

**COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING THROUGH  
URBAN SOCIABILITY**

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## Introduction

This paper introduces and explores the concept of ‘urban sociability’<sup>i</sup>. It argues that urban sociability is difficult to quantify – even define – but nevertheless represents the sum part of everyday patterns of life, comings and goings, memories and associations of places and qualities such as friendliness, civility and good manners. Urban sociability exists where communities of people identify, broadly speaking, with one another and with the place in which they live. This means that urban sociability is a combination of robust communities, good places – neighbourhoods, districts, suburbs, free-standing towns – and forms of social life that occur in public places. In turn, this means that in order to comprehend urban sociability, and to see its strengthening as a realistic policy objective, we need to first understand how theories of community, place and public social life might be combined. These clearly over-lap in the real world, but in the theory there are many overlaps and conjunctions that remain to be explained. At its simplest, urban sociability is the playing out of community norms and values in the places where people live. Where urban sociability exists, we can posit, community life and the sense of place and local identity will tend to be stronger. More than this, it seems likely that a healthy balance of community, place identity, a well-liked public realm and public social life will produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Urban sociability is an example of *gestaltdt*.

The remainder of this paper explores the concepts of community, place and public social life in more detail. It concludes by proposing how this concept might be considered and applied in practical, everyday situations. In doing so, it identifies an approach and a policy terrain for government agencies to pursue.

## 1. Stories, Stones and Memories

In a MORI survey of *Attitudes Towards Heritage* commissioned by English Heritage in the summer of 2000 respondents were asked to define what they understood by the terms 'heritage' and 'the historic environment'. Although initial perceptions of heritage were low, when prompted most people agreed that the historic environment is made up of:

Historic Buildings and Palaces	74%
Ancient Monuments	69%
Historic Gardens and Parks	66%
Local History	57%
Battlefields	56%
Industrial Archaeology	55%
Conservation of Buildings and Monuments	51%
History	51%
Art Galleries and Museums	50%
Archaeology	50%

A sizeable minority of people also agreed that the following are part of the historic environment:

National Parks	46%
Towns and Villages	45%
Canals and Rivers	44%
Landscapes	42%

Most people would agree that all of the above should be protected from demolition or redevelopment. But in some cases, history itself is contested, and so too is the meaning attached to events and places. For some, the great ancestral homes symbolise class divisions in English society. Others simply do not value places as having historical relevance to them at all. For some, Federation Square commemorates Australia's coming of age as an independent state, but for others its importance is simply as a gathering place, a space to hang out. These differing views of history and places are part subjective and part objective, but no less keenly held for that. There is no simple way out of this conundrum, no complete consensus even on what the past is: historical dates and reported events? the documented past? the remembered past? the mythical past<sup>ii</sup>? Does it matter whether Robin Hood or King Arthur really existed, if we all take some meaning from their reputed adventures? Is the Battle of Britain or Gallipoli only important to those who were there? The best we can hope for, arguably, is broad agreement on the fundamentally important elements of the past. This implies the need for a baseline conception of the history we hold in importance. The present - and the future - are history in the making. But the importance of the past is that tells us why we exist. The historic environment, represented in places, is the most visible connection to the past.

What are those blue remembered hills,  
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,  
I see it shining plain,  
The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again.

*AE Housman*

Landscapes play an important role in both shaping and sustaining cultural values within societies.<sup>iii</sup> The Housman quote is important not only because the hills are remembered, but because the poet is identifying with a place. If not who he has become, at least they help define who he was and where he came from. This occurs for all cultures including, for example, the Aborigine tribes of Australia whose history is represented and encompassed by Songlines across the land.<sup>iv</sup> The upshot is that people identify with landscapes as representing their society and belonging to themselves and society. In England's case, most people carry with them mental images of landscapes which sum up Englishness: the White Cliffs of Dover, the Lakes, the Yorkshire Dales, the Vale of White Horse, Exmoor, Salisbury Plain, the Peak District. In Australia there is the Great Barrier Reef, Ayer's Rock, the Great Dividing Range, the Murray River, the Great Australian Bight.

This is overlain with mental maps of landscapes closer to where people live. Within the cities themselves, people tend to have strong views on the importance of retaining parklands and places such as Hampstead Heath or Fitzroy Gardens or Hyde Park. This also applies to local streets and neighbourhoods and centres, and important local reference points: the town hall, the old theatre, the oldest house, a group of buildings on the High Street, examples of vernacular or federation architecture, favourite meeting places. This latter point implies an appreciation and understanding of local distinctiveness - the unique qualities of places - that goes some way beyond individual buildings of even historical or architectural importance. Individual places have their own distinct sense of place or *genus loci*.

## 2. The Idea of Community

The *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* defines 'community' as a group of people living together in sympathetic association, more usually in a village, town or suburb<sup>v</sup>. This rather benign definition is difficult to disagree with, yet it does not take us very far in our understanding of what communities are or how they develop. This is especially problematic at a time when just about any interest group or collection of individuals is referred to as a 'community'. Even Hollywood, these days, it seems is a community, so too collections of estate agents or even medical consultants. In part this reflects the fact that many people these days identify themselves as belonging to 'a community of interest', some shared enthusiasm<sup>vi</sup>. This extends to people who enjoy hill-walking, photography, flower-arranging, collecting old books or whatever. Quite often these activities occur in a particular place, but others are placeless in the sense they occur in cyber as opposed to real space, or are otherwise developed from mental rather than physical activities.

The concept of 'community' as a sociological term has a long history. In the late nineteenth century, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies drew a distinction between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft*, usually translated as 'society'. The distinction for Tonnies was whether social relationships were more intimate and durable or more impersonal, often fleeting<sup>vii</sup>. Tonnies was especially interested in the loss of *gemeinschaft* as a consequence of industrialization, rapid urbanisation and the breakdown of traditional society. Tonnies went on to argue that *gemeinschaft* could survive in village and small town life, but would be replaced in cities and metropolitan areas by *gesellschaft*. This spatial separation of community and society has proved a serious obstacle for policy-makers interested in reinvigorating the concept of community in urban places. For many, it was fitting that community should come to be overtaken by society<sup>viii</sup> as the latter was seen as more responsive to change and modernization.

‘Some believe that the hope of our social order lies in the return to the local ties of neighbourhood. The trend of our civilization, however, has generally been sensed to lead in the opposite direction. There can be no return to the local self-contained neighbourly community’.<sup>ix</sup>

Catastrophically, this view would be shared by modernist architects such as Le Corbusier whose vision of the city had no place for local communities. In western Europe, Britain and the United States, great damage was visited on the cities in the name of modernism, slum clearance and rational comprehensive planning, notably from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s. Much the same trend was followed in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and East Germany. Meanwhile, the garden city planners – Ebenezer Howard, Raymond Unwin – were moving in an opposite direction, arguing for a return to the more wholesome social life of the village. The idea that communities were surviving in urban areas, or existed at all, was largely ignored by modernists and garden city planners in equal measure.

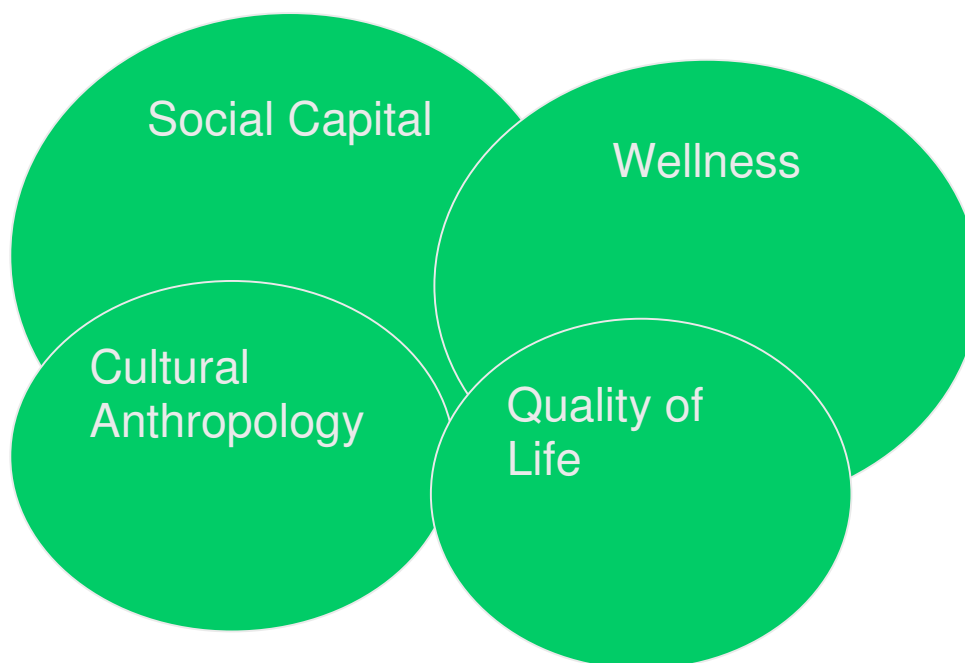
And yet, important work in the East End of London<sup>x</sup> and the West End of Boston<sup>xi</sup> demonstrated that not only were such communities surviving (the planners and the blitz in the case of London), they were characterised by strong social relations and common identity. Later because of wide-spread dissatisfaction with modernism and redevelopment, urban planning came to pay much closer attention to community development, or at least community consultation, during the 1970s. This followed the rise of the civic trust movement in the 1960s and the Skeffington Report on public consultation within the planning system, published in 1969. Levels of public consultation would increase slowly in the UK under the second and third Thatcher governments, and would be taken up more effectively under the Major government’s *City Challenge* programme, a forerunner of the New Deal for Communities of 1998. This would appear at least to mark a recognition by governments that pronouncements on the death of community in

urban places have been premature. For people seem to value local places, the collection of stones that form the built environment, local landmarks, and the association of place with identity and history.

One view posited by academic theorists is that communities, in the old sense of populations sharing distinctive identities, no longer exist. Or if they do, there are now simply too many 'communities' – of place, faith, space, interest, identity – for the term community to have any value left as a social concept. Worse still, there is the argument that communities can be 'sites' of conflict and oppression, for example where arcane religious and cultural practices permit discrimination against women. It seems that community is a good thing, except when it is a bad thing; that is, if it exists at all.

Yet the idea of community lingers on, even if we are not always sure what it means. There are now dozens of theoretical approaches to the understanding of community, ranging from the high order theories of social capital<sup>xii</sup>, through network theory<sup>xiii</sup>, complexity theory, theories of place and not forgetting the dreaded post-modernism. The problem, as David Adams<sup>xiv</sup> has pointed out, is that few of these theories are of much practical use when faced with the task of helping communities, or perhaps more appropriately in helping them help themselves. Alan Tranter<sup>xv</sup> has defined community development as 'the art of connecting', the power of telling stories and having conversations locally. His view is that the 'sociology of community' is made up of four inter-locking elements: social capital, wellness, quality of life and cultural anthropology.

**Figure 1: The Sociology of Community**



*Source: Derived from Alan Tranter.*

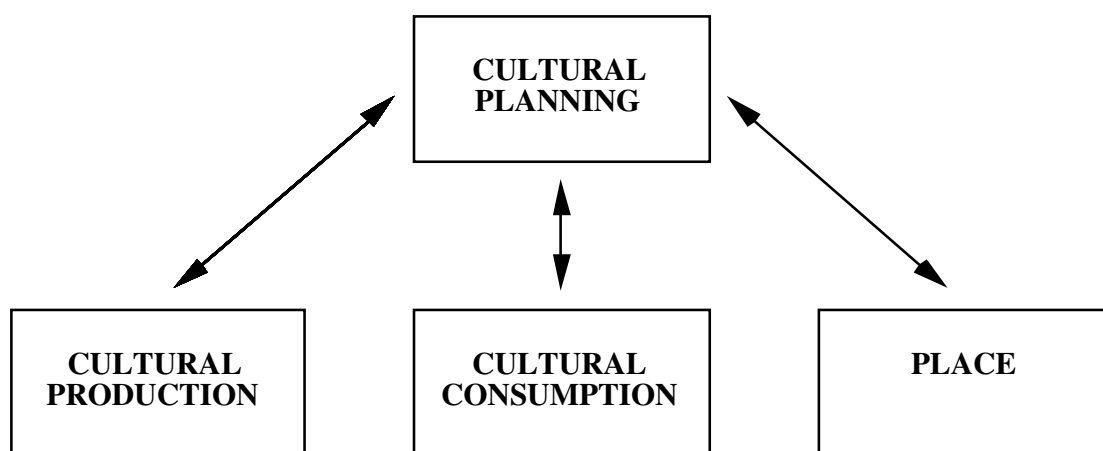
Social capital refers in the main to a population's capacity to benefit from life chances and opportunities for improvement, but also to the set of values and support systems those populations build up over time. Wellness is an indicator of health, physical and mental, and therefore the extent to which people can pursue opportunities and their personal aspirations. The quality of life includes living conditions, disposable income, access to recreation, leisure and culture, and local environmental conditions. Cultural anthropology refers in the main to shared values, traditions and customs and the overall way of life of a particular social group. These are often, but not always, derived from ethnic identities. Interestingly, Tranter also posits that a great deal of identity which attaches to a

community is derived from the local economy, the profile of businesses, their goods and services, patterns of trade and customers. This is most easily seen in relation to local shops and mainstreets, but community identity is also affected by how a place earns its living, as in for example the clothing and jewellery sectors of Tuscany and Umbria or the sugar cane industry of northern New South Wales.

David Adams has developed the concept of community capital, which he sees as an ensemble of relations<sup>xvi</sup>. These relations, in turn, derive in part from a community's assets, an 'endowment' made up of the histories, rules and behaviours of people and places. Strong communities tend to build up knowledge about themselves and their places, from which evolves a creation of meaning. Where they feel impelled to 'mobilise' their propensity to do so will be helped or hindered by their own capacity in such matters as leadership, having recognised meeting places, infrastructure and equipment and a strong local network. With the breakdown of large bureaucracies and the culture of state 'provision', Adams sees a need for more distributed and localised systems of planning, funding, accountability and delivery of social programs.

This idea of 'community capital' is in some ways similar to the 'paradigm' of cultural planning as advocated by Franco Bianchini.<sup>xvii</sup> Bianchini sees cultural planning as a "process of identifying, developing, managing and exploiting a city's cultural resources". As such, it involves monitoring and acting upon economic, cultural, social, environmental, political and symbolic trends and identities, cutting across the public and private sectors, different institutional concerns and different professional disciplines. Policies for cultural development should therefore relate to lifestyle, work and industry, leisure, sports, tourism, hobbies, political attitudes and moral values.

**Figure 2: Cultural Planning as a Holistic Approach**



What is interesting for our purposes is the notion of identifying and using a city's – or a neighbourhood's or a community's – cultural 'resources', or assets, not all of which will be immediately obvious or helpfully tangible. This should certainly include built arts and cultural facilities such as libraries, local museums and art galleries. But these days one should also take account of recording studios, edit suites, workshops, access level training in the arts and digital media, the development of traditions of skills and the concept of places as more or less creative milieu.

This is why, perhaps, the Department for Victorian Communities<sup>1xviii</sup> itself includes such unorthodox measures of community strength as 'feeling valued' or being able to raise \$2000 from friends and family in an emergency. These are all part and parcel of a community's asset or resource base (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Community Strength Indicators**

- Feeling safe walking alone after dark;
- Enjoying diversity in the local area;
- Feeling there are opportunities to have a real say on local issues;
- Feeling valued by society;
- Volunteering;
- Membership of Sports Groups
- Membership of School Groups;
- Attendance at local community events;
- Ability to get help from friends, family or neighbours;
- Ability to raise \$2000 within two days in an emergency.

Source: Department for Victorian Communities, *Indicators of Community Strength in Victoria*, 2004.

All of this, of course, makes more sense and is arguably easier to achieve where a community, as well as being a collection of people, is connected to a place. This is not a new argument, although it has lately been reinvented<sup>xix</sup>. Although communities of interest – many of them organised around shared enthusiasms such as Star Trek or vintage cars – are clearly important aspects of social and personal life, it is often in places that communities congregate, live and are or become attached to<sup>xx</sup>. In this way, the idea of community capital is grounded in the historical realities of a community, focuses on local knowledge and story-telling and is connected to place. Place matters, places matter.

### 3. A Sense of Place

It is a relatively simple task to think of a successful place, to go there and know that this is a good place. We all have our favourites. But it is much more difficult to know why a place is successful, and importantly, whether and how this success can be generated by setting the right conditions. What is it that "makes some places a pleasure to be in and others irredeemably dreary?"<sup>xxi</sup>

This debate has been ongoing amongst urban designers for at least 30 years now. It is an important debate for it allows us to understand *why* places are successful rather simply than observing or appreciating that this is so. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to draw up a checklist of 'urban success indicators', as Barry Sherman<sup>xxii</sup> has done (see Figure 4). What Sherman has provided is a list of qualities or characteristics of successful urban places. He tells us what to look for but not why it is there. For in addition to the 'surface appearance' which such indicators represent, we must understand that good urban places have a structure and an underlying dynamic of activity. Unless this is properly understood, it is more likely that rather than a successful urban place, what will be produced is an artefact, the ersatz city which, "even though it may appear exotic and picturesque, is superficial and has an effect only on the first-time visitor"<sup>xxiii</sup>. This is why it is so important to conceptualise fully what is meant by 'place'.

**Figure 4: Indicators of Successful Urban Places**

- "1. planning will be invisible and the results will look natural, as though they happened of their own accord;
2. there will be interesting and stimulating shapes;
3. the 'familiarity' of streets and street life will be celebrated;
4. there will be secret places which once discovered grow on you, making you look deeper to find more;
5. there will be surprises, to keep citizens awake, provide topics of conversation, prevent ennui;
6. experiments will be encouraged, and there will be exciting things to do;
7. there will be areas and opportunities for informal, casual meetings to take place, including warm and friendly bars and pubs;
8. food and drink will be a treat, and people will be able to purchase and consume it at varying prices and degrees of leisure;
9. there will be a variety of comfortable places to sit and wait - a city worth living in has to be a city worth sitting in;
10. there will be a good balance between the needs to prevent loneliness and to preserve anonymity and privacy;
11. changing seasons will not draw attention away from the sterner pursuits of daily life but rather will be an integral part of a continually changing city, and celebrated as such;
12. the senses will be heightened: affection/friendliness/hospitality; a sense of belonging; historical and cultural continuity; a sense of fun/humour; opportunities for gossip; open-mindedness; vitality; fantasy; flamboyance; colour; beauty/aesthetic stimulus."

*(Adapted from Sherman, 1988)*

Over the years, there has been a split of sorts amongst urban designers over what constitutes urban quality or the sense of place. There are those such as Cullen<sup>xxiv</sup> who place greatest emphasis on physicality - design styles, ornamentation and featuring, the way buildings open out into spaces, gateways, vistas, landmarks and the like. This is the rational objective classical view of urban design. Others such as Alexander<sup>xxv</sup> or Lynch<sup>xxvi</sup> stress the psychology of place, bound up in the notion of 'mental maps' which people use as internal guides to urban places. In doing so, they rely on their senses to tell them whether a place *feels* safe, comfortable, vibrant, quiet or threatening. This is the romantic subjective view of urban design.

If we were to combine these approaches we would see that urban quality must be considered in much wider terms than the physical attributes of buildings, spaces and street patterns. To be sure, there are many physical elements which, if combined properly (with each other and with the psychology of place) produce urban quality: architectural form, scale, landmarks, vistas, meeting places, open space, greening and so on. Yet the notion of urban quality is clearly more importantly bound up in the social, psychological and cultural dimensions of place.

Few theorists have managed to bridge this divide, and most remain either predominantly physical determinists or subjective mental mappers. Initially something of a voice from the wilderness, Jane Jacobs<sup>xxvii</sup> was the first to explore urban quality from the premise that *activity* both produces and mirrors quality in the built environment. She identifies four essential determinants which govern or set the conditions for activity: a mixture of primary use, intensity, permeability of the urban form and a mixture of building types, ages, sizes and conditions. Jacobs and others such as Gehl<sup>xxviii</sup> and Cook<sup>xxix</sup> argue that successful urban places are based predominantly on street life, and the various ways in which activity occurs in and through buildings and spaces.

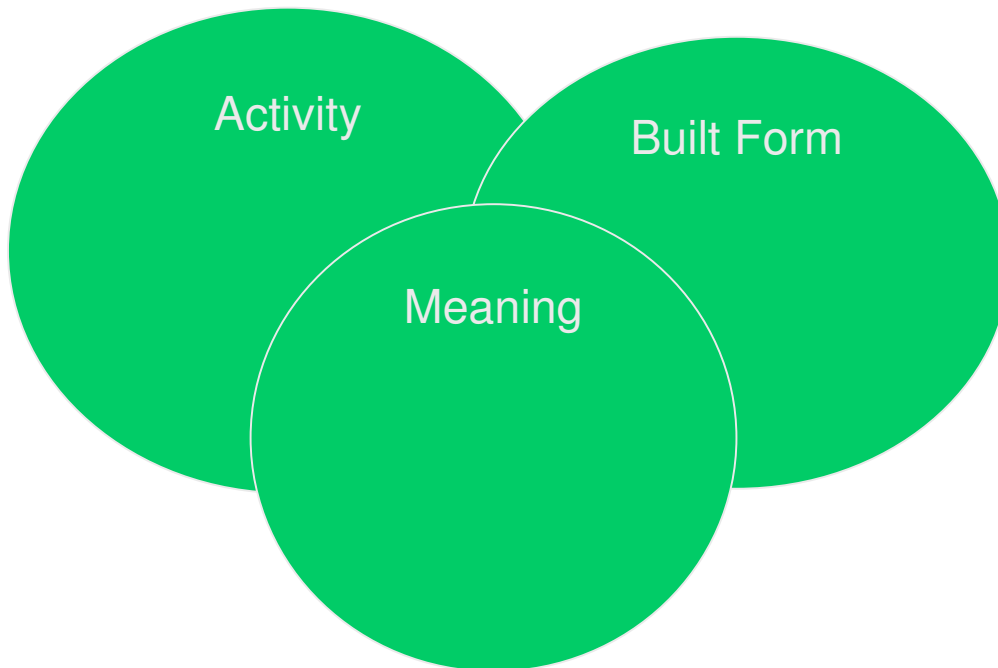
This appreciation led Peter Buchanan to comment that:

"Urban design is essentially about place-making,  
where places are not just a specific space,  
but all the activities and events which made it possible".<sup>xxx</sup>

Thus, we can now see that successful urban places must combine quality in three essential elements: physical space, the sensory experience and activity. Theorists such as Canter<sup>xxx</sup> show the components of a sense of place and the relationship (in abstract terms) between them. Canter's metaphor (Figure 3) combines the urban design perspectives of those concerned with mental maps and "imageability", with those who consider the physical attributes of place, and with those who stress the essential importance of activity or what has also been referred to as 'natural animation'<sup>xxxii</sup> or the "city transaction base". This has been most succinctly put by David Engericht<sup>xxxiii</sup> who argues (perhaps over-stressing the point a little) that cities were "invented":

"...to facilitate exchange of information, friendship, material goods,  
culture, knowledge, insight, skills and also the exchange of  
emotional, psychological and spiritual support."

**Figure 3: A Metaphor for Place**



*Source: David Canter 'A Metaphor for Place'.*

By pursuing the logic set out above, we can make use of the components of place to derive a set of preconditions and principles for the creation of successful urban places.

### *Activity*

Activity is very much the product of two separate but related concepts: vitality and diversity. Vitality is what distinguishes successful urban areas from the others. It refers to the numbers of people in and around the street (pedestrian flows) across different times of the day and night, the uptake of facilities, the number of cultural events and celebrations over the year, the presence of an active street life, and generally the extent to which a place feels alive or lively. Indeed, successful places appear to have their own pulse or rhythm, a life force or *elan vital*. But this can never be taken for granted, as there are now many examples of previously lively places which have become dull and inert. In the long-term urban vitality can only be achieved where there is a complex diversity of primary land uses and (largely economic) activity.

The simple truth is that combinations of mixtures of activities, not separate uses, are the key to successful urban places. This mixture requires a wide diversity of ingredients, which in turn is dependent on there being sufficient levels of demand to sustain wide-ranging economic activity. City or urban populations, living in relatively close proximity, are large enough to support this economic activity, including such things as coffee houses and cafés, foreign grocery stores, delicatessens, cake shops, cinemas and galleries, pubs and clubs. It is possible to find all of these things in combinations of the large and small, the ordinary and the strange. This means that the key to sustaining diversity lies in there being, within easy travelling distance, relatively large numbers of people with different tastes and proclivities. With rising car ownership and more fluid travel patterns, it is nowadays more likely than it once was that quite small places (towns and even suburbs) can attract enough people to support diversity. But, on balance, the tendency is for larger, more dense settlements to be the ones which can maintain diversity.

Whilst vitality can be gauged by measuring pedestrian flows and movements, the uptake of facilities and the existence or otherwise of 'things to do', the term 'diversity' ranges across a far wider set of indices<sup>xxxiv</sup>: (see Figure 5).

### **Figure 5: Indicators of Urban Diversity**

- the extent of variety in primary land uses, including residential;
- the proportions of locally-owned or more generally independent businesses, particularly shops;
- patterns in opening hours, including the existence of evening and night-time activity;
- the presence and size of street markets, and types of specialism;
- the availability of cinemas, theatres, wine bars, cafés, pubs, restaurants and other cultural and meeting places offering service of different kinds at varying prices and degrees of quality;
- the availability of spaces, including gardens, squares and corners to enable people-watching and other activities such as cultural animation programmes;
- patterns of mixed land ownership so that self-improvement and small-scale investment in property is possible;
- the availability of differing unit sizes of property at varying degrees of cost, so that small businesses can gain a foothold and not be driven out of business by sudden rises in rent and/or property taxes;
- the degree of innovation and confidence in new architecture, so that where possible there should be a variety of building types, styles and design;
- the presence of an active street live and active street frontages.

As a rule, the most lively and interesting urban areas tend to be places of complex variety, with a large representation of small-scale business activity

which trades not only with 'consumers' but with other businesses. Successful local economies are characterised by increasing volumes of trade, constant innovation and the building up of new products and services, networks of suppliers and purchasers. Often now referred to as 'post-Fordism' or the 'sub-contracting-out mode of production', this was always a feature of city economies before modern industrialisation. The successful city economy will be as complex and intricate as possible with myriad networks of firms - and, crucially, a high proportion of small and medium enterprises (SME's) inter-trading and sub-contracting. They will variously and continuously be involved in a dynamic of importing, exporting, import substitution, domestic consumption and adding new work. This is what is meant by 'growing a fine grain city economy'<sup>xxxv</sup>.

### *Image*

Every place has both an identity and an image, but these are not the same. Whilst 'identity' is an objective thing (what a place is actually like), image is a combination of this identity with how a place is perceived. To individuals, the image of a place is therefore their set of feelings and impressions about that place<sup>xxxvi</sup>. These feelings come from a filtering of information received and collected about the place. This filtering is partly based on individuals' values, beliefs and ideas, but also on wider cultural (whether received or otherwise) values, beliefs and ideas. This means that images of place are created from amalgamations of cognition (comprehension or understanding) and perceptions, as well as individual, group and cultural 'personality' constructs or meaning. Thus, the Royal Circus at Bath has an identity (its physical form and setting) which can be comprehended, an image (how it is perceived which depends on the filtering of information received through the senses), and a meaning which, in this case, represents enlightenment, civilisation and 'good manners' architecture. Other places have altogether different identities, images and meaning, and quite often hold out different images and meanings to different people – Soho is one

such example. And, of course, in no small part, image and meaning derive from the activity one finds there, and the built form.

An individual's knowledge of a city is, according to Lynch<sup>xxxvii</sup>, a function of the *imageability* of the urban environment: that is, the extent to which the components of the environment make a strong impression on the individual. In turn, *imageability* is influenced by a city's *legibility*: the degree to which the different elements of the city (defined as paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks) are organised into a coherent and recognisable pattern. By gathering information about these elements, the individual creates both an image of the city, and also a frame of reference. There is now a considerable body of literature dealing with the process of obtaining the spatial knowledge of these elements. One point of disagreement is whether it is paths and districts which serve as early learning frameworks<sup>xxxviii</sup> or whether primary nodes and reference points (landmarks) are the main building blocks in constructing an image of place<sup>xxxix</sup>. It seems likely, however, that paths are more dominant for new residents (finding your way around on an everyday basis) while long-term residents produce more complex mental maps containing both paths and landmarks (environmental cues). Visitors to new places, by contrast, tend to use landmarks as anchor-points in constructing route knowledge.

It is also clear that most people acquire knowledge of a place by a piecemeal 'bottom-up' process which is itself dependent on direct experience. Bits and pieces of knowledge are absorbed and then integrated through the individual's perceptual filters. This results in both an understanding of the city (its form and legibility) and an image of the city. And, again, these perceptual filters are partly individual values and ideas, and partly derived from wider cultural processes and identities.

Now, it is perfectly possible for a proportion of these wider cultural processes, values and identities to have emerged over time from associations of events and

places. For example, "this is where Ned Kelly was captured", "this pub is where Thomas Paine wrote 'The Rights of Man'", "this is where I first met your mother, under the town clock .....". So places come to represent memory, meaning and association for individuals, groups and societies. Sometimes it is clear from the buildings themselves what sort of meaning is being conveyed, for example Canberra could only be a seat of government. Sometimes it is an event (the Peterloo massacre, for example); and other times not from buildings or events or even landmarks, statues or place names, but simply space. This means that in addition to its contribution to a city's transaction base and its legibility, space (as well as buildings) can take on symbolic meaning. This explains the strong feeling which is often aroused when a public space is threatened with development, why civic spaces have always been considered an essential element in a city's identity, and why when asked to draw a mental map of their city, so many people start with a public square or garden.

Over time, successful places come to represent a sense of identity for their users (in the sense of identifying *with* a place). And this often results in a sense of belonging to a place, of feeling involved and taking an interest or perhaps even an active part in its affairs. This we term *psychological access*, and places which achieve this are much more likely to be respected and looked after. This sense of local ownership, however, must also allow for tolerance of strangers, so that successful places engender respect for the place and its people, but also for those who visit. This we term *receptivity*.

### *Form*

In his later work Lynch<sup>xi</sup> wrote of the *qualities* which urban design should seek to achieve, and so create a sense of place, while Alexander<sup>xii</sup> writes of the "quality without a name", which he defines in terms of the recurring and interlocking patterns of events (and, no doubt, meaning) in buildings, spaces and places. Lynch offers five basic dimensions of city performance - vitality, sense, fit, access and control. For Lynch, a vital city is one which successfully fulfils the needs of

its inhabitants within a safe environment - in other words, a good city allows maximum scope for activity. A sensible city is organised so that its residents can perceive and understand the city's form and functions - in other words, its legibility. An accessible city allows people of all ages and backgrounds to gain the activities, resources, services and information that they need. And a city with good control is arranged so that citizens have a say in the management of the spaces in which they work and reside. To varying degrees, we have covered most of this ground in our preceding discussions of activity and image. The question, now, is how activity and image inter-relate with form to generate a sense of place. Or to put it more precisely - can city form be so designed as to stimulate activity, a positive image and therefore a strong sense of place?

Lynch's fifth criterion "fit" seeks to demonstrate how this might be achieved. A city with good fit provides the buildings, spaces and networks required for its residents to pursue their projects successfully. Now, in a very real sense, this "fit" will be governed by the type of place and the range and intensity of activity desired.

That said, we can build up a picture of the fit necessary to achieve a successful place (Figure 6).

### **Figure 6: Urban Fit Indicators**

- complexity
- myriad patterns of movement (especially pedestrians)
- diversity of primary uses
- a fine-grain economy
- an active street life
- variety in opening hours
- the presence of people attractors
- legibility

- imageability
- knowledgeability
- receptivity.

This fit cannot be too precise, for it must allow flexibility for the city to grow organically. (If a city does not grow organically it is merely a planned as opposed to a living thing). This also means that cities must never be wholly predictable, too 'safe' or sanitised. Rather than visual order and certainty, places which work well also allow for a degree of uncertainty and randomness.

#### 4. The Public Realm

Having achieved all of this economic activity and diversity, it is important that at least a proportion of it should occur in the streets, squares and spaces in the city - "the public realm"<sup>xlii</sup>. For it is the public realm and associated semi-public spaces that provide the terrain for social interaction as well as a significant part of a city's transaction base (the market square, the street vendor, the shop frontage, the sidewalk café). It is activities such as these, and the all-important activities of promenading and people watching, which provide the dynamic quality of successful urban places. It is therefore as important to think through the design of the public realm - its sequences, proportions and dimensions - as it is for city blocks and individual buildings.

Lyn Lofland<sup>xliii</sup> argues that the 'public realm' can be distinguished from both 'private' and 'parochial' realms. The private realm, for Lofland, is:

... characterised by ties of intimacy among primary group members who are located within households and personal networks [while the] parochial realm [is] characterised by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbours who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within communities.

Unlike small towns and villages, cities contain not only private realms (private households) and parochial realms (local neighbourhoods) but also public realms: ... made up of the public places or spaces ... that tend to be inhabited ... by persons who are strangers to one another and who 'know' one another only in terms of occupational or non-personal identity categories.

Here an element of confusion arises, as Lofland uses the term 'public realm' to denote particular forms of social relations, when its accepted use in the urban literature refers to a city's system of streets and spaces. It is necessary to

distinguish between the public realm as a physical entity and the forms of public social life that may take place there.

For example, Dutch academic Jan Oosterman<sup>xliv</sup> has pointed out that during the 1990s many cities and towns across Western Europe poured investment into improving and re-creating the urban public realm, in the redesign of plazas, streets and parks. Moreover, these designs are intended to have a social impact by encouraging more active social life in urban public space. However, argues Oosterman, by seeing public space and the events which occur within it as contributing to "social organisation, the fulfilment of societal needs"<sup>xlv</sup> planners and urban designers and urban sociologists ignore the perspective of the everyday user. Oosterman argues that, far from being in public space to participate in a wider, perceived by urban professionals as laudable, social activity of 'citizenship', individuals congregate in public places to indulge personal and private interests. Apart from drinking, relaxing and enjoying the sunshine, people enjoy a number of activities which derive from the public character of the setting: watching the world go by, being 'entertained by street life', bumping into people one knows, showing off-the promenade, seeing and being seen, meeting strangers, flirting and perhaps (though not always) a sexual encounter. These observations led Oosterman to conclude that

it is not the meeting of strangers that is important, but the spectacle provided by them. Cultural and personal differences are neither left at home nor bridged [in public spaces] ... On the contrary, some public spaces, like the streets where one strolls past the cafes, are used to show personality, to show differences in culture, style, behaviour and taste.<sup>xlvi</sup>.

The secret to public social life in cities is, therefore, not so much to be public in public but private in public. Or both. Public forms of social life are then distinct from but related to the spaces in which they take place.

As a physical entity, the public realm in towns and cities performs a number of 'functions':

- as an integral part of the built form or townscape;
- as neutral territory where everyone has a right to gather;
- as a place where historical events occurred, and where collective memory resides;
- as places where public forms of social life can occur.

In his seminal work *Life Between Buildings* Jan Gehl argues that the public realm in cities has traditionally performed three roles: as places to meet other people socially, as market-places to transact in, and as channels of movement<sup>xlvii</sup>. He argues that one of the great losses to urban living in many towns and cities has been the re-siting, removal or indoor siting of street Markets which, as places of exchange have been a focal point for all manner of social and economic transactions in urban history. Very often, as in Northampton say, the market square is the town's most important public space.

Gehl argues that Movement should be considered more widely than the flow of road traffic or even mode and grade separation, a fixation which damaged so many towns and cities. Although he is in favour of pedestrianisation and the removal of cars from important public spaces, Gehl also sees that the resultant spaces must have activity along their edges, otherwise they will hold little appeal. He links his definition of Movement to other established urban design concepts such as legibility (whether an urban environment is simple to understand and in which people can orientate themselves) and permeability (the degree to which it is easy to move around an urban area).

This implies, in turn, that not all public spaces should share exactly the same characteristics. In his important work *The City Assembled*, Spiro Kostof<sup>xlviii</sup> shows that urban spaces come in many shapes and sizes, and perform many functions,

often simultaneously. He goes on to categorise a number of space types, not all of which need concern us here. The essential point to understand is that spaces in cities and towns are not uniform, either in their scale, shape, proportion or in terms of the activity they accommodate. Rather like appreciating that rooms in houses have different roles and varying degrees of flexibility as to the use they can be put, it is important that we recognise that 'outdoor rooms' ought also to have differing characteristics. Not all spaces should be kept for Sunday best, not all spaces should be large and very formal civic spaces. We can also have a few parlours and waiting rooms, outdoor concert halls and galleries. The important thing is that the relationship between scale and activity is understood, so that spaces can be designed and managed appropriately.

Thus, any good public realm will consist of or contain:

**Figure 7: The Public Realm: Space Types**

- formal meeting spaces - the town square;
- quiet corners for reflection;
- outdoor rooms to meet friends and acquaintances;
- streets and edges for watching passers by;
- spaces where temporary events and exhibitions can be mounted;
- street markets;
- transitional spaces linking the indoor private realm to the outdoor public realm;
- meeting points and landmarks;
- historical and environmental references.

Jan Gehl went on to argue that good public spaces are characterized by the presence of people staying or lingering when they have no pressing reason (or 'necessary activity') to keep them there. Indeed, Gehl argues that the success of urban public space can be judged by whether or not people are engaged in 'optional' and/or 'social' activities, such as having a conversation, sitting or simply watching others. By Meetings, Gehl is referring to all the human things which people do when they meet or watch each other in public places. He refers to these as optional, necessary and social activities. *Necessary Activities* are where participation is required, for example in going to work, waiting for the bus, buying groceries, or taking the children to school. *Optional Activities* are where participation is voluntary and this includes such passive activities as walking, standing about or simply sitting to watch the world go by. *Social Activities* occur where others are present in public space and where a social encounter of some type occurs, that is talking, hearing, passing the time of day, meeting, touching, and other forms of social exchange.

In this way, Gehl argues, it is legitimate for policy makers to create urban spaces that are intended to encourage public forms of social life, even although people will retain the option to behave as private individuals as well as public men and women. On this view, the public realm is a defining characteristic of city life. People who live in cities become increasingly more sophisticated and adept at handling the stimuli of city life, partly because they are able to separate the private self from the 'public man'<sup>xlix</sup> the complex pattern of lifestyles and identities which people can adopt in cities.

## 5. Public Social Life

Franco Bianchini has also argued that 'public social life' is "the interacting of socialising or sociability ... that occurs within the public realm".<sup>i</sup> The concept of public social life is a much wider concept than the public spaces or places in the city, but refers rather to a distinctive set of social relations. The attraction of the city is that it liberates individuals from deeply felt norms in the private self, and allows people to learn about themselves and others. But it is important to recognize that this is only possible because one can choose to be private (anonymous) in a public place, or public in a public place. This choice is made possible by the existence of the public realm. At one extreme, one might engage in public debate about the great issues of the time, celebrate democracy and be happy to be at one with the citizenry. At the other extreme, one might elect to follow some private desires to project an identity through one's public self—in seeking out sexual encounters, for example.

Today, the cinema and theatre have long since turned into the home video; the launderette and laundry into Ariston and Hotpoint; the library into Penguin and Pan; the concert hall into the compact disc. Even political meetings are now redundant when it is possible to see all one wants of candidates on the television, or join a political party by credit card.<sup>ii</sup>

In the above quotation, the sociologist Laurie Taylor describes the impact of technological change and the ongoing process of economic development on public social life. He is arguing that new products, particularly media products, have undermined public forms of entertainment and interaction, increasingly replacing them by privatized and 'home' entertainment. People, it appears, would rather stay indoors than go out. This gloomy conclusion was challenged by the 1991 study *Out of Hours* by Comedia<sup>iii</sup>, who argued that the privatization of public social life was in fact caused to a large degree by the planning and management of town and city centres in the evenings. To a considerable extent, there has

been a rediscovery of some forms of public social life in British cities since about 1992<sup>liii</sup>, although these have not always been problem-free<sup>liv</sup>.

The key to public social life is that, where they feel comfortable, are safe and have some time to spend, people rapidly switch from performing necessary activities (the things they have to do), to optional activities (things they enjoy doing). Before long, in most if not necessarily all cases, people engage in social activities, even if this is only saying good morning, asking the time or borrowing a newspaper. This social activity can itself develop through varying degrees of contact, ranging from the polite greeting, to meeting your future partner for the first time, to renewing and maintaining established friendships, and even as a way of understanding the world - for example watching men digging a hole in the ground! People can be stimulated by their environment in many ways: by its design, the colours and textures used, perhaps by events and small gatherings, even by public art. The upshot is that in a good public space, necessary activities quickly take second place to optional activities, from which varying degrees of social activity can emerge, and in the end good places create their own dynamic of watching, being watched and meeting.

Social activities in public space can then occur at varying degrees of intimacy:

*at a modest level as acknowledging other people in public space;*

*as a starting point for contacts at other levels;*

*as a means of maintaining established contacts;*

*as a source of information;*

*as a source of inspiration.*

### Figure 8: Indicators of Public Social Life

- People saying good morning and other greetings;
- People smile and nod;
- Shopkeepers and other small businesses say please and thank you;
- An absence of litter;
- An absence of anti-social graffiti and vandalism;
- Local meeting places where people meet on an informal basis;
- Evidence of local voluntary and hobby activity;
- The presence of cafes and other meeting places provided by local businesses;
- The existence of a local evening economy (cafes, restaurants) where families are welcome and eating out *en famille* is part of the local way of life;

It can be seen, therefore, that public social life is really all about the everyday pleasantries and niceties of living in a community, meeting, exchanging greetings, asking after family members and shared acquaintances, discussing local events and issues of the day. There is also a sense, in at least some of this, of ceremony and observing social conventions. Yet this can only occur if minimum standards of personal behaviour are observed in social settings. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>iv</sup>, there is a rising concern in western societies, not only that crime is escalating out of control, but that everyday standards of decency are also in decline. Bad language in public and on television is the least of it, general rudeness appears to be endemic, certainly in England. Anti-social noise, shouting and swearing in the street, drunkenness and violent behaviour, inappropriate clothing in social settings, all of these are perceived by many to be symptoms of a moral slide, a growing 'obscenification' of everyday life. The UK Labour government announced its *New Deal for Communities* in 1998, but has since felt compelled to introduce and ABSO's or *Anti-Social Behaviour Orders*, a

move likened by some to Cromwell's New Model Army and Puritanism. In China, there are moves afoot to improve everyday manners, covering sundry matters such as hawking and spitting, littering, queue-jumping, answering mobile phones in cinemas, as well as standards of personal hygiene. Interestingly, the Pride Institute, set up by Lu-Chin Mischke sees the lack of good manners as a symptom of low self-respect and an economic handicap for the less well-off.

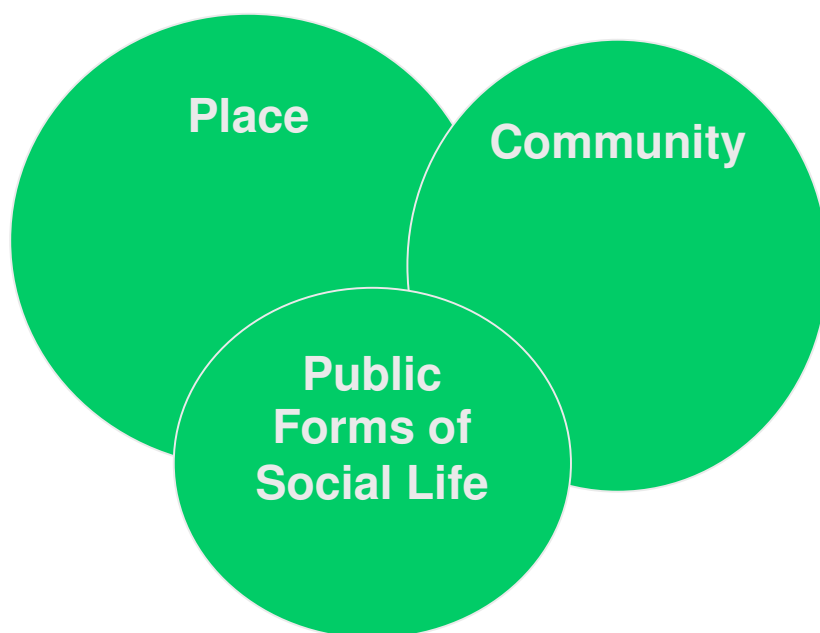
It seems the challenge in our post-modern societies will be to combine tolerance of different ways of living, tastes and preferences with an over-arching respect for others, minimum standards of public behaviour and at least some recognition that societies have, or should have, shared core values. At its simplest this might mean a revival of saying 'please' and 'thank you', observing the everyday courtesies of urban life<sup>vi</sup>. As Don Watson has observed, the place to start is with the language itself<sup>lvii</sup>. But even this may require a change to how people are taught to behave in schools. At its simplest, morality is some inner restraint within society, and unless this and the rule of law are broad terms upheld on an everyday basis by citizens, then the alternative suggested may be the police state. Whatever the modern embodiment of fundamental decencies may be, observed through manners and everyday conduct, we may need to consider these soon and urgently. Otherwise, extremes of bad and anti-social behaviour will push us, as individuals living in a society, ever further apart.

## 6. Urban Sociability

This paper has argued that communities still exist, although these include communities of interest as well as the older notion of groups of people with some shared characteristics living in a place. It has also been argued that people form attachments to the places in which they live, so that the characteristics of place or *genus loci* should be an important consideration in policies to strengthen community. We have also seen that the public realm plays an important role in cities and towns by providing a terrain for various forms of public social life to take place. However, in the past the term public realm has misleadingly been used to describe both spaces in the city and particular forms of social relations. This has led to some disappointment on the part of urban designers and planners who naively assume that public space will give rise to outbreaks of democratic discourse and the humanity of man. Rather, it seems that public social life can take many forms, including the indulgence of private pleasures or even anti-social behaviour. Urban sociability, on this definition, is the quality of behaving decently towards one's fellows in city spaces.

From this, it seems to this writer that the task for social policy makers and urban planners is to combine an appreciation of community development (how people living in places come to identify with that place and each other) with place (built form, activity and meaning), and with a wider notion of civility and public social life within the public sphere. This we term 'urban sociability', to distinguish from forms of social life found in villages or in rural areas, although there are many overlaps between these. But the fact remains that people living in cities and metropolitan areas are exposed to greater and more varied stimuli, and have greater options to remain private or 'anonymous' in urban places. Where people are inclined to pass the time of day with both neighbours and strangers, then urban sociability is present. This is summarised in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: A Metaphor for Urban Sociability**



*Source: John Montgomery, October 2005*

At one level, arguing for urban sociability is simply a call to value the little things that make a difference to everyday life and the sense of belonging, welcoming or otherwise. It is a premise based on gradual change, the incremental layering and patina of real places of community. It represents the difference between good places and ‘sustainable communities’ that exist only as jargon. An interesting concept is *machi-zukuri* which developed as a key principle of urban sociology and town planning in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s as argued by Neil Evans<sup>lviii</sup>. Evans identifies 4 principles for what he refers to as an ‘ideal-type contemporary planning tool’ for making better places and communities:

- Bottom – up, in that local citizens as far as possible make decisions about the future of their own places;
- Decentralisation of decision-making and a strong focus on local area individuality or character.
- Attention to detail, including the ‘soft aspects’ such as local festivals, voluntary activities, play areas and programs for children and organised activities for the elderly – tea dances and bridge clubs for example.
- Gradual rather than sudden change, so that a sense of continuity is maintained.

Most of these principles are established in Australia and the UK, although not always adhered to or implemented with much enthusiasm. The best example in the UK in recent years was the *City Challenge* process of the early 1990s. Of ten principles identified as central to urban planning and management in Denmark, two are directly focused on improving local consultation and involvement in decision-making about local urban environments: extensive decentralisation of decision-making and support for community initiatives<sup>lix</sup>. The City of Toronto<sup>lx</sup> has now launched a strategy of ‘neighbourhood strengthening’, while ‘empowerment zones’ have been a feature of US social policy, in various guises, since the 1960s.

In Toronto’s case, important indicators of neighbourhood strength include:

- neighbourhood decision-making abilities, in addition to measures of the cumulative strengths and challenges of its residents;
- qualitative measures, including measures of residents’ perceptions and attitudes;
- comprehensive measures of the strengths and challenges of neighbourhood services and community organizations;
- “one-stop”, easy access to information for a wide range of partners, including neighbourhood residents and organizations; and
- training for neighbourhoods so that they can use this information to build their problem solving and decision-making capabilities.

There is, however, a danger that organised activities can morph from being simply social in nature to the more or less overtly political, in the sense of 'fighting' for this or that 'right'. This may have its place from time to time in particular settings, but urban sociability and public social life are rarely built up in the long term by endless conflict. Perhaps it is time we swapped 'activism' for urban sociability and everyday manners.

## 7. Policy and Practice

There are implications here for the future planning, development, consolidation and ongoing management of urban settlements and sub-divisions. These revolve around the need to combine the various aspects of urban sociability in real places: memories and associations, community identity, place identity, the public realm and public forms of social life. This applies both to new master-planned settlements, but also to existing suburbs where stronger centres or activity nodes require to be fashioned, as in the case of the Melbourne's 2030 plan for growth. The aim should be to reduce the numbers of new suburbs and towns that lack not only a sense of place, but also a recognisable public social life. Improving urban sociability and the identity of local communities is thus an appropriate policy objective for a range of place types, including inner urban areas, outlying suburbs, local neighbourhoods, district centres, country towns and coastal settlements.

The implications for governance of local places are several:

1. Government departments and agencies will need to deliver services and measures to promote community strengthening in an holistic way, cutting across disciplines – the way life does. This means working across departmental demarcations and in new forms of partnership between local, state and federal tiers of government, and with other agencies. To give a practical example, new master-planned communities (or suburban refits) should give equal consideration to community strengthening, cultural life and the sense of place as to road layouts, sewers and shopping malls.
2. Urban planning and everyday management should focus on the neighbourhood level – places where people live – and work up-wards from there. Goals of efficient service delivery should still be possible, but such services should be tailored to the places in which they are

delivered. An obvious example is the often heated tension between roads being seen as fast arterial routes, even when they go through the middle of someone's town centre. Another example might be the contribution new or improved public spaces can make to everyday sociability, as opposed to being seen mainly as drop off zones or turning circles for buses. Yet another is the impact of more retail malls on the independent, small, local shops that often do much to help shape place identity.

3. All of this implies a focus not just on what is done (providing services) but how it is done, that is the qualitative aspects of helping to make places better and community life stronger. This should also be a benchmark in considering whether or not to build new or redevelop existing social facilities such as public baths, cinemas, sports halls or theatres. Planning policy and DA approvals must likewise consider the impacts of new developments on existing places.
4. In turn, as we have seen from examples in the UK, Canada, Denmark and Japan, all of this can best be achieved where local people have a stronger say – backed by sympathetic professional advice – of how their area is run, how services are provided and whether or not neighbourhoods are getting better or worse. This is more appropriate for some service areas than others, but should nevertheless be a general principle.

Finally, at the risk of being overly-prescriptive, the following is a series of measures that might be considered as part of future master-planning and the re-fitting of central areas within (mostly) outlying suburbs. These might well be applicable to major area plans such as those for Hume, Caroline Springs (generally considered a good example) and Whittlesea; but outlying suburbs closer to Melbourne CBD might also benefit from more modest improvements.

**Figure 10: Ways and Means of Improving Urban Sociability (Place, Community, Public Social Life)**

- Fashioning railway stations as arrival points and meeting places.
- Planning and Designing neighbourhoods around the notion of the 400 metre walking distance (radius), and therefore the 55 hectare place or parish. In the Melbourne climate (especially hot summer days) the walking distance may fall to 350 metres, or a 40 hectare place (100 acres in old money).
- Seeing the local centres of suburbs as mixed-use places, with good permeability and a legible street pattern.
- Including places for participation in sport.
- Including places for hobbyists and others to meet – village halls.
- Including places for viewing or and participation in the arts.
- Seeing schools as community places.
- Boosting and encouraging local business, shops and cafes through main street programs.
- Using main street programs to promote friendliness, smiling, eye contact and good manners by shop assistants, museum staff, restaurateurs, public transport employees, taxi drivers and park keepers.
- Developing sectors of the economy that offer opportunity for young people to become entrepreneurs, particularly in the creative and digital industries.
- Design of public spaces – both existing and new, large and micro – as meeting places where social encounters may occur but where people can also be quiet, reflective and private if they wish.

- The improvement of safety and a reduction of urban fear, especially at night, by better lighting, policing and by stimulating a more active evening economy (not late night) in appropriate settings.
- More generally, the teaching of manners in public schools, and a media campaign to 'smile better'.

Many of these, of course, will already be present in most cases. Yet the question is not so much whether, for example, social facilities exist but whether they contribute to place, community and urban sociability. For example, spaces for social use, notably public spaces, park benches and even 'village halls', need to be accommodated within new master plans. But these need very careful consideration so as to provide scope for social interaction, for example by overlooking interesting everyday activity, by being safe and comfortable. Badly designed public spaces do no favours. But it should also be recognised that urban sociability exists, or should exist, in private spaces such as gardens, shops and cafes, and that these are perhaps of even greater importance than public spaces. Such places provide meeting areas, venues for social interaction and often provide users with local knowledge and colour.

This is sizeable task, and governments will need to realise that the aim eventually will be for all of this to be part and parcel of everyday life, for the social life of places to grow and come to have their own dynamic. This implies letting go at some future stage when neighbourhoods and communities have good urban sociability. However, where action is required, across many policy areas, more immediately then the task will be to forge partnerships. These will be with local councils (for example in master-planning or urban design improvements or in building new social, sports and arts facilities, or in making new public spaces). Developers will need to contribute to building-type programs (sports halls, art galleries, village halls) and also 'soft' programs such as local fairs, festivals and events, or even contributing to local community 'chests'. Economic development agencies should also be considering how to grow more diverse economies in

local suburbs. Utility providers might adopt suburbs as places of experimentation, for example in water management. Arts councils and funding bodies should – no doubt already are – collaborate with local councils to develop arts venues and participation in or closer to places of residence. Activating key sectors in the new economy across a wider geographical area should also be considered, at least as an experiment.

Historically it has been tempting for urban planners, architect-planners, large-scale developers and state land development authorities in Australia (in truth, just about everywhere) to tackle these intricate concerns with big money, big schemes and big buildings. The outcomes have been over-blown retail centres, strip malls, single-use spaces, ill-considered site layouts, badly-located car parking, buildings that block out too much light, cultural centres that become institutionalised ghettos. This, simply, is no longer appropriate. Smart cities and metropolitan areas, whole city regions, should no longer develop along the lines of big box retailing, big floor-plate commercial ‘centres’ in sudden bursts of investment. Rather, as Jane Jacobs pointed out all those years ago, the way that cities and neighbourhoods grow and thrive is more gradual, a series of incremental changes accompanied by periodic bouts of wealth creation. Oddly enough, this means that the task for master planners is to plan for incremental change, intimacy and an urban form that is adaptable to change. A sort of ‘science of muddling through’, according to good principles of urban design and the economic and cultural life of cities.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This paper has been commissioned by the Department of Victorian Communities (DVC). It is the product of a combined research exercise and 'thought-piece' on the notion of 'urban sociability'.

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<sup>lx</sup> City of Toronto *Strong Neighbourhoods*, 2005