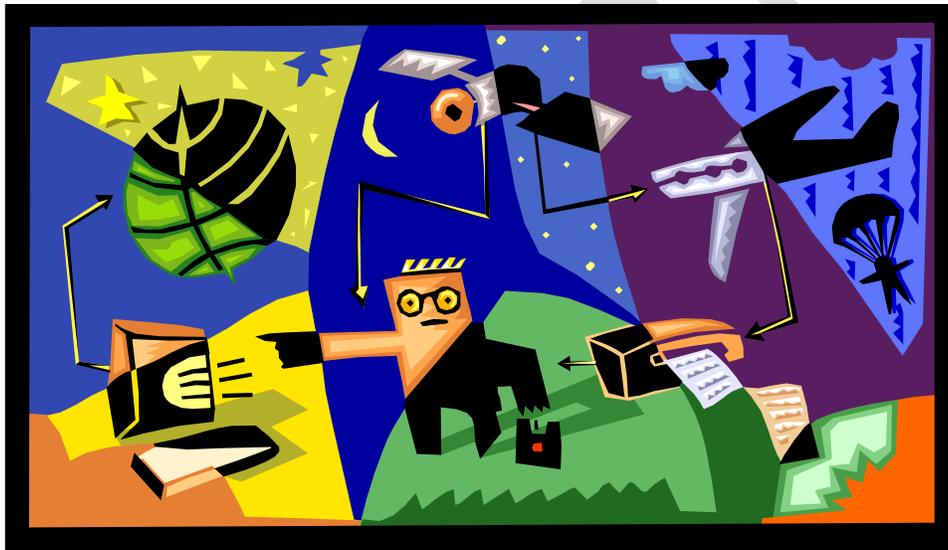# LIVING LIFE HERE
THE PLACE OF COMMUNITY IN URBAN PLANNING
Extract from Report completed for City of Joondalup, 2001

Tim Muirhead and Rose Williams

INTRODUCTION – an integrated approach to community well-being

People – human beings – have a complex array of needs, aspirations and emotions. The aim of urban planning is, in the end, to nourish these needs, aspirations and emotions, so that people can live fulfilling and meaningful lives, now and in the future. Ideally planning can provide us with a built environment that *helps community grow and thrive within it.* The City of Joondalup is working with its residents to explore how this might happen; what priorities urban planning must focus on to achieve it.

In this exploration, the first point of reference for most people is themselves and their families. This is fair and appropriate. What was so encouraging about the Visioning Workshops and Mapping Exercise was that participants understood that their own families' well being were dependent on broader economic, environmental and social factors.

It was clear that the needs and aspirations of people cannot be met without healthy and sustainable local and national **economies** - we need sufficient wealth to secure our own well-being.

They cannot be met without a healthy and sustainable **environment** – we all (including those to be born in distant futures) need sufficient food, water and air to meet our physical needs, and natural beauty to contribute to our spiritual needs.

And they cannot be met without healthy and sustainable **community** around them   - we need access to adequate human support and interaction to live our lives well.

PART 1
LIVING LIFE HERE –
THE SUSTAINING ROLE OF COMMUNITY

"Community" – what is it and where does it fit?

"Community" is a difficult term to pin down. People use it to justify a diverse array of aspirations – from a desire for vibrant retail strips busy with strangers to walled estates with armed guards, to insistence on social justice for the most disadvantaged groups. It is therefore important, here, to provide definition around elements of "community".

Well-being – meeting our needs and aspirations
All of us have needs and aspirations, and our lives are enhanced or diminished to the extent that these needs and aspirations are, or are not met.
Our needs and aspirations may include such diverse elements as:

❖ financial or material security
❖ clean water
❖ physical security
❖ social interaction and friendship
❖ beauty and harmony in the environment around us
❖ love
❖ information about the social and physical environment

❖ advice on appropriate actions and choices
❖ opportunities for recreation and creativity
❖ emotional support
❖ mobility
❖ food
and so on.

As a government, the City of Joondalup needs to ensure that people are able to have these needs or aspirations met in their own lives. People's capacity to ensure that their own needs and aspirations – and those of their loved ones – are met is the foundation stone of their well-being.

Note that it is <u>not</u> the City's role to meet most of these needs and aspirations directly; but to ensure that people are able to have them met. In other words, the City needs to create the human, natural and physical environments in which people are able get their own needs met.

Interpersonal Support

There are 4 broad "inter-personal" realms of support through which a person can get his or her needs met – his or her:

❖ self
❖ family
   (those s/he feels related to by blood or
   contract – including nuclear and extended families)
❖ community
   (those s/he knows or feels a part of)
❖ society (those s/he does not know, but who
   nevertheless, particularly in western societies,
   can support many of our needs and aspirations).

All of these are important, and if any of them are weak, people's capacity to meet their own needs and aspirations will be diminished.

A predominant theme of the Visioning Workshops and Mapping Exercise was the desire for stronger **communities***, this third, and too often neglected, realm of support.

REALMS OF INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT

Extended
Nuclear
Self
Family
Community
Society
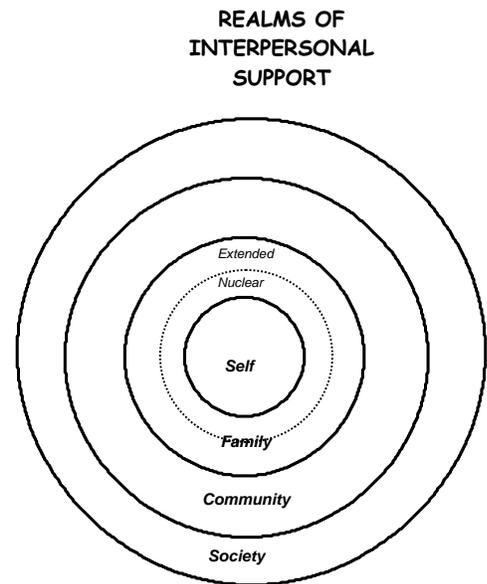
CHANGE AND CHALLENGE – BUILDING PLACES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Building community relationships

Good urban design creates the physical opportunity for people to interact at their chosen level and intensity.

Of course, people, not places, create community. Often, however, people need help. The human work of building and sustaining community has been sadly neglected in the last 50 years. In that time it has been, overwhelmingly, the **community** and the **extended family** realms that have weakened. The realm of *"society"* – particularly government support and welfare – has been through a period of strength (which is currently under threat). The nuclear *"family"*, on the other hand, has been forced to bear unprecedented pressures, largely due to the weakening of extended families and communities.

A devastating array of changes have meant that the natural processes of community building which we had unthinkingly engaged in over centuries (and which continue to sustain people in other cultures) simply crumbled around us.
Some of these changes[1] include:

❖ the separation of work and home,

---

[1] For details, see Appendix 1

- ❖ radical changes in family size and structure,
- ❖ growth of home based entertainment,
- ❖ increased car-ownership,
- ❖ higher workforce participation amongst women,
- ❖ the devastating effects of unemployment,
- ❖ longer working hours,
- ❖ the privatisation and centralisation of shopping precincts,
- ❖ a media led focus on fear and crime,
- ❖ a diminished tolerance of young people in public places,
- ❖ a more transient workforce,
- ❖ higher rates of moving house and suburb
- ❖ higher levels of job insecurity

It is not surprising, then, that our natural processes of community building have crumbled. We have slowly noticed, over the last 25 years, that community interaction has broken down and there has been a steadily increasing cry to "get back a sense of community". In the Workshops conducted with residents of the City of Joondalup this was a predominant and consistent theme.

But the truth is, what was once natural now takes considerable effort, because the world is so radically different to how it was 30 – 50 years ago.
We now need help in finding the courage and means to re-build community. As one group in the workshops said: "We want to do our part to build a stronger community around us, but we need help to make that happen"

Places and People: Neighbourhoods and Communities
It is important to re-assert that "neighbourhoods" are places, while "communities" are groups of people.

As people we make our own decisions on the extent to which we will interact with or avoid our own families, communities and society. No one can or should dictate our patterns of interaction, and planners must respect people's need for solitude as much as their need for connection.

The role of planning then is to create opportunities to build community and inter-personal interaction and support, not to force people into such interaction.

It can be argued that current suburbs were built around an emphasis on the family (eg large homes and gardens, and "in-home" entertainment) and society (eg large centres for shopping and social service) with inadequate consideration to the impacts on community. There is no doubt from the Workshops that people want the City to bring community back into the equation. They want neighbourhoods that encourage community building, rather than discouraging it.

Hierarchy's of space – the ability to choose our interaction.
But it is also important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The family, in its various forms, remains crucial to most people, and all planning needs to be equally mindful of the impact of housing and urban design on the functioning of families as it is on communities. We must be mindful of what people like about their homes at the moment.

People with children, for example value the privacy of their backyard, just as they yearn for interaction in the street.

Equally, many people love the anonymity of "society" that our culture offers, and feel stifled by too much interaction in their local street.

Our urban and housing design needs to ensure that all people are able to enjoy access to space that nourishes **_all 4 spheres_** of inter-personal support

We need appropriate spaces (indoor and outdoor) for:
> **_individual_** solitude
> (eg private rooms, places of "retreat" in private gardens and public parks)

> **_family_** activity and intimacy
> (eg private back yards, family rooms)

> **_community_** activity and interaction
> (eg community houses, local parks, front yards and verandah's)

> **_Social_** activity and interaction
> (eg shops, parks, commercial centres, etc, where we are safely,
> comfortably and enjoyably amongst strangers)

It is important to add that an empowering mix of interaction and solitude is created if such spaces offer both the opportunity for "being separate" and the opportunity for invitation and interaction[2].

Personal space
A door to a child's bedroom, for example, creates a polite boundary when closed, and a threshold of welcome into the child's space when open.

Family space
A backyard is both a place you can "keep the world out" of and invite neighbours into as a sign of friendship.

Community space
A front garden or verandah needs a low fence to create a boundary which allows verbal and visual interaction with neighbours, while making small children and all family members feel "safe" in their own territory. The "boundary" of the fence actually creates the point of interaction with the outside world. (Ironically, a requirement to have no front fences diminishes

---

[2] Some of the concepts in this section are drawn from an unpublished document "Solitude, Connection and Reverence, inspired by the vision of David Nourish.

community, as people do not feel emotionally or, in the case of small children, physically "safe" in their front yards)

Small local "pocket parks", similarly can be fenced from the street to create greater safety, and, if they are made smaller, shaded, attractive and with play equipment and pockets of beauty and reflection, will attract people of the same street to them more often. The street then starts to take ownership, and protect the park and people in it.

Social Space
Larger parks or shopping centres may have sections that are attractive to different age groups – a skate park, a play area for toddlers, and, for older people, a shaded area with flowing water for solitude and reflection. This "separateness" within the same park makes the various age groups feel welcome, encouraging, in time, the opportunity for interaction with strangers.

So a priority of all planning must be to re-build opportunities for <u>community</u> building within the City of Joondalup, while maintaining access to personal family and the more anonymous social spaces that people need in their lives.

But how is this achieved? This is explored in Part 2.

PART TWO
BUILDING COMMUNITY – WHAT IT WILL TAKE

A City that sustains people – key objectives for "people friendly" development.
The built environment in which people live can enhance or limit their ability to live spirited lives, drawing on the support of their families, communities and society.

The built environment will need to meet 7 broad objectives. (Input from the Workshops supported, particularly, the first 5 of these objectives.
The last two were not explicitly proposed by many participants, but they are both "hidden" objectives that must be achieved if we are to ensure sustainable communities.)

The 7 objectives are listed here in order of the broad level of interest from workshop participants relating to the particular objectives

1
Access

It is obviously crucial that people have optimum access to the opportunities (eg employment, recreation and leisure, natural environment), and services (eg hospitals, schools, child care, recreation, retail, commercial etc) that we need to live full lives.

2
Interaction

A physical and community environment that, while honouring people's need for solitude, also enhances opportunities for planned and unplanned *interaction* will significantly enhance their sense of community

3
Soul and Beauty

A predominant theme of the Workshops was the desire to have an environment that feeds people's soul. This included the need for beautiful parks and natural environment, but also the desire to maintain the natural and built heritage of our areas. No matter how "new" it seems today, webs of memory lay themselves across our built environment, and those memories nourish our soul.

4
Belonging and Meaning

This is about the relationship between individuals and their physical and community environment.

Peoples' lives are enriched and sustained by being able to make sense of their own place in their neighbourhood and community. When we feel we belong we are more confident to interact, we treat others with greater respect, we take more responsibility in our local area and we are happier.

5
Security

If people do not feel safe they will not build communities. And to use a line from *Strictly Ballroom* - "a life lived in fear is a life half lived"
We must make our neighbourhoods and communities feel safe.

6
Stability

A physical and community environment that makes it easy for people to stay in the same locality (though not necessarily the same house) for as long as they choose will encourage the development of relationships and trust.

7
Flexibility

Our planning must be about opportunities, not constraints. We cannot presume to know what our children's and grandchildren's lives will be like – the world is changing too rapidly and un-predictably. Yet we *are* creating the physical environment in which their lives will be lived.

So we must design neighbourhoods that are as flexible as possible. We must "plan as though we are wrong" in our assumptions about the future, creating built environments that will work under a wide range of different scenarios.

Strategies for achieving these objectives

There are a wide range of strategies that can contribute to these objectives.

These are of two types:

"Hardware"
The natural and built form – the space that is created through our planning and development - cannot, on it's own, create communities. But it creates opportunities and constraints for the enrichment of communities. It is like the "hardware" of computer systems – it's useless without the software, but it is also essential to the success of that software.

"Software"
While the built form creates the space in which communities may develop, conscious strategies are needed to encourage the development of community. One of the key themes that emerged from the workshops were that:

❖ People have a thirst for more community,
   and
❖ a number of people would happily be involved in community building,
   but

❖ they are calling for support and courage in taking the steps to building community.

Appendix 3 summarises a number of different forms of community building. The City of Joondalup is currently reviewing its role in community building. These workshops resulted in an articulate and consistent plea from those who attended. "Help us create community in our neighbourhoods"

The City therefore needs to ensure that the human resources are available to strategically foster community building within all of its precincts.

This work is the "software" that can be undertaken. But of course, it needs compatible "hardware" – the built form.

The Building Blocks – Ideas for building community in Joondalup

The consultants came to the Workshops with certain "building blocks" based on their experience in social and community planning. Some of these were included in "prompt sheets" which participants were asked to agree or disagree with. These "prompts" are shown in the shaded section under each objective.

The remainder of the ideas here are consultants' interpretations of the key elements required to build stronger communities. The great majority of them were highlighted in the Workshops. Where community input differed from the consultants' views, this has been highlighted.

1
Access

"Prompts" supported by the workshops included:
❖ **Encourage a range of housing types to support local centres.**
❖ **Promote a range of Centres to satisfy local needs.**

"Hardware"
1.1   Ensure a comprehensive network of footpaths, bikeways that allow fast and unhindered bike travel, and efficient bus routes to all District and Neighbourhood Centres, and train stations.

1.2   Review and amend safety issues in relation to all walkways, (through ongoing and strategic safety audit processes – see 5.5)

"Software"
1.3   Develop policies on service provision objectives outlining what should be made available at
         ❖   District Centres/Nodes
         ❖   Neighbourhood Centres/Nodes
         ❖   "corner store" nodes
         and work with all planning and service provision agencies to achieve these objectives

1.4   Undertake local community development work to encourage access to supports through such initiatives as:
- ❖   car-pooling
- ❖   community supports, such as child-minding collectives,
- ❖   local "community care" initiatives, such shopping for the elderly, visiting families with young children, local play groups, etc.
- ❖   encouragement of youth activities in local parks and/or at street level.

2

Interaction

"Prompts" supported by the workshops included:
- ❖ **Increase the opportunities for good quality rental housing to be created for residents, students and visitors.**
- ❖ **Create safe, high quality pedestrian connections and environments.**

Hardware

2.1   Create opportunities for unplanned "social collisions" through
- **-**   local "meeting points" like playgrounds, town squares, cafes etc.
- **-**   encouraging provision of generous front verandahs and "livable" (rather than just decorative) front yards.

2.2   Make neighbourhoods more "walkable" so that people are out in the streets. (See 1.1 and 1.2)

2.3   Encourage vibrancy and community activity in Neighbourhood and District Centres and parks - activities that are attractive to children (eg play equipment) young people (eg skating area), parents (eg coffee shops and community centres) and Seniors (eg places for resting, watching the world go by, University of the 3rd age in community centres)

2.4   Steadily encourage increased densities of housing (and consequently 'walkability") around Train stations, and neighbourhood and District retail/community nodes.

2.5   In any future neighbourhood Centres, encourage genuine integration of shops and cafes, Public Space, School(s), church, community buildings and child care, creating a focal point of community activity.

2.6   Explore feasibility of active encouragement of more "corner stores". (This will require a review of existing constraints including, for example, car-based road layouts, culture of "magnet" retail centres, environmental health laws, local zoning laws, etc.)

Software

2.7   Community building practices such as:
- ❖   fostering "streets alive" networks in local areas
- ❖   establishing local play-groups, self-help groups, book clubs, etc
- ❖   encouraging local level community and cultural events
- ❖   providing small incentives for street parties, street sports, etc
- ❖   Develop a wide range of activities (formal and informal) – for all age groups, at local community centres.

3

"Soul and Beauty"

"Prompts" supported by the workshops included:
❖ **Provide safe access to local parks, playgrounds and other recreational areas.**

3.1   Protect all remnant bushland as far as possible.

3.2   Through landscaping, shade trees, water sculptures, etc, create parks that cater not just for recreation and space, but also for rest, contemplation, and harmony. (The higher maintenance costs involved in more varied open space areas can be seen as an essential service to the building of stronger communities.)

3.3   Minimise demolition of any existing housing or structures, and only make significant changes after considerable consultation and a high level of support.

Software

3.4   Involve local people (<u>as well as</u> creative and technical specialists) in design of local parks and other public space

3.5   Encourage community involvement in development of public art (ie art in public places and streets)

3.6   Develop local "Community Garden" projects

4
Belonging and meaning

"Prompts" supported by the workshops included:
❖ **Recognise and respect the overall urban character of the area.**
❖ **Design new development to be responsive to the local neighbourhood.**
❖ **Promote a vibrant, diverse community and increase opportunities for street life.**

4.1   Ensure schools, shops and other focal points are built at a local scale, and include facilities and spaces that are open to informal community use at the weekend. (eg areas suitable for "street skating", basketball hoops, community building)

4.2   Provide attractive, symbolic places for community activities (carols by candlelight, local art displays, fetes and festivals), integrated with Neighbourhood Centres, or at selected parks

4.3   Encourage design of Neighbourhood Centres that re-claims them as community space, not just "consumer space". As far as possible, the space and structures should encourage people of all ages (including young people) to "hang around" in an environment of safety, interaction and familiarity. This should include provision of a community house at or close to all neighbourhood Centres,

Software

4.4   Develop networks of "welcoming" neighbours, who make a point of bringing together nearby residents, at least, when new people move into the street.

This extract does not necessarily reflect the views of the City of Joondalup.

4.5   In areas of new development, provide a full time community worker for the first three years to create a "culture of community"

4.6   Ensure that the built form is changed only when absolutely necessary, or clearly desirable according to local consultation.

4.7   Encourage a range of simple community arts strategies in all suburbs (such as, for example, the "badges" that adorn the footpaths of Joondalup CBD.) so that a wide range of people – of all ages – have "made their mark" on the local built environment.

(See also 3.5 and 3.6)

5
Security

"Prompts" supported by the workshops included:
❖ **Create safe, high quality pedestrian connections and environments.**
❖ **Provide safe access to local parks, playgrounds and other recreational areas.**

Hardware
5.1   Design housing, shops and streetscapes to maximise "observability", ensuring that people in the public arena (not their backyards) can be seen.

5.2   Upgrade safety of neighbourhoods and centres, based on information gleaned from "safety audits" (see 5.5 below). This is likely to include increased lighting in particular public areas.

5.3   Increase number of "walkable" destinations (pocket parks, corner stores, etc), to encourage more people on to the streets, making them safer.

5.4   In new areas, or in any re-developments, encourage road layouts that maximise quick access for emergency service vehicles.

Software
5.5   Carry out "safety audits" walking people through their neighbourhood to identify places where they feel unsafe.

5.6   Make residents aware that high fences, and a lack of relationship with their neighbours, increase their vulnerability to crime.

5.7   Pursue the City's comprehensive and integrated *Young People and Open Space* strategy, ensuring that young people do not feel un-welcome (and therefore more likely to commit crime) and that all people feel safe in the presence of young people.

5.8   Encourage positive images of young people throughout the City.

5.9   Encourage broad range of activities (both formal and informal) for young people, including interaction with older people. Some of this work can be done through partnerships with shopping centres.

5.10   Discourage all practices which set out, as their primary objective, to make outdoor life for young people less pleasant or convenient. (This creates a powerful feeling of being un-welcome, which fosters petty crime)

5.11   (Some people called for increased security patrols. While these patrols have not been proven to reduce actual crime, they can, with associated publicity, reduce <u>fear</u> of crime, which improves people's quality of life)

6
Stability

"Prompts" supported by the workshops included:
- ❖ **Allow for a range of housing types to cater for people's housing needs through the different phases of their lives.**
- ❖ **Provide for a range of housing types supporting different life styles.**
- ❖ **Promote a range of activities suited to different interests and age groups.**

Hardware
6.1   Provide a range of housing types (and costs) in all neighbourhoods, to accommodate people through their various life stages

Software
6.2   Encourage ample work opportunities in the local area.

6.3   Ensure that support services and opportunities are available for people of all ages in the local area or district. (see notes under Access.)

(Also see all notes under "belonging and meaning" – when people feel they belong, and when their environment relates to their own sense of self, they are more likely to stay)

7
Flexibility

Hardware
7.1   In new areas, or areas of significant re-development, provide more permeable and changeable street patterns. (eg "Grid patterns which can allow simple creation of <u>both</u> cul-de-sacs <u>and</u> through streets.)

7.2   Encourage retail and commercial nodes that can expand along the streets, rather than being bound within a particular "precinct"

7.3   In providing land for community services, place it next to public space so that the services can
- ❖ expand in the future, or
- ❖ contract or disappear without creating a "hole" in the urban fabric.
or, of course, both, at different times over the centuries.

This extract does not necessarily reflect the views of the City of Joondalup.

Software

7.4   Move toward a planning philosophy that focuses less on planning for our predictions of the future, and more on planning for a wide range of possible futures.

Facing the realities

If Council is committed to responding to this call for community building, it will face some challenging realities. The task will not be easy.

Our suburbs, our development industry and regulations, our notions of service provision, have grown around a culture of supporting households and people individually, rather than as part of a community. The focus on the family car, home entertainment, privacy, possessions, and fear are both consequences and creators of this culture,

But in the last 10 years we have begun to wake up to some of the unintended consequences of these, and the Visioning and Neighbourhood Mapping Workshops dramatically highlighted the need for change –the need for us to consciously re-introduce community into our planning.

It will not be easy. Any culture is a juggernaut that is hard to turn. The culture of individuality is no exception. But the people at the Workshops spoke loud and clear. They want to start turning it. And they want help from the City of Joondalup.