**Introducing the Social City: Overview paper**

Prof Bill Randolph  
City Futures Research Centre  
Faculty of the Built Environment  
University of New South Wales.

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**Introduction**

This theme of the conference focuses on aspect of contemporary urban living that fall broadly into the realm of social and cultural domains of study. The range of papers in this theme – the social city – is considerable. In the papers submitted under the social city theme, several key sub-themes emerge.

A dominant sub-theme is that of growing disadvantage and inequality in the contemporary city. It is widely accepted that Australian cities have become more socially polarised as they have grown in the last several decades, reflecting the changes at a broader societal level. This is firmly reflected in the papers in this theme. Over half the papers either explicitly or implicitly address aspects of social life clearly associated with the expression of growing social disadvantages in certain neighbourhoods. The level of research now being directed at public housing estates is remarkable, given that public housing represents only 3% of the housing stock nationally. As I’ve argued elsewhere, what is going on in the private rental market in
just as important, if not more so for future of our cities, but receives relatively little attention.

However, in some respects, the public housing estates are a litmus test of the downside of polarised socio-economic change, where the recent economic, demographic and social policy changes have focused in a very clear manner. The papers presented here all add to our understanding of the issues they face and just as importantly, on the policies and interventions being directed to tackle these problems.

Related to this is the theme of social mix. This is a recurring motif in a number of the papers, again both explicitly and implicitly. How do we reduce increasing social imbalances in our cities? Well, by mixing people up. Once again the public housing estates are in the front line of this bold social experiment.

A third and again related sub-theme is the impact of the new global economic order on the changing social life of our cities. Laying behind much of what has happened lies the ongoing roll out of a new global economic order operating at a structural level in the economy to create new sites of uneven development. A number of papers again implicitly or explicitly situate themselves within this overarching economic logic.

Two further sub-themes emerge. The impact of an increasingly multi-cultural population in driving emerging urban divisions and stresses, and the growing awareness – or re-awakening – of the relationship between urban form and health and wellbeing.

But in trying to summarise these papers for the overview, the one structuring device that seems to fit is that of scale. Cites are multi-scaled phenomena, and our collection of 18 papers reflects this – presenting a range of insights into the contemporary social city at a range of levels of spatial resolution.

The only paper to take a truly national perspective on Australian cities is Baum’s paper on social disadvantage. Addressing a common theme in many of these papers, this paper explores the dimensions of social division in our metropolitan areas. Placing these divisions firmly in the dynamic processes of globalisation, demographic
transition and declining political commitment to the welfare state, Baum provides clear evidence of the current structure of metro areas and the spatial distribution of the winners and losers in the urban race.

Baum delivers a national overview of the patterns of relative advantage and disadvantage across metro Australia, identifying seven clear clusters of local government areas, from the most privileged to the most disadvantaged. At the top end of the privileged scale sit the harbour suburbs of Sydney – the key winners in the global city. At the other end are the places that form redundant spaces in a post-industrial economy. Whether Australian cities can currently match the social extremes of US cites is debatable. However, workplace and welfare ‘reforms’ currently passing through parliament may hasten the convergence with the US case.

At the end of the paper, Baum notes that even at this scale, differences exist within each of the seven clusters, and importantly, the averages hide more local variations. More detailed patterns of social structure and change are the focus on the largest group of papers in this group.

Moving the scale of resolution down to the level of the single city as a whole, Anthea Bill focuses on labour market outcomes at local level across Sydney. Like Baum, she is concerned to understand broader patterns of regional social structure and the presence of patterns of socio-spatial clustering in a range of socio-economic indicators across the city. Despite an analysis which includes Sydney as a whole, Bill’s focus is on the potential role neighbourhood effects have on inequalities. One of the key findings is the role that rental housing has as a key determinant of economic clustering – in this case of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, reinforcing the role of housing markets in structuring the social outcomes of labour market position at the local level. Interestingly, Bill finds that clustering among higher status occupations is greatest – reinforcing the notion that those with higher incomes cluster more tightly together than the rest of us!

She concludes there is evidence that neighbourhood effects assist in the persistence of economically disadvantage localities, possibly through the low quality and low frequency of personal access to information about jobs – reflecting the well
established finding that personal contacts are very important for those trying to gain employment.

**Neighbourhoods**

Taking up where Bill leaves off in the progression down the spatial continuum, there are a series of 6 papers that focus more specifically on local level outcomes of social polarisation. In particular, these papers are concerned to explore aspects of disadvantage at the neighbourhood level, particularly in areas of public housing, and what might be done to alleviate the problems.

The large number of papers focusing on this level of spatial resolution is encouraging. In the overview I gave to the Social City theme at the last Cities Conference in 2003, one of the areas that I thought was in need of greater research and understanding was the outcome of urban change at the neighbourhood level. It was here, I argued, that the multi-scaled nature of social and economic relationships played out to create and recreate our social cites. It was at this level that the activities of the household, the key player in the social city, acts as the nexus through which labour markets, housing markets, cultural and demographic changes are focused.

So the fact that a third of the papers in this years conference addresses the processes and patterns of city change at this level is welcome – although I am quite sure purely fortuitous!.

Hovering somewhere between the meso and local spatial levels, Warr picks up the issue of the persistence of social stigma. In particular, she explores the social dynamic that acts to concentrate the stigmatisation of poverty in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Again, she also situates the issue in the context of the global city and macro process operating at a structural level in the economy to create new sites of uneven development. The “excluded third” of the ”two thirds” society emerges as a new phenomena in the current phase of disorganised capitalism, associated with
economic vulnerability, casualised and deregulated labour markets and low skilled employment.

The result is the emergence of new forms of ‘Problem Suburbs’ or ‘Discredited Neighbourhoods’. Many of these may be associated with public housing. The resultant stigmatisation of these places is an active social process that reinforces emergent social divisions. The other side of this particular coin is the emergence of gated and exclusive communities where the wealthy come together for fear of the mob beyond the gates (although they will let them in to clean their houses and mow their lawns). The privatisation of public spaces through commercialisation of open public areas – pavement cafes, restaurants etc, only serves to intensify exclusion of those who don’t have the economic wherewithal to participate.

However, much the same might have been said of Sydney at the turn of the 20th century – slum areas contrasting to villas in leafy new suburbs; and new municipal spaces which might not welcome the excluded from the waterside slums. How much of this is new and how much simply a case of history repeating itself is a question that suggests we need to be more aware of the historical precedents of contemporary patterns.

But it’s not always that easy to dispel the social construction of disadvantage. Stigma is hard to shift once created. This leads into the notion of how to reverse the concentrations of disadvantage and stigma.

**Social mix** has been promoted as a solution to entrenched local disadvantage. On our public housing estates, social mix is the current orthodoxy. Rebuild them and infuse the neighbourhood with home owners who work, and the social problems will dissipate.

**Arthurson’s** research in Adelaide focuses on several public housing estates where renewal programs to introduce greater social mix through redevelopment and sales to home owners have taken place. Qualitative research here showed that mixed tenure estates, rather than enhancing social interaction, may actually create greater awareness of differences. There was little evidence tenure groups actively mixed in practice.
The breaking up of public housing estates seems to have fragmented the social divisions to a smaller scale, but failed to eradicate them. Whether there will be longer term benefits of this remains to be seen – it may simply be too soon to tell. We will need longitudinal research on these estates to assess how social relationships between the new and old groups evolves into the future.

Perhaps an understanding of what may occur in these estates is given in the paper by Mee, who also takes up the issue of social mix – this time in inner Newcastle. Here she focuses on tenants living in more socially mixed suburbs, rather than those living in concentrated public housing estates. Two important findings come out of her study. The first is that there is evidence that tenants in the case study areas do benefit from living in more diverse communities, largely through the better access to services and transport in an inner urban area. Other research suggests it’s the very lack of these services that makes life on suburban public housing estates so much more difficult. But she also makes the point that in these areas, the dynamics of social mix operates are a scale below that of the neighbourhood. Mee’s emphasis on the ‘scaled’ nature of these processes, echoes the need for a multi-scaled understanding of the social, economic and political forces operating to generate urban structure and change as argued by Gleeson. In particular, she shows that in these mixed neighbourhoods, where mixing has taken place over a number of years, the outcomes are not clear cut, with some tenants mixing well with people in other tenures, but others not. Differences between tenants were also exposed, particularly between young and old, established residents and newcomers. So the issue of social mix is not simply one of tenure. It cuts across these lines in established areas like inner Newcastle at the scale of the block or street.

But there are other ways to address the problems public housing neighbourhoods face than promoting social mix and the wholesale disruption of the community that this results in. One of the most socially damaging problems facing many public housing estates is that of crime. While it has a major impact on the quality of the lives of those living on estates plagued by high crime levels, the prevalence of crime is one of the most significant major factors generating the social stigma Warr and Arthurson’s papers focus on.
From an urban design perspective, **Judd, Samuels and Barton** explore the relationship between the layout and amenity of public housing estates and the incidence of crime and fear of crime. The analysis details crime activity at the micro level in a series of case study estates across Australia. The results make uncomfortable reading for those policy makers who argue that physical change is the best way to deal with entrenched problems on these estates. Put simply, social and community level interventions aimed at generating greater social inclusion and engagement appeared to have much greater impact on levels of crime and fear than substantial redesigning to restructure the estates.

Whole of government and place management approaches to neighbourhood renewal have also become key policy developments for disadvantaged public housing estates in recent years. **Hopkin** describes the ongoing roll out of one of these strategies in Carlton in an inner city gentrifying neighbourhood in Melbourne as part of Victorias strengthening communities policy – to help communities tackle their problems. **Lifelong learning** is one of a large range of community strengthening strategies that have been implemented to tackle place-based disadvantage. This one involves developing frameworks and opportunities to encourage education, skills enhancement, training and personal development across the ages. Clearly this might be of relevance to people who have missed these opportunities in the past.

However, despite the promise, it’s not that easy to do implement these kinds of integrated strategies in practice. Hopkin describes the issues and problems associated with actually trying to implement a strategy within a neighbourhood that required hitherto separate bureaucratic silos to work together to deliver a single outcome. How many times have we heard this story?? Complex local competition and insecurities also hinder the development of integrated approaches on the ground. This research stresses the critical importance of the relationships between stakeholders that make or break local partnerships.

Of course, all are operating under conditions of resource scarcity – no wonder people are fearful of changes that might change the precarious balancing act most local social interventions have to make to get by. The paper also shows the dilemmas of researchers being actively engaged in the processes they are studying – a clear
message for anyone undertaking action research in these kinds of contexts. How far does the researcher enter the process themselves and what are the consequences? How far should we or can we retain an objective position observing but not directly influencing outcomes, other than by the findings of the research?

Another cut at the issues facing ‘poverty neighbourhoods’ is the paper by Cameron. Here, the issue is that of the relationship between poverty and low levels of social trust and insecurity among young families on public housing estates in Adelaide.

The paper also raises the vexed issue of crime and the fear of crime, a seemingly constant motif in studies of public housing neighbourhoods. She makes the important connection between crime and security issues and the erosion of trust and social cohesion in these neighbourhoods. In any event, Cameron finds that trust between families in the area she observed to be contingent, based on the pragmatic needs of the parent, rather than based on an unconditional sense of a shared future.

One of the issues these papers collectively raise is the lack of comparative data to show how good or bad these case study areas are in relation to other comparable areas. We are very bad at this in this kind of research. We really don’t know how these case studies stack up against other areas. Future research on these kind of issues therefore need to build in a ‘control’ or comparative component to explore just how far changes in these neighbourhoods compare to other similar areas undergoing change. We need a national framework to evaluate such policy interventions.

**The new urban fringe**

Moving away from the disadvantaged neighbourhoods, two papers switch our attention to another part of the social polarisation spectrum – to the new estates developing rapidly on our urban fringes. These new suburbs are in many ways the suburban mirror image of inner city gentrification. The zone of the aspirational voter and McMansions. Conspicuous consumption and intensive resource use are the defining features of these suburbs. Its here that the new suburban middle class can be found.
Kenna tackles that behemoth of new fringe development, the master planned estate. Popular with developers, planners and residents alike, they nevertheless raise the spectre of social exclusion, white flight and greater socio-spatial polarisation of the suburbs. Kenna’s concern is with the process of how new communities are effectively manufactured in these areas and the social choices residents make in relocating to this suburbs and its impact on social polarisation. The place in question is a typical master planned estate in Penrith on Sydney’s western fringe.

She makes the very interesting point about the failure of estate imaging to include the vexed commodity of “youth”. Nowhere are those problematical teens included in the image construction the master planners spin of their new communities. Yet, as the demographics clearly show, this is where Australia’s youth grow up. Old people are also often visually, and literally, excluded. And of course, there are no pictures of poor people or non-Anglo people.

You don’t need to read between the lines as to why these residents want to live in these estates – very much the mirror of the reasons public housing estates are undergoing such intense pressure for change and remodelling – safety, less crime and for a “better standard” of neighbour feature in the top five reasons for moving there. If only the residents of the public housing estates had that choice. But the residents love it there. That’s the key to understanding their significance and the popularity. For policy makers, it is also the challenge – not to disparage aspirations of these households, but to ensure the aspirations of all households are catered for effectively and fairly. There is also a key agenda about ensure greater social mix on these estates also – more older people, more singles, and a fair quota of more affordable homes for a much more diverse population. If social mix is OK for public housing tenants, then surely it is also OK for aspirational suburbanites.

Wildin and Minnery take the issue of suburban gentrification into a new area. Rather then gentrification being solely a product of increased demand for scarce inner city locations, it can occur in any location where desirable locational characteristics are sought by higher income populations. The resulting revalorisation of space that results means exiting residents and users are effectively displaced, wherever this might occur. Seachangers and Treechangers are all sub-categories of this process,
along with the urbanists of New Farm or Balmain. In contemporary Australia, desirable waterfront locations are at the top of the desirability list wherever it is.

As in Glenmore Park, government action is often critical to the process. There, the whole development was facilitated by the NSW stage land development agency, Landcom. In Bayside Brisbane, the Queensland government’s urban renewal program operated to assist in the coastal gentrification process. Government action is here supported once again by image boosters, this time in the media.

Here we are again back to social mix and looking at the estate renewal process from the other side – that of the gentrifiers. A good or a bad thing? Depends on who you talk to or whether you are buying into the area.

Wellbeing, health and the social city

Moving away further from the neighbourhood and back to the generic issues facing the contemporary Australian city, several papers address issues of wellbeing, health and the social city

The social city is not simply about class or race or social inequalities. One of the most interesting developments in recent years is the growing realisation that cities and urban form have a distinctive impact on health and well being. In some respects this should not come as a surprise. The origins of town planning can be found in concerns over the health of populations crammed into the slums of the industrial city. Today, there is a growing realisation that the very suburbs that, in part, were created to rid people of the fear of plagues and disease, have created new health crises – of obesity, depression and social isolation. Sprawl has had real impacts on urban health outcomes. In effect, the focus has shifted from the need to plan against dirt to the need to plan against depression. Its time planners once again took up the cudgels against poor health outcomes.

Two linked papers – I assume they are linked given a degree of comparable text and methodology they share – look at the emerging relationship between planning and health. While planners in Australia have traditionally struggled to get to grips with
social outcomes of city development, the relationship between planning and health has probably not registered at all on most planning agendas, until very recently. However, it is a big agenda in various global agencies, such as the World Health Organisation.

**Butterworth, Polermo and Prosser test the application** of ecological public health principles against the Melbourne 2030, the strategic plan for Melbourne for the next two decades. Apparently, Victoria has been at the forefront of the integration of the healthy cities agenda with urban planning and other policy areas, including community renewal and local government. They point to the fact that while health professionals have been forthcoming in identifying the connection between health and urban form, planners have not. Few triggers exist in planning frameworks to prompt them to do so, and few planning courses at university expose new planners to such concepts.

While Melbourne 2030 scores on its positive recognition of healthy city agendas at the rhetorical level, the authors fear that this may simply evaporate at the implementational level. There are simply no mechanisms by which the healthy cities agenda might be delivered through Melbourne 2030. Of course, a major financial beneficiary of the plan will be Vic Roads, hardly a positive sign for the delivery of a healthy cities agenda.

**The inevitable result of this game: Roads Lobby 5; Health Lobby 0 (nil).**

If the proponents of the Lifelong Learning Hub in Carlton thought they had problems getting whole of government sign off, then the proponents of a whole of government healthy cities agenda should give up now! Let’s hope they don’t.

The paper throws up the need for a concerted research effort to monitor and evaluation strategic planning policies in terms of their health and wellbeing outcomes. This has not really been on anyone agenda to date, although Health Impact Assessments are currently being promoted by some. Nevertheless, there is a major gap in the research market here.
Thompson and Gallico continue this theme by reviewing a range of international and national regional strategic plans against their healthy cities credentials. Reviewing a number of leading urban plans to test for references to three key words – health, wellbeing and safety – they find mixed results. London comes out tops. Portland and SE Queensland come out well also. Sydney’s draft Metro Strategy does not seem to trouble the scorer on these criteria. But that’s Sydney: Great fireworks, crap planning.

A welcome addition to a conference on the Australian city is a paper by Kearns, Collins and Bean who take a rather different view of this issue through an analysis of the impact of contemporary city life, and the way we travel in our cities, on children. We are back at the neighbourhood level here, albeit in Auckland. Wellbeing is conceived here in terms of getting children back to the old idea of walking to school. Surely there is no simpler definition of what a viable community might be is one where school children walk to school. Isn’t it a metaphor for the times and the urban areas we live in that initiatives such as the ‘Walking School Bus’, where volunteers walk with groups of children to school, are deemed necessary to ensure children get necessary exercise and the number of car journeys can be reduced.

Active cities are ones where we can feel comfortable moving around in on foot, not protected in a four wheel drive. Of course, for most of our children, incubated in the car dependent suburbs on the fringes of our cities, walking to school is a non-starter. Nevertheless, in many other suburbs, Walking School Buses offer the prospect of saving car trips – as well as improvements to local walking pathways and the increase in local social cohesion and connection. In this way both the physical and social health of neighbourhoods might be enhanced.
Planning for a liveable city

Finally in this group of papers, is Lyn Harrop’s paper looks at the importance of developing a practical application of the concept of “Liveability” for city planning. This has to be one of the most overused but underdeveloped terms in current planning jargon. But do plans which promote liveability have any clear understanding of the term? And has anyone really tried to measure it at the local level? We are all familiar with the fact the Melbourne is a more liveable city than Sydney (apparently) and that Vancouver is more liveable than any other city. But how does this translate to the local level? First you need an agreed definition of liveability. Then you need to agree how to measure it over time. Both are difficult, but if planners continue to use such terms in developing their urban strategies, then these issue need to be solved and quickly.

The Multicultural city

Finally four papers address one of the main defining issues of contemporary cities, their role as the principle location of new communities and cultures and the role of the housing market in expressing new forms of cultural and racial relationships.

Tsutsumi and O’Connor analyse the impact of overseas students on the housing market of inner Melbourne. Perhaps surprisingly, Melbourne is only just behind New York, London and Los Angeles in terms of the numbers of overseas students coming to the city. Rather than central city housing demand reflecting the increased demand from the winners on the global metropolitan labour market, much of this new central city demand comes from overseas students. Its an outcome of the increased globalisation of education, but its impacts on urban structure are poorly understood. The impact of 33,000 students on the housing market of central Melbourne is clearly immense. By and large, this significant housing demand has been largely ignored in strategic planning literature, or at least down played. But at this paper shows, international student demand has effectively underpinned the investment flat boom in central Melbourne in recent years. Much the same would be true of inner Sydney. Any significant downturn in this market would expose the high density metropolitan strategies being implemented by strategic planning authorities to considerable risk.
Whitten and Thompson (AGAIN) focus our attention on how our cities, planned and conceive by an essentially Anglo-centric planning and development industry, fails to create places where women from a Muslim background can feel included and safe. This is particularly true in public spaces and places of public recreation. The failure of planners to fully embrace social planning is noted by the authors, the latter being relegated to the sidelines of ‘community services’, rather than an objective that land use planners need to address as core to their business. Again the parallel with health is clear. These things require good planning, but few planners understand this or have the frameworks or tools to effect positive changes.

Dunn, Gerard and Forrest hones in on the critical issue of racism in urban areas. They argue that racial intolerance and cultural diversity are not necessarily coincident. Using clustering techniques and survey data, they produce a typology of Sydney areas identifying a number groups of areas ranging from more inclusive and tolerant areas to intolerant suburbs where racial is most overt. Dunn and colleagues show clearly that racism varies across urban space and that policy responses will need to vary accordingly.

Finally, slipping under the radar from Johannesburg, Crankshaw offers an insight into the issue of race and housing in contemporary South Africa and how far the black population has been able to desegregate in the post-Apartheid period. Again, the paper places the location of the black population firmly within a changing global economy of deindustrialisation. In this case, the spatial restructuring of the economy has left behind “ghettos of exclusion” where the black population is marooned with very high levels of disadvantage. We do not have comparable areas here in Australian cites. The argument over whether segregation has diminished largely focuses on whether the middle class white suburbs of northern Johannesburg have become less overwhelmingly white, rather than is the black townships have become less overwhelmingly black. Unlike here, where government action to actively generate greater social mix in highly disadvantaged public housing estates, practical moves to generate racial mix in these areas is not on the agenda in South Africa. The numbers are simply too big. Crankshaw is able to show that previously largely white enclaves have seen a noticeable increase in the number of black home owners, the
litmus test for affective desegregation, since 1993. South Africa’s own version of what might be termed reverse social mix appears to be working.

Summary

These are uniformly high quality contributions to the debates and knowledge on the evolving social conditions of our cities. They also pose plenty of questions about further research we need to do over the next few years until the next Cities conference. I hope we can get time to discuss this also.

Most importantly, the challenges of managing metropolitan change over the next several decades is now a principle agenda for many of those planning our cities. These papers all have a relevance to these plans. Yet my reading of the drivers of strategic metropolitan planning is that our planners are still largely unaware of much of the social context and outcomes they are busily planning for. Research such as the paper you will hear in the next few days should be compulsory reading for our planning professionals. So, welcome to the social city