Force or farce
Community consultation in local government

Ian Willis
University of Wollongong, NSW
iwillis804@gmail.com

Trust and understanding in the community engagement process are considered by many an essential part of a successful urban planning process. Yet these issues have proved problematic for the stakeholders in one New South Wales local government area.

This paper examines a case study of a community engagement process in New South Wales which has involved the re-development of the Camden Town Centre. The paper analyses how a trust deficit has opened up between the local council and the community over a lack of early and meaningful engagement in the decision making process. Many community stakeholders consider the planning proposals compromise the town centre’s heritage values and its historic significance.

The Camden town centre strategy involves a number of urban planning elements including a decked car park, traffic lights and other features. The decked car park is a particularly contentious issue that has risen like a ‘phoenix from the ashes’, after it was defeated a decade ago when it threatened to compromise the town’s sense of place and community identity. In particular the town’s historic St John’s church precinct, with links to the Macarthur family and Australia’s foundation.

While the Camden mayor has vigorously defended the council’s community engagement process, it has generated threats of legal action, a lively debate in the local press and community activism. Is it just a storm in a tea cup or a threat to local democracy?

Keywords: Community consultation; participatory planning, local government; urban planning; community activism; cultural heritage icons

Introduction

Cultural heritage icons have proved problematic for the participatory planning process on Sydney’s south-western rural-urban interface in one of Australia’s most important historic sites. The community of Camden settled in 1840 on the Nepean River crossing at the entry of the Cowpastures has many stories that are part of the foundational nation building narrative of Australia, particularly
those related to the Macarthur family’s role in the establishment of the wool, wine and dairy industries. The family established the Camden township as a private venture on their pastoral holding of Camden Park based on the idea of an English estate village. Macarthur iconography is found in street names, urban parks, memorials, buildings, and a host of other hard infrastructure in the urban landscape and is the basis of community identity and a sense of place. (Willis, 2004)

The construction of place over the past century has seen the development of a rural aesthetic that emerged as a type of branding or soft infrastructure. It has become embedded in community identity and is based on a notion of an idealised country town and, along with the district’s rural heritage, has been commodified by tourism authorities, land developers, and local businesses, and officially endorsed by Camden Council in the Camden Town Conservation Area (2008). (Willis, 2012)

Urban growth was prompted by the 1973 Three Cities Plan (Abercrombie, 2008) which came out of the 1968 Sydney Region Outline Plan. Eventually these plans put pressure on Camden Council to provide additional parking spaces in the historic Camden town centre and in 1996 the council considered a proposal for a decked car park. Controversy raged on and off over the next decade and in the end community activism saw the proposal defeated in 2006. The discourse around the issue was based on the threat to the rural aesthetic and the town’s historic icons – all part of attachment to place. Participant actors included the chamber of commerce, the council, the historical society and the residents’ action group. The chamber lobbied for the proposal, while the society and residents’ group were opposed. (Willis, 2007)

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the problematic nature of participatory planning processing when it intersects with a sense of place and community identity. I have examined the civic engagement process for the Camden Town Centre Enhancement Strategy - which included a decked car park, traffic lights, additional street lighting, new street furniture, and landscaping, signage and footpath development – between May 2014 and February 2015. The lack of a nuanced response to community concerns by local government have failed to convince the community of the merits of the infrastructure plans despite a formal community engagement process. Citizen anxiety grew around possible threats to the town’s historic iconography and its heritage values, and what resulted was cynicism, community activism and a loss of trust. In the absence of any compromise a bottom-up endeavour by citizen stakeholders resulted in the formation of a community initiated opposition group. A political response of citizen engagement that Crystal Legacy and Ryan van den Nouwelant have called ‘guerrilla governance’. (Legacy & van den Nouwelant, 2015)

Methodology

This case study is a qualitative study using an empirical methodology based on personal observations as a public historian of the civic engagement processes. The analysis builds on my earlier work that examined active citizenship using the lens of the 1996 car park proposal. (Willis, 2007) Attachment to place, as well as heritage and historical factors, have played a role as they did in the earlier planning debate, while parochialism and localism have influenced matters yet again. There are some of the same actors in the current case study although they have changed their political position from 1996 proposals, which illustrates the dynamics of local democratic processes.

This case study is drawn from a variety of local primary and secondary sources including local newspapers, emails, posters, banners, shop displays, flyers and other ephemera as well as informal
interviews with stakeholders. I attended forums, meetings and public rallies, and while being an observer to these processes I have also acted as a change agent. I wrote a discussion paper in late 2014 that was distributed to interested stakeholders and posted a personal reflection of these processes on the Professional Historians’ Association (NSW & ACT) blog. (Willis, 2015c) and my blog Camden History Notes (Willis, 2015a)

The paper is organised into a number of sections beginning with an examination of how the case study is placed in the literature surrounding the issues raised in the paper. The formal planning processes within the town centre strategy are then examined with their officially sanctioned forms of participation. The discussion then moves on to citizen responses and the emergence of citizen activism, and concludes with a discussion of the challenges and implications of these actions.

**Heritage, place making and civic engagement**

The historic nature of this case study needs to be set in the context of research around the development of community activism (Howe, et al., 2014), its colonial origins (Hutton & Connors, 1999), and a recognition that community activism in the Camden area is not a recent event (Hagan, 1972). Heritage and place making are complex and contested concepts with their own broad fields of work. One that crosses the disciplines and provides a useful model here is Jones and Shaw survey of heritage in Australia. (Jones, et al., 2007) Attachment to place and belonging, and its meaning has been explored by Read and others (Harrison, 2004), and in particular Read has examined the meaning of lost places using one example from the Camden District. (Read, 1996)

There is a rich literature covering participatory planning and a useful model to examine the concept of citizen participation has been provided Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation. (Arnstein, 1969) Further to this position Monno and Khakee maintain that two dominant models of participatory planning have evolved – communicative and radical. (Monno & Khakee, 2012) Legacy and others have provided an examination on civic participation in a neoliberal context (Legacy, 2015) particularly the perception of limited ‘civic participation’ through a political process called ‘guerilla governance’. (Legacy & van den Nouwelant, 2015) There are also studies of attachment to place relative to the participatory planning (Anderson & Schirmer, 2015) and citizen involvement with local government. (Kasymova, 2014)

**Case Study: Camden Town Centre Enhancement Strategy**

The Camden Town Centre Enhancement Strategy was part of a suite of measures that were prompted by the 2012 Camden Council decision to re-locate its head office from the Camden town centre to a Greenfield site at Oran Park, a new land release area in the northern part of the Local Government Area (LGA). In preparation for the council’s departure from Camden the council established an internal committee to develop a range of strategies in mid-2013. (Camden Council, 2014a, pp. 103-105) The council’s reluctance to involve citizen participation in the 2013 planning processes was to cause problems for them in 2014 and contributed to the impression that the project lacked transparency.
The council’s re-location created concerns amongst local business owners about the commercial viability of the town centre, loss of customers and parking. Similar concerns had been expressed a decade earlier when local businesses in the chamber of commerce supported the 1996 decked car park proposal. On that occasion the threats of change proved unwarranted as the Camden town centre has continued to thrive.

The council’s re-location also prompted a review of the Camden town centre infrastructure, an update of the 2008 Camden Town Centre Strategy and an evaluation of traffic movements, car parking, drainage, street lighting, paving and furniture. The council stated that the review would respect the area’s ‘unique history’ and ‘Camden’s country town feel’, and maintained that there would be ‘extensive consultations with all stakeholders’. Only then would work begin on Argyle Street upgrades and construction of a decked carpark. (Camden Council, 2014a, pp. 103-104)

News of the town centre enhancement strategy first appeared in May 2014 when The District Reporter broke a story about the re-emergence of a proposal for decked car park adjacent to a sensitive heritage precinct in the town centre (Abrahams, 2014a, p. 4). What followed was a slanging match between stakeholders in the Macarthur Chronicle Facebook page (Thompson, 2014) and letters to the editor (Dunshea, 2014). Over the following weeks the gap between citizens and council widened with claim and counter claim and the politicisation of the town centre strategy. In June 2014 The District Reporter editorialized the town centre strategy and complained about ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ (Abrahams, 2014b). Mayor Symkowiak responded:

I was dismayed to read your article last week on council’s exit from Camden. Your newspaper has a history of these sensationalised council bashing stories where you conveniently do not ask me personally for comment – because the truth may get in the way of a good story. (Symkowiak, 2014a)

The mayor claimed that there had been meetings with the chamber of commerce in February and April 2014 and that the council’s general manager had also been present. The mayor stated that the time-line for the consultation process would begin in mid-2014 and be finalized by mid-2015. She claimed that final reports to council on the strategy elements were only presented to council on 17 June 2014. (Symkowiak, 2014a) Mayor Symkowiak stated in the Macarthur Chronicle that sufficient consultation was a main concern of the process. (Elmerhebe, 2014a)

Council endorses town centre strategy

The town centre strategy and supporting documents were officially released for the first time as part of the business papers for the council meeting on 8 July 2014. The council endorsed the proposals in a 6-1 vote. (Camden Council, 2014b, p. 5) The strategy was to be put out for public exhibition later in July and comment in an eight week period (23 July to 17 September 2014).

Chamber of Commerce president Miriam Roberts lamented the lack of ‘transparency’ in the consultation process and stated that the chamber had only received a copy of the strategy report on 7 July 2014, the day before the council considered the proposals. Mayor Symkowiak defended the council’s position and again stated ‘there would be significant community consultation’. (Abrahams, 2014d) The Camden Chamber of Commerce is a key stakeholder and its concerns, according to one
source, have been that the car park development would sterilise the most valuable commercial site in the town centre.

The council proceeded with the announcement of the public exhibition period from July and ‘a package of exciting works for the Camden Town Centre’. The council encouraged members of the community to ‘Have your Say!’ and then outlined three community forums that would be held at the Camden Civic Centre during the consultation period. Plans, samples and information were made available by council at Council Customer Service Centres, libraries and on the council’s website. (Camden Council, 2014c) The council employed a team of consultants specializing in community engagement, distributed comment forms to residents and announced an online survey. The mayor wrote to all businesses in Camden and invited them to register with the council if they wanted regular updates on the strategy development process. The mayor was featured in a series of advertisements in the Camden press outlining elements of the strategy during the consultation period (Camden Council, 2014d) and supporting stories appeared in the Camden press. (Elmerhebe, 2014b)

Community disquiet continued with claim and counter claim in the Camden press. The Camden Chamber of Commerce liaison office Maryann Strickling criticised the council’s decision as ad hoc, stated that in her view ‘when things are put on exhibition they are a fait accompli’ and claimed that the chamber had been trying to ‘engage the council in a dialogue about the future of the Camden town centre for months’. Mayor Symkowiak continued to defend the council’s position and claimed that ‘her leadership team had met with members of the chamber executive to discuss the progress of the work’. She said she was disappointed the chamber had ‘formed such a negative opinion about the package of works before they’ve read the information or looked over the report’. (Armstrong, 2014a) The chamber responded by suggesting that there should be a people panel to ‘help guide Camden Council’ similar to an approach adopted by Melbourne City Council, while the chamber re-stated that it’s principal complaint was the process of consultation and the ‘lack of inclusiveness’ by council. Chamber president Miriam Roberts maintained that it, or another organisation, ‘should have had a seat at the meetings’ in the previous 12 months in the planning process. (Abrahams, 2014e) The view of these stakeholders puts this part of the consultative process somewhere in the middle of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation.

**Formal citizen participation**

There were three formal Camden Council organised community forums that were well attended by citizens. The first forum (29 July 2014) attracted a large crowd with the author counting 148 people with official sources recording 86 community and business organisations. Community participants were seated at tables of eight led by a council paid facilitator. The mayor introduced the evening, a scribe was appointed at each table and the facilitator directed discussion. About 40 minutes of lively discussion followed, which was reported by a table spokesperson. After the forum Mayor Symkowiak summarised the findings of the forum in a letter to all participants (22 August 2014) where the mains issues were listed as town centre improvements, traffic concerns, and the need for a diverse range of businesses. (Symkowiak, 2014b)

The second council forum (27 August 2014) was similarly well attended when over 80 community and business representatives. At the beginning of the proceedings a citizen asked a question from
the floor about the findings of Forum One and why they had not been included in the discussion documents. The chair replied they would be collated towards the end of the public consultation period. The delegate stressed to me in an informal conversation later in the evening that he felt his concerns had been dismissed by the forum organisers. On the evening citizen participants stressed the need for a distinct and vibrant town centre that was accessible to all the community. (JBA Urban Planning Consultants Pty Ltd, 2014) The second forum failed to convince some in the community. Resident Michael O’Brien left the forum with the impression ‘that the council has already made the decision to carry out the work’. (O’Brien, 2014)

The third forum (3 November) attracted fewer participants. The council reported that during the eight week consultation period its representatives had delivered presentations to over 600 residents, received 587 formal submissions and, within these submissions, considered over 3,000 individual comments. (Capaldi, 2014) Mayor Symkowiak felt that the official exhibition period and council forums were sufficient. She was disappointed to hear some people say the council would do ‘whatever it wanted whether the community wanted it or not’ (Armstrong, 2014c)

The Camden Chamber of Commerce felt the council forums lacked credibility. Chamber spokesperson, Ms Maryann Strickling, felt that the council had ‘little vision or understanding’ of the current strength of Camden (Abrahams, 2014c). Consequently the chamber decided to hold its own forum which it called ‘A Viable Enduring Future’. Keynotes speakers were Director of the University of Sydney’s Urban Design Program Associate Professor Rod Simpson, architect John Johannsen from the Lane Cove Alive Leadership Group and urban designer Maryann Strickling. Speakers stressed the ‘good bones’ that the Camden town centre possessed and the need to use the existing structure to encourage the growth of town. They outlined how smart design through a collaborative community approach could deliver quality outcomes and improve the overall town environment. (Abrahams, 2014f) Resident Thiru Nagan was very impressed with the chamber of commerce forum but not those organised by council. (Nagan, 2014)

The mayor agreed to address the September chamber of commerce meeting where a dispute arose over the recording of her presentation. There were accusations of ‘slander’ in the Camden press and the mayor stated she was ‘considering her [legal] options’. In the end the council cancelled its membership of the chamber. (Armstrong, 2014b) Tensions within the chamber of commerce were taking a toll and two executive members resigned. (Armstrong, 2014d)

By September 2014 exasperation had started to creep into community concerns. Resident A Childs felt that ‘the council has already made up its mind on the Camden Town Centre vandalism’ (Childs, 2014) while some took direct aim at the mayor. Sheila Williams felt that the mayor was ‘determined to put the final nail in to the heart of Camden’. (Williams, 2014) Meanwhile word was spreading across Sydney about the level of disharmony the town centre strategy was creating in Camden. A group of North Sydney Probus members stated that their October visit was driven by desire to see the town before the town centre strategy upgrade ‘ruined’ the town centre. (Abrahams, 2014g)

Tipping point for community activism

In late November 2014 Camden councillors voted 6-3 to endorse the key infrastructure initiatives in the town centre strategy. (Camden Council, 2014e, p. 4) In response the chamber of commerce
president Miriam Roberts stated that the chamber ‘wasn’t holding its breath that the community consultation regarding the proposed Camden Town Centre plan would have any real sway’. She maintained the members did not believe that the ‘consultative process provided a balanced and broad presentation of the facts or the alternatives’. Roberts felt that planning process ‘showed a lack of any comprehensive strategic vision for the town centre’. More than this Councillor Eva Campbell thought the whole plan was a ‘flawed process and in many respects a “farce”’. She stated that it was an ‘ad hoc series of piecemeal, so-called improvements that lack any underlying vision’. (Abrahams, 2014h)

In early January 2015 resident Pieter Versluis wrote a letter to the Camden press and stated:

If the councillors are so convinced public opinion supports the changes they have approved, Camden Council must release all responses for public viewing. Those of us strongly opposed must not simply accept the council decision. Camden Chamber of Commerce opposes the changes, many residents do; and I suggest, so do most visitors – the current charm is why they come to Camden. The public consultation process has, in other quarters, been labelled a ‘farce’. Oppose the changes with action.

Pieter Versluis, Kirkham. (Versluis, 2015)

Following this letter the Camden Narellan Advertiser reported that ‘Camden residents [were] concerned about the transparency of the public consultation period’ and mentioned that I intended to put up an abstract for consideration about these issues at the 2016 Australasian Urban History Urban Planning Conference. (Armstrong, 2015) The same week The District Reporter published a story exploring the history of the 1996 car park proposal. (Abrahams, 2015b)

At the end of January I posted a personal reflection on the Professional Historians’ Association’s (NSW & ACT) blog maintaining that public historians had a role to play in civic advocacy that encouraged active citizenship and citizen engagement in the democratic process. (Willis, 2015c) At the same time I released a discussion paper on the town centre strategy and posted my conclusions on my history blog stating that a trust deficit had opened up between the community and the council. (Willis, 2015b)

The politicisation of the participatory planning process had reached a disjunction amongst stakeholders just as Crystal Legacy highlighted in her Melbourne case study. (Legacy, 2015) The mayor continued to vigorously defend the council’s decisions stating the consultative process was ‘the most open... process that council [had] embarked upon since I’ve been on council since 2008’. (Abrahams, 2015a) She went further and stated that ‘the cynical and suspicious tone’ as press reports were ‘unfair and unfounded’. (Symkowiak, 2015)

Within a week of these matters being aired in the Camden press seven Camden citizens informally met to form a new organisation, the Camden Community Alliance. Their aim was to campaign around the council’s community consultation campaign and encourage ‘meaningful consultation’ to protect ‘the present character of Camden’. (Camden Community Alliance, 2015) Pieter Versluis was elected president. This level of activism had not been seen in the Camden LGA since the 1970s and the formation of the Camden Residents’ Action Group (Willis, 2012). There was strong support from
some citizens and within a month the organisation had over 70 members. (Abrahams, 2015a). Over the following months the alliance held public rallies and meetings, conducted a social media campaign and gained airtime on Sydney radio.

Funding for the first stage works of the Town Centre Enhancement Strategy was provided as part of the Western Sydney Infrastructure Plan announced by the Abbott Federal Government associated with the plans for Sydney’s second airport at Badgerys Creek in January 2015. (Nutt, 2015) Camden Council commenced the first stage infrastructure works in August 2015 with the removal of a number of Jacaranda trees in the main streets accompanied by community protests. There has been a continuing debate in the Camden press covering hundreds of column centimetres devoted to the town centre strategy with a stream of letters to the editors of all local newspapers. In November 2015 Camden Council approved the next stage of the project and expects to commence work in early 2016.

**Conclusion: Challenges and Implications**

This paper has argued that the participatory planning process around the Camden Town Enhancement Strategy has been contested. The proposed infrastructure works were in an urban conservation area, one of Australia’s most historic sites. The town centre itself is a Macarthur family icon and any urban planning processes taking place within it were likely to be problematic. Camden citizens remember the direct threat posed to the town’s heritage by the 1996 decked car park proposal and were wary of any new proposal. Rightly or wrongly citizens felt that their emotional attachment to a much loved place was under threat again and might turn into one of Read’s lost places. (Read, 1996) Parochialism and localism have played a part again as they did in the 1996 urban planning proposals.

The Camden media have led the public debate around the town centre strategy, including breaking the story of the 2013 decked car park proposal adjacent to a sensitive heritage area in the town centre. From that point the council’s communication strategy developed a defensive posture of which, despite attempts to the contrary, it seems unable to break free. There has been a constant stream of letters to the editor, extensive reportage of the issues and the chamber of commerce and the Camden Community Alliance have been pro-active in their use of the media. Local newspapers have become a valuable community noticeboard and a constant source of information for stakeholders. All supporting the notion that a strong independent media is necessary for a vibrant democracy. Social media and the internet have also been used extensively by stakeholders in the debate, which is different from the earlier 1996 car park controversy, when electronic media played virtually no role.

Camden Council commenced the planning processes behind closed doors, which did not give the appearance of transparent government. The mayor’s strident defence of the formal participatory planning processes are justified while it is a mystery to some that the council did not commence the consultative process earlier. Best practice examined by the Gratton Institute has called for deep and meaningful engagement in the community consultation processes, which has been lacking in this case study. (Kelly, 2010) Yet it is quite probable that an earlier engagement with citizens by council may have ameliorated community angst, built community confidence and neutralised stakeholder
mistrust. The council has failed to convince stakeholders of the projects merits and citizens have not felt a sense of ownership of the processes.

The paper has provided a useful case study from which comparative generalisations may be made and demonstrated some of the machinations of local democratic processes. The participatory planning processes have elements of both ‘tokenist participation’, the formal community forums, and ‘radical planning’, the Camden Community Alliance, examined by Monno and Khakee. (Monno & Khakee, 2012) Attachment to place and cultural heritage icons on historic sites can be problematic for the planning processes particularly when deeply embedded historic factors are in the mix. When faced with community conservatism participatory planning processes needs a nuanced approach from officials in local government. Cynicism by citizens needs to have a meaningful response from local planning authorities to ameliorate citizen activism and avoid unnecessary opposition to necessary infrastructure works for civic enhancement purposes. This is an ongoing process where increased politicisation of the issues may only be resolved at the 2016 local government elections.

Acknowledgements

The author of this paper is grateful to two anonymous referees who have made very useful suggestions and comments. A number of stakeholders involved in the Camden Town Centre Enhancement Strategy participatory planning process made valuable suggestions and comments in a formal and informal capacity and thanks are extended to all.

References


Abrahams, L., 2014e. Chamber seeks 'People's Panel'. The District Reporter, 18 July, pp. 3-5.


Abrahams, L., 2014g. Pedestrians out of the CBD upgrade. The District Reporter, 10 October, p. 3.

Abrahams, L., 2015a. Alliance has trees and town centre in their sights. The District Alliance, 23 March.

Abrahams, L., 2015a. Mayor says community was consulted. The District Reporter, 16 January .p. 4.


Camden Community Alliance, 2015. Minutes. 3 February.


Symkowiak, L., 2014b. Correspondence from mayor to participants of forum (email). 22 August.


Versluis, P., 2015. Consultation on Town Centre changes was a 'farce' (Letters to the Editor). Camden Narellan Advertiser, 7 January, p. 2.


Willis, I., 2012. Townies, ex-urbanites and aesthetics, issues of identity on Sydney’s rural-urban fringe. 11th Australasian Urban History/Planning History Conference Urban Transformations: Booms, Busts and other Catastrophes, 5-8 February, University of Western Australia, Perth.

