Beyond Protest
Activism and participation in 1970s Sydney

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The 1970s was a time of significant urban activism in Sydney. Most famously, Jack Mundey coined the term “green ban” to describe a movement bringing together property owners, public tenants, workers and ‘ordinary’ citizens to demand a say in planning. There is a well-worn historical narrative that provides us with the concrete achievements of the green bans in preventing demolition of much-loved parts of the city and in helping to trigger the passage of new planning legislation with express provision for public participation and conservation.

While the most recognisable, the green bans should not be understood as the primary avenue for participation in Sydney during the 1970s. As this paper will argue, the green bans emerged during a period of broader experimentation and exploration in participatory planning and design. The legacy of the period, like that of the bans themselves, extends far beyond protest.

This paper will illuminate that wider context. Histories of participation in the 1970s have focused on the green ban movement, and have discussed these primarily in terms of the connection between the green bans and social and labour movements. Focusing particularly on what will be described as ‘positive participation’, this paper will instead explore the range of tactics employed during the period from the perspective of planning and design practice. It will illuminate little-discussed elements of the green ban movement such as the design panel established to guide architectural decisions, as well as a range of participatory practices far beyond the movement in which activists, community members and professionals engaged constructively in developing visions and strategies for the future of the city.
Introduction

The story of the green bans is well-known (Roddewig 1978; Burgmann and Burgmann 1998). First was the unlikely alliance between middle-class housewives in the leafy suburb of Hunters Hill (the self-named “Battlers for Kelly’s Bush”) with one of Australia’s most radical unions (the NSW Builders Labourers Federation) over an area of riverfront bushland on the Parramatta River. In 1971, when the BLF threatened to impose a ban not just in Hunters Hill but on the developer’s other projects in North Sydney, the Battlers’ long-running campaign to prevent construction of housing on the site was at last successful. This prompted calls for union assistance from other groups, which in turn led to the imposition of over 40 bans, most famously in the Rocks, at the foot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The green bans attracted considerable attention in Australia and internationally. Paul Ehrlich considered them critical in the birth of urban environmentalism; key figures from the bans were invited to give lectures in the United Kingdom and to participate in the first UN conference on the built environment in Vancouver in 1976 (Roddewig 1978; Freestone 2010: 29). Petra Kelly’s decision to establish the German Green party, and with it the international green movement, was apparently inspired by her experience of the bans in Sydney (Brown and Singer 1996: 64-5). The bans have been linked to policy and legislative changes at both state and national levels, and particularly to the passage in NSW of the Heritage Act 1977 and the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (Thorpe 2013).

While controversial at the time, the movement is now widely recognised for its role in saving much-loved parks, streetscapes, housing and heritage buildings in Sydney and beyond. Today, the green bans have an almost folkloric status. As one prominent historian has suggested, “the bans are almost shorthand for the wider unrest that was happening”.¹

That shorthand provides the impetus for this article. We argue that there is indeed a dominant narrative in which the green bans are treated as symbolic of a much wider range of activities that took place in Sydney during the 1970s. We argue that this shorthand unhelpfully suggests – for both that wider activity and the green ban movement itself – a narrower and more negative approach to engagement in planning than that which actually occurred. In contrast to that dominant narrative, the aim of this paper is to highlight examples of what we describe as “positive participation”.

Protest and conservation as the legacy of the 1970s

While a full discussion of the histories of architecture, planning and environmentalism – or even just one of these fields – is beyond the scope of this paper, our work identifies and responds to one particular narrative which is present in all three fields. We argue that two elements are consistently repeated in the histories of planning and related activism in the 1970s: protest and conservation. The literature we surveyed consistently emphasises the ways in which communities expressed objection and dissent, and the ways in which they endeavoured to preserve and protect the natural and built environment.

Turning to accounts dealing with the field of professional planning itself, for example, Robert Freestone and Margaret Park (2009) have suggested that: “From the late 1960s resident action
groups sprang up wherever planning and redevelopment endangered amenity, flora and fauna, and urban character. Such groups constituted a new form of informed and activist environmental protest…” (p335, internal citation omitted).

For planners, it seems, the green bans tend to constitute the defining example of participation in this period. In Nancy Marshall, Christine Steinmetz and Robert Zehner’s chapter on community participation in Planning Australia (2012) they are depicted as shaping subsequent public participation and the two tropes of conservation and protest are again foregrounded:

“One of the defining movements for Australian public participation in response to government decision-making was driven by the emerging global environmental movement in the late 1960s. This was demonstrated through a confrontation regarding Kelly’s Bush… The BLF’s ‘Green Ban’ was successful and the unexpected collaboration of people from different social milieu gave added publicity to the effectiveness of open opposition to the decisions of local government and the necessity to involve the public in local decision-making.

… from the time of the BLF’s Green Ban on Kelly’s Bush, significant decisions by local, state or federal governments have often engendered opposition during the decision-making or implementation stages.” (p279).

That focus has also tended to produce a characterisation of citizen participation in planning during the period as fundamentally protectionist and oppositional. The following quotes are extracted from articles addressing the issue of public participation in planning, over a period from 1975 to 2001:

“…people reacted with whatever instruments they had to hand, sometimes in surprising alliances: residents’ action groups, BLF green bans, conservationist groups – coalitions with common negative aims but not always shared positive aims.” (Sandercock 1975a: 4)

“Green Bans simply ensured that the ‘status quo’ was maintained, and that the rich kept their parks intact and prosperous suburbs retained their trees. The most the poor obtained from the Green Ban approach was not to have an expressway demolish their homes, not to be obliterated by office blocks, and not to be moved out to the fringes of the city for housing towers.” (Fogg 1981: 264)

“Community groups mobilised, sometimes in curious coalition, for reasons that ranged from opposing NSW conservative politics to protecting “better class” property values to preserving natural environments.” (Ryan 2001: 569)

Consistent with this understanding, responses to activism, such as establishing precinct committees and other channels for formal participation, have been described as “institutionalisation of protest” (Costello and Dunn 1994: 74).

Turning to architectural history, we find the activism and citizen participation of the period, and particularly the involvement of the architectural profession, registered largely as the rise of a preservationist consciousness. The architect and critic Robin Boyd provided an early appraisal of the shift, identifying a demand for a retreat from “bulldozer rehousing techniques” towards a more
sensitive approach to design and development, involving the retention of greater amounts of the existing built environment. Alongside Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), the architect Don Gazzard’s 1963 ‘Outrage’ exhibition at Farmer’s Blaxland Gallery, and the subsequent book *Australian Outrage* (1966), are key examples of that shift in the architectural profession – presenting a compendium of visual blight in Australia’s built environment. Gazzard would go on to be one of the founders of the Paddington Society and led the citizen actions that culminated in the conservation of the Paddington area in Sydney.

The architectural historian Jennifer Taylor, in *Australian Architecture Since 1960* (1986), followed the same line of thinking, suggesting that the cumulative effect of the Green Bans in places such as the Rocks and Wooolloomooloo was to highlight the importance of Australia’s built heritage: “These events drew attention to the changes that had been taking place and increased the average Australian’s awareness of his [sic] heritage.” (p54)

Taylor’s, admittedly brief, accounting for the broader participatory initiatives of residents and union groups tends to reduce their intentions to protest against the destruction of historic built fabric. Specifically discussing the resident action groups that were such a prominent aspect of 1970s grassroots participation in planning, she downplays the diversity of their aims and activities. Instead, Taylor suggests a more reductive focus: “While the social bias remained strong, before long more emphasis came to be placed on the preservation of buildings, trees and other objects in the streetscape for their own intrinsic merits.” (p65)

Peter Webber in ‘The Nature of the City’, his introductory chapter to *The Design of Sydney* (1988), similarly condenses the intentions and outcomes of 1970s planning participation in the city. In a section tellingly titled ‘Conservation politics and pressures’, he aligns Vietnam War protest and nuclear disarmament struggles with a realisation, across a wide cross-section of society, that a continuation of the 1960s building boom would decimate historic buildings of earlier periods and important enclaves of inner-city communities. Webber highlights the *Heritage Act* as a key outcome of the period, but does not mention the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act*. Again, the narrative about the shaping of the city – and the motives of citizens and professionals who sought to rethink the processes of its formation – is narrowed to a concern for the preservation of exemplary elements of the Sydney’s built fabric:

“The form of the city would be a great deal different today had it not been for the remarkably strong movement which emerged during the early part of the 1970s towards conservation of the most important elements of urban heritage.” (p13)

In addition to its consideration in the spheres of planning and architecture, activism regarding the built environment is often discussed as part of environmental histories. Participants in these histories tend to be described as ‘conservationists’; their activities as ‘protest’ and ‘objection’. Tim Bonyhady’s (1993) much-cited book is a clear example, making this focus clear right from its title: *Places Worth Keeping: Conservationists, politics and the law*. As the introduction explains:

“During the 1960s, dozens of new groups began working to protect both urban and natural environments. ... By the end of the decade conservationists had begun discovering their rights to object to grants of new mining leases and to appeal against approvals of new urban
The language of ‘protest’, ‘appeals’, ‘objections’, ‘securing protections’ and ‘stopping developments’ continues throughout Bonyhady’s book, and much of the literature (Mosley 1988; Hutton and Connors 1999; Ryan 2001; Pakulski 1991). Along with the green bans, histories of environmental activism in Australia focus on conflicts such as those against the damming of the Franklin River, against sand-mining on Fraser Island, and against uranium mining in Kakadu. The objectives of participants are described almost exclusively as securing protections for the natural and built environment, and as stopping new developments. There is very little discussion of activists contributing to the formation of more constructive visions for the future.

The similarity between the discussions of conservation and of protest across planning, architecture and environmental histories is striking, and is itself worthy of further exploration. One explanation for the dominance of this narrative may be the recognisable impact of such activism: it is much easier to identify instances where communities have saved particular places, than to try to identify their contributions to new developments. However, such questions are beyond the scope of this paper. Our aim is instead to highlight the gaps in these histories, and in doing so to lay the foundation for a much larger body of work.

**Positive participation**

In contrast to the protest/conservation narrative, this paper will highlight examples of what we describe as “positive participation”. We do not deny the importance of protest, preservation, or the conservation movement for public participation in Sydney’s planning during the 1970s or more generally. However, we argue that there is, firstly, a fuller history to be accounted for and, secondly, an unacknowledged potential for the struggles and experimentation of the 1970s to inform contemporary practices. The reductive understanding of the period and its legacies constrains a more nuanced examination of the possibilities for participatory planning and design. More specifically, it obscures the opportunities to understand and articulate participation that goes beyond the simple blocking of development and unmitigated opposition to change.

It should be noted that “positive participation” is a term for which we do not yet have a sophisticated definition. It is a working concept that will hopefully be illuminated and sharpened through the examples we discuss below. At the most basic level, it involves anything more than just saying “no”. The citizen participant in planning is often caricatured as the ‘NIMBY’ – the person arguing ‘not in my backyard!’ Again, we do not dispute that opposition to development is sometimes warranted. The green bans certainly offered many examples of important struggles to avert potentially catastrophic interventions in the city. Sydney would be a far poorer place had some of the places that were retained instead disappeared. However, cities inevitably change: their populations grow and change in composition (and sometimes they decline); their economies shift; their ecologies transform; their infrastructures extend, decay and are renewed; their citizens’ aspirations and lifestyles are transfigured. Positive participation is the expression we have used in an attempt to capture efforts of citizens, professionals and others who have engaged constructively in developing visions and strategies for the future of their city.
Positive participation implies something beyond simply future-oriented planning. The examples we point to are particularly concerned with the development of a more just city. In line with the recent work of scholars such as Edward Soja (2010), David Harvey (2012), Leonie Sandercock (2003), Ruth Fincher and Kurt Iveson (2008), Susan Fainstein (2011) and Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (2011), we believe that discussions of justice in cities must involve some normative evaluation of outcomes. Whether the efforts toward participation we discuss in this paper were more just is beyond the scope of this paper. While the question of impact and assessment is important, it is not our focus. Rather, we have been more attentive to intent, and seek to highlight conscious efforts to create forms of participation that increase meaningful inclusion in planning and design processes.

Drawing on the work of influential scholars from the period such as Sherry Arnstein (1969), our understanding of, and attention to, positive participation is also concentrated on the facilitation of people’s creative and collective involvement in the shaping of the places they live in. The emphasis here is on forms of participation in planning, design and direct action that have developed around struggles over urban spaces. The examples from 1970s Sydney that we draw on can be linked through Henri Lefebvre’s focus on the importance of city dwellers’ continual, inventive spatial production. The creativity and experimentation in urban living that defined the ‘70s activism offers a clear, forceful expression of Lefebvre’s contention that human beings have “a need for creative activity, for the oeuvre (not only of products and consumable material goods), of the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play” (1996: 147). The oeuvre was a concept that recurred in Lefebvre’s work and stood for a more expansive understanding of the city, placing it as an unintentional and collective work of art, richly significant yet embedded in everyday life – beyond the realm of commodified space (p101). The struggles over participation in the making of Sydney we highlight can be thought of as struggles to inhabit spaces and access their resources, to transform them to suit values, lifestyles, and identities, and, perhaps above all, to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process that determines their fate.

Following this thinking, it is important to note that positive participation for us does not necessarily invoke ideal consensus; it includes forms and processes that are conflictual and unpredictable (and do not uncritically accept a single role for the citizen). Positive participation seeks to be productive, but it does not ignore fundamental, structural differences of interest – participatory practices often become important realms for struggles over questions of empowerment, inclusion and justice. We see positive participation as practices that do not simply reject expert, or professional, roles, nor do they idealise inclusion and localism – they engage with the difficulties of what Tim Richardson and Stephen Connelly (2005) have termed ‘pragmatic consensus’. They are practices that involve dwellers and their designers in the negotiation of urban and political space.

The selection of initiatives, activities and projects discussed in the following section was informed by this idea of positive participation. In turn, these projects form part of our ongoing exploration and definition of the term.

**Grassroots activities**

The portrayal of the green ban movement as shorthand for citizen activism in Sydney during the 1970s is reductive both in its failure to acknowledge the wider range of activities taking place, and
also in its depiction of the green bans themselves. While the green bans are frequently discussed as the movement that stopped development, saving bushland and heritage buildings, both the aims of and the tactics used in the movement were much broader. This section will begin to sketch a more comprehensive picture of the green bans. It will then consider another key avenue through which non-experts sought to engage in planning: resident action groups.

Green bans were not conceived as a long-term solution, and were not intended simply as a means to block development. While a handful of bans were conceived as permanent – Kelly’s Bush, and the few buildings classified by the National Trust – the majority were not (Summers et al 1973: 25). Rather, by delaying projects, green bans were intended as a means to put the community onto a footing where they could negotiate with developers and government decision-makers (Mundey 1981: 82-4). As a contemporary guide to the green bans noted:

“The BLF and the people who support them are not opposed to change per se... In almost all cases the residents have asked for green bans to be imposed to give them time to discuss what kinds of changes they would like to see in their area, to enable them to consult with each other and with all those affected by the proposed developments and to draw up alternative plans.”(Summers et al 1973: 25)

In many cases, the negotiations secured through the green bans included calls for new developments – particularly social housing, child care and other community facilities. In recent archival research on the green bans, Kurt Iveson found that “…green bans were not only against a proposed development, they were enacted in favour of an alternative plan for the area, which was usually described as a ‘People’s Plan.’” (2013: 10) A consistent demand of residents in green-ban protected areas was that plans for low-cost housing replace “high-rise executive style apartments and expensive trendy town-house development”; green bans were seen as a means to work out an alternative system of housing (Summers et al 1973: 30).

In the Rocks, Glebe and Woolloomooloo, for example, green bans secured not only the preservation of heritage buildings, but public engagement in the formulation of alternative plans and the provision of new social housing (Roddewig 1978; Burgmann and Burgmann 1998). The Residents’ Advisory Committee established in the Rocks was active in informing and engaging residents and, in addition to securing a number of design modifications (including vast reductions in the amount of demolitions proposed, restricting the scale of development to nine storeys, rather than the 30-50 storey heights originally proposed, and the provision of facilities for residents including playgrounds, a pedestrian overpass and a car repair pit), persuaded the redevelopment authority to acquire land and build new pensioner housing.

This constructive approach was consistent with the BLF’s increasing engagement in social and environmental issues from the 1960s. In addition to its actions on apartheid, Aboriginal, women’s, student and homosexual rights, the BLF had been criticising the boom in office construction, predicting an oversupply of office space and calling instead for work on socially useful projects (Burgmann 2011). Recognising that improvements in pay and working conditions would be little use if pursued without concern for the city in a broader sense, the green ban movement was driven by a desire to move beyond both the economic interests of workers and the interests of local residents, to consider instead the long-term interests of the broader community (Mundey 1981). In agreeing
to impose a ban, the BLF required local groups to demonstrate that their cause was broadly supported and not just about “a fortunate few who [wished to further] their own vested interest” (Mundey 1981: 81).

The tactics employed in the green bans extended much further than strikes and protest. The BLF developed procedures to be used in determining whether to impose a green ban: the project had to be of a sufficient size, there had to be a sufficient number of people supportive of a ban, and the neighbourhood had to be supportive. In line with their philosophy that workers had a right to a say in the end result of their labour and whether it was in the best interests of the community, the union leaders also believed that residents had the right to a say in development that directly affected them (Pringle, Mundey and Owens 1978: 158). Resident groups were consulted and their views given significant weight. When developers began to approach the BLF early in their planning processes, the union’s response was to direct developers to contact the local community first (Roddewig 1978: 31).

Experts were also given a significant role. In addition to encouraging developers to speak to local communities, the BLF responded to requests from developers by recommending they prepare an environmental impact assessment (Roddewig 1978: 31). The BLF also sought professional advice to inform its own decision-making (Freestone 2010: 29). As the bans progressed this came to be formalised, with the BLF establishing an architecture and planning panel to review the merits of conservation before determining whether to impose a green ban (Roddewig 1978: 31).

After the green bans, resident action groups (RAGs) are probably the most well-known forum through which members of the public have engaged in planning. The number of RAGs in Sydney more than doubled during the 1970s, from 15 at the start of the decade to 35 by 1980 (Costello and Dunn 1994: 68). RAGs also became increasingly influential in this period (Freestone 2010: 28; Costello and Dunn 1994: 74).

Like the green bans, RAGs are typically understood as a force against development and against change, and derided as self-serving “NIMBY rat-bags” (Costello and Dunn 1994, p74). However, many RAGs also broadened their approach to planning and development during the 1970s, moving from single-issue, parochial and ephemeral groups to take a more holistic and integrated perspective. For example, residents in Surry Hills joined with local ethnic leaders to hold a number of meetings on the Strategic Plan proposed by the City of Sydney. The meetings were “packed,” and led to the development of an alternative People’s Plan for the area (Pringle, Mundey and Owens 1976: 60).

Ten RAGs came together formally in 1971 as the Coalition of Resident Action Groups (“CRAG”). The group agreed on five main objectives:

1. The arrangement of regular meetings to exchange experiences and share methods, strategies and tactics;
2. United action to amend town planning legislation especially right of appeal and citizen participation;
3. The organising of joint action about complaints of local areas when agreed upon – e.g. citizens rights and shown inadequacies of planning legislation;
4. The use of this Coalition to be a body which can draw support from other general groups, e.g., trade unions and professional groups; and
5. To ensure that planning by public and private agencies should have as its end the well-being of the people not profits. (Nittim 1980: 234)

Like these objectives, many of the activities of the Coalition could be described as positive planning. In 1973 CRAG Chair, Murray Geddes, supported lobbying by residents in Mt Druitt for local hospital facilities, criticising the government’s plans to construct a new children’s hospital in the already well-served Eastern suburbs instead. 

CRAG also engaged in formal policy and law reform processes. In 1971 CRAG made a submission on the City of Sydney Strategic Plan, calling for subsidised housing for low income earners, street closures for child play, resident participation in planning decisions, spot zoning and differential rating to allow for social and use mix (Nittim 1980: 237). When it became known that revisions to planning legislation were being considered, CRAG made a submission to the Minister for Local Government, as well as engaging with the media, lobbying politicians and undertaking street demonstrations. CRAG members contested local government elections. In 1972 CRAG organised a conference on local government reform, with speakers from local councils, universities, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the Civic Design Society, as well as student activists. A post-conference press release called for a number of radical reforms to broaden the range of interests considered and to recognise “the rights of ordinary citizens to have a say in decisions which affect their living standards” (Nittim 1980: 237).

It is important to note that not all of the RAGs moved beyond parochial concerns, and differences in the objectives of various RAGs meant that the CRAG was a loose coalition. However, it is clear that at least some of the activities of RAGs fell within our concept of positive participation.

Professional initiatives

Freestone and Park (2009) have noted that the professions were slower to question the aims, processes and results of established modes of urban development in Sydney. However, there were shifts occurring: “Milo Dunphy’s Environment Subcommittee of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects led the way from 1963” (Freestone and Park 2009: 335; also Meredith 1999). By the 1970s, questioning of the role of the architectural profession in the production of the city, focused on the issue of public participation, was appearing in the pages of its journal of record – Architecture in Australia. This was, in part, due to a shift in the Royal Australian Institute of Architect’s publication policy, announced by Architecture in Australia’s editor Colin Brewer in the February 1970 issue. The new approach was aimed at providing “material of more general interest” in order to “greatly improve communication with members and the general public”.

Whether or not the new policy increased the journal’s (or profession’s) engagement with the wider public, its impact certainly was a growth, during the early 1970s, in articles addressing social and environmental issues considered relevant to architectural practice. Two issues of the journal stand out in relation to this discussion. In February 1974 a student-edited issue included extensive critique of the profession’s approach to citizen participation, as well as examples of student involvement in alternative experiments, such as participatory school building in Papua New Guinea and ‘Learning
Exchanges’ (including the “Learning Co-Operative” in Surry Hills).\textsuperscript{10} The August 1974 issue included an interview with Jack Mundey on the development process (alongside interviews with Gordon Barton and Sir Paul Strasser) in which Mundey stressed that: “We’ve [the BLF] mainly encouraged residents to call upon more progressive architects who haven’t got a particular definite interest with one of the big developers to assist them in formulating their ideas.”\textsuperscript{11} The issue also contained articles on two other initiatives that worked toward positive participation – the Autonomous House and the “Archanon II” collective.

Both of those initiatives point to a strong engagement by some in the profession with social and environmental activism in Sydney during the 1970s. The architect and activist Milo Dunphy even took the resolute step of leaving practice in 1972 to establish the Total Environment Centre, which would become one of Australia’s key organisations campaigning on environmental protection issues in both the city and the country.\textsuperscript{12} A significant part of architecture’s engagement with positive participation during the period was connected to the University of Sydney’s Faculty of Architecture. For example, students and supportive staff from the faculty were involved in Green Ban campaigns during the 1970s.\textsuperscript{13} By 1972, amid the milieu of University of Sydney student activism, architecture students and staff more openly pursued educational projects that addressed pressing social and environmental issues – including citizen participation (Hill and Stickells 2012: 75).

One of the most ambitious (and notorious) projects ran from approximately 1974 to 1978. The Autonomous House – a bricolage of alternative technologies on the lawn beside the architecture faculty – was one of the earliest experiments of its kind in the world.\textsuperscript{14} Designed and constructed by architecture students using recycled and donated materials, it employed passive solar strategies (including a Trombe beer bottle wall), and ambitiously aimed to generate its own power, harvest and heat its own water, produce its own food supply and recycle all of its waste (sadly, biogas production was thwarted by Council’s refusal to allow pigs on campus).\textsuperscript{15} Far more than a technical exercise, the house was an experiment in rethinking design processes, community engagement and the mediation between people and environment. It was used extensively as an educational tool in this regard: “The four years of exposure with fairs and school visits did demonstrate the technological impact of solar and wind power, passive solar design, rainwater collection, productive gardens and recycling waste.”\textsuperscript{16} Its meaning for the student inhabitants went beyond professionally proscribed notions of architectural design as a client-driven, building procurement – architecture was rethought as a process of people living creatively together.\textsuperscript{17}

A key figure connecting this and similar activity was the architect/planner Colin ‘Col’ James, who had pursued an activist practice in Sydney since the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{18} This included establishing the architectural cooperative Archanon (Architecture for the Anonymous Clients), whose second incarnation (Archanon II) was featured in the August 1974 issue of Architecture Australia. The group worked with clients such as a farming commune, the Aboriginal Legal Service and also planned a community “Architectural Shopfront” for South Sydney: “a free service that enables people to modify their own environment if they so wish with minimum of expenditure and fuss.”\textsuperscript{19} James also worked as an independent advisor to the BLF on the green bans and as a government appointed ‘resident advocate’ during the controversial 1970s redevelopment of Woolloomooloo (James 1988; Devenish 1981).
By 1979 James was a Senior Lecturer in the University of Sydney’s Faculty of Architecture, where he was active in linking teaching, research and socially engaged practice. During the 1970s, James and others in the School of Architecture operated an owner builders design advice service (‘Designasaws Collective’), ran continuing education course on ‘alternative’ housing-construction methods, and (through the Ian Buchan Fell Research Centre) undertook research into ‘alternative lifestyle’ communities. James’ activities are particularly significant for our discussion – involving many communities, innovative professional and political alliances, and work across multiple scales of planning and design. His work is also important for our discussion because its emphasis on co-producing projects and visions with communities operated in distinction to the more oppositional endeavours of fellow architects such as Milo Dunphy and Don Gazzard (which focused on conservation and preservation).

However, James was not the only design professional operating to effect positive participation. For example, the architect Morrice Shaw (who temporarily held a teaching position at the University of Sydney) deployed his experience in community architecture on the lower east side of New York to projects in Sydney. Shaw formed alliances with the Education Commission, school principals, local councils, and students to reimagine and rebuild poor quality playgrounds and parks. Around the same time, another architect - Chris Johnson – working in the Schools Section of the Department of Public Works, was involved in preparing a “Playgrounds Self Help Manual”, which highlighted ways in which teachers and pupils added to and moulded their own environments (Allen 1975: 93). This very limited selection of architectural ventures into positive participation again points toward the need we have identified for a fuller exploration of such activity in the 1970s.

5. Local government initiatives

In addition to the efforts by residents, community groups and unions to engage with experts through RAGs and green bans, and to those of experts to engage with communities through various architectural initiatives, examples of positive participation in Sydney during the 1970s can be found at the local government level. As the following section will explain, these were both more and less community-driven than the green bans and the RAGs (typically, participatory efforts by local governments were triggered by community action and particularly the election of RAG and other community members to local governments). They were also both more and less expert led, with some examples involving expert consultants, and others relying much more on community direction.

Urban planning and development was a major issue in North Sydney by the start of the 1970s. With Australia’s post-war ‘long boom’ concentrated in Sydney, inner areas such as North Sydney were prime sites for redevelopment. Perceived over-development with high-rise flats and office blocks, coupled with concerns about traffic associated with the Sydney Harbour Bridge, generated increasing opposition among local residents. In 1971, local government elections resulted in the appointment of a number of aldermen on a “reformist-conservationist-social welfare-participatory program” (Sandercock 1975b: 48). Significantly, the new council expressed a commitment to public involvement in planning.

To give effect to this commitment, Council went beyond its statutory duties in preparing a new Outline Plan and Flat Code for the area (Sandercock 1975b: 53). This was done by appointing a planning consultant, Terry Byrne, to prepare the plan and code in 1971-72. Byrne’s brief required
him to encourage public participation in their preparation, for which he relied primarily on system of
precinct committees. These committees were tasked with conducting surveys, discussing ideas with
community, and developing specific recommendations for Council to consider. They were formed by
election at precinct meetings, to which all tenants and ratepayers were invited. It was envisaged that
the committees would continue to operate after the completion of the plan and code, with a role
reviewing development applications and proposals, and in projects such as the development of a
foreshore walkway system (NSW Planning and Environment Commission 1975: 124). After Byrnes
completed his work, Council then called a public meeting to discuss the draft plan. 22

According to Leonie Sandercock, Leichhardt Municipal Council was one of the first local government
authorities in the world with a commitment to citizen participation (Sandercock 1975a: 4). As in
North Sydney, this followed the election of a number of new aldermen at the 1971 election, which
was triggered in turn by residents concerned about pressure for redevelopment at higher densities
since the late 1960s (Sandercock 1975b).

The new council’s first move to increase public participation was to open the meetings of council
and all of its committees so that members of the public could speak (but not vote) at any time during
meetings. Council papers were made available the day before meetings, and senior employees were
given permission to speak to the press and the public on any matter.

In addition to surveys and public meetings, Council employed a number of innovations to engage the
public in planning. These included an Open Planning Committee, open works inspections, and
exhibition of policy options including visual materials and information on consequences (Sandercock
1975b: 55-7). Around 90 residents nominated to join the open planning committee, and up to 30
met fortnightly with planners and aldermen, helped planning staff execute detailed planning studies,
and acted as a review committee for technical studies carried out by Planning Officers. The
committee had no decision-making authority but, according to the planning officer, had great value
in educating the planners. Open works inspections were held on the site of contentious proposals,
and were held late in the afternoon to enable attendance by residents along with the council
planner, the developer and architect. These were very well attended, and compromises were usually
reached.

The plan prepared for Leichhardt was exhibited three times; the first at the policy stage, focusing on
objectives. These were prepared by the Planning Committee, supported by technical studies
(covering land values, residential development, shopping, industry, traffic, transport, open space,
detailed environmental studies of 41 areas) prepared by the committee with the assistance of
additional residents as well as students from the University of Sydney. Advertising went to local
shops as well as newspapers; council planners were available to the public in person and by
telephone, and addressed schools and other organisations on request. Significantly, the exhibition
included not just one set of policies but, rather, a range of options. Photographs were used to
explain these, and the consequences of each alternative policy.

Our third example took place at Lake Macquarie Shire Council. While located outside of Sydney
(approximately 60km north of the Greater Sydney area), we believe it is important as an example of
positive participation in a regional context. In contrast to North Sydney and Leichhardt, and to the
areas where the green bans and RAGs were most active, the issues for communities in Lake
Macquarie were much less about redevelopment, and particularly high-rise development. Engaging the community in developing positive visions for the future was very clearly the focus of Lake Macquarie’s experiments in public participation during the period.

Council used a number of innovative measures to engage the community in considering its draft planning scheme in 1973. This included advertising through pamphlets and advertisements in the press, local radio and TV, as well as displays in local halls and in private commercial premises. Significantly, Council constructed a special display caravan to take its proposals to small shopping centres and high schools (NSW Planning and Environment Commission 1975: 125). Comments were taken through written submissions as well as public meetings in local halls at the end of the displays.

Even more interestingly, for the less developed parts of Council to the west of Lake Macquarie, Council proposed a more innovative form of community involvement. Public forums were held at which residents were asked to form advisory groups for each district. Each group was tasked with preparing a plan for the district, which was to originate from the community itself, as an expression of the wishes of the community. Council staff were available to provide technical support and advice. As for the plans prepared in consultation with the precincts to the East, plans would be given to Council for consideration.

**Conclusion**

The 1970s was indeed a time of significant activism in Sydney. As this brief survey has shown, a very wide range of groups and individuals – from architects and planners to students, from unions to property owners, from councils to tenants – sought to engage in issues of planning and development during the period. Protest was just one way in which this engagement occurred. As the examples above have shown, many different activities took place during this period, from caravans taking planning to schools and shopping centres, to grassroots-initiated expert panels, to experimental housing, to open councils.

Significantly, many of these may be characterised as positive participation. As contemporary planning, architectural and environmental discourse is increasingly consumed by questions of governance – citizen engagement, outsourcing and panelization are today pressing questions – there is much that could be learned from a fuller survey of these activities.

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1 Robert Freestone, personal communication by email, January 10, 2013.
2 “In the early seventies the few voices that had been raised in protest against the destruction of historical monuments were joined by the insistent demands of Resident Action Groups and by the militant forces of one of Australia’s largest trade unions; the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF).” (p65)
3 Arnstein (1969) emphasizes that citizen participation is a ‘categorical term’ for citizen power: “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.”
4 Concerns had been raised within the BLF about assisting middle-class housewives. Union secretary Jack Mundey was a key figure in bridging the two groups, convincing BLF members to join with the argument that fights for higher wages and better conditions would be pointless if they lived in cities devoid of parks and denuded of trees.
5 One example where the BLF determined not to hold a ban based on these criteria was the redevelopment of an old dairy in Vaucluse: only 50 people supported the ban, and the area was already well-provided with public open space (Roddewig 1978: 31).
Examples of RAG successes include securing conservation zoning for an area of Victorian terrace houses in Paddington, preventing the displacement of residential tenants to make way for the proposed eastern distributor, and preserving an area of bushland on the Wollstonecraft Peninsula where ‘bachelor flats’ had been proposed (Nittim 1980: 232-3).


While early members such as the Rocks RAG supported tenants groups and the Housing Commission, later members opposed Housing Commission and other government land resumptions, and sought to define the conditions and value of compensation. The limited scholarly attention that does exist on the RAGs has been mixed in its assessments. While conceding that RAGs do not always make a serious challenge to the dominant social order and are often driven by parochial aims, Costello and Dunn (1994) found RAGs can provide a voice to those who would otherwise be disempowered, and can challenge the social and spatial order. Nittim (1980) has similarly emphasised the importance of the radicalising experience of resident action.

References


