

Women Who Shape Cities: Dorte Ekelund

[00:00:00] **Sara:** Hi everyone, and welcome to the People and Place podcast by WSP. My name is Sara Stace, and I'm the Director of Cities and National Executive of Planning and Places at WSP Australia. This year on the People and Place podcast, we're running a series on Women Who Shape Cities.

I'll be speaking with some brilliant women from around Australia and beyond who have made and continue to make a significant contribution to shaping the places, communities, and cities we live in.

Before we begin, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land I'm on today, the Gadigal and Bidjigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respects to their elders, spanning back more than 30,000 years, present and emerging and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people listening in.

For this inaugural Women Who Shape Cities podcast, I'm very pleased to be interviewing Dorte Ekelund. An urban planner who's held some of the most senior government roles of any planner in Australia, including as head of the Major Cities Unit at Infrastructure Australia, where we worked together. In our conversation today, we'll cover a wide range of topics related to urbanism, including net zero, planning, data and careers.

Welcome, and thank you for joining us, Dorte.

[00:01:20] **Dorte:** Pleased to be with you, Sara.

[00:01:21] **Sara:** So Dorte, your first name is as recognizable in the planning profession as Adele or Madonna. You've worked at federal, state and local government in a number of high powered roles, including as Deputy Director General of Planning and Infrastructure in Western Australia, Director General of Environment Planning and Sustainable Development in the ACT, and as Head of the Major Cities Unit in the Australian government. You've had a phenomenal career. But let's start from the beginning. When you started out as a planner, working in local government in the Illawarra, what inspired you as a young planner to take this path.

[00:02:00] **Dorte:** Well, Sara, my inspiration to become a planner actually came from a geography class in my last year of high school. We had a guest speaker on urban geography who happened to be the regional director for New South Wales Planning and he was an incredibly inspiring speaker. And just listening to him made me think, "Wow. Planning seems to include a lot of things that I've got an interest in." It touched on geography, biology, environment, art, design, and people. And I thought maybe town planning is the sort of job I'd like to get into. I didn't really have a firm view about what I wanted to do like, most people in high school. And with town planning at the sort of forefront of my mind, I saw a job for a trainee town planner as I was leaving school. And this was at council and I was living in the area at the time. I got the job, which was full time, which meant that I had to

study by correspondence and I did that through the University of New England, and I have to say I've loved my profession ever since.

[00:03:03] **Sara:** Wow. That's amazing. And so then how did you make your way from being a planner in a local council to Deputy Director General of the State Department for Western Australia.

[00:03:15] **Dorte:** Well, It was a bit of a journey, Sara. My career journey to WA was, I guess firstly, from the Illawarra in Shellharbour then via Rockdale in Sydney back to Wollongong and then through the ACT. And the period through the ACT was actually quite a while. I was there for 14 years in the first stint and I worked my way up the ranks in planning in Canberra. And I left as Deputy Chief Planner in 2006. And during my time there, I had probably about 10 different roles in various strategic and development control jobs. And I was also taken offline a few times to do major governance reforms for the government at the time.

While I was in the ACT, I also did an MBA, which was really important I felt for my emerging jobs in management and leadership. When I left the ACT it was as a Deputy Chief Planner and I was responsible for strategic land use, transport, and infrastructure planning for the ACT. Ironically, this is pretty well the role description for my job that I was head hunted for in WA, except of course at a massively different scale. Going from the tiny ACT to Western Australia which was huge.

On paper I looked like I was totally suitable, but I'd never worked for a jurisdiction anywhere near the size of WA. And I have to say it was a really full-on job. Because it coincided with the peak construction time for the resources boom in WA and there was massive demand for new urban development, infrastructure, and there was huge pressure on the government to speed up approvals, state significant developments, which seem to be happening all around the state but obviously very much up the Pilbara and Kimberley as well. So it was a really exciting time to be in WA and I loved it a lot. But then there was a change of government and they split the planning and infrastructure roles and one of the things I loved about the job was it actually was about integrating planning and infrastructure and transport planning. So I ended up moving back east again after that, but it was a really exciting time. I was very privileged to have that role.

[00:05:29] **Sara:** Yeah, it's unusual to be able to have both of those portfolios in such a large context. So then in 2008, at that point of time, you helped to establish the Major Cities Unit at Infrastructure Australia. So firstly, how did you work with the government and key stakeholders, such as the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors, the Planning Institute of Australia, and others to get this underway.

And secondly, what did you achieve at the Major Cities Unit in the four and a half years that you were there?

[00:05:59] **Dorte:** Well, I have to say that the Major Cities Unit was an absolute once in a lifetime opportunity for a town planner and to have an opportunity to influence how the development of our cities could be supported at a national level was an incredible privilege.

But it's certainly was tough at the beginning I think we concluded quite early, that we needed to enlist the assistance of others to explore options for the government to consider. And the Council of Capital Cities Lord Mayors that you mentioned was one of the first organizations to approach us to offer help with the City of Sydney and Clover Moore, she was fantastic supporting us. They embedded one of their top research and policy people into our team, and that was of enormous benefit to us. We then went on to develop strong alliances with peak industry bodies, such as the Property Council, the Green Building Council, the Planning Institute, the architects, landscape architects, Engineers Australia, Consult Australia, Infrastructure Partnerships Australia, Tourism and Transport Task Force, Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council, and many more.

And it was amazing the level of support we got. Because these peak organizations really understood that all levels of government need to be involved in decision-making in cities for us to be as successful and prosperous as possible. We started off as only four people and we gradually grew but our power was about the alliances that we established.

So the Major Cities Unit was really powerful in our ability to build alliances, work collaboratively with other people. We didn't pretend that we had the font of all knowledge about what was really important for the future of our cities. We knew, I think intuitively, that to work through and with other people is how we have the biggest impact and achieve the best outcomes for our cities.

We, of course, also did produce publications and pieces of work. It wasn't just all about chatting to people and building alliances and probably some of the most important pieces of work that we did were our Annual State of Australian Cities reporting, which really presented a comprehensive evidence base about what was actually happening in urban Australia.

And that actually helped to shine a light on what possible policy interventions needed to be made. And certainly, the minister we had at the time Anthony Albanese, saw this strategic investigation of what was actually happening in cities as one of the most important pieces of work that we did at the beginning. So we had an evidence base for what we could go forward to help the government consider their involvement.

And Sara, I do want to mention three other major pieces of work, which I think were really great successes of the Major Cities Unit. One was the urban design protocol for Australian cities, which was called Creating Places for People and Sara you were, of course, very instrumental in the success of that work. Some of the work that I'm doing in the Northern Territory at the moment it keeps being brought up, not just by me, but other people that see the merit of using that framework even today.

We produced a discussion paper on the importance of active travel, walking and cycling. And whilst we were part of the infrastructure department, it was really all about roads, rail, bridges, et cetera. And some of our colleagues were like, "walking and cycling, that's wimpy, isn't it? Soft infrastructure?" But of course every foot path that we walk on in our cities, has got an economic value.

You know, anybody who walks on those foot paths, they're shoppers, they're visitors, they're employees. They've all got economic value. They all need to be thought about as part of the whole system of productivity and livability and sustainability. And that was a really important piece of work focusing very much on the role of active travel on achieving better health outcomes for our communities in particular and again, Sara, I've got to acknowledge you are a powerhouse behind that work and of course you still are very active in promoting active travel across Australia.

[00:10:16] **Sara:** Yeah, absolutely. It was a real joy working in that team with you Dorte and I think we did achieve a lot. And being able to leverage, as you said, working with other organizations and other stakeholders really helped amplify that message or get that further out there. And as you said, we're still seeing the positive impacts of some of that work today.

I've also found it really interesting that the United Nations, the UN Habitat Sustainable Development Goals now requires countries to create a national urban policy. And the fact that they do turn to us and say, what should we be doing? What should we be including? And I think particularly having that implementation plan in the national urban policy is what sort of made that stand out as a next step. So what do you do after you've done that policy work? So after that Dorte you went on to be the Director General of Environment and Planning in the ACT.

How were you instrumental in helping the ACT shift towards Net Zero?

[00:11:11] **Dorte:** Sara, in my role as Chief Planner, as well as the Director General role, I did all the sort of normal things that chief planners do in terms of strategic land use and transport and infrastructure planning and responsibility for all significant decisions. The ACT is a hybrid state local government.

So you have all the state and local government functions together in the Department of Planning or the Planning Authority. And so that did all that sort of normal stuff, but my broader role as Director General of Environment also involved being responsible for the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, for the Environment Protection Authority, and responsibility for climate change action, water and energy policy.

I had the great fortune to work for a very enlightened couple of ministers one from Labor, and then subsequently a Green minister, and my team and I were responsible for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Including investing in wind and solar farms to secure a hundred percent renewable electricity for the ACT by 2020, which was achieved and they are a hundred percent renewable in their electricity. They have subsequently turned their

minds to other sectors, which are still contributing carbon. So transport, gas, and waste in particular are their target areas now.

But while I was there, we also supported the uptake of battery technology. We supported the startup of various small, renewable companies, some of them software companies spinning off the Australian National University and the CSIRO.

We started policy development for electric vehicles and we also started investing in a fledgling, hydrogen industry. And of course, hydrogen's the big thing now. But the ACT has actually got a publicly accessible electrolyzer that you can actually go and fill up your hydrogen vehicle if you happen to have one.

So it started early and, there's now a couple of really big projects. Port Kembla and Newcastle in New South Wales and the other projects around Australia. But of course we see a big opportunity in hydrogen, but we started thinking about that about six or seven years ago. So we were pretty early then.

So there's a lot to be done. But it was a really great time to contribute to a significant reduction in the carbon profile of the ACT. And it's great to see that the territory continues to maintain its commitment to progressing to net zero carbon.

[00:13:44] **Sara:** Fantastic. Now you're working with the Northern Territory as part of their planning commission. And you're working to help create a Darwin design vernacular and address critical issues such as heat mitigation due to climate change, which is a focus area for the Darwin City Deal in collaboration with the federal government as well. Can you elaborate a little more on this work that you're doing now?

[00:14:08] **Dorte:** Yeah, sure Sara. In fact, working with the planning commission in the Northern Territory's one of my great loves at the moment, it's so much fun. I feel very honored to be part of the commission as a southerner. Interestingly, even though the commission's been around for 10 years I'm the first and only town planner that's been on the planning commission.

So, I think they treated me with a bit of suspicion at the beginning. But I think they now appreciate that town planners have got something to contribute to a planning commission. Anyway, after leaving the ACT I was appointed to the NT planning commission and it meets every couple of months. So it's not a full time job. And I love hitting up to Darwin, especially when it's winter time down south. But anyway, getting back to your specific question and the Darwin vernacular or the Northern Territory vernacular. At the moment, particularly in those sort of high density developments people are living in hot, closed up air conditioned buildings. And they don't respond well to the climates that they're located in. And I go up there and I look at these dark closed up buildings that have got windows facing the sun, what is going on up here. Anyway, so this is one of my hobby horses at the moment is to go, well hang on, without losing the strength of the buildings, what can we do to make the buildings much more responsive to the climate, to enhance quality of life and enjoyment,

and to have a much better indoor outdoor relationship between the buildings and their settings.

And not everybody likes the climate in Darwin, but it's actually quite wonderful if you use the natural breezes and the storms coming through, et cetera, to help naturally cool. And make the buildings work for you. Plenty of people I know up there, they're happy to go from their air conditioned homes to their air conditioned offices via their air conditioned cars, but really there's a lot to be achieved in terms of comfort and livability by allowing cross flow of breezes, wide shady balconies, use of light colored roofs and walls and ample, appropriately scaled landscaping. And the vapor transpiration from plants is really fantastic. And of course, addressing these issues in Darwin is really important because climate change is making Darwin even hotter and Alice even hotter. As you mentioned, it's a concern that people are really only starting to realize in Darwin. Locking themselves in, what can we do in the built environment and the landscaping, supporting the built environment, to actually reduce urban heat and make much more comfortable, livable places and make Darwin and Alice more pleasant places to visit as well, you know.

[00:17:01] **Sara:** Yeah, that sounds really interesting and very topical to be working on as we turn more to how do we mitigate that heat island effect or to adapt to climate change. And so now for a final question, Dorte, can you tell us, what are you most proud of in your career to date? And would you have any advice for young planners, architects, and other related professions?

[00:17:24] **Dorte:** Sara, the work with the Major Cities Unit was a really satisfying pace of work and it's such a privilege and one that so few planners get an opportunity to be involved in. Seeing the thirst for the information that we're putting together was incredible when our State of Australian Cities Reports were being downloaded more than a million times each. At one point crashing the server of the Department of Infrastructure, because so many people were downloading it all at the same time. Our IT people were telling us off for having such big documents and telling too many people about it all at the same time. But that was a great thing to experience.

Then seeing, whether it was the Productivity Commission, or the ACCC, or whoever actually referring to data in our reports and having that huge evidence base that we developed. And I guess what we tried to do with those reports was not only put data out there, but to actually interpret that data and to create knowledge from that data.

And in some ways lead the horse to water if you like. Giving then people the opportunity to say shouldn't we be doing something about that? Shouldn't we be intervening? And what if we treat policies in this way and that. So I have to say that work was really satisfying. And of course, as I said earlier, to see that there is now a bi-partisan commitment to the Australian government being involved in the cities. That's really rewarding because that's certainly never existed before we were created. And we weren't the big machine that was established in the Whitlam era with that Labor government intervention in cities. We were pretty small and nimble, but we still working with stakeholders were able to cut through. So, that's got to be one of the proudest pieces of work that I was involved in.

But Sara I also have to say I'm really proud of the work in the ACT, especially signing off on all the contracts that secured 100% renewable electricity for the people of Canberra.

No matter who sits in Parliament House, they are getting 100% renewable electricity. You might be opposed to renewable energy. You might support coal, but if you're sitting in that house, you are benefiting from 100% renewable electricity whether you like it or not.

And that came at a small cost to the ACT community. At its peak, it costs the community about a cappuccino a week per household. To have a hundred percent clean energy. There's still gas, and they're working on reducing gas consumption and reliance in the territory, but it's certainly made a big impact. And the other thing that was a really important project in the ACT from my perspective was being involved in initial planning for light rail and the light rail network and now seeing stage one of light rail running through the middle of Canberra. With commitments to extend that rail network south to the rest of the city and then our broader network.

So I feel as though I've made some small contribution to Canberra becoming a much more contemporary and cosmopolitan city and a terrific place to live and visit. It's been incredible legacy to be part of from my perspective.

In terms of your question about advice to others. I think you have to be a little tenacious and committed. Once the chief minister in the ACT told me, Dorte, why would you ever want to be a town planner? That's got to be the worst profession ever. She just saw town planners as getting in the way of development and progress rather than a creative, strategic, guiding profession.

It's very difficult to please everybody. But you've got to be driven by a desire to make a positive contribution for people and for planet. And I think that's really important that you've got to give a damn about outcomes. And you've got to be able to think systematically, this is not a linear profession. There's so many balls up in the air at the same time. The butterfly in the Amazon. If you move one thing, then what are the repercussions? So passion, commitment, ability to think long-term and systematically.

And to me it's very much about, it's not about you. It's actually about the system and people and future outcomes and an ability to work with stakeholders, with governments, with community. To accept that you're never going to be the font of all wisdom to know everything. That you need to be open to listening to people, to learning and promoting better outcomes to work with the challenges of our time. Whether that's coronavirus, or climate change, or closing the gap between haves and have nots. So, what's my advice is follow your passion. And if you're passionate about making a difference, then it will help guide you to where you want to go. And I also think it's important to seize opportunity and I have to say, as a woman, we are often a bit modest about what we can achieve a little more so than our brothers. I think women have to overcome that a little bit to push themselves a little further forward and have confidence in their own ability.

[00:22:49] **Sara:** That sounds like fantastic advice. I really appreciate that. Thank you so much for joining me, Dorte Ekelund.

[00:22:55] **Dorte:** Thanks for inviting me to participate in this.

[00:22:58] **Sara:** Thanks for listening to the first of our mini-series on Women Who Shape Cities. Keep an ear out for the remaining podcasts in this mini-series throughout 2022, as we have some outstanding speakers lined up.