Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

Dallas Rogers – Love thy neighbourhood

Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar, Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre, and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Dallas Rogers' talk, Love Thy Neighbourhood. Enjoy the talk

[Applause]

Thank you, and I would also like to acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional owners on the land in which we're meeting today having this chat. In a pub, a chat in a pub. Please, feel free to get rowdy, to drink beers, have shots, do all of that stuff.

If maybe if I make a good point you have a shot or something. I don't know. There's a statistic that urbanists like me like to start off a talk like this with that goes a little bit something like this.

About 55 percent of the world's population now lives in cities, and in about 30 or 40 years that figures probably more likely to be 60 percent of the world's population. It always struck me that that was a weird statistic for a Australian urban scholar to start with, because we basically live on a big desert where everybody lives around the edge. And, most of us live actually in cities, about two-thirds of our population live in cities.

But, I think there is something to that. Sydney today has about five million people. In the next sort of 20, 30 years we're probably going to put another million and a half people in this city.

And, I heard just the other day that western Sydney might actually take about a million of those people. So, we're going to see some pretty big population changes coming into our cities over the next 20, 30, 40 years. And, I think that this actually will introduce a couple of challenges that we will need to address that will require us to work across our differences.

We are a migration country. We are people from many different parts of the world. We are very culturally different. We are probably not as socially – and there's probably not as many class differences in other places.

But, we will need to work across our differences to solve – I think of three key challenges. The first is how will we feed and water all of this population? Where will we get enough food and fresh water for this city?

The second one is where will we house everybody? Where will we house everybody in the city? And, the third one is how will we move people into and out of and move people around the city?

And, I think the three key challenges – I'm glad you opened the windows just before, because it's very noisy in here. But, it does feel a lot cooler, so I thank you for that.

Yeah, so what I want to do today is talk about how we might work across our differences to build and plan a better city focussed on those three core factors. I'm not going to talk too much about them, food, housing, and transport.

I want to start with perhaps a contentious claim, an idea about what – the way I think we govern the city. I'm sure that there's people who work in government here and work in the infrastructure, transport industries. So, you can tell me whether you think this is an accurate representation of urban governance, how we plan and manage our cities a bit later.

I like to think about the way we govern cities as a urban governance ménage a trois. I'm very bad at French, so if anybody can — is speaking French, please don't call me up on that a bit later.

Basically, it's like an urban governance love triangle, where not all three players get along. So, just think about this for a second, about who sets the planning agenda, who sets the big plans voracity, and who makes the plan decisions. And, I think there's three key actors here.

The first one is government. So, we have urban planners either at the local level during regulatory type planning matters, or in state government doing strategic planning. We also have politicians that sit on the top of that, and sometimes do weird things like say, "We should make the decisions, because we know a lot more about planning than you do."

We have the private sector. So, we have property developers and banks. They have a role to play in this governance arrangement too.

And, then we have the people that I'm interested in tonight, which is the people of our cities. And, the question is, how do we get the people, and, in fact, do we want the people of our cities to set the planning agenda, set our plans for the city, and be making planning decisions?

And, I would argue that if you give the planning agenda setting and decision making power to one of those groups, you need to necessarily take it away from others. We can have a chat about that maybe.

I want to talk about the involving citizens, involving the people in our city, part of this argument about this love triangle tonight. And, I want to put forward three types of ways to get involved in city making.

The first I will call rigid antagonists. These are your classic nimbus that you are familiar with. The second I will talk about are soft antagonists, and the third I will talk about is strategic antagonists.

I'm going to argue at the end that everybody in this room should become a strategic antagonist. Just a little bit about the way that we set up our urban governance system in Sydney.

Over the last sort of 20 years we've been reconfiguring the way that our planning system goes together. And, particularly we've been reconfiguring how the local and the state government relate to each other in terms of the way that we govern our city.

And, perhaps the easiest way to think about how that system goes together is to think about the local council amalgamations. So, starting to think about governing our cities not necessarily at the local level, but starting to think about governing them at a broader metropolitan or regional level.

And, I think that the local council amalgamations is a kind of representation of that type of thinking. We've even — maybe another example of this is the kind of periodic talk of a national urban agenda.

So, every now and then we hear people talking about, "We need a national urban agenda. We need the federal government to be laying down a set of fairly big and broad plans for how each city in Australia should be set up."

And, I think that also says something about the way we're thinking about cities. We're starting to think about them not necessarily at the local level per say, but as regional areas that fit into the global network.

Things that manifest in certain types of regulatory bodies. I think the Great Sydney Commission is a good example of the way that this type of thinking materialises in our city as well. So, there's kind of been a reconfiguration of formal planning governance in our cities over the last ten to 20 years.

Inside that we also have new roles or changing roles perhaps for the public and the private sector. So, of course the private sector has long been involved in things like infrastructure provision. That goes back actually all the way to the founding of the colony.

But, I think there's been a change in the roles for the government and the private sector in how we deliver major infrastructure. We're seeing the government used to put out tenders and also build infrastructure periodically.

We're seeing the government now increasingly being the manager of large scale infrastructure where the private sector will be the provider of that infrastructure. I think it's quite interesting that they asked me to come down here to Barangaroo to do this talk.

I mean, I could have done a whole talk just on this site. I think, you know, the unsolicited proposal process that resulted in this site is a kind of warning bell. I mean, maybe this — we are the canaries in the mine in some respects down here in Barangaroo, having this talk.

I think this indicates some of the changes that are at play in the urban planning system. Think one of the key things that happened with infrastructure provision over the last kind of 30 years is we started to treat infrastructure not just as a social democratic process to provide equity in the city, something that would enable and flatten our past hierarchy, we started to treat urban development as an economy in itself.

And, when you treat infrastructure provision as an economy and not as a social democratic process, you start to change the types of goods and serves you provide. So, changing dynamics between the public and private sector.

Citizens had been engaged in managing their cities probably all the way back to the ancient Athenian city-state. When I did my PhD some time ago with Michael Darcy who's sitting up the back, he knows I can talk for about an hour about ancient Athenian democracy. But, I'm sure he would also warn that I should not do that.

So, I'm not going to do that, but I will just say that there are a lot of formal ways that we can get involved in the participation of the planning system. We can go and submit objections or other processes at local council. We can attend the local meetings. We can also attend state government community consultations on long-term strategic plans.

So, there are a lot of formal ways that we can get involved in city making. But, the state, in terms of the local government and the state government, has been trying to rethink how citizens should be involved in the planning of their city. And, there's been a real push for involving citizens.

We think that involving citizens in city making is a good idea. And, we've had all sorts of new approaches from government that range from digital consultation processes to consultation on long-term strategic plans.

I note that that is mostly up front. So, we create a long-term strategic plan for our city that maps out where all the infrastructure should go. We need hospitals there and schools there and houses there and transport nodes here.

And, we lock that in for 30 years by asking the people of the city to come and comment on that process once, up front. So, I want you to keep that in mind as we move through.

People who object to these processes say that, "Community consultation is just a farce. It's just a way of managing our resistance." So, there is also a lot of opposition to that.

I think what's really interesting about the community consultation space is the rise of what I call the community consultation consultant. So, that's a consultant that consults to government about how to consult people.

Did you get lost there, because I certainly did. So, I think that's a good indication of the sort of changes we're seeing in this space as well.

What I really love is all the informal ways that we can engage with the city. So, we can go and lobby politicians, and that's what the private sector does. We can do all sorts of urban protests.

We can throw Molotov cocktails at people. I do not suggest that we do that, but you certainly can train your self-defences. And, I think that everybody should train themselves to offence at least once in their life for something they believe in.

I think that's a good thing to do, but I'm going to suggest probably not very productive. We can use the media. We can use the social media.

These are all new ways of getting involved. You can join a local resident action group, but interestingly now, you can also joint a broader community alliance at the level of the city.

The private sector is lobbying government in all of these ways, and I would suggest that if you want to have a say in the city then you need to start lobbying the government in all of these ways too.

These broader metropolitan alliances, so I'm thinking here about groups like the Sydney Alliance for Better Planning network. I also think they're a response to the way that we're starting to rethink the city.

So, at the beginning I said we're starting to no longer thing about the city just as a local site. We're starting to think about it as a region, as a city that's connected to a global economy. And, I think these new community alliances that are operating at the city are sort of responding to that.

They're also probably responding to things like the Greater Sydney Commission, which is a regional body. And, I think that this is a very productive way forward.

So, in all of that, there's a number of things. These are kind of like the key points I think for how we should think about community engagement in the city. And, if you are trying to engage people, some of the things that you need to think about.

The first one is about at what scale are you going to dedicate your community action? So, is it going to be at the local level? Is it going to be at the regional or metro level, or is it going to be at the national level? So, questions of scale are important for action in the city.

Also, time frame, are you going to do one action at one point in time, or are you going to do multiple actions over a long term? Is this a long-term project of action, or is this a one off process? As I said before, we're getting up front — calls for up front consultation on long-term strategic plans. Think we should question whether that's the right way forward.

Then there's the question of how we will participate? So, we know that we've got the formal channels that we could use, but there are also informal channels we can use. So, I said you should chain yourself to the fence. I said definitely don't throw the Molotov cocktails, but definitely think about the informal ways of engaging with the city as well.

Something we don't often think about is the difference between visible acts and invisible acts. This one's very important for here actually.

So, we know what happens in opening meetings. We know what happens in the big community consultation processes, but we don't know what happens behind closed doors. We don't know about corruption in the city, and we certainly didn't know what was happening with the unsolicited proposal that was occurring right here for a very long time.

So, we need to try to think of a way to account for the visible and invisible acts. One of the big challenges is also trying to balance any local and short-term issues with the broader long-term strategic planning issues and the broader planning of the city.

And, one of the things that happens in consultation often is that we get trapped at the local level, and we stop thinking about how this locality fits into the broader Sydney region. I think we need to start having that discussion about Sydney as a whole, our key issues we need to address, and the localities that we live in.

All this needs to occur of course across some pretty big differences in the people that live in the city. Probably going to get bigger, the differences, with the way our migration history has tracked so far and the changes that we're likely to see.

So, we need to work out a way to work across our difference. And, this leads us to the challenge of trying to manage urban change and things like population increases, housing pressures, environmental concerns, and transport provision in our city, those things that I talk about earlier.

And they're things, in fact, that all these cities around the world will share. As more and more people work moving the cities around the world, more and more people will have those same challenges. And, we can, you know, – there is an opportunity to have broader discussions about those issues.

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So, what I've been doing in my research then is asking pretty much four key questions. And, they are, what does the community groups and the community action groups and the other groups in the city that I've been working with, what actually do they know about urban development and urban planning?

Because, I think to comment on and to contribute to urban planning and urban development issues you need to know something about it. So, the first thing I ask people is what they know about it.

The second thing is I want to know what the demand is in those groups to participate. And, indeed, when people aren't participating, if there's demand in those groups too. I think there's an assumption that we want everybody to participate in the planning of our city, but we need to check that.

We found actually that in the people who don't participate there isn't always a desire to participate in city making. Sometimes people just want government to get on with building the infrastructure in our city.

There are structural constraints in our planning system that mean that we can do certain things, and we can't do other things. We need to know what they are, and we need to know how they might restrict certain types of activities.

And, the last thing I wanted to do, and this is the bit that I will talk about just for the last ten minutes, is I wanted to know how people currently participate in the planning of their city?

How do they try to change what happens in our city? And, that has taken me to look at four different things.

One of the scales at which they're operating. So, are they focussed on the local level or the regional level or some combination? What timelines are they looking at? Are they just looking at one off action or multiple action? What places are they working in, one place or multiple places, and, what alliances are they forming? And, there's some pretty interesting research findings coming out about the alliances that they're forming.

I have got one little bit where I will talk about a little bit of theory. I promised myself that I wouldn't talk about any political philosophy, but I just can't help myself, so here it is.

I've been working with three ideas in this project that are super easy to get your head around. I'll just summarise them for you. You probably know them already.

The first one is in terms of community participation and action, is the idea of consensus. That we can all come together. We can have a debate about something. We might disagree, but in the end we can have it out, and we can come to an agreement.

A lot of the community consultation processes in Sydney have used these models over time. And, they need to if you have a one off, up front process, because you need to come to an agreement before you can move on.

I don't think they reflect the ongoing tensions that actually exist. The second idea is antagonism, and this is the idea – this is like your classic nimby, right? This is active or hostility and opposition to everything. No matter what it is, I'm going to say no, antagonism. No way, active hostility, chain yourself to the fence. Don't throw the Molotov cocktail.

The third one is agonism. And, the idea of agonism is that we know we won't agree, and we know that we probably can't come to a consensus like we talked about just a second ago. But, we – and, we understand the conflict is normal. Conflict is normal is our society, so we will come together to agree to disagree.

But, we'll have a discussion with each other. We will talk. We're open to hearing other people's points of view. We're open to hearing about what different people's ideas are for the city, and we're also willing to change parts of what we want for the city if it serves – if we can see that there's some trade off in that.

So, we're willing to talk about it, and we're willing to compromise on little bits of the negotiation. What I was interested in after I found that – looking at that group, there's a political philosophy says that, "People move from antagonism to agonism."

So, they start out as nimbus. They chain themselves to the fence, and then they work out that the city's actually very complicated, and people's views are complicated. And, that they might not agree with them, and they enter into the discussion, and then they end up being antagonistic after. They ended up getting into the discussion.

So, I wanted to test that transition. Moving from that very rigid antagonism down to being more engaged in the city. And, this is where I found these three different types of actors in the city that I want to finish with.

The first one is what I called rigid antagonists. This is your classic nimby. If you work in local government or if you work for the state government, and you go out and do consultations, this is the local resident action group that turns of to every meeting, and says, "We're going to resist this at all costs."

You probably spend a lot of your time dealing with this group. I've been in that group. Sometimes I still join those groups. The problem with being a rigid antagonist is it's a zero sum game.

If you win, the whole project stops, and if you lose, the project goes ahead. Because, you're not having a negotiation with anyone, it's a zero sum game. But, you're a rigid antagonist, but accept that the odds of winning are very low.

The second one is the soft antagonist. So, soft antagonists are willing to compromise. They're willing to enter a debate. They're willing to think about the city at a broader level, and they go along to the local or state government community consultations.

They fill out the post-it notes. They stick them on the maps. They fill in the questionnaire. They answer all the questions, and then they wait for the plan to come back. And, they can't see any of their input in the plan, and they are pissed off.

And, they tell me that they've been co-opted. "I've been co-opted, and now I've been silenced." This is words they use. "I've been silenced through inclusion. They included me, and that's how they silenced me."

So, they didn't feel like they were very effective either. So, don't be a soft antagonist, because it's not very effective. And, you might get angry with people, and being angry with people's not good, because that leads back to rigid and Molotov cocktail, all that stuff.

I want you to think about becoming a strategic antagonist. The groups that we found that were strategic antagonists had been in the game a long time. They were groups that had gone through the environmental movement, that had lived in parts of the city that were surrounded by bush that now high density development was effecting them, and they knew how to run a campaign.

But, they also knew that cities change. They knew that the city was changing. They knew that they would have to compromise, so what they did was they started to make deals. They started to make deals with the local government, with the state government.

They tried to find a friendly ear in the political circle. They tried everything they could to start negotiating a better outcome. They used formal and informal acts. So, they did things like go along to the state government community consultation, collect a whole bunch of information about the project, and then go down to the local journalists and get them to write a story about it.

So, they were co-opting the formal processes. They were using them for different purposes. And, this is the interesting, bit, sometimes they even chained themselves to the fence. So, sometimes when they thought it was necessary, they went back to being strategic antagonists. And, what that means is they kept every tool at their disposal that they could use.

Most importantly they thought about the city, not only at the local level, but at the regional and metro level. They were interested in talking to a range of actors, private sector, government, about their campaigns and their wants and desires. They networked up with other people.

So, they said, "We might," — and, this is the interesting bit. "We might not agree with this other resident action group. We might have shared thoughts about exactly what happened, but we both believe that there needs to be more affordable housing here. So, let's come together and just share our political campaign around that common issue."

And, I think that that's where we'll start to see a lot of alliance work being built. These common issues, transport, housing, food security, things like that. And, we should foster those. We know

we'll have differences about how to roll them out, but we should foster those connexions as we move forward.

The last thing that they did is what we call opportunistic networking. So, what they would do is if there was a politically important moment in time – if it's a moment in time when a big plan is coming out for a development that they've got an interest in, they would go around to all the resident action groups and other groups in their area. They would go to the big alliances. They would go to anybody that they thought would support their cause, and they would develop a fairly big constituency to come and support them at that moment in time.

These were always temporary alliances. They were always defined by difference in disagreement inside them, but they were a politically powerful moment in time. So, what goes along with strategic antagonists is the idea of opportunistic networking to produce these politically powerful moments in time.

So, just to sum up so that everybody can get back to the bar. I think somebody said they'll buy me a drink. Was it someone at the back there?

Not all nimbus are the same. Rigid antagonists, you have to be one in your life. It's a great thing to do, but it's not a very powerful – it's not a very effective political strategy, because it's an all or nothing game.

Soft antagonists go into the process in good faith. They have the right ideas about consultation and engagement, but they feel co-opted by the process if they just engage in the formal processes.

Strategic antagonists are very effective political operators, because they use formal and informal acts. They operate at multiple scales. They network up political power across the city. They don't get locked down into specific issues, or they open the debate. And, they're talking, commonly, about the big issues in our city, transport, housing, and things like that.

So, I'm going to leave you with a call to arms to become strategic antagonists. Thank you.

[Applause]

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