

## Urban People, Urban Places, Urban Resilience

A paper in honour of Pat Troy

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We are gathered here today to honour a life's work, one that is by no means concluded and doesn't even look like slowing up! We are here to honour Pat Troy, whose career and contribution to research and to *getting things done* is extraordinary. He got the message through when we in Australia needed to hear it: that cities are complex entities which required complex research and analysis; that the fate of increasing millions worldwide are tied up with cities; that they are the greatest creations of humankind, yet in case of a terrible hubris they seem agents of their own vulnerability and destruction.

I would like to pull out just two key strands underpinning Pat's work as my jumping off points today. First, his interest not just in impersonal, abstract 'forces' and 'factors' but in *people*, and in issues of social justice.

And second, his respect for other disciplines and his openness to cross-disciplinary discussion and exchange of ideas. When the Powers that Be were handing out disciplinary narrowness, competitiveness and superior attitudes, Pat was out of the room (probably haranguing someone). And whereas we all might think that interdisciplinary exchange is a lovely idea and leave it at that, Pat practices what he preaches, organising the hugely successful State of Australian Cities conferences as forums for such exchanges and cross-fertilisation.

So, what I'd like to do today is argue, with Pat, and with Frank and Steve, for a more holistic approach to urban research, in particular for a closer relationship between the humanities and the urban sciences. I want to demonstrate why we need to find a common language and more forums for real exchange, why historians need to connect with current challenges and why planners and others need to know something beyond the last ten years or so. And second, I want to follow his lead by focusing on the social, on urban people.

Pat, Steve and Frank have all pointed out that historical understandings are essential for thinking about and planning better urban futures. Their focus, accurately, is upon 'path-dependency', the rather crushing, historical weight of past policies and decisions, past building and destruction. We all have to live and plan with this legacy, as future generations will have to deal with the things we build and destroy.

But historical perspectives have more uses even than this: for example, the long view can give us a healthy dose of self-reflection by demonstrating the way urban ideas and critiques have oscillated back and forth over time. Think of the way urban housing forms have shifted radically from 'virtuous' to 'vile', from 'vibrant' to 'vacuous' and back again. Terraced housing, flats and of course the detached suburban house have all been held up as ideal at times, but demonised at others. History demonstrates that concerns about materialistic outlooks and consumerism swamping more communal and spiritual ideals are not ours alone - in fact they came ashore with the First Fleet and have been regularly voiced ever since. The convicts, after all, were great consumers.<sup>1</sup> History can even show us that McMansions are not new- it's just that they aren't all built by rich people now. Rich people's McMansions are *heritage*.

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Karskens, *Inside the Rocks: The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1999, Chapters 1 and 2.

But vulnerable cities? Here the long view is an ironic one. Historically, Australian cities have been seen as marvels, sources of colonial or national pride. At the same time they have been seen as far too powerful, greedy, sucking the life-blood out of rural Australia.<sup>2</sup> Yes, there were flurries of fear and a sense of vulnerability at times – but these tended to be episodic - and then forgotten. Sydney's foreshores, for example, are littered with defence structures built at various times over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most of them knee-jerk responses to a perceived enemy threat. My favourite episode is when two US warships snuck into Sydney harbour completely unnoticed under cover of darkness in 1839. Shocked Sydneysiders awoke to find them on their doorstep, as well as a rather annoying American captain boasting that he could have 'reduced the great part of the town to ashes' before sunrise! The result was Fort Denison and the military installations at Bradley's and Middle Head, though the latter were not completed for decades. In short, the immediacy of the threat subsided and Sydney went back to business as usual.<sup>3</sup>

But now our cities, once complacent, rich, powerful, seem beleaguered. Global warming, extreme weather events, peak oil, phenomena in which cities themselves are deeply implicated, threaten them with disruption or disaster on an apocalyptic scale. The simple fact of many people clustered in one place makes them vulnerable to terrorist attack. After September 11, I remember looking up at the global-city gloss of glass and concrete towers that now encircle the skyline from Circular Quay with new eyes. All of a sudden, instead of smugly invincible, they seemed crazily, extraordinarily, vulnerable. They were just standing there,

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Proudfoot, Roslyn Maguire and Robert Freestone, *Colonial City, Global City: Sydney's International Exhibition 1879*, Sydney, Crossing Press, 2000; Peter Spearritt, *Sydney's Century: A History*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2000, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Oppenheim, *The Fragile Forts: The Fixed Defences of Sydney Harbour 1788-1963*, Canberra, Australian Army History Unit, 2004, pp. 29-44; Simon Davies, *The Islands of Sydney Harbour*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1984, pp. 20-1.

under an innocent blue sky, the hundreds or thousands of people inside them such an obvious and defenceless target.

Urban landscapes have histories, as do global warming and climate change, international terrorism, urban drought, urban problems - even the way we think and conceptualise cities and urban forms have a histories.

But today I want to turn the historical telescope around so to speak: at the risk of sounding starry-eyed, I want to argue from history that, at base, hope for our cities lies with the people themselves. It is through the actions of citizens, through common realisations, commitments and actions that cities can be made sustainable and secure, or at least more so. The best and wisest policies, governments and bureaucracies in the world cannot alone secure these things. And conversely, I want to argue that cities are critically vulnerable when their people lose faith or interest in them and in their own ability to shape and improve them; when they feel their own stake in urban places are ignored or bulldozed; when they feel policies and laws are imposed upon them without consultation or consideration. These are conditions which foster withdrawal into private havens, little worlds.

Despite the assurances and hopes that planning and policy-making is or will be inclusive, people – the community - are often left out of discussions about the futures of cities. As Gary Smith has recently argued in *Living Cities; An Urban Myth?*, despite some improvement in community consultation, state and federal governments would really rather not seriously include the public in their decision-making. In fact apathy and ignorance gives them a free

hand.<sup>4</sup> In other scenarios, 'the community' is considered to be rather like an inert gel, upon which policy and laws are simply imposed. Or, city people themselves are considered as the enemy: as one of the many threats facing the cities. They are the sources of pollution, of stupid and irresponsible environmental behaviour, the squanderers natural resources, particularly water. Their excrement fouls the oceans, their needles stud the beaches, their cars choke the roads and the air. People, rather than industry or governments, are the culprits. They need to be re-educated, their behaviour needs to be altered by strict legislation.

These views are underpinned by some historical assumptions. The story goes something like this: the Europeans were spoilers from the beginning. They hated the alien environment, sought to exploit it, and left a trail of degradation behind them. The cities and suburbs themselves are evidence of this rejection of the Australian bush; cities turn their backs on nature and suburban dwellers in their separate houses in particular represent the epitome of the culture of individualism: selfish, self-centred, apathetic about anything beyond their own homes and families and obsessed with superficial material gain.<sup>5</sup>

It's a bleak and miserable assessment, it's very widely believed, and it's not true. Well, the bits about environmental degradation are true, but I want to show you that this is not the whole story, that since the beginning of European settlement, non-Aboriginal people have admired the local environment and sought to understand it and protect it both for the enjoyment of humans and for its own sake. I want to sketch the history of environmental concern and activism, of the continuing pulse of community amidst the go-getting individualism of capitalist new world cities,

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Smith and Jennifer Scott, *Living Cities – An Urban Myth: Government and Sustainability In Australia*, Sydney, Rosenberg, 2006, p. 32ff. Some local councils have a much better record, for example the genuine community consultation carried out by Sydney City Council for proposed new parkland at Pyrmont.

<sup>5</sup> See Geoffrey Bolton, *Spoil and Spoilers: A history of Australians shaping their environment*, Allen and Unwin, 1981; William Lines, *Taming the Great South Land*, Allen & Unwin, 1991. For surveys of historical and sociological approaches to suburbs, see Andrea Gaynor, *Harvest of the Suburbs: An Environmental History of Growing Food in Australian Cities*, Perth, UWA Press, 2006, Chapter 1; Tim Rowse, 'Heaven and a Hills Hoist: Australian Critics on Suburbia', *Meanjin Quarterly* 37 (1) 1978, 3-13.

the history of ordinary people, wherever they live, coming together out of common interest, for a common goal. And I will have to apologise now, my special interest is Sydney, so I will focus largely on the Sydney story, though I know that this pattern is true of other cities too. We will visit Pat's home-town Canberra briefly at the end.

How often have you read that the first settlers found Sydney a hostile, barren landscape and hated it? Can this be the same Sydney we know – the one with the temperate climate where lush vegetation which threatens to cover everything if let go? In fact, apart from the disappointment about the sandy soils around Sydney (which was soon remedied with barrowloads of loams) and apart from the whining of cranky homesick officers, the Europeans enjoyed and praised the local environment as beautiful and fruitful. After enduring an El Nino drought, they found the climate simply delicious. They wrote home of the fertility of the soils and the pleasures of rambling in the bush. When women who had been barren started to conceive and bear healthy children, the environment was considered to have miraculous restorative powers: this was the first white dreaming, if you like.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, it is true, suburbs spread over 'once lovely hills', raw sewerage and slaughterhouse waste poured into the harbour and, from the 1870s, the great wetlands to the south of Sydney were befouled by industries banned from the city centre.<sup>7</sup> By the 1870s and 1880s, scientists and other learned and deeply interested people, and various societies, were campaigning for conservation and for National Parks.<sup>8</sup> But earlier in the century

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<sup>6</sup> These are some of the findings of my research for *Naked Possession: Negotiating Nature in Early Sydney*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, forthcoming 2008. See also Eric Rolls, 'More a new planet than a new continent' in *From Forest to Sea: Australia's Changing Environment*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1993, pp. 160-76; Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-1890*, Oxford University Press, 1987, chapters 2 and 3; Grace Karskens and Melita Rogowsky (eds), *Histories of Green Square*, Sydney, Sydney City Council and University of New South Wales, 2004, chapters 3 and 4; Spearritt, *Sydney's Century*, chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> See Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environmental Movement*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1999, Part 1.

there were also individuals in the community who tried to mitigate or halt the incursions of exploitation and development, and to raise community appreciation of local ecologies. On the Parramatta River, Brent Rodd waged a campaign to save Rodd Island from the ravages of timbergetters, shell-gatherers and those collecting rock for ships' ballast.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1850s and 1860s, novelist and naturalist Louisa Atkinson made a great contribution to raising public awareness about the natural environment. She painted and sketched animals and plants and wrote wonderful newspaper columns about natural history for an eager, increasingly urbanising population in Sydney.<sup>10</sup> At the parliamentary inquiry into the Field of Mars Common in 1861 ordinary local people argued strongly for the retention of the still-forested common, for the use of the people, instead of its subdivision for new suburbs.<sup>11</sup>

When a proposed coalmine threatened Cremorne Point on Sydney Harbour in the 1890s there was a storm of protest. The artist Arthur Streeton raised awareness of the beauty that would be destroyed with his famous painting 'Cremorne pastoral'. The campaign was successful, though a coal mine, short lived and ill-starred, was built on Sydney Harbour – in working class Balmain.<sup>12</sup> Over the twentieth century residents and activists have fought to save the remaining foreshores from development. Their campaigns and lobbying raised consciousness among governments at all levels - Sydney Harbour National Park was declared in 1975.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Russell, *Drummoyne: A Western Suburbs' History from 1794*, Sydney, Drummoyne Municipal Council, 1982, pp. 84-8.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Clarke, *Pioneer Writer: The Life of Louisa Atkinson, Novelist, Journalist, Naturalist*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1990; Elizabeth Lawson, *The Natural Art of Louisa Atkinson*, Sydney, State Library of NSW Press, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> NSW Legislative Assembly, *Progress Report from the Select Committee on the Field of Mars Common together with the proceedings of the Committee and Minutes of Evidence*, in NSWLA, *Votes and Proceedings*, 1861-62, vol. 2, pp.1323-1352 and vol. 5, pp. 1-128; Lynne McLoughlin, *An Island of Bush: The Field of Mars Reserve*, Sydney, NSW Department of Education, c1993.

<sup>12</sup> Bonyhady, *Colonial Earth*, Chapter 11.

<sup>13</sup> Spearritt, *Sydney's Century*, p. 175; Tom Uren, 'Opportunities worthy of her setting', in Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, *Sitelines: Aspects of Sydney Harbour*, Sydney, the Trust, 2005, pp. 45-59; and pers. com. Tom Uren, Brisbane, 5 May 2006.

But the harbour was not the only arena for urban environmental appreciation and campaigns in the twentieth century, nor the most important in the long run. On Sydney's north shore, where the houses often stood close to bush, something extraordinary was happening. Women were redefining the bush in their own terms, they were raising awareness and successfully organising in its defence. May Gibbs, whose house you can still visit down on the water at Neutral Bay, was busily writing her famous stories. In her books the bush was transformed from the dark, brooding, menacing, uncaring place that 19<sup>th</sup> century men had portrayed, into a haven, a magical feminised place, a retreat from the evils of city life, populated by cute fairy creatures conjured out of flowers and nuts.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Amy Mack was busy writing and published the popular *Bush Days* (1911) in a similar vein.<sup>15</sup> Bushwalking clubs flourished, their members city-folk who relished the challenge of walking for days in the most inhospitable, wild country. Leading walkers like Myles Dunphy and Marie Byles also became ardent and successful lobbyists for wilderness protection and the creation of National Parks all around Sydney.<sup>16</sup> In 1946, Annie Wyatt, member of the Ku-ring-gai Tree Lovers Civic League decided to do something about the destruction and damage wreaked on nearly Ku-ring-gai National Park by the local council. She knew it had to be a 'new organisation pledged to perpetual responsibility' and that it had to 'rise among the people themselves'. She formed the National Trust of Australia in 1946, committed, it is true, to the preservation of stately old McMansions, but also to defend natural bushland. Thirty years later, two Mosman sisters decided there had to be a better way to treat the bush than the attacking it with poison, fire, slasher and bulldozer. The Bradley sisters developed their famous Bradley

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<sup>14</sup> Ashley Hay, *Gum: The story of eucalypts and their champions*, Sydney, Duffy & Snelgrove, 2002, pp. 105-41.

<sup>15</sup> Amy Mack, *Bush Days*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1911. See also Alec H. Chisolm, *Nature Fantasy in Australia*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd 1932, which focuses on the bushland of Sydney.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Meredith, *Myles and Milo*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1999; Hutton and Connors, *A History of the Australian Environmental Movement*, chapter 2.

method to 'Bring Back the Bush'. Their methods were adopted and taught by the bush regeneration movement ever since.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1960s, the struggle for conservation was ridiculously asymmetrical. The National Trust was small and chronically under-resourced, while building boom development seemed unstoppable and was fully supported and approved of by the men in suits: politicians, planners and bureaucrats. In Hunters Hill in 1971 some Hunters Hill housewives formed a group to save Kelly's Bush, a rare surviving remnant of foreshore bushland which was under threat from a major housing developer. Like good girls they campaigned, wrote letters, sent petitions, lobbied politicians. No-one took any notice of them. The development was about to go ahead when as a last resort, the women asked the Builders Labourers Federation to help them, and thus was born the world's first Green Ban.<sup>18</sup>



Plaque commemorating the world's first Green Ban, Kelly's Bush (Photo: G. Karskens)

Kelly's Bush is still there today through the actions of the Battlers at Hunters Hill, and their success inspired the people power which led to the saving of inner-city housing at the Rocks

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<sup>17</sup> See 'History of St Ives' at <http://www.stivesvillage.com.au/history.html>; quotes from [http://www.nationaltrustqld.org/files/CMO3450\\_Bequest\\_final.pdf](http://www.nationaltrustqld.org/files/CMO3450_Bequest_final.pdf); for local conservation activism at St Ives see also 'Historical Outline of Blue Gum High Forest at St Ives' at [http://www.step.org.au/bghf\\_history.pdf](http://www.step.org.au/bghf_history.pdf); Joan Bradley, *Bringing back the Bush: The Bradley Method of Bush Regeneration*, Sydney, Lansdowne Press, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Marion Hardman and Peter Manning, *Green Bans: The Story of an Australian Phenomenon*, Melbourne, Australian Conservation Foundation, n.d. c1976.

and Woolloomooloo from redevelopment (though looking at the Rocks today I think the outcome is rather ironic). The actions of the women at Hunters Hill caused a groundswell of public protest and a deep shift in thinking about urban development, social justice and heritage. The Battle for the Rocks, led by a local housewife, the articulate Nita McCrae in defence of affordable working-class housing, was particularly violent and bitter. The residents, protesters and the BLF faced the combined might of the government, developers and police and the condemnation of the press.<sup>19</sup> Historical accounts tend to sanitise and normalise these struggles and assume that the outcome was inevitable – it was not, by any means.

In the booming suburbs of southern, western and northern Sydney, the post war period saw golden decades of community activity. Here the focus was more on local facilities for people. My parents, as young marrieds, built a small house in Seven Hills in the early sixties and my Dad has never forgotten the welcome and kindness of the people of Blacktown and Seven Hills: he says they were beautiful, salt of the earth. He was one of those immigrants who literally wanted to join in Australian life, forget the horrors of war and Europe and the betrayals of his own country. He joined the Blacktown Good Neighbour Council which welcomed migrants and sought to bind them into the community with glamorous balls, meetings and talks and multicultural parades down the main street of Blacktown, all well before the official policy of multiculturalism of the Whitlam years. Neighbourliness was big too, with informal links providing support and assistance in everything from recipes to childcare to building houses.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hardman and Manning, *ibid.* and Pat Fiske, 'Rocking the Foundations: A History of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation 1947-1974 (videorecording), Sydney, Bower Bird Films, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> See also Kathleen Mee and Robyn Dowling, 'Tales of the city: Western Sydney at the end of the millennium', in John Connell (ed.) *Sydney: The Emergence of a World City*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 273-91.



Building fences, Seven Hills 1962 (Karskens family collection)

Out of the modest fibro houses and the unkerbed dirt streets came an astounding numbers of clubs and organisations working for local facilities, for schools, for parks and playing fields built entirely by volunteers, for services, for the new licensed clubs which made such a difference to people's lives.<sup>21</sup> At Mt Colah, where the suburb was carved out of the bush by men and women mainly building their own houses on the weekends, women took up petitions, lobbied local residents and pestered the Department of Education until they got a primary school. Then they made curtains and blocks and other equipment for the children themselves.<sup>22</sup> On the Georges River, it was only the persistent and determined efforts of local people which saved the river shoreline from suburban and industrial development; today the George's River National Park is their legacy.<sup>23</sup> Multiply these examples a few thousand times and you may have some idea of the extraordinary energy, community spirit and communal activities among suburban people.

But is it a lost golden age? Perhaps those decades were exceptional, propelled by the service traditions engraved so deeply by war, forced by sheer want and neglect in raw suburban

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<sup>21</sup> Grace Karskens, *Holroyd: A Social History of Western Sydney*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 1991, pp. 202-3, 238-41; Tracey-Lee Downey, 'A Good Night Out: Variety entertainment on the Sydney club circuit during the 1960s & '70s'. BA Honours thesis, School of History, University of New South Wales, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Gwen Kelly, 'Portrait of a new community: A personal impression', *Meanjin*, December 1957, 399-407.

<sup>23</sup> Heather Goodall, S. Wearing, D. Byrne and A. Cadzow, 'Green Cities: rethinking suburban conservation campaigning in Sydney 1940 to 1990', State of Australian Cities Conference, Brisbane, 2005, conference proceedings published February 2006, <http://www.gu.edu.au/conference/soac2005/publishedpapers/environmentalcity/env10a.pdf>.

Sydney? Should we, once more, lament the loss of community spirit? Has it been banished by rising living standards and material expectations, the endless race for new and more commodities which capitalism thrives upon?

The quickest glance at the suburban histories before and after reveals not exceptionalism but constancy, though the focus of activities change. Every self-respecting new nineteenth century suburb had its hardworking church, school, charity group. Sporting clubs have sought to transform 'waste grounds' into sports grounds since the beginning and created local pride in sports teams. And, not unexpectedly, given this historical pattern, community organisations and environmental activism have continued to proliferate since the 1970s, too. Unions may no longer be interested in supporting green bans, hardly anyone lives in the Rocks anymore, and people aren't so keen on direct and violent confrontation, but community action and protest thrive nonetheless. Think of that self-declared 'Ratbag of Botany' Nancy Hillier, who, with and on behalf of fellow residents, has campaigned against industrial pollution in Botany for over thirty year. Or Elizabeth O'Brien who helped establish the LEAD group in inner city Sydney to fight for the prevention of lead poisoning in children.<sup>24</sup>

In Zetland people battled for 24 years to have the 'Zetland Monster' closed down. This was the Waverley-Woollahra Incinerator which poured stench and dangerous levels of particle fallout onto their neighbourhood, their houses, yards and streets between 1972 and 1996.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kathleen McPhillips, *Local Heroes: Australian crusades from the environmental frontline*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 2002, chapters 1 and 6; see also Smith and Scott, *Living Cities* for excellent accounts of local activism and campaigns.

<sup>25</sup> Scott Cummings, 'Chimneys and Change', in Karskens and Rogowsky, *Histories of Green Square*, pp. 38-9.



The 'Zetland Monster' 2004 (Photo: G.Karskens)

In western Sydney, people still battle to save the last bit of open bushland space at the ADF site, sold for a song to a developer.<sup>26</sup> There are literally thousands of stories like these around Australia. Check our histories of environmental activism! Check the web! Why is it then that those who think and write about urban forms so often portray suburbs, and cities, as alienating, anti-communal and sterile? Peter Newman for example, writes of (and writes off) 'the feeble attempts at community which characterise our suburbs'.<sup>27</sup> Is this lazy unfamiliarity, deliberate distortion, or simple historical ignorance?

It is worth remembering too that many of our planning policies, government bodies and conservation and pollution legislation were triggered or shaped by lobbyist, campaigners,

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<sup>26</sup> Smith and Scott, *Living Cities*, pp. 274-6; National Parks Association, 'Emus and Bulldozers: St Marys ADI', at <http://www.npansw.org.au/web/journal/200106/cover.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Newman, 'Sustainable settlements: Restoring the commons', *Habitat Australia*, August 1991, p. 20, cited in Gaynor, *Harvest of the Suburbs*, p. 13.

activists and community groups – in short, by the people.<sup>28</sup> And if activists are among the drivers of policy and governance, what drives them? People generally come to activism not through global thinking but through the local, the visceral, through experience and observation. So sense of place, whether positive attachment or alarm at environmental problems, matters.<sup>29</sup>

I am not arguing that this tradition of concern, sense of place, activism and communalism characterises the entire population – that would be as ridiculous as asserting that all citizens are selfish, materialistic, greedy, stupid, environmental vandals. Nor can it be said that all local pressure groups and activists have the monopoly on wise decisions, environmental or otherwise. The larger point is that they *come together for a common goal*. This is a strong tradition, one which offers hope. And surely those who think and plan for the awesome problems of our cities face would recognise this capacity for human commitment, this willingness to give of oneself for the greater good, nourish and tap into it? What has been the record of governments and planners with regard to communities and activism, with regard to people and the places where they put down roots?

Let's look briefly at three sites of major urban transformation in Sydney, places to see how governments and people have interacted: Castlereagh, Kellyville and Green Square. All of these were initiated or propelled by state and local government decisions, policy and planning and all had dramatic impacts on local communities.

Castlereagh, on the floodplain of Nepean River near Penrith, was our last, most intact colonial rural landscape, dating back to the first white settlement in 1803. Local families put down roots and were still in the area in the 1970s; a community so settled it could not imagine destruction.

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<sup>28</sup> Though of course as Tom Uren points out, it is the politicians and bureaucrats who make the final decisions; pers. com. Tom Uren, Brisbane, 5 May 2006.

<sup>29</sup> McPhillips, *Local Heroes*, Introduction.

Castlereagh had a deeper history too, the history of the Booroberongal and Mulgowie peoples, recorded in around forty archaeological sites. (There may have been more recent Aboriginal histories too, but these were questions not asked or pursued at the time).



Castlereagh landscape, 1999 (Photo: G.Karskens)



Castlereagh landscape, 2005 (Photo: Benedict Taylor)

In the 1980s, the government allowed local gravel and sand mining companies to mine Castlereagh – and they could do it by open-cut mining, completely destroying the earlier landscape and community. (The brighter aspect is that the remaining quarry will be filled as huge lakes, remade as open space and returned to the people – though this project is not without environmental problems). Although extensive EIS studies were carried out, no-one consulted the community. In fact EIS research leaves out the very things that are most

important: intimate attachment to place, the layered webs connecting environments and people, and the meanings people invest in localities.<sup>30</sup> At Castlereagh, local people simply did not believe that an entire landscape, their familiar, everyday country, would be destroyed. When they did realise, effective protests were mounted in the 1990s. However the company's right to complete the project had already been guaranteed by a Deed of Agreement signed by the then Minister, Bob Carr in 1984.<sup>31</sup> Key activists say they were eventually silenced by the threat of legal action. Today local people are still angry, but they feel utterly powerless, and they feel betrayed. One wonders how they will receive exhortations to conserve, to behave responsibly, to respect the environment?<sup>32</sup>

At Kellyville in the 1980s, a tidal wave of bricks and mortar began sweeping over the market gardens and flower farms, swirling around small gabled churches, the old doglegged, post-and-rail-fenced roads, the forgotten settler graves in the old paddocks. Kellyville was part of the northwest sector land release, and it was where urban consolidation policies were imposed: here the blocks are relatively small, and the houses often reach almost to the boundaries. There was some community information and publicity. It was blunt, uncompromising and patronising: 'Sydney is growing, whether we like it or not', only that really meant 'whether you like it or not'. Basically it informs people that their area was going to change drastically and

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Read, *Returning to nothing: the meaning of lost places*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1996 p. 183.

<sup>31</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 12 August 1987, see also 14 April 1986.

<sup>32</sup> The Penrith Lakes Scheme and Castlereagh are the subjects of my current Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project. A key document for the Scheme is Kinhill Stearns, *Penrith Lakes Scheme, Regional Environmental Study*, Sydney, Department of Environment and Planning, 1984; see also Grace Karskens, 'Water Dreams Earthen Histories: Exploring Urban Environmental History at the Penrith Lakes Scheme and Castlereagh, Sydney', *Environment and History*, forthcoming, 2007.



The transformation of Kellyville, 1999 (Photos: G.Karskens)

there was nothing they could do about it.<sup>33</sup> Certainly there were heritage studies completed – I was one of the consultants. But, apart from putting lines around the settler grave and a few colonial homes (now languishing with no use and no hope of restoration funds) it made not a jot of difference to the planning. I tend to think of that type of work now as ‘enabling window dressing’. A typically underfunded cultural planning study was carried out. Its findings are depressing. People felt invaded by newcomers, their place literally bulldozed, the old creeks cloudy with earth from the wrecked banks. They felt the old community, centred around churches and schools, was diluting, disappearing.<sup>34</sup>

And what has been the response to Kellyville since? Why, having been deliberately designed in this way, it is regularly and waspishly demonised as the worst, most tasteless expression of Australian suburbia which ever blighted the face of our fair city, as well as emblematic of all our

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<sup>33</sup> Department of Environment and Planning, ‘Draft Sydney Regional Environmental Plan, Rouse Hill Development Area, North West Sector, brochure, n.d. c.1990; Rouse Hill Infrastructure Consortium, ‘Rouse Hill Development Area and You’, brochure, 1993. See also Smith and Scott, *Living Cities*, pp. 271-3.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Conroy, ‘Project Report: Kellyville Cultural Mapping Project – Greetings from Kellyville’, report prepared for the Hills Community Aid and Information Service, Sydney, 1997; Smith and Scott, *ibid.*

social, cultural and environmental ills.<sup>35</sup> Under this barrage of insults, it really would not be surprising if the new Kellyvilleans went back into their houses, shut their faux-federation doors, turned on their tellies and never came out again.

And Green Square: a deeply ironic name, invented to rebadge the gritty old industrial suburbs to the city's south. Alexandria, Waterloo, Zetland and Rosebery were to be renewed and sold off as glossy high rise apartments in a cool and 'vibrant' urban environment. Here in the early 1990s planners argued passionately that urban renewal had to come from below as well as above, and they went to enormous efforts to consult the community. Meetings, focus groups, competitions and surveys were held, contributions collated. Yet something went wrong. Few, if any of people's concerns translated into what eventuated, and after ten years Green Square is a strange, almost surreal landscape, a collection of designer apartment blocks cheek by jowl with derelict factories and overgrown yards, and the great rusty chimney of the Zetland Monster rising up in the middle. The state government's hopes that somehow developers would create social and cultural infrastructure and 'vibrancy' have come to nothing. Green Square still has no centre, no cultural and social facilities, no identity.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> But they didn't – in the complete absence of public transport, they successfully campaigned for better and safer main roads. Typical of current criticism and satire is Elizabeth Farrelly, 'Beauty, exclusionism, stuff: the basis of community?', in Robert Freestone, Bill Randolph and Caroline Butler-Bowden (eds), *Talking About Sydney*, Sydney UNSW Press and Historic Houses Trust, 2006, pp. 135-48. See also Glenn Murcutt cited in Miranda Devine's rebuttal 'Copping the bile in Kellyville', *Sun Herald*, 24 October 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Tessa Endelman, 'The roots of Green Square', in Karskens and Rogowsky, *Histories of Green Square*, pp. 115-19; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16, 17 November 2005; City of Sydney, 'Feedback on Issues raised at Green Square Planning Community Forum, 10 October 2005, see <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/Development/documents/UrbanRenewals/GreenSquare/GreenSquarePlanningForum10October2005.pdf>



Old Portman Street, Zetland 2004 (Photos: G. Karskens)

While new residents must wonder where they have landed, old residents feel their familiar neighbourhood has been hijacked. This is old, scrabbling, urban working class Australia, 'rusted-on Labor' people, so loyal to their football team it is said they have 'one red eye and one green eye' for the club colours.<sup>37</sup> Most want a cleaner, better serviced place to live, but they detest the imposed new name, and don't want their familiar suburbs swallowed up in a glitzy attempt at a Manhattan downunder. Apart from the innovative work by Landcom at Victoria Park, local history and culture and local sense of place have been unacknowledged and ignored. No history was ever commissioned. The seductively sleek fantasy landscape could not be more different from tradition urban forms here; it could be in any city in the world.<sup>38</sup> Despite its long, dramatic history and community activism, Green Square, like Castlereagh and Kellyville, was seen as a blank space on a map, a place developer Phillip Bartlett happily described as 'a void, a vacuum'.<sup>39</sup> I can think of no more effective way of alienating local people, discouraging communal action, and fostering a sense of apathy.

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<sup>37</sup> Margo Beasley, *Everybody Knew Everybody, histories and memories of Green Square*, NSW Dept of Urban Affairs and Planning/South Sydney Development Corporation, 2001, pp. 18, 34 and *loc. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.greensquare.com.au/gstc>. A fine oral history was later commissioned by the South Sydney Development Corporation, see Beasley, *ibid.* although the printing and paper was donated by a local company.

<sup>39</sup> Phillip Bartlett, 'Urban Design calls for big picture solutions while managing human dimensions. How have these been managed in Green Square?', Public Lecture, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 12 July 2004.

Over thirty years ago, Justice Hope in his Report on the National Estate noted 'the almost wilful official unconcern' about citizens' concerns for the quality of their traditional environments.

Heritage now has a great edifice of policy, laws and professional practice, yet when it comes to familiar urban and suburban places, it seems little as changed.<sup>40</sup>

In a thoughtful essay about the aftermath of the Canberra fires, Jack Waterford wondered about what brings people together. He thought perhaps it was Hugh Stretton's 'six-lane highway' scenario: the common outside threat which makes caring allies out of self-interested strangers. In Canberra, the fires kindled an astonishing community spirit and selfless sharing.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps so, though with the longer view in mind, is it really only a disaster which awakens this spirit?

The other story out of post-fire Canberra was about a different, but related, kind of community action. A sewage plant was in danger of failing, and so people in one area were asked not to put grey water down their sinks. As one, they did it. The grey water level plummeted to almost zero and the disaster was avoided.<sup>42</sup> As I have argued today, this is simply a recent example of a longer tradition: given clear, accurate information, a common, urgent goal and a sense that they can do something about it, urban people can and will help, work together, put themselves out for the common good.

It would be truly tragic if these most recent lessons from Canberra about people, place and community were forgotten in the way our longer histories appear to have been.

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<sup>40</sup> R. M. (Justice) Hope, *Report of the National Estate*, 1974, p. 26, cited in Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw and Tracey Ireland, *Social Significance: A Discussion Paper*, Sydney, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Waterford, 'Rebuilding Canberra's Spirit', *Griffith Review - Dreams of Land*, Summer 2003-2004, 114.

<sup>42</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 19, 20 January 2003; *The Source*, Melbourne Water, Issue 24 February 2003, <http://thesource.melbournewater.com.au/content/Issue/February2003/canberra.htm>; pers. com. Dr Tom Griffiths, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, December 2005.

Forgetting such lessons, ignoring that vital human potential, makes our cities vulnerable.

Remembering, nourishing and building upon them will make cities resilient.