

Better urban design can bring community together

Redfern-Waterloo provides a chance for smarter urban regeneration, writes **Caroline Pidcock**.

SOcial researcher Hugh Mackay says people are lamenting society's degenerating morality and loss of their sense of community. He thinks the real challenge is about connecting people through better urban design.

"We need greater emphasis on public spaces," says Mackay, who also believes good urban designers are some of the most important people in society and rival psychiatrists for their impact on our good mental health.

He notes that people still care passionately about neighbourhoods and about community. His research finds that while people tend to glaze over about some globalisation issues, they want to be involved with the things they can touch – the tangible in their neighbourhood where they can make a positive difference.

This is the important glue that will

empower and enable a meaningful strategy for the future development of the metropolis of Sydney. So what is good urban design? Many agree this has been achieved when a place is easy to get to and move through, and has:

- Its own identity.
- Public and private spaces that are clearly distinguished.
- Appealing, attractive and successful outdoor areas.
- A clear image that is easy to understand.
- The ability to change easily and incrementally.
- Variety and choice.
- A balance between natural and built environments.
- Created value to sustain the desired mix of uses and quality of townscapes.
- Something for everyone where a diverse range of users' needs are met.

The Redfern-Waterloo area is a high

priority area in urgent need of attention that will deliver these attributes. Particularly in regard to such complex and sensitive areas such as the Block, the Waterloo Towers, Redfern station, its existing strip shopping streets, the Australian Technology Park and the Eveleigh railway yards.

Even more complex are the problems to do with realising the potential of the area while maintaining the diverse social mix of the current neighbourhood. The situation allows one of the very few urban Aboriginal communities and many low income people (from people on various pensions through to students and artists) to live within easy travelling distance of the city. Such diversity is something that is critically important to every city and becoming increasingly rare in Sydney.

So how can good urban design be achieved in this instance? How do we overcome apparently conflicting and complex community interests and what often appears to be impenetrable barriers of bureaucracy and red tape to make such places?

Some basic attributes that would seem requisite to deliver good urban design include:

- Thorough consultation and research into the issues of a particular place.
- Skilled community/social workers, planners, urban designers and architects to devise a responsive vision and the specific solutions that will be required to resolve them.
- Leadership that will find a way through the maze of conflicts, mixed land ownership, multiple planning rules, etc, to ensure implementation.
- A community that has been appropriately consulted and feels ownership over the ideas to assist with their implementation.

This long overdue process would seem to be what the new City of Sydney is/was following. The authority proposed in the bill before the upper house suggests the Carr Government has decided a very strong hand – some would say autocratic – is required to re-develop the Redfern-Waterloo area.

For many of us who have laboured under the planning system in NSW, the idea of an authority that does not get bogged down in the requirements and details imposed on us by this system might sound attractive.

However, we must remember the system is a reflection of the community expectation that unfettered development is not a right of land-owners and developers, and that the community rightly expects consultation and engagement as well as checks and balances are in place.

There are many development sites around Sydney that ably demonstrate outcomes focused mainly on profit, and with little regard for the community, that do not deliver built environments that a city like Sydney can be proud of.

In Britain there is an alternative model in place for achieving good urban design. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment is an independent body that looks to inspire people to demand more from their buildings and spaces, thus cre-



ating a market force for such solutions. Its website – www.cabe.org.uk – says: "We use our skills and resources to work for a higher quality of life for people and communities across England, with particular concern for those living in deprived areas."

"We do this by making the case for change, gathering hard evidence, providing education opportunities and through direct help on individual programs and projects.

"We motivate those responsible for providing our buildings and spaces to design and develop well. We demonstrate to those clients that investment in excellence will pay back many times over through a more productive workforce, more contented customers and a healthier bottom line."

What an interesting idea.

Caroline Pidcock is NSW president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.