Discourses of community in urban waterfront regeneration: the case study of the Port Adelaide waterfront redevelopment.

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Abstract: Increasingly property led urban waterfront regeneration projects offer highly choreographed and packaged lifestyles that construct new forms of community under the guise of social sustainability. While the term ‘community’ is subject to multiple meanings waterfront redevelopments arguably market a concept of community expressed through the physical layout and landscaping of the waterfront site, the diversity of design and density of residential complexes and the way public space is supplemented with service and consumption activities. While the real estate market indicates a desire for diverse forms of cosmopolitan living it may not necessarily extend to a diversity of social classes. Through a discursive analysis of interview and document material, this paper explores the extent to which ‘community’ is both imagined and re-imagined as an outcome of these distinct new urban forms. This is considered using the Port Adelaide waterfront as a case study.

Introduction

Waterfront regeneration reflects a distinct urban experiment in the provision of a residential development and individualised urban life. Changes to dockland and waterfront sites are occurring within Australia and overseas. This paper offers an Australian perspective of this global phenomenon from a particular standpoint. Australian waterfront projects are often located within working class suburbs that have traditions and a sense of ‘community’. Unlike master planned estates and urban renewal, waterfront regenerations promote distinct features in residential occupancy that appeal to high income non-nuclear populations. It is more often packaged as offering a particular lifestyle through housing consumption and leisure activities that reflect post-industrial post-fordist trends (Miles and Miles, 2004). Waterfront regeneration can therefore be characterised as entailing a unique processes of gentrification and cultural overlay that is not necessarily evident in green-field developments. The redevelopment of the Port Adelaide inner harbour signifies a radical transformation in the discursive identity; the economic function and the social relations through the remaking of it as a ‘future-oriented’ waterfront landscape (see Oakley, 2007).

The residentially-led property development is not so dissimilar to other urban waterfront regeneration projects around the world (Brownhill, 1990; Dovey, 2005; Marshall, 2001; Searle and Byrne, 2002; Marshall, 2001; Waitt, 2004). The 51-hectare site is located 14 km north-west of the city of Adelaide and is expected to accommodate over 2000 new up-market dwellings to cater for an expected increase of over 4,500 new residents. This multi-billion dollar regeneration is expected to be accompanied with a shift in the economic activity in and around the waterfront. New commercial and IT enterprises, an increase in recreational and tourism activity through the investment in new restaurants, cafes and retail outlets is expected to feature as part of this urban make-over. In addition over 2,000 jobs in new commercial enterprises and existing businesses, with a further 4,000 jobs in construction are expected to be created.

The Port’s economy has suffered from industrial and shipping decline. This has been further compounded by an external and ‘powerful meta-narrative’ that has been associated with negative and stagnant images of dereliction and decay that has its origins in pre-colonial times (Rofe and Oakley,
This systemic characterisation of the place and its people is encoded in the language of a media report outlining plans to redevelop the inner-harbour, ‘Grime out people in for Port’s grand plan’ (Craig, 2002, p. 3). This ‘socially charged language’ suggests that the revitalization of the waterfront landscape will attract new residents to the Port, ‘while implicitly inferring that the existing community are aligned with the old Port’ (Rofe and Oakley, 2006, p. 281).

Against this backdrop the paper examines how discourses of community are imagined and re-imagined in an area undergoing a significant urban transformation. The place that is the Port cannot be described simplistically. It is an area that is known to accommodate a ‘mix of residential and industry, of development and underdevelopment, long term and recent residents, poverty and affluence’ (Verity 1999, p. 91). Not unlike many other old working class localities throughout Australia it has been, and continues to, experience the process of gentrification through new residents purchasing and renovating older homes in and around the area. Conceptions of ‘community’ of long-term residents in working-class suburbs like Port Adelaide are symbolic of social relations often described in terms of ‘support’, ‘resilience’, ‘care’, and ‘solidarity’ (see Peel, 2003, p. 40). Such language implies a sense of belonging, a shared mutual understanding of everyday life and identity. While the population profile has been changing, reflecting general characteristics of intra-migration of a different profile, the Port has nevertheless been credited with having a strong sense of ‘community’ rooted in working-class tradition and relations (Oakley and Verity, 2003).

The Study

Mapping the Port Adelaide waterfront redevelopment is an ongoing longitudinal study. Of interest is how the redevelopment will transform the place, people and function of the waterfront land. Exploring discourses of community informs part of the overall study. The term ‘community’ is subject to multiple meanings. As Perrons and Skyers (2003) note, even within communities real and material differences can and do exist. The concept of community as both theory and practice has renewed interest in a time of significant urban change. Waterfront regeneration is an example of this change and provides the opportunity to re-visit the ways in which ‘community’ is discursively constructed. For the purposes of this paper a ‘textually oriented discourse analysis’ (Fairclough, 2003) is used to examine select key documents produced by government, marketing materials, media reports and interviews with local residents. The paper draws on promotional brochures published during the public consultation period by the South Australian government department the Land Management Corporation (LMC) between July 2002 and September 2004. These materials were used as a communication tool to feedback ‘community’ views of those who participated in local forums about the impending redevelopment, provide key updates and notify of any revisions to the redevelopment concept plan.

Changes to the Development Act 1993 were required through the Port Adelaide Waterfront Plan Amendment Report (PAR) which was open to the public for comment through written submissions. A total of 45 submissions were made from local residents, local businesses, environment groups, heritage groups and local government as part of the consultation process. Extracts from PAR submissions and interviews with those local residents who made submissions to this process inform this study. Media reports from the city’s metropolitan newspaper The Advertiser and the local messenger newspaper The Portside (between 2002-2007), and advertising material from the developer consortium Newport Quays promoting stages 1 and 2 of the redevelopment (between 2005-2007) were other sources of data informing this study.
This paper is a preliminary analysis of narratives of community that are encoded in place, social relations and in urban change. Those locals who participated in forums, made written submissions to the PAR and were interviewed for this study come from a range of social backgrounds. Some of these locals have lived in the area all their lives while others have moved into the area over a 30 year period. While these locals exhibit different life experiences through education, occupation and household composition, they share similar views about the proposed redevelopment (Oakley 2007). Of concern was how the redevelopment would signal a dramatic recasting of the image of the place and its people. It is through an analysis of this that discourses of community can be read. This is evident through three inter-related themes. Firstly, local residents believe that the regeneration will compromise the maritime heritage of the inner harbor. In particular there is an anxiety about a concept of the Port-as-‘working port’ will be made redundant through the redevelopment. This closely relates to the second concern expressed by local residents: reduced access in and around the waterfront because of the redevelopment. Thirdly, local residents are troubled that the regeneration is targeting a select population profile at the expense of building on the present ‘community’ and social mix that is characteristic of the area. A different interpretation and emphasis of ‘community’ is evident in how the redevelopment is being promoted and marketed by the developer. The final section of the paper outlines how community is effectively assigned a commodity status in this distinctive urban project. The use of marketing material informs this final section.

**Defending a concept of a ‘working port’**

At the outset media reports in *The Portside* were outlining local resident concern that the regeneration would negatively impact on the maritime function and heritage of the waterfront landscape (Oakley, 2005). Seemingly, one of the place-marketing strategies during the public consultations was to emphasise to locals that the maritime history and function of the inner harbor would be maintained. This is evident in the following text:

> The proposed development concept focuses on the preservation of State heritage buildings…the protection of Port icons…an extensive range of boating activities such as those already carried out…[and] maintaining the character of the ‘working port’ (LMC, 2002, p. 2).

> The key to the design…is for the development to integrate into immediate surroundings, complement the heritage of the area and work in favour of the local community…by protecting the Port’s heritage and character (LMC, 2004, p. 4).

Many locals believe that their notion of the Port’s maritime heritage and it remaining a ‘working port’ will be rendered redundant because of the bulk, density and building heights earmarked for the waterfront site. Local cynicism of the urban venture was intensified with the knowledge that the redevelopment relies on the removal of the boat yard businesses that currently operate out of the inner-harbour:

> We understand that a number of existing buildings may be demolished, and boat yard relocated, to make way for the new development. This will diminish any notion of a living working port and will erode the continuity of the history of the Port (Local resident, PAR submission 13).

While the number of boat yard operators has decreased over the years, those still operating in the inner harbour provide evidence of it as a working port. The site and activities of boat building is considered symbolic of a history and a heritage of the Port as a ‘working port’, which many local residents believe is

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1 The term community was used by those locals who participated in public consultations.
quintessential to their notion of an existing sense of place that is the Port. This nostalgic view of place, of belonging and of relationships with place that has a known and connected ancestry is what Taylor (1995, p. 27) refers to as the ‘ordinarily sacred’. The connections between the role of boat activity and local narratives keep the history of the Port in the present:

It’s a working port in that the boats, pleasure boats and tourist boats and private boats depend upon the facilities there. The small business, especially small businesses around hospitality very much depends upon the narratives, the stories that still pervade the place. You can wander around the docks and find someone sitting there and sit down and hear a story about the way the port was. And that connection between the past and the present is still very strong. That, I suppose, is the greatest fear…that if that linkage is severed, the very basis of community and of its working life will be severed (Ashley, local resident).

Another resident suggested that the Port’s potential lay in its history:

Working in effect as a place where people make a maritime living in the Port, it’s not a loading on and off cargo working port, it’s a service industry port working port where the boats are serviced and maintained, its where the sailing club gets its boats out and works on them and puts them back in the water, its where tugs are moored. I see working port in a broader sense, the potential for tourism, based opportunities, business based around maritime services – things that are really connected to what the Port was (Peter, local resident).

A desire to defend this concept of a working port was further highlighted by the collective action of local residents. In late 2006 a public meeting was held to gauge support for establishing a local branch of the National Trust of South Australia as a mechanism for lobbying government and business on heritage and environmental concerns related to the redevelopment. Around 100 people attended the meeting where the motion was passed to establish a National Trust Branch for the Port of Adelaide. With membership well over 100 people the Branch has been active in lobbying to have boatyard activities continue in the inner harbour. This culminated in the Branch making a submission to have Searles Boatyards protected as part of the 2007 Heritage@Risk List. The boatyard is considered to be an integral part of the visual and cultural fabric of the waterfront land that many local residents want preserved.

A desire to protect a concept of a working port reveals the extent to which the concept of community is complex. Community is often expressed through processes of gentrification, the focus on the ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY) issues or the significance of class. The motivation for establishing the Branch, and its membership reveal a more multi-layered concept. The membership of the Branch is made up of a diverse group of people from different socio-economic backgrounds, length of residence in the area and tenure of residence. Cohen (1989, p. 118) notes that a concept of community can lay in its members’ perceptions of their vitality of its culture. That is people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning and a referent of their identity. It is a discourse of community that is constructed through shared perceptions of culture, meaning and identity. Wanting to preserve an aspect of the maritime heritage of the inner harbour reveals this discourse of community. It is a narrative that emphasises the interconnectedness of culture with a particular ‘spatial area’ (Firey cited in Gwyther, 2004, p. 89).
Defending right to accessing the waterfront

The importance of a spatial referent is closely linked to the second theme to emerge from the study. Many locals expressed concern over right of access to the waterfront. Increasingly public access to parts of the city’s beaches and waterfront land is being privatized. For some local residents there is a fear that access to the inner harbour will follow this trend:

I get a bit worried that it will turn into another Glenelg or West lakes where people will have sole access to parts of the waterfront. Like the government giving Outer Harbour to Mitsubishi….I don’t like the government taking hold of the space and then a few people being able to experience that. And why I mentioned Glenelg because I was given a body massage to go there and when she’d finished, like they sit you in this nice space and then want to sell you their product and she said to me…beautiful view of the ocean, I said, yeah, well, I used to have it every time I drove down Anzac Highway before they built these apartments (Pat, local resident).

Another resident recounted that the inner harbour has been an important recreational area for the Port residences for many decades. As one local argued:

I can take this walk through the old warehouses and come out at the other end of the water, walk around the water all the way around past houses and then back through Port Adelaide and back home…And the old heritage areas…and whether the buildings are old and derelict…it’s still interesting and unique, and you can look across the river and see the boatyards and the tug boats and know that that’s something special (Ruth, local resident).

Residents who have lived in the area all their lives reminisced about boating, fishing and swimming in the harbor, albeit at times of risk when it was a busy commercial shipping channel. For another resident it represented an important alternate place of being:

…whether it’s the spirituality, I don’t know, but there’s an eeriness and stillness and an incredible sense of space…you can see the horizon…when you’re in the country you can see sky, but when you’re in the port you can see the sky…(Karen, local resident)

This sense of tradition, history and experience is not fixed in time and space. The population profile is changing reflecting general characteristics of a different population profile. Yet for many locals there is something quite unique and particular about the changes that have been occurring in the Port. As one resident explained ‘[o]ne of the attributes that people have enjoyed so much about Port Adelaide is that it’s a bit of a diamond in the rough – its’ not too polished’ (McClusky cited in the Advertiser, 2003, p. 40).

Defending the social mix

The third theme articulated by locals was the importance of maintaining an existing social mix in and around the Port. Many of the written PAR submissions from local residents expressed broad support for the waterfront regeneration, however it is the nature and scale of the proposed urban venture that was questioned. For many residents the decision to live in the port is based on a familiarity-with-place:
...My father is a shipyard worker, a trade unionist. My mother did a lot of jobs. So we feel a strong attachment to living in a working class area, an area with those traditions but we've all gone on and done tertiary study at various times. And this area seemed to have a lot of traditions related to our background, from Ireland, but also because there's a strong sense of community. So it was a mixed community in other words. It was socially mixed with a strong sense of its own history and its own community and culture and that past tradition of resilience in adversity…it’s a bit of a cliché but it’s related to all sorts of things, including the football club, the history of the strikes…(Stephen, local resident).

Another resident, who moved into the area some years ago, offered her reflections of the place and people:

...And even though older industries and pollution are an issue, and continues to be an issue I think, the thing about living here is the mix of people, families and the kind of connection with work and with labour history…the fact that we've got lots of boarding houses here, we've got lots of people and families on different levels of income. So even though there has been [a] gradual process of gentrification it is still a really interesting community. And it has still got that community feel…it’s identified. It’s got a self identity which other suburbs don't have anywhere near as much...

I suppose it's kind of linked to things like its identity as a footy club and its identity has a kind of industrial working class area, and there is a kind of fierce pride and strong sense of connection with people. If you come from the Port it's different than coming from Unley. So there’s an understood culture about the place. And I think the community is still one that feels and expresses a connection with each other (Michelle, local resident).

The importance of social relations and social connectedness-in-place is perceived to be unique to the place:

...When I've been asked about why should we even try and protect Port Adelaide, unless you're down here you don't understand the feeling that's here. If something went wrong tomorrow the word would be around the Port, the greater Port in no time flat and there'd be people everywhere helping (David, local resident)

While David would be considered a ‘new comer’ because he has only lived in the area for 9 years Rex has lived in the area most of his life. A retired wharfie who can remember the inner harbor as a thriving working port employing thousands of men who manually loaded and unloaded cargo offered this view:

I love the people and their loyalty...port Adelaide was the beginning. Port Adelaide was where my early relies landed…it’s the people I think; the loyalty of the people…they’re special…I'm on the National Trust…some of the people have only been here about 5 or 6 years. They came to port Adelaide and all of a sudden they'd found something...some of them say as soon as I saw Port Adelaide I just made up my mind. We had to stop here, that's what they say. They just found something special…(Rex, local resident).

The Port area has provided for a social mix of residents in terms of type and tenure of housing options. A concern that locals may be displaced or ‘priced out of the market’ was an issue raised throughout the
public consultations. This would seemingly have implications for the next generation of locals continuing to live in the area.

We do not believe that the development will encourage a diversity of housing types or achieve social mix...the densities espoused in the [PAR documentation] are unlikely to attract a mix of people, particularly young families or older people, and are more likely to cater for affluent young singles, childless couples and professionals...The likely entry price into the new development will prevent a mix of people...where low income people are effectively excluded from purchasing in the area because of price (group of 13 local residents, PAR submission No.23).

**Inspired by the past, looking forward to the future**²

In September 2004 the announcement was made that the Port Adelaide waterfront redevelopment would proceed. According to the media release ‘the go-ahead for this project is great news for the Port Adelaide community’ and that this redevelopment ‘will rebuild and restore the Port's status as a strong, lively, economic powerhouse...It's time to look forward to Port Adelaide finally realising its potential as a world-class tourist destination... (State Government of South Australia, 2004, p. 1-2). The revised Development Plan was made public on the same day as the press release. It was a document that many locals believed would reflect in part their aspirations for how the waterfront landscape should be developed. For example local residents lobbied to have the bulk, density and building heights in the redevelopment reduced (for a more detailed discussion of the extent of local opposition see Oakley, 2007). The revised Development Plan confirmed that the redevelopment was to proceed relatively unchanged.

Seemingly one consequence of scripting the Port waterfront as both nationally and internationally important was that it effectively reduced local resident interests as less significant. Redevelopments of this nature are increasingly being driven by public-private partnerships, which impact on local communities, local economies and physical and commercial infrastructure as a means of transforming the landscape into an economically competitive and productive space. As Cochrane (2007, p. 57) argues ‘community itself is given an economic inflection, so that transforming community is also about finding a more secure economic base’. In the case of the Port Adelaide waterfront regeneration it is apparent that an economic imperative is driving this urban project.

The rejuvenation of the Port waterfront reflects what Collins (2003, p. 77) refers to as the construction of a different ‘architectural space’ for paid work, leisure and community life. Re-developments of this nature create expensive and exclusive enclaves for a largely homogenous population that is oriented towards a high consumtion and leisure lifestyle or as Miles and Miles (2004, p. 51) suggest, a lifestyle that emphasises a particular form of ‘conspicuous consumption’. It is a form of consumption that is geared to a particular economic market one that thrives on an increasingly diversified range of products and consumer tastes in residential form and leisure. The success of re-imagining the Port waterfront lay in the capacity of this urban venture to offer a cosmopolitan lifestyle as an expression of both status and desire that is targeted to high-income or high-earning occupancy.

² Title of a promotional brochure published in 2004 by LMC.
**The Port waterfront as a future-oriented space**

An image of the Port waterfront as a future-oriented and clean landscape is evident in the way the urban project is now being marketed for sale. This vision for the place symbolises a different discourse of community, one that is an outcome of the urban design and facilities available within the redevelopment. A purpose built over-water display centre of mainly glass and complete with gourmet café offers a venue for potential buyers to leisurely take in the vista of the entire site in its pre-development form and then view a three-dimensional model layout of what the site will become. Within the display centre large colour posters of young couples dining in trendy waterfront restaurants, working out in the soon to be built gymnasiums or sailing on expensive yachts reflect this future-oriented landscape for those potential new residents who become part of the Newport Quays development. Sale of stages one and two have been successful with residences ranging from the low $300,000 for a one bedroom-apartment to waterfront villas with a marina berth selling for over $1 million. While the real estate market indicates a desire for diverse forms of cosmopolitan living in such urban projects it seemingly does not extend to a diversity of social classes based on these sales.

Further, this newly created cosmopolitan lifestyle discursively re-orientates the concept of community to one of a commodity form:

> Edgewater is destined to become the most sought-after harbourfront address…Life rewards those who recognise opportunity…an exciting part of that opportunity at Newport Quays is membership to the “Edgewater Club”…exclusive to residents. Members will enjoy the swimming pool, sauna, spa and gymnasium facilities…plus a host of ongoing benefits as the Edgewater community evolves. In years to come, the Edgewater Club will broaden its exclusive advantages…so now is the time to become involved’ (Newport Quays, 2005, p. 15).

> Newport Quays vision is to build a community venue which will provide unparalleled facilities for residents…The Newport Quays Club will be a destination within the development, a place to dine, relax, meet, exercise and do business (Newport Quays, 2006, p. 13)

The contrast between how locals discursively understand community and place and the above texts are stark. Implicit in the language is that new residents will be offered ‘membership’ into an ‘exclusive’ and ‘privatised’ living environment. Community is marketed as a highly individualised experience through consumption and leisure activities, even through business endeavour that sits alongside yet is separate from the existing social fabric of the surrounding area. Seemingly it is discourse of community that is symbolic of a yearning for community which is focused on wealthier Australians spending substantial amounts in the hope of purchasing security and personal meaning (Mullins and Western, 2001; Gleeson, 2004) along waterfront scapes. This trend can only fuel divisive trends such as securitization, fortification and insularity between existing and new residents (see Davis, 1990).

A potentially divisive tension is evident through the conflict over the re-naming of the waterfront. The redevelopment is located within the suburbs of Birkenhead, Exeter and Glanville. The developer consortium lodged a submission to the state government to have the waterfront land renamed Newport Quays premised on the redevelopment having ‘its own character and style’ that is considered separate from the existing area (Brown 2006, p. 5). This position is at odds with the local government and local residents who argued that the existing suburb names should be retained. Letters to the Editor of *The Portside* overwhelmingly suggested that the name change is based on the importance of marketing a distinctive brand identity for the place and of ‘community’ for incoming residents:
...most Port and Le Fever Peninsula residents are not so naïve to believe the pressure being exerted for a name change has any motive other than the ability to market an “exclusive address” to potential buyers...Your insistence on differentiating the New Port development from the established and, dare I say it, working-class suburbs...smacks of elitism and snobbery, and should be resisted (Holden, 2007, p. 23)

This reading of the redevelopment was not universally shared. Within communities differences do exist (Perron and Skyers, 2003). This is reflected in the following extract from a local resident’s letter:

The Port development is the best thing to happen to the Port, and probably SA, in decades. This development is giving the Port a future and has rescued it from being a ghetto....They should be able to give the name that best reflects its image and marketing potential (Beaumont, 2007, p. 30).

It was a position that sparked a series of letters in favour of, and opposed to, renaming the waterfront land. Further support for its renaming is reflected in the following letter to the editor:

I couldn’t agree more. If [government] decides to call the redevelopment at the Port Newport Quays, it will be the best thing...The vocal minority should get on the bike and campaign for things worth [while] instead of denigrating all development (Roberts, 2007, p. 12).

After much lobbying from both sides the state government announced that the inner harbor would be renamed New Port. The government’s decision to over-ride local resident resistance to a name change and create a new suburb was justified on the grounds that it reflected a connection to the history of the place as well as reflecting the significant change the redevelopment will make to the local area. Not surprisingly the developer consortium considered the name change to be an appropriate compromise.

**Conclusion**

Urban waterfront regeneration reflect a significant and recent change to the structure of Australian cities and this has occurred in concert with a major shift in procurement processes to public-private partnerships. Increasing reliance on the market in this process signifies a very different approach to, and investment in, urban living. Seemingly a key aspect of redeveloping brown-field waterfront sites is the way they are assigned a particular ‘brand identity’. These distinctive urban projects offer potential new residents a particular cosmopolitan experience that on the surface seeks to supplant rather than compliment and integrate with the existing social and material landscape. With stage one now complete the incoming residents are now moving in. What these incoming residents consider important in terms of the place-identity, the heritage, the surrounding areas, how they understand community or even seek to experience community is unknown. Do they seek an individualised, exclusive and marketised notion of community, or alternatively a ‘yearning’ for community that is not so dissimilar to those existing residents? For example it is unclear how these new residents will view the contestation over the re-naming of the waterfront site. What is known is that from the perspective of those existing locals who have concerns regarding the nature and scale of the Port waterfront regeneration, their sense of community is complex and multi-layered and is expressed through memory, experience, history and belonging of culture, place and people. Their concept of community cannot be reduced to simply the processes of gentrification, or NIMBY issues or even along class alliances. The renaming of the inner harbor revealed the extent to where there was difference between existing residents on this matter. The concept of ‘community/s’ is symbolic and material. It is imaginary and real. It is subject to multiple and contested meanings.
References
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