

Kerr, Thor. 2015. *To the beach: community conservation and its role in sustainable development*. Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing. 196pp. ISBN: 9781742586649; US\$40.00.

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In his book *To the beach: community conservation and its role in sustainable development*, Thor Kerr offers a descriptive case study of a large coastal development project in the city of Fremantle, a part of the Perth metropolitan area in Western Australia, using data collected from local government meetings, advertisements, newspapers, websites, and other media sources. The framing of this coastal project was illustrative of production operating under the ideology of ecological modernization, which is based on the assumption that science and technology can provide the solutions to ecological crisis with the help of economic agents including innovators, entrepreneurs and technologists (Mol 1997). In Kerr's study of project failure, we can see how ecological modernization materialized in the context of a proposed large residential and commercial development, and the challenges of framing this particular type of production as 'green.' Kerr argues that the promotion of the [North Port Quay](#) (NPQ) development project as carbon-neutral, and therefore beneficial for an ambiguous global public, opened the doors for local opposition predicated on residents' different conceptions of a local working-class utopia.

The structure of this book is conducive to easy reading. The first few chapters introduce the major themes and subsequent chapters build on these themes by developing relationships among them and analyzing the dominant and subordinate discourses surrounding NPQ. The primary narratives of NPQ introduced by Kerr are: local and regional elections, the framings of development and elections used by media sources; the context of Australia's colonial history; and larger discourses of green development and ecological modernization.

This book begins by introducing the geography of Fremantle and the goals of developers in Perth, who envisioned North Port Quay (NPQ) as a community of 20,000 people living on islands on a reclaimed seabed, powered by renewable energy, and insulated against rising sea levels by a 3.5 meter wall. While the project had the support of renowned sustainability scholar [Peter Newman](#), the development consortium responsible for this venture misjudged the reception their proposed project would receive from nearby residents.

In the second chapter, Kerr discusses the colonial history of Australia. According to the text, British colonization used discourses framed with maps, surveys, and language to displace and erase the presence of Aboriginal peoples (p. 18). Resistance to the appropriation of land by the Nyoogah Indigenous peoples living in the region around Fremantle was met with violence by the British Crown. As Kerr discusses later in the text, the remnants of this colonial relationship and its corresponding violence are embodied in historical relics and are maintained as cultural resources by the Fremantle Historical Society. Beaches also hold cultural and symbolic importance and are considered by many Australians to be the border of their homeland, and have military significance for Euro-Australian people. Kerr compares the methods used by the NPQ consortium in proposing and advertising their development project to those used by European colonists against the Nyoogah. The developers of NPQ also failed to recognize and address the fact that their proposed project over-wrote pre-existing spaces to which community members felt an intimate connection.

Kerr argues that attachment to place in the case of Fremantle was rooted in the sensory experience of local people for whom the beach represented fond memories, rather than an environmental object that spurred traditional environmental movements. Dissent against the large development project was focused on preservation of the town, which often resulted in an essentialized and idealized Fremantle. Kerr summarizes this mechanism by stating that the semiotic distinction between defending natural environments and defending urban environments clouded as Fremantle was talked about as something 'natural' to be saved from the threat of an alien city [Perth] (p. 32).

In Chapter 8, Imagining Fremantle, Kerr draws on work by Benedict Anderson to construct Fremantle as an imagined community. Kerr also notes that much of Fremantle's shared identity is founded

on its history as a port city with dock workers unions. This working class identity persists despite the middle class demographic of Freemantle today.

Kerr writes that local oppositions to development targeted the nature of the project as overly lavish, unnecessary, and contrary to Freemantle's working class identity. The role of media in framing NPQ may also have had a substantial effect on public perception. For regional political candidates and developers, claiming the authority of public opinion was important for establishing the legitimacy of their positions. Many local and regional newspapers were sites of aggressive advertizing campaigns run by developers, and by politicians who either vocalized support or opposition to the development project.

In Chapter six, Kerr unpacks the meaning of green building infrastructure labelling, and the challenges in framing such construction as environmentally friendly. Green certifications allow developers to claim a moral imperative for their projects; however, unlike industrial manufacturing, developers cannot hide the visible destruction of local environments occurring at construction sites. According to Kerr, one way that the green building industry addresses such challenges is by appealing to the public sense of global environmental crisis. Tied to this crisis is a purported need for "radical departures" from normal planning procedures, such as the incorporation of expert panels. In these models, select community members are invited to give comment on proposals, rather than planning decisions reached through municipal institutions beholden to the public. Developer's unsuccessful calls for a change to the independent planning board format for evaluating the merits of NPQ is not unusual in Australia, but was met with harsh criticism from politicians whose campaigns used development as a platform.

Chapter seven addresses the contradictions inherent within the green building discourse, and often noted by critics of ecological modernization. The development of NPQ is framed as a solution to climate change; however, without the development of the project, there would be no carbon emissions, and therefore no need to mitigate emissions. Kerr writes that this high-tech solution was particularly problematic in Freemantle, where sustainability was often associated with grassroots efforts to recycle or use bicycles, which are more consistent with the communities' working class identity.

In the final chapters Kerr contextualizes the events in Freemantle by relating them more broadly to issues of hegemonic discourse and in relation to the larger global movement towards neo-liberal policies. The growth of independent planning boards has been prominent since the NPQ was [rejected](#) by the Freemantle city council in September 2009. However, Kerr warns that a lack of viable political alternatives for local people to express their opposition to development project may result in the use of violent coercion by the state. The state also loses access to claims of legitimacy from the democratic process, and therefore has an incentive to reassert its authority through other means. In this case, the rejection of NPQ was a result of the conservative desire for local residents to protect their way of life, as well as the need of the Australian government to maintain legitimacy through local democratic institutions.

While Kerr's text has many merits, it may have benefited from additional attention to theoretical linkages between case study material and scholarship on ecological modernization theory, sense of place, and community activism. Over-all, this book was thorough, accessible, and well organized. I would recommend it for scholars at any level who are interested in exploring how communities respond to large development projects predicated on ecological modernization.

References

Mol, A. 1997. Ecological modernization: industrial transformations and environmental reform. In Redclift, M.R. and G. Woodgate (eds.) *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*. Northampton: Edward Elgar. Pp. 845-871.

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