

A New Relationship between Planning and Democracy? Urban Activism in Melbourne 1965 -1975

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This paper is a reflective overview of urban social protest in the years 1965-1975 and its influence on post-war planning, especially on models of public participation in planning, and conceptions of effective local democracy. Drawing extensively on a major study of urban activism in Melbourne, Australia, the paper discusses the political and organisational strategies used by activists in Melbourne's inner city areas to resist the large-scale planning/urban renewal projects especially of the Victorian state government. The paper focuses on Melbourne's inner city Residents' Action Groups and examines their motivations, strategies and rationales, placing them within an international context of urban protest movements demanding local democracy and consultation. The paper concludes that the Melbourne urban protest movements of the late 60s and early 70s deserve recognition for their contribution to inclusive, consultative processes in planning decision-making. This is done within a context of questioning contemporary academic discussion around the interpretative concept of gentrification, widely and indiscriminately applied to this and later periods of urban change.

Urban social movements: the international context

This paper is a reflective overview of urban social protest in the years 1965-1975 and its influence on post-war planning, especially on models of public participation in planning and conceptions of effective local democracy. It draws extensively on a major study of urban activism in Melbourne, Australia, especially the emergence of residents' action groups (RAGs) and the extent to which such organisations were grass roots democracy in action, as compared with common conceptualisations of local action groups as part of a middle class gentrification/displacement dynamic.¹

The decade 1965-1975 was a period of tumultuous economic and social change interacting with the specific conditions prevailing in many large cities in the northern hemisphere and Australasia. Displacement and migration, which had begun in the post-war years, continued on an unprecedented scale impacting on urban areas along class, racial and cultural lines. These changes challenged assumptions of early post-war urban planning centred on the need for reconstruction of cities as central to comprehensive social and economic re-building planning strategies (Howe, 2000). Post-war centralised planning models were destabilised by a demand for more transparent and consultative planning models, alongside a questioning amongst academics and other critics of large-scale infrastructure and corporatist planning. Jane Jacobs, in her 1962 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, attracted international renown for her attack on the redevelopment of areas of New York by Robert Moses and the Port of New York Authority as 'not the rebuilding of cities [but] the sacking of cities' (Jacobs, 1962, p.14) articulating emerging protest to the large-scale destruction of inner-city communities by corporatist planning authorities. In Britain, studies by Wilmott and Young of the Bethnal Green area in the East End of London demonstrated the importance of community networks and the destructive effects of indiscriminate relocation (Wilmott and Young, 1957) reflected in the retreat in the 1970s from the 'New Towns' in Britain and the outer suburban housing estates built in many cities as the solution to post-war housing shortages and overcrowded 'slums'.

At the same time, and connectedly, we see an onset of community politics reflecting the altering age structure of inner-city populations, as well as an expanding middle-class demographic in inner-city areas. Changing lifestyles, rapidly altering attitudes to work and marriage along with racial and ethnic politicisation all signified and impacted on inner city change, leading to an 'explosion of community and grassroots organizations on both sides of the Atlantic.' (Hamberton, 1978, p. 22)

The most effective urban protest movements emerging from this 'explosion' took place in cities 'caught on the upside of economic and social restructuring' (Dutton, 2003, p. 2558) which led to the suburbanisation of industry and subsequent shift of blue-collar workers following their workplaces to new, or decentralised outer-ring locations. These changes were so widespread that, in a study published in the early 1980s, Peter Hall identified wide spread concern at the emergence of a 'global inner city' characterised by unemployment, poverty, population decline and multiple deprivation (Hall, 1981).

By the early 1970s informal global networks of urban activists mostly in Australian, Canadian, British and American cities affected by these changes had emerged, linking progressive sections of the planning profession, academics, political activists and a myriad of grassroots groups. Melbourne urban activists were well connected in these networks, many having studied, lived in or visited overseas cities, while new courses in urban sociology and planning in Australian universities and colleges enabled students and academics to contribute to the burgeoning international literature on urban issues.

Gentrification/Displacement theories

Interpretations of this period have been dominated by theories of gentrification and displacement. As Rowland Atkinson, editor of *The Gentry in the City*, a recent issue of *Urban Studies*, writes, 'gentrification continues to be a problem of definition, theorization and social cost, as well as a significant challenge for public policy' (Rofe, 2003 p. 2349). The volume itself bears this out, its contributors exploring multiple facets of present global debates surrounding the process. Many issues are projected and explored from 'gentrification as a positive public policy tool' (Cameron, 2003, p. 2373) to the third-wave manifestation of the phenomenon as 'super-gentrification' (Lees, 2003). The use (or even, arguably, abuse) of cultural capital in the formation of newly gentrified areas (Ley, 2003) and the global nature of gentrified communities and a new, thriving 'globally oriented residential identity' (Rofe, 2003) are also discussed. Some papers, such as Loretta Lees' case study of the now (by her controversial definition, 'supergentrified') Brooklyn Heights, discuss 'grassroots organisations and community groups' in the 1950s and 60s – in this case, agitating 'for renovation and preservation' and imposing on powerful planner, slum clearance and freeway builder Moses his 'first defeat' (Lees, 2003 pp.2494-2495). Grassroots and community groups are, thereby, seen as a stage in a process that leads perhaps not irrevocably, but certainly in many cases, to a neighbourhood's 'full circle' restoration to a state of opulence and exclusivity.

Lees does not directly accuse community groups of agitation with intent to gentrify, but her work raises questions of the motivations of such 'grass roots' organisations. Was their grassroots status genuine, or were they, as is often suggested, heralding merely the return of new middle class professionals to increase property prices and global gentrification of the inner city? Because of the increase in property values in the inner city which has seen land-owners who purchased property for small amounts now owners of houses putatively worth millions, the resident associations and urban activists of the period have not been seen as trail blazers for a new democracy but rather as selfish gentrifiers displacing working class residents and marginal groups from inner city areas. Early assessments – such as that of Australian planning historian Leonie Sandercock – that local resident associations were 'defensive' and 'often narrowly self-interested in their aims' (Sandercock, 1975, p. 172) still hold sway for many. In the enthusiasm to adopt the British *noblesse oblige* idea of 'gentry' first used wryly by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1963 (Hamnett, 2003, p. 2401) to describe the movement of middle class residents to inner London, inner city local residents' associations have been damned by commentators as self-interested, inward-looking and keen to appropriate ideas of 'community' for their own purposes without acknowledging or appreciating the diversity or value of the community in question.

Definitions of gentrification have linked the concept with the displacement of working class residents, especially those by urban geographers influenced by Chicago School theories of urban development. W.S. Logan, in his study of gentrification in Melbourne described gentrification as 'the middle class replacement or displacement of working class communities for property speculation and locational advantage in the wake of economic restructuring and personal life style reasons' (Logan, 1985 p. xix). Another view of gentrification has recently been developed by Neil Smith in a comprehensive study that has analysed the rhetoric of 'gentrifiers' in detail via a comparison between Turner's frontier thesis and gentrification's references to 'rolling back of wilderness and savagery' (Smith, 1991 p. 86; Smith, 1996, pp.3-29) thereby assisting the presentation of gentrification as 'the leading edge' of the exclusive nature of the 'American urban renaissance' (Smith, 1991, p.89).

Residents' Action Groups in Melbourne

Our study of Melbourne in the period prior to the 'second wave' of gentrification suggests that gentrification/displacement explanations can oversimplify the complexity of urban change in the city and the broad support for struggles against powerful and unrepresentative bureaucracies and incompetent and even corrupt local and state governments. The extent and effectiveness of Melbourne's RAGs in the 1960s and 70s makes the city a revealing study and emphasises the importance of distinguishing different periods of 'gentrification' for interpretative purposes.

Melbourne in the 1960s was Australia's (perhaps the world's) suburban city *par excellence*, and the reaction against the conformity of post-war suburban development was a factor in the location of young middle class families in the inner city. Melbourne was also the nation's centre for manufacturing industry and the inner city was significantly affected by economic structural changes spurred on by the winding down of tariffs and industry protection in the 1970s (O'Connor and Rapsom, 1990). The decline and relocation of manufacturing industry impacted especially on post-war migrants (mostly from Greece, Italy and Yugoslavia) who had settled in the inner city and formed the majority of the manufacturing workforce.

Major inner city resident action groups were formed in the inner-ring of Melbourne's suburbs: North Melbourne, Parkville, South Melbourne, Carlton and Fitzroy by 1970.

(Figure 1). The municipalities the RAGs covered were small, sometimes merely a recognised neighbourhood within the City of Melbourne, a larger local government area. Carlton, Parkville and South Yarra, for instance, were all a part of the City of Melbourne. The RAGs were usually run on a committee system: in 1971, the Fitzroy Residents Association typically had committees dedicated to Historic Buildings, Open Space, and Redevelopment. RAGs were also dedicated to public information, using film nights, newsletters and print media announcements and, after the introduction of public access radio in 1972, electronic media.

That many of the leaders and probably the majority of members of these organisations were professionals and new arrivals to the areas they represented has encouraged interpretations of urban activism in Melbourne as less confrontational than in Sydney, the site of many successful anti-demolition 'green bans' (Burgmann and Burgmann, 1999). The dramatic battles in Sydney and the central role of the Builders Labourers' Federation and its NSW secretary Jack Munday, in enforcing what was seen as socially responsive obstructions to inappropriate redevelopment has obscured the importance and effectiveness of the locally based RAGs in Melbourne with their professional and community leadership. However, the Melbourne RAGs were also strengthened by the support of the Victorian branch of the Builders Labourers' Federations, most notably in the battle over a stretch of former railway land in North Carlton slated for light industrial use, but ultimately retained as public open space. Although activism in Melbourne was mostly characterised by lobbying and protest by local groups, the support of the union movement for RAGs was a defining characteristic of Australian urban protest.

The RAG's efforts were originally built around the regeneration of Melbourne's 19th century terrace housing. Though many of these areas of terrace housing had been identified in the 1930s as 'slums' (Figure 1), particularly in their single-fronted, single-story 'cottage' form, 19th century terraces were to become the mainstream of intellectual exchange and production in Australia at a time of political foment and imagination. So strongly did the new residents identify with the Victorian terrace that Michael Jaeger, writing in the mid-1980s, saw the proposed destruction of Victorian-era Melbourne as the key threat to the new middle classes for whom 'Victoriana' was a key element of their self-identification and a reason why such groups opposed aspects of central urban reconstruction programs (Jaeger, 1986, p.84). They especially opposed the assessment of slum areas made in the late 1950s via a casual 'windscreen survey':

Housing Commission of Victoria (HCV) officials would drive through inner city streets and judge housing conditions by houses' frontages (Tibbits, 1988 p. 143). Though a more consultative and intensive follow-up was originally projected, the results of the initial survey, announced in 1960, were ultimately deemed sufficient.

Although housing and conservation were important factors, the primary influence on the emergence of the RAGs, their powerful position in Melbourne and their widespread community support was their opposition to the redevelopment activities of the semi-autonomous state government planning authorities who dominated planning in Melbourne, especially the Housing Commission of Victoria (HCV), Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) and the Country Roads Board (CRB). It was the large-scale reconstruction and development plans of these bodies, rather than private sector development (influential in Sydney, the locus for global capital investment in Australia in the early 1970s) which mobilised a broadly-based and committed support for Melbourne's resident groups.

Corporatist planning conflicted with new notions of community, communalism, the limitations and/or obligations of local, state and federal government, the public good and issues of marginalisation of certain sectors of the community which were highly influential on the inner city of Melbourne in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the 1960s in particular, a time when residential areas of apparently degraded Victorian-era housing seemed to many to be an inefficient and socially undesirable use, numerous individuals and bodies had an interest in the inner city. These included ethnic organisations, residents, business people, developers, government bodies and departments, groups with heritage interests, planners and architects. All had cause to advocate particular courses of action in what was usually depicted as a problem region in need of technical solutions. A further boon to development plans was the assumption that the office/retail function of the central area of cities like Melbourne would continue to expand, and that freeways would allow those who worked in the city to commute from middle if not outer ring suburbs. In this regard responses by Australia's three tiers of government to Melbourne's 'problems' of expansion were similar to responses to many other western cities in the 1960s-80s.

One of the chief difficulties faced by traditional and newer residents of inner-city areas was the lack of transparency or consultation from planning bodies in the years leading up to 1972: residents felt powerless in the face of bureaucratic intransigence. The post-war language of these authorities intent on regeneration of the working-class communities of inner city Melbourne was typical of worldwide reconstruction rhetoric, though unlike many European cities subject to such discussions, Melbourne had not been bombed or otherwise damaged during wartime. The new inner city of Melbourne, as envisaged by planners of the HCV was to be of a much higher density, and rationalised along Le Corbusier lines. Concrete towers set in open space would replace cramped and often poorly-built late 19th century housing. In tandem with the commitment to resumption and demolition of 'slum' housing came another, supported by business, to the creation of a larger pool of consumers for city-centre retailers only beginning to expand into middle and outer-ring suburban retail developments.

The unaccountability of these state authorities enabled broad-based coalitions to develop around RAGs campaigns. The HCV's redevelopment plans and those of the CRB for extensive ring roads and freeways to facilitate suburban car traffic access to inner and central Melbourne were similar in their lack of consultation, a familiar situation at a time when technical experts were arrogantly assumed to know best. Planning bodies' decisions on major demolitions and building projects disrupted thousands of lives and caused major damage to the character of particular areas. Brian Ladd's recent account of battles to save the 19th century built environment from a recalcitrant and uncommunicative bureaucracy in East Berlin up until the early 1990s contains numerous points of connection to 1960s Melbourne (Ladd, 2003). Castells'

observation that 'the tendency towards state centralism and domination by the state over the city is being opposed all over the world by a massive popular appeal for local autonomy and urban self-management' (Castells, 1983, p.318) is pertinent to Melbourne and explains the emergence of extensive and effective oppositional movements.

Melbourne RAGS as urban protest movements

Urban social protests were part of the wider response to the perceived 'global crisis of capitalism' in this period. In the 1960s and 70s, capitalism's global crisis went hand-in-hand with the rise of broader protest movements – most famously Paris in 1968 – which had ramifications around the world. Melbourne's urban activism was more locally based and primarily inspired by the anti-Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s, although urban Australia did have a well-established culture of public political protest (Sparrow and Sparrow, 2001). Anti-racism protests, usually focused on South African apartheid, and Vietnam-related demonstrations were seen as the spearhead of a new culture of protest springing from the universities from the early 1960s (Armstrong, 2001). Protest on international social justice issues was paralleled by smaller, but similarly committed, movements centering on conservation and redevelopment issues which also contained a social justice element. This was the branch of the protest movement from which urban activism, and concern for the protection of built heritage, grew. Melbourne's articulate middle class residents and social reformers of the 1960s and 70s, many of whom had international experience and were informed by British and American urban studies and analysis of the city, enforced demands for information and discussion. RAG protests might involve street marches, sit-ins, or in one instance – celebrated by many protesters – the burning of the Minister for Housing, Ray Meagher, in effigy (Figure 2).

Networks were also important in exchanging ideas on tactics in Melbourne RAGs. Networks for disseminating information and proposing alternative action included progressive sections of the planning profession, academics, political activists and churches. The involvement of unions in protests in Sydney and Melbourne and the confrontational nature of Australian protests attracted international attention. (Burgmann and Burgmann, 1999). The issues and approaches were sufficiently global that Melbourne journalist and sometime activist Pete Steedman could relocate from Melbourne's inner suburb of Carlton to London in 1968, using his expertise as a social justice 'shit-stirrer' to campaign for preservation of Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square and Covent Garden as well as publicising issues relating to Northern Ireland and media monopolies in Britain (Steedman, 2002). Information, tactics, propaganda, slogans and ideas came back to Australia via a small but burgeoning alternative (print) media (Nichols 2004).

Within the RAGs, a commitment to preservation of existing streetscapes and (more controversially, then as now) community and its networks, facilities and institutions, created complex and varied partnerships and support, as well as encouraging the emergence of community leaders and agitators who might otherwise have remained untried. The RAGS also attracted support and leadership from sections of the 'old' Australian working class residents and of ethnic organisations for particular campaigns. A campaign against the Eastern Freeway and demolitions of factories, industrial sites and houses in the Brooks Crescent area of Fitzroy were characterised by the widespread participation of residents, writers, factory management, students and a myriad of other supporters of the Fitzroy RAG's campaign (Burke, 1988 p.212; Tibbits, 1988 p. 160-1). Indeed, Brooks Crescent, which began as a 'battle' between local residents, local industry and the typically intransigent HCV, saw the Fitzroy Residents Action Group and related networks stop the HCV from proceeding with further Melbourne inner city redevelopment plans and producing an 'alternative plan' for the Brooks Crescent area (Fitzroy Residents Association *Bulletin*, 1971 p. 1).

The professional and strategic leadership of the Melbourne RAGs, able to draw on a long tradition of social reform and progressive civic and church organisations in the city (Davison 2003), was to act as a model for similar residents' groups in Sydney and Brisbane. The infusion of a new political consciousness amongst an increasingly educated Australian middle class, and particularly amongst women within that class, created scenarios in which women, for the first time, played an active and in some instances leading role in lobbying to conserve particular urban areas from demolition and/or redevelopment.

The Melbourne RAGs conflicts then were with semi-autonomous state government authorities with strong planning powers granted in the flush of post-war faith in modernist planning and weak local councils unable to resist a pro-development state government. Between the late 1960s and the first three years of the 70s, RAGs found themselves locked in a three-pronged battle: with the Housing Commission of Victoria over large-scale redevelopment plans, with the Country Roads Board over freeway plans that would cut a swathe through inner areas, and with the MMBW over planning that would facilitate large-scale development. The RAGs campaigns and programmes influenced a change of Victorian state government leadership in late 1972, which roughly coincided with the election of Gough Whitlam's national Australian Labor Party government. The state government remained conservative and the federal was the most radical Australia had seen, nevertheless both were sensitive to the new urban issues: in many respects the RAGs might be seen to have 'won' from this point on, at least on crucial issues of government approach, accountability and community consultation.

The RAGs contributed to the demise of the Housing Commission in the late 1970s, reinforced by accusations of (and prosecutions for) corrupt dealings within the Commission which highlighted the organisation's lack of accountability (Howe, 1988). Certainly prior to this the RAGs had been partially instrumental in the change of Commission policy in the matter of high-rise apartments, now deemed – belatedly – to be a backwards step both in terms of social welfare of residents and safety. The scrapping of the majority of freeway plans, which were, in any case, somewhat hastily drawn up, was seen to be an electioneering move by the newly installed Premier of Victoria, Rupert Hamer, in 1972 and a response to RAG campaigns.

Though some of Hamer's environmentally-conscious changes might appear cynical, he and other progressive members of the state government were committed to his own conception of 'grass roots' democracy – a conception which essentially eschewed party politics or dogma at this 'ordinary' level: 'I thought community opinion was very important. That seems to me to be part of democracy, isn't it?' (Hamer, 2003). Hamer's 'quality of life' approach to government saw a new commitment to conservation and consultative planning with the enactment of laws ensuring preservation of some built environment areas, as well as the revision of the Town and Country Planning Act, the establishment of a Planning Appeals Board with remarkably open access for community groups and third parties. This period also saw the passing of the state's first heritage protection legislation.

At the same time inner city local councils were changing irrevocably. Councils, previously made up of shopkeepers and landowners who did not live in the areas they represented or locals often beholden to a corrupt political 'machine', came to represent a diverse cross section including women, members of ethnic communities, and younger people. Inspired by, and attracted to, new models of community based health centres and legal services created in Melbourne's inner city and facilitated by the 'new' councils, the Whitlam government adopted these models at the national level.

Most important, as demonstrated by Sheila Byard in her discussion of the North Melbourne Residents' Association and its impact on the City of Melbourne's planning, interaction and consultation between planners and the community was now possible and desirable. Byard notes that 'the promise that people in the street could assist to bring improvements about was to

dissolve notions of planning as a mystery performed by experts' (Byard, 2000 p. 83). The detailed plan for the Carlton area prepared by the Carlton RAG in the early 1970s also involved widespread consultation, as did *Seeds of Change*, a proposal developed for planning sustainable cities co-ordinated by the North Melbourne RAG. The setting up of the Committee for Urban Action as a co-ordinator not only of opposition to the state planning authorities but also of developing planning strategies for Melbourne's inner city areas was another remarkable achievement for community based groups in this period (Baker, 2003).

The Melbourne Resident Action Groups established a new model of participatory planning not only through organised opposition to the state planning authorities, but also by their ability to demonstrate alternative consultative planning models and by their active participation in local politics. While this state of affairs was to prove temporary – especially when under Victorian Liberal Party Premier Jeff Kennett, Melbourne's municipalities were amalgamated in 1993, limiting local influence in planning and enabling a move back to corporatist planning models – this should not detract from the on-going achievements of the urban activists of the 1960s/70s.

Conclusion

In response to the opening up of planning in Britain (exemplified by Community Development Plan teams, 1972-76) Gordon Cherry wrote in *Town Planning and its Social Context* of 'the developing arena of public participation in planning' and of a 'new relationship between planning and democracy' (Cherry, 1973, p. 163). Although such judgements with hindsight might seem over-optimistic, the study of urban activism in Melbourne 1965-75 indicates that this was a watershed period in the development of more democratic planning models, that gentrification interpretations have obscured the significance of inner city resident associations. Indeed recent revisions of gentrification theory emphasise the complexity of urban change and especially the importance of changing labour markets on urban spatial changes that were underestimated in earlier analysis (Buck et al, 2002; Hamnett, 2003). We would also argue that urban protest movements had a broad base of support and that the important involvement of ethnic and racial groups has been underestimated in analysis of this period (Amin and Thrift, p. 46; Castells, p.316). Discussions of gentrification have become confused between the period of the 1960s and 1970s and the developer-led gentrification of the 1980s and 1990s, often referred to as 'second wave' gentrification. In Melbourne in the 1960s and 70s, gentrification was a 'cottage industry' carried out on a comparatively small scale in inner-suburban areas so that low-income areas alternated with pockets of middle class settlement. Indiscriminate use of the word as describing an on-going similar process has confused analysis of the 1965-1975 period.

Our study of Melbourne suggests that gentrification/displacement theory oversimplifies the complexity of urban change in the city and underestimates the broad support for many locally led struggles against powerful and unrepresentative bureaucracies and incompetent and often corrupt local and state governments, and the cost of these struggles to individuals and organisations. Castells' identification of the demand 'for increasing power for local government, neighbourhood decentralization, and urban self-management in contradiction to a centralized state' as 'the struggle for a free city, a *citizen movement*' is relevant to our Melbourne study where the successful development of new, more inclusive planning models, which despite the setbacks at the end of the century, continue to influence planning practice and legislation in the city, albeit within a more institutionalised framework. In this regard the bitter confrontations between bureaucratic planning and grassroots democracy has had a long-lasting impact, crucial to conservation, planning, and consultative ideals and models in the 21st century.

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¹ An Australian Research Council-funded project entitled 'Community and Governance: Urban Activism in Melbourne in the 1960s and Beyond' under the aegis of Deakin and Monash Universities, Melbourne, Australia