

# Making Great Places – PIA Talk, Adelaide, 2005

## Introduction

The aim of this talk is to firstly convince you that we, as place makers, need to embrace a much more participatory way of building place, if we are to live in a more sociable future. Participatory design is relevant in the city, in the suburbs and in the country and leads us to better solutions for helping people to live well. The workshop after the talk focuses on some techniques I've developed to allow people a role in planning, design and construction, and then moves to debate some prickly scenarios which haunt me.

## Place Making: Worthwhile Process or Extinct Species?

The nature of town and place planning has changed like a fluid stream over the last one hundred years. It has done a complete circle from the modernist visions of the 1950's and 1960's to the economic rationalist plans of the 2000's. Currently, we are experiencing a wave of nostalgia for the good old days of villages and neighbours, those mystical golden years of our collective imagination. At the same schizophrenic moment, we plunge toward a virtual world controlled by data and images which have no particular place. This diverging world could be compared to the industrial revolution and the resulting response by the arts and crafts and art nouveau movements, however the scale now is global and the results may not be reversible.

Taking a world view, it could be argued that planning and urban design have played a minor role in the rise and fall of the urban form of the **third world** in the last century, given the much stronger role of multinationals and corrupt leaders in these places, and the weak link between planning control and resultant physical action. **Their world will change as others see fit.** Meanwhile, in the North, our cities continue to deform and de-construct according to the whim of the market. On the surface, we attempt to patch the face of community onto this shifting bed of investment and property; trying to **maintain a semblance of place.**

By 2050, we may not have government. Planners may be located directly in the financial institutions, and the physical form of our cities may be a complete by-product of the current marketing and fiscal policy, as suggested by the writer William Gibson in 'Virtual Light'. **Place in such a future may be viewed as another product, produced for consumption, modified and rubbed out as the styles of clothing and cars change.**

How will we face our planning future? Will place making survive? Whatever planners are thinking, this does not seem to change the parameters of the world view now being formed by the multinational and financial institutions, who are controlling change by a formula of increasing privatization; gradually taking away the roles and services of government at all levels. How do we mediate a path between the digital and the communal? What path of change is required to create a future where real planning and design still plays a role in the world: where placemaking is still sought?

I would like to argue that we can't live inside computers within the foreseeable future, so let's push on with real places!

A contemporary philosophy which connects landscape, urbanism and infrastructure design is needed to **drive sustainable placemaking into a more central position in the development world**. This philosophy could be centred around **participatory design, planning and economic processes**. **Building, thinking and dwelling** would be inextricably linked in the design process. All participants in the place making process would be engaged as a community of **potential dwellers**. This will require **designers and planners to place themselves in the role of dwellers** as they respond to specific people and landscapes. The practice of placemaking would shift **'from what things are, how they function, and what they look like, to what they do'**.

## Place or No Place?

Is there a genie  
in the Loci  
or just a mirror  
for a child.  
does the land sing  
or is it a container  
for our dreams.

Can Places have a unique identity in the digital world? Do places have any local meaning anymore? I would argue that **people are social animals and will always seek to commune and to make home (to dwell)**. These fundamental needs require **places to house them**. **Great places nurture the land, the individual and the group**.

Heidegger, the German philosopher, implied that to express and understand the heart of a place, one needed to become a 'dweller': because of our perennial search for 'home' in the world, we have a **primal need to dwell**. He used poetry to try to capture a language which best expressed the meaning of place, because, like music, it moves toward the emotions; moves beyond the rational.

Whether you believe there is some essential genius in the loci or just a shifting field of experiences and struggles, the main issue is probably to have a sense of purpose and conscious intention in the place making process. People will continue to create meanings for themselves in the places we build for them, the question is how much passion we place in being a catalyst.

Design is a process as well as a product. The important thing is to solve placemaking problems with good ideas which have their genesis in the needs and visions of people who will dwell in these places. Great ideas rarely come out of a bad process, so it is worth pondering how they come about.

Let's make great places - centers and edges, which sing with vitality and relevance. Let's look at some case studies of CENTRE and EDGE.

## Making Great Places: Placemaking in the Centre (Crafting not Manufacturing the Public Realm)

A sense of local craft and identity is missing in the culture of creating public space in our centres. Blinded by the difficult

pursuits of satisfying political constraints and the technocratic and time centred concerns of governments, perhaps it is not surprising that we can easily lose sight of the ephemeral elements of community placemaking.

- How does shade and texture unfold in the space?
- What sort of impressions will the amalgam of functional and non-functional objects leave on a visitor?
- Will the locals recognise the space as 'home'?
- What sort of symbol does it represent for the collective population of the city: is it space to complement gentrification, or space which can accommodate even the fringe dwellers?
- Is it space to celebrate civicness? If so, whose civic pride?
- Who is welcome and how does the space reflect on time, both future and past?
- What will the space be like for the city in fifty years time?

In the unrolling of the new, the mass production of main streets and adjunct public realms throughout Australia, there is a sense that a product is being sought and created, much like the development of 'a new' type of washing machine or toaster: 'We would like one of those please'. The local industries, crafts and community processes supporting this place production have yet to be really developed, and we are left with a very basic palette of standard building products and furnishings.

In a long-term perspective, we are at the early stage of developing public realms in our towns that are instilled with communal significance and participation. **The old process of drawing a plan, presenting it for comment, and then building the works is clearly an inadequate model for placemaking in our times.** We need interactive processes that involve the user/community in each stage of the placemaking process. This requires a change in the structure and process of the planning and design process. **By crafting place with local people and local artists, we stand a chance of creating local meaning in place.** Years of further habitation lead to the layering of place which we as designers so desire. It will not happen quickly: there is inertia in our cultural and economic patterns. It is plainly just not enough to build well and to solve the pragmatic problems. Designers need to tackle the sublime: the experiential and the emotional needs of dwellers. These are the unlocking boxes where we find those finer layers that allow people to make place. Designers also need to tackle the social: to find a middle ground between the individual and the communal, with the accommodation of the poorest dwellers being the litmus test. **These things are the hard to grasp intangibles that sit behind the physical realm and they are where the great places live.**

### **Case Study1: Queensland Gladstone CBD and Library Square Projects, Queensland**

Gladstone is a medium sized regional city with a large harbour and a strong industrial heritage. Work has always dominated this place, but now the city would like better places to dwell and to play.

The vitality of the city on the hill was dragged away by shopping malls and the centre was left without life after work. A

participatory place making process was enacted to try to dream a new and more sociable future for the city. Over 300 people participated in developing ideas through a 'set-up shop' process - a temporary shopfront studio in a vacant store.

The community's genesis for a new and better city focus around a few important notions:

**Culture needs expression and places to be enacted in the City:**

- Event spaces of formal and informal nature, and of varied sizes, are required to provide a setting for cultural life.
- The creative people in the city need to shape the material quality of the city through art, craft and design. In this way, the city takes on local meaning and identities.

**The city needs to be a worthwhile journey:**

- The connected paths must provide an experience worth walking, attracting all the senses and engaging the visitor.
- Barriers need to be removed, allowing people to take precedence over cars, and to reclaim public space for gathering.
- Anchor points in the journey (main destinations and event spaces) need to be housed in quality spaces which will last many generations.
- The signs, symbols and story's are focused on people and not traffic: a process of telling the city's stories and poetry will enliven the journey.

**The city is a process not just an object:**

- Residents will invent and dream at each stage of the place making process.
- Traders, owners and stakeholders become active collaborators: public place is activated by adjacent private space. Joint funding and dreaming occurs.

## **Making Great Places: Placemaking in the Greenfields**

The **great American dream** continues to be rolled out into the suburbs of the globe, with the recent addition of **a few environmental gestures** to lakes and swales. Are we contributing to the death of difference in our hinterland and rural areas as they become absorbed in city sprawl?? **We can't seem to get beneath the skin of this suburban thing** to change it into other typologies relevant to our sustainable visions. **Is there no other new way** of living in areas of new growth?

This snap shot of making great places in the hinterland offers two case studies of alternative models for a more sustainable way of

facilitating living places using participatory community planning processes. These case studies are of hinterland communities faced with the prospects of suburban sprawl.

## About the Suburbs

The most economically efficient way to exchange goods has not proven to be the most environmental or social model in the suburbs. The consumerist model of success required people to have cars and money to participate effectively in this suburban dream, and so it has been individual material wealth rather than any notion of building communities which has driven the development machine.

The idea of **fostering a sense of community** in 'subdivision' design has thus been to date mostly a marketing exercise. The elements which foster and engage a community are **treated as extras** in these developments: seating, public open space, streets, plazas and free community venues such as halls and recreation areas.

"**Intentional community**" is a term describing a more purposeful way of planning places for living. It implies that making community is an **urban process as well as an urban form**, and that future dwellers need to be actively involved in both.

## Other Placemaking Alternatives...

An **ecovillage** is a new urban form which capitalizes on the sustainable principles which have been inspired by the Permaculture movement and makes an overt objective to facilitate intentional community. Ecovillages also draw inspiration from alternative lifestyle movements calling for better energy usage, more community life and a greater **nexus between work, play and living areas**. The energy conscious neighbourhood is at the heart of Ecovillage planning, as is the conservation of landscape and biodiversity values.

Ecovillages offer a **different level of density which feels rural or landscape oriented but still provides a communal centre**. This centre may vary in its uses and functions but should aim to provide as many home/work/play networks as are possible.

The idea of an ecovillage embodies **diversity as a primary social and environmental generator**. The spatial layout of an ecovillage creates double active frontages, with the potential to facilitate social activity. This model has been successfully in place for over twenty years in the Village Homes development in Davis, California U.S.A. Central greenways, where clusters of homes can share a communal and productive landscape, are another spatial element in the Village Homes Project which encourages sociability. At Village Homes, studies showed that residents consumed half as much energy as those living in neighbouring standard suburban blocks, and that the crime rate was ninety percent less than those same adjacent suburbs.

The ecovillage may be an emerging urban form to replace or supplement the suburb as a development template in many places where landscape and conservation values are primary considerations.

### Case study 2 : The Ecovillage at Currumbin, Queensland

The brief for the Ecovillage at Currumbin was strongly influenced by the community design process enacted, with the visions, concerns and

ideas of the valley's residents actively harnessed through onsite brainstorming over a period of a week. Over four hundred people attended these brainstorms, which were run from an old dairy shed on the property. This process showed that co-design is as relevant on a greenfields site as in the middle of an urban area with an established population.

**The layout of an ecovillage strongly follows landcover and landform, creating eco-hamlet footprints which are created only on cleared lands.** The ecovillage at Currumbin not only retains the rural landscape but assists in ecological restoration. This is achieved by **retaining 80 percent of the land as communal open space** and developing cleared land for rural village living. The yield of the development is the same as that of blanket rural residential development, but the environmental and social benefits are much greater.

There is a slowly rising call in Australia to build living places which are **not 'urban' or 'suburban' in character, particularly in rural and hinterland areas.** The **suburban design standards** which are now templates for all types of urban growth, whilst being effective and safe, are destroying the very qualities which people seek in rural and bushland areas.

Currently, **over fifty percent of our energy usage in the suburbs of South-East Queensland goes to heating water.** The Ecovillage at Currumbin will address all aspects of energy use and conservation, from the use of local materials and technology, to the **'closed-loop' paradigm** for keeping all materials and wastes on-site and recycled. All storm, roof and site water is re-used onsite for growing landscapes. An onsite recycling centre will separate glass, plastics, organics and even recyclable white goods. Part of the ongoing decline of our rural areas is **the loss of small lot food production.** Is it possible to grow food near where you live, even if you are in the suburbs? At The Ecovillage, all scales of food-productive landscapes will be implemented, from community orchards through to private and communal vegetable patches. On site waste treatment will create irrigation water. A food co-op will sell the produce in the village centre.

Ecovillages such as Caral and the Landmatters Ecovillage at Currumbin are trying to promote a more sociable and environmental type of living place. This requires stepping out beyond the subdivision and infrastructure standards and the invention of new ways of building houses and landscapes. Such **new templates and pattern-languages** are urgently needed to help the Australian construction and development industries become sustainable, but more importantly to **give Australians better choices for how and where they can live in more environmental and sociable ways.** The combination of work, live and play in new and practical ways needs to occur in the greenfields just as much as in the centres. Ecovillage may offer us the chance to re-invent community in a more integrated way: a better way than the suburbs.

### **Case study 3 : Tooradin Village Strategy, Casey City, Victoria**

The type of place making occurring at Tooradin accepts that cultural and community planning is a network and a process, not a series of isolated events, constructions or projects: **it calls for social and environmental planning to be inexorably woven through an interactive practice.**

Tooradin in 2000 was on the verge of a new wave of development pressure. The catalyst for this change was the imminent connection of the village to reticulated sewerage, which will eventually triple its population. The community strategy provides direction as to how new and 'greenfields' housing growth can be managed within a rural village setting and without compromising its fragile ecosystems. The plan allows for the following key outcomes: (refer slide)

To create the desired future for Tooradin's natural environment, a system of **Green Credits** has been developed and implemented by residents and Council through a community planning process. **The local council trades the rights for additional development with that of significant restoration of the natural environment.** The starting point for all Green Trades is that the **environment is the primary beneficiary**; additional development is a negotiated by-product, and is in no way to drive the decision-making.

A Green Trade is considered by Council where there is a **clear net community and environmental benefit** and Green Credits are not limited to a particular property. This means that, a landowner in one part of Tooradin could re-vegetate a property, or hand-over to the crown valuable wetlands or turn a drainage channel into a wildlife corridor, in exchange for additional development rights in another predetermined location.

The principle of a green trade is that **fifty percent of the value** created above the original sale price of a newly created green trade development property **goes to the landowner and fifty percent goes back into Tooradin's environment.** The process has now been actively working for **two and a half years** and has been well embraced by the local community.

The green trades system has yielded five conservation reserves to date, and has already added **hundreds of hectares of valuable environmental areas** to the pool of the common landscape. This has been achieved smoothly and at little cost to the local council.

The Tooradin Village Strategy aims through its multi-pronged community approach to **bring biodiversity into a central place** in the planning for growing rural communities. The Green Trades mechanism offers hope for achieving Placemaking in under funded towns and regions and accepts that communal benefits in such scenarios have to be collaboratively fought for.

## Conclusions

The design problems of centres and edges are fundamentally the same: how to assist people to dwell in comfort and joy. The design processes to achieve great place making are also similar at differing scales and city densities: **to create real community, people need to participate and dream at each stage of the process.**

We have to try new ways of achieving an interactive planning process, because **'it is the constant building of a thinking in which to dwell, and upon which dwelling depends'** that will move us toward a more **sustaining placemaking.** This requires us to talk to people more and to become virtual dwellers through the design process.

**Striving for a meaningful process of building sustainable and sociable communities is a practise worthy of the future.**

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