

Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre

Talk by Dr Wendy Sarkissian LFPIA

***Not in my backyard:
Community responses to higher density living - is it all in the mind?***

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**Allan Scott Auditorium, UniSA City West Campus,
Hawke Building, Level 3, 55 North Terrace, Adelaide**



Greetings and welcome, everyone!

I offer my deepest respects to the Karuna people of the Adelaide Plains and to their elders past and present. Their care for this country over many thousands of years has enriched it beyond imagining and I sincerely thank them for that.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to Liz Ho, Louse Carnell, Rosanna Galvin and the staff of the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre for many, many kindnesses.

Adelaide has been in my heart since I migrated here from Canada in 1968 in my mid-twenties. The Dustan-era Adelaide transformed my life, opened me to planning, housing, activism and feminism and grounded me in what I now regard as my spiritual home. As I walk around this City, I can see my younger self marching for good causes down so many Adelaide streets. Particularly in the City of Adelaide, every corner evokes a memory for me. I can smell it, sense it, taste it: a memory of passionate, principled people speaking out in our attempts to create a more equitable society.

We have an honourable tradition of speaking out in this State and in this City. I feel as though I am contributing to that legacy in speaking with you tonight.

In the Jarlanbah community

If I don't tell you, you'll soon find out that I live in an eco-village in Nimbin!

Rural paradise, you might think.

But, I have to tell you that my neighbours on the 46 half-acre lots in my small community, Jarlanbah (*Place of the Rainbow*) are awash with anger and frustration about proposed housing density increases. On my doorstep. A spoonful of my own medicine. Or just bad karma, the locals say.

Andrew who lives on Lot 35 wanted to put a kitchenette into his shed and turn it into a dual occupancy so he could rent it and get a small income stream. The building was already there.

"I did not move here to live in the inner city of Redfern", hollered my neighbours at the explosive community meeting.

My husband and I – next in line to renovate our shed – were also in their sights.

“This will result in the forced extinction of all our wallabies, antechinus and echidnas”, my neighbour David screamed at me, trembling with rage.

I spent many months – and a lot of professional advice from planning theorists, mediators and wise friends – unpacking what they were *really* saying.

Truly, they weren’t really expecting all the local native animals to die. Not really. They were saying things about what they loved and valued about living in Jarlanbah.

But it took me a very long time to hear that.

Because the language said something else.

But underneath and within the language was another story... a story of place-protective behaviour.

The turbulent river

I am here tonight to speak about the turbulent river of so-called NIMBY behaviour and opposition to higher density housing and its two tributaries:

- (1) insensitive housing design that reflects a lack of appreciation and understanding of the core significance of “home” in our lives;

and

- (2) Inexpert and insensitive community engagement processes about proposed housing density increases that are inadequate to the task of dealing with the strong emotions generated by place attachment.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to share my bewilderment with you.

I hope that together we can have a good discussion – about issues that **MUST** concern all housing, planning and community engagement folks.

My own housing situation is all about so-called NIMBY-type behaviour, as it turns out.

I expect that we all know that community opposition to higher density housing and infill development is alive and well – here, in the USA, in Canada, the UK – in *many* countries. It’s such a common experience that we even have acronyms that we use to sum up and – let’s admit it – dismiss the comments and perspectives of the opponents.

- *NIMBY: Not in my backyard*
- *BANANA: Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything*
- *NIMTOO: Not in my term of office*

Recently, I was talking with Ned Jacobs, Jane’s son, in Vancouver. Ned commented that his mother really disliked the NIMBY label, largely because it didn’t tell us anything about the reasons — and they may be numerous and quite distinct from one another — why people are opposed to a development. He said it lumps together people who may have very different reasons for their opposition, some of which may have nothing to do with being against increasing housing density, *per se*.

I believe Ned’s onto something important.

So here’s my first question:

*What if so-called NIMBYism were justified because what is planned for your backyard was really something that shouldn’t be in your backyard? (a **design** question)*

Now, I am not talking about *BANANA* – I’m talking about neighbour resistance to housing density increases that people experience as happening *in their backyard*. And **backyard** is important in this context. This is about the proposed new housing planned for a lower density neighbourhood that has not had much of that – at least, not yet!

My second question today is this:

*What if our new higher density housing were truly “home-like” and fitted well with and into neighbouring housing and residential neighbourhoods? (a **design** question)*

And a third question:

*What if everything we learned – and knew – about housing – as planners, developers and members of the land professions generally – in the 1960s and 1970s – were brought to light and brought to bear in the creation of – and community engagement about – increased housing densities in lower density neighbourhoods? (a **design** and **engagement** question)*

Would it make any difference?

Are these issues important?

Recently I spent a month teaching at Harvard and living in Boston. The people I spoke with in Boston reminded me of the building blocks of community psychology in the 1960s and 1970s, when many critics and researchers explored the effects of the forced relocation of the multi-ethnic residential community from Boston’s West End. In all, 2700 families were displaced from the 46-acre site to make way for only 5 buildings with 477 high-rise, luxury apartments -- and government buildings.

Even the road pattern was eradicated.

To force them out, the City of Boston condemned the buildings and then stopped collecting rubbish and cleaning the streets.

Here’s the *Last Tenement House* – the only residential building that is still standing.

We studied that horrible case when I was a planning student at Adelaide University in the early seventies. The worst of the worst examples of urban renewal.

The American community psychologist, Marc Fried, spent several years with West Enders researching the psychological effects of their forced dislocation. More than 90 percent showed symptoms of depression. Fried concluded that cohesive neighbourhoods provide residents with a feeling of rootedness that is essential in maintaining a sense of identity and purpose.

His study also helped establish that people can grieve for the loss of something other than a loved *person*. Today, it’s estimated that 40 percent of former residents suffer from severe long-term grief reactions.

I walked around that “50 acres of emptiness” in Boston in late February of this year.

It was very cold and I struggled to breathe. Under the traffic noise from the nearby freeway, I heard terrible sounds: the voices of the women – still crying. Still grieving. Grieving for their lost home. Suffering now encoded in the fabric of the landscape.

I stood in the snow outside the West End Museum on a cold, windswept day in that drab, bare wasteland. Gasping for breath, I felt much, *much* more shock than I had expected. Nothing could have prepared me for this.

Gone, all gone.

Since physically it’s gone, for the displaced residents who are still *living*, the old West End is now only a “neighbourhood of the mind”: a landscape of memory.

Back in the seventies, we learned from this disaster: We learned that forced relocation – when you are physically torn from your core territory of home – breaks you and it breaks your heart. It destroys people, neighbourhoods AND communities. And the grieving persists

The British sociologist, Peter Marris, who lived in Boston in the seventies, writing in *Loss and Change* (1974) argued that:

“People cannot reconcile themselves to the loss of familiar attachments in terms of some impersonal utilitarian calculation of the common good.

They have to find their own meaning in these changes before they can live with them” (1974: 156).¹

Peter also suggested general principles for reducing the traumatic impacts of an event **before** it took place, as well as assisting in psychological recovery after the change has been introduced.

Instead of resisting, vilifying or dismissing communities’ resistance to change, we might be better off **slowing down to the psychological limits of what communities can handle** and preparing people well before we introduce major social change.

He suggested giving affected communities **a lot of advanced notice** to prepare mentally for a change (as abrupt change tends to be more traumatic than expected change).

Just ask the descendants of the thousands of Aboriginal people – in our country and my birth country – who were forcibly removed from their traditional homes and lands. Giovanni Attili and Leonie Sandercock have documented that pain in their powerful new film about First Nations people in northern British Columbia: *Finding Our Way* (2010).²

In the sixties and seventies, when I was a young activist planner and planning academic in Adelaide, sociologists and psychologists still hung out with planners. I was one of them.

But somehow we’ve forgotten the wisdom of those wise, heart-centered and thoughtful Boston researchers. Many Australians are highly critical of planning in the United States. Yet what we’ve done in Australia – tearing down public housing estates and destroying longstanding, close-knit communities, especially in southwestern Sydney – is a national disgrace.

So we must relearn these lessons because there appears to be no repository of this knowledge with its painful and hard-won lessons.

Perhaps this is an example of professional and institutional amnesia: the sort that occurs when a dominant paradigm cleanses history and excludes “the inconvenient truth”.

The same goes for the psychology of housing and the psychology of place...

For *that* body of core knowledge, we need to tie on our headbands and rainbow scarves and journey back to Berkeley, not Boston, in the seventies, not the sixties. In that decade, when I taught at Berkeley, environmental psychologists all over this country (and a few in Australia) were contributing to an understanding of the psychology, meaning, symbolism and effects of the core territory of “home”.

My mentor, Clare Cooper Marcus, was among them.

Yet that work seems – like the Boston work a decade before – to have sunk from sight. At least where local government planners, developers and politicians are concerned. Sunk like a stone. It’s fully alive in other fields but dead to us in planning.

What I’m saying is that there *was* a time when we in the land and community-building professions **knew** about the building blocks of good housing and good neighbourhoods.

That knowledge influenced the education of thousands of planners and architects. And more than a few principled developers.

¹ Marris, Peter (1974). *Loss and Change*. New York: Pantheon Books.

² Attili, Giovanni and Leonie Sandercock (2010). *Finding Our Way: Neba wheti hon'a e kwuznut*. 90-minute documentary (Vancouver: Moving Images distributor). See: <http://www.mongrel-stories.com/films/finding-our-way/>

I know, as a practitioner, that we *did* discuss those matters – that body of research and knowledge – when we planned suburbs and residential neighbourhoods. It DID influence us. I KNOW that. I was there in the thick of it planning new suburbs and the schools to go in them --- in Adelaide.

There was a richness and texture to our conversations in those days. But not NOW.

We've lost that – just as we lost the West End lessons.

We've lost – or we've forgotten – the basic, fundamental building blocks of the professional practice that might – just might – help us create more *acceptable* higher density housing and encourage its positive reception in existing residential neighbourhoods.

Today I'm going to share some of my recollections of this lost material, this forgotten discourse. The sixties and the seventies.

And to suggest how we could use those old/new insights to influence our *current* community engagement processes about proposed housing density increases.

But before I embark on my wander down *Memory Lane*, I'm going to foreshadow what I believe a reconsideration of our forgotten knowledge might mean for **community engagement practices**.

The discourse I'm about to describe has a very "seventies" quality to it, like the village where I live. My model is based on a deep respect for the pivotal concept of "place attachment".

Daily, in my consulting practice, I encounter the dominant paradigm: the deficiencies of current community engagement practices. Everywhere – in my consulting practice: a shallow meanness, a tightening, harshness... Particularly in local councils and among developers, the risk managers and spin doctors are in the ascendancy; their victims are harmony, collaboration, creativity and inclusiveness.

It's almost impossible to be caring and completely impossible to be "loving" in such a harsh and alienating environment.

I have spent 44 years working in community engagement in every Australian state and territory (and 17 years in Adelaide, which I regard as my home town) and my considered view is that *only loving attention* can help us with this problem.

Truly, I mean it!

Academic planners like Australians Leonie Sandercock and Libby Porter – and Karen Umemoto and Aftab Erfan -- are now writing directly and explicitly about "What's Love Got to Do with It?" in *Planning Theory & Practice* (December 2012). I'm with *them*. I never thought I'd see the day!

Aftab writes:

To know you is to love you.

*Over the months of my so-called research
You have emerged
Like a three dimensional world
Out of a pop-up book
The flat version of which I had read
too many times.*

*Now you're standing before me
With all your strength
And all your vulnerability on display.*

*To have seen your suffering up close
Is to look at you with new,
far more appreciative, eyes.³*

³ Erfan, Aftab and Leonie Sandercock (2012). "Plato's Lacunae: On the Value of Loving Attachment in Community-Based Planning Research and Practice" in Libby Porter, Leonie Sandercock and Karen

My model for community engagement addressing so-called NIMBY issues is about **LOVE**. In my model, **L** is for listening, **O** is for openness, **V** is for validation and **E** is for community education.

I'm all for approaches that enable community capacity strengthening. We need to help community members understand the deep and complex sustainability reasons behind housing density increases. However, I believe we make a *huge* mistake when we try to educate people **first** – before we listen openly to them and validate what they have to say to *us*.

As I am suggesting that we need to go back to the sixties and the seventies, I present my model graphically in an appropriately hippie fashion.

So, I'm advocating that we engage with so-called NIMBY responses with community engagement processes that are deeply respectful, with more than enough time for the **L** of listening (the *social policy of everyday life*, as John Forester would have it); that we model the **O** of openness and inclusivity in our processes; that we **V**, validate and respect community members' views.

Influence

In validating local views, we must work especially diligently to address the issue of the *influence* of community members – so brilliantly highlighted in Roz Lasker and John Guidry's latest book, *Engaging the Community in Decision Making: Case Studies Tracking Participation, Voice and Influence*.⁴ For them (focussing on influence by marginalised groups) community engagement is like running in a relay (baton) race.

Unless you are actually in the baton race, at the starting line, starting on time, are running in a lane, carrying a baton (your precious local knowledge or information), able to jump hurdles on an uneven track, keep the baton in your hand and pass it to someone who can cross the line and hand it to an "expert" [who will inevitably have a "blind spot"]...), your views have little or no chance of having "influence".

Our **V** for *Validation* must include *influence*.

And finally (*not* firstly), we come to the **E** of **LOVE**: *Education*.

We must develop strategies to build and strengthen community capacity, literacy and knowledgeability about why housing density increases are important for sustainability. A huge battle has been waging for more than two decades about this matter in Australia: *Does housing density really achieve sustainability objectives?* (Please, God, we are *not* going down that road...)

Today, so that we can all leave here before midnight, I am going to *assume* that increasing housing densities has ecological and sustainability benefits and that we ought to find ways to educate community members about those imperatives.

I discuss how that community education should occur in chapter 5 of my book, *Kitchen Table Sustainability: Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability* (2009).⁵

I'd transform community engagement processes from the shallow, mean-spirited and stingy, mingy things they are today into a process based on love.

My experience teaches me that processes infused with loving attention would work a certain magic on even the hardest heart. I

I've seen that happen. Often.

Umemoto, eds. "What's love got to do with it? illuminations on loving attachment in planning", *Planning Theory & Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 593–627, December.

⁴ Lasker, Roz Diane and John A Guidry (2009). *Engaging the Community in Decision Making: Case Studies Tracking Participation, Voice and Influence*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company Ltd.

⁵ Sarkissian, Wendy *et al.* (2009) *Kitchen Table Sustainability: Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability*. London: Earthscan.

But what of housing *design*?

We all know that some infill housing is simply awful. Woeful. Not home-like. It looks like offices or factories, is harsh, not domestic in scale or appearance... causes problems with privacy, overlooking overshadowing... It rarely "fits in" because many designers, seeking peer accolades and representation in the glossies, want their housing to "stand out". It does not look as though it belongs in *my* backyard.

What to do in *that* regard?

We'll need more than loving attention to remedy the design of some of the new higher density housing I've seen in recent years – and it's not only in Australia!

Here's some new housing in central Adelaide on a bitterly contested site that had been pretty much promised by the City politicians and the planners to Urban Ecology for an eco-village.

And here's what Paul Downton did down the road.

They built one highly successful village in central Adelaide (Christie Walk) but they failed to get this one approved. I walked it in March with my friend, Dr Paul Downton, the architect.

In the home-like Christie Walk, developed from 1999 to 2006, the overall strategy used high internal mass within highly insulated envelopes with multiple user-controlled ventilation options and thermal flues. Vegetation and outdoor spaces are an integral part of the passive house design approach. Smaller house plan areas have a **quality** of space considered more important than mere **quantity**. The first cottage built on the site is a two-storey, two-bedroom straw bale house of just 55m^{2,6}.

The City of Adelaide may have rejected a second Christie Walk for Adelaide, but, let me tell you, it's very, very famous interstate and overseas. Just ask the people who run the tours there on a regular basis.

What Christie Walk has is what leading-practice medium-density housing needs.

Here are a few images of what it would look like if we did it properly – from recent research I undertook for the Council of Mayors of Southeast Queensland.⁷

And this is how these principles are embodied in the sensitive site planning and design of the 40-year-old Manitoba site, currently slated for urban renewal by RenewalSA. Back in 1972 and 1973, respected Adelaide architect, Ian Hannaford, knew exactly what he was doing.

I was on the Housing Trust Board in those days with Hugh Stretton. We knew our work was at the leading edge.

The lessons converge

So this is where the two sets of lessons:

(1) grieving for a lost home in the sixties in Boston

and

(2) the psychology of home in the seventies in Berkeley

..... converge, in my opinion.

This is where place psychology, place attachment, the psychology of home, place-protective behaviour and the interconnected fields of community psychology, environmental psychology and humanistic psychology come into play with regard to so-called NIMBY responses to proposed housing density increases.

⁶ www.urbanecology.org.au/eco-cities/christie-walk/

⁷ Council of Mayors Southeast Queensland (2012). *Open Space and Medium-Density Housing Toolkit*. <http://www.sarkissian.com.au/consulting-services-offered-by-wendy-sarkissian-phd/housing-services-by-wendy-sarkissian-phd/medium-density-housing/>

Back to the turbulent river...

Just as I am suggesting that we need to engage with **LOVE**, we need to design with **heart** and put the **heart** back into the design process. And that means designing with an understanding of people's heartfelt attachments to *home*.

Because the intensity of people's reactions to proposed housing density increases is such a *huge* issue for planners and developers, we must identify some of the building blocks of territoriality, place attachment and place protection and the psychology of housing to gain insights into what's happening to neighbours when they get so upset.

What exactly have we forgotten?

This is some of the 'psychological' material we've forgotten from the seventies. Ten major categories of information, just for starters...

I'll briefly touch on each of them now...

1. Environmental psychology
2. Place, place attachment and placelessness
3. The territorial core
4. Housing messages
5. The threshold
6. Congruence or "fit"
7. Privacy: frontstage and backstage
8. Identity, image and housing form
9. Personalisation
10. The house as mirror of the self

Environmental psychology and place

Recently, I discussed this matter with Boston-based John Zeisel⁸, whose path-breaking book, *Inquiry by Design*, is now in a revised second edition.⁹

His new book has a new chapter on the implications of neuroscience research for planning and design.

In this new book, Zeisel argues that:

"if a new paradigm is to further the discipline of environment-behavior studies [which I believe has faded from the planning discourse], it must shed new light on old concepts and introduce new concepts, methods, theories and models."

For Zeisel, *place*, *personalization*, *territory* and *wayfinding* are four topics that form the core of environment-behavior (E-B) theory and practice. Critically, they also "play a central role in the evolution of the brain in all animals, including *Homo sapiens*."¹⁰

So ... if we accept the importance of these old/new components of what we might call "residential satisfaction of the neighbours", then we can look more deeply into what's going on.

And perhaps, armed with this forgotten knowledge, planners, developers and architects could start creating housing that is more home-like – in the deepest, most symbolic and significant sense of the term.

⁸ See Hearthstone Alzheimer's Care: <http://www.thehearth.org/>

⁹ Zeisel, John (1981). *Inquiry by Design: Tools for Environment-Behavior Research*. Monterey: Brooks/Cole. Revised edition, 2006: *Inquiry by Design: Environment/Behavior/ Neuroscience in Architecture*, Interiors, Landscape and Planning. Revised edition. New York and London: W/W. Norton.

¹⁰ Zeisel, 2006: Chapter 14.

So where are we in our journey tonight?

I've suggested that shallow and mean-spirited approaches to community engagement that vilify so-called NIMBYites won't work, but that engagement approaches aligned with loving attachment and **LOVE** might.

I've also suggested that creating new housing that looks and feels like home, that obeys some basic, archetypal rules and acknowledges the psychological and symbolic components—for both residents AND neighbours — might help.

So, to conclude: what can we do – here in South Australia?

It's a great mystery to me why these precious and relevant environment-behaviour discourses have sunk from sight in the land professions.

If anyone understands *why*, I'd be delighted to discuss it. Please!

However, to the business at hand: I'm a planner. I believe that, as planners must do the following seven things:

Above all:

- (1) We must take action on these matters without delay. **Inclusion** is at risk here. **THIS MEANS** that we must support affordable housing and ethnically and culturally mixed communities, as effective so-called NIMBY-type strategies work to defend neighbourhoods against social and tenure mix and other forms of integration and inclusion.

With respect to Tributary 1: housing design:

- (2) We must be more curious about and respectful of the deeper messages about home and territory that so-called NIMBYites are communicating. **THIS MEANS** deep listening, keeping our cool and not labelling, vilifying or jumping to conclusions about people's motives.
- (3) We must retrieve and embrace our lost sociological and psychological wisdom about what makes for good housing and good neighbourhoods. **THIS MEANS** that we need more responsible respect for place attachment and human ties to place and territory. We need to understand better the dynamics of place-protective behaviour.
- (4) We must work to create more sensitively designed higher density housing – as if it were going into **our own** backyards. **THIS MEANS** using guidelines based on evidence-based research about what works in higher density housing and using those guidelines that guide our design to assess the effectiveness of the result – from the residents' and the neighbours' perspectives.
- (5) We must pay careful – and loving – attention – to the **fine grain** of housing design. *The divine dwells in the details.* **THIS MEANS** that, while we must work effectively at all scales to achieve what residents and neighbours experience as “good design”, tiny details matter greatly. In a high-crime neighbourhood, if I can see who is at the door before opening it, it's a great boon. It won't cost more, but it needs forethought.

With respect to Tributary 2: community engagement:

- (6) We must transform our weak, shallow and inexpert community engagement processes into leading practice. **THIS MEANS** paying specific attention to the principles of loving attachment and **LOVE: listening, openness, validation and education.** South Australia has more wisdom in this regard than any place I know. Let's tap into it.

There are some very hopeful new signs with the proposal from the State Government for a Community Engagement Board.

- (7) We must evoke the memory of Boston's West End and remember what happens when we mess with the fundamentals of housing and neighbourhoods.

THIS MEANS that we need to be very, very careful about how we do urban renewal anywhere – AND in the City of Adelaide. It's a very delicate matter and we must proceed with the greatest of care. We need to ask ourselves, what messages are we sending out, particularly to vulnerable public tenants? We've avoided the worst urban renewal mistakes of the other states for decades – let's not turn back the clock now and start making those obvious mistakes that others now deeply regret.

In general: if we are to develop higher density housing that is inclusive and welcoming, we must take decisive action. And quickly.

THIS MEANS our state and local governments need to work together. We've had enough rhetoric. We now need practical advice.

Here are my commitments and my suggestions:

We have a huge responsibility here.

These are urgent matters of direct relevance to everyone who cares about planning and community engagement in our cities today.

We urgently need cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary collaboration on these urgent matters.

Could there be a role for our Adelaide universities in this work? I'd eagerly participate, coordinate, collaborate...

I am eager to pursue this work in practical terms and to collaborate with other scholars, researchers and practitioners in all the land professions.

I would be willing to offer a short course on the social design issues raised in this paper at any university (or universities) that would like to have such a course. Perhaps a summer course sponsored by a number of Adelaide-based universities and the Government of South Australia in collaboration with the Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute in Perth, where the Director, Professor Peter Newman, is a passionate advocate for housing density increases.

I am an Adjunct Associate Professor there and would certainly try to make something creative and relevant happen.

I know from decades of teaching that there is a great hunger for this learning and that, once it is offered, it is readily embraced.

We could call the course *Housing Density and Social Factors for Planners and Designers*

or

How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love High-Density Housing.

Is anyone interested in working with me? Let's talk later.

NIMBY clearinghouse

I am also in the process of setting up an online NIMBY psychology clearinghouse and am looking for student researchers to work with me. This is unfunded work but I already have three overseas postgraduate planning students signed ready to begin work with me in June.

* * *

I am honoured to be speaking at the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre today in what I regard as my Australian home town. Thank you, again.

I have a dear, wise friend who grew up in public housing in South Plympton. Her mother worked in a factory and her father was a bartender.

She's taught me a lot about housing, responsibility, relationships and place attachment over the 39 years I've been her friend.

I close with her words -- my friend, Adelaide born and bred, planning theorist, Professor Leonie Sandercock – from her recent article on loving attachment:

*The chemistry of attachment
is relationship*

*The ethics of attachment
is responsibility.*

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