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The community is not a place and why it matters – Case study: Green Square

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THE LANGUAGE OF PLACE

In an era when place making and place based management are the vogue, it feels somewhat risky to stand up among urban planners and claim that the community is not a place. After all planners make places, they are concerned with the quality of life in places so isn't it reasonable that they treat communities as places? Places are, if you like, a planner's canvas. Simplistically one might say that it is a planner's job to make places that are nice to be in and which function effectively for the people who live and work there. More subtly, planners are often also interested in the sustainability of a place, by which they mean its economic base and its environmental qualities, and sometimes this concept includes social sustainability. Almost invariably however, discussions about social sustainability come back to a discussion about what is contained *physically in the place* – the buildings, the town square, the transport grid, etc.

At first sight, all appearances suggest that planners deal with community in terms of place. But lest you think that this is appearances only, I begin with a selection of demonstrations of the proposition that planning discourse abounds in the assumption that communities are place based.

First, this is readily apparent from a review of planning documents, for example strategic regional plans or the policy statements of planning departments. Recently, I laboriously went through a number of these highlighting every time the word community was used as a noun. I found that the documents examined¹ used the noun community almost exclusively in reference to place or area. While the size of the area varied, from NSW as a whole (a rare usage) to local government area, suburb or sometimes neighbourhoods, the clear and consistent usage treated the concept of community as place based.

Second, I conducted a survey of 135 practicing planners in Sydney in 2001, and I repeated the survey with 28 final year planning students at the University of NSW in

¹ these were the 1998/9 Annual Report of the NSW State Government's Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP), DUAP's 1999 – 2000 Strategic Directions document, DUAP's Affordable Housing Strategy Background Paper(2000), DUAP's Area Assistance Scheme Policy and Procedure Guidelines (1999) (the Area Assistance Scheme is a community self help grants program administered by the Department); the Green Square Draft Structural Masterplan prepared by the firm Stansic, Turner/Hassall in 1997, and a Report of the Policy Action Team 4, put out by the UK Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Unit – a unit whose output was at the time significantly influencing public planning and social policy in NSW.

2002. 85% of practicing planners said that when they read planning documents about a community, they usually think of community in terms of place. Just in case you think this might be a declining trend, the proportion of students was 93%.

Third, the idea of community as a place is as old as planning itself, especially if you accept Peter Hall's view that the birth of the planning profession was part of a widespread reaction to perceived ills arising from the industrial revolution (Hall 1996). The garden city planners were convinced that social ills could be addressed through place making, and they set out to make wholesome new communities in the area based sense.

While some areas of planning branched off into The City Beautiful or specialisations in road and rail infrastructure, the community-as-place theme has emerged again and again. It is at the heart of new urbanism. It is at the heart of ecological approaches to sustainable living arrangements. It is at the heart of urban design. Just consider the concerns of these closely related approaches to planning:

- the exhortations to 'design each new area as a clearly defined urban or rural village with its own heart' (DUAP 2000)
- the 'hub' approach to small area design (Barton 2000)
- the emphasis on natural surveillance, acquaintanceship and neighbourliness (Katz 1994)
- the emphasis on walkability and permeability, legibility, (Barton et al 1995, DUAP 1998)
- the emphasis on sense of identity, sense of place, (Ibid) and the like.

In all these recent planning approaches, the concern has been, in effect, to create social connections *within* a place – and usually a smallish place. Feeling that you belong to a place is apparently a good thing and these schools of planning are deeply concerned with it.

The conflation of community with place in planning is so ubiquitous, and so clearly well intentioned that it almost seems churlish to point out that if there is one thing that a community is not these days, it is a place.

Many sociologists have struggled with definitions of community. One particularly muddled individual came up with 94 definitions (Hillery 1955). However, a well
State of Australian Cities National Conference 2003

regarded and straightforward set of definitions is provided by Peter Willmot (1989) and his definitions show the issues quite clearly.

He points out that the word community refers to people who have things in common. What they have in common can generally be categorised as territory, interests and/or attachments. People do have territory in common – their street, their state and sometimes much larger territories such as the European Economic Community. However people also have interests in common. An interest community may share ethno-cultural origins, profit motives, religion, politics, sexual preference, occupation or a common condition or problem. In most urban situations, the distribution of interest communities cuts right across territorial boundaries.

For example, the Italian community in Sydney is not confined to one local government area, or even a major region of the city. The middle classes (a clear community of interest) shift between suburbs and LGAs with a significant disregard for boundaries as such, providing their interests are met. Consider how much the middle classes seem to enjoy finding housing that is currently in the wrong area and inexpensive. It is not just that by making such purchases, the middle class continually redistribute themselves and the geographic boundaries of their interests, but also that they seem to relish the 'find'. The up and coming suburb is an area where people's economic interest is the glue rather than the area itself or any attachment to it.

If you think about communities of interest relevant to planning, then, apart from the communities of the middle classes, you might think of the community of developers, the community of homeless people, the community of Vietnamese or Iraqi immigrants, the community of lone parents and so on.

Perhaps these groupings do not strike you as a community. But look back at the idea of community as territory in common. These days, even in a neighbourhood, people mostly do not know each other, not even as nodding acquaintances. So knowing the other people with whom you have something in common is not a necessary element of either communities of territory or communities of interest.

Willmott's third category is people who have attachments, that is feelings and sentiments in common. It is possible to think of communities of attachment where people do not actually know each other (the community of the alumni of a University for example). However, most usage of community in this sense tends to emphasise strong bonded social relationships based on feelings of belonging and shared daily life – the very stuff of the garden city, new urbanism and even eco-villages.

But in the 21st Century attachment communities which are also area based are extremely rare. They only really occur in circumstance of geographic isolation such as parents isolated at home with their children for want of child care or transport, remote one horse towns or relatively contained towns and villages with a strong bank of community organisations. Territory based attachment communities may be the vision splendid of theorists but in reality they are thin on the ground.

Why does this matter? Since the vision is splendid and well intended, why does it matter that it is out of kilter with reality? Isn't that the function of a vision – to provide the ideal we should be aiming for? My proposition is that treating community-as-territory as an ideal has some negative consequences for the practice of urban planning. On the one hand it is empirically inaccurate and unrealistic, but more importantly, as I will show, as a concept it focuses planners' attention on some tools and strategies least likely to bring about the social aims that many planners profess.

Territory based attachment communities have been on the decline since at least the industrial revolution, if not before, and the trend is not abating. These days, the plethora of commitments and connections between people now rarely coincide with any geographic boundary, much less a local one. Rather, the connections between people, their social, economic, political, religious, cultural etc affiliations and interests are a diverse and ever shifting kaleidoscope of inter-related layers which cross territorial boundaries with all the ease of electronic communications. Except perhaps for issues of national identity, these across-territory relationships are far more powerful and far more pervasive than place-based connections.

This is especially true at the village and neighbourhood level. Urban sociologists have virtually abandoned the idea that neighbourhood characteristics are determining factors in urban well being (Buck 1996: 295-6; Pahl 2001:881). Research shows that

most people's important social networks are geographically dispersed (Willmott op cit, Mitchell 2001; Wellman and Leighton 1979), neighbourly relations in 'Western' urban environments are confined to the exchange of small services - things like getting someone to feed the cat when you are away or possibly to get you to hospital in an emergency (Bridge 2002:25); and socialising and friendship within one's neighbourhood is on the decline (Guest and Wierzbicki 1999); the more so in poor neighbourhoods where many residents are renting (Rohe and Stegman 1994 Forrest and Kearns 2001, Saegert et.al. 2002).

Further, far from acting as a bonding agent, these days one of the key social functions of a neighbourhood is to establish one's social status. As Kearns and Parkinson put it, '*Today, it could be argued that neighbourhoods (as much if not more so than homes themselves) are competitive and inherently comparative entities which are visible and convey social information. One can either influence one's social position or have it determined for one, according to the type of neighbourhood one inhabits and creates.*' (Kearns and Parkinson 2001:2106).

People who live in low status neighbourhoods suffer from labelling, and a negative social reputation, (Forrest and Kearns 2001); and numerous studies show that employers often base hiring decisions on the residential addresses of applicants (Bauder 2002). It is quite easy to overhear conversations in which people are disparaged or respected on the basis of their suburb. This role of place in acting as a signal of relative status is important because of what other research reveals about the social impacts of relative social status.

A number of social epidemiologists, and an extensive bank of studies, have confirmed a clear and direct relationship between social well being and relative social and economic equality (for a summary of these see Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). As relative social and economic inequality in a society increases, so do the indicators of social distress – heart attack rates, a host of other health indicators, education outcomes, crime rates. People's sense of social exclusion, of being 'disrespected', disregarded and isolated are functions of these widening gaps – that is they are functions of their *relative* socio-economic position (Wilkinson 2001).

Why is this in conflict with place based planning? Well, its one thing for a vision to stretch our imaginations, but the stretch should be in the direction of reality *and* in the direction of the aims and outcomes we profess. In this regard, the focus on community-as-place has a hidden and negative consequence. It works like this: relative socio-economic inequalities are the drivers in social disintegration (see above) but the way place-based planning tends to operate is to entrench social and economic inequalities in geographic areas and make these relativities not only spatially related but also physically highly visible. A number of writers have noted this effect particularly in regard to gated communities (eg. Blakely and Snyder, 1997), but I assert that the entrenchment of social and economic difference can readily be seen in all kinds of recent urban design and development.

For example, the much heralded public housing component of the Millennium Village² is instantly identifiable – it looks different, the building materials are inferior, the colours less vibrant³, the space allocation meaner, and (unbelievably) the public housing has inferior natural surveillance and dustbin storage seems to have been placed by the front door. Lest you feel this is a peculiarly English design manifestation, I invite you to visit any Sydney public housing estate. Sydney's public housing is usually identifiable by its design⁴. Public housing tenants in Australia have been asking for inconspicuous housing for some time⁵ (Phibbs et al 2002).

In private housing, planning and designing new places or new neighbourhoods on the basis of selling to one income group, or a cluster of similar income groups, also entrenches the role of place as a status differentiator – look at Green Square, in South Sydney or Stanhope Gardens in Blacktown. The developers appear to have mistaken sameness for social cohesion. Grouping housing according to type and style in new release or large urban regeneration areas makes the newly designed place the antithesis of socio-economic diversity or inclusion. Visually it may satisfy urban design interests in consistency and frequently it satisfies intending residents. The very sameness makes them feel safe – hip pocket safe and socially safe. It raises no warning bells about negative social impacts perhaps because local homogeneity suggests that all these negative impacts will happen to someone else

² On the Thames at Greenwich, London.

³ The colours on the balconies of expensive flats nearby are eye catching.

⁴ Including occasionally its excellent design. For some examples of excellent, but conspicuous, design and excellent but inconspicuous design consult City West Pty Ltd

somewhere else. That relative social and economic inequality has an adverse impact on everyone (Wilkinson 1996) is not widely understood.

In fact, is not geographical segregation by wealth is at the unwitting heart of zoning? At a meeting I attended in a Western Sydney council a while ago, a senior planner, pointing to a map said *'over here there is a little hill with a view of the water, so this is zoned for larger lots and single dwellings, the more affordable housing, the housing with greater density, will be these high rise flats located near the railway station'*. Nobody murmured or shifted uneasily in their seats.

In addition, treating urban areas as a series of hubs (and discussing what should be in the hub, how long it should take to walk to the hub from your flat or house, how far it is to the next hub, where the buses stop in the hub and so on) has tended to go hand in hand with unwarranted assertions about the social role of hubs – usually this boils down to the social role of shops⁶ especially coffee shops⁷ and things like town squares, streetscapes and even public art. This mechanistic approach to social outcomes is a form of physical determinism. Physical determinism is not respectable planning, but conceiving community-as-place covertly legitimises it. It also seems that planners have long been comfortable with mechanistic solutions (Glass 1959).

Or to put all this in another way, trying to solve the problems of social exclusion by working *'within particular areas of cities is bound to fail, since the causes of the problems and the potential solutions to them – whether they are economic and social changes or institutional resources and programmes – lie outside excluded areas'* (Parkinson 1998: 2). But some planners feel that these issues (the causes and their potential solutions) lie outside their role.

⁵ Personal communication with City West staff

⁶ The social role of shops is alive and well in planning. In October 2003 the NSW Minister for Western Sydney and assistant Planning Minister launched a plan for the commercial and retail centre at Rouse Hill saying *'it will be a traditional sort of town with a main street where people meet, eat, chat and shop'* (Nichols 2003). What was she talking about other than the myth that shops = community? Indeed the paper referred to the Rouse Hill regional centre as a 'community hub'. Surely they were just testing to see if we were slumbering over our muesli that morning. The Rouse Hill regional centre will have nothing to do with social relationships except for the minority of people who work there or, in the unlikely event (not mentioned in the article) that there is a significant educative or cultural facility there.

⁷ Recognition of the role of coffee shops in excluding people with very limited means is long overdue. *State of Australian Cities National Conference 2003*

The problem seems to be that some parts of the social context - perhaps the structure of status relativities, networks, and distribution of civic resources, seem to belong to a non-planning dimension. However, physical elements and buildings have social impacts and planning seems to be littered with unsubstantiated assumptions about what these are, either being far too optimistic or classist about the social impacts of various urban forms (town squares and coffee shops) or simply overlooking the social impacts of what one interest community or another wants to do in their own interest. Planning tools, especially zones, character statements, heritage areas and assumptions about what kinds of people live where, help rather than hinder these assumptions and the language of urban design at best contributes to social controls (surveillance and accessibility) and more frequently happily helps developers mark social difference in a highly visible way.

My survey of practicing planners in 2001 revealed that these assumptions are alive and well. The survey provided an opportunity for planners to consider what they would do to achieve good community development if they were the senior planner in charge of a large new town somewhere on the coast of NSW. In the scenario, they had an unlimited budget, excellent access to research and community consultation processes and, as I say, they were to imagine that it was all their call. But this proved to be a difficult challenge for many respondents and for the most part their initiatives were weak and indirect.

The majority, 57%, proposed to rely on physical initiatives like buildings and urban design while 26% proposed to rely on the work of other people such as community development workers and 13% stated that they could not have any ideas which did not emanate from the future community – which means of course that the planner's work is unfettered by such contributions since by the time the residents have arrived, most of the major structures and distributions are determined.

While 22% of responses were concerned with building social networks, the strategies proposed were weak and often very short term. In the latter category were things like providing information leaflets to new residents, organising community events such as festivals, and holding sausage sizzles. Longer terms strategies included applying a management protocol to community gardens, facilitating the start up of clubs, playgroups, neighbourhood/precinct committees or a residents' association. Even

with these responses it was often apparent that the respondent thought that this was something that someone else would organise - later.

There was no clear body of opinion or expertise demonstrated in my survey of practicing planners about the role of planners in community building. Not one practicing planner made reference to distributional issues. Several thought that social well being could be facilitated by having ecological initiatives such as bush regeneration schemes and buffer zones in place, there was strong reliance on assumptions about the socially bonding impacts of town squares, shops and footpaths. Overall, these respondents could, or at least did, not articulate a direct role for the profession in social wellbeing other than in physical structures or calling in someone else.

On the up side, although 20% of practicing planners thought that planners have no role to play in 'community building'⁸, among the remainder there was a strong interest in acquiring the skills to do so. They were interested in being able to undertake a social impact assessment, argue the case for various social initiatives with a developer, negotiate and install, at the planning stage, initiatives which would build civic infrastructure and engagement, or facilitate social network development. Of course these activities too would mainly be applied to places, however, their take up would change the conceptual vocabulary of planning and this would challenge the dominance of mechanistic solutions.

WHAT HAPPENED AT GREEN SQUARE

In the second half of this paper I would like to look at what has happened and what did not happen at Green Square in Sydney. The developments at Green Square were first envisioned in the Green Square Draft Structural Masterplan prepared by the firm Stansic, Turner/Hassall in 1997. Their document treated the community as area based and they tended to wax somewhat lyrical about the social benefits of urban design, studios for artists and open space.

In 1998, the South Sydney Development Corporation (SSDC), which was charged with bringing about the regeneration of this Growth Centre, commissioned a

⁸ The phrase used in the survey
State of Australian Cities National Conference 2003

Community Plan. The Green Square Community Plan was prepared by Australia Street Company and adopted by the SSDC in 1999. Note that the social issues were not considered as an integral part of the planning process but were separated out into a discrete plan – there were other discrete plans, for example for marketing. However, in this case I believe that the location of planning issues related to the social outcomes proposed for the area in a document that was separate from the main planning documents epitomised the problem.

There was some confusion at South Sydney Council about whether the Green Square Community Plan was really a social plan and really belonged with Council rather than with the Corporation, however, as one of the consultants preparing the document I can say that we were quite clear that we were preparing a plan specifically for the use of the Corporation *and in relation to its planning activities*. Accordingly we prepared a document that sought to alert the Corporation to the social benefits to be sought and the social risks to be avoided and the initiatives in the Plan, as adopted, very much related to things to be achieved during and as part of the planning process.

In adopting the Plan, the Corporation took on six planning principles including sustainability, relative social equality and social inclusion. Aware that the Corporation and others might find it difficult to put these social principles into planning practice we went to some lengths to describe how these might be used and to provide examples.

Before drafting the Plan we had prepared an Issues Paper which warned the Corporation about social risks arising from the development of a relatively wealthy enclave next to one of the most impoverished housing estates in the inner city. Many of the actions contained in the Plan's six strategies were directed at dealing with this issue. As a whole they constituted a strategic program to reduce the social exclusion impacts and distribute the benefits of the new developments beyond the boundaries of the Growth Centre. The Plan was prepared well before any construction had commenced, that is before the planning opportunity had been lost.

For example the Plan included:

- an Electronic Communications Plan for the Town Centre

- an interactive bulletin board as a precursor to an Intranet for Green Square with extensions to neighbouring areas and a brief to foster and support social, economic and cultural development in the wider area (eg. acting as a noticeboard, swap shop etc)
- a Green Square Education and Employment Strategy – to canvas such issues as a Green Square jobs brokerage (for jobs in the development phase), and we had also hoped that this Strategy would result in opportunities for local school kids to visit sites as they were being developed and to have aspects of urban development included in their curricula
- an educative or cultural facility located in the town centre –with a pricing policy applying to its use which would foster social equality and inclusion
- a Green Square Partnership to sponsor the Electronic Communications Plan and the Education and Employment Strategy
- a Green Square Forum as another mechanism to involve a diverse range of groups and individuals in the development of Green Square
- affordable housing throughout the Growth Centre.

Of course it was ambitious. On the other hand, none of the initiatives proposed in the Plan were so unusual that we were not able to point to other urban regeneration schemes where they had been put in place.

What happened? Well the Council struggled long and hard on the issue of affordable housing with small results. Bill boards were placed along the Eastern Distributor in an apparent misunderstanding of the idea of bulletin boards. Two competitions were held for the design of the town centre. These included water features but not a cultural or educative centre. As far as I can ascertain, there was no Green Square Partnership or Green Square Forum. There was no Electronic Communications Plan and no Education and Employment Strategy⁹.

Earlier this year, a new document was posted on the very static and non-interactive Green Square website. This is a short paper attached to the Green Square Town Centre Masterplan entitled *Social Considerations*. In this paper the social issues flagged in the Community Plan have been replaced by the following 'social considerations': accessibility, connectivity, permeability, integration, legibility, provision and diversity of public spaces, diversity of land use and surveillance. These, and the bulk of the paper, relate to the physical infrastructure.

A short section on social infrastructure – defined as services and facilities – leaves their provision up to developer incentives and contributions. Six years after the Corporation began, it is only able to note that open space will be funded by the Development Rights Scheme and '*other facilities to be provided as a result of the increase in demand consequent upon new development in the Green Square Town Centre have not yet been determined*' (p5) The Corporation is leaving this up to the South Sydney Council as if the Corporation did not also have a critical role to play. The paper offers criteria for the assessment of development applications for community facilities, but these criteria only concern their location and physical accessibility.

What happened to the issues of social exclusion and relative social inequality that were taken up by the Corporation in 1999? Well, they are not dealt with in these *Social Considerations*. Gentrification is anticipated - '*some traditional households may be displaced*', they say, and any '*tensions*' will be '*short term*' (p11). The nearby public housing estates are not mentioned, nor the increasing gulf between rich and poor which the new developments will proclaim. There will be a little bit of affordable housing in the Growth Area and '*proposed developments will be assessed in terms of*

⁹ Although recently an Employment and Skilling Taskforce has been established.
State of Australian Cities National Conference 2003

whether the proposal has had regard to the likely or actual opinions of surrounding occupants and other relevant interest groups'. (p11) It is difficult to imagine a way in which this criterion could have been more weakly expressed.

None of the initiatives intended to provide social benefits and social inclusion for the residents of Redfern and Waterloo have been commenced. The possibility of a jobs brokerage has been passed to South Sydney Council (p13) - this is tantamount to saying that it won't happen¹⁰.

The Vision for the Masterplan states that *'while Green Square Town Centre will be recognisable, it will join up seamlessly with surrounding neighbourhoods'*. But if you visit the area you will see that the development of an enclave and the contrast of socio-economic difference we envisaged has commenced.

What happened at Green Square is a cautionary tale. On the one hand I appreciate that it demonstrates some political realities. However, Green Square has its own Development Corporation, that is to say an organisation with a special brief and an opportunity to think and act purposively and innovatively with regard to the social consequences of the developments that will occur. Instead, after an early flutter with a new approach, it has fallen back on urban design¹¹ to deliver social outcomes. It is time to recognise that traditional urban design concepts do not address the key drivers of social health and well being.

SOME NEW QUESTIONS

Of course practicing planners know all about communities of interest. They spend their professional lives trying to manage them – the community of irate residents, the community of powerful and determined developers, the political communities, the green community and so on. I am suggesting, however, that the community of interest in social well being does not have enough standing room in urban planning debates as the other communities of interest jostle for power. I am also proposing that the language of place, and the assumption that communities are place based, reduce the legitimate arena within which practicing urban planners could be making a difference to social outcomes.

¹⁰ Employment brokerage is not a traditional local government responsibility and a council which is under repeated threat of boundary changes and amalgamation is unlikely to take up an optional new function requiring specialist skills.

¹¹ The Introduction to the Masterplan even says that the Town Square will be the *'heart of the Town Centre'*

Practicing planners have a lot to do already, they are under considerable pressure and it is probably not realistic to expect that they will conduct a wholesale review of their professional language at the same time. However, this is contribution which urban researchers and planning schools could, and in my view, should be making.

I believe this discussion raises for legitimate research and teaching consideration questions such as these:

- Can planning (as distinct from fiscal policy, for example) reduce residential segregation by income, and if so what planning strategies seem to work best?
- What planning and design strategies reduce *perceptions of* relative social inequalities between suburbs and neighbourhoods?
- How can planning processes contribute to building networks *between* suburbs and across cities, both physical networks and networks of communication and access to resources, knowledge and cultural life?
- Can planning assist in building the organisational and civic structures which foster relative equality, social networks and civic infrastructure?
- Finally, what is the role of place in network facilitation? There are plenty of assertions about the social benefits of coffee shops, bus interchanges and optic fibre installations, but to the extent that these things have any effect, it seems to be because they are well managed (Wellman 2001). What can planners do to facilitate this?

These questions are about more than semantics. When social inequalities get entrenched in place, it is bad for health: yours, mine and everyone's. Lets get focused on it.

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