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-surburban 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
complexity comes in many forms: the need to be grounded in the context of global change (e.g. climate change, population growth, peak oil and other, food production, biodiversity loss); the interconnectedness of key issues (health, transport, community wellbeing, environmental impact, multiple demands on limited space); the multiple perspectives and ‘languages’ involved (developers, citizens, bureaucrats, planners, scientists, community groups); and the many spatial and time scales (from individual to global population, and from daily decisions to impacts on future generations). Collectively we can improve our ability to negotiate such complexity.

Key conclusions emerged. First, there was surprisingly little hostility towards densification per se; but the manner in which the change is made is of vital importance. Second, there was understanding that we need to embrace the challenge of acting holistically by working with the whole, interconnected system rather than individual problems. This was associated with recognition of the importance of genuine engagement that enables all stakeholder perspectives to contribute to creative change that is oriented towards benefits to all. Such processes require intelligent vision and inspiring design. Participants recognised this, and expressed a wish to be better able to work with and support imaginative and creative designers who facilitate meaningful and rewarding urban life.

There was a strong sense in the room that the future is co-created by engaged citizens. The better we hone our skills to listen to, understand and respond to one another, the better our chances of recognising and creating change for the collective good.

Chorus: I am the spirit of this place
I am the spirit of its people ...
I am the spirit of community
I am Ethos in the people

Words by Tom Bass (sculptor of Ethos); music by Glenda Cloughley

Wordle

(Created at http://www.wordle.net/ from notes taken during the Conversation.)
PARTICIPANTS

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Eliza Hopkins  Australian Youth Climate Coalition
Felix MacNeill  North Canberra Community Council
Geoffrey Nelson
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Joan Kellett  Dickson Residents Group
Johanna McBride  Chorus
John Dobson  Chorus
Canberra Conversation, 31 May 2011

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- 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
- Merilyn Jenkins, Chorus
- Merryn Hare, Health Promotion Branch, ACT Government Health Directorate
- Michael Cusack, UC student (Urban Planning)
- Michael Roy, The Expert Client
- Michael Slee
- Nancy Zorbas
- Nectar Efkarpidis, Molonglo Group
- Neil Savery, ACT Government Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate
- Nick Hopkins
- Nicky Grigg, Chorus
- Owen Abbott, UC student (Architecture)
- Peter White
- 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
Stan Bevanda  Old Narrabundah Community Council
Sue Hoffmann  Chorus
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Val Brown  Fenner School, ANU
Will Steffen  ANU Climate Change Institute
Zahira-Madeleine Bullock  Chorus