

# Essay: City Dreamers

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For the first time in history, the number of people living in urban areas has outstripped those in rural areas – an urban reality that jostles uneasily with the iconic image Australia presents to the world. But beyond the wide outback spaces and sandy beaches are the houses, suburbs, master-planned estates and high-rise buildings where most Australians actually live. Within this there is diversity, creativity and resilience. Yet the uneven costs of urban progress and development are emerging as deeply felt, highly inequitable outcomes of reduced public planning. It seems ironic that, in the wake of an era defined by market-driven logic and minimal government intervention, some including Alan Moran in his book *The Tragedy of Planning* (Institute of Public Affairs, 2006) continue to blame urban planning for the loss of the ‘Great Australian Dream’.

Not everyone agrees. One of the most striking themes to emerge from the 2007 State of Australian Cities Conference was the need to address urban issues within the national policy agenda by ‘planning with a light touch’ - using what keynote speaker Ruth Fincher describes as the principles of ‘redistribution, recognition and encounter’ to provide both conceptual and practical guides. It is over twenty years since Australia had a coordinated and strategic national vision and agenda for urban planning and development. In the years that have followed the dismantling of the Department of Urban and Regional Development and later the Better Cities Program, there have been few attempts to produce urban-focused policy.

‘Communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined,’ Benedict Anderson suggests in *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991), his study on nationalism. He argues that ‘out of estrangement comes a conception of identity which, because it cannot be “remembered”, must be narrated’. The urban form and planning of Australia have been imagined and narrated by a small community of Australian scholars who have reframed the ‘Australian Dream’ with an urban cast. A significant number are women.

Female urban scholars have provided insightful and often provocative research and commentary on Australian cities, urban processes, policy and planning. They have contributed critical analyses of inequalities, and highlighted issues related to gender, diversity and the built environment. In many ways, they have been at the

forefront of challenging dominant planning practice and research paradigms by drawing from feminist critiques and historical frameworks.

An early article for the *Journal of the American Planning Association* by antipodeans Leonie Sandercock and Ann Forsyth highlights this 'gender agenda' in planning, and the way contemporary Western feminism has largely emerged from within a particular urban form – the capitalist city. Grounded with examples from Australia, they draw attention to five key areas where feminist theory can inform and enrich urban planning: spatial, economic and social relationships; language and communication; epistemology and methodology; ethics; and the nature of the public domain.

Australian female urban planning scholars, including Sandercock and Forsyth, have argued for the need to theorise the 'multiplicity of voices' that constitute 'the urban' and redefine the paradigms on which planning is based. They have sought creative ways of to embrace the inherently political questions of redistribution, sustainability and equity that lie at the heart of the way cities evolve.

These scholars have been strong advocates of multidisciplinary approaches to planning, and new tools and methods that engage cultural development and participatory techniques – storytelling, multimedia and action research – that have opened new ways of developing diversity in planning. Mary Field Belenky describes this in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Basic Books, 1986) as 'connected ways of knowing' that foster relationships and redirect the focus of urban planning towards questions of social, economic and ecological justice in more personal and inclusive ways.

Yet, despite these substantial contributions, many of these women no longer live or work in Australia. What has driven this apparent geographical and intellectual diaspora – particularly in urban planning? Is it a result of gender (there is no similar male diaspora in Australian urban planning), or just the search for a bigger pond?

I am starting to believe that disappointment can often lead to moments of serendipity. As a doctoral candidate in urban planning, I had hoped to attend something like the program run for many years by Pat Troy of the Australian National University which brought together research students, supervisors and scholars from across Australia to focus on issues associated with urban Australia. By the time I started my study, funding cuts had led to the demise of the workshop, and no replacement was likely.

The only formal opportunity to engage with other students particularly interested in cities and urban planning was to attend a workshop in Vancouver, Canada run by Australian expatriate Professor Leonie Sandercock and her partner John Friedmann at the University of British Columbia. Conveniently misreading the line about the workshop being for American and Canadian students only, I promptly sent off an application.

In many ways, attending the workshop unsettled me. It was exciting to hear and be heard. There was a tangible sense of energy and vitality underpinned by a belief that urban planning, for all its faults, is an endeavour that can meaningfully contribute to a sustainable future. But I wondered where 'the buzz' is in Australia. If, as Brendan Gleeson suggested in 'The Endangered State of Australian Cities', his keynote address to the 2007 State of Australian Cities conference, urban planning and policy are the necessary starting points for the national effort required to meet the twenty-first century emergencies of climate change and oil vulnerability, what steps are being taken to bring together Australian minds?

As I pondered this, other questions arose. Why, at a time when Australia's urban environment is undergoing enormous changes and pressures, are established scholars choosing to relocate overseas? Are the opportunities of an international experience more compelling than those available at home? Why has it been mostly women who have left? I contacted four of the most eminent expatriate women to find out: Leonie Sandercock, Ann Forsyth (Cornell University, USA), Jean Hillier (Newcastle University, UK) and Margo Huxley (University of Sheffield, UK). In the quasi-anonymous and surreal space of the internet, I asked about their experiences in Australia and reasons for leaving.

Leonie Sandercock: Humbling, exhilarating, frustrating ... It was Hugh Stretton's *Ideas for Australian Cities* (Georgian House, 1970) that drew my attention away from history and literature to contemporary urban issues. I was twenty-one and I had that youthful romantic zeal for social justice, as a working-class kid who grew up in public housing in what was at the time an outer southern suburb of Adelaide. Class inequality (which I saw for the first time when I got to uni) was what motivated me. Once I read David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (John Hopkins University Press, 1973), everything sort of fell into place, conceptually and ideologically.

My first stint as an urban scholar (1971–86) was all about that – urban political economy stuff. But those years were also exhilarating, as they were the years of Whitlam and Tom Uren as Minister for Urban Affairs and the Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) and Pat Troy as adviser to Uren, and it was tremendously exciting and full of idealism. I wanted nothing more than to get my PhD and get into DURD and *do* things about urban inequality.

The best part of the PhD was the fieldwork in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, where I started to really learn, and meet amazing people doing grassroots stuff and I got involved in grassroots movements ... And then came frustration. No sooner had I finished than the Whitlam era ended and that tremendous sense of purpose that many urban scholars shared started to dissipate geographically, and to dissipate intellectually into critical discourse. Activists left Canberra and headed for Labor states. Some went into the academy. There was no point (for me) in joining the disintegrating DURD.

The Fraser years, 1975–83, were a grim time. I stayed in the university, spent a year in London as a post-doc which was very important in opening my eyes to other kinds of urban living – more dense, more convivial, more sense of an urban public realm. I returned a year later to take up a lectureship at what was then Footscray Institute of Technology, and taught undergrad urban studies. It was great. I was teaching the kids of Italian and Greek and Yugoslav immigrants, and I could see that for them the university was the same mind- and life-opening experience it had been for me, as a working-class kid in Adelaide.

From 1971–86 I was pretty much under the influence of a democratic socialist analysis of the city – the social justice framework, as it was evolving in the academy in neo-Marxist directions. I was also developing a feminist analysis and critique of the urban system, influenced less by urban scholars than by my friend Wendy Sarkissian, who was all fired up about the miserable lives of women with kids in the suburbs. I'd read Greer and Friedan and that generation of feminists, but was not yet into the feminist urbanist scholars from the United Kingdom and the United States. That came in the late '80s, once I was teaching at UCLA.

By the mid-1980s, I was starting to feel disillusioned with academic life. It was partly that I felt like I knew what everyone was going to say, at whatever conference I went to, and analyses were very black and white. It was also an epistemological crisis, which I wrote about later, with the limitations of a social science and political economy approach to understanding cities. So some part of me was ready to quit academia in my mid-thirties.

When I left the first time, in 1986, the biggest pull factor was that I was in love (with my now husband) and he wasn't prepared to move. But this coincided with the various kinds of disillusion I had been feeling as an urban scholar. I was also tired of always being the 'first woman' to do this and that (youngest full professor, etc., etc.). And people were starting to pressure me to become the first woman vice-chancellor and I couldn't think of anything I'd less rather do than go into university administration ... I felt like a big fish in a little pond. I was ready for new challenges. I was afraid of stagnating. I felt like I'd had tremendous opportunities – being in at the start of a whole new field really, but I also felt like something was missing, and no one knew what I was talking about when I talked that way ... So I left and went to LA, but personal issues were as important in that decision as were my academic disillusion and searching.

When I returned eleven years later, as a department head at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, I had an international reputation but I was really excited about coming home. I felt I could contribute more than I could in LA, not as a scholar so much as an activist/public intellectual ... my influences were feminist, post-modern, post-colonial, post-structuralist. The new cultural politics of difference were my starting point. Alas, in the time between accepting the job and my arrival, Keating

had been defeated and a new dark age had begun. I can't begin to express what a miserable experience I had as an urban scholar in the next few years. The worst part was the effect of the federal budget cuts. Suddenly unis had to be 50 per cent self-funding and department heads had to produce 'business plans' and start prostituting ourselves ... It was a total corruption of the educational mission, and I hated it.

My mum in Adelaide died in 1999, and my husband's family were all on the West Coast of the United States – and I like them a lot. I started looking for jobs back in North America where, to be honest, I felt my work was much more appreciated ... I'm really happy where I am now and have just become a Canadian citizen and am very pleased about that. I love the Pacific Northwest and my family is all pretty close. I have no desire to move again. People there told me I was crazy for giving up a tenured full professorship to go off to the US, and some people who had been my supporters were quite angry with me for 'deserting the cause', but of course it turned out to be the best thing I could possibly have done for my own growth.

**A**nn Forsyth: Many people don't even know I'm Australian. I was twenty-four when I left ... any reputation I have, however, has been made overseas. I remember a particularly odd book review of my book *Constructing Suburbs* (Routledge, 1999), published at the end of the 1990s when I'd spent quite a bit of time in Australia. It said that I had a very good analysis but that the reviewer felt that because I was American I likely misunderstood the Australian situation even though he couldn't identify any actual mistakes (or something like that); at that time, I'd spent the majority of my life in Australia!

In terms of a gender angle, before I left I did more gender work – it was the time, the mid-1980s, when that kind of thing was prominent and new. Of course, I kept writing about that into the 1990s and even last year published something on women in architecture in the *Journal of Architectural Education*. But my point is that certain things, such as gender, are/were part of a zeitgeist or intellectual period; they posed interesting questions given current knowledge and were a pull factor rather than a push factor in my leaving.

I wanted to do a PhD and, as I didn't like living abroad, I thought I'd better do the two [degrees] one after another to save moving. UCLA, where I first went, was at that time the centre of the world, in my opinion, for gender and planning. But as I moved on to think about multiple systems – social, ecological, urban design – I moved on to different places as well.

I am still an Australian citizen. I go there each year for several weeks. I've been back for a few six- to twelve-month stints, and I'm a Certified Practising Planner in the Australian Planning Institute. I'm even currently doing some research work for the state of Victoria, but I haven't really contributed to specifically Australian urban studies in a decade. My core interest is in the development of healthy and sustainable

cities, looking in particular at some key issues: urban design models, public participation and acceptance, social versus ecological tradeoffs, walkability. Given this, I interact with some of the public health research community in Australia – they are world leaders.

I think that there are definitely challenges for women in Australia, but I left quite early in my career so it's really about having other opportunities. The really wealthy US universities have enormous resources, and as someone who practises in a non-profit design centre model, there is tremendous opportunity for finding funding from foundations.

The advantage in coming from Australia is that one typically has to understand the systems of a number of different countries in order to understand the literature. In the United States or Europe, one can focus on a single continent – that really isn't possible in Australia. I've kept that sensibility so I see myself as an international.

**J**ean Hillier: I thoroughly enjoyed the collegiality of being a geographer in Australia. Isolated in Perth, the Institute of Australian Geographers' annual conference was the Australian highlight of my academic year. It was great fun and the whole thing was so supportive ... No blood on walls after papers from people demolishing others. Australian geography has a very good international reputation, and rightly so. I personally felt out of place as a geographer in a planning department. I was never regarded by my colleagues as a 'proper' planner, and one colleague would delight in telling the students that they could ignore what I said as I wasn't a planner. I was introduced to new students by this male one year as teaching the 'touchy feely stuff'. Planning in WA is extremely technocratic.

My work in Australia was a response to suburban sprawl and its disadvantaging of women in mono-zoned land uses serviced by poor public transport and lack of local facilities, shame for the way in which European invaders and white fellas treated Indigenous peoples, and planning practice and its approach to giving the development industry 'certainty' for investments, plus a lack of public participation in the early 1990s and subsequent practices of marketing and 'educating' the public rather than real participation.

Push factors included a lack of research funding opportunities, the feeling of being on a treadmill writing grant applications to keep research assistants employed, geographical isolation in Perth, isolation as a woman in architecture and planning, and the loss of several women colleagues to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. Even with email, I missed them.

I also was frustrated by the lack of grant money available. Only 9 per cent of Australian Research Council money went to humanities and social sciences at the time. In the late 1990s, the Howard regime squeezed university funding so hard that it made life very difficult. At Curtin, the School of Architecture and Planning ran out of

funds one financial year, and we went without photocopying and stationery for about six weeks. I wanted a new challenge, more research money, a quantum mass of academics to talk with and to meet. By comparison, if someone famous in my field were visiting Melbourne or Sydney, I'd be unlikely to travel from Perth just to talk. Finally, my partner's parents and siblings are in Belgium and ageing rapidly. My parents and sister's family were in the UK.

My official position is chair of town and country planning, but that's the same 'level' as in Perth, so it wasn't a pay or status increase. I'm not interested in status – or pay, it would seem! I've been away for four years now so I think that the research I did in Australia is getting a bit 'dated'. There's too much cargo-cult new urbanism and such copycat strategies used in planning. Australian planners need to rid themselves of their cultural cringe. Perth does not need to look like Portland or Seattle, but Perth!

**M**argo Huxley: I'm not sure how to separate out 'influences' and 'experiences' from living in cities, or life in general, and pure accident and serendipity. The work I was doing in the 1980s and 1990s was influenced by the Marxist urban theories and feminist theories of the time, and a commitment to addressing gender, economic and spatial inequalities as they intersected in urban processes and built form.

I left Australia for very personal reasons related to a series of job-related and domestic crises (including the death of my partner, Brian McLoughlin). I was born in the United Kingdom, and have a brother and family here, so that was one motivation. I also had made several attempts to study for a PhD, but always found work or domestic pressures too great to continue. When I left RMIT, I applied to a couple of Australian universities for funding to study full time, without much success, so decided to move, and ended up with a grant to study in geography at the Open University. I'm not sure this had much to do with being female, but I did want to study geography (urban, social, cultural, gender).

To be honest, I think Australians do themselves a disservice when they imagine this wonderful 'international level' that is bigger and better than parochial little Australia. At the moment, I just happen to be working in the United Kingdom, which is just as parochial in its own way as the United States – and more so than Australia in some ways, because they don't seem to feel the need to engage with other academic contexts like India or China or Australia. England still seems to see itself as the heart of empire to which everywhere else must defer. Australian academics are perforce much more aware of the variety of research that is done around the world than are most UK academics.

So I don't see myself as having a role as an 'international' scholar, as such. That said, however, there is something intellectually exciting about being in a much larger university system and in a place in the world where academic interchanges are made

much easier through proximity. I suppose I could say that this enables me to continue being a scholar in a way which might be a bit more difficult in Australia – although it's not a bed of roses here either, what with funding cuts, increasing student numbers, research assessment and all the other joys of 'advanced liberal' academic life.

I don't see myself working any more or less 'internationally' here than I would be in Australia. At the moment, I'm still trying to make the kinds of local links in practice and research in Sheffield that I'd built up over years in Melbourne. My current research is historical, and draws on material from Australia and Britain, so I need access to archival resources in both countries. Part of this current project is to 'parochialise' England and treat historical developments on the same level, rather than positioning Australia as a colonial imitation.

My personal connections with Melbourne, in particular, are strong. This keeps me more or less in touch with what's happening. It's quite depressing to see the amount of meaningless redevelopment going on – but that's no different from Sheffield, or indeed London, New York, Johannesburg, Mumbai ...

This is not the essay I had intended to write. I had visions of cleverly weaving key themes from the four women's stories into a critical narrative that provides insights into the Australian urban condition – a tale of gendered diaspora that has left urban planning in Australia impoverished as a result. That may well be true, but what emerged were stories that were far more personal, humble and poignant. The power in the stories, the conception of identity, was firmly located in their own narratives, not mine – particularly the strong desire to be close to family. Yet the frustrations of working in Australian higher education also emerged as a key driver, magnifying the attractions of international experience.

Within these four journeys, the influence of other Australian colleagues has endured despite the distance in an imagined community of scholars with roots in one of the most urban nations on earth. While my focus started as the desire to explore why a number of established Australian female urban planning scholars have left to work overseas, many questions have emerged in relation to those women who have returned or indeed have never left. What has held them within a political and economic climate that has provided so little support for their research? This highlights another story within Australian scholarship more broadly that is still waiting to be told. ■