

# THE FESTIVAL OF 'ENDANGERED' URBANISM REVIEW

Henry Halloran Trust, the University of Sydney



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# FOREWORD

It was a tremendous honour to direct the eighth Festival of Urbanism, in partnership with Professor Carl Grodach.

This year's festival theme of 'endangered' urbanism engaged with the existential threats facing cities and regions in Australia and across the world – from the global pandemic to social division, economic turmoil, and deepening climate risk. But it also highlighted the strategies of resistance and innovation by which communities, policy leaders, practitioners and researchers can and are responding to these dangers

From Indigenous perspectives on country to the future of urbanism; from public health in cities to the flight to the regions; and from infrastructure governance to ethics in urban decisions; the two week Festival featured 22 diverse events and 85 impressive speakers. But in keeping with previous Festivals of Urbanism, this was no academic talk fest.

Rather, researchers from the Universities of Sydney, Monash, Melbourne, Western Australia, NSW, RMIT, Harvard and more were joined by industry leaders, policy makers, politicians and community advocates, debating the spatial logic of Australia's cities, disrupted by public health concerns, new patterns of working, and the ongoing housing crisis. Festival audiences were invited to experience an extraordinary smoking ceremony filmed on Bundjalung country in Northern NSW before engaging with a rich conversation on the need to transform planning, environmental and cultural heritage processes in ways that genuinely respect and foreground Indigenous knowledge, stewardship and land.

A panel of leading international urbanists, from North America to Australia, discussed the lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic for future city planning and urban life. The NSW Minister of Planning and Public Spaces, the Hon. Dr Rob Stokes MP shared his own reflections on the future of Australian cities and the role of planning, informed both by his professional and public roles as well as his research experience most recently at the University of Oxford.

Among the many other Festival highlights, I was delighted this year to establish a student film competition which yielded numerous, creative and thought provoking entries exploring endangered urban environments and communities. We also launched the Festival of Urbanism book club podcast series, curated by Dr Dallas Rogers and featuring a diverse collection of fiction, essays, and non-fiction books by Australian and international authors.

The Festival program attracted more than 5,000 registrations and strong audience participation was a highlight across the events. I would like to thank our Festival audiences for bringing their own insights and perspectives to the discussion. Particular thanks are also due to all our of speakers and panel chairs, the Festival curatorial committee of Drs Dallas Rogers, Sophia Maalsen and Jennifer Kent, as well as the expert technical and communications team at the School of Architecture Design and Planning.

The papers, accounts, and images collected in this Review represent just a sample of the diverse perspectives shared at this year's Festival of Urbanism. Together, they highlight the need for ongoing research informed dialogue about the future of the city and the quality of urban policy and debate.

**Professor Nicole Gurran**  
Director, Henry Halloran Trust



# THE POST-COVID FLIGHT TO THE REGIONS: WILL WORKING FROM HOME CHANGE OUR CITIES AND REGIONS FOR GOOD?

Dr Alexa Gower

With Nellie Sheedy-Reinhard, Cassandra Tremblay & Vania Djunaidi.



Necessitated by lockdowns and enabled by technology, working from home has become a viable and potentially long-term alternative to work arrangements across a range of sectors, offering greater flexibility for workers and changing the criteria for where we choose to live and why.

Even when restrictions are reliably eased, there is the possibility that workers will choose to remain at home ongoing, with **44% of workers surveyed at the end of 2020 reporting they are reluctant** to return to Melbourne's CBD. What will this mean for the liveability of our city, as well as our regional centres and towns? A recent Infrastructure Australia report warns that an **overhaul involving all levels of government**, communities and business will be required to cope with the changes brought on by our flight to the regions.

As recurring lockdowns create more opportunities for people to work from home, the **hold that cities have over job markets may ease**. Rather than access to employment being the key decision-making driver, a re-prioritisation of value is possible, with initial population movements during COVID-19 revealing preferences for quality of life and residential amenity.

This could prompt a shift in planning and design policy thinking for cities and regions, from the need to attract businesses, **to people centric policies that focus on creating great places**. The emergent nature of the data and ever-changing conditions complicate policy making in this area, so it's important to explore these changes and early findings with some nuance to better understand population dynamics occurring now and in the future. This could help to guide the places subject to immediate pressure to capture the benefits offered by the working from home catalyst and avoid repeating the same challenges our cities have grappled with for some time.

Working from home presents a potential rethink of the existing monopoly that city centres have on urban life and activity. While many cities are experiencing a loss of vitality, there is a concomitant gain to be found in suburban and regional areas. These changes are reflected in **reductions in footfall traffic**, which were **more pronounced and took longer to recover in capital city centres** than in suburban areas. The associated implications for office space and small retail, food and beverage businesses alike may cause **a restructuring of the value of commercial property** in each of these places.

For regions, these population movements can also place pressure on residential housing markets and associated planning policies. This is already visible through their impact on regional real estate, where **rapid price inflation is occurring** and threatening the supply of sufficient, affordable housing. Questions can be asked as to whether these regions are prepared and sufficiently supported for the rapid growth in development interest occurring. Regional migration trends also present a disjuncture with current compact city policies and a growing concern is the contribution of this pattern to **unsustainable urban sprawl in regional areas** and the environmental/bushfire issues this brings.

Design challenges presented by the phenomenon include the **importance of better-quality housing** to significantly improve mental health during lockdown conditions. Experiences of loneliness and stress were intensified due to inadequate access to air, light, temperature control and green spaces in the home during these difficult times. Moreover, there is a recognised **need for adaptable work from home space** as well as spaces for relaxation.

While there is a popular focus on *intercity* migration – which tends to highlight the movements of professionals who can work remotely – there is also evidence of



*intra-city* migration, which largely involves low-wage, service workers moving to outer-suburbs. These groups have been identified as the **most vulnerable to changing work conditions** and are relocating away from city centres to areas where housing is more affordable but access to jobs and amenities is limited. This has drawn attention to **spatial disparities in the provision of services** between neighbourhoods. Early evidence from Melbourne suggests that people's well-being through successive lockdowns was highly dependent on the level of amenities available in the areas they live in.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that for some cohorts, their **remote work enabled relocations may be temporary**. Greater housing affordability and lifestyle factors may draw young professionals to a coastal town, but work commitments and socialisation factors may well see them return.

There is a need to broaden the working from home migration discussion to consider planning implications and opportunities for both the places people are leaving and those they are moving to, factoring in the possibilities above. It is vital that regions are able to retain the drivers which have caused the flight to the regions - housing affordability, walkable neighbourhoods, connections to space and the natural environment and community feel. Not only do we want

to avoid a repeat of issues facing our cities, we also want to learn the lessons of this migration and prioritise those drivers in our urban areas as well. Both will require increased attention to a diversity of experiences and community needs, and more nuanced consideration of how spatial equity might be redistributed. In this way, both cities and regions can capitalise on the benefits of the working from home flight, while ensuring the pitfalls are not following the path.

*Dr Alexa Gower (Monash University) is currently researching how the COVID-19 restrictions and future shutdowns may reshape Melbourne's urban form, focusing on implications for housing. This research forms part of The Melbourne City Experiment, a landmark Monash University research initiative investigating the effects of the COVID-19 shutdown. She was joined by **Leanne Hodyl** (Hodyl and Co), **Jeremy Addison** (City of Port Phillip), **Jonathan Daly** (City of Greater Geelong) and **Trevor Budge AM** (City of Greater Bendigo) to discuss the theme of remote work and population migration at the **Festival of 'endangered' Urbanism**. A recording of the panel can be found [here](#).*

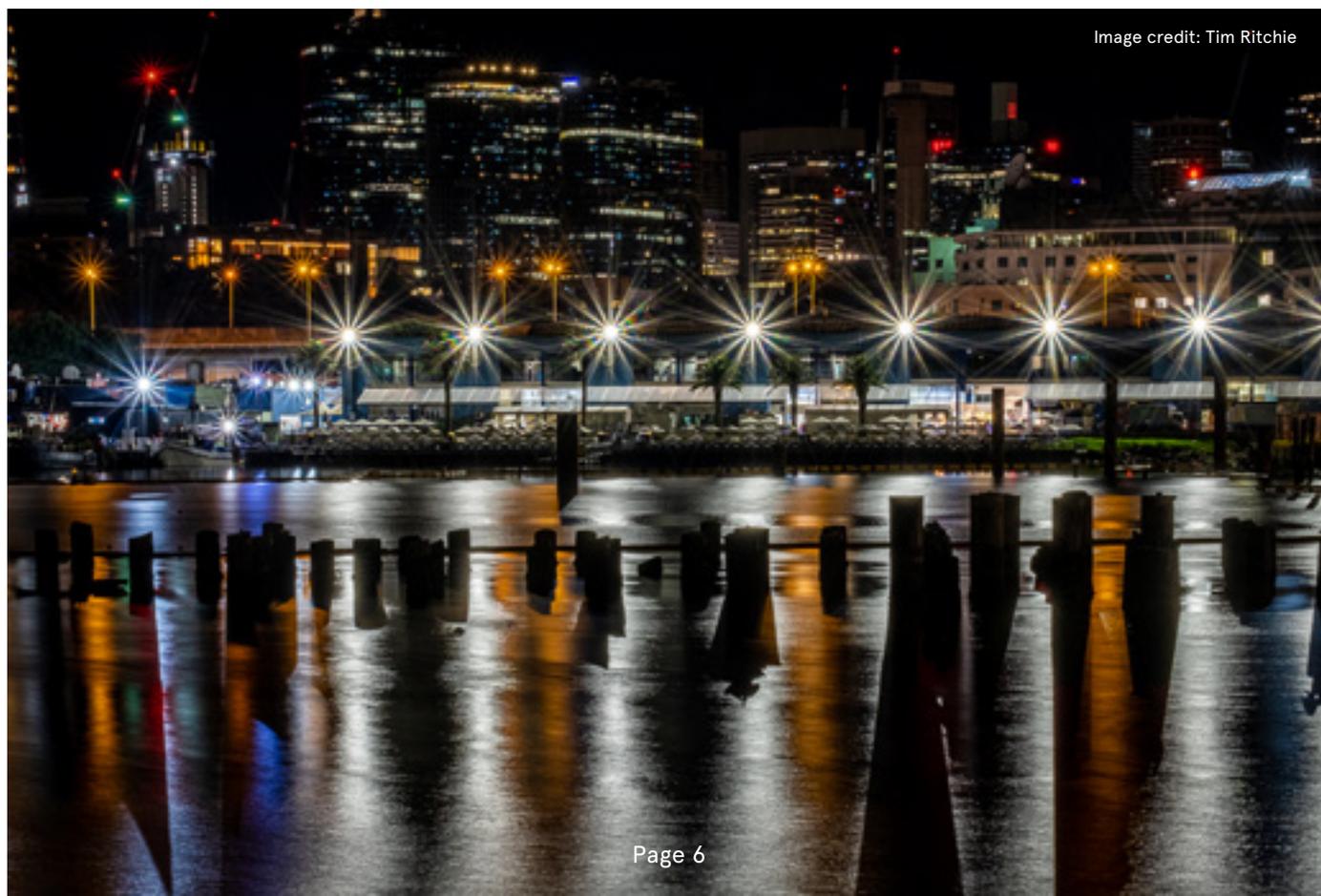


Image credit: Tim Ritchie



# ENDANGERED PUBLIC SPACES?: ENCOUNTERING THE PEOPLE OF MELBOURNE CITY CENTRE

Nícolas Guerra Rodrigues Tão, PhD Candidate, Monash University



**This session was organised by the Alliance for Praxis Research, a multidisciplinary collective of PhD students from RMIT and Monash University.**

The effects of COVID-19 pandemic in the urban dynamic included a deep disturbance in the real estate market reducing rent prices in the Melbourne CBD and consequent attraction of previously priced out 'publics'. As debates around the role of the CBD as a residential neighbourhood fires up in the wake of the work-from-home move, we drew attention to a sensitive discussion about the lifestyles, identities, cultures and histories of those who make the city their home. This event recognised people living in the CBD - residents, workers, artists - to discuss who constitutes the 'publics' of the city, what is the role and nature of the central district, and how these are changing?

Originally, the event was designed to be an opportunity to gather in person and was scheduled to take place in a public space. In light of the new COVID-19 restrictions the event transitioned to an online space. To keep the event as interactive and dynamic as possible, we asked people who were current residents of the CBD to take a reflective walk, sharing with viewers their experience of the city. In his acclaimed writing on "Walking the City," de Certeau argues that walkers are the practitioners that make the city 'speak' in comparison to the planner or architect who reads the city's geometrical or cartographical 'text' from above. Walkers in the city compose and read the city in a way that transforms each space into something new.

We offered our contributors a few prompts or guiding questions and asked them to record a video on their phones, as they walked through their city neighbourhood. In general people shared information about who they are; their connections,

and disconnections with the city; their perspectives on common stereotypes of CBD residents and reflected if they felt represented or not within such portrays; and if/how they find community and social cohesion in the overwhelming spatial conditions of the city centre. Most concluded with what they envision for the future of the CBD and how to make the city more liveable.

All contributions were edited together in a short video, which was played during the Festival. On the occasion, stakeholders from local CBD organisations - such as the "residents 3000" - were able to talk about their work and reflect on the concerns and aspirations residents expressed. Residents in attendance at the session shared their perspectives on the ideas expressed in the videos. Planners and researchers had the opportunity to ask residents questions and join the discussion.

From this experimental practice it was possible to reflect about the city centre beyond the "business district" perspective and make visible the memory, life, and day-a-day experience of some of the people that occupy its spaces presently- amidst a pandemic. The reflection that stays is that if we move beyond outdated stereotypes and adjust our lenses, we will see the need to make space not only for people passing by but also for families, children, students, and all sorts of citizens trying to socialise, play, and be politically present in their polis.

*Nicolas Guerra was joined by Monash University's Ana Lara Heyns; Zheng Chin, PhD Candidate, Monash University; Rachel Lampolsk, PhD Candidate, RMIT University; and Alexandre Faustino, PhD Candidate, RMIT University in a panel convened by Dr Carl Grodach from Monash University. A panel recording can be found [here](#).*

# SPRAWL REPAIR? PLANNING FOR A CITY OF 20-MINUTE NEIGHBOURHOODS – A REAL CONVERSATION

Liton Kamruzzaman, Associate Professor of Planning and Design, Monash University



## Introduction

This article reports the concerns and challenges facing our urban planning communities for the planning of 20-minute neighbourhoods. It is based on dialogues among a large cohort of 264 participants (practitioners, researchers, academics, and students) involved in the urban planning and design field. The dialogues happened in a 2021 version of the Festival of Urbanism event. The original discussion can be viewed [here](#). This report is structured following the QA format to better reflect the concerns reported.

## Urban sprawl and the 20-minute neighbourhoods

Australasian cities are **sprawling**, characterised by low-density, automobile dependent, homogenous, and aesthetically displeasing, despite different consolidation policies are in place. Common planning/design based solutions to prevent urban sprawl in Australasia are derived from the **smart growth** and **new urbanism** principles. The concept of the **20-minute neighbourhood** is the latest addition to the strategic toolkits of planners in this regard. The smart growth is a planning concept that aims to reduce the extension of low-density suburban. The new urbanism is more like a design concept that reflects a more human scale, pedestrian-oriented European style of urban life. The 20-minute neighbourhood concept, on the other hand, focuses on to support living locally through the provision of basic goods and services (referred to as community/social infrastructure) within a 20-minute return journey from home on foot. Like new urbanism, the 20-minute neighbourhood concept also emphasises the need for good design. These accessibility and design benefits are expected to attract people to live in 20-minute neighbourhoods, and offer the opportunity to densify (which is also a precondition to meet the threshold population needed to make the **community infrastructure viable**) and thereby to reduce urban sprawl. However, our knowledge is limited about what outcomes they would bring.

## Impacts of, opportunities and challenges for 20-minute neighbourhoods

When asked about the potential effects of 20-minute neighbourhoods, Distinguished Professor Billie Giles-Corti from the Healthy Liveable Cities Lab at RMIT reiterated that a 20-minute neighbourhood is an ideal urban form from the perspective of health and climate change. It encourages people to walk (and thereby less car dependency) due to the availability of opportunities within a walkable catchment. However, she thinks that the major challenge is getting it right because of the retrofitting tasks necessary for existing neighbourhoods to provide access to different opportunities. It is equally challenging to create 20-minute neighbourhoods from

the outset because not every 20-minute neighbourhood will have all the opportunities, which means that different neighbourhoods will require different density levels to make the opportunities viable. So, the question that needs to be answered in the future is: how do we optimize density to be able to achieve the 20-minute neighbourhood? It is a mathematical problem. Although planners do not like to deal with mathematical problem, this is the only way to know how much density is needed – we have to give the proper dose to have an effect. Similar concerns were raised by Professor Iain White from the University of Waikato, with specific reference to Hamilton, New Zealand.. Additionally, Iain outlines three specific challenges for 20-minute neighbourhoods: a) changing narratives and value of planning for 20-minute neighbourhoods to overcome the perception of policy makers that planning is a problem; b) using 20-minute neighbourhood as an opportunity to develop integrative concept to overcome silos to address multiple urban crises together (climate, housing, transport, infrastructure); and c) how to implement research into practice for 20-minute neighbourhoods.

## Planning and design of 20-minute neighbourhoods

Like Billie, a large number of participants in the event raised a similar question. Jo O’Byrne from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is addressing the implementation challenges of 20-minute neighbourhoods in Greater Melbourne. She responded that a 20-minute neighbourhood is a desired goal. There are already some areas evolved as 20-minute neighbourhoods in Melbourne by the virtue of their history, population size and economic base. They contain the features needed for a 20-minute neighbourhood, but all the features were not there from day one. This means that the concept does not necessarily work like ‘plug and play’, but it has to be context specific with options to plan for opportunities when the population size meets the threshold for an opportunity. Many station areas in Melbourne are now becoming a 20-minute neighbourhood because they have been able to be retrofitted to address the lacking features of 20-minute neighbourhoods. Dale Bristow, Team Leader of Strategic Planning and Sustainability at Maroonda City Council, who is leading the pilot 20-minute neighbourhood project at **Croydon South** added that the design principles should be determined based on the location of a particular neighbourhood in the wider networks of 20-minute neighbourhoods – how a neighbourhood contributes to and receives from other neighbourhoods. This conceptualisation leads to a hierarchical nature of 20-minute neighbourhoods and highlights the need for a structure plan outlining the location, size, connectivity, opportunities, and understanding the needs of people

for various typologies of 20-minute neighbourhoods. Some opportunities should be located closer than others (primary- vs. high-school).

### **Partnership, engagement and design matter**

As Iain highlighted, we asked James Mant from DELWP to identify the opportunities/challenges to develop an effective collaboration among different actors based on his experience of leading the 20-minute neighbourhood policy for Victorian Government. Following the release of Plan Melbourne, the overarching plan for Melbourne, DELWP was proactive in terms of reaching out to councils to build collaborations, conducting necessary research for the councils, and providing grant support for pilot projects. James also highlighted about the connections that the department built with researchers to address Iain's third point. Billie outlined the possibilities of building partnership with health through the implementation of 20-minute neighbourhoods in Melbourne – traditionally a missing link between planning and health. Adrian Gray from Brimbank City Council who is leading the pilot 20-minute neighbourhood project in **Sunshine West** suggested not to consider a 20-minute neighbourhood as a standalone project, but to consider it as a part of a larger city to bring a whole and different perspectives from multiple stakeholders. This also reinforces the idea of networks of 20-minute neighbourhoods. Adrian also thinks that a dedicated team of design professionals in every council is indispensable to ensure that the new urbanism principles are properly addressed with the implementation of

20-minute neighbourhoods. Dale pointed out that it is the community that will give us the honest answer about the performance of a 20-minute neighbourhood, and therefore, it is important to go to our community, build a partnership with them, and ask the big questions about what they need.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of a 20-minute neighbourhood appears first in the **Portland Plan** in 2012. However, the concept did not receive much policy attention elsewhere until recently when people's daily mobility was severely restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent need to access goods and services locally. Although the concept appears under different taglines in different places (**30-minute neighbourhood in Sydney**, **15-minute neighbourhood in Paris**), the overarching design strategies are almost identical everywhere. Given their prominence in policy circle, this is the time to make them right before they end up like another suburban sprawl. This conversation piece highlights the ways to make them right at the outset.

*Dr Liton Kamruzzaman was joined by Adrian Gray from Brimbank City Council; Professor Billie Giles-Corti from RMIT; Dale Bristow from Maroondah City Council; Professor Iain White from University of Waikato, New Zealand; and James Mant and Jo O'Byrne from DELWP. A panel recording can be found [here](#).*





# ENDANGERED URBAN SPACES: INDUSTRIAL LANDS IN GEELONG, MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY

Dr. Xin Gu, Monash University

Industrial lands have been massively transformed into sites for cultural production and consumption in post-industrial cities around the world. The merge of these two seemingly unrelatable things – ‘industrial lands’ and ‘the creative economy’ has drawn the interests of policy makers and urban planners globally.

Cultural clusters, cultural quarters, creative precincts, and creative neighbourhoods were happy accidents, merged organically mainly on redundant industrial lands in post-industrial cities. Many of the land uses were semi-legal, whilst they were waiting for demolition. Rents were cheap and they were conveniently located near CBD with easy access to urban amenities that the creative economy thrived by.

The success of the earlier organic transformation has been taken up by property developers and local economic development agencies to turn them into the ‘creative cluster development model’. In many of these examples, industrial features have been painstakingly preserved or restored in accordance with the aesthetics values commanded by the creative economy. Despite the enthusiasm, the question remained, ‘what exactly is the business model of these creative clusters?’

This happened during a period of rapid de-industrialisation across metropolitan cities around the world, especially in developing countries where it makes much more economic sense to demolish industrial lands than to restore them. Different culturally sensitive research has been applied to extract the value of industrial lands to interpret future uses for industrial lands. In Shanghai (China), hundreds of officially planned clusters emerged within less than ten years. Observations such as that artists are attracted to the rusty feel of industrial heritage and the location of large enclosed or semi-enclosed public spaces combining work and play, are now popular claims of the creative economy literature.

Industrial lands have greater potential for clustering because of their large scale, providing fertile ground for diverse cultural businesses to co-work, sharing knowledge and resources. Redundant industrial lands do not have prescribed uses, they are not easy to be turned into modular office buildings. Unlike purpose-built offices, industrial buildings/warehouses are blank canvas always open for new socially enriched imaginaries.

Moreover, industrial lands are part of the cultural history of cities. They contribute to an urban identity that many local creative businesses share. Many small creative businesses decide to start in these cities with associated industrial heritage, e.g. fashion in Manchester (UK).

Unlike top-down planned modern facilities, industrial lands provide scope for a more inclusive way of approaching urban planning, by inviting diverse communities to shape the urban future. This adaptive capability is critical to the intrinsic connection between industrial lands and the development of new urban cultures.

Despite the above, industrial lands are declining rapidly in major cities. They continue to be pressured by rising property value in suburbs that form part of the new inner-city creative economy. The question of how we value them beyond the real estate model is now a key consideration for policy makers and planners.

Since the late 1960s, post-industrial cities in the developed West have focused on the development of the creative economy and asked industrial lands to fit with the needs of the newer creative industries. In more recent years, many industrial lands have acquired mixed use status to diversify income streams but must increasingly retrofit sites for high end cultural amenity uses, contributing to declining numbers of niche manufacturing businesses. Such thinking is exemplified by the following approaches in urban design trends:

- Less investment on hard infrastructure, more investment in **soft infrastructure: Design for more human interaction and networking** or the concept of “networked urbanism”.
- There are those from the design discipline who promote ideas of **slow design**, and **acupuncture** urban design which leave spaces for iterative intervention by local communities. The fourth largest city in Indonesia, Bandung, has implemented the *Ten Principles of Acupuncture Urban Design*, placing culture and creativity as the core driver for critical urban transformations.
- **Designing industrial land as part of community planning**, is about considering the historical and future positioning of the cluster within its community. Community buy-in is now an important aspect for building sustainable urban futures. This is reflected by the philosophy of ‘creative neighbourhoods’ through which Melbourne’s Collingwood Yards (CAP) project is framed.
- **Co-design** is now ubiquitous as a mode of working. Co-working spaces and maker spaces have mushroomed around major cities providing critical infrastructures for the new creative economy in cities.

What has been overlooked in the above list, I think, is an ‘industrial lands’ centred approach. We have very rarely been asked ‘how we can design/re-design industrial lands from the meaning of manufacturing industries

and see what creative economy may emerge from it.’ This **Design from the needs of makers, rather than asking makers to fit into the narrowly defined ‘creative industries’** is also about acknowledging the fact that the creative economy is better utilised as a value-add rather than a prime driver for economic growth.

Our ARC project has highlighted alternative examples focusing on niche manufacturing as core for sustainable, needs based critical urban transformation. In Shenzhen, for example, we found an old printing factory which has converted its ground floor into a public library with the world’s largest book wall. This intervention extended the symbolic meaning of the cultural manufacturing (printing) that is still taking place in the basement of the building. It is open to the public as library, bookstore, art gallery, café, meeting rooms and restaurant, all deriving their meaning from the cultural manufacturing on this industrial land.

In short, industrial lands are in a precarious state because we refuse to see their meaning as part of the re-imagination of the new inner-city creative economy. By connecting with the creative economy, industrial lands gained new meaning, but such dependency brings uncertainty and risk within the neo-liberal mantra surrounding the ‘creative economy’ discourse. To move beyond this conundrum, we need to re-centre cultural manufacturing in the design of the new inner city economy.

*Dr Xin Gu was part of the **Endangered Urban Spaces** discussion led by **Professor Carl Grodach** from Monash University also featuring **Jeremy Gill**, SGS Economics and Planning; **Dr. Mirjana Lozanovska**, Associate Professor and Director Architecture Vacancy Lab, Deakin University; and **Mark Woodland**, Director Echelon Planning, Melbourne.*

Image credit: Tim Ritchie



# HIDDEN INFRASTRUCTURES, WILD UNDERCURRENTS

Associate Professor Wendy Steele (Urban Research) RMIT

**Overview:** Artistic intervention, speculative proposition, community discussion—this experimental panel focused on the hidden infrastructures and wild undercurrents of inner-city Melbourne from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing into view the subversive, dirty, multi-sensory, lived nature of the city - and the many ways we are all emplaced within it. This live/digital performance was inspired by the spaces in and between the Collingwood Yards and Collingwood Underground Carpark in inner-city Melbourne, inviting the online audience into an experience of the city's metaphoric and literal subterranea through the lens of dirt theory.

**Summary:** This was a panel that roamed, tracing the human and more-than-human entanglements of what lies beneath the city and its culture/natures. Our interest in exploring the hidden infrastructures and wild undercurrents of urban subterranea is to spark different kinds of conversations, understandings and rhizomic actions around climate change. This draws on research and creative artistic engagement with underground ecologies, ecosystems and communities that are increasingly threatened and vulnerable. Key

provocations and questions raised by the panel include: What happens when climate activism goes underground? How do government and industry agendas reverberate beneath our feet? What are the wild undercurrents and hidden infrastructures coursing all around? How do we encounter feral ecologies, contaminated creativity and stray ethics? How can we sensory imagination act as a precursor to critical praxis? And how do we create space for conversations and rituals that create the conditions for regeneration and wild life? To really shift the sustainability of cities and regions requires a thoroughly problematic glimpse of our urban habitats and fetishes as we move into an ever-uncertain, endangered future.

Associate Professor [Wendy Steele](#) was joined by [Professor David Carlin](#) from RMIT; [Dr Fiona Hillary](#) from RMIT, [Dr Jordan Lacey](#), RMIT Senior Lecturer; visual ecologist [Aviva Reed](#); Liam Fenaughty from [KERB Journal of Landscape Architecture](#); and researchers from the Alliance for Praxis Research. A panel recording can be found [here](#).





# ENDANGERED COUNTRY? INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

In this Festival of 'endangered' Urbanism session, Aboriginal planning and cultural heritage experts shared their perspectives on planning, land management and how to embed Indigenous perspectives in the planning process.

The mood was set with a powerful virtual smoking experience facilitated by Belle Arnold and Elle Davidson to cleanse the body, the mind and the spirit, drawing the whole self into alignment with Country. In the words of panel chair, Elle Davidson, the yarn ran 'mob style' – exploring the meaning of connection to Country and the importance of empowering Indigenous voices.

*Talking about Country, how do you navigate between the professional and the personal?*

Overwhelmingly panellists recognised the inextricable link between Country and 'everything'. "For the mainstream mob," said Belle. "Everything is in silos and separated. For me I like to see the connection between everything."

For Chels, Country defines who she is and her career path in ecology and protected area management. 'If you look after Country, Country will look after you. Country benefits people and our society and if that is not looked after we become a degraded society, a degraded people,' said Chels Marshall.

Designing with Country gives us the opportunity to be innovative, said Christian. "Our knowledge is ancient but constantly evolving." Adding that when he works collaboratively on design, Country – a living being – can be innovative, accessible and draw on 'empathetic design'.

The main challenge: Giving power to the voice of decolonising and to empower Aboriginal voices.

*In talking about the cultural heritage space with reforms having been on the agenda for a long time. What are some of the challenges in the current legislation and what needs to change?*

Aboriginal culture is the environment and Aboriginal identity is intrinsically linked to those places. "Any alteration to that landscape is alteration to our identity," Chels said.

As Country is all-encompassing, the caretakers and custodians need to focus on cultural landscapes and the song lines that traverse Country. The tangible and intangible are one, are all real. And, as Belle Arnold noted, we are constantly evolving, just look at the virtual smoking experience, and in this way, we can keep our cultural alive using new technologies.

Christian was more cynical about any legislation, benchmarking, and the bureaucratic processes. "The system is run by people who think in 2 to 4-year windows which is so detrimental for Country."

*What practical advice and examples can you give for best designing with Country and empowering the voices of the custodians?*

Christian is heartened to see that his collaborators really want to change their practices. There's an opportunity to extend song lines as the landscape changes, building new connections and embedding Aboriginal voices at every stage of the projects this way outcomes are respectful. It's more about starting the conversation, collaboration and the process that follows.





When you look at connecting with Country, Chels thinks about sustainability of Country, our culture and ourselves. In designing, how do we build these frameworks and platforms and ensure that they are embedded these the whole way through.

Belle recognises that this will work if the framework allows for Country to be put at the start, and if people are given the opportunity to co-design throughout the various stages of the project, and into the future. "It's a big step forward in decolonising the massive machine, this system." It's about seeing things through another lens, without a presumption of what an outcome is going to look like.

*If you had the ability to change anything (literally anything) in planning and development right now in order to promote Indigenous voices and give more agency what would it be?*

In Belle's response to this question, she discussed a planning process that is dominated by developers submitting cultural heritage reports and planning proposals on our land with no mechanism for them to provide evidence that communities agree to what goes in to these reports. There needs to be more accountability and more alignment with how Aboriginal see land.

In answer to what should shift, Chels feels that there are lots of policies and legislation for our environment, cultural and heritage but it's not coming from a Western

mindset. In a radical suggestion, Chels would extract all the funding that is supposed to be reaching Aboriginal communities and disperse it to Aboriginal people, allowing them to form collectives and buy back Country. "Then you'd have an equitable playing field."

In Christian's opinion, each mob should be able to say what is important to them. "We get hung up on borders but what's important is not where we are separated but where we meet. It's the confluence of people." He likes the idea of 'scaling out' to create intergenerational wealth and allowing space for Aboriginals to be entrepreneurial.

To sign off, Elle referenced the Tweed River cultural management plan which she believes should be replicated. Here planners have worked knowledge holders to map the culture values and be engaged when it matters to them.

*The Endangered Country Panel was convened by Elle Davidson, Aboriginal planning lecturer, University of Sydney; and featured Chels Marshall from [Urban Apostles](#) and Director Flying Fish Blue; Christian Hampson, CEO of [Yerrabingin](#); and Belle Arnold a Consultant with Zion Engagement and Planning. The panel recording can be found [here](#).*

# COVID (SUB)URBANISM: LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION WITHIN AUSTRALIAN CITIES

Associate Professor Paul J. Maginn, University of Western Australia



The last 18 months or so have witnessed a profound restructuring of the way we live, work and play as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. At various times, since March 2021, CBDs within Australia and other so-called advanced liberal democracies such as the UK, the US and Canada have been hollowed out. This hollowing out has resulted in metropolitan regions being described as 'doughnut cities' and CBDs resembling 'ghost towns' or 'zombified business districts' (ZBDs).

This zombification of CBD has been due to a combination of inter-related factors: (i) government-mandated lockdowns and restrictions on internal mobility; (ii) closure of national and state borders which has prevented tourists and international students from visiting and/or living in our cities; and, (iii) the rise of working from home (WFH), learning from home (LFH), and, safeguarding at home (SAH).

Such was the impact on COVID-19 on the socio-spatial structure of metropolitan regions there was some initial speculation that this might be the death-knell of the CBD. Some cities, most notably Melbourne, have had multiple urban cardiac arrests due to a series of extended lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021.

The impacts of COVID-19 on Australian capital city local government areas are evident in the fall in visitors to Retail/Recreation, Workplaces; and, Transit Stations. Data from Google's Community Mobility Report shows that Melbourne has been hardest hit on all fronts. Brisbane has been one of the least affected capital cities, especially in terms of visitors to retail/recreation spaces.

Whilst death may have coming knocking at the door of Melbourne's CBD, as well as cities such as London, New York and, more recently Sydney, its worth remembering that our cities have endured other major health pandemics and economic shocks to the system over the last 100 years. And not wishing to discount the loss of lives and livelihoods as a result of such events, our metropolitan regions – CBD and suburbs – have proved somewhat resilient and bounced back from adversity.

In a morphological, physical, spatial, economic and environmental sense, our cities are in a constant state of life, death and resurrection. In simple terms, An abandoned dwelling, shop, office complex, or factory all signify a form of death; a residential sub-division, urban renewal and gentrification signify forms of life and resurrection. Ultimately, the big question is: who are the 'victims' and 'beneficiaries' in this life cycle of the city?

Whilst life has been sucked out of the CBD during COVID-19 it has helped breath new life into the suburbs. As many people have worked from home they have (re) discovered their local neighbourhoods and helped bolster local suburban economies via everything from buying coffee, ordering take-away food and buying groceries from local cafes, restaurants and supermarkets – i.e. new localism.

Spatially, then, there has been something of a re-ordering of the structure of our cities. That is, CBDs have lost quite considerable ground to the suburbs – a space that has long been stereotyped a **blandscape** and very much a secondary space within our metropolitan regions. This should not be read as a rejoicing of another nail in the coffin of the CBD, or victory cry for the suburbs rising from the ashes.

Rather, we need to recognise that our metropolitan regions are complex systems comprised of two primary, inter-dependent, spatial genotypes – 'the urban' and 'the suburban'. Hence, the terms (sub)URBAN and (SUB)urban can be used to denote if a metropolitan region, a local government area, or a neighbourhood exhibits more 'urban' or more 'suburban' traits.

Of course, as complex dynamic systems, metropolitan regions are constantly evolving as a result of government policy, capitalist processes, climate change, global pandemics and other disasters, population movements and individual preferences. This all points to the emergence of a (sub)urban blendscape whereby suburban areas are urbanising and urban areas are suburbanising across metropolitan landscapes.

Moreover, as metropolitan regions expand – horizontally and vertically – this will arguably lead to the creation of what might be termed brutopian (sub)urbanisms. That is, a metropolitan system that aspires to and exhibits elements of both a brutal and utopian way of planning and living.

*Dr Paul Maginn joined the Endangered Urbanism panel along with journalist and author Dr Dr Elizabeth Farrelly; Dai Le, Councillor at Fairfield City Council; Gabriel Metcalf, CEO, Committee for Sydney. The panel was chaired by Fenella Kerneborne from Sydney Ideas. A panel recording can be viewed [here](#).*



# INFORMAL URBANISM IN SYDNEY: PRECARITY, PRIVILEGE, POLITICS

Associate Professor Amelia Thorpe, University of New South Wales

What do we mean when we talk about informal urbanism? Pop-up placemaking perhaps, or squatter settlements in the Global South? Our panel on informal urbanism in Sydney discussed some prominent examples – graffiti, DIY interventions in public space – but also others less commonly associated with the term, like responses to our escalating housing crisis. Informal urbanism is not a fringe phenomenon.

In my new book, *Owning the Street*, I examine PARK(ing) Day, perhaps the best known example of DIY urbanism (Thorpe, 2020). PARK(ing) Day is well known partly because it makes for beautiful photos: grey streets transformed into green parks and playgrounds, people celebrating the reclamation of parking space for people. PARK(ing) Day is also well known because it prompted the City of San Francisco to create a new permitting process for more permanent parklets, which in turn inspired the adoption of similar processes in Sydney and many other cities worldwide.

It's important not to see this as a simple linear story, from grassroots experiment to formalisation. What is interesting about PARK(ing) Day is much messier: the event shows how rules are contingent and contested, constantly being created and recreated in their social and material context.

I interviewed people involved in PARK(ing) Day in Sydney, San Francisco and Montreal. Most of the time there was very little official engagement with pop-up parks – people like seeing roadscape turned into playspace; the joy that participants get out of reclaiming streets is generally shared by those who see them. In a small number of cases, things didn't go so smoothly. I found examples in all three cities (especially in Sydney) in which people were asked by police to pack up their parks and return the road to cars.

These contested cases are important in understanding formality and informality in cities. What matters when pop-up parks are challenged are the stories people tell about law, and the kinds of support they can build around those stories. Informal ownership – a sense of belonging, a feeling that this is *my* street, *my* city – is crucial. Problems arise when people intervene in places where they don't belong, or where other people have competing claims.

Like so many other opportunities, the ability to intervene in public space is not equally available to everyone. Analysis of PARK(ing) Day reveals that informal ownership enables people to make interventions in the city; it is also strengthened by that kind of engagement. This

means that ownership is much harder for some people to develop than others, and often tends to reproduce pre-existing inequalities in access to public space. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains in *The White Possessive*, “the right to be here and the sense of belonging it creates are reinforced institutionally and socially; profound personal sentiment is enabled by structural conditions” (2015, p. 18).

Far beyond the policing of streets, a sense of ownership also influences lots of other rules and regulations – whether and how people comply with formal regulations, whether and how officials enforce them. This is significant because laws are rarely black and white. Planning rules, building codes and engineering standards, like other regulatory texts, are invariably discretionary and open to interpretation. Because there's always ambiguity, the way that officials exercise discretion is unavoidably subjective.

The line between formal and informal can be surprisingly thin and permeable, which is why ownership, with its connection to voice and agency, can be so significant in determining how rules are enforced. We can see this in the very different official responses generated by PARK(ing) Day, and by comparable practices like graffiti (as Kurt has documented so compellingly (Iveson, 2007)). We can also see the significance of informal ownership on a much larger scale, when powerful actors secure support for the stories they tell about rules and regulations. Unsolicited urbanism at Barangaroo and Melbourne's docklands, for example (Rogers and Gibson, 2021).

Pop-ups can be valuable in thinking about informal urbanism, but it is important to remember that ambiguity, transgression and subversion are not limited to these kinds of projects. The processes and practices that enable (and prevent) small scale urban interventions are evident also at a much larger scale, in developments more commonly understood as 'formal' urbanism. As we think about the benefits and challenges of informal urbanism, and particularly its potential to contribute to more just and sustainable cities, we need to think also about informality in other forms of city-making.

Associate Professor Amelia Thorpe was joined by the University of Sydney's Associate Professor Kurt Iveson, Dr Pranita Shrestha and Professor Gaby Ramia in a session chaired by Dr Sophia Maalsen also from the University of Sydney. The panel recording can be viewed [here](#).

# WHAT'S ENDANGERING PUBLIC HEALTH IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS?

Dr Nancy Lee, Charles Perkins Centre, the University of Sydney



Diet, exercise, and sleep are fundamental aspects of good health, both mental and physical. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a different perspective to how we might manage our health, and what we might be taking for granted. Those who went from commuting to working from home, have had to consciously work in more physical activity into the days, on top of home schooling and other responsibilities. For health workers who have worked tirelessly in our hospitals and on the frontline, their sleep patterns have had to change significantly.

At the 2021 Festival of Urbanism, we asked, what role does design play in making sure you're fit and healthy in a public health crisis? How can urban planning encourage more physical activity and good eating? To consider these questions, we were joined by Charles Perkins Centre experts to hear about the different ways urban living impacts on our health, and what we can do to make the most of our environment.

Epidemiologist and sleep health expert Dr Yu Sun Bin took the audience through the foundations of a good night's sleep: it's all about our circadian rhythms, getting sufficient exposure to natural light to set our internal body clocks and let us know it's time for bed when the natural light fades. Poor sleep can increase the risk of poor mental health as well as the risk of conditions like obesity and heart disease. While bad sleep is detrimental to our health, pet ownership can be beneficial to our wellbeing and mental health. Dr Emma Power from Western Sydney University discussed the changing legislation on pet ownership in strata living, with the 'blanket ban' on pets essentially being lifted, in NSW. Pet ownership is on the rise as more people realise the benefits of companionship, emotional support, sense of

community and exercise they bring to our lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant increase in pet adoptions as to ease the monotony of working from home and to get pet owners out of the house and socialising with other pet owners. Incidentally, dog owners may tend to sleep better because their owners take them for a walk first thing in the day, soaking up that morning sunlight.

Sydney's COVID-19 lockdown saw a surge of people taking to public parks, with or without dogs, for some regular physical activity. Dr Melanie Crane from the Prevention Research Centre highlighted possible consequences of the COVID-19 lockdowns to our regular commutes, after we start moving into the 'new normal' of 'living with COVID'. Dr Crane argued that the policy we enact and infrastructure we provide can shape habits; increasing availability and affordability of electric cars will not necessarily decrease traffic congestion, for example, but rather create a new and different problem of congested electric car traffic. Instead, providing safe, connected bike paths can encourage more bike riders to commute safely. Her research in the Sydney Travel and Health Study looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on how we think about and value travel to work and its health implications.

The final pillar of good health is diet. Restaurants were restricted to takeaway only during the various lockdown periods of 2020 and 2021, which saw a rise in the use of delivery services like Uber Eats and Deliveroo. With busy lifestyles and the relative ease of ordering and paying for takeaway meals on an app, the popularity of these services looks like they're here to stay. In addition to the nutritional implications of eating takeaway food regularly,





this of course leads to other related issues like pay and working conditions for the riders who deliver our food, and the risks inherent in delivering by bike – especially in Sydney’s less than ideal cycling infrastructure. Urban planning that allows for convenient access to diverse and healthy food offerings, like the 15-minute city (where most necessities including food, entertainment, and school are only a 15-minute walk or cycle away) is one way to encourage convenient, healthier eating and regular physical activity.

And the takeaways for good health in our urban environments:

- For good sleep, spend time outdoors (particularly in the morning) and avoid screens after sunset
- Where you can, switch to walking or cycling for your commute. Write to your local MP about the importance of bike paths in your area
- Say hi to other dog walkers when you’re out, or take a stroll through a dog park to get to know other dog owners (and their dogs!)
- Call the restaurant to order pick up or delivery to support local businesses directly. To make cooking easier, try to plan your meals for the week; if you live with others, make a group activity out of it.

Our health – physical and mental – is influenced by a combination of interacting factors; it cannot be determined by simply sleeping well, or having a pet to keep us company, or focused on our level of physical activity or diet. This year’s panel on public health showed that an awareness of how different factors can influence each other can help us make the most of the environment we live in.

*The Charles Perkins Centre is a multidisciplinary initiative at the University of Sydney. Its work addresses the burden of chronic disease including diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and related conditions.*

*Nancy Lee from the Charles Perkins Centre was joined by Sisi Jia from the University of Sydney; Dr Stephanie Partridge from the University of Sydney; Dr Yu Sun Bin from the University of Sydney; Dr Emma Power from Western Sydney University; and Dr Melanie Crane from University of Sydney. A panel recording can be found [here](#).*



# ENDANGERED GOVERNANCE: PUBLIC TRUST, URBAN DECISIONS, AND ETHICAL PRACTICE

Crystal Legacy, Associate Professor, The University of Melbourne

What is ethical about contemporary planning in Australian cities? The answer to this question is in no way straight forward. Numerous independent studies from the Grattan Institute (Daly, 2021), Auditor-Generals' reports (VAGO, 2021) and academic research (Rogers & Gibson, 2021, Searle & Legacy, 2021, Woodcock et al, 2017) call to our attention the poor processes, back-room deal-making, flawed assessment schemes, and the skewed power relations determining who is being served in planning and how the public interest continues to be undermined. Across these studies are recommendations: to improve accountability and transparency good governance practices and processes need embracing. But little more is ever said about what it might take to embrace an urban governance that can be transformative, and what is at stake as we try to shift the political landscapes towards more just futures.

Ethical frameworks establish the values that underpin decision making processes. They offer assurances that in development processes issues such as financial risks, conflicts of interest, politicisation, compromise, and corruption are addressed through a recognised commitment for transparency, accountability and clarity of process. Importantly, within these calls for better processes, are calls for fairer and more just outcomes. Articulating a public interest – and to be sure, there is never *only one* public interest – demands commitments to engage throughout the entirety of the planning process. It requires engagement with and across diverse communities, stakeholders and generations of urban inhabitants, and delivering outcomes that are community-led and owned. Admittedly, designing processes that are transparent with clear accountability structures, committing to ongoing public participation, and implementing just outcomes is no easy task. But our willingness to do better; to strive for better, fairer and just planning and outcomes in a time of climate change and spatial injustices requires planner's and decision maker's urgent attention.

Much has been written about the ethical challenges related to urban development. A public discussion as part of the [Festival of Urbanism](#) engaged participants in a 90 minute discussion grounded in knowledge sharing and reflection. Chaired by Dr Dallas Rogers, from the University of Sydney, I shared the panel with Han Aulby, Centre for Public Integrity, Michael West, Michael West Media, and Sue Weatherley MPIA, Director, City Strategy and Innovation, Georges River Council. The conversation touched on a range of important issues including transparency, corruption, accountability and integrity. A need for clarity around what those terms mean and how they could be observed in practice saw this panel teeter between critique of current practices and a call to do

better with insights around what 'better' might look like in the urban development that is right now determining the future of Australian cities.

The discussion was lively, and much was said about how the current systems of planning are not serving cities and their inhabitants well. However, what is often missing from such discussions is what we – yes, we – as practitioners, academics, advocates working and engaging with urban development might do about the governance challenges in Australian cities. Returning to the main title of this session, *Endangered Governance*, the endangerment of urban governance impacted by decades of neoliberalism has found ways to, on one hand, de-politicise planning by limiting its scope to a technical practice, contained within managerial processes, and structured by growth-led logics; while on the other hand, politicise planning by centralising decision control in Ministerial offices while limiting the planner's capacities to engage strategically and advocate for cities and their inhabitants.

Under these conditions it would be reasonable to feel powerless; but as the latest IPCC report laments, we have run out of time for complacency and business as usual planning. Instead, now is the time for planners, academics and community advocates to find their allies. Now is the time to cultivate the spaces where solidarity-building can occur. Now is the time for the foundations for a different future to be set. Rejecting the terms upon which poor planning and governance is practiced is a start. Working with allied organisations to build a politics of social and ecological justice, in the first instance, will establish momentum towards the setting of new standards for what could be deemed ethical practice; on our collective terms. From the grassroots up, through the informal channels of community-led planning, and advocacy planning can a new governance for cities emerge. This is not outside the reach for planners and planning.

Cities like Vancouver established a new urban governance from the ground up in the 1970s, 80s and 90s through dialogue and trust-building across diverse local government jurisdictions. It wasn't easy, it was a long process, and yes, that was a different era of planning that was performed under different social, political and economic conditions. But we need to take inspiration where we can find it! Also, there are many stories here in Australia of different ways communities and stakeholders are coming together. Spaces like the Festival of Urbanism, and the panel discussion like this one, are important places to share such stories, to reflect and to find friends and colleagues who are prepared to be intentional in their planning practice.

Pushing the boundaries of what is possible, planners and academics alike can become active in setting new terms for urban governance and establish the conditions for a transformative planning practice to take form.

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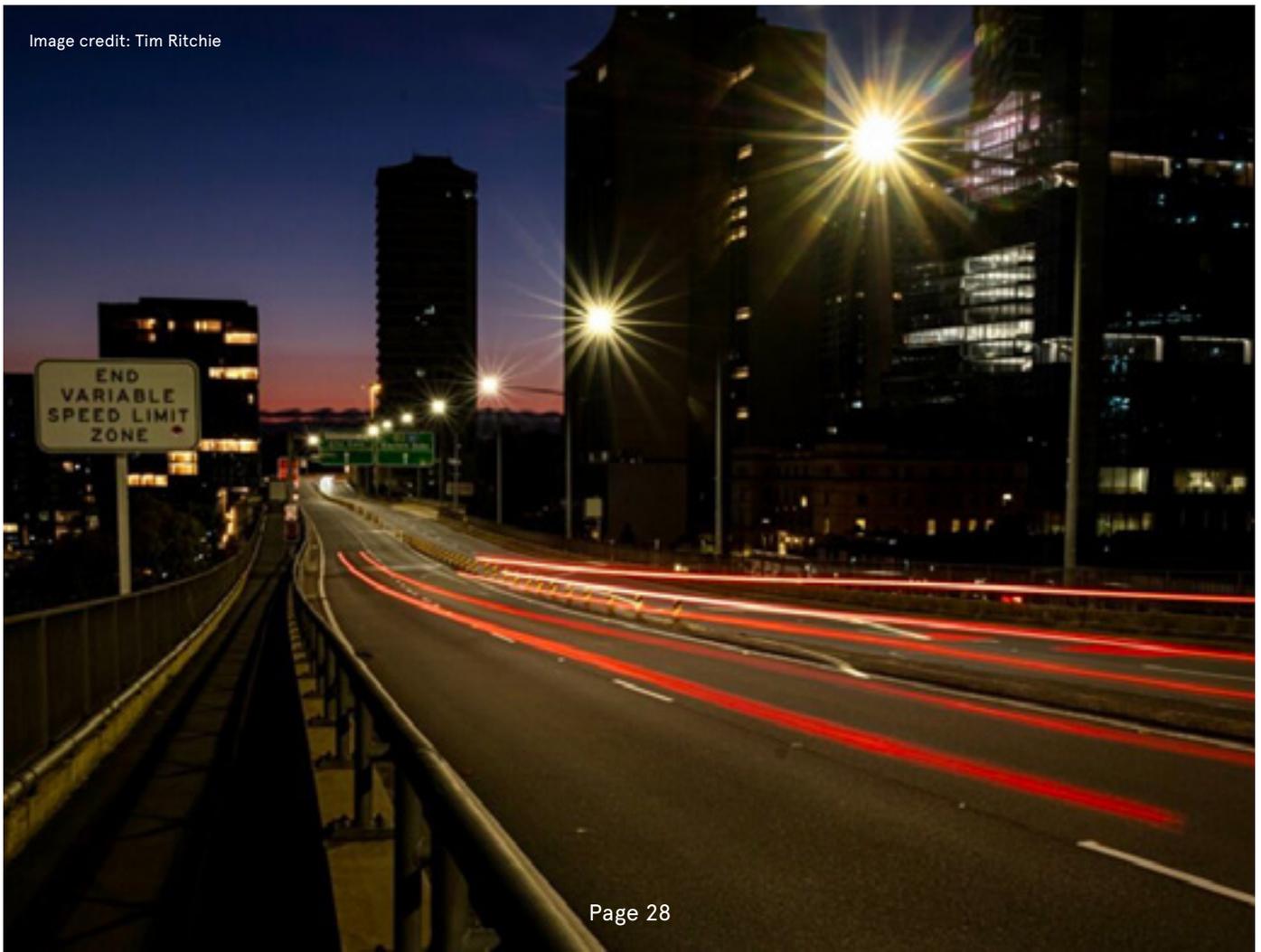
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Associate Professor Crystal Legacy was joined by panel chair, Dr Dallas Rogers from the University of Sydney; Han Aulby from the Centre for Public Integrity; Michael West from Michael West Media; and Sue Weatherley MPIA, Director, City Strategy and Innovation, Georges River Council. A panel recording can be viewed [here](#).

Image credit: Tim Ritchie



# ENDANGERED DISCOURSE: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC DEBATE ON URBAN AND HOUSING POLICY

On why we need to stop telling lies about our housing and planning policies

([The Fifth Estate](#), 24 September 2021)



**Professor Peter Phibbs got a rousing retirement send off from his gig as director of the University of Sydney's Henry Halloran Trust on Wednesday but he didn't leave without a few piercing observations on housing and planning.**

Even economic and finance commentator Alan Kohler when he appeared on Q+A a few months ago – the man who seems to have a quick and concise answer for near everything – threw up his hands when the topic turned to housing affordability. Nothing works he said. Throw money at first home buyers and the money just goes straight into the pocket of the vendors during the heated auction. Give a tax break on stamp duty. Ditto.

But though housing and the asset bubble that's infected it, is now a global problem and solutions are so hard to come by there's absolutely one thing we should not do. And that's lie about it.

Yet according to Professor Peter Phibbs who's been a member of the exclusive tell-it-like-it-is contingent on planning and housing for 20 years, that's exactly what's been happening. Sure. we expect spin from the powerful property development lobby. They are sophisticated and well-heeled enough to afford the most impressive names of the consultancy buffet. But when the public service joins in it's time to call them out.

During a rousing send off Wednesday from former students and colleagues alike as he retired from his academic life at the University of Sydney and running the Henry Halloran Trust, Phibbs shared some persuasive views about the way the debate is manipulated not just by faulty logic but by outright lying.

The occasion was the Festival of Urbanism; a panel event to discuss why the public domain and media fail so badly at honest and robust discussion of housing and planning issues.

Moderator Professor Nicole Gurran, who's the new head of the Halloran Trust managed some "spicy" views as she put it from the audience for panellists Dr Erin Brady deputy director general of the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate in the ACT Government, Eliza Owen, CoreLogic Australia's Head of Research and The Fifth Estate. Which was to be expected. Housing and planning are among the most contentious issues on the political spectrum given they are key drivers of our quality of life, economic activity, mobility, and "postcode equity", not to mention environmental outcomes.

As population pressures grow for the best places to live, as house prices keep rising and developers keep encroaching on people's sense of what their hood is,

or should be, planning and housing will also become increasingly politicised and possibly toxic issues. And watch what happens when property prices start to become influenced by climate change.

But planners, those quiet unassuming professionals that deal with these issues and understand the nuanced factors at work are not likely to grab headlines or manage big social media followings, either from supporters or trolls. There are complex reasons for this and over many years this publication for one has been frustrated at the lack of a clear if not loud voice from this profession, which could be so illuminating on these important issues.

There's a slow shift under way, especially on housing and the furphy that the high prices are because of a lack of supply. The Reserve Bank of Australia, NSW Planning Minister Rob Stokes, lively urban commentator (and occasional columnist for The Fifth Estate) Tim Williams, and even the former head of planning in NSW Jim Betts now moving to head up the NSW public service, are all starting to question the dominant narrative about supply being the main driver of prices. (Think tax incentives for just one powerful alternative ingredient that could shift pricing, an option now possibly kyboshed for years by the grand failure of the Labor Party to shift the appetite of Australians for genuine reform.)

But to illustrate our prediction that this issue will become more toxic, Betts apparently received disgraceful treatment from The Daily Telegraph for his views to try to unpack the dominant narrative on housing (we can't confirm the details as we refuse to subscribe) but you can see from this report that Betts told a meeting of the UDIA that we needed a more informed and honest debate. See the social media responses here from Williams and Chris Brown from the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue.

Supply as the dominant culprit of prices has been debunked many times in these pages, absolutely and conclusively.

And now as the federal government embarks on yet another housing inquiry it's no surprise that this article [Why the RBA is wrong about zoning and house prices](#) is trending right to the top of our hits again.

Here's a snippet.

The NSW Minister for Planning and Public Spaces Rob Stokes has correctly acknowledged in a private member's statement in the Legislative Assembly that the report "relies heavily on evidence provided by the Urban Taskforce ... using a contested methodology to produce findings that are both superficial and misleading".



And then there is this snippet from another equally powerful article on our pages that debunks the myth of inadequate speed on development approvals.

Housing supply in Sydney is a success story with the city having the highest housing approvals in the developed world – a product of the established planning system (not of course without its flaws but by no means the block or barrier to development it is painted as. Yet despite the evidence most observers say very little by way of refuting the deception of the single-minded simplistic mantra that has dominated public discourse and gone unchallenged for decades now.

Not Peter Phibbs. In his short presentation for the festival Phibbs was able to not just nail an alternative view – but bolt it into place. What was happening even in the public service, he said was “structured misrepresentation”. “In other words lying”.

It goes like this, he said: Prices rise, people worry, social housing advocates get louder and the government finally decides to hold an inquiry.

“And the response is very predictable: after 20 years they say the same thing: the only problem is red tape, taxes and planning regulations. “The federal agencies say it’s land supply. The RBA says it’s nothing to do with us and the Grattan Institute blames NIMBYs.”

The whole thing ends up with blame heaped on local government, he says. “The main thing among politicians is to sound concerned, blame someone else and do nothing.” They do nothing because they’re terrified about the prices falling and because most voters are home owners.

And as we’ve said countless times developers purport to want lower prices but if the prices fall they immediately stop building. Besides check the landbanks they own, all approved for housing. Phibbs tips that nothing will change until most voters are renters.

The development lobby blames policy failure. But that’s not true either, “I don’t think we’ve had policy failures; the system has operated exactly the way people have wanted it to behave.” What’s intolerable Phibbs says is when public servants fall into the same trap and engage in deceptive data manipulation.

The NSW productivity Commission for instance. In a report from the commission that came out in May this year one of its graphs, 7.2, shows supply not keeping up with needs. The data starts at 2006 and “we can see a shortage of housing”. “The underlying narrative is that planning must be busted because there is so much a shortage of housing over a period of time.” The trouble is the commission doesn’t say how they constructed the graph. “They don’t tell you the source documents so that’s a bit of a concern.”

A major problem easy to detect though is that the graph uses old 2006 person per household numbers, while in fact we know that the number of persons per household has increased, which is not surprising, Phibbs says, because the cost of housing has gone up so people defer creating their own households.

This skews the results “If we’d use the 2016 number instead of a shortage, we’d see there’s been a surplus for a large part of the graph.”

Another problem is the report ignores the huge surge in dedicated student housing in both Melbourne and Sydney and because kitchens are shared the

accommodation is simply excluded from the count of dwellings. Student numbers though are counted in the population data. Accommodation where bedrooms are carved out of a lounge room and used by short term immigrants to save on rent, is also ignored.

And there's more. "They ignore that half the population is coming from natural increases and that a lot of people when the family gets bigger simply renovate and extends the dwelling. So that's not counted. And again helps push the narrative."

Data from Tim Toohey, chief economist with fund manager Yarra Capital and previously Goldman Sachs counters all this with data that shows there was a surplus of housing in the 2002 to 2006 period and he predicts a "substantial surplus of stock" in the next few years because of COVID related reasons.

"They make things up," Phibbs says. The commission shows purportedly ABS data that residential private building approvals decreased by 44 per cent across the nation from 2016 – 2020 compared to the previous five-year period. "The only trouble is that instead of being a 44 per cent decrease there was actually a 10 per cent increase."

Proving they engaged in "strategic misrepresentation, otherwise known as lying."

The new government housing inquiry by led by MP Jason Falinski came in for a serve as well, and to be fair it's come in for a serve from a growing number of sources who are all concerned that Falinski appeared to decide the problem was supply before the inquiry had even started.

Supply is one item in housing and planning complexity. But it's so simplistic it's almost laughable. Imagine deregulating zoning like the Reserve Bank has called, echoing the productivity commissions NSW and federal. Imagine this happened and developers were unleashed, building wall to wall towers or big box retail and factories wherever they liked. Prices would soon fall of course, because only low income people would choose to live there.

The thing is that planning and housing is not a factory delivering widgets where equilibrium between supply and demand is a beautiful thing. It's about our quality of life and designing the world we want to live in, no less than that. There is so much more involved in housing prices too. Tax policies are crucial. Capital gains tax discounts on our own homes and investment property is probably the biggest incentive driving the bubble now that rates are so low and so few people need to negatively gear.

There's also the dominant ideology that abhors government housing and thinks the private sector is the way to go – where it must be said all the intermediaries can "clip the ticket". Victoria has drawn a line in the sand with its announcement of \$5 billion plus in social housing but according to the experts that's a drop in the bucket.

Meanwhile 1 million people in Australia are struggling with huge housing costs. As Robert Harley pointed out in The AFR last week, there is "more than a million low-income Australian households struggling in private rental accommodation.

"The average Australian household spent 14 per cent of its income on housing in 2017-18 according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. But those on the lowest 40 per cent of incomes in private accommodation paid on average 32 per cent of their income for their homes, which puts them well into financial housing stress."

Phibbs' analysis and that of so many others we've touched on signal that it's time to turn the tide on this debate. Enough with denial and misdirection as to the solutions. This is all a bit too much like the battles from climate deniers.

On the panel Core Logic's Eliza Owen, well known housing analyst in the public forum, said that as a Millennial she and her cohort are probably living the lifestyle they can afford now but what they might not expect is that if they don't own a house by retirement they could be in for significant stress.

The ACT government's Dr Erin Brady who completed her PhD under Phibbs' supervision would like to have a better understanding and discussion of planning.

But how? asked Nicole Gurrin, in the hope perhaps we could get more rational outcomes from a more collaborative approach between the skilled developers who deliver the places where we live, work and play, the politicians and planners who must make the tough decisions to allocate our scarce resources and we the people who stand to win or lose from the results.

To be truthful, it could start by that: stop telling lies.

*Tina Perinotto from [The Fifth Estate](#) was joined on the [Endangered Discourse](#) panel by [Professor Peter Phibbs](#), University of Sydney; [Dr Erin Brady](#) from the ACT Department of Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development; and [Eliza Owen](#) from CoreLogic. A panel recording can be found [here](#).*



# **‘ENDANGERED INFRASTRUCTURES’ IN TIMES OF CRISIS: GOVERNANCE ENABLING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES**

Associate Professor Tooran Alizadeh and Postdoctoral Research Associate Rebecca Clements

The 'Endangered Infrastructures' panel discussion at the 2021 Festival of Urbanism brought together diverse expertise to explore some of the biggest challenges for infrastructure governance in Australian cities in our current time of intersecting crises. Drawing from the Infrastructure Governance Incubator's research, Associate Professor Tooran Alizadeh laid out several key gaps that need greater attention in our struggle for more just and effective infrastructure planning and delivery. Firstly, infrastructure planning in Australian cities takes place upon unceded First Nation land, and we must turn our attention towards recognising this colonial legacy, exploring the many existing and emerging alternative governance models that enable Indigenous-led governance in Australia and internationally.

There is also a need for more attention towards effective governance integration within Australian cities, ensuring that different levels of government and infrastructure sectors and stakeholders are aligned and working collaboratively. Particularly in the wake of COVID, the social legitimacy of infrastructure requires greater research attention to support the delivery of key local infrastructure. It is also clear that there are major practice-research gaps in Australian infrastructure sectors. The first is between the strong work on sustainability within infrastructure research and the weak political stance on climate change at national level.

**A recent Climate Council report has ranked Australia's climate commitments last among 60 developed nations .**

There is also a wide gap concerning critical scholarship on governance that protects public interests in the increasingly private sector-led governance approaches.

Dr Simon Bradshaw from the Climate Council drew attention to the realities of climate emergency in Australia. With only a narrow path to avoiding climate catastrophe, our infrastructure planning needs to aim high now. He highlighted the need for a national adaptation and resilience framework that provides accessible and actionable information on the impacts and risks down to all levels of government, ensures adequate resourcing, and empowers local communities. "Things like renewable energy infrastructure work for communities just as they work for the planet". A key pathway forward is listening to those on the frontlines, particularly our First Nations communities.

Khelsilem, an elected councilman with the Squamish Nation Council in Canada, discussed the inspiring Seńákw project occurring in downtown Vancouver, the largest First Nations economic development project in Canadian history. In a city with massive housing affordability issues built on unceded First Nations land, this housing project built on reclaimed Squamish land aims to deliver

6,000 largely rental housing units, estimated to bring in billions of dollars of value. Owned and led by the Squamish Nation, this value flows directly to Indigenous communities, enabling the building of a sustainable economy, and directly supporting the provision of important community infrastructure and services such as for health and education. "When Indigenous people were given their land back, they were given influence and control over what happened on that land, and they're able to live out their values on that land". These values are rooted in deep connections to land, ecosystems, and intergenerational care, underpinning the strong sustainability credentials of the project, such as being a net zero carbon development, and providing only a tenth of the typical car parking facilities in Vancouver.

Dr Cathy Oke from the University of Melbourne described the importance of building international city networks, and the inclusion of city governance in global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Cities are well-placed to drive meaningful action on climate-neutral infrastructure that might be lacking at national levels, and these city-level connections enable key support for financing, capacity building, and knowledge and technology sharing. "Here in Australia, the decision and funding mechanisms, the links between the levels of government and with citizens also need to radically change if we are to future-proof our cities".

John Brockhoff from the Planning Institute of Australia drew attention to the risks of creating 'endangered infrastructure' through our current system favouring mega-projects - prone to massive cost overruns, and often ill-suited to community needs, locking in poor outcomes over decades. COVID has revealed the need for more resilient frameworks guiding infrastructure prioritisation that can build in adaptive capacity over time, and allow communities to function on their own if needed. John suggests that we need a place-based micro-paradigm shift, where 'bundles' of community infrastructure projects can support integrated strategic planning. "There's no reason these bundled groupings of infrastructure projects can't be on the same footing as the stuff that gets served up to us every year in our project priority lists".

The Seńákw project: <https://senakw.com/>

Associate Professor **Tooran Alizadeh** was joined by **Khelsilem** Tl'ákwasiłan Sxwchálten, Councillor for the **Squamish Nation**, Canada; **Dr Cathy Oke** from the University of Melbourne; John Brockhoff from **Planning Institute of Australia**; and **Dr Simon Bradshaw** from the Climate Council. A panel recording can be found [here](#).

# INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES BUILT ON DIVERSITY AND ITS DIFFERENCES

Professor Jioji Ravulo, Professor and Chair of Social Work and Policy Studies,  
The University of Sydney



Living and working across the unceded lands of Aboriginal people, and being of iTaukei Fijian heritage, I have come to learn the importance of diversity. If we are truly going to create inclusive societies, cultural diversity and its differences need to be part of that conversation.

Through my work as a social worker and academic, I've developed the following acrostic – INCLUSIVE – that strives to highlight how diversity is key to this shared approach.

# INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES



Prof. Jioji Ravulo  
The University of Sydney

Sea (Axiology), Land (Epistemology), Sun (Ontology), Space (Methodology) & Place (Ecology)

- Injustice 🙄
- Neo-colonialism & dominant discourses 🙄
- Cultural diversity & differences 🌈
- Locating strengths and solutions 🤝
- Understanding marginality and social capital 🎓
- Social Work education, practice, policy & research 📖
- Indigenous knowledges & collective collaborations 🌐
- Violent structures reformed (micro / meso / macro) 🙄
- Effective models of engagement 👍

Mental Health AOD Youth Marginality Decoloniality
Qualitative Indigenous Methodologies Talanoa Surveys Co-Design & Collaborative
Young people & their families Non Government Organisations Human Services Sector Diverse Communities

## SOCIAL WORK / EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT / CULTURAL RESEARCH

If we are going to create societies that are fair and just, we first need to acknowledge that **Injustice** and privilege does exist; that they are part of our communities and we need to acknowledge them if we're going to move forward as a society.

We need to intentionally recognise that such injustices, including the over representation of First Nations people within carceral spaces exists because of **Neo-colonialism and dominant discourses**. The idea that there is one particular way to how we create societies is premised on the underlying notion of 'white is right' and 'west is best'. This further perpetuates the status quo that continues to permeate our conversations, where anything outside of this way of thinking is considered as the 'other' and not relevant.

Instead, **Cultural diversity and its differences** should be at the forefront of our conversations. Generally, western societies fail to see that they are also a cultural force in and of themselves and they determine whether forms of diversity is included. We need to have a broad and intersectional view of cultural diversity and

its differences to include age, gender, class, religion, sexuality, indigeneity, ability and so forth. All of these diverse characteristics will also create nuanced and complex identities that intersect with each other and it's within those nuances that we also learn to embrace diversity and it's differences.

Through this shared approach, we are **Locating strengths and solutions** through the acknowledgement of such areas of diversity. We can include such strengths as part of our shared conversation in creating spaces that are focussed on the possibilities, rather than a deficit and paternalistic approach to forcing people to fit in.

**Understanding marginality and social capital** is also key. Traditionally we see marginality as being outside the centre. However, when I look to amazing academics especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, there are diverse ways in which we understand the concept of marginality. bell hooks suggest marginality as being a *site of resistance*. Marginality is a recognition of our choice not to fit into the status quo. Instead, it's an invitation to come and learn from us, to come and be an ally and learn

what it means to be in such marginal spaces. But also learn to include our voices as a valid form of social and cultural capital.

My work as a social work academic is mobilised through **Social Work education, practice, policy and research**. How and what we teach the next generation of social workers will have an impact on how they will engage and promote engaging responses and sustainable solutions with diverse communities across societies. This will occur across social work practice, policy and research that strives to genuinely meet the needs and amplifies the voices of our communities in which we are located and serve.

Privileging **Indigenous knowledges & collective collaborations** in the way in which we structure our societies can be of great benefit. Concepts of egalitarianism – where everyone is included, has a role to play and is valued can support contemporary contexts.

As a result of meaningfully including areas of diversity, we aim to have **Violent structures reformed (micro / meso / macro)**. This is where our individuals (micro), our families and communities (meso), and broader society and their social systems (macro) including education, legal, health and welfare are nuanced and supportive.

As a society, we will value diversity as the base line to create and implement **Effective models of engagement** across our social systems to ensure we are providing sustainable support that makes a difference that is helpful, and formative to our goal to be inclusive.

*Professor Jioji Ravulo featured on the Endangered Communities panel with Warren Roberts from the Redfern Waterloo Aboriginal Affordable Housing Campaign; Lena Nahlous, CEO, Diversity Arts Australia; and Shannon Burt from Byron Shire Council. A recording of the session can be found [here](#).*





Image credit: NYC Department of Transportation

# PLANNING FOR RECOVERY: LEADING URBANISTS IN CONVERSATION

Notes by Professor Ann Forsyth, Harvard Graduate School of Design (Panel Chair)

COVID-19 has brought many changes in urban areas. In this panel on Planning for Recovery panelists discussed the experience in the United States from their first-hand experiences in Seattle, New York, Washington DC, and Boston. In 2020 COVID cases were followed quickly by the death of George Floyd and numerous protests in what became known as the racial reckoning. An election year federal politics in 2020 played out in tense situations at the state and local level, culminating in the start of 2021 in the January attack on the US Capitol in Washington DC. Several waves of COVID buffeted the US with health and economic effects.

In this context cities had to address multiple challenges in crisis response, recovery, and imagining a new future. The first case of COVID-19 in the US was identified in Washington State in January, putting Seattle on the forefront of COVID response. Sam Assefa explained how in Seattle, the planning department initially provided support to the frontline departments dealing with COVID-related crises in areas such as housing, food distribution, and business support. Later on in 2020 they helped support work on racial equity while dealing with smoke from wildfires.

New York City was also an early epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA. Irene Figueroa Ortiz described how in New York City the Department of Transportation leveraged the major public spaces

of the city—its streets—and energy from residents and community associations, to provide places for pedestrians, cyclists, recreation, community events, and to support small businesses. Through its Open Restaurant program more than 12,000 restaurants (as of November 2021) added outdoor dining along sidewalks and in the parking lane of the roadway. This program is being made permanent.

Glenn Grimshaw, working in Washington DC, outlined how COVID-19, political events, economic stresses, and social movements provided a very complex landscape for urban activities. Multiple levels of government were engaging the COVID situation while also addressing one challenge after another.

Panelists reflected on the new future for urban areas. The emergency situation speeded up adopting policies, plans, and programs already underway—for example pedestrianizing streets at least for part of the day or week. However, they raise questions for the long term—should restaurants be able to continue using the public street for free, and if not, what should they pay? Many other dimensions of urban areas from commute patterns and office space usage to housing preferences and equitable development are still in some flux. The enormous disruptions of COVID-19 provide some insight into the potential disruptions climate change may bring forward.



**The Hon Dr Rob Stokes** is the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, where he is focussed on promoting development throughout NSW that improves people's lives into the future, as well as protecting, restoring and building our State's public spaces and parklands. Rob is an environmental lawyer and has read sustainable urban development at Oxford and completed a PhD in planning law under a Commonwealth Scholarship.

In October 2021 Rob Stokes became the Minister of Planning, Public Spaces, *Transport* and Roads.

Image credit: Tim Ritchie

# MINISTER'S ADDRESS: URBAN CHANGE AND ADAPTING TO NEW REALITIES

Excerpt from address given by the Hon. Dr Rob Stokes, Minister for Planning and Public Spaces

## Impacts of COVID-19

The pandemic will change the city. Urban changes have always been fueled by pandemics and other disasters. Just as necessity is the mother of invention, so too can calamity capitalized regeneration. For example, the great plague and the subsequent fire of London, led to the 1667 rebuilding act, which included some London's first planning controls. Later outbreaks of cholera typhoid, resulting in great engineering works like metropolitan sewerage and water supply systems. Respiratory diseases caused by industrial air pollution, domestic wood and coal burning resulted in clean air and pollution control legislation. Closer to home, the bubonic plague in 1900 paved the way for the significant urban renewal of Sydney's precincts including Pyrmont, the Rocks and Miller's Point.

The Spanish flu of 1918 it was closely followed by amendments to the New South Wales local government act which prescribed, the development of terrace housing and apartment buildings for decades to follow, giving rise to the urban sprawl characterising our city today.

In the same way, even if we cannot yet predict how, we know the COVID-19 pandemic will have a profound impact on the way we plan, use and build our cities. For example, the pandemic has sponsored the donut effect driving residents and businesses to larger spaces and remote working in the suburbs with cloud-based sharing and video conferencing, making workplace flexibility, a permanent fixture of our labour market.

More home-based workplaces will also change how we think about the design of our homes and our localities with more of us spending significantly more of our time in our immediate neighbourhoods. This shift has left city centres virtually vacant exposing the risks inherent in limiting economic activity to specified land uses in spatially segregated precincts.

The negative impact on the value of CBD real estate might generate negative impacts for millions of Australia families. Commercial property accounts for almost a 10th of assets held by our superannuation funds, the income generated by these assets underpin the investment income that millions will depend upon. And not just investors but small businesses in CBDs, cafes are at risk. If pandemics become the new norm, then tens of millions of urban services jobs, are likely to disappear.

As COVID-19 has shifted employees away from their desks and into the homes and out of CBDs and major towns, the importance of flexibility in a planning system will become increasingly clear.

## Building back better

While the future city will look different, we can have an opportunity, as they say, to build back better. And while, as I said, we can't predict with certitude what the changes will be, history tells us that the pandemic will leave an indelible mark on the future of the city and many others.

And here, as in other environments, there is now the social, environmental and economic momentum for change. Our greatest opportunity right now is to nudge that change into the direction we want.

Justice must lie at the heart of reshaping Sydney post pandemic.

Since the industrial era, cities have been shaped around geographies of disadvantage. Underlying geography is a disadvantage and emerged in starkly throughout the pandemic, both here and abroad.

Perhaps the most powerful analogy from the from these lockdowns was one shared by a 17 year old from Mount Druitt in the Sun Herald last month.

He is trying to navigate the challenges of the pandemic, while studying for his higher school certificate while supervising his kindergarten age brother and translating the latest COVID information to his Egyptian born parents. He expressed frustration with repeatedly hearing the mantra that 'we're all in this together, we're all in the same boat'. His response to that was 'we're in the same storm, but some of us are in a dinghy and others are in a yacht'.

We need to create a future Sydney where everyone has a right to the city.

A just city is also why a new design and place policy is so important. Increasing housing supply must not come at the cost of decreasing housing standards so that we design 'in' community and inclusion and design 'out' crime and exclusion.

At the centre of just cities are healthy places.

The pandemic has dramatically exposed the need for healthy built environments, access to fresh air, light, well ventilated homes, organics, food, green spaces, employment, and a strong community foundation of public health.

The garden city for Sydney can join us all together: the Aboriginal city, the colonial city, and the multicultural city. That's the sort of place, that I want to help create post pandemic.

# THE HENRY HALLORAN TRUST

The Henry Halloran Trust was established in 2013 through the generous gift of developer and philanthropist Warren Halloran. The Trust aims to become a leading voice and advocate for the advancement of liveable cities, thriving urban communities, regional planning and sustainable development. The Trust seeks to:

- Support scholarly research into critical policy issues relevant to current practice in Australian and international urban and regional policy, planning and land management.
- Promote collaborative cross-disciplinary engagement of local and international scholars, practitioners, and industry and government partners.
- Support and inform policy dialogue and academic, professional and public debate through research publication and public events that encourage inspirational thinking about how to better manage urban and regional development.

[sydney.edu.au/henry-halloran-trust](http://sydney.edu.au/henry-halloran-trust)