



family support & community activities

Inaugural Margaret Barry Memorial Lecture

event

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Building e-communities: community development and the changing nature of neighbourhoods

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This City Space

The land of what is now the City of Sydney has been contested space for over two hundred years. Here Pemelwuy led the Cadigal clan of the Eora people in resistance to the European invasion of their lands, until their defeat but not capitulation under the barrage of biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction deployed against them. As the British crown populated the land with a mixture of military guards and condemned criminals, a certain view began to establish itself among the settlers about the way land should be used. Over the following generations, Sydney, David Williamson's Emerald City, played out in physical space, the political struggles between classes, religions and ethnic groups that would define the city and its neighbourhoods.

When I first became aware of inner Sydney I was a youngster hanging around my father's dry cleaning business in Taylor Square. His plant was in a lane behind

Kinsela's funeral business, and I would watch the comings and goings of the hearses and the men who worked them lounging about, smoking and telling tales of the lives of those whose corpses they handled. The streets would be full of colourful characters from every corner of the world, though the politics of the area were firmly in the control of the Irish Catholic community whose churches and pubs seemed to catch my eye wherever I turned. I guess I would have been about five then, a time that the Australian Census tells us most of the inner city was made up of tenants living in decaying terraces rotting in the lea of decades-old rent control. Less than a decade after the end of the War, my refugee parents had established themselves in the heartland of an old Australia, albeit one experiencing the first surges of both the non-Anglo European immigration, and the local baby boom.

Over the next decade or so, until he moved his business to Bondi, my father and I would share my Saturdays and holidays working in the shop, and watching the face of Australia change before our eyes. Across the road the barber was Greek – the café we ate at was Czech, while the fruiterer was of course Italian. The employees in the business were mainly itinerant east coast Aussie drifters, some Aboriginal, straight out of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, salt of the earth blokes. Later one was revealed in dramatic circumstances as the self-proclaimed Fuhrer of the Australian Nazi Party. He had been holding branch meetings upstairs after work, behind the back of his own favourite Jew, my father, whose parents had been annihilated in the Lodz ghetto in 1942. Australia harboured its own contradictions.

Thirty years ago

I returned to the inner city in my university years, living in Balmain as it first tasted gentrification, then

in Redfern where Marie Bashir was the local community psychiatrist trying to manage the impact of urban poverty and dislocation on the now crowded tenements, with their sleeping shifts of immigrant factory workers and their shell-shocked young brides. It was during this period that I first met Marg Barry. I was working on a community development project exploring the use of the new medium of potable video, using South Sydney Community Aid as a base, and making local contacts through The Settlement. She was a homeowner in Waterloo who had just come face to face with the redevelopment zeal of the NSW Housing Commission under its crusading Chairman Jack Bourke, and its very efficiently bureaucratic secretary David Richmond (later a Health and then an Olympics bureaucrat).

The politics of the inner city were never simple – this was a period of Robin Askin as one of the more corrupt Premiers in Australian history, funding vast redevelopment plans in conjunction with many of the post-war immigrant entrepreneurs, drawing on funding from the Moscow Narodny bank, and being opposed by the unions led by new Communist leaders such as Jack Munday. The old Irish Catholic Labor branches still ran the City, until Askin replaced them with administrators and then re-gerrymandered the boundaries to produce a right-of-centre council, led in those days by the maverick Lord Mayor, Nick Shehadie (Marie Bashir's husband). Then, as now, the politics of the city were about power – of capital over labour, of the Whites over the Blacks, of the old Australia over the new Australia, of men over women. Marg emerged as a leader of a new type, one of a number of women who were blooded in the resident action movement (like Carol Baker in North Sydney and later Genni Macaffrey) and proved to be relentless foes of the developers and demolishers who were seeking to remake the city in their interests.

Clover Moore is the most recent and arguably the most sophisticated of these. They occupied a niche that had not existed prior to the mid 1960s – tertiary educated homeowners drawn to the inner city by its Victorian architecture, village topography, and appearance of communal solidarity. They were informed by a unique combination of feminism, popular mobilisation experiences, middle class expectations about quality of life and control of one's space, and a passion for their own home. They nudged their way between the old power players – Labor machines representing Anglo-Australian tenants, who had campaigned for public housing throughout the fifties and sixties; state bureaucracies mandated to push over the old urban form and replace it with acres of modernist high-rise into which the welfare state would shoe-horn its clients; and the developers freed to package the sky under the Strata Title Act, devised by one of them (Dusseldorf of Lend Lease) in order to produce profit, quite literally, out of thin air.

Urban struggles and social change

Through the 1970s, urban battles raged across Sydney – in the Rocks, in Woollomooloo, in Surry Hills, in Glebe, in Ultimo, and in South Sydney. In the midst of these struggles the Federal government changed – Whitlam with his Urban Affairs Minister Tom Uren, swept into office on the promise of a new deal for cities. At the time the language was all about participatory planning – even developers sought to co-opt resident groups to devise frameworks for development that would avoid the feared call for a Green Ban. Although the Builders' Labourers' Federation had been

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tamed by the late 1970s there remained a widespread recognition of resident rights, and an emerging strategy for consultative local planning.

In the midst of the turmoil the Federal government created the Australian Assistance Plan, an attempt to develop a participatory social planning model that would bring together local people, communities, local government and regional planners to devise programs that would help alleviate poverty and disadvantage. Across the country some twenty-five or so regional councils for social development were instigated, funded by the Commonwealth and requiring

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collaboration between local government and local communities.

For many local Councils, these regional councils for social development (RCSDs) with their paid community development workers and organising resources, were anathemas. They destabilised local power by enabling voluntary action groups to participate more aggressively, and to undertake research into community issues that were not directly defined and controlled by the old regimes. They also fostered the leadership skills and aspirations of people who were not tied by loyalty or business to either Labor or commercial interests (such as real estate agents). Implicit muscle in the new equation came at least early on from the militant



Nicholson of "The Australian" newspaper: www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au

unions and their capacity to interfere with the development agendas of major bureaucracies or corporations.

It was in this environment that the Inner Sydney RCSD was established and Marg Barry, by then a well-blooded activist in Waterloo against the Housing Commission, became its co-ordinator. It is a strange irony that this talk is occurring in the week following the Housing Minister's announcement that the rules are changing, the old certainties of public housing tenancy have been terminated, and a new era of public housing as welfare housing (rather than working class community building) is firmly on the page, guaranteeing that the capacity for community leadership will be reduced.

Communities in the 21st Century

This historical context can only provide a very broad indication of the dynamics at work in 2005 – thirty years after those first meetings of the ISRCSD in the halls of Surry Hills, Leichhardt and Redfern. We are still facing the same broad issues in terms of urban power. While we now live in a period of neo-liberal free-market ideology (though my memory of the 1970s under Askin suggests it was hardly different then), the class politics has changed a great deal. Trade unions are not nearly as strong as they were, and a much greater part of the population has no organised representation

of their interests. Fewer people belong to political parties. Far more households have female heads, more children live in poverty, and there are many more single people, often with serious impairments trying to survive in an environment that intensifies their disabilities. Chronic illness is more widespread and a far greater part of the population depends on the disability support pension. Indigenous communities are more self-aware but still very marginalised. Drug abuse and alcoholism has intensified, and people feel far less safe in their neighbourhoods than they used to do. Many more people have been in gaol, or are under the surveillance of the criminal justice authorities.

Turnover of population is accelerating, and as new housing developments bring thousands of new residents into the inner city, few structures exist to build community networks and create what is today fashionably known as social capital. As Emile Durkheim the French sociologist recognised in a similar period in Europe over a century ago, these conditions are classically those associated with rising anomic alienation, a state of disengagement from society that can intensify psychological anguish and social breakdown.

We are seeing in the city new forms of social networks, often facilitated among the young or more affluent through use of new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones (especially SMS). As

the city is transformed we find new commercially-provided communal centres, especially fitness clubs and coffee shops, where people with disposable incomes can link up with like-minds, or check their emails on wireless laptops or multifunction PDAs. Cities are becoming more expensive, less hospitable and more dangerous. Sydney is in the midst of a cataclysmic planning crisis, with social statistics from suicide to asthma out of control, and the sustained run-down of social infrastructure revealing a crumbling edifice beneath. There is not a single social service that can meet the demands of its clients, while an ageing population creates ever-greater pressures for support and quality of life improvement. After decades of tax cuts and privatisation, we have a social framework that leaves many of our most vulnerable citizens stranded, and powerful economic forces feeling quite capable and justified in running them over on their way to greater 'shareholder value'. On the way antiseptic housing estates pop up like instant stalagmites.

Digital city

It is worth turning our attention to the digital divide, that chasm between those who 'have' and those who do 'not have' access to the Internet and related technologies. For 'the haves' government is shifting its service delivery to cyberspace, and Bill Gates has sprinkled Microsoft Foundation dollars on the Commonwealth's national IT policy. For the 'have

nots', we should explore what digital resources the community has and what we might mobilise to balance the traditional inequalities of power.

Information technology theorists talk about two sorts of IT community. One is the 'community of interest', where people build their own relationships, exchange information and strengthen their capacity to operate. Community is then about self-awareness and active engagement where we find everything from yahoo groups to closed societies organised around hobbies, or political interests or philosophical discussions.

On the other side is the commercialisation of community, the creating of groups that are not self-aware but are nevertheless linked because some government or corporate body wishes to see them as a group with common characteristics – as clients, customers or consumers. Here we find the increasingly omni-present Alpha practices of companies such as Amazon, that track individual Internet search patterns and feed back to them appropriate behaviours for people like them – usually purchase behaviours.

Back in 1997 the NSW government created *connect.nsw*, a plan to make the state a leader in the use of electronic networks. The goals were to incorporate community needs, improve regional and remote access and establish regional electronic communities. One of the outcomes has been the creation of Community Technology Centres (CTCs), but only some rural communities are actually connected in this strategy. The potential for the establishment of sites in urban suburbs, regions or neighbourhoods has not been activated. On a local government level, NSW councils have an IT project to build similar, though less sophisticated websites. *Local-e-Online action for NSW*, funded by the Commonwealth's *Networking the Nation* program, says it wants community participation and enhanced democracy, but succeeds mostly

in delivering council information. Only in CTC's do we find some idea of access to technology as a strategy for facilitating social participation, and yet increasingly these CTCs are being driven to cover their bottom line through small business activities. In addition, the NSW Government's *Community Builders Website* facilitates communication about 'how to do' community development, but it has no sense of activism nor does it exude a philosophy of participatory democracy.

There are apparently no government initiatives in the inner city; no need or desire to enhance democracy or encourage community participation as government priorities. A systematic exploration of the website of the City of Sydney council reveals no such public commitment, nor any framework for activism, other than a listing of neighbourhood groups and contact phone numbers. Some community groups in Ultimo and Darlinghurst have active local networks, with functioning websites. So as with most things in the inner city, it has been left to community activists to try to develop ways of resisting the marginalisation of local people. The only community building websites in South Sydney are being developed by local communities – not by government as elsewhere. Newtown Neighbourhood Centre offers a local information service, though not a community network, while REDWatch offers a running commentary on the State government's activities in the Redfern area. As many critiques of e-democracy have noted, most governmental activity has focussed on telling people what government wishes them to hear/read/see.

The Victorian government has taken a rather different direction – establishing *VicNet* as a free environment for the building of communities of interest. As *VicNet* has grown, it has enabled hundreds of social groups to set up networks that allow information exchange and mobilisation.

Building digital neighbourhoods

Studies of digitally interlinked communities in North America reveal some interesting trends – showing quite striking social benefit from wiring living environments (or these days wirelessing them). In a study of a new Toronto community in the late 1990s, where some homes were electronically linked by high speed broadband and others were not, researchers found that wired households were more likely to know their neighbours, and more of them, more likely to interact with them socially and visit them, and more likely to share social tasks, thereby building social capital. Wired communities were felt to be safer, and more supportive.

In reflecting on the Toronto research in 2003, the researcher, Keith Hampton argued that collective action depends on a dense network of weaker ties – in fact very strong emotional ties may limit collective action. Wired residents, connected to a local neighbourhood email list (about 50-60 families) are part of a dense but weak network – exactly the conditions necessary for collective action to be facilitated. Hampton found that the capacity for collective action was dramatically enhanced through the sharing of information – in his case by frustrated homeowners of *Netville*, whose early experience of the estate on which they lived was not up to expectations.

I-Neighbors

When Keith Hampton moved to MIT in Cambridge, Mass. in the USA (where I interviewed him), he created *I-neighbor*, a huge project that enables anyone in the USA or Canada to join a local virtual neighbourhood. Built around postcodes, Hampton and his students have created circumscribed electronic communities that are open to anyone living within the local area. Resources of the I-neighbourhood, includes the matches function, which identifies people who are similar to you in the neighbourhood – potentially

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Building e communities

available to share in like-minded activities. Neighbourhoods can create polls to test local reaction to issues. You can decide to join (and leave) the local email list, and use the GovLink function – to send faxes (better than emails) to government officials and politicians, including those identified by local residents as important.

Conclusion

While governments have identified ICTs as being critical to efficient governance, pathways to increase participation and democracy are less apparent on their agendas. Activist networks and websites now abound, though they tend to attract the already committed individual. Community development requires us to move beyond that notion – and recognise that advocates can too easily lose their legitimacy if they are not closely connected to their constituencies. It is hardly in the interest of those with power in this city to empower those whom they wish to roll over; or to put it more crudely, it is unlikely they will go out for their way to help trouble makers make trouble. The challenge for community development remains as always, how to empower those without voices, enable those marginalised by social change, and encourage those devalued by the wider society. The digital world remarkably can help to do these things, and build on the struggles of the past in the process. Over the next few years, community organisations will have to take on these challenges, or find themselves digging weeds from the verges of the information superhighway. ICT is only a means to the goal of social justice, but increasingly it is a necessary means. □

This is an edited version of the lecture

industrial relations



Photo: Jane Rogers

Still Not Happy, John!

How changes to Industrial Relations will impact on the community sector

The battle to protect workers pay and conditions is in full swing across Australia. From outback Western Australia to under the Harbour Bridge, workers have rallied to voice their defiance to the Howard Government's attempt to wind back awards and the protection they provide. The first round has gone to us, with Howard's approval rating plummeting as Australians are informed of how their hard-won pay and conditions will be up for grabs if he has his way. And there's growing opposition in his own ranks, with some National Party senators and Family First's Steve Fielding expressing disquiet with the proposed changes.

The Australian Services Union represents some of the lowest paid workers in NSW and is determined not to let their members lose the modest increases they gained with new SACS award, in November 2001. Reducing the pay and conditions of those who care for the elderly, people with disabilities, occupants of refuges and others who are disadvantaged or marginalised could see good workers leave the sector and the standards of service drop. Apart from being unfair to workers, the proposed changes could affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of community service recipients in NSW.

Howard's proposed changes would abolish the SACS Award and reduce the sixty rights workers now have down to five "essential conditions". The Industrial Relations Commission would no longer set the minimum wage; instead a body appointed by the government would set the minimum hourly rate. As Howard has opposed every increase granted by the commission, his appointees would hardly support workers getting a fair wage.

The abolition of unfair dismissal laws for workplaces under 100 would place the vast majority of community workers in workplaces where you could be unfairly dismissed and receive no compensation. Peter Costello has suggested, that ultimately, the laws will be scrapped altogether. The new head of the Anglican Church, Dr Phillip Aspinall has attacked Howard's proposed changes asking if it is moral to allow workers to be unfairly dismissed? Workers in the community sector will be very vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal by employers who often put their workers rights and conditions last.

These attacks on organised labour is the most ferocious of any government in nearly a hundred years, and as Bob Gould points out in the following article, the last time a conservative government launched such an attack on workers rights it cost them dearly.

See ACTU facts on dismissal - page sixteen