

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

How true for today are the opening lines of the Charles Dickens book *A Tale of Two Cities*, recently revisited in an episode of *House of Cards* where an unravelling scenario was in play. The technology at our fingertips and potential for the future beggars' belief, while our social and moral responsibilities take back seat to a political status quo aimed at national security over individual freedom, and privatization of public lands over broader community needs. These topics are highly rated in today's media and twitter handles.

Tango for two of government, developers lock the public out - *One, it's largely public, in the sense of protagonists, funding and land. Two, it's nevertheless intensely resistant to both public input and public benefit.* (E Farrelly SMH 3-6-15)

But in the pursuit of overall economic well-being and widespread opportunity for success, **social capital** in cities is critical where reciprocity and connectedness underpin the mutually beneficial role that place-based social ties can have in generating economic opportunities. The emerging collaborative economy enables broader and flexible use of information, talents and resources to meet community needs that are changing as fast as digital technology and increasing at similar rate to Sydney property prices

The recently released Grattan Institute book *City Limits* explores how Australia, with living standards at the highest levels, still has major issues where urban living suffers from overpriced property market, excessive commuting times and more divisive communities that reduce the social glue with consequences for both quality of life and prosperity.

Our diverse housing typologies and ability to move around urban areas are critical to the quality and extent of social networks. Employment opportunities are affected by lengthy commuting times that increasingly diminish time available for family, recreation and socialising, and negatively impact our economy through lost time.

Douglass North, a Nobel economist, has put **social capital** as major driver for adaptive efficiency in modern society that enables economies to progress. Ed Glaeser, in his book *Triumph of the City*, has also argued the case for **social capital** in the effective function of cities and urban economies: "Humans," he says, "are a social species, and our greatest achievements are all collaborative. Cities are machines for making collaboration easier."

City Report: Less in Common (Joe Cortright – June 2015) explores the ways in which the social fabric—the network of connections that tie us together in communities—has recently become generally thinner and more frayed, where commuting or isolation and less time socializing with friends and neighbours in the civic commons has diminished **social capital**.

Urban sociologist Peter Walters (ArchitectureAU Discourse 1-6-15) argues that change is needed in planning decisions and tenancy laws for Australia is 'to avoid a dystopian future with socially polarized cities'. Denser inner urban residential development has largely overlooked needs for the public realm, diversity of lifestyles, vibrant activated streets and adequate local green space.

Changing patterns of home ownership will have far-reaching negative impacts on how people live together in both urban and suburban areas without significant changes to planning, housing and investment policies and taxation structure.

Without a strong independent planning vision from local authorities, developers will continue pursuit of development models that give the highest return on investment. The inner urban areas increasingly follow the “compact city” growth model, with high-density residential developments marketed to overseas and domestic investors and occupied by high turn-over renters - young professionals or international students, affluent and without families. Little attention is given to a strong public realm where a diversity of lifestyles, age groups, ethnicities and earning brackets can interact daily on vibrant, activated streets with adequate local green spaces.

Now is the time to review and renew planning policies and tenancy laws, to encourage more diverse, affordable housing with a strong public realm where renters can build lives rather than commute. But to take on powerful vested interests represented by property ownership and negative gearing requires a great deal of political will and leadership needed to overturn policies that support homes as speculative investment vehicles, and often part of precious neighbourhoods that are seen as sacrosanct in many local council areas.

As suggested by Mark Fitzgibbon (SMH 15-6-15) ‘the logic of most council borders - most notably in the conurbations of Sydney and Newcastle - are lost in time and are anachronistic.....The radial road and rail networks built last century connected urban communities once separated by distance rendering most boundaries entirely artificial....telephones, TV and the internet have connected us socially and totally redefined our very notion of community..... We typically have more friends on Facebook than in our neighbourhood.’

From his experience of local government Fitzgibbon has seen local town planning policies and decisions that diminish community potential and promote social exclusion. ‘It's an approach - often unconscious - that resents increased cultural, economic and social diversity in their neighbourhoods as well as sharing environmental attributes (such as a harbour or beach) or infrastructure’.

Fitzgibbon believes the NSW government has a strong economic case to push the council amalgamation agenda, which can help foster ‘the capability, resources and diversity to rethink how communities can be better connected, serviced and made more inclusive’ – and thereby help build the much needed **social capital**.

