

COMMUNITY, PLACE AND BUILDINGS

The Role of Community Facilities in Developing Community Spirit

**Themes and Issues Emerging from the
Better Facilities, Stronger Communities
Conference,
15-16 August 2005, Melbourne Victoria**

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Introduction

In 2004, the City of Whittlesea approached Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) to propose a wider debate on the links between the planning design and management of community and leisure facilities, and beneficial 'community outcomes', that is to say general improvement in community life, cohesion and identity.

For some time, DVC and Councils like the City of Whittlesea had been responding to requests for sport, leisure and community facilities, usually from local community organisations who are strongly of the view that facilities of this kind can make the daily life of local communities easier and more rewarding.

As the discussion developed, interesting questions emerged, for example:

- Are community facilities valued locally?
- Do they serve a broader community benefit?
- Do multi-purpose facilities or the co-location of services contribute to positive community outcomes more so than individual facilities?
- Is the building of community facilities the only or best way to promote stronger communities?
- Is it possible to identify an approach to the building, design and management of community facilities such that community outcomes are not only delivered but become self-sustaining?

To discuss these and other themes a conference, jointly organised by DVC and the City of Whittlesea, was held in Melbourne on 15-16 August 2005. Government agencies, Councils, industry practitioners, business, academic and community organisations were invited to consider the way in which facilities are planned, managed and designed, and whether these contribute to community strengthening. As such, the conference was held to appraise the long-term benefits of public sector investments in community, sport and leisure facilities in Victoria.

The Department for Victorian Communities

The Department for Victorian Communities was established in 2002 with a remit to promote community strengthening through a 'more integrated approach to planning, funding and delivering services at the local level'. The Department's work is predicated on the principle that much can be learned from simply listening to what communities have to say about themselves; and to understanding the inter-relationships between people and the places they live in.

In this way, DVC sees its role as helping to build the potential of communities and people within them. One means of doing so is to support the construction of community infrastructure such as libraries, swimming pools and community centres, as focal points for community life. DVC does this by entering partnerships with local councils, developers, businesses groups and the voluntary sector.

The *Better Facilities, Stronger Communities* conference would provide an opportunity for DVC to fine-tune and adjust policy and programs, for example in linking grants for community infrastructure planning to identified community strengthening outcomes; in

weighing the pros and cons of multi use facilities; in developing place based initiatives; and in the considering the best ways for State and local government agencies to plan for new facilities in areas of high population growth, in new and expanded settlements, or in areas of economic and population decline.

The paper that follows summarises the themes of the Melbourne conference of 15-16 August 2005. In doing so, it reports on the conference proceedings, the key-note, plenary and workshops papers, and the discussions raised from the floor. It also seeks to locate the debate of community facilities within wider debate of 'community', the concept of 'place' and a short history of earlier attempts to build communities from scratch. For if we are not to learn from the mistaken assumptions of the past, then it is all the more likely we shall repeat the same mistakes. The paper concludes by recommending an approach to community strengthening in the immediate future.

Attempts at Building Community

Ever since the dark days of the 1880s, at which time Charles Booth completed his major surveys of poverty in East London, town planners and sociologists have striven to improve living conditions for the urban poor, and others, in cities, towns and new towns. At its heart, the practice of town planning in its modern sense contains the assumption that a better built environment produces improvements in health, well-being and contentment; and as a consequence underpins the development of community spirit and sense of belonging.

The early town planners were in fact social reformers. Ebenezer Howard's famous work 'Garden Cities of Tomorrow'ⁱ was originally published in 1898 as 'A Peaceful Path to Real Reform', a work that would become the central tenet of English town planning in the 20th century. Howard's view was that the problems of ill-health and crime that were associated with the overcrowded slums of inner London could best be addressed by the planned decentralisation of the population to planned garden cities. His famous 'three-magnets' diagram depicts a beneficial combination of the virtues of the city and the country within a series of planned new towns.

By this means, Howard and later the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) believed it was possible, by means of land use planning and public forms of land ownership, to balance the desirable outcomes of much improved living conditions, balanced economic growth, environmental husbandry and political stability. The British academic Michael Herbert has recently argued that both New Urbanism and the current mantra for 'sustainable communities' owes a great deal to Howard's concept of the garden city.ⁱⁱ

Urban planning in Australia currently is much influenced by New Urbanism, as in the past it was also much influenced by the British new towns movement and the central tenets of UK town planning in general.

The first British garden city was built at Letchworth, some 40 miles north of London. Howard's partner was the architect Raymond Unwin, himself a committed socialist, who would later mastermind the great public house building projects of the 1920s and 1930s. What appears to have been something of an oversight in Unwin's town planning was the

lack of community meeting places or cultural venues, particularly pubs which were blamed for the evils of alcohol-related crime and the breakdown of family life. Moreover, the early new towns were planned for the 'deserving poor', the skilled workers and tradesmen who could improve themselves and their families given a chance. In this way, there was a tinge of social engineering and paternalism running through the garden cities movement and later public housing programmes.

One unforeseen consequence of this planned decentralisation of population away from the central areas of cities was that the people left behind tended to be poorer, less skilled and less employable than those who had departed. While government was investing in new towns and large suburban housing estates, the residual inner cities were falling into economic and physical decay.

As early as the late 1960s, research was showing that ties of kinship and community had been severely damaged by the planned decentralisation and these were proving stubbornly slow to develop in the new estates and new townsⁱⁱⁱ. The assumption that people would come to develop a sense of community identity and spirit simply by living next to each other, was proving to be too simplistic.

By the 1970s, it was clear that people living in the new towns and outlying estates needed, at the very least, some places to meet on an everyday basis. They also needed things to do when not at work. The large estates of Drumchapel and Castlemilk, on the edges of Glasgow, had been built with no recognisable 'community meeting places', no sports halls other than those attached to schools, no cultural venues, very few pubs and not too many shops either. A self-formed community action group in Craigmillar in Edinburgh, campaigned not for sports halls or even drop-in centres but for an arts and music festival. The main reason being that children growing up on that estate had no-one to teach them how to play musical instruments. The 1970s were the decade of community action in the UK; the Craigmillar Festival itself would become the largest community arts event in Europe.

Meanwhile, in Australia the Whitlam Government of the early 1970s greatly expanded its program of building community centres, on the assumption that buildings of this type, provided locally, would help engender a sense of community bonding and also provide life opportunities to local people, and especially young people.

An interesting example is the Park Community Centre in Adelaide, an ambitious development combining a secondary school, sports hall and playing fields, a theatre, community cafe, artists studios and workshops and even metalwork, sewing and woodwork rooms. Many state welfare agencies were located there to provide locally-based services. The buildings themselves were built to high specifications, are low to medium rise and are architecturally interesting (1950s modern Scandanavian). But the urban design of the centre, its layout and the configuration of paths and spaces, is poor in the extreme. Within ten years it was clear that the Parks Community Centre too was a failed experiment.

During the 1990s, the school closed for lack of pupils and the centre became more and more a concentration of welfare agencies and therefore welfare problems. Today, it is regarded as unsafe, unwelcoming and a place to avoid. Other than welfare agencies, only the artists remain, attracted by the low rents.

The long post-war boom had peaked in 1974, and by the early 1980s the Western economies were in the grip of a deep and deepening recession. The property boom that would follow saw a pronounced shift in the balance of new housing construction, away from the public sector to private house-building. Sadly, these new estates around rapidly growing towns and cities (such as Reading or Swindon in the UK) were developed with scant regard for community facilities or even local shopping parades, since everyone could easily drive to the indoor shopping mall, newly constructed and barely a few miles away.

The estates of the 1980s, privately built and privately owned, lacked many of the amenities once associated with the very idea of community-building. They were also badly designed. Australia too has examples of such places around the major cities and large towns. A large number of these have been built in the last 20 years.

The Idea of Community

The *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* defines 'community' as a group of people living together in sympathetic association, more usually in a village, town or suburb^{iv}. This rather benign definition is difficult to disagree with, yet it does not take us very far in our understanding of what communities are or how they develop. This is especially problematic at a time when just about any interest group or collection of individuals is referred to as a 'community'.

In part this reflects the fact that many people these days identify themselves as belonging to 'a community of interest', some shared enthusiasm. This extends to people who enjoy hill-walking, photography, flower-arranging, collecting old books or whatever. Quite often these activities occur in a particular place, but others are placeless in the sense they occur in cyber as opposed to real space, or are otherwise developed from mental rather than physical activities.

Speaking at the conference on community facilities in Melbourne in 2005^v, the respected social planner Alan Tranter defined community development as 'the art of connecting', the power of telling stories and having conversations locally. Tranter went on to posit that the 'sociology of community' is made up of four inter-locking elements: social capital, wellness, quality of life, cultural anthropology. Social capital refers in the main to a population's capacity to benefit from life chances and opportunities for improvement, but also to the set of values and support systems those populations build up over time. Wellness is an indicator of health, physical and mental, and therefore the extent to which people can pursue opportunities and their personal aspirations. The quality of life includes living conditions, disposable income, access to recreation, leisure and culture, and local environmental conditions. Cultural anthropology refers in the main to shared values, traditions and customs and the overall way of life of a particular social group. These are often, but not always, derived from ethnic identities.

Tranter went on to explain his concept of the 'community matrix' which he uses as a tool for understanding the profiles, needs and aspirations of communities. This matrix includes topics such as generations, economic eras, local economy, sustainability, ideologies, socio-economic, demographics. Tranter argues that the different generations that may be found in most places have differing outlooks on life. The 'depression' generation are those who grew up in the 1930s, fought World War 2 and set about

building better societies in the 1950s. Their firm belief was in helping their children to excel and benefit from chances that they themselves had lacked.

By contrast, the 'baby boomers', born between roughly 1944 and 1964 tend to be much more self-oriented. Although this was the generation that campaigned for civil rights, equal opportunity and drew attention to the environment as a cause for concern, much of this would collapse into narcissism and a fixation with property prices.

Generation X, born between 1964 and 1980, grew up during another economic depression and are less interested in property than the baby boomers, although this may now be changing. Generation Y, born after 1980 and therefore under the age of 30, are the generation that is taking the new economy and digital media in its stride. In this way, the outlooks of the various generations are partly influenced by the economic era in which they came to adulthood, and partly by a sense of continuity or otherwise with the mores and manners of the previous age. Tranter went on to show how this basic formula is overlaid by demographics and socio-economic class, so that an individual's life chances are in good part influenced by his or her class status, attitudes to learning and so on.

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

It follows, therefore, that at least some aspect of community identity might change as new economic sectors and activities take hold in particular cities, regions and districts. For Tranter, sustainability is the 'continuity of an idea' about who we are and the values we share, even although these will modify to varying degrees as new industries develop and new people move in.

Community Stengthening

It is important to understand that successful cities, towns, suburbs and even local neighbourhoods share a set of characteristics. All of these have an ongoing sense of purpose, a dynamic^{vi}. This is not to suggest that all places must operate at a fever pitch of vitality and endless comings and goings; simply that good places have a *raison d'etre*, an everyday rythmn which derives from the mixture of activities one finds there. This includes such things as local shops, little cafes and grocery stores, perhaps local galleries, launderettes, post offices, even banks. It might also include local meeting or 'village' halls where voluntary groups and enthusiasts can meet, doctors' surgeries, sports halls and playing fields, maybe a local theatre or theatre group, an art college or maybe simply an area where people like to sit and watch the world go by.

Some of these elements are predominantly economic in character, in the sense that local shops and cafes must first and foremost operate as businesses or else they will not survive. Others might be self-organised groups of enthusiasts who can simply book the local hall for classes in yoga, flower-arranging, vintage car restoration, photography or

still life drawing. Yet others are more specifically public services, whether in the running of the local recreation centre, providing child-care, libraries or drop-in centres of various kinds. Some are examples of a mixed economy in that what appears to be a public good or service is in fact provided privately but with state support, as in the example of doctor's surgeries. The point is this: successful places offer a mix of activities and services, and all of these are of importance in the ongoing development of place and community identity. Such places are an example of *gestalt*, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. By contrast, a place with no real purpose will quickly cease to be a place.

This means, in turn, that in future strategies and policies and programmes and projects framed with the purpose of developing or improving community spirit will themselves need to contain a mix of the private and the public, the self-organised, the old and the new, the small and the larger elements. Nowhere can this be better seen than in the many examples of town centre and main-street revitalisation in the UK and Australia since the early 1990s. A similar approach to development within a mixed economy framework can be seen in Manchester's cultural strategy of 1991^{vii}, which moved away from the model of the local state as sole provider, to one of partnership, encouraging and enabling private initiative within a strategic framework, as well as operating some facilities directly (the City Art Gallery) or providing funding streams.

Overall objectives set were to develop the city's cultural heritage and encourage its wider use, increase audiences, increase participation, encourage new work and new art, develop the city's cultural economy and improve the design of the built environment.

Similar over-arching objectives or 'outcomes' can be applied to other aspects of a city or town's life, as demonstrated by the Victoria Government's Health and Active Strategy and 'Go for Your Life' campaign^{viii}. This stresses the role sport and recreation has in maintaining and improving health, in helping to form and maintain social bonds within communities, and often provides a focus for participation in matters of community interest. Youngsters who participate in sport, it is argued, are more likely to finish school and get a good job, and less likely to commit crime.

Generally speaking sport is very important to the Australian sense of identity, particularly for men and boys, but also girls and women. Whilst they excel at elite sport, Australians also view sport and leisure as a key aspect of social cohesion. Sports very often provide a focal point, relating local facilities to local communities through activities such as volunteering, fund raising, local sporting clubs, and local identity. Sport gives many Australians a tangible focus for connecting with local communities and institutions, and this is held to be an important feature of community strengthening. Participation in sport is also an important counter to the problem of obesity.

All of this suggests a need for clear public policy on such matters as sport or the cultural economy, and indeed for community building more generally. In some instances, this will also require new public investment in buildings and centres and halls and galleries, for the simple reason that these would not otherwise exist. There are a variety of ways in which communities may be strengthened according to the Department for Victorian Communities^{ix}. Important indicators include: getting help from neighbours and friends when needed, feeling safe walking alone at night, feeling valued by local society, feeling that one has a real say in the area's future, helping as a volunteer, attending community events, being able to raise \$2000 in an emergency.

During the following two days speakers at the Melbourne conference would return to the idea of community and how to grow, develop and sustain it over time^x. Some, such as Peter Burns, argued that the sense of community derives from participation in activities locally, a sense of satisfaction and 'feelings of ownership'; while Steven Francis stressed the need to plan community provision for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse populations (CALD). Joe Manton and Angela Armstrong-Wright see community development as 'managing a process for inclusion'. Carolyn Whitzman proposed that in working with young people it is important to understand trends and fashions, to engage with what is cool now as opposed, say, to what was cool in the 1960s. Whitzman also argued that safety and fear of crime is a major concern for many communities. Elizabeth Waters argued that food and cuisine is an important indicator of ethnic, cultural and community identity. Vanessa Ford and Katy Hawkins reminded delegates to remember young children in the planning of community programs and facilities. Most if not all of these contributions supported Tranter's model of community as being multi-faceted at the same time as representing shared values and a sympathetic association.

A Sense of Place

In his key-note presentation, Alan Tranter^{xi} emphasised his view, more than once, that whereas 'community' is a sociological concept 'neighbourhood' is a spatial one, that is to say largely concerned with the physical dimensions and properties of suburbs, districts and local areas. He was at pains to point out that ill-advised notions of building estates and neighbourhoods in the 1930s, 1960s and early 1970s had succeeded mainly in uprooting communities whilst failing to cultivate new feelings of belonging and shared identity. Town planners, operating within a paradigm of physical development have proven less than adept at growing communities. For Tranter, and others, this is a problem of environmental determinism where the assumption is that new built environments can improve social behaviour and public forms of social life. Yet it should be pointed out that the understanding of place, since the early 1960s, has moved far beyond simple physical determinism. This is especially true of the field of urban design, of which North American 'New Urbanism'^{xii} is but one strand.

For it is clear that people come to form strong attachments to the places where they live. They also attach importance to places - towns, villages, landscapes - as a whole, as well as to particular historical features within them. Landscapes, for example, play an important role in both shaping and sustaining cultural values within societies.^{xiii} This occurs for all cultures including, for example, the Aborigine tribes of Australia whose history is represented and encompassed by Songlines across the land.^{xiv} This occurs too at the level of the neighbourhood, parish or even for an individual street. The West Indian novelist Mike Phillip^{xv} describes his first impressions of London, arriving in 1956. He goes on to argue that London is *his* city, that he feels a sense of ownership over the place in which he lives. He describes some of the activities - street markets, carnivals, shopping areas - which for him define London.. He then goes on to write fondly of Notting Hill, the Harrow Road, Little Venice, the "perfect curve of Regent Street" and others, revealing that Alexandra Palace has been his secret place of over 30 years. "Give me time and I'll find another. The city is full of such places."

What this reveals is that, although activity gives London its identity, so too do the places in which the activity occurs. In other words, an appreciation and understanding of local distinctiveness - the unique qualities of places and their distinctive cultures - goes some way beyond individual buildings of even historical or architectural importance. Individual places have their own distinct sense of place or *genus loci*.

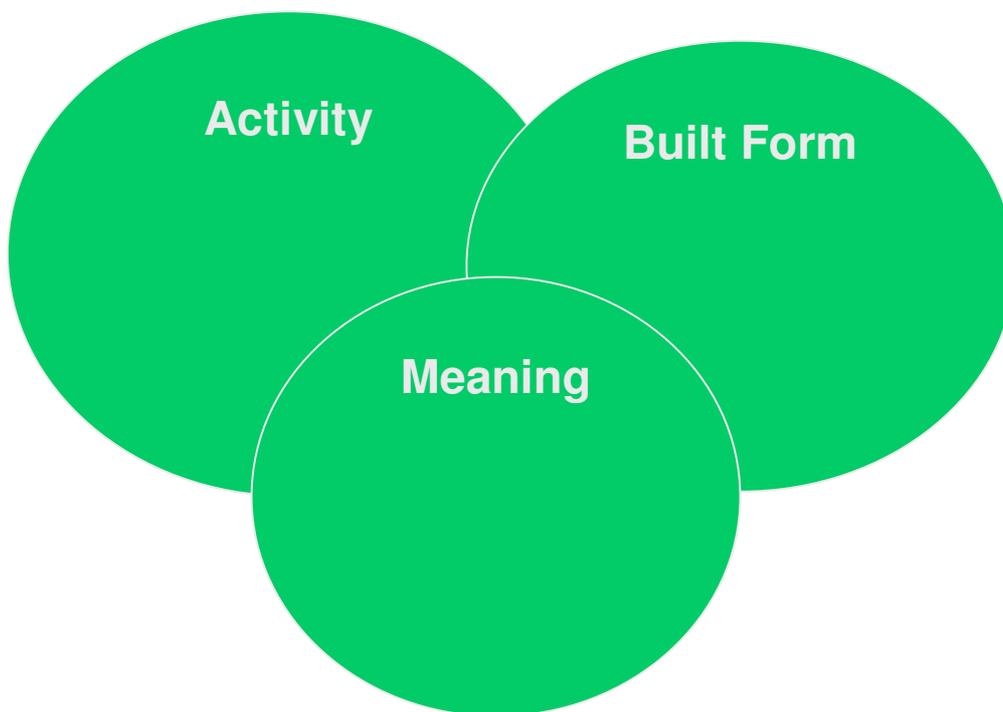
Over the years, there has been a split of sorts amongst urban designers over what constitutes urban quality or the sense of place. There are those such as Gordon Cullen^{xvi} who place greatest emphasis on physicality - design styles, ornamentation and featuring, the way buildings open out into spaces, gateways, vistas, landmarks and the like. Others such as Alexander^{xvii} or Lynch^{xviii} stress the psychology of place, bound up in the notion of 'mental maps' which people use as internal guides to urban places. In doing so, they rely on their senses to tell them whether a place *feels* safe, comfortable, vibrant, quiet or threatening. If we were to combine these approaches we would see that urban quality must be considered in much wider terms than the physical attributes of buildings, spaces and street patterns. To be sure, there are many physical elements which, if combined properly (with each other and with the psychology of place) produce urban quality: architectural form, scale, landmarks, vistas, meeting places, open space, greening and so on. Yet the notion of urban quality is clearly more importantly bound up in the social, psychological and cultural dimensions of place.

Few theorists have managed to bridge this divide, and most remain either predominantly physical determinists or subjective mental mappers. Initially something of a voice from the wilderness, Jane Jacobs^{xix} was the first to explore urban quality from the premise that *activity* both produces and mirrors quality in the built environment. Jacobs and others such as Jan Gehl^{xx} argue that successful urban places are based predominantly on street life, and the various ways in which activity occurs in and through buildings and spaces. This appreciation led Peter Buchanan to comment that:

"Urban design is essentially about place-making,
where places are not just a specific space,
but all the activities and events which made it possible".^{xxi}

Thus, we can now see that successful urban places must combine quality in three essential elements: physical space, the sensory experience and activity. Canter's metaphor (Figure 1) combines the urban design perspectives of those concerned with mental maps and "imageability", with those who consider the physical attributes of place, and with those who stress the essential importance of activity or what has also been referred to as 'natural animation'^{xxii} or the "city transaction base"^{xxiii}.

Figure 1: A Metaphor for Place



Source: David Canter 'A Metaphor for Place'

The conclusion from this brief overview of urban design is that place matters, for it comes to represent identity, historical associations, memories and even aspirations for the future.

Indeed, there are now many examples of places being improved by urban design, not only in the sense of physical improvements but also in overall identity and sense of belonging. In his main plenary presentation the architect and urban designer Stuart Niven^{xxiv} showed how this can be done with reference to projects in New Zealand and Victoria. He argued, following Jan Gehl, that one of the important things that urban

design can do is provide a 'public realm' in urban places in which public forms of social life (strolling, sitting, promenading, watching the world go by) can occur. Other delegates would later argue that cafe culture was arguably the primary means by which Melbournians rediscovered public social life from the 1980s onwards.

Other conference contributors such as Chip Kaufman stressed the need for 'walkable' places, proposing the 'ped-shed' or 10 minute walk as an organising principle. Heidi Dixon argued that redevelopment and new development should prioritise 'community connections', that is routes and pathways connecting people and places. In concluding, Niven warned that good urban design was not a palliative, and that where what he referred to as 'failed activities' had concentrated then there was much less likelihood that urban design would help.

The upshot of all of this is that cities need to be designed and planned if they are to balance the dynamic of commerce, culture and changes to the built form, and if places within cities are to be improved. Urban design offers a way in which this can be done, for its very purpose is to safeguard and improve the sense of place.

To Build or Not to Build?

During his welcome address to the Melbourne conference, Justin Madden MLC, Minister for Sport and Recreation Victoria, argued that investing in new and improved community facilities is very important because such facilities help build communities, keep people healthy and happy, and provide opportunities for individuals to improve, learn and prosper.

Delegates were able to judge the power of this argument for themselves during site visits to important new and upgraded facilities in places such as Darebin, Whittlesea, Hume, Knox, Monash, Maribyrnong, Hobsons Bay, Wyndham, Port Phillip and the City of Melbourne. These included an international sports centre, a new library, a 'global learning centre', two aquatic centres, a gathering place for Indigenous people, an 'integrated community hub', an arts studio space for children, a community centre in a former baths and an arts park and cultural centre. All of these are impressive facilities and represent a major investment for the State Government and local councils.

Yet there was at times heightened debate during the conference proceedings over whether or not building new facilities is the best or only way to promote community cohesion and a sense of identity. Alan Tranter, for example, had earlier argued that built facilities are just one of a range of policy 'tools' for developing community life. Other initiatives such as sports coaching, arts tutoring, artists in residence, community urban design forums, Mainstreet programs, cultural events and festivals can all be just as, even more, important than a new 'centre'.

The question was raised that for many places a new building is not necessary and may even be counter-productive. Trev Greenberger, for example, warned that an emphasis on economies of scale in facility provision might lead to new regional centres replacing local centres which tend to be more important – well-loved even – within the places where people live. Ellen White argued that it is often preferable to use existing spaces, for example, pubs and shops, to run community development activities, or even to

convert unused buildings such as banks to small-scale social centres. This notion of community centres operating at a smaller scale was also discussed by Ursula Corvan in her paper on community ‘hubs’.

The question of whether more and better facilities guarantee stronger communities is not therefore a given, but rather depends on the circumstances, the community itself and the place. It may be that money is better spent on programs and activation, rather than – or as well as – bricks and mortar. As Alan Tranter memorably put it ‘you can be heroes without building’.

In situations where a new building is the best way forward, it is important to research, locate, plan, design, build and manage new facilities to the best possible standard. Delegates heard from Cr. Bill Horrocks and Kerry Thompson of Maribryngong City Council that new community facilities should have in-built flexibility, be adaptable to new uses and activities. Their view was that a building project is an opportunity to help bring about change, and that it is counter-productive to build facilities that will become obsolete or are badly designed. To deliver such a project requires strong leadership, commitment, skills and expertise, and cocktails of matched funding from as many sources as possible. If you do decide to build then good research and feasibility studies are essential, argued Robert Panozzo and Adrian Fernon, as indeed are full design briefs, according to Peter McGinley.

In her plenary presentation, the architect Virginia Ross argued that it is possible to get stronger communities from building new facilities, but this depends on the client’s brief, the overall vision for community and place development and the skill of the architect in effecting a design concept. She pointed out not all communities welcome change, as this can be equated with ‘loss’ where a local hall or facility is replaced or ‘improved’. She also argued that in recent times it was becoming more recognised that a new building has to be designed in relation not only to its primary purpose and site, but also its wider urban environmental setting. She reiterated the need for good urban design alongside good architecture, and for innovative urban art as part of both, a view shared by Sarah Poole, Sandy Caldwell and Anne Kershaw, all of whom see public art as a means of community development.

Once the new building is completed and the ribbon has been cut, there follows the hard road of everyday management. Of course, this should be an important consideration during the feasibility stage. A number of facility management models were presented to the conference workshops by Ian Swan, Cliff Wood, Wendy Dunstan and Julie Hyde.

Bryce Moore argued that community development is good for places, and therefore, speaking as a major developer, good for business. Mike Salvaris proposed greater uptake of the Victorian Government’s community indicators^{xxv} as a means of monitoring and evaluating progress into the future. Arden Joseph highlighted the role of community infrastructure grants via Community Facilities Funding Program, and reiterated Minister Madden’s commitment to ‘collaborative resourcing’ for new projects.

In the midst of all this serious discussion, a hypothetical on the question of which type of community facility to build was led by Nick Bastow. Panellists included Julie Hyde, Carolyn Whitzman, and John Jackson. Proposals discussed included a support club for ageing baby boomers, an indoor/outdoor sports complex, a Shane Warne school of

holistic motor movement and, a personal favourite, a community sand-pit surrounded by polystyrene, free to all but only to be used by one person at a time!

The message coming over loud and clear was that the planning, design and management of community facilities cannot be done in isolation and cannot be the sole responsibility of one program or agency.

Equally the notion that “place matters” gained momentum. Moreover, all of the keynote presenters, other Government departments, Councils, the sporting - leisure industry and the private sector, including urban design consultants and developers (such as Delfin Lend Lease, VicUrban, Laurimer, and Stocklands), stressed the importance of:

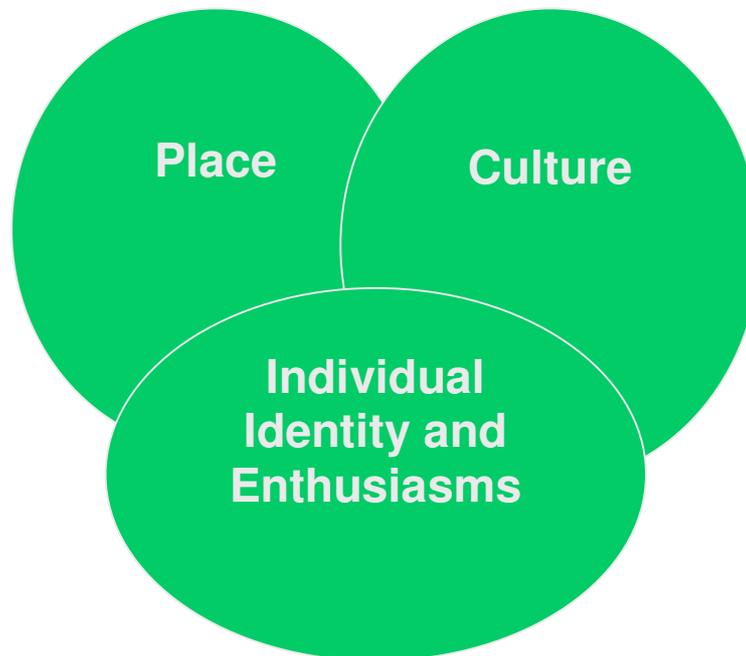
- Partnerships – multiple stakeholders including public, private and not for profit interests;
- Integrated local area planning;
- Collaborative resourcing (all parties bringing their wallets to the table);
- Outcome measurement and evaluation;
- Consolidating neighbourhood facilities and precincts, that is at the more local spatial level;
- Community involvement at all levels in planning, design and management of new facilities and/or social programs.

Paths to Progress

In his summing up of events, the conference moderator (and author of this report) proposed a four-point framework for carrying the work of the community development forward. These were presented as four ideo-grams or helpful diagrammatic summaries: a metaphor for community, an action area matrix (noughts and crosses), a cross of obstacles to circumvent or overcome (presented in the shape of a Scottish flag or Saltire), and a shamrock or four-leaf clover representing the 4 P’s of good management practice.

The *metaphor for community*, a ven diagram of three over-lapping circles is presented here as Figure 2. This stresses the importance of balancing the question of community identity and its various variants; a sense of place identity with a good ‘fit’ of the built form to these activities and meanings; and recognition that individuals within communities have choices over what they ‘become involved with’ locally, their interests and hobbies more generally and the level to which they wish to ‘participate’ in local community affairs. The task is to pursue strategies and programs that strengthen as opposed to diminish both communities and good urban places.

Figure 2: A Metaphor for Community



Source: John Montgomery, August 2005, derived from David Canter

The *action area matrix* (Figure 3) can usefully be considered as two sets of parallel lines crossing at right angles, to give the grid for a game of noughts and crosses. This has the effect of creating nine spaces or 'pigeon holes' into which action areas can be slotted. Thus, although the relative importance of these policy areas will alter over time and between different communities and areas, it will always be the case that the action areas will comprise at least some of the following:

- Meeting places;
- The local economy and its role in community identity;
- Ethnic and other groupings that constitute or form part of a community;
- Urban design and place-making;
- Food and cuisine;
- Design of the public realm as public spaces for everyday public social life, including cafe culture;
- Events, festivals and cultural animation;
- Education and training in the arts;
- Sports halls, swimming pools and playing fields;
- The design and management of new facilities

These headings relate back to the metaphor for community (identity, place and personal intertests) and they can also be used to shape specific policies and programs within an overall framework.

The third ideo-gram is the *cross of obstacles* to be overcome, circumvented or otherwise addressed. These fall into four types: Regulatory, Physical, Cultural and Image.

By Regulatory we refer to the ongoing fact of life that public sector agencies largely exist to regulate, govern or otherwise control the activities of the market and individual businesses and people. The problem is that regulation can become heavy-handed, over-zealous or simply too slow in reacting to changing circumstances. This means that there is a constant need, on an ongoing basis, to keep regulation under review so that the activities that are being regulated are not unduly circumscribed. Not all regulation is bad, but sometimes some of it is unhelpful. In the words of Julie Hyde the need is for shared responsibility, good relations, clear guidelines and less bureaucracy.

By Cultural we refer to the business culture or everyday *modus operandi* of a place and/or community. The chief concerns would be a sense of doom and gloom, a 'can't be bothered' attitude, an *ennui*, a fatalism. Negativity is nothing but negative, and no good can come from it. Physical obstacles to overcome might include a road that is too wide, splitting opposite sides of the street from each other, traffic that is travelling too fast, insufficient crossing places, a shopping mall that turns its back on its neighbours.

Obstacles to do with Image are difficult to overcome if your area has a reputation for being unsafe, dirty, smelly, unfriendly or in some general way 'not nice' or inconvenient. The point in using the 'cross of obstacles' as a point of focus is to remind people that there will always be obstacles, but that these can readily be addressed in most cases.

Figure 3: Community Strengthening Matrix

Community development as a process	Social Networks and exchange	The Local Economy and its role in Community Development
Buildings and Facilities	Activation and Programming	Education and Learning, including art and the humanities
Sport and Art	Place and Urban Design, including public art	Public social life

Source: John Montgomery, August 2005, derived from Alan Tranter

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been argued here and during the Melbourne conference that building new facilities is but one mean of promoting community development, sense of belonging and spirit.

Other measures such as activation, inreach and outreach and education programs are as important. Building-based projects are not always the right thing to do, and they do not always succeed. Yet, there is much evidence, from Victoria and elsewhere, that new facilities can help foster a stronger sense of identity whilst simultaneously improving life chances. This is especially true of new sub-divisions, suburbs, neighbourhoods and whole new towns and city districts.

Where new facilities are to be built, it is important that proper research is undertaken. Local consultation should be thorough, a good design briefing should be prepared and a good architect appointed. The design of the external spaces and the way they link to surrounding streets, spaces and buildings is also critical. For at the end of the day, the concepts of 'community' and 'place' may not be coterminous, but they do and must overlap. The focus of any new facility will depend on what the community feels it needs, what aspirations are to be met and how priorities are set, for example: sport v arts, old people v the young, day v night, the local population as a whole v special ethnic groups, physical activity v cerebral learning.

All of these have a role to play in community development, but not necessarily all of them, everywhere, all of the time.

Suggestions for Future Policy and Practice

1. Government's role in community strengthening will sometimes be as direct provider, or a funding partner. Increasingly government should see its role as an enabler, policy maker and promoter, working in collaborations with local Councils, but also developers, local businesses, arts and sporting bodies and indeed the voluntary sector itself.
2. There is a need for clear public policy on community strengthening generally. This will need to range across the spatial levels from State, rural areas, the wider Metropolitan level, city quadrants and local areas, effectively covering the range of different place types.
3. As well as sport and generic 'local community facilities' more attention should be focused on the arts and Victoria's cultural economy.
4. Policy-makers should adopt 'place-based' approaches to community strengthening, and these should be organised on a human scale – that is to say in places where people live and within which they can comfortably walk.
5. As well as working with a series of community indicators, a set of place indicators should be developed to allow policy makers to judge the 'health' of local places. This would cover activity, identity and built form.
6. Chief amongst these place indicators will be the concept of public social life, that is how people use local spaces for the everyday activities of meeting, sitting, watching the world go by. This is an argument for designing and managing small public spaces in local areas in order to promote public forms of social life – a secret life of small urban spaces.
7. Local communities should be involved at all points of the planning, designing and managing of community and leisure facilities, where these are required, to ensure community ownership and leadership. But local communities will also require access to good professional advice, whether in urban design, architecture, recreation, sports or the arts.
8. Any new facility built should connect into the social fabric, including children young people, families, older people, networks, community governance and so on, and connect to existing and new programs for community development.
9. The concept of community strengthening should be extended to include local economies as a source not only of wealth creation, but also local networks and local identity. Economic development is particularly important in areas of economic decline, for unless there are jobs and businesses local communities will become inward-looking, stagnant and may even die.
10. Overall, the approach should be to integrate the planning, design, and management of buildings (new and existing) with place, identity and culture.

Endnote

The idea of community is a powerful one, but there is more than one model of community and for this reason and others, many ways to help develop community spirit. At the end of the day, it is a question of how we choose to identify ourselves and whether, as groups and individuals, we feel we belong. Not all communities are constructed around places, but many of them are, although sometimes the place in question is the one we have left behind. But the notion of community spirit within urban places is still important, for the places we inhabit inhabit us.

For this reason, the final conclusion here is that the Department for Victorian Communities might consider extending its activities to work with other agencies on place-making, on understanding the links between local economies and local identity, and in promoting public forms of social life in the urban public realm.

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