When Strangers Become Neighbours: Managing Cities of Difference

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ABSTRACT Beginning with Healey’s definition of planning as “managing our co-existence in shared space”, this article asks what it means to manage our co-existence in cities of difference. The focus on difference is justified by referring to an emerging literature that identifies the issues and challenges involved in planning for multiple publics. The article elaborates four different ways in which multicultural or polyethnic cities and regions are a challenge to planning systems, policies, practices, and education and identifies four possible ways of responding to these challenges. One of these responses, political dialogue, becomes the focus of the final section of the article, a case study of a recent conflict in inner Sydney between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents over land use. Reflecting on the implications of this case study, a more ‘therapeutic’ approach to planning practice in certain contexts is recommended, and this is compared with existing models of communicative action.

This article sets out, indirectly, to answer the question posed at the end of Sharon Zukin’s The Cultures of Cities, namely, whether all of us, children of various Diasporas, can find a home in the city (Zukin, 1996). I interpret this question as a challenge to planning theory and practice, indeed as one of the most urgent challenges facing the profession. I first ask what kind of a challenge it is, and then what methods we have or might need to invent for dealing with the problem as I understand it.

To my mind the most beguiling formulation of planning yet offered, at least in the English language literature, is Patsy Healey’s notion of ‘managing our co-existence in shared space’ (Healey, 1997, p. 3). Such a formulation speaks with equal clarity about environmental, transport, housing and other conflicts, reminding us that, whether we like it or not, we do share space on the planet with others who in many ways are not like us, and we need to find ways of co-existing in these spaces, from the next-door neighbour to the street, neighbourhood, city and region. In this article I explore the particular dilemmas of ‘co-existing in cities of difference’, and what it might mean to manage difference in ways that could be transformative rather than repressive.

I begin with a brief introduction to the issue of difference in the city and an acknowledgement and discussion of some of the pioneering work of the past decade which has inscribed difference onto the map of planning thought and practice. I then ask why we might think of difference as a problem in the managing of cities, or rather, in what ways cities of difference pose a challenge to planning systems, policies and
practices. The article then focuses on one dimension of difference, that of cultural diversity, asking what happens when ‘strangers’ become neighbours, when the presence of indigenous peoples or of immigrants from significantly different cultures begin to make their presence felt in streets and neighbourhoods which had hitherto perceived themselves as relatively homogeneous, and how this becomes a problem in and for the planning system. I suggest four possible broad responses to the dilemmas of difference: the courts, the market, social movements, and political dialogue. The latter becomes the focus of the final section, in which I discuss a recent conflict in inner Sydney between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents over land-use, in the context of existing models of collaborative planning and communicative action. I ask whether those existing models can deal with what I see as the core problem, the dark side of difference, namely fear of the other, of the stranger, and suggest how they might come to do so.

Difference in the City

The argument that we live in ‘cities of difference’ is by now a well-rehearsed one. Geographers Ruth Fincher and Jane Jacobs published an edited collection with that title in 1998 which covered everything from gender and sexual preference to ‘race’ and culture, stages in the life cycle, and intersecting differences of gender, class and immigration in globalizing European cities (Fincher & Jacobs, 1998). In the previous year, I had argued, in Towards Cosmopolis, that three socio-cultural forces—transnational migrations, post-colonialism, and the rise of civil society—had converged to place the concept of difference on the agenda of the planning and design professions (Sandercock, 1997). Most presciently, the Royal Town Planning Institute had, in 1992, commissioned two British researchers to explore the sensitivity of the British planning system to the needs of black and ethnic minorities. Their report, having surveyed over 100 local planning authorities, concluded that there was a great deal of ignorance of the existence and nature of racial/ethnic disadvantage in planning, and they recommended creating an institutional framework which would give greater priority to the issue (Krishnarayan & Thomas, 1993). This work perhaps inspired, certainly prefigured, a handful of similar studies in Australia (Sandercock & Kliger, 1998a, 1998b; Watson & McGillivray, 1995) and Canada (Ameyaw, 2000; Dale, 1999; Qadeer, 1994, 1997; Wallace & Milroy, 1999) which have drawn attention to a number of issues: from the overall failure of the planning system to respond to the increasing cultural diversity of the city, to the ways in which the values and norms of the dominant culture are reflected in plans, planning codes and bylaws, legislation, and heritage and urban design practices, to planners’ inability to analyze issues from a multicultural perspective or to design participatory processes that bring racial and ethnic groups into the planning process (Ameyaw, 2000, p. 105).

Thomas & Krishnarayan have continued to do path-breaking work in this field of cultural diversity and planning, particularly in relation to the ways in which planning is influenced by and implicated in the racialization of social processes (Thomas & Krishnarayan, 1994; Thomas, 1995a, 1995b, 1997). Work is now emerging from the USA (Burayidi, 2000) and Europe (Khakee et al., 1999; Ratcliffe, 1999) of both a theoretical and empirical kind, documenting the circumstances and needs of indigenous and ethnic minorities, and critiquing urban policies and planning practices which either ignore these needs or actively contribute to the ongoing exclusion of minorities. The work of
some Israeli scholars should also be noted as pioneering both for drawing attention to the plight of minorities like the Bedouin and Ethiopian Jews under the geo-politics of Israeli planning, and for delineating the conflicts between the discourses (and practices) of cultural difference and of human rights (Dinero, 2000; Fenster, 1999a, 1999b; Yiftachel, 1994, 1996).

Difference, then, can be said to have arrived on the agenda of the planning and design professions, and difference, in this context, takes many forms. It acknowledges that population groups, differentiated by criteria of age, gender, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, sexual preference, culture and religion, have different claims on the city for a full life and, in particular, on the built environment. A politics of difference has emerged, or what philosopher James Tully calls a politics of cultural recognition (Tully, 1995), the struggle for the right to difference, as well as the right to a voice in decisions affecting a wide range of groups, including indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees, women, and gays and lesbians. Each of these struggles and their associated claims has an impact on, and in, the sphere of the built environment.

From the body of literature referred to above, it is possible to distil four different ways in which culturally diverse cities and regions are a challenge to planning systems, policies and practices, and why ‘difference’ comes to be seen as a problem. First, these studies have demonstrated that the values and norms of the dominant culture are usually embedded in legislative frameworks of planning, in planning by-laws and regulations. This is not, on the face of it, a surprising conclusion, since this legal framework evolved at a time when most societies were not yet multicultural and imagined themselves as more homogeneous than now. The planning system thus unreflectively expressed the norms of the culturally dominant majority. It is disturbing, however, to recognize that these values are still driving decisions which in turn are reinforced by the courts.

To take a recent case in the USA: a dispute between the Navajo tribe and the US Forest Service over proposed road construction and logging led to claims by the Navajo that this development would violate their rights of religious freedom, which had been established in the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978. The case ended up in the Supreme Court, where Justice Sandra Day O’Connor ruled in favour of the Forest Service. The fundamental issue in dispute was the definition of what constitutes ‘religious use’ of the land. O’Connor’s argument was that the land in question was not used actively for ritual purposes and did not contain a specific religious site. This finding, however, “begs the central question in planning for a multicultural society: it imposed a form of Judeo-Christian standard of ‘exercising one’s religion’ on Native American cultures” (Meyer & Reaves, 2000, p. 94). What the Justice’s ruling did not allow for is that not all religious practices are bound in time and space as are the church-based belief systems of the dominant US culture.

There is an additional issue relating to legal frameworks and the right to difference. Planning’s legal framework in the West has been embedded in a particular conception of democracy as majority rule, and a corresponding belief that the right to difference disappears once the majority has spoken. As one planner whom I interviewed expressed it: “Local laws and regulations are framed for the majority of the community. If the minority can’t fit in, then bad luck” (Sandercock & Kliger, 1998a). For the most part, planners have not questioned the modernist paradigm of ‘one law for all’, in spite of precedents in feminist planning literature, which have challenged the universalism of the
legal framework of planning, a framework which has generally been regarded as neutral, or unbiased, with respect to age, gender, religion, and culture. Applying a critical lens to this framework reveals, however, that it is underpinned by all sorts of implicit assumptions: about what constitutes a ‘normal household’ (the nuclear family), about an ‘appropriate urban form’ for such households (single family housing), about gender relations and their spatial expression (women occupying domestic space, men public space), about preferred forms of recreation (cricket and football), and so on. These norms conceal not only gender and sexual preference biases but cultural biases as well.

A second way in which the recognition of the right to difference presents a challenge to planning practice is that the norms and values of the dominant culture are not only embedded in the legislative framework of planning, but are also embodied in the attitudes, behaviour, and practices of actual flesh-and-blood planners. Burayidi (2000a) has documented six ways in which ‘cultural misunderstanding’ might occur between planners (who belong for the most part to the dominant culture in the societies of Europe, North America and Australia) and cultural minorities:

(i) communication style (cultural differences affect the outcomes of the transactive and social learning processes in planning); (ii) attitude toward disclosure (cultural differences influence the types of information people are willing to share with planners); (iii) attitude toward conflict (this has implications for the role that the planner plays as mediator in community conflicts); (iv) approaches to accomplishing task (this may affect the way in which planners and other professionals undertake teamwork in planning projects); (v) styles of decision making (different cultural groups have different decision-making procedures); and (vi) approaches to knowing (this affects the procedural approach to planning). (Burayidi, 2000a, p. 5)

Problems can arise not just from cultural misunderstandings such as these, however, but from more deep-seated beliefs in the superiority of one’s own culture, or the belief that all immigrants should adapt to the mores of the ‘host’ culture.

A third challenge revealed by the research reviewed earlier, concerns situations in which the xenophobia and/or racism within communities and neighbourhoods finds its expression or outlet through the planning system, in the form of a planning dispute over, say, the location of a mosque or Hindu temple, the use of a suburban house as a Buddhist community centre, the conversion of an abandoned factory into a training facility for indigenous youth, or the retailing practices of Vietnamese traders (see Sandercock & Kliger, 1998a, 1998b). In such conflicts, it is not the planning system per se which is the problem. However, the fact that the system becomes an outlet for the deep-seated fears, aversions, or anxieties of some residents means that this does become a problem for the planning system, in terms of responding in constructive ways.

A fourth challenge arises when (Western) planners come up against cultural practices that are incommensurable with their own values. One way of interpreting Justice O’Connor’s rule, described above, would be to see it as an incommensurable issue of different perceptions of the value of land between secular mainstream American society and Native American communities.

Another illustration of this dilemma is Tovi Fenster’s sensitive account, from her own feminist perspective, of planning new towns for Bedouins and housing for Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Fenster’s post-occupancy research uncovered a deep distress amongst
both the Muslim Bedouin women and the Ethiopian Jewish women as a result of the failure of the site plans and the housing design to deal with their culturally specific needs for spatial separation—the separation of women from certain men in the case of the Bedouin, and the separation of menstruating women in special huts away from their own family compound in the case of the Ethiopian Jews. The problem, as Fenster describes it, is far more complicated than that of a top-down planning process that failed to consult those for whom the towns and housing were being planned. There is a double dilemma of control and power at work here: of the state over minorities, and of certain community members (men) over other community members (women).

This dilemma in fact confronts two approaches to cultures: the first which views Western culture as superior and claims that other cultures should adjust to Western cultural norms, primarily those which assume equality of all members of a community. The second, the particularist approach, claims that different civilisations have different cultures which need to be understood and judged within their own terms which means acknowledging gender and class inequalities as part of those cultures. (Fenster, 1999a, p. 148)

Her nuanced discussion of planning across the divide of incommensurable cultural values and practices raises a profound difficulty for planners working in cross-cultural situations. She herself is conflicted, as a feminist on the one hand, and as a planner committed to the acknowledgement of and respect for cultural difference, on the other. Her way through this dilemma has two dimensions; the first addresses the need to open up a dialogue within Bedouin and Ethiopian Jewish communities concerning the cultural construction of space and the associated lack of freedom of movement for women, and the other imagining more flexible design solutions which may be amenable to change over time, as inter-generational family values are likely to change. This is what she terms “mapping the boundaries of social change” (Fenster, 1999a, p. 165).

How can planners and the planning system respond to these four challenges? How is, and how might, the right to difference be accommodated in our cities and neighbourhoods? As Wallace & Milroy have noted, neither the planning literature nor experiences in planning practice make it obvious how one ought to deal with difference in planning (Wallace & Milroy, 1999, p. 55). I want to suggest that there are four broad kinds of response. We might consider overhauling the planning system, either by revising legislation, or challenging it in the courts or appeal tribunals, testing whether it is consistent with, say, anti-discrimination legislation, or espoused multicultural policies. Wallace & Milroy drew this conclusion in their study of planning issues in Toronto and Southern Ontario, arguing that rather than the ‘neutral’ framework currently in place, difference needs to be taken as the point of departure. However, the template for this kind of planning, as they note, has not yet been developed (Wallace & Milroy, 1999, p. 70). Of course, overhauling any legislation is a daunting task, and usually only occurs as a result of powerful lobbying which often takes at least a generation. Think of feminist or civil rights reforms and how long and hard they were fought for. This suggests that unless social movements are actively working on behalf of the rights of cultural minorities in and to the built environment, this kind of change is unlikely to come about.
A second type of broad response to the needs of different cultural groups is through market mechanisms, and here we can see a certain amount of progress in most cities. Most notably, stores open up to provide specialist goods and services (Halal and Kosher butchers, Asian and African markets for fruit and vegetables, Turkish video stores, Italian bridal wear, Greek pastries, Chinese acupuncturists and herbalists). Shopping malls and whole precincts within a city spring to life providing, say, Vietnamese hairdressers, lawyers, tax accountants, shoe repairers, for predominantly Vietnamese (or Bengali or Iranian or whatever) enclaves of the city, whose members are unwilling as yet to venture beyond their own community for these common services.

Other kinds of small businesses emerge, say in housing construction and renovation, to cater for culturally specific kinds of domestic spaces (Jewish builders who know how to do a kosher kitchen; Muslim builders who know about the orientation of bedroom and bathing spaces to Mecca, or about the gender-based spatial separations, or the spatial requirements for praying). But what has this market response got to do with planning? Typically, there will be requests for signage, or for a change in regulations concerning retail practices, to allow street vendors, or to allow street displays of wares. Planners can ease these neighbourhood transitions by facilitating such changes, or they can be obstructive (see Figure 1 ‘The Battle for the Sidewalk’, and Sandercock & Kliger, 1998a, for such a case). Alternatively they can establish mediation processes when local conflicts arise.

This market response, and planning accommodations to it, is all well and good for those who can afford to pay for such goods and services. But we only have to think of the appalling housing situations of certain cultural minorities (indigenous peoples everywhere; gypsies), or of the poorest members of any immigrant group (Bengalis in London, Vietnamese in Melbourne) to recognize that the market does not, and never will, address all the needs arising from and problems relating to cultural diversity. This was indeed the conclusion drawn from a recent cross-national comparative research project which investigated the socio-spatial exclusion of ethnic minorities in six European countries (Khakee et al., 1999). The specifics of the research inquired into the impact of urban renewal or regeneration policies on immigrant communities, and concluded that whereas ‘property-led renewal’ has tended to displace ethnic minorities (by demolishing or upgrading inner city housing), state-led programmes have resulted in the ghetto-izing of immigrants in the worst housing in the worst neighbourhoods, and have failed to address associated issues of economic and political integration. The general pattern that emerges from these six national studies shows a strong concentration of immigrant minorities in the worst housing, in specific districts of large urban areas, either in inner city high density housing or in peripheral districts. In all six countries (Sweden, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, France and Britain), discussions of immigration are framed by the conception of the ‘immigrant as problem’. Most disturbingly, each national case study notes the intensification of national and cultural forms of racism, an observation which has been reinforced by the political successes of anti-immigrant parties in Austria and Switzerland in 1999, (and in France much earlier), and the accompanying discourses, which both racialize and spatialize the immigration issue, portraying it as an invasion of national space by the Other, those with different everyday practices, which manifest themselves most dramatically in the concrete spaces of streets, shops, schools, housing and neighbourhoods.
Managing Cities of Difference

In Australian cities in the past two decades, the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants of Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu faiths has led to the desire to build their own mosques and temples, and thus to requests for help from local planners in finding a suitable site. It is remarkable how often the sites to which these groups are directed are located on the periphery of the metropolitan area, or in industrial zones, remote from their worshippers, inaccessible by public transport, and often adjacent to incompatible land-uses such as garbage tips, or storage depots, or ‘big box’ retail outlets (see Figure 2 ‘Temple Row’, and Figure 3 ‘The Mosque on the Highway’). The standard justification given for these kind of locational decisions is the need to provide for adequate parking, and the likely disruption of neighbourhood amenity from noise and traffic congestion if such facilities were to be located in existing residential areas. While difficult to ‘prove’, these examples do seem to illustrate discrimination against new immigrant groups in the planning system, whether as a response to pressure from older residents uncomfortable with the idea of new neighbours, or because planners are second-guessing, and trying to head off, conflicts that might arise.

Thus far we have discussed responses to the right to difference through the courts/ legislation and through the market. There are two other (interdependent) possibilities, which will occupy the remainder of this article. One is the process-based response of
establishing a dialogue. The other is an educational response that addresses the different set of skills that might be required if planners are to work in cross-cultural contexts. To introduce this discussion I will begin with a small example of conflict drawn from my own research on planning issues in culturally diverse municipalities in Melbourne. This serves as an entrance into the darker side of difference which we must then probe further, namely, fear of the Other.

In one outer suburban municipality with significant numbers of recent arrivals from Vietnam, Cambodia and China, the Buddhist community sought permission to build a temple and asked the planning staff for help in locating a site. They were directed to industrially-zoned land on the periphery, where the temple subsequently built stands empty most of the time because of its inaccessibility in the daily lives of the community, particularly the elderly and transport-disadvantaged. Reacting to this disadvantage, Buddhist monks have purchased suburban houses as residences, and then converted the garage into a small temple, and part of the house into a communal kitchen for preparation for feast days. Visiting one such house with a community worker as guide, I encountered a triple-life-sized statue of the Buddha next to a lotus pond in the backyard, and, indoors, 15 or so elderly Vietnamese women making dumplings for a feast day. In the garage was the shrine and place of worship, tell-tale pairs of sandals lined up at the door, and the smell of incense emanating from within. From the street there was no indication that this house was a de facto community centre and temple. The local council, however, had received a complaint from a neighbour about the ‘excessive’
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The category of the stranger breaks open from the inside the established categories and stereotypes of the local world (the world of the locals).
Strangers do not fit into any of the neat containers that they are supposed to fit into, and therein lies an extreme irritation. To put it in another way, strangers are those who actually should be excluded according to the stereotypes of social order ...

Strangers are ... a living refutation of the apparently clear borders and natural foundations through which affiliations and identities are expressed in the nation-state ...

The strangeness of strangers appears frightening and enticing. (Beck, 1998, pp. 125–130)

I have written elsewhere about how the future of planning in cities of difference requires a coming to terms with the existence of fear in the city, specifically fear of the Other (the stranger/outsider/foreigner) (Sandercock, 2000a, 2000b). James Donald has argued that urban reformers for the past century and a half, since Haussmann, have viewed the space of the city as a territory to be bounded, mapped, occupied and exploited, a population to be managed and perfected. This, he says, was the overarching dream of Enlightenment rationality: to render the city transparent, orderly, to get the city right, and so to produce the right citizens (Donald, 1997). This is the dream of the rational city. It is a dream about producing subjectivities as well as producing space. The history of planning could be rewritten as the attempt to manage fear in the city: fear of disorder, fear of disease (and those subjects/citizens thought to cause its spread), fear of women, fear of the working classes, of immigrants, of gays (‘polluting the moral order’), of gypsies. The ‘solution’ has been twofold: both exclusion—spatial policing and segregation, keeping certain bodies out of certain areas; and moral reform—the attempt to produce certain kinds of citizens and subjectivities, good Melburnians, good Bostonians, by providing parks and playgrounds, settlement houses, and other ‘civilizing’ urban facilities. By framing the issue of cultural diversity in the language of ‘managing (cities of) difference’ are we still trying to dream the rational city? Does ‘management’ always imply, as Foucauldians would have it, containment, control, manipulation?

Contemporary planning approaches dealing explicitly with fear in the city revolve around crimes to property and threats to personal safety, and have focused either on urban design (Oscar Newman’s ‘defensible space’) or environmental design (the ‘crime prevention through environmental design’ literature). Each of these tackles what could be called the hardware of crime prevention rather than the software of fear in the city. Another, more psychoanalytically-oriented literature, comes at the issue of fear in a very different way, recognizing, to begin with, that individual identity is often suffused with anxiety, and that these anxieties are projected onto the figure of the stranger, whose very presence seems to challenge and undermine the known social order on which our identity is based. This projection conceals conflicts within the self, mixtures of fear and desire, as Julia Kristeva would have it (Kristeva, 1991). In other words, the stranger is also within ourselves. In Kristeva’s understanding: “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 1). This last phrase is a very interesting choice of words: “the space that wrecks our abode”. In Bourdieu-ian language, we are talking here about the destruction of the habitus, the destruction of our comfort zone, of all that is familiar and homely, all that we have
grown up with and take for granted, including the socio-spatial knowledge of our neighbourhoods and indeed, the nation as a whole.

Both Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck have observed that “strangers bring the outside in” and, in so doing, they appear to come as a threat to the known order in which we are able to feel ‘at home’ with ourselves (Bauman, 1990; Beck, 1998). The stranger threatens to bring chaos into the social order, from the imagined community of the nation to that of the neighbourhood. Individual strangers are a disconcerting presence, like the Buddhist monks who moved into the suburban house in Melbourne. In numbers, strangers may come to be seen as an invading mass or tide that will engulf us, provoking primitive fears of annihilation, of the dissolving of boundaries, the dissolution of identity. Racist and xenophobic panics are driven by this fear of the dissolving of boundaries, of disintegrating identity (Robins, 1995). In the face of this unsettling, the desire for the logic of order and identity is reasserted. ‘We’ must secure our centrality and ‘they’, those who disrupt our homely space, must be pushed out from the centre. Difference is an attribute of ‘them’. They are not ‘like us’ and therefore they are threatening. Yet, the very strangeness of strangers is not only frightening but also enticing (Beck, 1998, p. 130). Our ambivalence towards strangers expresses fear and desire fused into one, and is thus doubly unsettling.

Armed with these insights about fear, strangers and ambivalence, I want to turn now to the possibility of a more dialogical, or therapeutic, approach to resolving conflicts arising from or distorted or magnified by this fear of difference, of Otherness. What we might take from the psychoanalytical literature is not that ‘difference’, and the fear/aversion it generates, is unmanageable, but rather, that such fears and anxieties are not being, and cannot be addressed, by the rational bureaucratic regulatory methods that are, or have been, the bread and butter of planning. Should we then declare the whole project of ‘managing cultural diversity’, or ‘managing difference’, as fatally flawed? Or do we simply need to think about the problem in a different way?

**Managing Intercultural Co-existence in Shared Space**

In this final section, I want to argue that fear in the city is not a problem to be solved, at least not along the lines of the modernist dreams of control, order and transparency. Rather, we face the eternal, impossible question of how ‘we’, all strangers to each other, can live together in the city. The approach that would seem to make sense, given the discussion in the previous section, is what I will call a therapeutic one: a dialogical approach (as would occur in psychoanalysis) which brings antagonistic parties together to talk through their concerns. This requires an open and communicative planning process, involving negotiation and mediation in working through a problem with those directly affected. It requires life experience, communicative skills and, in multicultural or multi-ethnic contexts, cross-cultural understanding. While models of collaborative planning and consensus-building have been discussed and practised and analyzed in the planning literature since the mid-1980s in the USA and UK (see Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1995; Susskind & Cruikshank, 1987), I have two critical differences with this literature. One is that the so-called communicative action or collaborative planning approach is a model that has assumed (following Habermas) that rational discourse among stakeholders is both appropriate and achievable. The other is that outcomes from this approach, even when consensus is reached on a way forward, are not necessarily (or
even intended to be) transformative. To ground this discussion, what follows is an account of a recent cross-cultural conflict over land-use in inner Sydney, Australia, and its resolution through such a therapeutic process in which the space is created for speaking the unspeakable, for talk of fear and loathing, as well as of hope and transformation.

The issue concerned the future of a factory site immediately adjacent to the residential area known as The Block in the inner Sydney neighbourhood of Redfern. The Block had been a 1970s federal government initiative that had granted urban Aboriginal land rights. This area has received a lot of media and political attention in recent years as housing owned by the Aboriginal Housing Corporation deteriorated, and the area became a centre of drug dealing and drug taking. Local opinion is now dramatically divided regarding the Aboriginal presence, with some non-indigenous locals believing, or hoping, that the government will ‘clean up’ the area before the Olympic Games in 2000, while other non-indigenous residents are firmly committed to a multiracial neighbourhood, as a symbol of a wider reconciliation process in the nation.

In the 1980s the local (South Sydney) council had rezoned the site for community use, which meant that when the factory closed down a decade later, the council had to acquire the site. It then tried to rush through an approval to demolish the buildings on the site, in sympathy with the conservative white residents’ faction who wanted the site to become a park with a prominent police station at its centre. This group expressed strong disapproval of any use of the site for Aboriginal purposes. A second group, the Redfern Aboriginal Corporation, wanted the buildings and site used for Aboriginal economic and community purposes, including a training facility. A third group, white residents calling themselves Redfern Residents for Reconciliation (RRR), supported the Aboriginal group and the larger issue of ongoing Aboriginal presence in the area.

After being embarrassed by resident protests, the council backtracked and hired a social planning consultant (Dr Wendy Sarkissian) to conduct a consultation process that would result in recommendations for a Master Plan for the 2200 square metre site.1 The consultant’s initial scoping of the situation suggested to her that there was such hostility between the three identifiable groups of residents that any attempt at a general meeting to start the process would either meet with boycott from one or more groups, or end up in violence. Her strategy therefore was to organize a series of meetings. For the first few months, separate meetings were held with each of the three ‘camps’. These included small meetings in people’s living rooms, larger meetings in more public settings, meetings with children, and meetings with members of the Aboriginal community using a black architect as mediator. Eventually, after three months of dialogic preparation, a ‘speak-out’ was organized in which each group agreed to participate. The latter was the most risky part of the whole process in that it was the most likely to get out of hand. The point of participation in this event was for people to say what they felt, to speak their feelings, no matter how toxic, or painful, it might be for others to hear. The hope, implicit in such an event, is that as well as speaking the unspeakable—that is performing a sort of cathartic function for all those carrying anger or fear or betrayal inside themselves—the words will also be heard, in their full emotion, by those whose ears and hearts have previously been closed.

At the time that the speak-out was held, three months into the process, there had deliberately been no discussion (and certainly no drawings) of alternative uses of the
The consultant’s intention was to encourage the ‘real issues’ at stake to be aired, prior to any site-specific discussions. The ‘real issues’ ranged from sheer resentment on the part of conservative whites at the Aboriginal presence in ‘their’ neighbourhood, to concerns with personal safety and children’s well-being related to the presence of drug-dealing and drug-taking, to, on the part of indigenous people, anger and sadness at 200 years of domination by ‘white fellas’ who even now had little understanding of their history and culture. At one point in the speak-out, the consultant herself was verbally attacked by a tearful Aboriginal woman storyteller who demanded to know how the consultant thought she could shift 200 years of racist history in a few months, with a few meetings. There is no satisfactory answer to such a profound question, only the honest answer in this case, which was the attempt to create the space, in one place, at one point in time, where perceptions might shift, where public learning might occur, and some larger transformation take place.

Such a shift did in fact take place. Interestingly, before the speak-out, the consultant had been criticized by white residents sympathetic to the indigenous desires for the site, for her overly therapeutic approach, for too much talk about feelings. But clearly what had been happening during this initial period of meetings and listening was the creation of a safe space in which parties could meet and speak without fear of being dismissed, attacked, or humiliated. The speak-out would not have been possible without this preparatory work, which simultaneously involved the building of trust in the consultant and her team. The speak-out itself also had to be designed as a safe space, and this was achieved in part by ceremonializing the activities. In describing the mediation practice of Shirley Solomon, working on a dispute between Native Americans and a county government in the state of Washington, John Forester notes that “the ceremonial design of innovative public policy conversation can be an important signal to all parties that they are about to engage in a different—fresh and non-threatening—kind of exploratory conversation in a different, deliberately designed setting” (Forester, 2000, p. 151). Solomon moved from the first stage, of creating a safe space, to a second stage, creating a sacred space in which the whole idea was of “getting to higher ground” (Solomon, in Forester, 2000, p. 152). Solomon’s story, like Sarkissian’s, teaches us not only about caution in the face of explosive histories, but also about the place of storytelling in setting the stage for beginnings of reconciliation. Neither of these practitioners wishes to disguise the fact that “all this is experimentation. It’s not like there’s a cookbook, and you’re following it, and it all goes the way it should” (Solomon, in Forester, 2000, p. 158).

It was only after the speak-out (and the painstaking communicative preparation for it) that Sarkissian was able to move the process on, to enable joint group discussions and negotiations, to forge a set of principles for deciding the future use/s of the site, and finally to a set of meetings to draw up guidelines to present to the council. One of the operating principles guiding the consultant was the determination not to force closure before there was the possibility of a genuine agreement, rather than a mere ‘deal’, an unsatisfactory compromise. That agreement finally came, not without pain, after nine months of talk, and a budget of about $50 000. The outcome, 10 guidelines for a Masterplan, was a compromise, but it was also a breakthrough of sorts, in that the white conservatives backed off from their opposition to any Aboriginal use of the site and agreed to some training facilities.

This kind of planning work, involving dialogue and negotiation across the gulf of cultural difference, requires its practitioners to be fluent in a range of ways of knowing
and communicating: from storytelling to listening to interpreting visual and body language. It would seem to be a model that is very relevant to the new complexities of nation-building and community development in multicultural societies. It is perhaps the best model in situations where direct, fact-to-face meetings are unthinkable or unmanageable due to prior histories of conflict and/or marginalization. In such cases, the use of narrative, of people telling their own stories about how they perceive the situation, becomes a potential consensus-building tool for unearthing issues unapproachable in a solely rational manner.

For most complex and highly charged public policy issues, sound expert analysis plays an important role in shaping the possibilities for agreement. So too, do well-planned, well-executed, face-to-face negotiations. But when the parties involved have been at odds for generations, or come from disparate cultural traditions, or where there is a history of marginalization, something more than the usual tool-kit of negotiation and mediation is needed, some ‘method’ which complements but also transcends the highly rational processes typical of the communicative action model. In the case just discussed, that ‘something more’ was the speak-out, which provided an occasion for dealing with history in highly personal, narrative, and emotional ways. There are other possible methods, using drama, for example, or other more symbolic or non-verbal means of storytelling and communicating deeply felt emotions. Indigenous people are often, with good reason, preoccupied with the unacknowledged and therefore unfinished business of the past. It is particularly important for them to be able to tell their stories. But all parties involved in planning disputes have a story, and there is growing recognition of the importance of the telling and hearing of stories in the process of conflict resolution. Narratives about the past can be vital in navigating long-standing, cross-cultural disputes.

Norman Dale, a Canadian practitioner experienced in working through conflicts involving First Nations peoples, argues that stories are a common denominator valued by all ethnicities and ages.

Relatively few people learn the rules of specialised modes of discourse such as legal argumentation or Western scientific debate. But nearly all of us, beginning as very young children, are immersed in stories—whether of fiction or family tales. (Dale, 1999, p. 944)

A more democratic and culturally inclusive planning not only draws on many different ways of knowing and acting, but also has to develop a sensibility able to discern which ways are most useful in what circumstances. What has been missing from most of the collaborative planning/communicative action literature is this recognition of the need for a language and a process of emotional involvement, of embodiment, of allowing the whole person to be present in negotiations and deliberations. There are, however, two notable exceptions to this absence, two scholars to whom we can turn for guidance: Howell Baum (1997, 1999, 2000) and John Forester (1999, 2000).

Baum argues that when such language and behaviour is disallowed or discouraged by planners insisting that participants be rational, or that discussions follow a logical order, they will elicit only superficial participation. “Told to be rational, people assume they have been told not to be themselves. They may feel relieved. Planning will not require them to reveal or risk what matters” (Baum, 1999, p. 12). Baum also suggests that it is important for planners working in emotionally charged situations not to try to
suppress conflict, for to do so is to sabotage the work of grieving and healing which needs to be done as part of a process of change. Helping people to discuss their fears, he argues, is a way of seeing past them toward the future. Baum emphasizes that the planning process must create a transitional space, between past and future, “where participants can share the illusion of being apart from time. They need to imagine stepping away from past memories without feeling they have lost their identity or betrayed the objects of memory ... They must be able to imagine alternative futures without feeling obliged to enact any of them” (Baum, 1999, p. 11). This is what he calls the ‘serious play’ of a good deliberative planning process.

What also interests me about the philosophy underlying this therapeutic approach is the possibility of transformation, that is, of something beyond a merely workable trade-off or bandaid solution. Much of the negotiation and mediation literature, argues Forester (1999, p. 90), remains economistic, more concerned with trading and exchange than with learning, more concerned with interest-based bargaining and ‘getting to yes’ than with the broader public welfare. But, just as in successful therapy there is breakthrough and individual growth becomes possible, so too with a successful therapeutically oriented approach to managing our co-existence in the shared spaces of neighbourhoods, cities and regions, there is the capacity for collective growth. Or, to move from the language of therapy to that of politics, there is the possibility of social transformation, of a process of public learning that results in permanent shifts in values and institutions.

John Forester’s work since the mid-1990s, culminating in The Deliberative Practitioner (1999), is arguably the most important work to date in advancing the idea of a democratic deliberative process which can produce transformative results. He is concerned with a transformative theory of social learning in which not only our arguments change in dialogues and negotiations, but we change as well. The importance of explicitly addressing traumas and grievances, feelings of loss and betrayal, of ‘not leaving the emotions at the door’ when one enters a negotiation, is also emphasized by Forester. While he is explicit that “we cannot turn public deliberations into therapy sessions” (Forester, 1999, p. 219), he is equally clear that:

in the shadow of traumatic histories, public deliberations will have to enable ... acknowledgement and mourning of loss as well as the articulation and reinterpretation of ends. When we learn about the significant historical experiences of others and articulate our own in public settings, we may change ourselves as well as our strategies and senses of priorities ... We need to learn about strategies, about norms, and about selves, transforming all three as we go. (Forester, 1999, p. 218)

It hardly needs to be said that the success of this kind of planning work depends very much on the skills and wisdom of the practitioners involved. It would take another essay to deal adequately with the kinds of preparation appropriate to this kind of work on deep-seated conflicts in cross-cultural contexts. At the very least, it involves training in negotiation and mediation, facilitation and consensus-building, organizing and working with groups of different sizes and different kinds of internal conflict. It involves some understanding of individual, group, and community psychology, as well as group and community dynamics; and some experience doing research in and about communities, with community members. Again the works of Baum and of Forester have taken these
matters furthest. Baum suggests that we might learn from anthropologists’ methods. First, they tell us that getting to know another (group, or culture) takes more than a few meetings and/or a needs assessment survey. Understanding, and building trust, depends on spending time in a community; and it calls for in-depth talk, and not just discussions with formal leaders. Second, they tell us that every group we encounter has a culture (as does every observer/planner), which may be thick or thin, thoroughly or only partially defining and directing actions. Learning about any culture is an empirical, and time consuming, task which requires a special attitude (Baum, 2000, p. 133). Planners need to learn about culture: what it is and what shapes and maintains it, how and why it changes, and how one’s own culture affects one’s ability to understand that of others. Baum also recommends courses in cultural anthropology, community psychology, group process and organizational behaviour (Baum, 2000, p. 133).

For 10 years John Forester has been listening to and learning from the practice stories of good mediators and negotiators. The richness of that work cannot and should not be summarized in a list of ‘how to’s’, but Forester himself has tried to draw out lessons for ‘multicultural planning’ from this work. “Planners can learn ... how they might establish consensual and shared ground rules, how they might help to create safe spaces for discussion, spaces in which parties can learn about each other as well as the issues before them, and explore options in creative ways” (Forester, 2000, p. 166). There is the underlying theme in all of Forester’s work, that of listening as ‘the social policy of everyday life’ (Forester, 1989).

Interestingly, in the light of the concluding remarks which follow, Forester does not suggest that mediation should always be the strategy of choice, remarking on the question of power and power imbalances which has long been a sore point with critics of communicative action approaches. “Collaborative problem-solving can only be truly collaborative when the power of parties is balanced enough to make them interdependent, to make their problem-solving a joint enterprise, not the decision of one party visited upon the others” (Forester, 2000, p. 167). He does not deny that courts and legislatures are sometimes the more appropriate avenue to redress or protect the rights of those with less power. Susskind et al. (1999) have made a similar argument, that mediation processes can complement, but not substitute for, legal and political processes in which weaker parties might gain real protections of their resources or entitlements.

What, then, might we conclude about the wider significance of this Sydney case study, and of the therapeutic approach described here? One point is the cost and time involved. These are significant commitments of resources, and cannot be expected to be available for every dispute that arises. My argument is that this approach is the best model in cases where prior histories of conflict have made more traditional negotiation techniques irrelevant. A second point relates to scale and significance. The conflict in this case was ostensibly over the fate of a 2200 square metre site, within one local municipality. The symbolic stakes, however, were considerably greater, especially for indigenous people, whose ongoing presence in the inner city seemed to be the hidden agenda and longer-term threat. So this small, localized conflict was, in the minds of most of those involved, about core issues of history, injustice, and national identity. At whatever scale such conflicts arise—neighbourhood, city, or region—there is a strong case for using this therapeutic approach. Indeed, South Africa’s experience with its Truth and
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Reconciliation Commission points to possibilities of its application at the level of a whole society, in extraordinary circumstances.

The final point to be teased out of this Sydney case study relates to the perennial question of how change comes about. I do not want to close leaving the impression that planners, if only they become ‘therapists’ in their practice, will rid the world of racism, sexism and other plagues. Remember that the (politically conservative) South Sydney council initially attempted to rush through its preferred solution, and would have succeeded had not some of the white residents who supported the indigenous community mobilized, confronted and embarrassed the council into conceding a more consultative approach. A political space had to be created for this approach through political action. Occasionally, planners themselves can create such a space, but in highly charged, highly politicized conflicts, it is more likely that the planner’s role will be to ‘design’ the space which has been created through political action. In the case of Redfern, once the space was created, the skills, courage, and commitment of the consultant were what made it possible to work through to a solution which dealt with the kinds of fears and anxieties previously discussed, rather than ignoring, marginalizing or overriding them. Herein lies my concluding observation: that the work of planners in ‘managing difference’, is the work of negotiating fears and anxieties, mediating memories and hopes, and facilitating change and transformation.

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Note

1. The following account is based primarily on discussions with the consultant, Dr Wendy Sarkissian, in October 1999.

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