

# Lost in Translation: the Voice of the Community in our Changing Urban Future

Terence P Byrnes, Byrnes and Associates, Australia

## 1. Introduction

The title of the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Congress of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) is *Fast Forward: Planning in a (hyper) dynamic urban context*. The role of planners is a particular focus of enquiry within the theme, intended as it is to explore how quality can be maintained in the face of expediency; how organizational responses can be reshaped, and whether prioritising economic imperatives means marginalising social cultural and environmental needs, amongst other challenges. The failure to achieve is alternatively contrasted as a 'fast backward' somersault

While overall urban planning theory and practise understandably finds itself hastily playing catch-up with what the 'urban challenge' has come to mean, those levels of consternation currently experienced are not confined to the ranks of professional interests alone.

Contemporary urban living for much of the world's population means undergoing unprecedented levels of change, unsettling for some and threatening for others. At one extreme it can make the city you were born in almost unrecognisable from the city you will die in, even when it is the city of the same name. Do we understand why that should be? Would we know how to be of influence if we did? As the ultimate end user of the urbanising process, is it not about time we knew better? Runaway urban change cannot be relevantly addressed by the planning process unless integrated within the contributions of an informed urban community educated in the limitations and the means by which urban environments are created.

The novel phenomenon of a world population dominated by urban dwellers is of less significance than the short time frame in which it has occurred. Taking our predominantly urban world as the baseline means that simple majority is barely one generation old but its history remains rooted familiarly in the experiences of agrarian societies and long transition from a non-urban world. It took the first 1800 years of the Gregorian calendar for the world population to reach one billion. It then took only twelve years after 1999 for the world to add a further billion, to a world of now seven billion.

Throughout this period there has been significant technological change and with it came corresponding growth in middle class expectations for rising standards of living and ever greater reliance upon the means of the communication. Suddenly we are in the world of information/communication overload be it TV, talkback radio, a widely differentiated press, social media, the mobile phone and the ubiquitous the world of WWW. With so much scope for communication generated within an urban presence, it is timely to review the effectiveness of those communication links between the creators of our urban environments and those for whom the environment has been created. How well do we understand the limitations to change within our urban environment and how well served are we by any opportunities to participate as a community in the urban development process?

The concept of a population having any direct say in its planned future is a curiously contemporary notion developed over the closing decades of the last century. Such that many nations still make little or no provision at all for their urban populations to have any direct planning participation - a position commonly defended by the need for subjugation to *the general good* and *the public interest*, the supreme justification for all professional interference

to begin with. However with an eye to the increase in the *number of electoral democracies around the world from around 45 in 1970 to more than 120 by the late 1990s* (Fukuyama, 2012) the predominant contexts of our urbanising world will favour the participatory community.

However we need to incorporate community engagement for the right reasons if it is to be sustainable. At its core, planning as applied to urban development is the implementation of competing interests within the political process. The community is one such representative interest among others that deserves a place at the table, if only to learn the rules of the game.. The good planning decision is at best only a response to a variable set of priorities. Justifiable planning decisions will always result in losers as well as winners. Sometimes heritage values are sustained and commercial opportunities lost. At other times that expressway linkage just has to be accommodated for the overall economic benefit.

We need effective community engagement if only for the sake of those managing the planning process itself. As an informed audience, a community's contribution can then always be respected within that process of political decision making we identify as urban planning. In recognition that the population for whom we are planning is ultimately the client, we acknowledge the outcome to be a political, not a technical endeavour. The objective for the most effective engagement of our urban communities for whom we are planning must therefore be to assure an equally informed level of fundamental expectations, without which we cannot expect to achieve the needed differentiations within urban societies that enrich the cultural growth of future generations.

This paper identifies the essential worth of having an informed community as the necessary catalyst for achieving the needed differentiation between an otherwise inevitable collective of future urban monotonies. But it also disputes, as misguided and ultimately counter productive, the relevance of a number of the more common bases on which community intervention has so far been attempted to be justified.

As a further recognition that exposure to community engagement in the urban planning process is internationally both varied and limited, an example of Australian experience has been chosen to illustrate that even with the best of intent and long familiarity with community engagement, success depends upon more than providing sophisticated legislation. By demonstrating the local failings there are also conclusions to be drawn that have wider application outside the Australian experience, essential to the understanding and future programming in the pursuit of any successful community engagement

## **2. Don't Leave Town – It May be All that We Have.**

As late as the recognition of a community voice has been, this does not imply that a diminished role of the community voice has ever been justified as intentional. It is taken to be axiomatic that an effective level of planning sensitivity cannot begin to evolve without meaningful engagement of the differentiated populations it is meant to serve and as informed participants in the process, How well does the current process of urbanization achieve the vivacity of difference in urban development that was the hallmark of cities in history? Is downtown Dallas for example , architecturally speaking, so distinctively different from just about anywhere new in the culturally contrasted Arab States of the Middle East. If you have seen a few examples of tract housing you can easily recognise their clones worldwide.

In his observations about the formation of a *creative class*, Richard Florida (2003) would have it that the likes of Silicon Valley, Austin Texas and New York City in the USA are examples of how particular urban ingredients attract a particular commonality of interests.

They, in turn, through their singularity are fulfilled by their dominance within their chosen fields of endeavour and sustained by the attributes of their urban environments. While this explosion of creative energy demonstrates the value of a serendipitous nexus between occupants and what worth can be drawn from any location of choice, this happy advantage is not one able to be shared generally by burgeoning urban populations, if otherwise drawn to their location as an only means of economic survival and regardless of peripheral advantages or disadvantages.

Notwithstanding the gulf between the extremes afforded by urban diversity on the one hand and desperation on the other, our urban populations are mostly borne into predominantly established environments. The cultural differences of populations within our urban blur are not particularly manifested by any corresponding vivacity or diversity in the structuring of the urban environments that house them. They embrace a characteristic range of environments common to wherever we go. The world over, the best parts of town are usually small as compared to a sea of mediocrity, relieved only in part by occasional re-birthing of areas deemed heritage worthy. The suburbs of Prague bear greater similarities with Istanbul due to a common factor of density, while the new world suburbs of American and Australian cities bear otherwise common hallmarks attributable mainly to their similar densities..

Resilience, that capacity to cope with adversity, is clearly in the urban dwellers DNA. How else do we explain why the bulk of urban dwellers choose to live within their comparatively limited circumstances where access, accommodation and environmental standards are relatively inferior and with little prospect of change – singular, urban design based, renewal proposals notwithstanding? For most cities undergoing unanticipated growth, rapid or not, the future lies in the incremental process of sporadic urban sprawl in combination with the distraction of smaller redevelopment highlights which can only offer a limited prospect of ever being a viable alternative to meet the needs of any dramatic increase in numbers of households.

The modern legacy of faceless cities is that they reflect faceless communities. Without full participation in the urban building process, we cannot expect anything more than the *cookie-cutter* solution based upon an almost universally interpreted recipe. Not only is the physical outcome dull, worse still it denies urban living diversity to those who have to occupy our lazy planning outcomes built upon misconceptions. Until we stop camouflaging planning decisions with the mantle of *the public interest* and *the common good* as a higher order of decision making, the better it will be for the differentiation of our future urban environments. Responsible planning is not a popularity contest based upon numbers but it must be inclusive based upon a number of interests.

Therefore, by recognising that planning decisions only ever follow from a consensus of limited interests, at one point in time and within a given context, we will genuinely address urban planning as the political process that it is. Any community interest, masquerading as the overriding public interest, is but one of a variety of interests to be differently weighted according to values espoused at the time of resolution

In the name of the public interest we endorse a numerically greater benefit over any individual's singular interest. But there are any number of discrete sectors of public interest depending also upon the benefits over time to either the current versus future generations. There are, for example, the competing, but also widely supported agendas of public transport versus commercial land use distribution; public utilities versus the amenity of landscape retention; and heritage preservation versus intensified residential accommodation, just to name a few.

Not necessarily does meaningful community engagement in the planning process even need to lead to new concepts for accommodation of the impacts of unplanned growth, higher population densities, and ever greater economic diversification of employment. Or even less that there will be expected achievement through overnight response. The pace of change, based upon a similar range of checks and balances, may not be very different from the current rates of incremental changes.

The underlying benefits that come initially from participation in the urban formulation process must result in subsequent knowledge of why our cities are what they are, along with the limits to changing them. Knowing why means that future urban communities can enlarge upon mere resilience to cope with the mostly already established body corpus of city living.

Undoubtedly contentment with the inherited urban environment will be greater if we can have an informed evaluation of what it is and become educated to the manner of its formation - accepting congestion of traffic; unsightly improvisations of the built form; and an environmental infrastructure report card being marked harder by ever more discerning teachers. Living more knowledgably with what we have, while pursuing ways of improvement through participating communities, in lock step with planning as a process, requires a level of engagement that so far we have not achieved. But rapid though the changing urban world may be, it is clear that we are destined to be a world of urbanites with no better option and who are not about to leave town. Better than that, the community takes its rightful place as a participant and not just the recipient within the processes of urban change.

In a world of varying levels of response to community inclusiveness in the planning process even with the best of intentions, the generous Australian model demonstrates that there can be an overemphasis on individual engagement. Waiting until the latter phase of the development approval process is no substitute for the urban community's participation in the more widely engaging demands of initial strategic urban planning. The consequence means the local urban population, although comfortable with the ways of planning legislation, continues to live in ignorance of how to engage fully in the urbanising process, its possibilities for diversity and new ways that might achieve it.

As the world continues to be ever more rapidly urbanised, this lack of community experience within the planning process is ever more critical. If the rightful goal of the planning outcomes is to have an informed community as the obvious end user of the process, then the mature experience of the Australian model has much to offer as a demonstration of what not to do as much as it might lead the way in what has been done to provide for inclusive community input. Otherwise, without recognition that community engagement is the key to bringing urbanisation (at any speed) into lock step with professional endeavours, then the current levels of ignorance and misunderstanding about the creation of fulfilling urban environments can only continue to be compounded.

### **3. A Community Spoiled by Opportunity - But Betrayed by Self Interests**

It is to be recognised that cultural attitudes towards levels of urban satisfaction and expectation will continue to vary widely between cultures and nations. How else for example, does one explain a group preference for a Hong Kong lifestyle over that of a Sydney lifestyle as representative of the best form of urban living in the world? (Power, 2012). There is no universal community voice, thankfully, or it would be a very dull world. There are different models of governance, levels of home ownership, economic mobility, building density preferences and even shifts in world politics that all play a part in how any community voice will come to be expressed in the shaping of its urban future.

Australia has grown up with an orderly, legislated system of urban and regional planning applied continuously over the best part of the last 100 years and arising out of British foundations of Town and Country Planning. Though similar, there are variations in the legislature within the country's six States and Territories, but none more attuned to public engagement in the planning process than the system operating in the State of New South Wales (NSW) notably over the last 25 years, the urban focus being the conurbation on the east coast with the Sydney population of over four million at its centre.

The legislated framework essentially offers a division of responsibilities between State and Local Government and embraces opportunities for continuous community engagement - from the outset, through determination of the broader area planning aspirations usually at the municipality level, through to endgame provisions for the advertising of individual development proposals for comment and objection by neighbours, culminating in final determination at the local government level by locally elected councillors.

The development approval process is characteristically detailed, as well as comprehensive, in pursuit of proscribed matters of assessment. It is a process that on average can take around three months and taking more than twelve months to determine an application for development is not unknown.

The NSW State process of introducing or amending a local government statutory plan is a most thoroughly resourced and time consuming exercise. From the beginning, the public interest in the outcomes is not only safeguarded, it is further encouraged through legislated periods for gathering public feedback throughout the process. Initial survey analyses are provided for scrutiny further the opportunities for formal submission are available at both the draft and final stages of plan adoption. Up to that stage, the plan's approval is the responsibility of the State Minister for Planning. Post approval of the local government plan, the individual local government bodies become the consent authorities for the development applications made within their respective municipalities.

With so much opportunity for engagement by the planned-for community at large in the process of change, how is it that the process has translated into a failure to effectively engage community interest? An otherwise myopic view of participation in the urban processes of change has resulted in a community generally antagonised by development and spoiled by opportunity to frustrate implementation of the wider planning intent. The loss is not achieving the productive nexus between an informed community as the ultimate consumer and the plan making processors. The *gain* is a community with an exaggerated self interest in outcomes focused on only the immediate impacts of visually close building development proposals, enshrining a peculiarly Anglo Saxon view perhaps that a man's home is not only his castle but in Australian terms it also comes with a moat.

It was not always so. Urban planning in Sydney came of age when it arose out of community wide engagement (characteristically as an initial protest), focused upon specific area-wide issues of heritage and hazard – the demolition of an area of the first European settlement on Sydney Harbour and the depositing of hazardous land fill in an up-market residential area. Causes are still formed that give rise to protest as the initiator of response to planning process but only add to the choir of complaint by individuals. As a consequence, urban planning is mostly still viewed negatively - at best a necessary evil and at worst a misapplication, imposed in ignorance of locally (meaning personally) held values.

By contrast, the development approval process is a popular community pastime. It has become unduly time consuming and expensive for all concerned because it has become intensely political, most notably in the wealthier suburbs of Sydney where residential real estate values are amongst the highest in the world. Because the real estate stakes are high amongst a population with a very high rate of home ownership (as measured in the Census,

since 1971, ranging between 68% and 70%, ABS, 2012), there is considerable political pressure exercised by individuals to encourage elected councillors' decisions in favour of maintaining the status quo, couched in terms of favouring *the neighbourhood* and the esteemed wider *public interest*. Development approval authority can, and sometimes is, delegated to independently appointed Panels and local government in-house committees. This process has been rather late in coming and not generally popular with local governments, sustained in their opposition by their self importance as the local consent authority for separate developments.

It is the case of having too much of good thing and a community spoiled by opportunity. With such extensive opportunity for individual involvement remaining open and even encouraged to come at the culmination of the extended proceedings, the process of broader community engagement has become distorted. Encouraged to believe that residential amenity is the one and only determining factor in any planning outcome, the wider context of competing agendas are thereby seen to have lesser legitimacy. When the community is fed on a diet of residential value supremacy, the interrelated elements that make cities liveable to begin with, such as the intrusions of urban infrastructure and commercial land use opportunities are seen to have only inferior claim to precedence.

Detachment from engagement in the wider planning proceedings is understandable. Unless actively supported by an interactive planning agenda, personal involvement can be seen to be very demanding and preferable avoided. After all ignorance may not only be bliss, it may even save time in getting involved with learning how to live with a city and all its compromises. With any luck, development change may not occur that directly affects my retained interests. My neighbour may not be allowed to redevelop his property for multiple residential units even though the property may be permissibly zoned for that purpose. And why should there be any expectation that any highway extension would ever impact on where I live? Answers that need to be resolved at the outset of the planning process, not fought out in the name of deprived community values thinly masking only belated self interest.

Finally, hostility within the politics of the planning arena is still further exaggerated through the processing by the widely adopted administrative practises, such as of firstly advertising applications for public comment without any accompanying draft professional assessment to determine if there actually are any outstanding issues. The process then begins as one of alarming instead of informing even before the process of necessary resolution is begun.

Passing off the development approval process as a substitute for extended engagement throughout the entire planning process only assures continuation of an urban culture of ignorance about what it means to live in a city and what is achievable to change it. Pitting neighbour against neighbour is only a formula for aiding disgruntlement and ultimately personal detachment from the full enjoyment and at the least an understanding of the urbanised world we are mostly destined to live in.

Whatever capacity there may be for the professional procedures of planning to keep up with the pace of rapid urbanisation, the efficient engagement of the urban community, integral as it is to a successful result, relies upon the astute co-ordination with those procedures. While the Australian experience even at its level of failure needs to be seen through a lens of cultural idiosyncrasies, it nevertheless evidences values to be understood and applied that are of wider international interest and value. Sharing top billing as one of the most urbanised countries in the world (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2008), with long experience in formal planning procedures that enshrine considerable emphasis on community involvement, there is much that can be learned from an otherwise well intended process of long standing.

#### 4. Lessons in Application

One reason why there is such an uneducated underclass of urban dwellers is because they have been informed so badly. For example, it is an often espoused mistake to support the role of community participation in planning in the belief that therein lies the key to consensus, or that the right technical solution will be found that is somehow politically neutral and will offend no-one - as if *good planning* reliably depended upon fundamental scientific tenets, underpinned by research based evidence, or is even supported by a depth of common experience. Through the practice of sporadic trial and error, modern planning experimentation can offer no such assurances, because urban planning is not based upon universal truths that determine a universally *right* answer. Believing that *proper planning* is the only means of delivering *the right answer* puts faith in a theology that does not exist. What makes any planning outcome *right* is that it is the most agreeable compromise between contenders. Since 'Community' represents not one all embracing set of representative values it must be seen for what it is, another competing voice with other agendas in the determination of the urban compromise through planning. Good planning is ultimately not a panacea and can only ever be a compromise between competing values.

However sometimes having the opportunity alone is not enough to assure effective community engagement. One lesson to be learned from the Australian experience is that the opportunity involved with the initial process of plan making at the community level is being ignored, in favour of indulgent equal opportunity for neighbours to belatedly contest the development approval process instead. Development control at the level of individual proposals is not a substitute for urban planning through engagement in the initial process of formulation of the big picture and the choice and consequences of strategic options.

The absence of an informed community with a fuller understanding of the limitations of urban planning has been the longer term result. Despite the good intent of the authors of the otherwise sophisticated planning legislation itself, it is a model of opportunity for constructive engagement of the community from planning inception. Unfortunately it carried the seeds of its own destruction by incorporating indulgent oversensitivity to individual opinion. Further loss to the community at large can also come about when planned implementation of development is being discouraged by delay and is of such magnitude that it becomes a distortion within areas of intended change, for example the desirable inner city residential areas of strategic regional significance.

There are, nevertheless, fundamental aspects of the Australian model that reveal a worth of more universal application, especially in those instances where community engagement is presently non-existent and is likely only to be developed incrementally..

A sustainable system of community engagement in the urban planning process depends first and foremost upon transparency between all participants. At the same time it is also time consuming and costly to maintain. However, the measure of achievement is not necessarily a disproportionate community influence, much less a veto control in any determination of conclusions. The worth to be had for all parties involved is in the forthright identification of the real consequences of the planning options and thereby providing a measure of realistic expectations. On that basis, there is real value to be had in providing for an educated urban community.

Secondly, but no less valuably, the indispensable practical value of a well constructed community participation program to any right minded planning process is simply the advantage it offers to the professional planner's role in the management of the planning process overall. Initially, as a means of information gathering; correspondingly as a vehicle for relaying information back through the community. Also it can be an effective means of countering the sometimes less than helpful positioning of community spokespersons so often

acting with a personal ulterior motive. Fundamentally it is a most likely source of perceptive response in the quest for finding appropriately diverse planning outcomes.

The goal of an informed and informative community relies upon an understanding of otherwise critical impediments as follows.

*Transparency:* When the competing motivations for any planning conclusions are openly considered, unacceptable to some as they may be, the outcomes can be better compared and though contestable they are at least understandable after knowing the consequences of all alternatives. No plan has a universally acceptable result and *learning to live with it* may well be the height of achievement in many cases which is especially important where substantial planning changes require acceptance.

*Time consuming:* For effective continuity, a properly designed local community engagement in planning is demanding of the staff time to be provided by the government agency, necessary to not only formulating, but also encouraging fulfilment of the planning agenda. Arranging meetings and venues, disseminating information and sustaining feedback into the planning process is demanding of continuous staff involvement and distracts from *normal* daily routine responsibilities. Application on the part of staff to sustain participatory public interest in the process itself is one that takes place over years, not months, from inception to finality. Sustaining fickle community interests is usually a greater burden than just answering queries arising out of passing interest in occasional matters of planning conflict.

*Costly:* Community engagement has not been widely adopted as an integral part of the planning progress, in part because it is so expensive to sustain. Despite the obviously indispensable value of inclusion of the community as the ultimate client, exclusion from the process is nevertheless also (if unstated) tacitly agreeable. Without community engagement planning becomes simpler, in that there may be less contention and therefore conflict to consider and resolve. Likewise for the community at large, expectations for contribution usually do not run high. A hostile engagement, based on conflict, sends a message and calls only for a brief period of personal effort that, at most, is sporadic. Hence the familiar experience of community protest making headlines without necessarily making headway. But without investment in community participation the cost is to be measured in the structural deficiency of a society that sees planning as synonymous with conflict.

*Misplaced objectives:* The illusion that the best plan is the one that makes *the most people* happy has done great harm to the measure of planning success. The quest for *the common good* and *the public interest* is bedevilled by the need to recognise numerous common bodies of competing interests and the fact that these also vary over time. Planning only ever is the resolution of a set of priorities to be applied under selected and not always the prevailing circumstances. So when outcomes inevitably disappoint, for example where regional considerations prevail over local concern, having a transparent decision making process can help achieve greater understanding of the objectives despite having to bear the brunt of immediate impact of the outcomes. Reality is the best antidote for many of the false premises on which a community role has been justified but failed to deliver any prescriptive model for the future.

*Originality:* Cliché driven concepts of what is being planned for and the inevitable responses that follow partly explains why planning as a profession is often perceived as a dull career move. However, by enlivening the planning challenge, by including multiple agendas, before narrowing the plausible options, planning in practice can at least be seen to have asked more incisive questions of deeper interest and that go beyond the otherwise *certain knowledge* and accepted *truths*. Such as the fact that all traffic congestion is a measure of failure; the purpose of planning is to resist change instead of being an instrument of it; any



old building retention is justified by a claim to heritage preservation; increase in population density means destruction of community values, etc. etc. Varied though the urban prejudices may be throughout different cultures our professional solutions to change will continue to be in the global moulding of today's responses, as epitomised by gated residential communities, the inappropriate transfer of imitative urban design *solutions* and mega scale responses to accommodation justified by satisfaction of what are perceived to be overriding economic imperatives alone.

*The presumption of Veto:* Engagement of the community values constructively does not mean the automatic displacement of any competing agenda akin to *having God on my side* and being used as a divisive mechanism or a propaganda tool. It is fundamentally for the purpose of tapping into some as yet unmined resource of knowledge that can contribute to our city living environments and beyond what is available from other sources. A community voice is not universal nor need it be absolutely representative in the views expressed, in recognition of which it is to be taken as one view amongst others.

When the ultimate solution is found to be pertinent to any given set of circumstances, it is more than likely that regular assumptions will have been avoided and the answers will be just that much more relevant. Undoubtedly using the engaged community as the conduit for both gaining and disseminating information to the community makes the task of compromising within the planned outcomes just that much easier for all parties concerned.

The role of community participation as inherited on a world-wide basis, is inconsistent in its delivery, generally immature in its development, misconstrued and otherwise undervalued. We all do not need to have experienced the hyper-ventilation rates of change experienced by some to feel challenged by rather than being part of the urban process. The urban outcomes that do succeed mostly rely on the tolerance of its populations rather than any sense of direct participation in their formulation and satisfactions. Therefore until the legitimacy of an effective community role is universally recognised, we will by and large continue to inherit the similarly indifferent urban responses that we have today. We all deserve better.

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