon within an Australian context and will be discussed in terms of how it relates to definitions and terminology, the characteristics of peri-urban areas, typologies, and policy-making and implementation.

2. Challenges in categorising the peri-urban

The challenges that categorising peri-urban areas in Australia face

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ghazal.amirinejad@hdr.qut.edu.au (G. Amirinejad), p.donehue@qut.edu.au (P. Donehue), d2.baker@qut.edu.au (D. Baker).

are various, and include landscape fragmentation, climate change impact, biodiversity threats, and the land use management of a complex mixture of urban and rural activities. The peri-urban area is faced with ambiguous urban and rural functions, blurred transitional zones, heterogeneous land uses with conflicting values and constant changes, and is often classified and treated by policy-makers as part of a hybrid or non-hybrid type of settlement (Low Choy et al., 2008; Adell, 1999; Tacoli, 1998; Allen, 2003; Tavares et al., 2012). This paper will now discuss how the speed and transitional nature of land use change in peri-urban areas contributes to the existence of a number of competing theoretical models of the phenomenon, and as a consequence contributes to ambiguity in a fundamental way.

2.1. Transitional landscapes

Rapid urbanisation growth and the related consequences of increased affluence (for example, in an Australian context, new modes of transportation, sea change, tree change, or the desire for rural lifestyle in the vicinity of cities) have come together to make peri-urbanisation even more complicated (Qviström, 2013; Simon, 2008; Swaffield and Fairweather, 1998). The peri-urban concept is consequently in dispute because a clear division between what is urban and what is not urban is impossible for planners and decision-makers (Audirac et al., 1999; Qviström, 2007; Davoudi, 2012). The peri-urban area as a “transitional landscape” (Gallant et al., 2006; Hoggart, 2016) has changeable and amorphous features that make it uncontrollable and even barely understandable with respect to its characteristics and diverse span of activities, behaviours, and communities (Beilin et al., 2013). The difficulties imposed by the need for constant monitoring of a rapidly changing set of land uses for either research or policy-making purposes is daunting, and may in itself contribute to the ambiguity surrounding peri-urbanisation. Despite the difficulty of comprehending the exact situation that exists within these transitional zones, Crankshaw (2009) believes that the exurban (as a proxy for peri-urban) is defined by its internal characteristics, describing the area as a landscape where the dominant feature is identified as the exurban/peri-urban capability for destroying a desirable (rural) land use. Such an interpretation can have a great influence on framing and establishing policy, planning discourses, and resulting government actions in addressing the peri-urban trajectory.

2.2. Models of peri-urbanism

Contemporary research on the peri-urban phenomenon frequently demonstrates an understanding that is based on one of three fundamental concepts: the notion of a spectrum, with rural at one pole and urban at the other, discussing the peri-urban context as a hybrid area of urban/rural modality, or, alternatively, describing the peri-urban context as a specific area with particular characteristics of its own different and inherent nature.

One perspective is that the peri-urban area is still rural in some aspects, but the transformation of social and economic features drive people to have their own perception of their environment (Taylor and Hurley, 2016b). In this perspective, the peri-urban area is a hybrid region consisting of urban/rural attributes and can be more similar to an urban or rural region, depending on the society, economy, ecology and geography (Taylor and Hurley, 2016b). Within this context, the peri-urban region is countryside with partially urbanised characteristics or a kind of dramatic urbanism which has an especial rural/urban hybrid landscape (Davis, 2004; Murdoch, 2003). Taylor and Hurley (2016a) state this is not only a new area with its own characteristics and needs, but it is also still rural, and undergoing a transformation from of its previous land use towards a more urban lifestyle. This is a place which is intermingling or fusion of the rural and urban (Taylor and Hurley, 2016b; Woods, 2009). This definition considers that rural not the “urban’s poor political relation”, but rather a dominant land use and

cultural context (Neal, 2013) that is shaping and creating a new hybrid socio-spatial form of settlement (Woods, 2009). As a hybrid concept, the peri-urban area is a transitional form of urban and/or rural landscape with the amalgamation of their characteristics.

In comparison to this spectrum-based approach to peri-urbanism, many scholars are agreed on the need to have a new category for peri-urban areas beyond the contemporary categories of ‘urban’, which clearly refers to cities, suburbs and towns, and ‘rural’, which is used to refer to everything else (Lichter and Brown, 2011; Scott et al., 2013; Woods, 2011). According to their insights, the peri-urban area is a blurred and fused distinctive area between urban and rural land uses. Taylor and Hurley (2016a) conclude that as the peri-urban area is an urban/rural hybrid, it is constructed as an *antithesis* of urban and rural lifestyles and landscapes and it is not appropriate to view it just as another form of the urban or rural area. In this perception, the landscape may seem rural with the dynamism of exurban area and its various characteristics of social, cultural, and political land relationships (Cadieux, 2013). Given this identification, the peri-urban area is not just a landscape with urban, rural, suburban, and exurbanisation/peri-urbanisation features, that is, it is not only a step through the urbanisation process, but is also a step on a transforming spectrum from rural areas to urban ones, and vice versa (Lang, 2003; Taylor and Hurley, 2016b; Cadieux, 2013). Woods (2011) speaks of the benefits of accepting the peri-urban area a hybrid, which can help it to be fully understood by recognising both natural and social linkages together. This perception of exurbia/peri-urban area focuses on the difficulty of conceptualising that the peri-urban is a continuously changing phenomenon. As Taylor and Hurley (2016a) point out, the peri-urban area needs political dynamism rather than oversimplifying political conflicts, which may be inaccurate.

On the other side of the peri-urban definition spectrum and based on the opposite perspective, Rakodi (1998) states that the peri-urban interface is a form of transitional settlement between fully urbanised cities and agricultural landscapes, and has nothing to do with urban and/or rural features distinctively. Willis (2005) also speaks about an urban/rural binary with ambiguous classification. In this perspective, it is accepted that the peri-urban region is a phenomenon itself and is not part of rural/urban areas or any transitional form of them (Woods, 2009).

Rather than attempting to reconcile these multiple perspectives, this paper argues that their range and diversity in terms of even basic elements of peri-urbanisation are emblematic of the ultimately ambiguous nature of the phenomenon. The dynamic nature of peri-urbanisation and its tendency to express itself differently according to context, coupled with the ambiguities being discussed here, may mean that any single theoretical framework will be unable to capture all of the nuances of the phenomenon. This complexity extends beyond a lack of agreement on the categorisation of peri-urban areas to encompass how they may be defined in the first place.

3. Ambiguity and the peri-urban

The amorphous and transitional nature of peri-urban land use has been discussed in relation to how it contributes to multiple models for the categorisation of the phenomenon. This ambiguity has the potential to have particular impacts in terms of the management of this land use through the urban and regional planning process. It can also be seen to express itself in terms of how peri-urban areas are defined and named, how their characteristics are understood, how typologies of peri-urban areas are created, and as a consequence, in the manner in which policy making and implementation is carried out.

3.1. Ambiguity and urban and regional planning

The term ambiguity has been accepted as an important part of knowledge by researchers (Frisch and Baron, 1988; Best, 2008; Brand

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