



FEATURE ARTICLE

Community engagement

Empowering local experts

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To truly empower the local community to help shape our future cities and towns, there is a need for planners, councils and consultants to become more skilled at explaining the issues and encouraging informed debate around the scale and shape of the possibilities. It is critical that this occurs early on during the strategic planning phase, at a time when key planning controls are being established and well before a detailed design.

Timely community engagement

Over the last few months, family and friends have experienced the challenges of becoming engaged in Sydney's planning processes. They became aware of the change faced by their home, town centre or community via mailed notifications, community social media pages or the local paper and were confronted with a complex tide of material. The reams of information and consultant reports required hours of commitment to understand what

was being proposed and the impacts of the changes on their life, family and community. They are all engaged, can see challenges and hope their involvement will result in a better outcome.

The misfortune is that by this stage of the process, as any planner knows, it is often too late to make changes. In any Development Application, designs are typically substantially in accordance with State and Local Government policies and the detailed planning controls for the area.

Unique local knowledge

A powerful place to build the foundations of an effective strategic process is the local community. It has been my experience that the local community have a deep and extensive knowledge about "their place". The stories they tell are not just about the physical qualities of a place such as where the cooling breezes flow, but also about its social history and cultural values, and what it is like to live there. It is commonly assumed places are simply a reflection of the hard infrastructure, the urban grain, and the buildings. This is a misconception. How people use this hard infrastructure, how they inhabit the space and the meanings they apply to a place are equally critical.

How hard is to cross the road?

The importance of the lived experience was highlighted when Studio GL developed four Town Centre Masterplans for the Upper Hunter Shire Council. For this process we started by creating opportunities for



Figure 1: Consultation for the Upper Hunter Town Centre Master Plans used a web-based tool to increase who was engaged and the depth of the engagement. (Source: Studio GL 2016)



Figure 2: Effective engagement creates opportunities for one-on-one or small group conversations and the sharing of knowledge and ideas. (Source: Studio GL 2016)

conversations with the local community through workshops and drop-in sessions where we could listen and learn from the local experts. In one small town, Merriwa, we learnt that of the two pedestrian crossings in the main street, the locals considered only one to be safe. To an outsider both crossings appeared similar but the locals knew this was not the case. We were told of school age children, forbidden from using this crossing, walking from one end of the main street and back again just to cross the road. As would be expected, improving access in the town centre became a key driver of the final masterplan.

Online collaboration

Not everyone has the time (or indeed the inclination) to be involved in workshops so modern technology can be an effective method of engaging more broadly. Community websites, and social media sites (eg community Facebook groups) and online surveys are all ways to create a broader and more comprehensive engagement process.

We have found Arup's Collaborative Map¹ or Social Pinpoint² to be effective in expanding the numbers of people consulted and the depth of the engagement. These tools allow people to respond in their own time from a place of their choosing and to provide detailed comments pinpointed to a specific spatial location. They also create an environment, for those who find it uncomfortable to give feedback or voice ideas in a larger event, to be reached and heard.

Amplifying the quiet voices

Another challenge can be the need to effectively engage with the wider community who will be impacted by the strategic planning, the busy, the young,

the elderly, the confident and the shy. We find that to be effective, engagement needs to create opportunities for more intimate one-on-one or small group conversations. These events can even be designed to build connections between different groups in the local community, increase shared knowledge and allow the community to create ideas, identify unique opportunities and develop ownership of future changes.

Connect, inspire and embolden

As NSW heads towards an increased openness to community engagement, there is an opportunity to create a process that works more effectively for and with the local community. Inspiration can be found in the workplace management ideas of Margie Warrell.³ To increase workplace engagement she advises a threefold approach of Connect, Inspire and Embolden⁴:

- 1 **Connect** - Build trust and strengthen connections both between the decision makers and the community but also between different members and groups in the community. True connection requires openness and a genuine desire to communicate effectively and authentically. For effective consultation this means diagrams, models and images which can be easily understood by all members of the local community
- 2 **Inspire** - Explain the bigger picture, the "why" and help to connect people and to their actions to this vision. There needs to be a reason or purpose that inspires people to play a bigger role. As part of an engagement process this can involve physical models, photographs, artist impressions and visualisations that help the community to shape the future of their place and their community.

- 3 **Embolden** - Make it safe for people to challenge the status quo and provide candid feedback ensuring greater ownership of the process and the outcomes. Our communities are full of people with busy lives, they need to feel that their contribution is valued and will result in changes. An effective community engagement process provides real choices and modifies the final outcomes based on the feedback provided.

Conclusion

Successful places are more than just the physical bones of a place. They are a reflection of an engaged and empowered community. As English writer and philosopher, G.K Chesterton observed "Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her". We can take inspiration from this. Sydney and all the other cities and towns across NSW benefit from the care, skill and passion provided by those that have gone before. To be great in the future our places will require process that empowers the care, skill and passion of the communities of today ■

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Endnotes

- ¹ See: <https://www.collaborativemap.com/home/about/>
- ² See: <https://www.socialpinpoint.com/>
- ³ Warrell, M 2013, *Stop Playing Safe* Wrightbooks
- ⁴ Warrell, M 2013, '70% Disengagement, 3 Ways to engage those who aren't', *Forbes*, 7th June 2013