

**Renate Howe, David Nichols and Graeme Davison. *Trendyville: The Battle for Australia's Inner Cities*, Monash University Publishing, 2014.<sup>1</sup>**

I would like to thank the Carlton Community History Group for the opportunity to address the group and explore the significance of this book on Melbourne's inner city residents' associations in the 1960s and 1970s for the role of community groups in current planning decision making.

Many of those in this room tonight are here because of their involvement in community issues and wanting to learn from the experience of Melbourne's inner city resident action groups (RAGs) in the 60s and 70s - also a period in which the city was experiencing rapid economic and social change. In the early period that change was due to the decline of manufacturing industry in the inner suburbs, rapid population increase through immigration, a lack of planning expertise among politicians and bureaucrats and administrative weakness, especially at the local government level. The crucial city decision makers were the state government departments - the Board of Works, the State Electricity Commission of Victoria, the Housing Commission of Victoria and the Country Roads Board – all powerful independent statutory authorities who had little regard for community engagement.

The catalyst for change came from inner suburban residents' associations mostly led by new residents in the inner city. As manufacturing industry declined in the inner city, working class residents found employment in the suburbs and were replaced by younger residents employed in universities, hospitals and offices. They and their families were the members of Melbourne's inner urban RAGs which were part of an international movement especially in British and American cities. For example, whilst studying in Chicago in the 1960s, Brian

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<sup>1</sup>*Trendyville; the Battle for Australia's Inner Cities* is available from [Monash University Publishing](#)

and myself had been involved in community organizer Saul Alinsky's opposition to the demolition of the south side of Chicago to build high rise apartment buildings. Especially influential for the Melbourne RAGs was Jane Jacobs' book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* which included the successful fight, initially led by a group of young mothers, to save New York's Greenwich Village from demolition by a proposed cross town freeway.

As well as this international context, Australian urban protest was on a national scale. The most well-known struggle was the Green Bans on developments in Sydney led by Jack Munday of the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation which was influential in saving the Rocks and other inner city areas. Brisbane's anti freeway protesters took on the Bjelke Petersen government, while RAGs were responsible for stopping the demolition of areas in North Adelaide, Battery Point in Hobart and Subiaco in Perth.

In Melbourne, Victorian government bureaucrats initially underestimated the determination and strength of the new resident action groups and their ability to mobilize diverse inner suburban communities. However, as *Trendyville* documents, the long term outcome was significant political change at state and local government level, an overhaul of state bureaucracies and the preparation of comprehensive urban plans begun by the Hamer Liberal government and followed by the Cain ALP government. The legislative framework for community consultation was put in place in these years – Planning Acts and the Planning Appeals Board, Heritage legislation and the Heritage Council and a major overhaul of state and local government administration.

The Carlton Association was a major player in these changes – it battled the expansion plans of the University of Melbourne, the extension of the Eastern

Freeway, and a proposal for a factory on railway land in North Carlton - which some of those here tonight were involved.

It is important to remember the achievements of the RAGs as they are often belittled as NIMBYs - acting in their own self-interest. It is especially important as over forty years later urban planning in Melbourne and other Australian cities faces formidable challenges. New models are needed if the voice of communities is to be heard in the current rapid expansion and rebuilding of Melbourne. Today's flashpoints – Docklands, the St Kilda Triangle, Fisherman's Bend – all raise a central question - 'How can community groups realistically stand up to the power of capital, especially international capital and the power of corporations?' The institutions of the 1960s/70s – the Planning Appeals Board, VCAT, the Heritage Council, local government, planning legislation and regulation – have been largely overwhelmed by the expanding, entrepreneurial, investment led international city.

Our discussion should focus on new responses to deal with these new realities. As in the 1960s/70s, Carlton now faces formidable challenges from familiar foes – eg. The University of Melbourne expansion and the incorporation of parts of South Carlton into the university, the proposed East-West link, the use of Railway Land in North Carlton, local government failure such as the split of representation of Carlton between the MCC and City of Yarra which prevents a wholistic approach to planning policy. As *Trendyville* shows, confronting these challenges is demanding – some CA members paid a high price in terms of family and career for their activism – but the outcomes from not acting are also high.

**Renate Howe**