

## **The death and life of the great Australian suburb**

**Dr Louise Johnson**  
**School of History, Heritage and Society**  
**Deakin University**

### **Introduction**

Inspired by the approach to understanding, critiquing and rebuilding both planning and the urban environment that Jane Jacobs adopted in her *Death and life of great American cities* (1961), this paper begins with the personal experience of living in a suburban neighbourhood in Melbourne, Victoria. Particular elements which make this such a positive experience are put alongside the geographical, planning and urban studies literature to offer suggestions by which better suburbs can be planned and activated. This literature and experience will then be contrasted with existing planning practice to highlight what might bring life rather than death to the great Australian suburb.

The paper will be in four sections:

1. Urban life worlds: Johnson and Jacobs
2. Life and death of the great Australian suburb – the literature
3. Planning agendas
4. Affirming life over the death of the great Australian suburb

### **1. Urban life worlds - Jacobs and Johnson**

Jane Jacobs was one of many living in an urban America being transformed in the 1950s by disinvestment, a flight of capital and energy to the suburbs, freeway extension and urban renewal. Without formal planning education she had moved with her sister from Scranton, Pennsylvania to Greenwich Village, New York, in the 1930s. Here she was drawn to, described and lived in the inner neighbourhoods; in those parts of the city designated slums and “needing renewal” as well as freeway access. As she watched the impact of modernity on her beloved city, she wrote both a critique of the ideas which underpinned the changes and celebrated the world around her in the neighbourhood of Hudson St. First in a series of articles, she later collected her ideas together in a book, described as one of the most influential books in the history of city planning. In the *Death and life of great American cities* (1961), Jacobs launched a stinging critique of modernist planning and presented a set of observations and principles by which the city could be valued, revitalised and planned. The book was intended as a counter to insensitive urban renewal schemes and to those fostering low-density, car dependent suburbanisation which was emptying the cities of people, prosperity and prospects. For Jacobs the twin threats to a vibrant city life were the abstract ideas of modernist planners and suburbanisation (Parker 2004: 78-9).

Denouncing the “pseudoscience of city building and planning” Jacobs saw in most renewal schemes “a celebration, in art, of the potency of statistics and the triumph of the mathematical average” (Quoted by Fischler 2000: 146). Much of the book proceeds to describe and draw from acute observations of her neighbourhood, just what made Greenwich Village work well. She wrote with passion and commitment of the world she loved and railed against those who set out to destroy it, in the process winning her many allies but also making numerous enemies along the way.

*Safety*, especially for women and children was a priority and for her, it came from “eyes on the street”, the kind of neighbourhood surveillance that many planners attempt to build into new developments today. She also argued that a sense of personal belonging and social cohesion came from well defined neighbourhoods and narrow, crowded and multi-use streets. Urban vitality comprised an intricate “street ballet”, emerging from the myriad and non-directed decisions of those living in a working neighbourhood (Le Gates and Stout 2003: 114). It is from these observations that Jacobs distilled a set of aims which, she argued, should guide future neighbourhood planning, to actively create density and diversity:

- First, to foster lively and interesting streets and enhance diversity
- Second, to make the fabric of these streets as continuous a network as possible *throughout* a district...
- Third, to use parks, squares and public buildings to intensify and knit together the fabric’s complexity and multiple use...
- Fourth, to emphasise the functional identity of areas large enough to work as districts (Jacobs 1961: 139).

For Jacobs, the principle of *diversity* – physical, social and economic - was fundamental to the operation of successful neighbourhoods. From her observations of Greenwich Village – as an area which worked – as well as of many an urban redevelopment scheme that did not, Jacobs noted that four conditions were indispensable to the presence of diversity in city streets and districts (Jacobs 1961:162-3). These conditions could be created or enhanced by urban planners if their aim was indeed to bring life and community to the great American cities:

1. The district, and many of its internal parts, should serve more than one primary function. Such diverse functions should ensure that people have different time rhythms but use many common facilities. This would mean that there are people on the street all the time
2. Most blocks must be short. Opportunities to turn corners must be frequent, to ensure many encounters and options for movement
3. The district must mix buildings of different ages and conditions
4. There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people (around 100 units per acre). She supports a compact city where different types of households – families, the elderly, small business, migrants, students, artists – live together. Just how dense is related to the other elements but there needs to be enough people to support local shops and services.

Despite the many critiques of Jacobs – for her physical determinism, lack of formal training, unworkable notions of governance and anti-poverty measures (Fishman 1994; Hospers 2007) - *The death and life of great American cities* (1961) hit the world of planning like an earthquake. The book questioned universally accepted articles of faith – that all parks were good, that crowding was bad and the tendency for planners and politicians to override local objections and impose their own values on people. Most vitally, the book legitimised and built on Jacobs’ experience of living in a viable neighbourhood and from this took lessons to inform others. It is a model well worth emulating as we all try to establish what makes an urban environment – suburbs as well as inner city precincts - great.

I would therefore like to begin *my* take on the *life and death of the great Australian suburb* with a post card – from my own suburban patch in Melbourne. Accessing this place twelve years ago was possible care of two incomes, the sale of a small workers cottage in a gentrifying part of town and the purchase of a wreck. We have progressively restored and physically modified this house - as children have arrived, played, grown and acquired significant others. Open space has been cultivated as well as converted into rooms and thence into precincts, with the adaptability that only a suburban home on a 1/10<sup>th</sup> hectare block can provide. Located on a street where others too engage in ongoing restoration as well as conversation, this house is but a short walk from bus stops to regional shopping centres, a fixed rail line to the city centre, local primary and high schools, medical centres, child care facilities (co-operative as well as private), ovals, parks, playgrounds, community and senior citizen centres, a local library, strip and car-based low order shopping centres. It is here that every morning I spend thirty minutes walking my dog, meeting others who greet and share the spaces, smells, sights, sounds, sociability and civility that has seen the local hospital stay open and expand, the rail spur line maintained and sea side open space saved from housing. Such campaigns are led by those who have lived here the longest, but also by small business people, retail and café workers, tradespersons as well as the newer professionals who have found Williamstown. On weekends you find the shops full of those who know or at least recognise each other, meeting, talking, taking coffees in the shops and street seats provided for the purpose. There are also those from outside, tourists lured by the carefully cultivated historical image, the beach and maritime flavour. It is a suburb renown for its ship yard, light industry, port-related activities and railway workshop as well as its maritime history, café culture, sense of community, political coherence and fiercely held identity. There is a rhythm generated by the local employment, the beach, the tourists and the inhabitants going about their daily, weekly and seasonal tasks as well as by the social mix of ages, ethnicities, incomes, employment, housing stock and sexualities. Despite the image of expense and privilege; social and physical diversity, high quality services and a sense of community are the norm.

From this rich suburban experience, a number of lessons can be drawn that, following Jacobs, might well inform those who are attempting to breathe life into new or older suburbs:

- The community has *significant social, physical, economic and cultural diversity*, through a range of age, ethnic, class, household, land use and built formations. But it is also relatively homogenous in terms of class/income/education, as are most suburbs
- As with Hudson Street, Williamstown operates on a *walking and human scale* and is infused with generates *intense emotional responses* – to its smells, sounds, sense of place, community and feeling of mutual responsibility.
- Such a scale is evident at the street level – where there are indeed short blocks and a range of activities, ages of buildings and open spaces – and the scale echoes across the district. Movement, rest and encounter are all facilitated within this place (Seamon 1979).
- *Time* is vital to developing a sense of place, of knowing and coming to be known in this community
- Most of those in this place have a *commitment to its well being, identity and high level of publicly-provided services*. This is regularly activated into

usually successful *political campaigns for the protection and enhancement of services and the local environment*

- There is a *high level of physical and social services* available within the community, most within walking distance
- *Accessibility is critical* – especially to a range of high quality services locally. But they are not all present, some are available via public transport in regional and central locations. The utilised hierarchy is only three fold – local/neighbourhood, regional and central/CBD.

## **2. Life and death of the great Australian suburb**

If this is but one personal story of success and liveability, for most academics and planners surveying the contemporary Australian suburb, there are mainly problems and few solutions. If a suburb is defined as primarily a residential area beyond the city centre there are, of course, quite different issues for those areas defined as inner suburban and the middle, outer and fringe suburbs. I will concentrate here on those sites imbued with the most problems – suburbs beyond the inner ring, usually more than 10 kilometres from the central city.

The inner suburbs of the major Australian cities – those within 5-10 kilometres of what remain as primarily single centred metropolises, once the decaying slums of the 1960s doughnut city, have now been re-discovered, first by newly arrived European migrants and thence by the intelligentsia and professional middle classes. These areas are now the centres of renewed life – of population inflow, of renovation and infill development, of rising incomes, growing white collar employment, retailing and service provision centred around revitalised strip shopping precincts, a café culture, the private car and public transport (Logan 1985, Forster 1995). The range of land uses in such areas no longer supports social diversity, as ethnic and income variability lessens, while their environmental sustainability is highly questionable (see Low 2005). But overall, the inner suburbs are trumpeted as a major success story, providing models for how other areas might work – especially if their density, accessibility and servicing rose to comparable levels. The parallels with Jacob's portrayal of Hudson Street are obvious and the challenge remains to extend such successes to middle and outer suburbia.

But the real challenge for planners and academics in creating life in the Australian city is in the middle and outer suburbs. It is across these locations that income inequality is increasingly evident (see the various Social Atlases), physical decay is beginning (at least in working class, medium density parts of Sydney and Melbourne see Randolph 2003), young people are isolated and bored, physical infrastructure inadequate and social services overstretched (Logan 1986; Troy 1996; O'Connor, Darby and Rapson, 1995), ethnic concentrations troublesome (Dunn 1993; Burnley et al 1997), "privatopias" rampant (Gleeson 2006), car dependence inevitable, good design abandoned (McGregor 1995, Hawley 2003, Farrelly 2007, but see Johnson 2006) and environmental sustainability all but impossible (Newman and Kenworthy 1989, 1999; Low 2005).

If such are the litany of problems killing the middle and outer Australian suburb, from the 1990s, solutions emerged from the United States and Europe via New Urbanism and master planning, with their idealisation of suburban villages, urban communities and higher density planned neighbourhoods (see Calthorpe 1993; Katz 1994; Langdon

1994; Talen, 1999; Duany et. al 2000; Winstanley et. al. 2003). Faced with the costs and ills of suburbia, the depopulation of the inner city, middle ring decay and an idealised New Urbanist alternative, the planning solution to the many ills of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian suburbia became urban containment, activity centres and consolidation. The solution therefore was to replicate the urban village, to encourage middle and high density housing around activity centres, contain urban sprawl through the imposition of urban growth boundaries and extend freeway connections (while rhetorically supporting public transport). The solution then was to alter the form and network linkages of the city.

### **3. Planning agendas**

The planning agenda across Australia is therefore clear – low density suburban expansion is the problem and urban consolidation is the answer. Urban consolidation means increasing the density of population and/or dwellings within the existing urban area. Containment involves drawing a line around the edge of the city to ensure that future growth occurs within it. Containment has been added to the planning agenda in, for example, *Melbourne 2030 and Sydney City of Cities*, to lend further support to earlier moves towards consolidation – begun in the early 1980s. As a solution to an array of urban problems, urban consolidation has been subject to many critiques (see Bunker, 1983, 1986; McLoughlin, 1991; Troy, 1996), but basically the idea is built upon two main planks - one involves pathologising the broad-acre suburb and the second entails an idealisation of higher density living. The micro-politics of each planning scheme for Melbourne but also for Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth in the realisation of this consensual national agenda has been examined elsewhere (Logan, 1986; Lennon, 2000; Hamnett and Freestone, 2000; Birrell, O'Connor, Rapson and Healy, 2005). Here my concern is with the way in which this agenda has been generalised across the Australian urban system and how it relates – or not – to what makes a good suburb.

The rhetoric surrounding consolidation and containment owes much to the work of Jane Jacobs and her idealisation of inner city life. In particular, the faith in raising urban densities as a way to generate eyes and life on the street, make housing more affordable, boost public transport use and ease the environmental burden is readily apparent from the various metropolitan plans. So too is the belief that by drawing a growth boundary, suburban expansion on the fringe will be lessened, even halted, as new residents and households chose the higher density infill increasingly available in the inner city and at selected Activity Centres. The practice in, for example Melbourne, has not been realised, with research indicating that not only has fringe expansion continued apace while middle ring suburban redevelopment and higher density, affordable housing around Activity Centres has not eventuated (see Yates 2001; Searle 2004). Overall the city has not become higher density, with the diversity of house forms on the fringe at 10-15 dwellings per hectare now surrounded by acres of walking tracks, lakes, creeks and roadways, all leading to regional and car-based retail and social service centres. The physical infrastructure may be there, but such places are increasingly unaffordable, car dependent, and anything but on a human, walking scale. Clearly then, something is wrong and the creeping death of such places is now a cause of growing concern.

#### **4. Affirming life over the death in the great Australian suburb**

I would suggest that answers to the problems of the middle and outer suburbs still lie in many of the principles enunciated by Jane Jacobs over 30 years ago. But realising her model is not dependent on a blind faith in raising densities, nor a commitment to creating an arbitrary number of scaled up Activity Centres or in condemning the social stratification that inevitably accompanies the imprint of class onto the urban fabric. Rather, they flow from an honest appraisal of what makes a good Australian suburb work and planning actions to facilitate this.

As my reflections on my own world in Williamstown and the planning literature indicates, there are a few key things that typify a very liveable place. They are:

- The need to plan on a human and walking scale across all aspects of suburban life, not only housing and walking trails but in making civic, retail and social services accessible by foot
- A vital need to ensure not only physical diversity but also social, cultural and land use diversity through allowing more mixed uses within neighbourhoods and actively encouraging public and social housing as well as a range of private sector housing
- Ensuring that there are neighbourhood centres built within walking distance of housing ie 500-1 000 metres served by populations of around 5- 10 000
- Not allowing developments to occur without public transport planning being integral to them
- Building in five star energy and water ratings to houses and neighbourhoods with water capture and reuse and subsidised energy efficiency measures
- Finer grained zoning of mixed land uses and allowance of home offices, corner shops. The aim is to facilitate movement, places for rest but also of meaningful encounter
- Build strip shopping precincts in association with walking trails rather than only road ways. These are also hubs for public transport to regional and CBD centres
- Active policies for citizen engagement at the time of layout and for ongoing responsive planning to occur. Subsequent engagement procedures to enhance senses of pride, identity, cultural life via festivals, local papers, public art, café cultures, clubs

To summarise:

<b>Life</b>	<b>Death</b>	<b>Planning actions</b>
Malleable house design at a range of scales	Rigid rules on overall densities and standardised block sizes	Building and planning regulations allow greater diversity of house and land types in the suburbs
Private open space	No private open space and only public open space	Some private open space and a range of public open spaces (for passive and active use)
Affordable	Unaffordable housing	Expand social and public housing. Amend taxation and infrastructure regulations to lessen cost of housing. Smarter finance, joint equity etc
Accessible – low energy forms prioritised Walkable (shops, services, open space) Close Public transport	Car dependent Limited/no public transport	Walkability a priority Public transport a priority – especially heavy/trunk systems (rail/light/tram) Buses as feeders only
Local/human scale	Inhuman/mechanical scale	See above
User friendly retail and service hierarchy – house - local-regional-centre/CBD	House-Activity Centre-CBD	Rethink urban hierarchy at a human scale – house to local (walkable) centres. PT accessible regionals/CBD
Diversity – of ages/building stock, of ethnicity, of land use at a human scale, of income/occupations/class/sexualities	Large scale, uniform land uses, covenants on house forms, large distances between and separation of uses	Heritage controls/overlays Zoning for finer grained and more mixed use areas
Safe – especially for women and children	Fear and insecurity rampant. Throughways.	Street life and walkability Local social services Traffic calming and hierarchy of roadways.
Well serviced locally and regionally	Poorly serviced or most regional/centred	Dense local service provision and facilitation
Active citizenship via neighbouring, accessing services/.local centre, political participation, pride and identity	Non-engagement with neighbourhood, locality, or local political process Indifference/shame/hostility to place	Active engagement of citizenry via planning process (real consultation), festivals, art in public places, local identity markers
Environmental sustainability via decentralisation of water, energy, food, design	Non-action on sustainability. Increased carbon footprint.	Subsidised water tanks, solar energy, efficiency measures Garden produce, Farmers markets

## Conclusion

Current planning agendas have demonised the broad acre Australian suburb as the cause of many urban ills, ranging from environmental degradation to car dependence, youth violence and unaffordable housing. The main solutions – to raise urban densities, create major Activity Centres and encase the city with an urban growth boundary – is not only not having a major impact on these problems but is seen by many to be misdirected.

Emerging from international discourses on New Urbanism and master planning, my argument is that much can be learnt from our own successful suburban environments. Following the example of Jane Jacobs with her insightful examination of Hudson Street in New York, I have offered a set of observations on what makes at least one part of middle suburban Melbourne work incredibly well. While somewhat special – but what place when examined closely is not – I have argued that there are real lessons to be learnt from a place with has enormous amounts of life within it and a range of opportunities for movement, rest and encounter.

From such a personal foundation but also from an engagement with extant planning literature and practice, I have therefore proposed a set of ideas for enhancing the life of the Australian suburb. Building on existing planning practice, I have argued for a reduction in the scale at which suburban areas are designed, to encompass more of a walking and human approach, to ensure the accessibility of local centres of retail, service and civic life as well as their connection to larger centres by public transport. I have also argued for an increase in the diversity of land uses within suburban areas – via finer grained zoning – and active policies for facilitating civic and cultural engagement. For me at least, such suggestions are not impossible but are vital to ensuring the life rather than the slow death of Australian suburbs.

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