

Building social cities: the value of the human connection

Published online in The Drum, Monday 2 April 2012

*There are big changes underway in Australia's cities, writes **Jane-Frances Kelly***

Victorian Planning Minister Matthew Guy recently unveiled a bold new vision for central Melbourne, with taller buildings and more people living in an expanded CBD.

In NSW, Barry O'Farrell's Government is actively recruiting skilled migrants to Sydney as part of a strategy to boost economic development.

South Australia has embarked on an ambitious project called '5000+' to renew inner Adelaide, the mining boom is fuelling rapid growth and development in Perth and, as a former Lord Mayor, new Queensland Premier Campbell Newman is bound to take a close interest in the future shape of Brisbane.

Some people find the prospect of bigger cities exciting: if Melbourne is more like Manhattan then they'll no longer have to fly half way around the world to experience the joys of New York.

Others side with Bob Carr, who once famously declared that Sydney was full: they are fearful of living in crowded cities dominated by anonymous towers.

But the crucial factor in whether our cities are good places to live is neither the number of residents nor the height of skyscrapers. Most important is whether or not the city helps us to connect with other people or leaves us feeling lonely, and that depends in large part on what happens inside and in between the buildings in which we live and work.

Loneliness is very bad for your health. Just like smoking and obesity, it is associated with lower life expectancy. Yet Australians are at increasing risk of feeling lonely.

The average number of friends we have has fallen over the last 20 years, as has the number of local people we can ask for small favours.

As a society we are getting older, more people are living alone and the number of sole parent families is increasing. All three groups face a higher risk of isolation.

While there is no easy way to change these social trends, the way we build and organise our city can help to bring people together or keep them apart.

If new residential areas - high-rise or low-rise - do not have adequate transport links, then commuting will swallow a big chunk of our day. Instead of spending precious time with friends and family, we will waste it stuck in traffic, swearing at other drivers, or getting aggravated at fellow passengers on overcrowded buses, trams and trains.

A high-rise building may make a dramatic statement on the city skyline but if it presents a blank face to the street then it will make pedestrians feel small and insignificant and they will hurry past without stopping.

Alternatively, if the street frontage offers alcoves to sit in, green space to enjoy, artwork to admire or interesting window displays, then people are more likely to linger, and perhaps strike up a conversation.

Streets that are pleasant for walking encourage us to get out and about, increasing the chance of a chat on the pavement. Walking is not only good for our physical health but also for our mental health: it helps us feel a sense of safety and belonging in our local area.

If apartment blocks are designed so that residents drive into an underground car-park and then shoot up to the 16th floor in a lift, then there is little likelihood that they will know their neighbours well enough to borrow a cup of sugar, let alone ask for help in times of trouble.

But it is possible to build common areas and shared facilities in residential complexes so that neighbours meet by chance and become acquainted.

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This emphasis on face-to-face interaction might sound old hat in an era of social networking but connecting online is not the same as connecting in person.

Digital companies like Google and Apple know this: they deliberately design 'bump spaces' into their office buildings - places where staff run into each other and interactions occur.

Human beings are social animals; thousands of years of evolutionary biology means we still need to meet in the physical, as well as the virtual world. Imagine parents trying to bring up children via Facebook.

So whether our cities grow up or out, quickly or slowly, we need to give far more thought to whether we are creating places that encourage social connection or places that builds in loneliness.

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