The Social Life of Cities

- Geoff Mulgan

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Transcript

Thinking about social design for cities is lagging behind thinking on economic and environmental issues. Yet history has shown us that without design that takes account of social needs, built environments can easily lead to isolated individuals and communities. All over the world developments are being demolished only a few decades after they were built because of poor understanding of human needs and social design. Design has to incorporate an understanding of how people live, what makes them feel they belong, and the right balance of interaction and privacy.

We must be ambitious for the future, but also learn from the past, from what has and hasn't worked. As promoting wellbeing becomes a goal alongside economic growth, closer attention to the fine grain of social relationships becomes critical. How can we make 21st century cities economically robust, sustainable, and socially attractive?

About the Speaker

Geoff Mulgan is the Chief Executive of the Young Foundation, which is based in the East End of London and brings together insights, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. Before taking up his post at the Young Foundation, Geoff had various roles in the UK government between 1997 and 2004, including director of the Government's Strategy Unit and head of policy in the Prime Minister's office. Before that he was the founder and director of the think-tank Demos. He is a visiting professor at LSE, UCL, Melbourne University and a regular lecturer at the China Executive Leadership Academy. He is a fellow of the Sunningdale Institute at the UK National School of Government and of the Australia New Zealand School of Government. Geoff has advised many governments around the world, including several Prime Ministers.

His most recent book is The Art of Public Strategy. Other books include Good and Bad Power, and Connexity. He has also authored or co-authored dozens of pamphlets, recent examples of which include Sinking and Swimming: understanding Britain's unmet needs and The Open Book of Social Innovation.

Speaker: Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive, Young Foundation

Moderator: Jane-Frances Kelly, Program Director – Cities, Grattan Institute

JANE-FRANCES: Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon. I'd like to start by showing my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that we're meeting here this afternoon. Welcome to the Social Life of Cities, a Grattan Cities program public seminar. I'm Jane-Frances Kelly, Director of the Program.

JANE-FRANCES: It's a pleasure to welcome to Grattan for the second time this year Geoff Mulgan. Geoff is Chief Executive of the Young Foundation in London's East End, an organisation with a long history which in its contemporary guise, brings together insights, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. Before taking up the post, Geoff had various roles in the UK government including Director of the Government Strategy Unit and Head of Policy in the Prime Minister's Office. Before that he was founder and Director of the think tank Demos. He's a visiting professor at LSE, UCL, Melbourne University and is a regular lecturer at the China Executive Leadership Academy. He's also a Fellow of ANZSOG and has advised many governments around the world including several prime ministers. And so just to mention you've heard me mentioning the radio, we are recording this so please switch your mobiles off, and whether we get broadcast on radio or not, we will be available on Grattan's website as a podcast, probably as soon as tomorrow morning. There'll be a transcript up there as well once they're figured out what my accent said.

Geoff will speak for about half an hour then we'll open the conversation to the floor. So the "Social Life of Cities". The premise that we had and what we put in the invitation to this seminar is that thinking about social design for cities is lagging behind thinking on economic and

environmental issues. Yet history has shown us that without design that takes account of social needs, built environments can easily lead to isolated individuals and communities. Geoff's going to speak about this challenge for about half an hour and then I'll get him to sit back down and take some questions. Thank you.

GEOFF: Well, good afternoon and thanks to Grattan and University of Melbourne for the chance to speak about this topic. I'm going to share some thoughts but in a way the topic is one on which everyone is an expert, all of us who live in cities and either love parts of them, and hate others, is experiencing the social life and experiencing perhaps the results of either good or bad design. And I'm going to talk about how we can hopefully make the cities we live in and in particular the new cities which are being built not only more liveable but also a bit more lovable as well.

I'm going to start with a quote from a German magazine early this year describing a prize winning, apparently very impressive development in a city, Hamburg, which has more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in Europe. The architecture they said was award winning but the lifestyle, there's more going on at local cemeteries. And I think all of us probably recognise some other places like that where the building work has gone on, the plans look beautiful, the architect's walked off with prizes, but something was missing, some crucial chemistry which actually makes the places ones where people want to live. And in a way, all of our cities now face three overlapping challenges, as a challenge, how do you make cities work economically, creating wealth, jobs for people; how do you make them work ecologically low carbon, low waste and so on? But critically too how do you make them work for people? How do you make them work socially?

And over the last few years we've been working with a lot of planners and architects and developers and have been struck how thinking about the ecological dimension of cities has advanced incredibly the last 10 years. And as any development which is now being built will be much smarter in terms of water use, in terms of energy use, in terms of even designing our cars in some cases. And all over the world you can see wonderful examples of the greening of cities and green roofs and new types of transport which are making almost no use of petrol. But by comparison whenever you gather the people shaping cities together, and as well as your social knowledge, how do you know how to design a place that people will really get on with each other in, really love living in? And the answers are very mute.

And yet we've had decades and decades of examples of what no to do. Cabrini Green in Chicago, one of many examples from the US where the architects won prizes for their amazing developments, but fairly quickly it became really a watch word for crime and poverty and unemployment and isolation. And the sociologist Richard Sennett was actually born in Cabrini Green, is one of the people who's described its decay from being a place at first people quite liked to go to one where no-one wanted to live at all. In Britain many examples like Moss Side in Manchester, again looked wonderful on paper, became a place of riots, drugs, guns. Near where I live in London, Broadwater Farm's another example of a housing estate which won prizes and 15 years ago experienced really appalling series of riots as the people essentially revolted against what had been built for them. And in France a high proportion of the outer city projects, built again to high physical specifications in some cases, many won prizes for their physical designs and yet a few years ago a whole series of them literally went up in smoke as people took revenge on what the builders and planners had created for them.

Now whenever you see those examples, I'm … it's hard not to be struck by the contrast between the places which were being built, and still are being built for people, and the qualities of real living systems. And any living system, a forest, a wood, a jungle, has complexity, has many different links and gateways and passages, and the sort of patterns you see in a Mandelbrot fractal, and I've put a picture of a Mandelbrot fractal because Benoit Mandelbrot died only a few months ago. And he really captured the essence of living systems and their inherent differentness and complexity. And by comparison so much of what is built as housing is the opposite of that. It is straight forward repetition and as in the case of the picture here of a building in London, often isolated, there's no connection to place, no context, no linkage to the rest of the city around it.

And so we've been asking the question in my organisation, what have we learnt about what works socially, and how can we ensure that when new cities are being built, as there are being built around the world, they don't repeat the mistakes, they repeat what actually works, what makes places living systems, living environments where people interact, grow and nurture each other. And this matters because we're in a period of fairly dramatic urban growth. In Europe, 32 new towns are being created across 11 countries and most of them, or many of them in Britain, which is seeing its population rise quite rapidly at the moment thanks to migration in particular. China, 100 or so new cities, each with a population of a million or so. And many are aspiring to be truly ideal cities, models of the future. And the Shanghai Expo earlier this year was meant to be the exemplar of new visions of urban living, ecologically much more sustainable as well as making sense economically. In Korea, Incheon is housing 200,000 new people and Songdo is claiming to be the first city anywhere on earth where the soft architecture is more important and indeed more invested in than the hard architecture, and by that they mean the underlying technologies of communication, surveillance and so on. A series of new cities around Delhi being built, and all over the world, because of urbanisation and population growth, dramatic growth of new towns.

Now England has some experience of that because between the '50s and the '70s we had a very large scale new town program, three million or so people, 32 towns were built, part of the optimism of post war Britain perhaps. But the story they told, that unfolded, was quite a mixed story. Some successes, some failures. On balance it tended to take quite a long time for communities to grow in the new buildings. The ones which succeeded turned out to the ones which had taken a lot of care over social infrastructure and community development as well as physical quality. They had particular staff to welcome people in, to encourage them to meet their neighbours, to organise community events and those that didn't found it much harder to create a sense of belonging. They discovered many of their financial models were flawed because often the finance was pulled out too quickly and there wasn't sufficient incentive for the developers to develop community as well as physical spaces.

And you can see very similar things going on in the big new towns being built worldwide. Masdar in Abu Dhabi is one of the most talked about examples, extraordinary in some respects in its physical designs, radically low carbon, designed to be a centre of science and innovation, but very weak in terms of explaining why people will want to live there, what kind of lives they will lead. Hammarby Sjöstad in Sweden is often portrayed as the model of green living, but all the pictures of Hammarby Sjöstad are a bit like this one in that there are no people visible. There are beautiful buildings and public spaces and so on, but no sense of a living … a community or life. And yet we are the first generation in modernity where our life expectancy is greater than the life expectancy of buildings. Our life expectancy is going up two or three months every year and that means we will see many buildings come and go and yet the thinking about cities still puts the buildings first and the people second. And when it comes to technology and information and communication, we're still talking about these as primarily about surveillance, cameras watching what people do rather than technologies of interaction, technologies of community.

We've been trying to pull together a group of cities which are working to design themselves and build new cities and to try and distil what has been learned about what works and what doesn't, how you get your social design better. And I want to share with you just a few of the ideas which we're working on to see whether they resonate and make sense here in Australia.

The first in some ways is to state the blindingly obvious that you have to start by understanding how people live, what makes them feel they belong in a place. And some of that is about perhaps rejecting the vision of the city as a panopticon, London and Shenzen at the moment are competing to have the most cameras per head of population, each at the moment on about I think three or four million cameras, extraordinary vision of the city. But actually if you ask what makes people really feel safe at home, you get very different examples. Some of them are about the fine grain details of physical design, about lines of sight, about how you make it easy for people like in the areas of a university to interact enough so you get conviviality and sociability, but not so much that people feel scared in those spaces, so they still have some privacy. There are lessons about boundaries and identities and how you make people feel that their place is distinct from other places. There are lessons about how easy it is for children and

the elderly, the disabled to move around. There are lessons about how you have the right kind of night life and clusters for night life where people can go a bit crazy on a Friday and Saturday night but hopefully not in ways which will ruin the lives of other people who don't want to take part in that. There are some very important lessons about ownership, how you build into places a sense of direct ownership so that for example even in the public spaces of a housing estate, there are individuals who have guardianship over the grass, the gardens, the allotments and therefore care for them in a way that nobody cares if no-one has any ownership at all.

Another critical lesson is what we describe as designing in incompleteness, recognising the best cities evolve themselves rather than just following somebody else's master plan. And you can see this throughout history, the more perfectly planned and conceptualised the new city, the more certain that you can be that it will fail. And the best places are … have a vision but within that vision plenty of space for the people who actually live in the city to make it for themselves. A current example of this is the Bedzed development in London, a very radically green urban development but around which literally spaces have been left for different kinds of uses and for the residents to determine what might fill them up. And the same is true of developments like Queens Street on London's south bank where space was left for people to decide what mix of private gardens and shared gardens they might have, so they felt some ownership over the development process rather than just responding to the vision of the architects, the engineers, the technicians.

Another critical lesson is about social networks. Human beings automatically create social interaction and social networks, but if you've got a new urban development, 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 homes, you can make a lot of difference if you really try and accelerate and nurture them. That may just be organising events, festivals, reasons for people to come together, like the Big Lunch we have in Britain at the moment where once a year every street can create a lunch where everyone comes with some food and eats together and talks together. There's also room for hyper local websites. More and more we're finding these websites at the level of a few streets becoming a critical glue which holds a community together, and a very simple device of getting anyone who moves into a new street or a new housing block to share each other's email, turns out to be a simple way of making community grow faster than it would otherwise.

My very local website in northeast London, in Harringay now has 4,000 people as members of it in a community of about 8,000. So this has already become quite a major power, a place where much of the community life happens, whether it's news or people watching nature or bird watching or just exchanging their time or exchanging or sharing things like lawn mowers or other equipment with their neighbours.

And I think here too there's a very important lesson about what makes cities creative. Brian Eno has this nice word, senius, to describe the genius of a locale of a city, a milieu in a city where new ideas emerge often because a particular place is encouraging that intensity of argument and interaction which has always driven the leading edge in arts and music and science. And I think there are lessons about how you cultivate that, whether it's things like fixed low rents for artists or stopping large scale developments or putting public money into hubs which bring these sort of activities together, which cultivate community at this kind of high end of creative interaction which is a corollary of the every day community I've been talking about so far.

I think in every place we're learning lessons about how you design in for green behaviour, but ideally you do so in ways that also reinforce social connections and use the social connections to reinforce the green behaviour. Now part of that is about physical design of really ecological buildings and there are lots of good examples of that around the world. But I think the more interesting examples are ones which change behaviour. There are smart travel to schools projects which reward children for walking to school in groups either using swipe cards or mobile phones. There's what's happening in many cities where you can rent bicycles, and if you go to London or Paris now and you keep your journeys to less than 30 minutes, you need never pay for transport again and your whole feel of the city is transformed. There's the new smart grids which bring energy to the surface and in some cases allow you to see however people using energy in your street or in your community and potentially can give rewards to whole communities for their ability to cut energy use as well as to individuals.

And then I think there's lessons about how you create communities that work for everyone and grow these kind of circuits of exchange and interaction. And we've learned over the millennia that in any city good fences make for good neighbours, but if you have too many walls people end up simply frightened of each other, the community falls apart. We have our fair share of gated communities and gated communities produce what economists call negative externalities, and they actually often make the rest of the city less safe for the people excluded from them. There are many examples like Sao Paolo in Brazil where the walls between different parts of society have grown so big that there's no interaction at all, where the rich live in one world, the poor live in another world. And that's a society in which trust decays and which fear becomes the dominant spirit. But against that there are many ways in which you can encourage interaction across the boundary lines. Lots of examples of doing that with volunteering, and I think the whole category of new ways of orchestrating mutual support helped by the web.

An example I like a lot is from Canada called Tyze, which is a social network, which orchestrates a group of supporters essentially around a vulnerable older person so that their family, their friends, the doctor, the social worker can all align and co-ordinate who will visit, who will cook a meal, who will help to remind them with their prescriptions, and in some ways using new technology to do some very old tasks of community and support. And in all of these we're seeing new ways of growing social circuits of exchange where our cities don't just become as it were commuter suburbs, places where people just sleep, but don't have any connection with those around them. So there are things like time banks. Spice is one time bank which is spreading across the UK which bases the time bank in a housing organisation or a school and makes it easy for people to share their time, which may be time cooking a meal or doing plumbing, or fixing the roof. In Japan, there's a whole architecture of these sort of time credits used in particular to support care for the elderly. And these are ways not only of meeting needs but at the same time as meeting the need you also create social relationships as well.

The School of Everything is another example of this, a website on which anyone can offer to be a teacher or a learner, and it puts you in touch with someone in your local community who can teach you how to speak Mandarin Chinese or how to program a computer, perhaps even to get your mobile phone to work or something like that. And we're seeing everywhere the rapid growth of urban agriculture, seeing the city as an edible thing. Taking over underused land and planting it with onions or carrots or garlic, and again this is partly to meet needs for food, but as much it's in fact about using food as a way to bring people together to create stronger social relationships at the same time.

There's then an issue about stories. One of the … the blind spots of the planners and developers and architects in many countries is they've ignored the fact that we want our places to have meaning, not just to be physically useful for us. And often that means working hard to try and construct myths, to construct legends and meanings ideally which link the past, the present and the future of a place.

There's some wonderful technologies which help that, mobile apps which tell you about what happened in the street you're walking along, mobilise all history of the people who lived there 20 years ago or 40 years ago or 100 years ago, and therefore make the city speak in different ways. And everywhere there are new ways of trying to mobilise people into reinventing their own histories. One of the pictures I'm showing on the screen at the moment may look like a battle between citizens and police but is in fact a re-enactment of a battle between citizens and police which was used to invest new meaning into a city in Yorkshire which had been profoundly coloured by the miner's strike of 15 years ago. And this matters greatly for new developments because if you don't create positive myths and stories, negative ones fill the space. There's a development about 20 years ago in Bristol called Bradley Stoke which, because no attention was paid to its identity, almost immediately got the label sadly broke, and 20 years on it's still known as Sadly Broke. And so it became a watch word for being a sink place where no-one would want to live or feel any pride in.

'Cause then I think an important issue about how you lead new places. And any new development, any new community almost by definition won't have its own leaders from the start. But I've become more and more convinced that unless right from the start you are nurturing leaders from the people who are moving into that place, you won't get a real sense of

community. Those leaders don't have to be people in their 40s or 50s, they can be the teenagers, they can be the children in primary school who often in fact play the critical role in creating community where there wasn't any. And critically too we need new methods of linking together leadership of the different tiers of government which always have a role to play in shaping the life of a community. It's one of the things we did with a project called the London Collaborative, was to try and train the leaders of London from the national governments, the city government and the local government to work together on collaborative problem solving so they could become better at making places work and learning habits of collaboration that when we move from the formal structures of power. And I think everywhere we're seeing governments trying to learn a different style of conversation with the public to deal with these fine grained issues of daily life, and I'm going to share here an example from Twitter. And this is an example of a citizen of one of the boroughs of London complaining that their local square was locked and that the local borough was being mean in having locked it up. And here you can see the council employee communicating back when in fact the parks were locked because of staff shortages and we hope to be able to open them tomorrow, please check here for updates. Then the next day they are open and the council employee apologises for the inconvenience and then the grateful citizen says hello, I am super-impressed, I'm going to blog about how brilliant you are. Now this is a very different style of day to day governance to that which most bureaucrats were trained in. It's about a normal every day kind of conversation with people, organised over social media, but transforming the relationship between citizen and state along the way.

The final thing I'd like to focus on is about numbers and measurement because I think one of the greatest challenges we have with cities and their social design is not knowing quite what to measure. We know how to measure economic growth and productivity, we know how to measure transport numbers and carbon emissions and so on. But are we actually measuring the things which really count in the real life of cities? We've been developing a new method to try and get under the surface of what explains why some communities work and tick and why others don't. And it's called WARM which stands for wellbeing and resilience measurement, and I won't talk it through in detail, but essentially what it tries to do is look at how an area is doing at the level of the individuals, at the level of the social supports people have, their supports from others, family, friends and so on, as well as the systemic, the structural conditions of the place, whether there are jobs in the local economy or whether the public services are working. It tries to then help the place identify its strengths and weaknesses, what strengths it can build and what vulnerabilities it has to address, and how to compare itself with other similar places in order then to guide an action plan.

Now all of this overlaps with a much bigger shift happening in measurement at the level of national governments around the world. But there's much more interest now, how do you measure not only your GDP, your physical facts of health and so on, but also people's wellbeing, how they feel about life. President Sarkozy in France has already committed France to measuring these sort of indicators alongside GDP and early next year the British government will almost certainly do the same. And once you start measuring feelings, feelings of wellbeing and so on, this forces you to look at places in a different way because it forces you to ask why in some places which appear on the surface to have the same level of material prosperity, why in some of them are people actually rather miserable, in others they're rather happy. And I think it opens up a much more productive discussion. And where I think this will take us is to a more sophisticated understanding of what we would call the feedback circuits which happen in any real living place. And these are essentially the messages the place tells you about whether you belong or not. And if you just think about where you live, think about walking the streets of the community where you live, you will be receiving a series of messages from your environment. They may be the message that you have friends and family in the area who you can turn to if things go wrong, if you become sick, let's say. It may be telling you that there are jobs for you and your children in the local economy or perhaps that there aren't jobs and there's discrimination. It may be telling you that there are people like you in positions of power and politics. It may be telling you the streets are safe or not safe. And we found that these feedback circuits are actually measurable and you can actually, for any community, work out what messages are going back to people and which ones need attention, which ones are essentially negative messages telling people they don't belong and which ones are positive messages telling them that they do.

Now in a way, all of this is about trying to reinforce natural human instincts because people are incredibly good at making sense and making order in almost any conditions: the slums of India or South America are in many ways very well run places where people have found community even in the least propitious circumstances. We know that most cities weren't in fact made for people, they were made for monarchs or they were made for trade or they were made for gods, and yet even in those cities people have made circuits, made homes, made places of belonging. And we also know what happens if the belonging is missing. And in many cities we're seeing trends like the trends I'm showing on the screen here from Britain which show that if you measure people's anxiety or depression, unfortunately it's going up in a fairly straight line compared to 10 or 20 years ago that even as we've become richer, and on the surface our cities have become much better places to live, something is missing. People's levels of happiness, their levels of wellbeing, their sense of safety has atrophied despite those good things.

In America, the proportion of people who say there's no-one to talk to about important things has gone up from one in 10, 20 years ago, to one in four today, a dramatic shift and a decline of social wealth that's happened alongside a great growth of economic wealth. And all of this I think is forcing us to pay much more attention to this kind of wealth we have, the wealth of other people, other people who are there to help us to meet our needs if other things don't work. And I think the whole question of social design is above all how do you enhance, invest in, reinforce the social wealth that matters so much to our daily life even if the economic wealth isn't working.

I want to end with a quote from a man called William Whyte. He asked a question, having looked at many cities and many urban developments and commented, it's difficult to design a place that will not attract people. What's remarkable is how often this has been accomplished. People want to believe in their cities, they want to live in them, they want to love them, they want to invest meaning into the places where they live and work and love and so on, and yet remarkably we've had generations of urban planners and developers who have made places which are soulless, which are not living, which are not loved. And for me the great question is how do we ensure that the cities we build now are ones that in 10, 20, 30 years' time people look back with gratitude to their builders, not with bafflement at how they could get things quite so wrong. Thank you.

(Applause)

JANE-FRANCES: Thank you, it was an enormous and rich story of things to discuss there and I'll take advantage of my position to ask the first question while you get yours ready. And it's to reflect a concern that someone had in a conversation we had earlier this morning. So we've been talking about what works for the social life of cities and for that to happen, do they need to create a whole new set of regulations? In fact I think he expressed his concern as if you mandate these things, isn't that a bit like Soviet Russia in fact undermining democracy?

GEOFF: One of the things which is most striking about everything I've talked about is that you'd have thought if you were a commercial developer you'd want to do all of these things, because if you get social design right, your buildings, your land is actually worth more in 10 or 20 or 30 years' time than if it has become unliveable, unloved, if it's descended into crime and riots which so many places have done. And yet in fact because of the business models used by developers were often there trying to get their money out within three, four, five years of a development being completed, their incentives are actually rather weak to do the right thing. So I think there is an argument that any government, any city to some extent does need to be a pressure on the developers to do the right thing, to encourage and even enforce greater investment in social infrastructure and social connection. But that shouldn't mean social engineering. And I think the difference between social design and social engineering is really summed up in the point about incompleteness: the best social design is not a prescriptive design which fills everything out, it's a design which leaves space for the people who move into an area to shape it according to their own desires, which leaves flexibility, leaves openness, leaves spaces undetermined and not defined in the master plan. And hopefully that is our protection against the Stalinist kind of hubris of social engineering and indeed many of the worst examples of what I've been talking about were of course in the Soviet block where whole cities were truly planned in detail by the planners and the architects and descended into being the most monstrous places to live and practice.

JANE-FRANCES: Yes, I heard someone else say it's not called master planning for nothing. When you ask a question, if you could just wait for the microphone to make its way to you, and then to just let us know who you are and where you're from, unless you're uncomfortable doing that, in which case, don't. But who would like to go first? There you go.

AUDIENCE: Hi, my name's Pete Banyard-Smith from Foundation for Young Australians. I'm interested that Geoff you started off by talking … making reference to a lot of buildings that were awarded prizes in their day for architecture. Is there already out there a mechanism for recognising and rewarding good social … some of what you're talking about around good social design? And if not, how might we get that ball moving as an incentive for the architects so they are not only getting designs for economic or ecological success but also the social aspect?

GEOFF: Well, it's often been said that architects should have to live in the buildings they design, and that if they did they might design the buildings differently. That's not always practical. But maybe there should be a rule that you can't get an award until at least 10 years after your buildings have been built, just to see what actually happens when real human beings live in them. And that might be a … in some ways an equivalent to what's being suggested in terms of financial rewards and bonuses in the big banks, that you shouldn't actually get a bonus until it's turned out that your decisions actually still looked good five years later rather than just rewarding the sort of short term hit of asset values. But I think there's also an opening perhaps for a new kind of measurement. And one we've been trying to persuade the property industry in the UK to think about is a very simple one where you do have some measurements of the quality of community life in different places, and you make it either mandated or perhaps the market drives it on its own, that whenever a house is advertised in a newspaper or online, that alongside the energy rating which rates, you know, how energy efficient is the house, there should be a very simple rating which tells you the quality of community life in the place where the house is. Now that is very relevant information for the house buyer, but it's quite difficult information for them to really get hold of at the moment. And I think if that was more overtly measured and made visible it probably would help to change the behaviour of the developers and get them to take social design more seriously.

JANE-FRANCES: It would be very difficult to be an auctioneer. Here, look, I can't tell whether you were stretching your fingers or would like to say something. No. Okay, we've got … there you go, up there, and then down here. Thank you, sorry.

AUDIENCE: Hi Geoff. David Klingberg from David Lock Associates. Geoff, how do you think the internet's changing the idea of community? And secondly, do you … it's being used a lot these days as … or mentioned a lot as a way of bringing community together. Are you fearful of it being seen as the panacea to do that or the way of achieving that?

GEOFF: Well a few years go the internet was seen as the enemy on this and it seemed quite plausible that if we all spent all our evenings sort of logged on to Facebook we'd never talk to our neighbours ever again, and that technology would kill community. And I think it's been in some ways a surprise for many people that the opposite often is the case, that it's often through the internet that you get to meet the people who live three doors down from you. It's through the internet that it's now much easier to organise the community lunch or event or outing for the children. So I'm pretty optimistic about what the internet can do for community. We've been, in the UK, working with quite a few places on building up these ultra local websites and finding, as I was saying, that they can do a lot of things which perhaps in the past would have happened automatically in the community, but they can make it easier for people to get things done. You can around them create all sorts of new community roles, particularly for older people. There's creating new roles of… so nature warden, guardian of local history and so on. And also new roles for younger people, for example being the kind of emissions or pollution police and keeping a little log on the local website is quite an interesting way of encouraging behaviour change in a community. It's certainly not a panacea for anything, and in a way the internet only works in these respects where it reinforces face to face action and encourages more face to face sort of community and engagement. But so far that seems to be what's happening more than … more than the opposite.

JANE-FRANCES: Down here, and then up there.

AUDIENCE: My name's Donald Bates from LAB Architecture Studio. First a comment. I think when you talk about the role of architects you give far too much authority to the architects having control, that you know, in the process of any building, it's not just the architects, it's the client, it's the regulations around a site, it's how it's programmed over time and so forth. I wanted to go back to when you first mentioned about some of the examples. In fact a lot of the examples that you showed of unsuccessful developments were basically state-sponsored developments. And so the role of the developer in that instance is actually the state. And I think there's a … in many instances there's a big disjunction in those projects of not applying commercial realities to a site. So there is a, you know, many of the social developments of housing and otherwise precluded commercial entrepreneurial developments as part of the project under the assumption that the state shouldn't be involved in commerce. And in fact that disjunction meant that these became quite singular and monolithic developments and monotonic developments because they don't have any density of operation, engagement and activation and it seems to me that's one of the problems, when they're seen as only coming from the state which itself refrains from being commercially relevant.

GEOFF: I think that's a very fair comment. I mean some of them were commercial developments but a reasonably high proportion of them were government ones. And even the ones in China today which are being in fact very much driven by commercial developers there, commercial developers with quite close links to the state, and all that we've learned about healthy urban development says mix in the market, mix in the spaces for entrepreneurialism, for changing uses and so on, again reinforcing my point about incompleteness, about leaving space to breath. But I guess the challenge I'd make to the architects and the developers and everyone else, not least because we're in a university here, is what strikes me, the whole field I've been talking about is that there's something going wrong with the way knowledge is orchestrated in this field. We have thousands of years of human history where we've learned about how settlements work or don't work. We've had 50 to 100 years of fairly similar urban developments in and around advanced industrial nations. Some of the knowledge about how to do things, for example how do you plan roads, how do you lay water infrastructures, how do you plan hospitals is quite easy to find that knowledge. It's now even quite easy to find the knowledge about how you design in for very low carbon footprints to a new urban development. But if you try and find the sort of knowledge I'm talking about, the knowledge about social design, no-one quite owns the task of orchestrating, synthesising, making that knowledge available to the people who are day to day making decisions, who are architects, planners, developers, clients and indeed the residents themselves. And each group will say actually it's not really our job, it's not our fault. The architects will say it's the developer's job. The developers will say actually it's the planner's job. The planners will say well maybe it's the government's job or the … so the consumer demand should be asking for the right kind of social design. And as a result I think we've got this very strange situation, a crucial body of knowledge which makes an enormous difference to how good our lives are, is not really owned and orchestrated by anyone. And I think one of the tasks for universities, and for perhaps schools like yours, is how do we build in to the training of the next generation of architects, developers, planners and so on, that they're as confident and sophisticated in social design as they are quickly becoming confident and sophisticated about ecological design.

AUDIENCE: I was wondering if high rises represent significant impediment to the implementation of the social coherence and whether you can rehabilitate high rise situations with the kind of social models that you're talking about?

GEOFF: Well the organisation Why Work began its life in the mid-1950s when Michael Young issued a tirade against high rise developments around London and argued that they were destroying community and family and in the name of progress actually playing a very regressive role. And certainly a lot of high rise has been pretty damaging to social interaction in the past as people end up fearful, cowering in their own homes, not getting on with each other. And if you visit many of the more recent Chinese high rises, they are pretty bleak places where, with extraordinary speed, pretty strong community support networks have almost completely disappeared. That said, I actually think high rise does still have a role to play and for certain kinds of group, including perhaps often ageing population, surprisingly, the right kinds of high

rise, so long as the lifts work, so long as there is good social support and so on, can actually be more effective and efficient than low density, low rise housing. And some of the worst examples of award winning places which went terribly wrong in Britain, for example, around Newcastle or Marsh Farm in Luton, these are places, estates which at first glance look relatively pleasant places of two story houses, with plots of land around them. It was because everything else about their social design went disastrously wrong, they ended up with riots and misery. So this is again why it's always important to think of the interaction between the physical and the social rather than seeing the physical design as either the source of all the problems or as the source of all the solutions.

AUDIENCE: I'm Lou [unclear – Sauer? RMIT 46:24] and I'm an architect. Most of my … all of my practice has been in North America, in Canada, in the United States. I've lived here in Melbourne for the past 10 years. In all of my housing, I'm a housing expert working with developers, and in my projects anywhere from say 10 to 20 units all the way to a new town community I designed outside of Montreal for 10,000 dwelling units, in not one of them was I able to get corner stores. It's called spot zoning. Present day zoning dislikes spot zoning. And if you look at the history of zoning starting back in your England at the turn of the last century, people wanted to get away from industry. And then the modern idea of zoning was if you could name it, separate it. Right? Now the other thing that I found is that all the suburban areas that I've lived with, and in the people that I have been designing for, none of them want to be disrupted in their life. They want isolation. So I think the major thing is not to talk to the developers or the planners or a government, but talk to the people and explain to them on how diversity is desirable for their life. And in turn they will then exert, I would hope in a democracy, pressure on government, and in turn on the planning and design professionals.

GEOFF: I think you're absolutely right on zoning. The whole really ideology of zoning grew up because it grew up at a time when industry was noisy, polluting and what you wanted to be away from if you were a residential area. Today not much of that really applies and almost any new town you want work and life to be as integrated as possible, not as separate as possible. You want it to be easy for people to live without having to commute very far. You want it to be possible to have houses which are designed in a way that if you want to have a little bit of them as a studio, an office, is relatively easy for you to do so, which is a completely different mindset from that of 50 years ago or 100 years ago, as you were saying. There is still I think some zoning needed in any kind of community. You don't want to have necessarily your 24 … your sort of night clubs closing at 4:00am right next to your residential care for old people, and night life to some extent does need to be separated from day life. But the whole logic of work and daily life I think is very different from what it was in the past. And interestingly this is where I think public views and demands are so important. If you simply survey the public about what kind of housing they want, certainly in Britain and I've seen this in other parts of Australia, people very much offer a sort of vision of detachment, they want space for their two or three cars, they want to be away from other people, there's a dream of literally detached housing, detached gardens and so on. If you then engage them in a much more serious conversation about their needs over 10, 20, 30 years into the future, if you talk people through, imagining their children growing up from being small children to becoming teenagers, to leaving home, you tend to then end up with a rather different set of answers where people want more flexible housing, housing where there is more mutual support with their community, perhaps even housing where as they grow old, they are able to adapt their uses, perhaps share … move to a smaller house at the end of the garden where their kids take over the main house and so on. And I think it's the quality of conversation is absolutely critical to this issue. And on the website we set up called future communities, we've shared a whole series of methods which were essentially methods for engaging existing and new residents in a serious deep conversation about their needs, which doesn't just take the current needs at face value but allows people to think through different scenarios, and to imagine themselves 20, 30, 40 years into the future, because as I said, we are now the generation whose life expectancy is so much greater potentially than the life expectancy of our buildings. But we don't think that way. We don't appreciate that every hour our life expectancy, average life expectancy is going up 15 minutes. We need to think in very different ways about the patterns of our own life as well as the patterns of the buildings we need.

JANE-FRANCES: Michael. Right.

AUDIENCE: Geoff, Michael Lennon from Housing Choices Australia. Two points, one a general and one a specific one. The general point is I was struck in your presentation by the challenge of, if you like defining the problem that we're trying to address here because especially some things are spatially expressed in our neighbourhood or a place. But they're actually not spatially derived or they're a-spatial and so we deal with poverty or loneliness, it's very difficult to express those in terms of a fault in design or a place, they might be contributing but they're not the primary driver. But as there are some things which are expressly spatial in social policy around housing and public spaces and so on, so I was interested in that separation and especially for people in planning or the urban professions, how do we give greater specificity to the factors that can actually make a difference as opposed to things that are important, but essentially outside their influence. And the more specific question is I was struck in terms of your principles that there was no reference to activity centres and the changing nature of retailing, for example, and the way in which people access services and that kind of whole debate that's been in the UK about out of town centres and the destruction of the inner cities, and especially I guess the difficulties now in urban growth management, about designing these large spaces which become monopoly driven by commercial interests and are therefore devoid from some of the attributes you talked about.

GEOFF: Well we've had years of development very much driven by retail and finances, the two main drivers, which has left quite a lot of places, all identical and at risk of being rather soulless because they have sucked the life away from other kinds of public space. I've … certainly in Britain it feels like that sort of era may not have come to an end but it certainly to a degree burnt itself out, partly thanks to the financial crisis. And what are the different models of development look likely to take over. I'm not sure it's quite clear what there would be, but one interesting thought experiment is to imagine if you were designing your cities now through the lens not of retailing but of what already is the biggest industry in every developed economy which is health. And you made actually health the driving purpose of how you shape cities to encourage people to feel healthy, to be healthy, to do things in a different way. Now if you take that seriously you quite quickly end up with very different ideas about your roads and your passageways and your city centres and so on and you end up with a vision which actually people rather like when they're shown it and able to shape it and one they like rather more than towns determined by shopping centres entirely. And I think it relates to your point about isolation. I mean each of you ask what can you do to design out isolation for large numbers of older people where, as in the UK or the US, many people just don't talk to anyone week to week, sometimes even month to month. What can you do to change that? Now the answers maybe a little bit to do with physical design, and certainly if you do physically design more co-housing for older people and so on, you will get somewhat less isolation. But I think this is more about social design in the sense which I mean it which is design which isn't necessarily design of physical structures, but design of social structures. So within in a let's say a housing block or a street, there is one person who has a role as concierge, part of his job is to make sure that everyone is being talked to at least once every two or three days, who's there to notice if someone isn't going out at all, getting any visitors. You have actually a fairly practical answer to loneliness which doesn't require any changes to capital spending and physical structures, but is entirely about social design. And there are many, many other examples of that kind of fairly simple adjustments which can reduce the experience of loneliness. But one of my complaints, I guess, to the architecture and development professions is I don't hear much coming from them about what they're going to do to reduce what already is an epidemic of isolation and loneliness in most cities. Again they're saying that is someone else's problem, not theirs, and yet the buildings, the blocks, the communities they're building now will be ones housing a quite rapidly aging population in the future, and if they're not attending to that problem now, the likelihood of those being places of intense loneliness and isolation will be pretty high.

JANE-FRANCES: We've got three minutes left. I've got two questioners ready to go. Gentleman down here and a woman up the back. If I could ask both questioners and our esteemed answerer to keep their questions and responses in the context of having three minutes left, given that people have two o'clock things to get to, that would be fantastic, thank you.

AUDIENCE: Okay, my question's about demographic shifts as well, in that you've touched on single person homes and older … and the ageing population. Looking forward into to other

demographic shifts, I'm interested in what's being thought about in terms of young people. So we have the bubble wrap generation, we have very tribal young people, we have young people who are more and more coming from single child families. So what's the thinking around social design for young people generally?

JANE-FRANCES: Well let me take the other question and then you can answer them both together, would be great.

AUDIENCE: Geoffrey [unclear 57:19] from Monash Sustainability Institute. You've not mentioned the big society and the current government's stance in the UK and the extent to which this might be a platform for the sorts of innovations you're talking about, and the extent to which new institutional innovation, refocus on mutuals, community based distributed energy or water systems might be built into that.

GEOFF: Okay. Well the first question, well both are really good questions. And on the first one, I think there is a definite risk of young people being over-isolated from each other, perhaps over-driven to get exam results and so on, and therefore not being able to take part in the social design and social life of the places they live. Quite a lot of the work of my organisation is essentially trying to answer variants of your question, which ranges from the new schools we're creating, studio schools of which there'll be about 20 to 25 within two years, which are putting the learning of essentially social skills, how do you work with others in teams, how do you sort of get the confidence of working with other adults, and putting that at the core of the design of these schools rather than seeing it as an add on to a traditional curriculum. And our hope is and our field trials have shown this, this produces young people much more able to really become active players, even leaders in their communities. We're also running a whole series of projects around youth leadership for under 18s, and again giving them roles of leadership not just amongst young people but in the wider community. One of the reasons I quite like these things like ultra local websites is you can actually put young people in control of them so they are actually managing the local news, managing the local time banks and by doing so not only helping to reduce the risks of intergenerational conflict etc, but also learning absolutely vital skills about how to be a real human being, a full citizen in a way that our schools don't really adequately develop those capabilities. And in a way that is I think what is … if there's anything meaningful in the idea of the big society, a slogan used by the current British government which some people have criticised for being at risk of being a bit vapid, it becomes meaningful essentially if people can exercise real power in the communities where they live. And as you say, Ray, there are many institutional innovations which can help that, these ultra local sort of websites and new services are part of that community, land trusts are other examples, neighbourhood level governance structures which have real power to levy some taxes and take some decisions over planning and so on will be announced by the government in Britain in a few weeks time. These are all ways I think of making that community empowerment tangible and real, and hopefully if you can get those institutions to bring together young and old, men and women, people of different races, you can use those to build the habits of community in its real sense in a way that perhaps our current institutions aren't doing so well.

JANE-FRANCES: Thank you. Let me finish with a very quick plug for a piece … a discussion paper that we're putting together at Grattan on cities and social interaction. And look out for that in December. And if it doesn't come in December we got overwhelmed by Christmas, and it'll be there early February, but we're definitely aiming for December. Let me thank you all for coming and for the consideration you've put into listening and into your questions, but most of all join my in thanking Geoff. As you've seen, he's worth listening to.

(Applause)

AUDIO: This has been a podcast from Grattan Institute. Want to hear more? Check out our website, www.grattan.edu.au.

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