

THE COMMUNITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Marie Coleman

an edited version of an address

to Canberra Combined Community Councils' meeting

19 March 2011.

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A Tale of Two Cities

What is an activist?

An activist is simply an individual engaged with the community- whatever the particular issue or type of engagement.

- In the 1860s, concerned by increased loss of ships and life due to overloading, a British MP, [Samuel Plimsoll](#), took up the load line cause. The Plimsoll Line is now accepted international practice.
- At the same time, the Earl of Shaftsbury was an activist working to relieve the destitution of the working classes in the industrial revolution- children were working in underground mines pulling loads of coal. He raised community concerns and laws were changed.
- In 1973 Australia's National Health Insurance scheme was introduced by W.G. Hayden MP as Social Security Minister - Medibank was the end result of work of academic researchers Dick Scotton and John Deeble and a great many activists on affordable health care, including myself and the late Dr Sid Sax
- The Country Women's Association- a venerable body of activists, works to advance the well-being of rural women. The CWA was responsible for establishing and supporting many women's and babies health services from the 1920s onwards in rural NSW.
- Joan Kellett OAM of Dickson, another local activist- Joan refereed swimming for many years at national, local and international levels, and has chaired the Ministerial Advisory Council for Sport and Recreation
- The folk who run the Railways Historical Society
- The parents who serve on school councils and pre-school committees

Activists are the people who make our community work, whose energy allows a lot of us to sit back and think, 'I won't have to get involved in that particular group, because someone is handling the issues.' Their activities can enrich the community. They build what is sometimes called 'social capital'.

Whatever the field, community activists need to engage to varying degrees with government. Activism is a legitimate and valuable element of society.

Planning, and within that, housing policy, is no different. It involves activists and activism interacting with governments and developers.

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It is useful to consider two examples of community activism around urban renewal projects by state Housing Commissions:

Atherton Street Fitzroy: A vanished neighbourhood

The Atherton Gardens high-rise estate in Fitzroy was built between the mid 1960s and 1971, and replaced an entire neighbourhood made up of over 250 buildings, spread across eight streets. This neighbourhood was located between Brunswick, Gertrude, Napier, King William and Condell Streets in Fitzroy. About 180 homes lined the streets, most inhabited since the 19th century. The locals were mainly struggling families, including European migrants and Aboriginal people. Although many of their homes were in poor repair, not all were the 'slums' that the authorities claimed. Some migrants became home-owners and renovated their houses, putting in plumbing and other improvements. When the bulldozers moved through, many residents left the area, never to return.

The story of Atherton construction is the Fitzroy activism story.....local clerics Brian Howe, Peter Hollingworth were involved in protests- while the towers were built, the activism caused change in Fitzroy Council- this is now more activist and providing many social services; the non-redeveloped area of Fitzroy is now valuable 'gentrified' real estate- and recently the electorate changed its politics from Labor to Green.

Erskineville Housing Estate

...both a City and activist role, State Government instrumentality backed off

Sydney in 2002, 2009

A concerted campaign for several months by residents and Erskineville Housing Estate tenants forced the NSW state government on November 19 2002 to reject a housing department redevelopment proposal which would have adversely affected many elderly residents.

Built between 1938 and 1956, the two-storey estate was a model for Housing Commission developments throughout the state. It had 146 units, a child-care centre and a lawn bowls club. It had been listed by the National Trust, and is often described as a garden estate because of the surrounding abundance of trees and gardens.

The Department of Housing wanted to replace the estate with 600 units located in an eight-storey high-rise tower. The project was to be partly privately financed. Only 146 of the 600 units were earmarked to remain in public hands.

By 2009 a different approach was in place: LEIGHTON Holdings had teamed with property fund manager LaSalle Investment Management to build a new housing estate in Sydney's Erskineville.

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The project will include 300 apartments and townhouses, and be developed on a former light industrial site, set to be rezoned to Mixed Use under the City of Sydney's Draft Local Environment Plan (LEP).

Are there lessons for the Australian Capital Territory?

ACT governance is unique- a city state, without a municipal government- the level where in other jurisdictions most planning decisions are taken and community interaction with planning commonly occurs. (Although we can see that State entities can over-ride, or try to over-ride, local governments.)

There should never be any doubt that there is and should be a symbiotic relationship between government and community....government should be responsive to community aspirations, while necessarily being in a position to set final priorities for government action/expenditure among competing objectives/different interest groups.

Not every interest group can prevail, there is always need for negotiation...win some lose some... yet all parties ought try to establish and keep in focus congruent longer-term objectives.

Discussion, consultation, negotiation....these are always preferable to confrontation and brush fires in the suburbs where development is concerned.

But there have been local brush fires.

Current ACT planning processes puts the initial responsibility for consultation on individual development applications with the developer. This process is generally extremely poorly handled.

Subsequent re-consideration by ACTPLA of a revised development application can mean that original objectors find little change has occurred, leaving open only a difficult process of appeal through the Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Residents feel disenfranchised and resentful.

A more effective system of original consultation would lead to better outcomes all round, and reduce delays consequent on the appeal processes against disputed decision-making processes.

The Territory Plan itself is poorly understood by most residents, who are commonly ignorant of the zone system, and what is permitted. In actuality, the residential zoning system is proving to be the cause of many brush fires...since from the outside observer perspective so much seems left to guidelines, and interpretation. Few residents in an RZ2 zone expect to find a large multi-unit development in their midst. Many miss the opportunity to make initial comment because the developer is not obligated to undertake wide local consultation.

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Developers as a whole fail to engage with legitimate community concerns. If consequent costs are encountered as a result of appeals, there is a clear course of action open- earlier and genuine consultation.

ACT planners seem to regard community concerns as being of no value...one reported comment has been that these are merely 'aspirational'.

Some markers seem to be needed in this interaction between officials and citizens.

Planners will do well to reconsider their repeated public remarks about the dominance of the market, and the need for activists to stop wanting some 'Chinese' type of autocratic planning regime. The quote below comes from a recent e-mail from a senior planning official:

the view that in some way the community can direct market forces to only redevelop collectively, at one time, and in a specific location, is an absurdity. Redevelopment, by its very reliance on supply side economics, is ad hoc as individuals decide on (sic) their own time to develop their land and based on a range of personal circumstances. For this to be otherwise requires one to trample democracy and human rights and require centralised state machinery comparable to former soviet or current Chinese planning autocracy.

These very words have been used publicly before in the context of Dickson debates.

We already have in the ACT autocratic centralised planning machinery of our very own.

We have planners who state, publicly, they have no duty to consult.

More importantly, we clearly have planners who do not understand that in a Westminster system the elected Government sets policy, and statutory officer holders execute their duties within the parameters of that policy.

There is a significant problem with the current state of Territory planning law.

Only ACTPLA can put forward changes to the Territory Plan.

No other body, including the ACT Government, can promote a new precinct code to have statutory effect. Precinct codes clearly articulated would do much to reduce the current levels of uncertainty, anger and frustration.

This is quite extraordinary. In Commonwealth practice, chief executives of statutory bodies are answerable to oversighting boards or councils appointed by the Government.

The ACT Government has created a statutory office which need not recognise the Government's authority. Only the ACT Government can legislate to change that.

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The ACT Government has clearly articulated policies on sustainability, on housing affordability, on housing design suited to allow residents to age in place. The elected Government has every right to expect that its officers will work to put those policies in practice.

In my view, the elected ACT Government does wish to achieve agreed outcomes with the community on the thorny issues around re-development of urban areas.

There are numbers of individual one-off consultation processes currently underway. But something more is needed.

This may well be a thorough revision of the legislation establishing ACTPLA, and ensuring that the statutory office holder of Chief Planner is answerable to the elected government. This revision may be appropriate as the changes to ACT administration flow from the recent Hawke Report.

Here in Canberra as we look to increases in population in a very tightly constricted land mass, seeking to simultaneously achieve policies of affordability, sustainability, and a mix of housing types, we must work through issues around urban redevelopment...a process which will inevitably bring planners and community into conflict, unless plans are made with some degree of initial genuine collaboration.

Future concentration of dense development along major transport routes, and on such brownfield sites as can be identified will lessen the pressures on the suburbs, and hopefully lead to better public transport.

The story of the Erskineville estate could be replicated around the re-development of the Sydney Ancher Northbourne housing precinct **unless well handled**.

We see similar stresses around the Yarralumla Brickworks re-development proposals and in several suburban shopping centres.

There will always be competing points of view which must be respected and worked through, without displays of petulant official arrogance. Communities also need to negotiate with courtesy.

Whether there should be some new more formalised consultation machinery is worth considering, and worth exploring whether the Community Councils could be integrated into that.

In recent days more than one representative of the development and property sector has forecast a surplus of housing in the ACT within the decade. Regrettably that is already showing signs of being a surplus of unaffordable housing, leaving in place a crisis for low and middle income households.

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There is clear evidence nationwide of a surplus of housing emerging at the top end of the market, while the affordability of housing deteriorates. This is a market failure.

Let us be clear.

Australia is a democratic country. Individuals vote, not markets. Governments are elected. Governments fall. Governments legislate to achieve agreed outcomes- such as access to education, to health care, access to affordable housing. Market forces are not the sole determinants of societal outcomes. Markets are subject to government regulation, including instances where policies are designed to use markets to achieve desired outcomes.

Urban redevelopment and planning touch many people, and badly handled can and do lead to governments losing office. While change is inevitable and cities do grow we must recognise that at the core we are dealing with humans and their environments.

Good planning is planning with and for the community.

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Attachment A Erskineville

Erskineville public housing estate saved

Wednesday, November 27, 2002 - 11:00

BY PIP HINMAN

SYDNEY — A concerted campaign for several months by residents and Erskineville Housing Estate tenants forced the NSW state government on November 19 to reject a housing department redevelopment proposal which would have adversely affected many elderly residents.

Built between 1938 and 1956, the two-storey estate was a model for Housing Commission developments throughout the state. It had 146 units, a child-care centre and a lawn bowls club. It had been listed by the National Trust, and is often described as a garden estate because of the surrounding abundance of trees and gardens.

The Department of Housing wanted to replace the estate with 600 units located in an eight-storey high-rise tower. The project was to be partly privately financed. Only 146 of the 600 units were earmarked to remain in public hands.

Michael Thomson, Socialist Alliance upper house candidate, told *Green Left Weekly*, "This is a win for the people of Erskineville. They took the fight into the streets and built a lot of local support to stop the sell-off of their homes. This follows wins we've all had over Callan Park and the government's back-down over closing some of our schools and the merging of hospitals. And in Batemans Bay recently, thousands marched and stopped the charcoal plant being built at Mogo."

Sylvia Hale, from the Marrickville Greens told *GLW* that after Labor's backdowns from closing some public schools and selling off Callan Park, she wasn't too surprised by this latest backflip. "What's significant is the strong community opposition to the proposal. Most of the residents have been in Erko for between 30 and 40 years, and so these reasonably elderly people would have had to find alternative accommodation. While there was some public housing to be set aside, there was no guarantee that these residents would have had access."

Hale said she wouldn't be surprised if the state government had decided to back down on this issue in order to protect the pre-selected ALP candidate for Heffron, Kristina Keneally. Keneally was installed by the ALP administrative committee, instead of through a rank-and-file preselection ballot. Many believe that such a ballot would have been won by alternative candidate Deirdre Grusovin.

From *Green Left Weekly*, November 27, 2002.

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In 1995 the *Strategy for a Sustainable City of South Sydney*, identified the Ashmore Precinct as a new growth area, with the potential to provide large redevelopment sites around railway stations as well as significant accessible open space. The Strategy identified the site, covering 17 hectares, as having the potential to become a new sustainable urban village directly connected to the adjacent community.

The Precinct was then rezoned in 1998 to Zone 10 – Mixed Uses. This allows, where appropriate, a mix of land uses such as residential, retail commercial, light industrial.

The project is earmarked for a 1.6 hectare site at 36 Coulson Street, a site which also has frontage to MacDonald and Bridge streets. The development consortium paid Investa Property group's Investa Enhanced Fund \$21 million for the site.

It's part of the Ashmore Precinct, identified by both the NSW state government and council as a precinct set for residential development.¹

One bedroom units in the new complex are expected to start at about \$450,000, according to the AFR.

"Erskineville and Newtown have a unique urban feel, with excellent public transport links to the CBD and eastern suburbs," LaSalle's Ian Mackie said. "LaSalle looks forward to contributing to Erskineville's urban renewal and to growing its relationship with Leighton Properties.

Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore: speech 2009

Erskineville Public Housing Meeting

Tuesday, 31 March 2009

"Hello, everyone, and welcome to our first tenants' meeting for Erskineville. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of this land.

I'd also like to welcome Michael Modder, who's been acting Area Director, Inner West for Housing NSW, and the new director, Catherine Haines, whom Michael will introduce.

Part of the Erskineville Estate were created 71 years ago, making it one of the oldest in Australia, and there is a cohesive community living here. We saw that community in action in 2002, when the State

¹ <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/development/UrbanRenewalProjects/Ashmore.asp>

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Government announced redevelopment plans for the estate and the community rallied and organised incredibly well to successfully resist the plans.

Dominic Grenot, our Public Housing Liaison Officer, reported after his meeting with tenants just over a year ago that the major concerns here were about maintenance, and the allocation of some properties by Housing NSW.

Michael will be addressing these issues today. The Federal Government's economic stimulus package will help with some of these problems and Housing NSW has prepared programs of work that are now being issued to contractors – which of course will have the added benefit of supporting the building and construction tradesmen.

As you know, the City is preparing a pedestrian, cycling and traffic calming study for Erskineville which we'll be discussing from 6pm this evening at Rydges Camperdown Sydney Hotel in Missenden Road, and you will all be welcome there.

We're also running free dog obedience classes over six consecutive weeks. These are half-hour sessions held in a local park and the next course begins on May 9.

We are holding workshops for our Chinese Cultural Day on Wednesday April 15, and performances throughout the day on Friday April 17 at the Chinese Garden of Friendship in Darling Harbour.

Don't forget our Youth in Harmony Photographic Exhibition Launch at the Pine Street Creative Arts Centre in Chippendale. That will be on April 22, at 6.30pm, and the exhibition runs until April 30.

And I'd also like to remind you that our Neighbourhood Service Centre have concession cards for seniors and low-income earners which give discounted entry to our swimming pools. The Centre's manager, Debbie Ann Evans is here today, and I'm sure more than happy to answer any inquiries.

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Don't forget the Cliff Noble Centre in Alexandria which has meals, a discount podiatry service, walking groups, regular excursions and many interesting programs for the over-60s.

And for those who require it, the City also provides a top quality Meals on Wheels service which delivers over 65,000 meals a year to our residents.

At the other end of the age range, we run a Youth Service from the Jo Sargent Youth Centre, which works closely with Redfern and Newtown Police.

Young people coming there have concerns with housing, legal issues, employment and financial assistance, and child care for young women with children.

There's an Erskineville Youth Steering Committee which meets each month where young people can advise on useful programs and equipment for the centre, and discuss any issues concerning them.

Erskineville Youth Service works closely with Newtown Police on relationship building programs and activities and these include touch football, self defence, a protective behaviours course, sports and an employment program. There's also craft and cooking and on Friday afternoons, a DVD and pizza night.

There's also a special Easter program. The centre will be open all day every day during the holidays and a terrific range of special outings has been organised.

So thank you for coming here today for our first meeting. It's been great to meet you all and now I'd like to hand over to the Police to speak about their work in your area."

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Attachment B

Fitzroy circa 1966-1971 *The Atherton Gardens high-rise estate in Fitzroy was built between the mid 1960s and 1971, and replaced an entire neighbourhood made up of over 250 buildings, spread across eight streets*

High Rise Housing in Melbourne: Atherton Gardens Estate, Fitzroy

High Rise Housing in Melbourne

Melbourne embarked on an ambitious program of public housing following World War Two, led by the Housing Commission of Victoria. The Housing Commission had been established in 1938, following a campaign by social reformer Oswald Barnett that highlighted the poverty and living conditions in parts of the inner suburbs.

After the war, the Housing Commission built estates for low-income families on the suburban fringes of Melbourne, many using innovative construction techniques with precast concrete. It also instituted many slum reclamation projects in the inner city in the 1960s and early 1970s, demolishing 'slum' areas across Melbourne's inner suburbs.

These run-down areas were replaced with 21 high-rise housing estates dotted around suburbs such as Fitzroy, Richmond, South Melbourne and Carlton. Critics argued that 'suburbs in the sky' were hardly an improvement on the neighbourhoods they replaced. Local community resistance to further clearances in the 1970s brought an end to the high-rise program.

The 45 high rise towers on Melbourne's Housing Commission estates are familiar to many, yet their history is little known. A model of the Atherton Gardens estate in Fitzroy and a short video about the impact of high rise estates feature in *The Melbourne Story* exhibition at Melbourne Museum, and offer new understandings of Melbourne's 'suburbs in the sky'. They explore how high rise housing has radically transformed Melbourne's inner city skyline and how local communities have been affected.

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Attachment B

Atherton Street Fitzroy: A vanished neighbourhood

The Atherton Gardens high-rise estate in Fitzroy was built between the mid 1960s and 1971, and replaced an entire neighbourhood made up of over 250 buildings, spread across eight streets. This neighbourhood was located between Brunswick, Gertrude, Napier, King William and Condell Streets in Fitzroy. About 180 homes lined the streets, most inhabited since the 19th century. The locals were mainly struggling families, including European migrants and Aboriginal people. Although many of their homes were in poor repair, not all were the 'slums' that the authorities claimed. Some migrants became home-owners and renovated their houses, putting in plumbing and other improvements. When the bulldozers moved through, many residents left the area, never to return.



*Atherton Street looking south towards Gertrude Street, from Webb Street, Fitzroy, late 1950s.
Source: JL O'Brien Collection, University of Melbourne Archives*

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Atherton Gardens Estate: A Suburb in the Sky

The Atherton Gardens estate in Fitzroy was built by the Housing Commission of Victoria between the mid 1960s and 1971. It consists of 800 flats in four high rise towers, each 20 storeys high, surrounded by landscaped gardens, playgrounds and carparks, spread over eight hectares of land. The towers were assembled from pre-fabricated concrete panels made by the Housing Commission's concrete factory in Holmesglen. The flats are designed mainly for families, and are made up of two and three bedroom configurations. Two lifts are included in each tower, and communal laundry facilities are available on each floor.

Atherton Gardens, like many other public housing estates, has experienced some of the problems that the social planners had hoped to eradicate. Many who live there still suffer social disadvantages: poverty, unemployment, illness.

Despite this, Atherton Gardens has become a cherished home for many.

Atherton Gardens Estate Model

The Atherton Gardens estate model shows a section of the original neighbourhood demolished in the 1960s, and part of the new Atherton Gardens estate after construction was completed in 1971. It illustrates the impact of 'slum clearance' and high-rise public housing in Fitzroy. The model replicates the neighbourhood as accurately as possible, but records are incomplete. The Museum welcomes further information about the area and the people who lived there.



Model showing the Atherton Street neighbourhood as it would have appeared in 1960, and Atherton Gardens Estate as it would have appeared in 1971.

Photographer: Rodney Start, Source: Museum Victoria

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About fifty shops were clustered along Brunswick, Gertrude, Webb and Condell Streets. People could buy fish, meat, fruit and vegetables, and groceries. They could also do their banking, and dry-clean and repair their clothes. A Methodist Church provided a place of worship. A range of industries could be found too, squeezed in alongside houses and businesses. They ranged from clothing and furniture manufacturers to mechanics, electroplaters and a large timber yard.

There was a thriving, albeit notorious, social culture in the local hotels, cafes and clubs, some of which also illicitly operated as sly-grog shops and gambling dens. These were located on Gertrude, Condell, Brunswick and Napier Streets. Some cafes and clubs became important community hubs for recently arrived European migrants.

Visitor Information

The Atherton Gardens Estate is short walk from Melbourne Museum. Privacy of residents should be respected at all times.

Further Reading

New houses for old : fifty years of public housing in Victoria 1938-1988, edited by Renate Howe, Ministry of Housing and Construction, Melbourne. 1988.

Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb, cutten History Committee of the Fitzroy History Society, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991.