



# PHILIP WELTON

## Small propositions from an outer suburban life

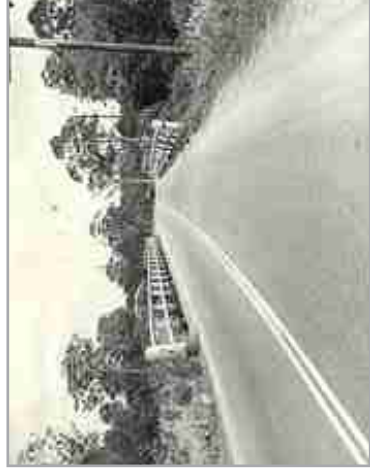
Linda Carroli

## Small propositions from an outer suburban life Linda Carroli

### Story One: Outer, out there, out here

I was talking to a colleague recently. She pointed out that when I spoke about where I lived, in the outer northern suburbs of Brisbane, a particular hand gesture swept away from my body accompanied by the expression 'out there'. There is denial in my engagement with life 'out there' (or 'out here' as my writing is now situated). Having spent a significant period of my growing up in this suburb as the second daughter of migrants, returning has an air of displacement. A feeling of being somehow **outcast**. In the time of my growing up, 'out here' was literally the end of the road before hitting the highway to the north coast. My experience is akin to 'inhabiting' rather than 'dwelling'. That is, rather than feeling at home, I seem to reside in a house.

The photo is in fact much older than me, taken in 1957, the year of my parents' marriage, a year after their arrival in Australia. But really, things didn't change much in the nearly 20 years between when that photograph was taken and when my family arrived here to settle. My mother still lives 'out here' and I am nearby to offer



### Story Three: Lost, excluded

I am often uncertain about what 'the right thing' means – vacillating between 'doing the right thing' and 'not getting involved'. Not so long ago, walking towards the bus station, located at the shopping centre, in the very early morning, I noticed two tightly bundled humans on the aluminium bench. Their heads buried under hats and into their bodies. Homelessness is 'moved on' from city centres to outlying areas. From a vantage point on the bus, I have a better view of them. As the bus engine turns over, they stirred, lifting their heads, squinting into the morning light. Sweet young things, their faces carried the signs of sleep. I've never seen this in the suburb before – stranded or homeless youths sheltering at a bus



### It's much easier to respond to a direct approach than it is to intervene

stop. Are they running away? Did they miss the last bus the previous night? Do they have anywhere to go? Should I buy them some breakfast? Should I give them my mobile phone to document their story and upload it to some social networking site? I feel incapable of doing anything, let alone the right thing.

There are quite a few retirement villages in this outer world, clustered around the shopping centre, yet severed from the landscape. Not so long ago, I was walking home from the bus stop, waiting to cross the main road, which at eight lanes wide often feels like a life and death undertaking. I've crossed on the walk sign many times as cars whizzed by, oblivious to the traffic signals and to me. I'm not the only one: a white cross adorned with flowers is staked into the traffic island, commemorating 15 year old Joline.

An elderly woman paused beside me as I waited, then asked if she could walk across the road with me because it's so wide. I was pleased to oblige and offered her my arm. So we chatted and she said that she had visited the doctor but wasn't sure of her way home. Where do you live, I asked her. And she replied with the name of her retirement village. As we stepped onto the road, I told that I was sure that it was in the other direction. No, no, she said, it's up there – and she pointed in the direction that she was facing. So I suggested we ask at the pet shop on the other side of the road. There, they confirmed that the retirement village is located in the other direction. She was embarrassed and agitated, saying that she usually came out in the car. As I escorted her, I tried to be reassuring. It can happen to anyone, I told her as we returned across the road and head to the next intersection where I suspected she could see her destination. Sure enough, when she sighted the landmark shopping centre, she knew where she was going. After thanking me for my help, she turned away to walk safely home.



on learning to dwell.

That is, **place needs to have a place**. This **synoikismos** needs to happen in place in a way that involves place and in a way that evokes place. It is a transformative idea of place found in **chorography** and founded

happen might unfold when other systems of governance and participation seem to have ossified. It needs to be something else.

And so I am trying to imagine how the conversation that needs to happen might unfold when other systems of governance and participation seem to have ossified. It needs to be something else. That is, **place needs to have a place**. This **synoikismos** needs to happen in place in a way that involves place and in a way that evokes place. It is a transformative idea of place found in **chorography** and founded

### Proposition One: Gathering conversation, dwelling

Something changed recently – an awareness perhaps – and I started searching for alternatives, ways of engaging communities in conversation about change: Either the change that needs to happen or the change that will happen. Richard Ingersoll evokes **synoikismos**, as an ancient process of city-making through agreeing to live together in dialogue, to dwell together. In **synoikismos**, Ingersoll presents a poetic possibility – “to accept one’s responsibility toward others, to take care of the environment, to participate in dialogues that define and resolve collective problems is to negotiate ways of finding freedom, even within the confines of consumerism. The polis was a city based on dialogue. Sprawl is conducive to escapist monologues.”

And so I am trying to imagine how the conversation that needs to happen or the change that will happen. Richard Ingersoll evokes **synoikismos**, as an ancient process of city-making through agreeing to live together in dialogue, to dwell together. In **synoikismos**, Ingersoll presents a poetic possibility – “to accept one’s responsibility toward others, to take care of the environment, to participate in dialogues that define and resolve collective problems is to negotiate ways of finding freedom, even within the confines of consumerism. The polis was a city based on dialogue. Sprawl is conducive to escapist monologues.”

assistance if needed. I tell others I live over the road from her and they are strangely curious about this

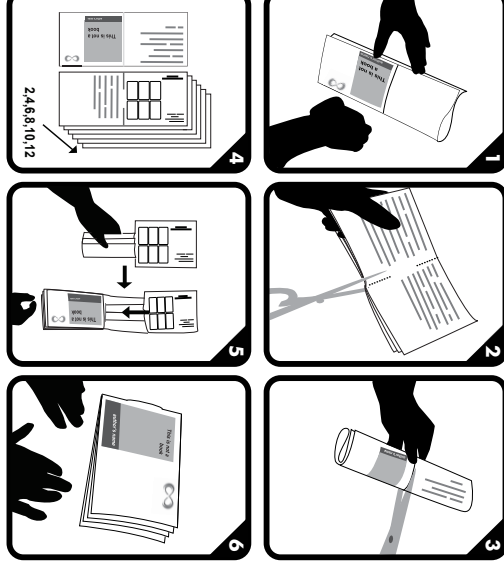
proximity. However, in reality, this means there are roughly 10 lanes of road to cross between my house and hers, including the main arterial highway that connects to the north coast. That is, the road pictured has expanded to eight lanes, increasing to 10 in parts. It is a road that is widened as other suburban **outposts** are built further north. It is a road that soaks up public works funding while play facilities sit in ruin and the community retreats. On the bus, I can more readily commute to the city than to the next suburb.

### Story Two: Going nowhere

In a recent lecture, Peter Newman, who has written about resilient cities and sustainability, said “suburban values kill off change”. The suburban ‘way of life’, and the practices that produce it, comes at a cost to other kinds of life, other possibilities, other futures. I am concerned that this landscape seems only capable of producing discontinuous networks and groupings of people – brought together not because they are ‘in place’ but for other purposes such as sport, education and worship. Rather than belong in place – or rather than dwell – citizens belong to those networks and clubs.

### With nowhere to gather, even place has no place!

Two expressions have settled in my mind: ‘protecting our way of life’ (which resonates with Heidegger’s idea of ‘harassed unrest’) and ‘out of character’ (which has implications of not belonging). I encounter these expressions commonly in the community consultation work I have done as well as in media reports about resident responses to development and change. I stumbled on some essays by Kenan Malik titled **Mistaken Identity and Identity is that which is Given** in which he interrogates liberal and conservative presumptions about cultural identity and discourses of cultural rights. What caught my attention is his postulation about the relationship between ‘character’ and ‘culture’. Urban and suburban environments are indeed cultural constructs – they are a form of meanings they are formative of meaning. Cultural identity is often grounded and ‘fixed’ in place or locale and people will zealously guard their staked out territories – imagined and lived. People can tell and share stories about their locality and their community – that is indeed a very compelling experience especially in terms of affirming local identity and local values. This is not akin to **dwelling**



made with [www.bookleteer.com](http://www.bookleteer.com) from proboscis

2009-10-16

Linda Carroll, October 2009

Creative Commons: BY-NC-ND  
Produced as part of the Placing  
Project

<http://placing.wordpress.com>

Published in the Diffusion  
Transformations series by Proboscis

<http://diffusion.org.uk>

Reclaiming wasted and lost space means **representing** our dwelling and our gathering in a social way: **creating a place for place**. It means replacing, as Ingersoll suggests, “monstrous incongruity” with “coordinated montage” - turning the soil of bitumen deserts to cultivate thriving and sustainable nodes, ensuring community benefits are a matter of public negotiation, and flipping shopping centres inside out to restore social experiences of intimacy and cooperation among people and place. The challenge is to grow a different way of life – to change ourselves, our building and our thinking – to overwrite the precarious life consuming us. Redirected from the way of life that already exists, such a change cannot be ‘out of character’ or ‘harassed unrest’. That change is the stuff of learning to dwell.

References  
T Fry, **Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice**

M Heidegger, **Building, Dwelling, Thinking**

R Ingersoll, **Sprawltown: Looking for the City on its Edges**

K Malik, **Mistaken Identity and Identity is that which is Given**

P Newman, **Resilient Cities**

Linda Carroll is a writer, researcher and consultant based in Brisbane, Australia. With a focus on urban environments, she works and writes at the intersection of planning, design and culture.

[lcarroll@pacific.net.au](mailto:lcarroll@pacific.net.au) | <http://harbingerconsultants.wordpress.com>



Young people are grist for the suburban consumerist mill, yet they have no place



There used to be a service station on every other street corner in the suburbs. Those halcyon days are over and those sites have since been reclaimed and reused.

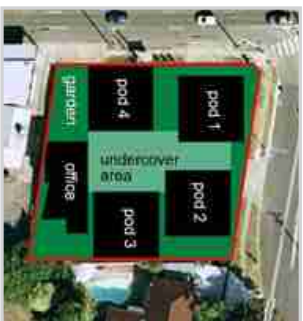
ideas that catalyse civic values rather than suburban values?

I remember bemoaning the lack of things to do during my growing up. Open space isn't always the answer:

in a sub-tropical climate it's hot, it rains or storms frequently. What does it take to make something to do or somewhere to go that young people can access? As Tony Fry says, "visions without means are not what are needed". How can communities marshal the means and regulatory response to realise simple and vital

### Proposition Three: Small change

Many elderly people are relocating (or relocated) with little or no connection to the area, harbouring in the compressed walled estates. Only to lose their way across the faceless terrain of roads and car parks, seeking refuge in cars because walking exposes frailty.



connect rather than disappear.

Each vacant and underutilised site represents a loss for a community - a loss of freedom and a loss of care. With several empty shopfronts dotted throughout the locality, these economically and socially dominant sites can incubate change. These kinds of social and cultural installations should 'just crop up' in other underutilised spaces, facilitated by community groups that are able to access a 'library' of portable and flexible structures. It involves a type of **representing**. While only a small change, it can make a difference or provide an alternative in a suburban world that offers so few.

So on returning home, I emailed the local Councillor to ask if anything could be done about it. Perhaps a combination of footpath improvement measures were in order: bollards, plantings, grassing etc, perhaps a shady tree or two, perhaps even a collaboration with the property owner to improve the streetscape, perhaps something that drew the community out into the street to participate. Even though the space is on a main road, it could still be used and walked more comfortably. The more pleasant and safe it is, the more likely it is that locals will walk. I was pleased when the Councillor's office responded with a commitment that something would be done.

be six cars parked in this space rather than in car parks at the rear of the building or next to the building. This particular evening as we walked, we'd just had enough. The driver was especially aggressive, a woman walking her dog had to walk on the main road to pass the parked cars and we had to walk single file to squeeze between them. A wheelchair or a pram probably couldn't get through.



In Malik's essays, he proposes that humans have the capacity for change and that the character of a culture can change. These things are fluid and negotiable. When the idea of something being 'out of character' (whether that something is the introduction of social housing, a new building height or a set of traffic lights), there is both an assertion of non-negotiable identity or character, and the rejection of the possibility of change (or difference). As Malik says, "is defines ough?". That is, just because something is, it somehow means it is right and, therefore, ought to be retained, continued or preserved. When someone says that something is 'out of character' they are saying that it is not consistent with what is. It does not belong and therefore is not permissible or desirable. Opposing development or change is not the same as citizen-based participating in planning and design. Conflicts over values are not readily settled, particularly given claims about rightness and rights which can be hardened in their presence. This is not akin to **synoikisms**.

### How can the conditions for gathering and conversation be created - present - so that dwelling is embedded as possibility?

#### Proposition Two: An early attempt

While walking along the footpath by the main road, my partner, John, and I were hassled by cars insisting on parking on the footpath outside the big brand franchise pizza shop. It's not the first time it happened and it was common for pedestrians to have to negotiate cars as they walked along here. There could regularly

