

Catalysts for urban change

A major challenge for our planning system and culture is balancing optimistic perspectives with realistic expectations. While large developments and associated infrastructure may have the hype that tends to dominate the headlines, they so often lack intimacy and potential for a finer grain that the community is looking for. It is so often the smaller spaces and projects that can seed future place based changes, creating familiar localised venues for social engagement and small business.

This article has evolved half-way through a trip to research catalysts of urban change that has included San Francisco and New York where Trump impeachment looms large, and then London where the dying throes of their Brexit debacle are in play. Before departing I attended a Festival of Urbanism symposium at Sydney University on the future of urban planning, with contributions by Heather Nesbitt, Sarah Hill and Sue Weatherly (all well respected professionals in the realms of urbanism) that were so pertinent to the planning dilemmas that are being faced across Sydney.

Discussion focused on the future of urban living and community needs for the supporting social, environmental and cultural framework to ensure we do not lose what quality character we have or jeopardise the scope to improve this in the future. Key points were raised on ways to assist integration of equitable place-based outcomes, and how transport, landscaping and the mix of uses can contribute to the development quality.

San Francisco has just seen the opening of Salesforce Transit Centre and a magnificent linear urban park above. The roof terrace links to foyers of several commercial and retail buildings, and a multi-level void linking several levels below to public transport. Residential appears to be sparse in this CBD context, but there are many activity zones and quiet spaces as well as a well-established Mediterranean themed landscape, and plenty of workers and visitors to give life to the place.

New York has the High Line that has now existed for 8 years, connecting the Whitney Museum to recently completed Hudson Yards, and gentrification of the former Meatpacking District on lower West Side of Manhattan. This has become a destination for locals and tourists alike, generating many spatial variables and a magnificent urban garden with a range of integrated artworks, a thriving market space beneath a bridge and quiet places woven in amongst the movement paths.

Around Kings Cross Station in London the Coal Drop development is a massive project that integrates industrial heritage with high end retail, commercial (Facebook and Google HQs) and residential, and the Battersea Power Station project has Apple as well as a huge housing component that includes a small proportion of public and 'key worker housing' involving some luminary architects like Frank Gehry and Sir Norman Foster. Both these staged projects are still work in progress but appear to have the ground plane framework to be successful catalysts for change in existing inner urban areas, and with perimeters that are already experiencing renewal.

The Canopy in Lane Cove is more modest than any of the above but could certainly benefit from understanding how the programming and connections in these projects can work with the surrounding built form and ground plane connections to generate renewal. Many of the hybrid of buildings that back on to Birdwood Lane are ripe for makeover and we must hope the pedestrian environment around the perimeter of The Canopy will generate a new lease of life for Lane Cove Village and the local community. More boutique bars and restaurants like Little Red Robin will bring a more cosmopolitan character, but it is hoped a balanced and equitable public domain will benefit all of our multi-faceted demographic.

Degrees of inequality are always going to be an issue where political power from above largely determines the macro controls over urban planning and transportation. But while the wheels of any local economy are subject to investment cycles and business confidence influenced by top down macro policy, the potential for bottom up growth to seed new community ventures, cultural events and social engagement can ensure ongoing urban life that is inclusive and sustainable. If managed the right way The Canopy can be a genuine place with those qualities to benefit the wide range of our residents and visitors, and capacity to be a true catalyst for future urban change.

But it's not just our natural tendency to let our own problems loom larger than other people's. It's also that, as property prices make our cities ever more stratified, we so rarely meet people from the poorer parts of town. We find it hard to imagine how hard they find it to make ends meet, and to lift themselves out of the hole they've fallen into. (Ross Gittins; SMH)