

Canberra Conversations

Filling in Canberra: can a denser city still be a 'home among the gum trees'?

ACT Legislative Assembly

Tuesday 31 May 2011, 6 – 9pm

Hosted by A Chorus of Women in collaboration with the ANU Climate Change Institute

78 participants (list attached)

Introduction

Chorus: Talk for our planet's sake
Talk with heart and reason ...
Words and music by Johanna McBride

Our purpose in the Canberra Conversation series is to create opportunities for constructive dialogue on matters of importance to Canberra citizens. The absence of genuine dialogue in political and media forums inspires us to work with dialogue and test its value in tackling complex issues such as sustainable development. It is our hope that in developing a habit of regular dialogue through conversations such as these, Canberrans will benefit from experience in drawing on alternatives to the adversarial modes of debate that are more typical in public consultation and decision-making processes.

The use of story and song throughout our conversations is to allow emotional and ethical aspects to be voiced; it is an acknowledgment that these very human qualities are of central importance, yet are not easily brought to the fore in public forums.

We have deliberately chosen to run Canberra Conversations at the ACT Legislative Assembly because it seems like the right place for a citizen's conversation. We frequently refer to the statue of Ethos in Civic square, which represents the spirit of the Canberra community.

We invoke the Chatham House Rule, which prevents names being reported against comments. In this summary we report on the key points of view and lines of argument expressed by participants, and conclude with comments on the conversation process itself.

Participants

As for our previous Canberra conversations, participants at the event included a broad cross-section of people interested in the future of Canberra, including members of community and environmental groups, public servants, business people, scientists and other academics, and concerned citizens.

We were joined by Professor Will Steffen of the ANU Climate Change Institute, who is our collaborator for the series. We were also pleased to welcome Dr Maxine Cooper, ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, and Nectar Efkarpidis, Director of the Molonglo Group of developers. Thirteen women from A Chorus of Women were joined by five men to provide the voice of citizens in music that commented on and deepened the conversation.

The Conversation

Give me a home ...

Chorus: Give me a home among the gum trees
With lots of plum trees

Give me a home among the buildings
With lots of people

Words adapted by Chorus with apologies to Bob Brown and Wally Johnson

In pairs, we talked about what 'home' meant to everyone. What does 'give me a home' evoke? This helped us to understand the variety of meanings that people bring to the concept of 'home'. Family, community, nature, open space, trees, birds, safety, comfort, inspiring landmarks, memorable landscape views, home-grown vegetables and more were all mentioned in the brief snapshots reported back.

Information-sharing interviews and presentations

In this session, we heard about different dimensions of the need for change in our city. The global changes are clear: climate change, population growth, resource peaks (e.g. peak oil), food and energy security were all acknowledged. Business as usual is not an option and change is before us. We explored the options for making the needed changes with intelligence and foresight, so that we also improve liveability, health, accessibility, environmental footprint, community vibrancy and opportunities to thrive in urban life.

We heard about the central role that trees, open spaces and wildlife play in our city, as highlighted in the recently released urban forest investigation report¹. An important concept is that 'green infrastructure' is just as vital as built infrastructure, and there are powerful arguments for designing and building them together (whereas more conventionally we have built the 'hard' infrastructure first and vegetation as an after-thought).

We also heard about the creativity required for successful development, as well as about some inspiring directions in urban development. These included the increased benefits of moving from an individual 'ownership' mentality to more sophisticated and effective means of sharing, recycling and re-using resources efficiently. The concept of 'design' evolves over time, and currently includes the need for buildings that meet sustainability criteria, the potential for city spaces that enable multiple uses, the benefits of open platform design principles and the possibility for broader engagement via social networks on online platforms. Design incorporates social and environmental needs, as well as the physical needs of a city.

In listening to the direct experience of infill from participants, it was apparent that there are positive and negative experiences of infill alive in the community. The important thing is not that there is particular hostility towards increased densification, but rather the process by which densification occurs ultimately shapes residents' experience of change and development.

Chorus: Why don't our leaders fix the problem?
Why don't developers and town planners?
Why won't the politicians change the way they do things?
... How can we together grow our city?
Music by Glenda Cloughley; words by Chorus and Glenda

We learned that it is possible to enable change so that it is welcomed, and crucial to that change process is active listening, engagement and participation across those involved and

¹ *Investigation into the government's tree management practices and the renewal of Canberra's urban forest*, Office for the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, 2011.

affected, and to ensure benefits are delivered to the community as a whole (not limited to the only benefit being profits for developers). In return, we heard that developers who offer broader benefits can only deliver if they are supported ahead of those pursuing a 'lowest common denominator' approach; the current planning process elicits complaints and objections rather than constructive, supportive community input. Problem solving comes through participation, not conflict, so we need community engagement that is meaningful, constructive and helps us create the future we want for ourselves and our descendants.

Small group conversations

Over supper, we asked people to consider the words that developers, town planners and politicians would use if they were writing the 'Why Why's' song above. This was followed by two rounds of small group discussions to address the questions: What would you imagine home would be like in a denser city? and How can we together grow our city?

Chorus: Dear Earth, Living Earth
Will you be our home?
Words and music by Johanna McBride

Plenary 'circle' discussion

The final hour of the evening was a plenary 'circle' discussion. Participants self-selected to speak by using the microphone as a talking piece, and were encouraged to build on what they had heard earlier and talked about in their small groups, as well as on what others were saying in the circle. The following themes featured:

- **Holistic thinking, planning and action**
The conversation highlighted again and again the interconnected nature of issues (housing, health, transport, economy, environment, energy, water, gardens, food, employment, open space etc) and the wide range of relevant scales (local to national, decisions here and now vs. consequences in two generations). There was a strong desire in the room to engage with issues in a holistic manner, and openness to suggestions on how to better work with whole systems.
- **Participation and engagement**
There was broad agreement that change is more likely to be welcomed and to benefit all when it has flowed from meaningful engagement between citizens, planners, creative architects and designers.
- **Big picture**
Although the topic was specific to Canberra and 'infill', there was a shared sense in the room of the importance of a bigger picture context with issues such as population, climate change, resource availability, economy and environment. People do not want to consider only their 'back yard' in isolation from the larger national and global context.
- **Community**
As in previous Canberra Conversations the longing for 'community' was voiced strongly. In changing Canberra to a denser city to accommodate a larger population, many recognised the potential to enrich community interaction and value.
- **Shift from focus on individual ownership to shared space and facilities**
Many participants appreciated that an obvious response to many of the issues before us is to develop more effective means for sharing our space, resources and facilities. Although the current norm is for individual ownership, both developers and citizens appreciate the benefits of developing models that encourage effective and rewarding sharing arrangements.

- **Green infrastructure**
An important shift in thinking is to go beyond thinking of 'infrastructure' as hard, built structures and to see trees, vegetation, bushland and water bodies as vital city infrastructure that also requires planning, maintenance and investment.
- **Design**
The need for good design was repeated often. It was also apparent that 'good design' is not always obvious and there is a lot more to it than popular discussions that dwell on aesthetics without an appreciation of other dimensions of design (e.g. function, form, context, contribution to history, environmental impact, public benefits). There was a much expressed desire in the room to attract and engage with creative, talented designers.
- **Change**
For many the central issue associated with infill and development in general is that it brings change. We heard that it is quite normal to feel anxious about change and fear its consequences, and that these anxieties and fears can be replaced by gratitude and pleasure if the change is made well. A key need, then, is to be aware of the dynamics of change – what enables some changes to be welcomed with excitement, and others to be feared and resented?
- **Thinking 'outside the box'**
Some participants suggested creative ideas for development that would build on existing non-suburban infrastructure, such as building in the airspace over Ginninderra Drive. While such ideas were seen by some as a bit 'provocative', the need to think 'outside the box' in a safe environment where all ideas can be properly examined was acknowledged.
- **Networks to share knowledge and learn from past infill**
We heard of many examples of infill that have been received well, and cases where the problems are resented. There is much potential to learn from tangible examples – the act of networking people so that they can share stories and experiences, and use such learning to guide better future outcomes.
- **Economy**
Although referred to only relatively little, it was apparent that the economic context provides many of the constraints on what is possible when embarking on change and development in the city. Many would like to see the value of meaningful open space, effective transport systems, streetscapes and so on more readily accommodated in planning decisions. A tendency to look only at economic values risks overlooking the more widespread, beneficial-to-all values.
- **Listening: appreciate multiple perspectives**
Many participants in the conversation noted the value of hearing multiple perspectives. Media reports often seek to cast issues as for/against, either/or propositions, whereas in reality the issues under discussion are rarely so polarised and in fact host a vibrant diversity of perspectives. Ironically, an appreciation of that diversity can actually lift the discussion into a more constructive mode through attunement to the important insights that resonate across multiple perspectives. In this particular conversation, for example, it was clear that participants were not polarised according to whether they were 'for' or 'against' infill, but there are some clear values that hold across developers, government and citizens alike (e.g. importance of effective transport, the value of green infrastructure).

Concluding comments

Participants expressed genuine appreciation for the opportunity to listen to and appreciate multiple perspectives on 'filling in Canberra'. We were struck by the skill shown by the participants: an ability to hear many people, hold an openness towards different perspectives and strive for the collective good despite the complexity of the issues involved. This

PARTICIPANTS

Facilitator

Janet Salisbury	A Chorus of Women
Alan Ford	
Alastair Swayn	ACT Government Architect
Andrew MacKenzie	Fenner School, ANU
Andrew Purdam	Chorus
Austin Lynch	Old Narrabundah Community Council
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Brian Hickey	
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Christopher Dorman	
Colin Lyons	Planning Institute of Australia
David Flannery	Lecturer, Architecture, UC
Deborah Hawke	
Dianne Firth	Head, Landscape Architecture, UC & Deputy Chair, ACT Heritage Council
Edwina Nelson	
Eliza Hopkins	Australian Youth Climate Coalition
Felix MacNeill	North Canberra Community Council
Geoffrey Nelson	
Gill Christie	Chorus
Gillian Helyar	
Glenda Cloughley	Chorus
Greg Mews	Heart Foundation ACT
Hazel Hall	
Heather Tomlinson	ACT Government Sustainability Directorate
Helen Pilkinton	Chorus
Honey Nelson	Chorus
Ian Baird	ACT Government Sustainability Directorate
Jenny Goldie	Sustainable Population Australia, Peak Oil
Joan Kellett	Dickson Residents Group
Johanna McBride	Chorus
John Dobson	Chorus

John Hibberd	Conservation Council ACT Region
John Inglis	Chorus
John Smiles	Chorus
Judy Clingan	Chorus
Judy Mann	
Kate Champion	Chorus
Larry O'Loughlin	Chief Ministers Department
Laura Hogan	Australian Youth Climate Coalition
Louise Cooke	Sessional Lecturer, Faculty of Education, UC
Margaret Lawrence	Red Hill Residents Group
Marie Coleman	Dickson Residents Group
Mary Porter AM	MLA
Maxine Cooper	ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment
Meg Rigby	Chorus
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Peter Wurfel	Inner South Canberra Community Consultative Committee, Deakin Residents Association
Phoebe Howe	Canberra Loves 40%
Rachel Williams	CSIRO
Rae Jacobson	Chorus
Richard Stirzaker	CSIRO
Robyn Craig	Griffith Narrabundah Community Association & Inner South Community Council
Rod Page	
Rowan Grigg	Chorus
Sheila Hughes	GHD

Shirley Gourgaud	Belconnen Community Council
Shirley Pipitone	
Shobha Varkey	
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