The Authorship of Space
The Role of Key Individuals in the Transformation of Melbourne – Ruth and Maurie Crow

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The purpose of this paper is to provide new insights into how Melbourne was transformed from the 1960s through to the 1980s and consider if there are lessons learnt from this work to apply to the future planning and design of cities. Archival research and interviews with politicians, academics and activists involved in Melbourne's transformation, outline the important role urban design thinking and community-led activism had on driving the radical social, political and economic agenda that reshaped the city and led to inner Melbourne's renowned liveability. Ruth and Maurie Crow were community activists with critical and widespread influence on key people (including policy makers and politicians) and the policies and plans that transformed inner Melbourne. Their beliefs and planning ideas were incorporated into the key design-led planning policies, strategies and urban design frameworks and projects that established the physical framework from which inner Melbourne has developed and thrived over the last 50 years. The Crow’s brought international historical and contemporary thinking to the Melbourne planning debate. They spoke, wrote, formed community action ‘ginger’ groups and joined town planning groups to promote the role of community in shaping cities and the kind of city that should be shaped. Much of their thinking is captured in the newsletters and plans for Melbourne they led—they edited and wrote most of Irregular and Ecoso on behalf of the Town Planning Research Group (TPRG), and developed Plan for Melbourne 1, 2 and 3. Devoted communists, they had widespread influence on state and local government planning debates, policies and frameworks. Maurie was an active participant and planning lobbyist in established left and conservative lobby groups, such as the Clerks Union and the Town and Country Planning Association.

Keywords — Melbourne; transformation; integrated urbanism; community-led activism.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my PhD work is to consider planning strategies and government arrangements to manage Melbourne’s growth predicted to increase from 4.82 million (October, 2017) to 8 million by 2051, by looking at the strategies to manage growth in Melbourne. Reviewing the Crows work provides an opportunity to investigate the models for managing growth and connected communities, their propositions on role of the local community and the influence they had on the plans and strategies that underpinned Melbourne’s transformation from the 1970’s and 1980’s to provide possible insights to how to create a livable Melbourne with a population of 8 million.

Many of the urban and social challenges championed by the grass roots radicals in the 1960’s and 1970’s we face in
Melbourne today. Managing growth at the rates predicted for Melbourne and retaining livability will be hard.

With unprecedented planned growth across Melbourne, livability will need to be dealt with at different levels, as proposed by Ruth and Maurie Crow, at the neighborhood level, the district level and the capital city level with new forms of government and governance. At the most local level, Seeds of Change champions the neighborhood house - a place to support the local community and enable people to come together and participate in activities of interest. It is at this neighborhood level, where according to the strategies of Ruth Crow, the developing concept of ‘complete communities’ in north America can be tackled.

THE EARLY RADICALS – RUTH AND MAURIE CROW

In the early 1960s the level of debate about the future of cities was gaining greater attention globally and in Australia as our cities needed to expand to accommodate population growth. The debate grew in sophistication and influence as more Australians were travelling overseas to Europe and the United States bringing back new ideas and city models to manage growth and to pursue a more socially just and equitable society. The debate was at a time of much wider social and cultural change occurring in Australia’s inner suburbs.

University students and young professionals populated Melbourne’s inner suburbs and became active in local politics to save the inner suburbs and create a new inner urban life, away and apart from the suburbia most had been bought up in. With their arrival came the beginning of gentrification and the creation of new creative enterprises such as La Mama Theatre, cafes, alternative bookshops and op shops. This was a time of growing political debate on a broad spectrum of social justice issues, from campaigns against the White Australian Policy, the rights of indigenous Australians to vote, equal pay for women and protests against slum clearance for the construction of inner city freeways and high rise housing commission flats. John Howie commented in interview; after years of conservative political leadership and government policies, people from the left that the time at last had come, where their views may count and make a difference. Ruth and Maurie Crow were radical early pioneers of this time. They had a very important early influence on the transformation of Melbourne from the late 1960s and 1970s. Their extensive research, writing and propositions for alternative solutions to inner city growth were well researched and informed by international urbanism references as well as local conditions and local people’s lives.

At the time, inner city churches were fostering ‘freedom, justice and communication in the city’; linking a pursuit of a more socially just society to improved urban outcomes. The Australian Labor Party, emerged from three decades of factional destruction as a reformed party, influenced by the Fabians and Gough Whitlam who had a commitment to improving the quality of life in cities. A number of the leaders in the inner city churches were active in the reformed ALP including Andrew McCutcheon and Brian and Renata Howe. University of Melbourne lecturers, students and professionals played an important role reinforcing the importance of the urban fabric of inner Melbourne, its rich diverse culture and community, establishing many of the early resident action groups that saved the inner suburbs.

The Academics and students

The influence of the inner city churches
The authors of Trendyville explain the phenomena of the post war years to save the inner city suburbs of Australian cities at the junction between geography, culture and politics. The individuals and groups that drove this change were diverse, complex and well connected.

Ruth and Maurie Crow were prolific researchers, analysts and writers in the field of urban policy, urban renewal and community activism. They were early adopters and promoters of integrated urban thinking and policy development to address the complex process of managing urban growth as it ensured social, cultural, economic and environmental factors were considered at the one time. They moved to North Melbourne in 1964 and became actively involved and shaped the direction of the North Melbourne Association, the first Resident Action group formed in Melbourne. This was only one of their many commitments to urban issues, quality of life and putting community interests at the centre of all they did.

In April 1967, Maurie Crow initiated the Trade Unions Living Standards Convention which including seminars on social services and town planning. An outcome of the seminar was agreement to form the Town Planning Research Group which commenced writing the publication Irregular in 1968. Irregular was written for the TPRG’s membership group. Irregular was replaced by the publication, Ecoso in 1972 which had a broader readership and recommended its articles were reproduced in other publications as it replicated articles from like-minded publications such as CURA. Ecoso moved substantially from an urban and community issues publication to focus on ecological sustainability.

The Crows were also key writers and thought leaders in the development of Plan Melbourne Part 1 (1969), 2 (1970) and 3 (1972). This was followed by the Citizens Action Plan for North and West Melbourne (CAN) completed in response to City of Melbourne’s call for public participation in response to the MCC Strategy Plan that was completed in 1975 and was never adopted due to community backlash. Ruth Crow commented that many of the subscribers to their publications Irregular (then Ecoso), were elected to significant leadership positions in local, state and federal parliament and included former Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, former Premier Joan Kirner, former State Ministers Evan Walker, Caroline Hogg, Barry Pullen and Andrew McCutcheon and Lord Mayor’s Bill Gardner, Leckie Oud, Winoume McCaughey and Richard Wynne. Wynne is the currently the Minister for Planning in the Victorian government.

In the early 1970s, Maurie and David Yencken (who worked for the Whitlam government and later became Secretary of the Department of Planning under Minister Walker) attended meetings at the previously conservative Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA). Their attendance comes soon after Andrew McCutcheon has joined the group and the TCPA’s previous support of slum clearance, freeways and the Housing Commission being responsible for Urban Renewal was reversed. Over this time, the TCPA supported the Fitzroy Council and the North Melbourne Association’s call to suspend the Commissions activities until urban renewal planning principles are adopted. Yencken reported on the cost of urban land and reported back on the progress of surveys of historic areas for conservation in inner Melbourne. He was appointed as their delegate on the Australian Road Federation. They also developed an alternative Transport Policy to the states and called for a seminar of Melbourne’s Future growth which was held at La Trobe University.

Over the period of 1968–69 and the early 1970s debates about Melbourne’s future patterns of growth were becoming matters of interest for the wider community and were better informed. In 1969, Brian Howe established the Centre for Urban Research, Hugh Stretton released Ideas for Australian Cities and Whitlam was fervently developing papers in preparation for government including Whitlam on Urban Growth, published by the Fabian Society (1969).

The Crows were early champions of promoting the protection of the very rich life found in the dense mixed-use inner city areas in the mid to late 60s. With Jane Jacobs, they attacked the principles shaping modern orthodox city planning, defended the inner city’s intricate, dense and close grained diversity that became a source of inspiration to newly arrived residents in Melbourne’s inner suburbs.

Ruth, an avid feminist, wanted to live and work in an 18-hour city that could meet all of her day-to-day needs and she could participate in the social, sporting and cultural life of the central city, a place she identified as a celebration of human endeavour and creativity. Both Jacobs and Crow took a major role in influencing the preservation of much of Melbourne that is now renowned as an exemplar of civic design and place making.

A review of the Crow collection recognises their extensive collection of planning, urban and social theory texts from around the world, providing them with a very broad and detailed knowledge and understanding about cities. Their political philosophy, hard work, eye for detail, passion and pragmatics, putting people at the centre of planning, is reflected in much of the City of Melbourne’s strategies and policies of the 1980s. Ruth’s regular article Ruth Writes in the local Northern Advertiser, their involvement in the North Melbourne Association and the development of the North and West Melbourne Community Planning Group Action Plans developed by representatives of the community over three years and documented by the City of Melbourne planning officers Larinda Gardner, Jane Monk and Roger Harvey in 1982, was incorporated in the 1985 Strategy Plan developed by the City of Melbourne.

Of importance was the comprehensive and detailed nature of their analysis of proposed development scenarios for Melbourne put forward by various government bodies, consultants and lobby groups including the MMBW, Town and Country Planning Board, HIA and the Main Road Department. They used planning theory and practices found across the world and tested them in the Australian context to understand the impact of their application to Melbourne. Their reference point was a commitment to social justice, citizen participation and intelligent debate about the cities future.

Maurie was one of the initiators of one of the first town planning congresses in Melbourne held in 1967. At the time, inner city slum clearance and massive freeway construction programs were being promoted. The Clerks Union sponsored the Australian Resources and Living Standards Convention: Town Planning – Co-ordination or Chaos on the 8 April, 1967. The steering committee comprised of trade unionists, planners, architects, civil engineers, solicitors, teachers, social workers, municipal councillors and members of community organisations. Speakers at the convention included representatives of the Australian Railway Union, Municipal Officers Association, VCOSS and the Melbourne University Town Planning Departments. At the conclusion of the conference the organisers developed an overview of what was required at all levels of government to improve city planning:

- Fostering of public discussion of planning problems and proposals.
- Federal, State, and Local government provide more funds to prepare plans for urban development and redevelopment based on thorough research.
Human values to be the central concern of all planning efforts and, therefore, for example, provision to be made for adequate cultural and recreational facilities of many kinds in an environment designed to enhance human dignity by providing for both family privacy and a full social life.

Co-ordination of all public authorities to secure the best overall efficiency and amenity in balanced development. Better and cheaper public transport as part of a comprehensive transportation plan. Residential, shopping, recreational, industrial and other areas designed so that the demands of motor traffic do not endanger pedestrians.

Growth patterns (including selective decentralisation) that minimise commuting yet give ready access to open space. Suitable country areas planned and protected (partly, at least, by acquisition) as open space for nature conservation and recreation. Experimental housing design and construction at various densities and control of speculation in land and building materials.

Vigilant observation and control of noise, visual ugliness and pollution of air and water.

Two of these proposals were later adopted by Victorian Governments in the creation of Metropolitan Melbourne’s Green Wedges and National Parks. After the convention, some of the participants agreed to hold monthly meetings. Calling themselves the Town Planning Research Group (TPRG) this small group developed the newsletter, Irregular later renamed Ecoso Exchange. Maurie and Ruth were key participants in the TPRG and wrote and circulated the newsletters to a wide and diverse group of members. It brought attention to the major planning, social and political issues of the day locally, nationally and internationally. Until 1975 Irregular and Ecoso Exchange had about 130 subscribers.

Irregular 1967–1972

From 1967 to 1972 Irregular was written to exchange information on urban planning issues in Melbourne and progressive planning matters from around the world. Its purpose was to keep its readers informed about current major planning controversies, raise understanding of the issues, indicate the scope of possible action and suggest better alternatives – to radicalise and inform change.

At the same time, Maurie and Ruth were preparing alternatives to the State Government plans for freeways, urban renewal and the shape of Melbourne. Ruth Crow comments that the TPRG and Irregular became a clearing house of ideas, “It helped people to grapple with these problems and find links through which to build coalitions.” Irregular included overviews of proposed planning ideas, plans and proposals of the State and overviews of national and international writers about the future of cities. The newsletters often included in depth analysis of the implications of planning proposals. Some extracts from Irregular below illustrate this:

David Yencken’s presentation on La Trobe University is commended for its elements of gracious living in a time when the editors lament in Irregular 4, October 1967 that there is “No more crucial period of Town Planning ferment can be imagined than right now…. and from now on.”

In response to the numerous reports of the Town and Country Planning Board, Town and Country Planning Association, MMBW, Transportation Committee, Rogan report, Report on Decentralisation, the Advisory Committee & Parliamentary enquiry into Melbourne’s Future Water, Irregular calls for an Integrated Plan that takes the best of these plans, is written in understandable language and synthesizes housing, transport and growth patterns with human needs as the ‘touch stone’ of reference for these integrated plans. Throughout the publications, the editors call for consideration of public rapid transport with density. Irregular assesses Lewis Mumford and Ebenezer Howard’s decentralisation as inadequate, applauds Gropius’ Scope of Total Architecture which was based on the earlier Deutsche Werkbund proposals creating high rise communities with centralised shared services releasing women from the burden of domestic chores seeking to maintain community life in local areas, with the school the community heart providing education for the widest community groups. Benevola’s The Origins of Town Planning, is supported for demonstrating the importance of town planning as a vehicle for social change.

Irregular commences the Debate about the Quality of Life and asks, ‘Can the quality of life be measured’ – what standards would raise the quality of life and advocates for compulsory social elements of any environment including schools, kindergartens, libraries, swimming pools, sports grounds, schools in parks and co-operative pubs.

The densities promoted by Jacobs for a Vital City are compared to Melbourne’s densities questioning how suitable they are for Melbourne. With a broadening base of community activists, architects, urban planners and politicians working to promote a better more humane city, in the early 1970’s David Yencken and Maurie Crow joined Andrew McCutcheon at the Town and Country Planning Association that saw the transition of that organisation from a very conservative ‘top end’ of town association to one that promoted international contemporary thinking about liveable cities where the ordinary citizen has access to high class, rich social and cultural activities.


Irregular was renamed Ecoso in 1973 and moved substantially from planning to what the ecological and sociological crisis of the time—Eco ‘ ecological’, So ‘sociological’ and Exchange.

Ruth Crow notes that its beginning coincided with the growing number of movements with similar objectives so Ecoso should encourage publications of like-minded groups to reproduce Ecoso’s material in their publications including: Housing for Aged Action Group, Union of Australian Women, Arena, Overland, Nexus, People’s Committee for Melbourne, Rainbow Alliance, Centre for People’s Committee for Melbourne, Centre for Public Education City Alternate News and the North Melbourne News.


The Modern Melbourne Committee of the Australian Communist Party formed to prepare Plan for Melbourne Part 1 for
the 1968 State Conference. It was pre-circulated for comment and ratified with changes at the conference.

The Purpose of the Plan was to assist improve the quality of life of Melbourne’s working people when they have finished their days work, rather than spend our lives working to earn more money. The Plan envisages a life where when at work we enjoy the creative fellowship involved in production, contributing a useful service to the community, and at leisure, the most satisfying experiences in some form of social life. The planning controversies of the day are listed as:

- More freeways or rapid rail transit?
- More sprawling suburbs or high density living?
- More big-city growth or more decentralisation?

The Plan outlines it is a first attempt to formulate a city-plan in preparing for a worth-while tomorrow by tackling immediate urgent practical problems confronting our city and its citizens.

The Plan is in 2 parts:

Part 1 Facts and principles (This publication – Part One)

Part 2 Blueprints for change (To be published later).

Part one concentrates on the services as well as facilities need for a rich, socially just life: ‘As well as privacy at home, casual informal association with relatives, workmates, friends and neighbors, a measure of enjoyment as one of an audience and at the highest level… for a rich social life full participation in some type of organized social activity Melbourne must have a heart. Any great metropolis is more than the sum of its parts.’

It outlines what is expected of a great city:

’… the best sports finals, the best orchestras, opera and ballet, the best shops, the best churches, the best race meetings, the best gardens, the best theatres and television studios, and therefore, the best actors; comedians, artistts and singers; the best shows circuses exhibitions, and the best festivals and marches—all of this is expected of a great city centre … the central offices of the public services and big commercial enterprises, and in Melbourne, the seat of state Government. …The higher the class of such central activity, the more vigour and quality it generates, the more inspiration it creates for local suburban or district activities.

The plan then goes on to outline the faults—the ‘deadness’ that overcomes the city at night and weekends, many fine facilities lay idle that could be used at the very time people have leisure time.

**PLAN FOR MELBOURNE PART 2 February 1970**

In response to the suddenly released Metropolitan Transporation Plan, Part 2 provides a detailed analysis of the functions and services a city needs with a strong social and environmental focus. It sees hope with the ‘hands off movement’ beginning to come of age and join forces with the humanitarian and dedicated section of the churches, welfare organisations and people with a sensitive political conscience. And the focus in attention on basic value judgements as to what is worth preserving, how to preserve it and the desirable flux of change. It promotes a city with a heart:

- The vigour and quality of the activities in the central city and inner areas, are not created by buildings and facilities, however necessary these may be. They are created by people. And a really civilised city does not consist of only the highest forms of specialist activity in certain buildings or places at certain times, which are then often ‘dead most other times, but in a lively, interested community—spirited coming-and-going of people of many types who live or work in the area, with those who come into the area from the middle and outer suburbs… Inner areas are the most diverse types… The diversity can be valuable, and there is need in the inner areas to take advantage of the rich and varied talents on every hand, creating opportunities to release their expression for the enrichment of all.

The Plan outlines how community centres should be updated, extended or coordinated to support community, directions for the provision and purpose of kindergartens, day nurseries, commercial child care centres and outlines the needs of working and student mothers, schools act as a community hub providing out of hours training and activities.

**THE CITIZENS ACTION PLAN FOR NORTH AND WEST MELBOURNE – THE CAN PLAN**

In 1973 Interplan was engaged to develop the 1975 City of Melbourne Strategy Plan. The Citizens Action Plan for North and West Melbourne, the CAN Plan, was prepared by the North Melbourne Association in response to a request by the Melbourne City Council and Interplan for public participation in the preparation of the City of Melbourne Strategy Plan 1973–1974.

The CAN Plan is based on the proposition that Variety, Compactness and Accessibility of people provides the highest standard for any civilised central city. It was substantially influenced by Plan for Melbourne Parts 1, 2 and 3. It considered North and West Melbourne as a whole and stressed the interconnectedness of human and physical planning and included local neighborhood hubs as a focus for community activities. According to Lecki Ord it was the development of the CAN Plan that educated a wide number of the local residents on the planning matters that mattered. The 1975 Strategy Plan was rejected by the inner Melbourne residents. Many of these residents went on to become key individuals who undertook critical roles in transforming Melbourne.

With the support of the Crows, Lecki and Winsome McCaughey ran for Council and were successfully elected in 1984. The fundamental economic, social and environmental planning matters that are dealt with in the CAN plan are found in the City of Melbourne 1985 Strategy Plan. Rob Adams says that this was the Council’s ‘bible’ upon which they based their decisions.
Following the release of the 1985 Strategy plan, Ruth and Maurie Crow developed A Charter for a Central Region: A Principled Community View, February 1986. The charter outlines the human values which included:

- An expanded central city that support specialist functions
- They reject growth for growth sake
- To re-establish and strengthen social stability through the development of networks at neighborhood level with people involved in the delivery of human services, local cultural, sporting and other activities of their choice including street parties, festivals and ethnic celebrations
- The protection of urban conservation areas
- Protecting open spaces and seashores, preventing their use for car parks, marinas or the exclusive use of private clubs and linking the open spaces by linear ‘landscaped ways’ for pedestrians and cyclists
- Increased low cost housing
- A regional approach to job creation that focuses on small labor intensive enterprises, service employment delivered by public, private or community enterprises
- Support for mixed use areas and communities of all ages and income where people live, work and recreate locally
- Support of public transport, increased freight by rail, placing a ceiling on road capacity and commuter off street car parking in the central region and objecting to inner or outer ring roads and measures to avoid through traffic through residential areas
- Celebration of cultural diversity
- The shedding of state government powers to local government and regional organisations and for local government to devolve power to neighborhoods

SEEDS OF CHANGE – THE SHIFT FROM PLANNING TO ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE.

Deborah White, Philip Sutton, Alan Pears, Chris Mardon, John Dick and Maurie Crow The authors developed this text as a blue print for a liveable Melbourne in light of the challenges of a perceived energy crisis, outlining a new city development model with a new urban structure, transport system and model for community at the centre of planning.

Seeds of Change was written from 1975 and published in 1978. It reflected the Crows shifting focus from Melbourne Planning issues and the politics of planning to environmental and social matters. Ruth Crow explains that after 1975 the subscription list was broadened to include more people involved in organisations promoting ideas about ecological issues and social issues. Maurie formed a group to apply the seeds model to north and west Melbourne outlined in the published book “More Enjoyment with Less Energy in North and West Melbourne”.

Authors and contributors to Seeds for Change interviewed to discuss why they had reached this position and what lessons can be learnt to be applied to the ‘city in crisis’ today.

A hierarchy of locations is defined by the provision of community activities:

The domestic unit: Domestic

Neighbourhood house at a residential block level: Supportive

Locus focus for neighbourhood – an urban centre for the suburb; Specialist Community focus at district level: Selective

People focus at central area level: Unique

The aim is to bring what people do as close as possible to where people are. Not prescriptive, uniform, inflexible or unalterable but defined to suit from a grass roots level. The ‘neighbourhood house’ describes ‘a caring and sharing neighbourly supportive activity that is the essence of that function.’

CONCLUSION

The Crow’s objectives were to involve people in community life at a local level and that community life is rich with the broadest range of publicly accessibility opportunities and activities. The authors advocate for planning through careful observation to meet people’s needs and interests and providing facilities that cater for needs. The Crow’s work integrated contemporary planning, sustainability and community thinking. They worked at a time when the social justice churches, ‘ginger’ groups, academics and university students and the trendies had significant influence shaping the planning policies and strategies that created livable Melbourne. The Crows work provides opportunities to rethink how we manage growth and better connect communities, so that Metropolitan Melbourne may retain and develop a livable Melbourne with a population of 8 million.

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