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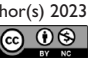

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Infrastructural gaslighting and the crisis of participatory planning

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Abstract

This paper traces and critiques *gaslighting* – the manipulation of circumstances by elite actors to sow doubt or confusion in residents over what is 'real' – as an affective experience of infrastructure planning. Predominantly observed within intimate relationships, scholars now identify gaslighting as a structural condition that manipulates whole communities and reproduces systemic oppression. We concur, extending analysis to the realm of urban infrastructure planning, and drawing connections with Rancièrian critiques of elite orders of governance. In infrastructural worlds, regulatory arrangements have been harmonised to suit coalitions of elite government and private actors whilst extolling the virtues of participatory governance. Megaprojects are legitimised by planning processes that cement monopolies and shroud elite public-private deal-making, while detractors are delegitimised discursively in political and media discourse. Yet, dissent is also pacified via participatory planning processes that invite publics to give testimony but undermine their epistemic and moral validity. This, we contend, is an example of infrastructural gaslighting. The case of Melbourne's West Gate Tunnel Project (WGTP) is instructive – a 'Market-Led Proposal' from corporate infrastructure giant Transurban, backed by the Victorian government – where participatory planning was not simply tokenistic, but rather a discombobulating experience, concealing and 'breadcrumbing' information to publics, while undermining deliberative capacities. Exposing grounded experiences of infrastructural gaslighting, we join other critical urban scholars seeking conditions for just planning practices. Infrastructural planning regimes are consequential, but the realities they police are illusions that are as tenuous as they are politically constituted and, like other forms of gaslighting, are ready for challenge.

Keywords

Infrastructure, participation, planning, postpolitical, urbanism

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Introduction

Is infrastructure planning subject to gaslighting? This prospect surfaced as the three of us – scholars in planning, economic geography and urban studies respectively – grappled with regressive urban planning outcomes in places where we have conducted research over the past decade. According to Sweet (2019: 851), gaslighting describes a kind of 'mind-manipulat[ion]' and associated strategies intended to confuse victims and undermine their sense of reality. The term derives from the 1944 motion picture, *Gaslight* (in which a husband tricks his wife into believing she is mentally unwell to steal from her), though has only entered the popular lexicon in the past decade in reference to a distinctive form of manipulative psychological abuse.

More commonly observed within the context of intimate interpersonal relationships, a growing number of scholars argue that gaslighting is burgeoning as a predicament affecting whole communities, and a strategy reproducing colonial, class, racial, sexist and other forms of systemic domination (Davis and Ernst, 2020; Ruíz, 2020; Sebring, 2021). Manne (2023: 123) draws attention to gaslighting's moral dimension: when 'someone is made to feel morally defective—for example, cruelly unforgiving or overly suspicious—for harbouring some mental state to which she is entitled'. This, for Manne, is gaslighting that weaponises moral norms, and in so doing undermines the evidence of our own senses, memories and convictions. It is upon such grounds that the possibilities exist for much more prevalent, structural forms of gaslighting, which occur through ideological and regulatory structures and political and media discourse, reinforcing the realities of the powerful while undermining the lived realities of those who suffer and/or seek to resist oppression (Davis and Ernst, 2020). On the receiving end, publics experience gaslighting as an invalidation of their sensed convictions, feeling confused, guilty or shamed (or all of these). The result is that social groups are 'much more reluctant than they otherwise would be to challenge the prevailing narratives' (Manne, 2023: 142). Systemic inequalities – misogyny, white supremacy, settler-colonialism, capitalism, class relations, patriarchy – are masked by gaslighting and, in turn, can become tools or techniques of gaslighting (Manne, 2023). In consequence, the capacities of publics to generate community-led 'collective power' (Sebring, 2021) in opposition to inequalities, are disrupted.

It is our contention that gaslighting has also infused the realm of infrastructure, and the planning regulatory environment and public engagement processes that preside over it, with profound implications for the way infrastructure planning processes shape the everyday functioning of cities. This article examines how, and with what effect, by focusing on resident's accounts of feeling gaslit as part of their involvement in community engagement in infrastructure planning. These are processes designed to support infrastructure planning in regulatory contexts where elite state and market actors have established positions of influence. In our previous work we have focused on the rise of unsolicited urbanism (Gibson and Rogers, 2021), and the regulatory shifts in planning systems that allow elite market actors privileged access (Gibson et al., 2023). In infrastructural worlds, regulatory arrangements have been harmonised to suit coalitions of elite government and private actors whilst extolling the virtues of participatory governance. Here, we uncover grounded experiences of these contemporary arrangements among affected publics, by considering a prominent example from Melbourne, Australia: a market-led proposed transport infrastructure project. To interpret this case and reveal infrastructural gaslighting, we bring into conversation three threads of urban scholarship: more-than-neoliberal 'unsolicited' urban planning; post-political participation; and gaslighting in its emergent, structural form. We engage with Rancièrian critiques of the 'aesthetic regimes' that legitimise and delegitimise through sense-making strategies (Dikeç, 2017; Rancière, 2013), to contend that contemporary infrastructure planning's established orders of governance oppress publics in a manner experienced by those publics as a form of structural gaslighting.

In so doing, we advance both urban infrastructure literatures and Rancièrian critiques by considering the grounded, affective dimension of the post-political: to be gaslit. The Melbourne example

shows how the post-political and unsolicited urbanism combine to secure rent-seeking infrastructural landscapes, by remaking participation. Infrastructural planning's participation processes invite testimony from affected or concerned publics but delegitimise their views. They do so by challenging their sense-making (as understood in Rancièrian terms), or by undermining their testimonies, convictions and experiences (as understood by researchers of gaslighting, such as Manne, 2023). While public participation is becoming an accepted feature of infrastructure planning processes, it exists in a regulatory and market environment that, by design, structures elite interests over those of affected publics. That in turn, we argue, relies upon public participation being manipulated, severed from democratic due process. Affected publics, who are motivated to participate in the planning process to 'have a say' in city-shaping because of moral principles or convictions (commitment to their local community, or to issues such as public transport and climate change) instead find their testimonies invalidated. Viewing gaslighting as a feature of contemporary infrastructure planning, and considering its implications for social and environmental justice, is our core concern.

Structural gaslighting and infrastructure planning

Infrastructure – the 'mundane' architecture that structures life and markets – is a source of power, 'capable of expanding an authority's range and capacity to extract income and wealth, as well as concessions and consent over a population' (Hall et al., 2023: 1). Inherently grounded rather than free-floating, infrastructure projects are shaped by place-based knowledges and subject to local contestations. Yet, in an era of widespread privatisation and 'asset recycling', infrastructure companies and their financiers seek to operate in a planning and policy environment that is calculable and predictable. Far from solely providing infrastructure in the common good to enhance human and ecological flourishing, for private infrastructure interests and their elite government well-wishers, places and publics are structured as the passive recipients of those infrastructures most capable of expediting rent extraction (cf. Christophers, 2020). The planning system required to support this is increasingly detached from long-term strategic spatial planning (Dodson, 2009), instead taking on the feel of asset risk management (Christophers, 2023), managed by as few 'safe hands' actors as possible, and without the complexity of having to deal with the everyday politics of people in the city. To that end, infrastructure planning, financing and delivery has taken on its own life and, as Silva (2011) has argued, is often executed without a plan and delivered through improvisation. A focus on material infrastructure – what it is, where it is and what ends it serves – overshadows the mechanisms through which such infrastructure emerges (O'Brien and Pike, 2019; Gibson et al., 2023). These mechanisms in turn have conditioned planning as a post-political practice, whereby the political – who wins and who loses and how tradeoffs are understood and negotiated – is foreclosed (Rosol et al., 2017; Swyngedouw, 2007).

Enabling these foreclosures requires new instruments of regulation and consultation that, on the surface, welcome public testimony but in effect place boundaries around and police what are considered legitimate, credible speaking positions – thence enabling infrastructure planning's 'aesthetic regimes' to defuse the possibilities for political disruption. Research into infrastructure planning's post-political condition has brought into focus two such instruments (Greiss and Piracha, 2021). They are participation (Haughton and McManus, 2019; Legacy, 2016), and, more recently, unsolicited urbanism, encompassing the evolving 'market-led' schemes which are also known as 'unsolicited proposals' in other contexts (MLPs and USPs) (Rogers and Gibson, 2021; Gibson et al., 2023; Stiglich, 2021). Participation has since the 1970s been held up as an important element of democratic inclusiveness in planning – part of the social contract, though often criticised as tokenistic and ineffective (Schatz and Rogers, 2016). Unsolicited urbanism, meanwhile, refers to regulatory 'innovations' touted as means to access private sector creativity and resources to fund city-shaping megaprojects in infrastructure, but that shroud elite public-private deal-making and cement monopolies rather than fostering competition (Gibson et al., 2023). Unsolicited forms of infrastructure provision imagine a city in terms of pure rent extraction (Christophers, 2020), populated by willing consumers rather than politically active citizens.

Infrastructural projects are supported by these regulatory instruments that reconfigure institutionalised orders of governance, while detractors are delegitimised by political and corporate actors through their application. Here we look to Cornwall (2004: 83), and Miraftab (2009) who draw attention to the power relations circulating within the invited participatory spaces that are created by powerful institutions to subjugate participating publics. What happens within these spaces is shaped by their configuration, but these spaces are also 'constantly in transformation as well as potential arenas of transformation' (Cornwall, 2004: 75). The possibility for dissenting publics to co-opt these invited spaces is met by state elites seeking to maintain their power by cultivating an 'epistemic dependency' of participating publics from which their 'epistemic agency' can then be diminished (Beerbohm and Davis, 2021); that is the role, function and purpose contemporary invited participatory spaces may serve in gaslighting participating publics.

At this juncture, we engage with the political philosophy of Rancière (2013) to diagnose how infrastructural gaslighting is experienced by affected publics. Rancièrian interpretation enables urban scholars to question the 'stories told' (Nethercote, 2022: 2) by those elites, corporate and governmental, whose deal-making conspires towards infrastructural ends (see also Engelen, 2015). Rancière is concerned with what he calls *aesthetic regimes* – 'involving distinct framings of visibility and intelligibility or a so-termed *distribution (or partition) of the sensible*' (Nethercote, 2022: 3; emphasis in original) – and the *police* – 'established orders of governance' (Dikeç, 2017: 53) that effect a 'distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions' (Rockhill, 2013: xiii). Aesthetic regimes work to separate, include and exclude, to define what it is 'to speak' and to delineate what is sayable and what 'makes sense'. Certain actors or communities are '(de)emphasised, "unheard" and strategically "ignored"' (Dikeç, 2012: 674) as consensus around 'common sense' propositions are corralled and policed (Nethercote, 2022: 2).

The increasingly established post-political order of governance for infrastructure planning has reshaped the process of participation. Schatz and Rogers (2016: 43) lament all the talk of 'social inclusion' and 'public engagement' has rarely translated to governments and infrastructure proponents being made accountable for their decisions. Key structural conditions are also being reshaped within infrastructures contemporary aesthetic regime: how information is shared with communities; how projects are justified in relation to public interest claims; and how accountability to those claims is maintained over the life of construction (Haughton and McManus, 2019; McManus and Haughton, 2021). Little else matters so long as infrastructures show a degree of 'progress' – things are being built and this is good for economic productivity or simply for sake of 'innovation' itself, the latter usually meaning novel finance arrangements and ways to facilitate smooth approvals for major proponents (see O'Neill, 2022; Rogers and Gibson, 2021). Under the banners of 'social inclusion', 'progress' and 'innovation', the major urban infrastructure 'project' becomes too big to fail and too innovative for planning, and dissenting publics to disrupt. Rather than address social and environmental injustice through public infrastructure provision, the emergent post-political condition has created ways to diffuse risks of public protest while protecting the rent-seeking interests of capital.

None of this is to say that public participation is not important in infrastructure planning. Participation is central to contemporary planning practice, often viewed as an antidote to the excesses and injustices of modernist schemes (slum clearances, housing projects, evictions etc) and in recognition of the knowledge possessed by and contained within communities (Friedmann, 1989). What might be called 'tokenistic' participation, the problem is consistently documented in the urban studies and urban planning literatures as one of narrowness of public engagement to serve the interests of capital, support project delivery and diminish any power that might gather through public dissent (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). What has been coined a 'crisis of public participation' (see Legacy, 2017a) arises when elite actors re-shape engagement into a public relations exercise (Legacy et al., 2023). This sanitisation of participation, or what could be otherwise understood as a form of micromanagement, expertly distinguishes between those ready to participate on the terms set by proponents, and those who are not – the latter often tarred with the label NIMBY ('not in my backyard')

or simply viewed as illegitimate participants (the homeless, vulnerable, activists, etc). In Rancièrian terms, participation processes involve sense-making framings but also structural and temporal features that limit '*what* is sayable' as well as '*who* has authority to speak' (Nethercote, 2022: 4). It is the latter of these, the authority to speak, which we contend is especially vulnerable to gaslighting within infrastructure's contemporary regulatory and participatory processes.

While planning approvals processes presiding over infrastructural propositions are structured to guarantee certainty for proponents and empower consultants and technocrats literate with their terminology, for participating publics their complexity 'operates through blurring, dispersing, and rescaling lines of responsibility and allowing for the exploitation of information asymmetries between intermediaries' (Fields, 2017: 6). Complexity and technicality operate against the interests of public transparency and democratic input, embodied in the obtuse documents and highly technical languages of infrastructure proposal documents, that exclude all but the keenest from applying scrutiny (Gibson et al., 2023). Such documents establish the aesthetic regimes for infrastructure propositions. Pro-development lobby groups, business councils and cosy relationships between government and corporate elites meanwhile dominate the debate over infrastructure needs, shaping discourses of urban problems while offering their versions of solutions (Nethercote, 2022; Slater, 2016). The resulting established orders of governance for infrastructure planning thus shorten the time horizon between project conception and profit realisation and, crucially, de-risk the possibility of proposals being rejected.

The orders of governance for infrastructure planning enrol information asymmetries, delineating exactly what is visible and known, by whom, at various stages in the unfolding sequence of events, documents and decisions that make infrastructure planning possible. By structuring participation within spaces subsidiary to the deal-making in question – a touted feature of infrastructure planning process but removed from the actual deliberations between corporate proponents and government over specific infrastructure deals (Gibson et al., 2023) – citizens become beholden to long wait times related to the release of information about projects that is otherwise crucial to meaningful and empowered community engagement (see Auyero, 2012). In pursuit of a post-political infrastructure planning environment that is unencumbered by government regulation and the 'messy' timeframe extensions of community consultations and planning approvals processes, large developers with access to globally circulating debt capital use novel urban planning mechanisms such as market-led and unsolicited proposals and/or manipulate required approval hurdles such as community consultation, to ensure dissent is minimised.

Participatory infrastructure planning involves drawing publics, and their potential for dissent, into the folds of these contemporary infrastructural regimes, enabling articulation of diverse views, even if those views are never meant to have a material bearing on outcomes. For proponents (and government backers), the result is greater control over approvals timelines and granting of a social licence to operate, eliminating risk and the possibility of contestation. For those drawn into participatory infrastructure planning processes, however, the result is disillusionment and the questioning of one's sense of which 'reality' prevails. This latter condition is to be gaslit. And, as we elaborate below, for disaffected publics, this is more than being unheard or strategically ignored. Indeed, the grounded experiences of being gaslit involves the appearance of being *included* rather than being invisible or inaudible; being 'marginalised and silenced through inclusion in the formal process' (McAuliffe et al., 2018: 228).

In a post-political context, 'proper' participation is conducted by and engaged through formal planning settings where it is implied that 'having a seat at the table' grants access to decision-making spaces, decision-makers and thus a capacity to shape infrastructure outcomes for respective communities. Formulated in this way, participation is instrumentalised, where it becomes a tool to establish clear inclusions and exclusions based upon the public's preparedness to enter formal participatory spaces. At the same time, and as our examination of the West Gate Tunnel Project below will explore, this aestheticisation of participation as an 'exclusion-setting' tool of planning is setting the scene for

infrastructure planning's more insidious register: that of gaslighting publics whose participation is welcomed, but ultimately defused. Publics are invited to give testimony, in other words, based on their rational assessments of proposed infrastructure projects. But what transpires is something else entirely, as participating publics are made to question their own rational and moral capacities to deliberate (cf. Manne, 2023). We contribute to and extend urban and geographical literatures applying Rancièrian concepts to critique elite power (Legacy, 2016; Dikeç, 2017; Nethercote, 2022) by drawing to the surface grounded experiences of perceived gaslighting in the context of a prominent example of infrastructure planning.

Transurban's West Gate Tunnel Project

Revealing gaslighting as a perceived experience of public participation in infrastructure planning requires extensive fieldwork. To support the aims of this research, one of the authors examined Transurban's West Gate Tunnel Project (WGTP) in Victoria (Australia) over a period of 8 years (2014–2022). The fieldwork included 29 interviews conducted with senior policy makers and (former and currently sitting) elected officials at all three tiers of government – local, state and national. Interviews with planning and transport consultants, former advisors to the Minister, citizen campaigners, transport advocates, representatives from neighbourhood associations and community engagement consultants were structured to elicit insights about the political moments in the planning of the WGTP. Interviews with the primary proponent Transurban, the delivery agency the Western Distributor Authority, and the chair of the Community Liaison Group for the West Gate Tunnel were sought but never secured.

The research also involved observational analysis, including attendance at neighbourhood meetings, exhibition of the proposed project and the panel hearings as well as participating and/or observing street protests, and in some instances acting as an invited panellist on community-organised open forums.[1] Observational aspects of the methods captured the temporal and spatial rhythms of the WGTP, documenting discourses articulated by the differently impacted communities along the route of the WGTP and insights into their grounded experiences of gaslighting. The research also incorporated in-depth policy and local media analysis which commenced upon the formal cancellation of another controversial inner urban tollroad – the East West Link (see Legacy, 2016; Murphy, 2022). The election of a new government that preceded this cancellation in late 2014 oversaw the announcement of another new inner urban tollroad. As attention placed on improvements to infrastructure planning arose in the wake of the earlier project cancellation, we sought to understand what would make the planning for the WGTP project any different. We now turn to this case.

Yet another tollroad

In November 2014, a centrist-left Labor Party government was elected to power in the state of Victoria, precipitating the announcement of the West Gate Tunnel Project (WGTP). A now $10b tollroad project (still under construction at the time of writing), the WGTP was evaluated through the market-led proposal (MLP) scheme and pitched by the tollroad operator Transurban. The WGTP was a significantly expanded version of a $500 million Western Distributor project that featured in Labor's campaign documentation. While the smaller project was relatively uncontroversial, the WGTP was considerably larger – a mammoth undertaking whose physical bulk and rerouting of traffic flow would unleash ripple effects across Melbourne's multicultural, working-class western suburbs. This new, larger proposal was promoted with 'moral authority' (Manne, 2023) as providing an infrastructural solution to the problem of large diesel trucks on residential streets. Given its scale the WGTP had all the tenets of a project that would attract a groundswell of opposition.

A note of contextual explanation is warranted at this point on Transurban. Transurban (trading as TCL on the Australian Securities Exchange) is a tollroad operator, formed in Melbourne in 1996 by Australian infrastructure giant, Transfield and Japanese construction firm, Obayashi, to build and operate CityLink (a network of tollroads linking the city's existing and new motorways). Their core source of value is operating motorway assets that generate revenue – what might be considered classic monopoly rentierism (Christophers, 2020). Core to its ongoing business model is to generate further links in the network, and thus compel more paying users (O'Neill, 2022). Transurban's growth model is predicated on the securing of further monopoly concessions, be that through extensions, buying failed projects, purchasing new tollways from governments or proposing unsolicited projects to governments. Their monopoly status demands close partnership with governments, and this is supported by 'capital and organisational structures' they have established that function in a way that 'triangulate[s] with its regulatory domain' (O'Neill, 2022: 11). The implications for city planning are extensive: to ensure the model remains viable, it is necessary to direct users towards Transurban's assets (O'Neill, 2022: 7). Resulting contracts burden the state government with liability for claims if subsequent government roads and/or transport projects negatively impact upon the number of paying vehicles (e.g. by upgrading other nearby roads, or offering bike lanes or public transport modes). Extracting greater rents and delivering shareholder returns requires growth, thus the need for additional tollways feeding into the existing monopoly network. That, in turn, requires new projects with immense financing needs – hence the requirement for planning mechanisms that increase the certainty of approval within a timely, well-managed and orderly process. The WGTP was one such project that, for Transurban, promised growth, and additional capacity to funnel paying users into its pre-existing, profitable network.

The announcement of the WGTP came in the wake of one of the most fiercely contested transport infrastructure projects in a generation in Victoria: the East West Link project that sought to bridge Melbourne's sprawling left- and right-side suburban flanks (see Legacy, 2016). Following its announcement, the Western Distributor Authority (WDA) was established in 2016 in partnership with Transurban, to oversee the delivery of the WGTP which was then approved for construction in 2017. Concerns about transparency and accountability again featured, but this time, directed at the WGTP. The WTGP also raised concerns about the MLP approval technique, such as from one of the project's transport planners, who went public in Melbourne's metropolitan newspaper, *The Age*:

> I was so deeply concerned about the traffic forecasting and economic analysis being carried out for the West Gate Tunnel business case I raised my concerns with Treasurer Tim Pallas. My warning was ignored and I was removed from the project. . .As someone who has been involved at the highest level in Victoria as a transport planner for many years, I am thoroughly disgusted by the mess our politicians have created (McDougall, 2018).

Based on the similar Unsolicited Proposal (USP) mechanism created in New South Wales to reverse-engineer planning approval for a contentious mega-casino complex (Rogers and Gibson, 2021; Gibson et al., 2023) the MLP scheme entails a reconfigured 'order of governance' (Dikeç, 2017: 53) in which private proponents approach the government with ideas for new infrastructure, rather than government tendering to the private sector for infrastructures identified as public interest priorities. The Victorian government's objectives encompassed, 'ensuring a transparent and fair process that maintains the highest level of probity and public accountability' (Victoria State Government, 2021: 4). For Transurban, the MLP mechanism resolved its dilemma of ensuring an ongoing pipeline of additional new tollway concessions at the same time as defusing public resistance. As if spooked by the East West Link cancellation, the MLP provided Transurban a crucial regulatory 'fix'. It separated the project's financial deal-making by elite state and corporate actors from the statutory planning process, including its community engagement elements. This, as we discuss below, was crucial to undermining the possibility of opposition gaining traction in a manner similar to the East West Link (see Abramson, 2014).

In lockstep with McDougall, Victorian transport scholars shared concerns about the growing use of MLPs, lamenting how governments can 'avoid the capital costs appearing on public balance sheets' whilst at the same time risk 'engineer[ing] monopoly rents from users to private interest' (Legacy et al., 2019). Particularly noteworthy was that the WGTP was assessed without a transport plan from which publics could deliberate its merits, or whether and how it might have aligned with the state's strategic planning ambitions. As an MLP, the project signalled further abandonment of strategic planning by the state government, and a willingness from private consortia, like Transurban, to fill 'voids in government planning' and, in so doing, 'proposing, planning and building "city-shaping" infrastructure' (Legacy et al., 2019). Embracing the MLP rather than proceed with established planning instruments was a regulatory improvisation (Silva, 2011) by Transurban to not only collect tens of billions of dollars in tolling revenue, as concession deeds for other parts of the network under their control, but to also risk-manage anticipated opposition. In Ranciérian terms, infrastructure planning for Melbourne's next toll road involved elite government and corporate actors working within a reconfigured order of governance (the MLP) and an aesthetic regime whose framings legitimated the project as 'common sense' (even if the requisite supporting strategic plans and evidence were thin or non-existent), while excluding from the realm of the 'sensible' those testimonies voiced by publics and transport planners (i.e. technocratic experts). Yet, as we explore in the next section, the WGTP's proponents did not foreclose the possibilities for disruptive politics through regulatory reconfigurations alone. Participatory planning elements of the WGTP also undermined residents' perceived 'epistemic agency' and 'epistemic capacities' (Beerbolhm et al., 2021) to productively shape their futures as part of infrastructure planning. At its core, the conditions were created for structural gaslighting of affected communities.

Participatory planning as structural gaslighting

Participatory spaces became the platform through which the State and Transurban cultivated an 'epistemic dependency' with participating publics, diminishing the latter's perceived 'epistemic agency' (Beerbolhm et al., 2021). Akin to Cornwall's (2004) 'invited space' concept, the form that the participation process took enabled the de-risking of the approvals processes. To understand the work these invited spaces performed, we consider the five-staged MLP process in Victoria and its interplay with the Environmental Effects Statement (EES) process which is a requirement of the Environmental Effects Act (1978) (Figure 1). The EES is where statutory decision-makers, namely Ministers, make decisions about whether a project with potentially significant environmental effects should proceed. Supporting documents are prepared by the project proponent and then released for public comment. Central to the EES is the proposing of measures to avoid, minimise or manage adverse environmental effects, including a program for monitoring and managing environmental effects during project implementation. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the MLP mechanism opens another distinct 'lane' for a project to proceed through the planning process: where unsolicited proposals are considered by the State, and if successful, a contract is awarded. Running in parallel, but unlikely ever to alter the outcome once the MLP has reached a certain decision, the EES process produces a complex governance arrangement where what is being considered – a proposal or a full project with the formal support of the state – remains still undefined.

A consequence of the MLP instrument was that it blurred accountability structures. Where the roles of government and the private sector began – financial deal-making over the terms, scale and nature of the project – required shrewd interrogation of the structure of project governance. Separate to this, but adding to the complexity, was the Community Liaison Group (CLG) with a remit to provide an avenue for community involvement during the planning phase (2015 leading into the EES process). Composed of an independent chairperson, representatives from local government, community members situated along the project corridor, industry and the WGTP team, all meetings were designed to

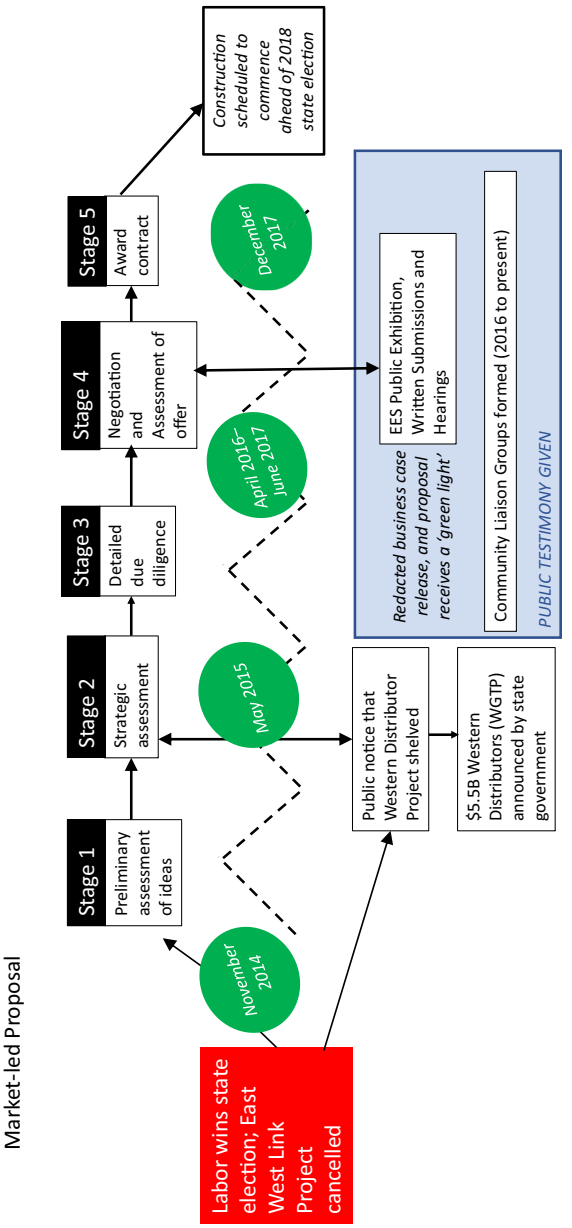

Figure 1. Market-led proposal assessment, and community engagement plan (Gibson et al., 2023).[2]

be closed forums unless a guest was invited to speak (WDA, n.d.). Establishing a space for a 'local perspective on the project', the CLG was promoted as 'allowing stakeholders to appreciate each other's views to the benefit of the project'. The CLG supported information exchange on the development of the concept design, but also sought to limit issues and debates to those most relevant to the project (WDA, n.d.). A code of conduct was signed by all members (WDA, n.d.) thereby formalising a channel for public participation and in so doing creating the impression of the proponent's commitment to transparency and community engagement. Government provided 'Community Update' briefs, where they could announce design changes having been made because of community input. The most notable was an April 2017 brief announcing changes to the project design, namely a longer tunnel that would support 'even better connections, less community impacts, more walking and cycling paths, and new green spaces' (WDA, 2017).

The CLG period that we assessed occurred in stage 3 of the MLP process. CLGs functioned as spaces for invited publics to be drawn *into* the established order in a way that structured participation and the development and eventual release of information. While the use of a CLG is not a requirement of the MLP guidelines, its use is noteworthy, because it forms an intermediary between the formal processes of proposal assessment led by the State and Transurban, and the informal realm of community debate and opposition. Considering the adopting of CLG in the context of the wider politics of infrastructure building in Victoria, we identified how they can be instrumentalised to demarcate the formal and informal spaces of engagement. The CLG had power to defuse conflict by rendering those outside as illegitimate disruptors against a project. As one member of the CLG noted, 'The process is completely different to the [now cancelled] East West Link'. Participatory practice supporting the WGTP enabled the project proponents to mobilise power in the wider politics of infrastructure planning towards changes to the project's design that remained *always* conceptual, despite calls for more detailed designs to help affected communities understand the impacts. The same interviewee spoke about how the design of the community consultation was to 'tell us what's going on but giving no detail'. This was reflected in there being no available traffic impact studies, and no detailed design of the project made available for public scrutiny at that point in the participatory process. In this interviewee's view, they were being asked to engage, but it was unclear what they were engaging with:

> [the project has] always been couched as, "Ah, things will change, this will change, we're getting community impact, which will all feedback into the design," which is actually incorrect. So, it's being couched in terms of, "These are just pending designs, nothing has been firmed up, we want to get your involvement, tell us what your concerns are, and we'll put them into the design." (Community Representative 4)

This was an early experience of gaslighting, where concept designs were used to skew the deliberative capacity of publics towards concrete propositions (Manne, 2023). Seeking clarity on impact, community representatives on the CLG instead encountered vague designs and facilitators seeking to reassure them that 'oh, things will later change'. The limiting of information led to the curtailing of the epistemic capacities of those community representatives participating in the CLG. The participatory spaces invited testimony based on rationality – engaging with a concept design – yet given the limited information, the capacities of those giving testimony to do so were undermined. Moreover, motivation to participate in the CLG came from moral convictions and concerns for perceived harms, not simply to engage with an intellectual process of what designs might be rationally ideal. Unclear what it was over which their testimony was sought, CLG members' moral convictions to represent their communities could not be fully realised either. As another representative on the CLG lamented,

> For the CLG it is entirely frustrating because we get no more information for the community. We are there simply to take the community concerns, of which there aren't that many because nobody can identify anything of the project because there's no detail, feed it back to the group, and they supposedly put it into designs. But what they're actually doing, in our cynical view, is having a community liaison process so that the end of the project, they can say, "Look, we consulted". (Community representative 3)

Frustrations felt on the CLG were amplified in another invited space for public testimony: the EES public hearing. Residents concerned with wider issues such as climate change impacts associated with ongoing motorway construction found their capacities to deliberate curtailed. Such concerns were beyond the frame of 'the sensible' as established by the public engagement process. As one person remarked during the planning panel hearing process, after an afternoon of community presentations:

> The process is designed so that community have to act as NIMBYs. We then get criticised for that but the Terms of Reference for the EES [Environmental Effects Statement] process is so tightly bound that we can only participate if we speak to the local impacts of this project. (Informal communications, 2017)

As the lead author of this paper can attest, participating in the EES was an overwhelming experience that involved engaging with over 10,000 pages of technical text to produce a written submission within 30 days. The panel hearing that followed subsequently involved willing residents defending their testimony through an oral presentation in front of a panel of planners, lawyers and project proponents. Even when residents cited credible academic research to support their testimony, any effort to stop the project from proceeding was dismissed as 'self-interested claims'. Yet, as the above interviewee argued, the process was designed to engage in no other way but to implore residents to articulate negative local impacts. Communities defended their testimony, which is what they were being asked to do: engage in a way that centred rationality. What they encountered in return was a perceived diminishment of their capacity to deliberate the infrastructural proposition, through an accusation – merely acting in self-interest – that undermined their moral credibility. This circumstance, 'in which someone is made to feel morally defective. . . for harbouring some mental state to which she is entitled' (Manne, 2023: 123), is moral gaslighting.

Gaslighting was further experienced when boundaries were policed around the 'reality' of the infrastructural proposition. Victoria Treasurer Tim Pallas was, upon the release of the business case for the WGTP, quoted stating that it was 'setting new standards for transparency, release[ing] the West Gate Tunnel contracts and allowing Victorians to see for themselves the benefits this project will bring to our state'. In the same article the Treasurer was reported as saying, 'Never in Victoria's history has so much information been made available about a major road project' (Preiss and Jacks, 2017), further undermining residents' perceptions of there being *poorer* transparency. This was tantamount to the state setting the parameters for expected engagement and, in turn, establishing a dominant reality ('the sensible') that could legitimate the project's proponents (Transurban and the Victorian government) while disempowering sceptical voices. In the view of the Minister, who held epistemic power, the WGTP approval process *was* transparent. This speech act resembled a form of 'epistemic gaslighting' that sought to 'put out of circulation a particular way of understanding the world. . .oriented at getting knowers to change their beliefs, to stop noticing or testifying of something' (Pohlhaus, 2020: 677).

Tellingly, following calls to release the business case, the government only did so on the final business day of the year, 30 December, when few would be paying attention. Its release allowed the government to claim it was committed to transparency, whilst knowing full well that the timing of its release would attract minimal media reporting and public scrutiny. The epistemic dominance of 'what is true' would remain uncontested and the asymmetric balance of power enjoyed by the proponent was strengthened through what could be described as 'information starvation' (cf. Fields, 2017), a phenomenon that allowed proponents to maintain power (Auyero, 2012: 6).

Compromising epistemic capacities

The eventual signing of the WGTP contracts precipitated renewed concern that it was the wrong project for the state. Affected neighbourhood associations and local community groups continued to agitate, as did 'expert citizens' – those with networks both within the community and into government (see López and Montero, 2018), such as the Victorian transport and urban planning academic community, and long standing pro-public transport advocacy groups. Nevertheless, community opposition was spatially uneven, reflecting different understandings of the 'community benefits' afforded by the WGTP. On one hand there was a belief held by some that the government would deliver on promises to reduce trucks on inner city streets. Those who saw themselves as beneficiaries became, in some ways, important allies to the proponent who could reference those positive remarks/alliances to counter oppositional attacks. On the other, different groups feared that the project would lead to a displacement of the truck problem onto communities further afield (Legacy, 2017b). One strong opponent who was also instrumental in establishing a local oppositional campaign, lamented the impacts of trying to intervene in the planning process which for this interviewee described it almost in terms of an abusive relationship:

> I probably didn't expect it would take over my life so much. I feel passionately about it, that's why it makes me angry. I feel so much about it is wrong and as time go on, I see that more and I keep thinking, "You have just got to get out of this" because it is very hard to be involved to a small extent. It is like you are fully in or you are fully out and there have been a number of times when I have thought about being fully out. (Community organiser 2)

For another, their unique position as a local politician was used to leverage information about the project to help empower their community to engage with the planning process. They shared,

> One of the things we're asking for is the traffic modelling because they're telling us that it'll get all these trucks off the road, but they haven't proved it to us. So, we need to understand how they can say that there'll be 5,000 less trucks a day. We need to see their modelling, we need to see their assumptions. So that's really pivotal to the discussion. (State politician 1)

In this example, the interviewee reflected on the promises offered by the State to be consultative and a commitment to knowledge sharing. Instead, what this interviewee experienced was a skewing of 'deliberative perspective' (Abramson, 2014: 10). To participate deliberatively in the invited spaces there was a need for greater shared information to strengthen residents' capacities, not just to meaningfully engage with the evidence, but to credibly challenge the WGTP itself. In the absence of that information (traffic modelling) the state and proponent engaged in what could be described as gaslighting tactics, 'destroying the possibility of disagreement' by 'destroying the *source* of possible disagreement' (emphasis in original, Abramson, 2014: 14–15).

As a long-time politician (Federal politician 3) said in an interview, the community in the western suburbs have been 'sold' that they *need* a new road to accommodate a 'massively growing population'. Meanwhile, there were no alternatives offered to solve the area's transport challenges. Communities were left unable to collectivise in opposition. As this interviewee argued, 'There's no credible case that's been put to people and the government hasn't developed it because it's not in their interest to develop it. There is a lack of really good integrated transport planning'. Moreover, as this interviewee also lamented,

> I've been to a lot of the community sessions, and I think they're shit. I just don't think Transurban is serious about engaging. They're doing what they have to do and nothing more. It is a process of giving the community just enough but not too much. . . the classic thing is they will not call public meetings, they individually talk to people and so what's told to A, a slightly different version is told to B, then to C and then there's mass confusion in the community about what is actually going on. (State politician 1)

Communities felt they were being 'breadcrumbed': promised superficial or piecemeal benefits that on one hand satisfied a community's need to 'be heard', while on the other hand building a relationship of epistemic dependency between the project proponent and specific communities. In circular fashion, only the proponent could satisfy the needs of affected communities and help them address their challenges. One of the most revealing differences arising from interviews centred around the level of preparedness to accept a road-based solution – an almost resolution – to the issue of trucks in the inner west. This resolution could also be seen as a kind of capture, and at worst a complicity, that allowed the injustices of MLPs to continue unchallenged. Residents became locked in a perpetual cycle of engagement, but as this interviewee noted, it was the kind that 'disempowers community groups' (Community organiser 3).

One inner-west campaigner was resigned to accept a toll road as a solution, and in their remarks below one senses an exhaustion from decades of campaigning to remove trucks off inner streets – a resignation and frustration simply to see something done (Legacy, 2017b),

> . . ..we're not about looking at what the whole transport needs are of Melbourne. . ... We're about trucks. And at the moment, in terms of proposals that are on the table to get trucks off the streets, the [West Gate Tunnel] proposal, despite its flaws, still offers the best solutions we've got to actually deal with the trucks. (Community Organiser 3)

The theme of playing concerned groups against each other in different areas, each anticipating different benefits from the project, was evident in interviews with citizen campaigners and leaders. As suggested by one interviewee, conflicting views created 'mass confusion in the community about what is actually going on' and 'pit[ted] communities against each other' (State politician 1). For a long-standing member of one of the community groups who saw significant benefits in the WGTP,

> We recognise that the government has been using [community group's] position on the WGTP to help legitimize this project. The government has been saying that [some groups] support the project, but has not publicly recognized that [community group's] support for the West Gate Tunnel Project has always been, and remains, conditional on full truck bans and filtration on the vent stacks. (Community representative 4)

Despite differing views based on geographical proximity and impacts, there were numerous efforts to unite residential action groups together. Visible leaders in the community played a role in building a degree of consensus or at least common concerns shared by groups. There was a strong sentiment expressed by some citizen interviewees that one of the very organised and long-standing advocacy groups had had their concerns heard over and above all others,

> I'm treating them exactly the same as all the other groups, yet they are actually quite critical and take this very strong line that it's only because Yarraville is so noisy and so organised that nothing will happen to them, and Spotswood is going to be left. Whereas if all the groups work together and weren't played off against each other then we could actually achieve a much better outcome for everybody.

The WGTP's regulatory process delineated and defused the grounds of political possibility – positioning community engagement *within* infrastructure planning's reconfigured order of governance, but on its margins rather than its centre. In this liminal space, participation came to be perceived as a form of gaslighting. Engaging with interviewees, as well as observing the invited spaces of community participation enriched our understanding of participation's darker sides. Speaking with a local resident impacted by the WGTP project, who after nearly 20 years of experience in community activism possessed a pragmatic view of the limits and potentials of participatory spaces, offered insights into the experience,

> With the market-led proposal, initially, when we went to government after it had been announced they were like, "well, it's just a proposal that's been put to us, we don't have any comment, we can't really talk to you about that yet because this isn't a definite project or anything like that." Initially it was very hard to talk to government about it, so we were talking with Transurban, but not with government, because they said, unless the government actually accepts this proposal and moves forward on it, we don't have anything to say, because it's just a proposal. So, from that point of view that was difficult as well. . .So it was very easy for both sides to not be answerable early on. (Community Organiser 3)

What became evident, in hindsight, was that the planning process was in effect not solely a marginalisation or 'strategic ignoring' of public dissent or opposition (as a certain kind of Rancièrian reading might suggest). Through a strategic paralleling of two processes – the MLP's five stage assessment and the separate EES process – without clear established (formal) guidelines regarding how they knitted together, the state and the proponent were able to 'destroy' any possibility that community dissent could place the project at risk. This distinction is critical to exposing the resulting experience of community participation as gaslighting. The 'real' action of planning the WGTP was occurring via the MLP assessment process (where the project was being assessed behind closed doors towards a signed, commercial-in-confidence contract), while the more superficial display of inclusive consultation was tilted towards the EES process. These parallel processes served two different stakeholder groups. One, Transurban, had direct access to the planning system through the MLP with its reduced risk. The other, the diverse array of concerned communities, was invited into dialogue with elite actors, but left to input with limited bandwidth within tightly proscribed (and highly technical) EES procedures for which information was withheld or at best 'breadcrumbed'. Ensuing dissonance between these parallel processes generated ample opportunities for government and corporate actors to befuddle publics with technicalities, conceal vital information, manipulate press coverage favourably and/or create the impression of inclusive due process. For affected citizens worried about climate change, transport, trucks and their neighbourhoods, the affective experience of the process was more than being unheard or invisible. Rather, their realities and moral convictions felt undermined, as infrastructural planning created conditions for structural gaslighting.

Conclusion: Infrastructure planning as structural gaslighting

This paper canvassed the possibility that infrastructure planning is subject to forms of structural gaslighting. We did so initially with trepidation, for fear of misappropriating a popular psychological term without justification. Yet the evidence that gaslighting is a structural condition of infrastructure planning is compelling. Writing conceptually about gaslighting, Manne (2023: 124) alerts us to the ways that 'Gaslighting can weaponize morality as well as rationality against its targets and victims'. Considering 'moral forms' of gaslighting we become attuned to the ways gaslighting is made 'possible, and indeed not uncommon'. Transurban's West Gate Tunnel Project illustrated how planning enrols regulatory reconfigurations such as unsolicited and market-led proposals that can be rationalised through the planning system, thereby revising the order of governance for infrastructure projects, financing and approval. These in turn structure participation elements projecting a sense that transparency and inclusive engagement will be supported, but delineating what constitute speaking positions and 'sensible' views, while destroying the possibilities for disruptive politics and denying publics from holding 'mental states' – confusion, anger, distrust – for which they are otherwise entitled (Manne, 2023). For elites, dissent must be managed because dealing with politically active people is to put projects at risk. While the people affected need to be consulted – in keeping with the edicts of 'best practice' participatory planning – the project must move forward as planned. Gaslighting is the resulting affective experience where calls to engage with the project rationally – for instance, with traffic models or to present evidence at the EES – is met by challenges that undermine one's moral compass, for instance being accused of being self-interested.

If we are correct that gaslighting now features structurally in urban affairs in such ways, there are important implications for the way we understand citizen participation. In post-political settings, where elite actors gain privileged access to novel planning processes while public scrutiny is disabled, participation moves from being a principled practice, intended to open planning to diverse communities to engage meaningfully in the production of their cities and neighbourhoods, to become a deceptive feature of intentionally obfuscating planning processes. The sum effect is not only that the impact of participation is negligible, but that participation actively undermines the epistemic capacities of citizens to influence outcomes. Whereas once the social contract between the state and citizens might be thought as being continuously navigated and re-negotiated through participatory planning, gaslighting manipulates and produces a mutated kind of participation that actively attaches (and perpetuates) epistemic authority to the gaslighter (for example, a coalition of public and private actors in the infrastructure realm). Thus, those participating 'within' the invited spaces of the formal planning system could be deemed complicit in quelling possibilities to oppose, and thus the making of harm. Those that dare to step outside are undermined, and their authority to make counter claims and the experiences and knowledge systems that support those claims become the target of questioning, derision (e.g. the NIMBY stigma) and at worse, suspicion. As we progress our understanding of post-politics and unsolicited urbanism (Gibson et al., 2023), and how it manifests in planning tools to mobilise and expand the power of elite actors, we call for more research on the insidious ways in which participation is being used to control and discipline communities. How participation in the formal spaces of planning becomes an act of complicity warrants urgent comparative analysis.

To that end, we join with philosophers writing about gaslighting (e.g. Abramson, 2014; Manne, 2023; Pohlhaus, 2020) to advocate for gaslighting as a worthwhile concept for structural analysis – in our case, urban political-economic work concerned with social exclusions, the perpetuation of state power, and privileging of capital. Introducing gaslighting into the debate allows us to explore more deeply the politics of participation, and how it reflects and is mobilised through the political-economy of cities (Haughton and McManus, 2019). The focus therefore moves from how the post-political condition is reframing planning, although those debates remain relevant. Rather, gaslighting shifts the focus to how participation, particularly formal participation, is being used to undermine the political legitimacy of concerned publics by destabilising not only their truth claims and knowledge but, more fundamentally, defusing the very basis of their political subjectivity and agency (i.e. their political identity and the moral standing from which political power emerges). Because concerned publics will have to live with resulting infrastructures when they are built, they have political and moral authority to influence the established planning system. Gaslighting attacks these authorities.

Finally, an ongoing dialogue we hope to open through this analysis, is what can be done about gaslighting in the planning realm, including parallels beyond transport infrastructure, such as housing, which are also subject to aesthetic regimes, disabling framings and elite policing (Nethercote, 2022). There is much to be gained from considering how gaslighting may be affectively experienced by publics through a range of other plans and planning matters. It is unclear from the psychological and sociological literature on gaslighting how best to combat it in heterogeneous realms such as infrastructure planning. Perhaps naming gaslighting for what it is, is at the very least a first necessary step (cf. Davis and Ernst, 2020; Ruíz, 2020). Naming as gaslighting the experiences of those publics who have sincerely engaged with participatory processes, only to find their perceptions of reality undermined, would certainly embody the kind of 'open' and disruptive politics encouraged by Rancière. As Dikeç (2017: 49) reminds us, 'politics is a permanent possibility. . .all established orders are contingent'. While participatory processes of infrastructure planning unleash 'politically disabling effects' from 'the consolidation of spatial and temporal orders', there is always the 'political potential of disrupting them through opening up new spaces' (Dikeç, 2017: 52). While we have sought to expose gaslighting as part of planning in post-political contexts, we join with other critical urban scholars who advocate for an infrastructure politics that recognises the subjectivity of people to make claims about justice, equality and climate change, and an infrastructure planning system that not only hears

those claims, but directly attends to them (McManus and Haughton, 2021; Stiglich, 2021). For 'something, somewhere will erupt when the established institutions fail, as they do, to address denials of equality' (Dikeç, 2017: 53). The orders of infrastructural governance resulting from reconfigured regulatory and participatory processes are real – in the sense that their concrete outcomes consolidate market and elite government power at the expense of communities. By calling infrastructural gaslighting for what it is – a systemic reconfiguring of approvals process to circumvent public scrutiny, while purporting to be inclusive – assists scholars in viewing the realities they permit as illusions, forms of deliberate deception that are as tenuous as they are politically constituted. Like other systemic forms of oppression, moral gaslighting, as Manne (2023: 141) describes it, casts attention onto the structuring qualities of gaslighting as both real and common. The power of elites to manipulate public participation within infrastructure planning is ripe for challenge. It may be that only in moving beyond, and even resisting (see Pohlhaus, 2020), the institutional order – when the political is foreclosed in the formal system – can the politics of participation be most acutely observed.

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Notes

1. As activist scholars we are embedded within a wider community of engaged academics. We are regularly called upon by community groups to speak at community-based events, to provide expert-witness statements at planning panels for controversial transport projects, and offer comment for print media, commentary on radio and television news broadcasts; our document and media analysis captures some of this participation, and includes wider public discourse about the WGTP, Transurban and market-led proposal that took place between 2014 and 2022.
2. The WGTP was previously named the Western Distributor Project. The Figure reflects the name of the project at the time of the MLP process. At the time of writing, the project is now formally known as the West Gate Tunnel Project.

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