

# The role of planning in community building

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## ABBREVIATIONS

DIPNR	Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, NSW Government
DUAP	(former) Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, NSW Government
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
ESD	Ecologically Sustainable Development
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
NIMBY	Not in my back yard (colloquial)
NSW	New South Wales
RTPI	Royal Town Planning Institute (United Kingdom)
SEPP	State Environmental Planning Policy
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the contribution of practising planners, working in town or urban planning departments, to social wellbeing. It is concerned with what planners do, how they conceptualise the application of town or urban planning practice to social issues, and what they think about their role in achieving social outcomes in a place.

The general question is initially addressed through an introductory story and then via a content analysis of recent regional strategic plans. This is followed by a review of town planning literature on social issues, particularly literature concerned with small areas such as villages and neighbourhoods and which treat urban areas as a series of villages or neighbourhoods. The work is further advanced by a discourse analysis of the use of the word community, as a noun and as an adjective, in a series of planning reports. Recent literature on community development, community consultation and sustainability principles is also reviewed for its contribution to the way in which planners address social issues.

On the basis of findings from this work, five research propositions are developed. These are explored through a survey of practising planners. The research propositions are explored in a number of questions so as to search for consistency and establish the reliability of the results. The same questionnaire is also administered to a class of fourth year student planners as a control. Four of the five research propositions are demonstrated by the survey results.

The results suggest that practising planners have a knowledge and skill shortfall in the area of applying planning practice to achieving social outcomes. However, the results also demonstrate that most planners think that community building is part of their role, they have a realistic appreciation of their skills and are open to new ideas and learning opportunities. The concluding section of the thesis makes a series of suggestions for responding to the shortfall and developing planners' knowledge and skills relevant to community building.

## INTRODUCTORY STORY

One of the advantages of writing a thesis late in a working life is the opportunity to observe its antecedents. This thesis is about the role of planning in community building or in social sustainability (depending on your preference for jargon), and it would be easy to see it as arising from a series of experiences I had in the 1990s. But on reflection, my first encounter with the question happened shortly after I finished my final examinations in Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1966.

A number of us were sitting in the Union coffee shop facing the future. We supposed we would have to get jobs. We were already mourning our student days. A passing member of Academic staff suggested that we consider doing the town planning postgraduate qualification. His suggestion, he said, was in the interests of the planning profession whose current student body came from geography and economics and didn't seem to have a clue about social issues. It was time their ranks were swelled by some sociology graduates who understood about social structures and social systems. He thought we had a lot to offer.

We continued to drink our coffees. The thought of embarking on a career characterised by a life time of endeavouring to enlighten the men (for they were mostly men and we were mostly women) who draw lines on a map moved us not one jot. Perhaps if we had realised that that was what we were facing anyway, some of us might have followed up this suggestion, but as it happens none of us did. We moved out into the workforce to discover that sociology was slightly suss, that we were wrong gender, and, that (on both counts) a career of enlightening the uninitiated was in fact exactly what we had been set up to do.

But I thought no more about it for a long time although I encountered plenty of men drawing lines - for roads, for zones, and for organisational structures in which the lines, both vertical and horizontal, also accomplished demarcations between people. It was only when I joined a small planning consultancy specialising in planning for ecologically sustainable development (ESD) that I consciously re-encountered the issue. My colleagues were consulting to several developers wanting to build large developments in urban areas as well as on greenfield sites. These developers wanted to present their ESD credentials. The question

was, what were the social dimensions of ecologically sustainable development in an inner city development.

My colleagues were clear about waste management, pollution control and solar benefits, they understood design, privacy and surveillance. What else could there be and what was I talking about? Did I mean that the kitchens in each unit should accommodate Asian cooking styles, or that the meeting room for residents should have an outlook and be part of commercially viable space? Or was it an issue about cultural differences in open space requirements? Would the anticipated populations, drawn predominantly from Asian countries in some cases and from the UK in others, have different requirements for private and public open space? In any event, it was clear that my question related to buildings and physical things and couldn't easily be answered.

The issue having been raised, I discovered that social issues were well and truly on the back burner in most planning departments. For example, social issues are listed for inclusion in Environmental Impact Statements<sup>1</sup>(EIS), but typically social impacts would be addressed at the eleventh hour and none of any significance would be found. When, as a consultant, I identified social impacts arising from mining a valley (wide swales of subsidence would ripple across the landscape and some homes would have to be demolished and rebuilt) I encountered disbelief among the writers of the rest of the document and rage on the part of my client who sought to have me change my report. He told me that demolition of homes was what was to be expected (by the homeowners) and they'd be better off with a new home.

In an impact assessment on the reduction of the forestry industry in a rural area in NSW, the Reference Committee for the project (which contained economists and geographers but no sociologist) commissioned the social impact assessment when the other parts of the assessment was almost completed. When I presented a report based on a diverse range of assessment methodologies I again encountered rage, except on the part of one community representative who almost wept as he spoke in support of the social impact assessment I presented. His was a lone voice. He was soon drowned out. Sitting in the ESD firm, I had a look at

<sup>1</sup> The NSW Environment Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (as amended) requires impact assessments to take account of social impacts Section 79C(b).

other EISs, for example those for the Eastern Distributor and for the development of a Casino on the Pymont/Ultimo site<sup>2</sup>, and found that these were not unusual experiences.

As a consultant it became all too clear that social impact assessments attract small consulting fees and short timeframes for their completion and so, generally, they result in small documents. The people assessing these documents generally do not include social specialists, so it is potluck whether the impact assessment is seen as credible. The proponents for social issues in planning assessments usually have to battle the vested interests of other professions and groups for legitimacy and then for dollars to respond to them. But social dollars are sitting in other departments – health, social welfare, ageing and disability departments not in planning departments.

I also discovered in my travels as a consultant that there were no sociologists in the NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP) which was renamed PlanningNSW in 2001<sup>34</sup>. That Department did not have a social impact assessment unit, nor a social plan of its own. The Department had a Sustainability Unit and a Sustainability Advisory Committee but these bodies did not contain sociologists and were not looking at social sustainability issues<sup>5</sup>. The Department's 'Living Centre' teams, charged with developing regional strategies which integrate economic, social and environmental issues, had real difficulty integrating social aspects of sustainability into their projects, and in some cases gave up trying to do so at all<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Both in Sydney

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from the Department Head in January 2001. PlanningNSW is the NSW Government's state planning department.

<sup>4</sup> Since this thesis was prepared PlanningNSW has been amalgamated into the NSW Department of Infrastructure Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR) and a change in the focus of the department has occurred. For example one of the aims of PlanningNSW was to achieve vibrant liveable communities, whereas the Goal of DIPNR, according to their website in 2004, is, inter alia, to improve the quality of life for the NSW community through better land use ([www.dipnr.nsw.gov.au](http://www.dipnr.nsw.gov.au)). My research was concluded before this amalgamation and does not take it into account. For this reason I have retained the name PlanningNSW when referring to the pre-amalgamated department. As far as I am aware, DIPNR also does not have a social impact assessment unit nor a social plan of its own.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Taper, Director Sustainability Unit, PlanningNSW, personal communication, January 2002

<sup>6</sup> Unpublished formative evaluation reports on the Living Centres projects prepared for PlanningNSW by Alison Ziller

And I also know from my years as an employee in local government, and as a consultant, that local councils in NSW have Social Plans but are not required to implement them (NSW Department of Local Government 2002:24)<sup>7</sup> and if they have Section 94 Plans (for developer contributions) these need not include contributions for social facilities and may not be used for non-physical items (except for salaries for limited term planning exercises and for road maintenance where the development imposes excessive wear and tear – thus demonstrating the point again).

Flailing around in the mire of incredulity I asked a friend of mine, a town planner, why planners didn't facilitate the establishment of social and civic infrastructure in new estates. I had to explain what I meant – at the time I meant things like precinct committees, or mutual support organisations or committees to manage the local community centre or local progress associations, car pools, babysitting clubs and so on. That, I was told with immediate disapproval, was social engineering.

After starting the research for this thesis, I felt sure that the bias in the focus of planning must be obvious to everyone and not just me. I began to fear that the more I interviewed people for my research, the more the obvious gap would smite the profession as if it were collectively on the road to Damascus and I would be done out of my topic. But no, recently I received the following email:

*'Basically I am the social conscience on the Infrastructure Planning Council. We have just released our interim report and are now trying to add detail and pull some threads together in our four areas of concern - water, communications, transport and energy. As a human geographer I have found myself in the role of raising questions of space and social impacts at our various meetings. One of the other members of the Council -... - is a professional recycler and there are others in the group who are into sustainability in a big way. So too is the premier so this angle is getting a good run and will be one of the key principles that will underlay our final report and the criteria we put forward as means to assess infrastructure decisions. However, I am concerned to get a social equivalent of the human impact of infrastructure with KPIs that have some*

<sup>7</sup> Unlike most other kinds of plans, councils' Social Plans are recommendations rather than commitments. Each Council 'must decide annually which of the actions recommended in their social/community plan will be carried out'.

*meaning, some connection to social wellbeing, employment creation and community building. And it is at this point that I hit a wall.*

*I am no expert in all of this but I would love to talk to someone who is and to access any reading that deals with these kinds of issues. I am aware of the social capital stuff and am researching cultural capital in regional centres. But that still does not give me or the Council what we are after.<sup>8</sup>*

By contrast, I have been struck repeatedly by the empty utopianism of planning-speak.

In Australia, planning departments in state and local governments frequently refer to the triple bottom line. By this they mean that their planning work, and its outcomes, should be measured against a yardstick with three elements. The yardstick is usually sustainability and the three elements are economic, environmental and social sustainability. Planning documents frequently say things like this:

*'The primary goal of the Draft Structural Master Plan for the Green Square area is to establish an environmentally sustainable suburb which supports the wellbeing of present and future communities as well as providing a complex urban environment for rich interaction.'*(Stanisic-Turner 1997:1)

*'The four key regional goals for the Central Coast are consistent with the principle of ecologically sustainable development. ESD is both a process and an outcome that integrates environmental protection, social equity and economic opportunities within a political decision-making framework' and 'Communities become more livable and sustainable by integrating biophysical needs with the social and economic imperatives that characterise a civilised society.'* (Department of Urban Affairs and Planning 1999b:8 and 9)

*'Our purpose is to plan for a sustainable future – for a better environment, jobs and liveable communities'* (Department of Urban Affairs and Planning 2000:1)

<sup>8</sup> Email to Alison Ziller received in March 2002

It cannot be said that planners as a profession are unfamiliar with social objectives or desired social outcomes, nor that planners, and town or urban planners in particular, have made a public, documented or well debated decision to concentrate on economic and, recently, environmental outcomes to the exclusion of social outcomes. So what could account for the gap between the stated goals and the actual practice?

This thesis sets out to demonstrate and explore this gap, and to discuss what the disjuncture between the stated goals and the actual focus of planning means for the profession of planning as well as its clients.

\* \* \*

This introductory story describes how my research interest grew out of my work experience and early student days.