



# 'Deep engagement' and urban regeneration: tea, trust, and the quest for co-design at precinct scale



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## ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses a new methodology for community engagement: 'deep engagement', comprising a range of formal and colloquial actions to support community engagement in urban regeneration, and examine the responses of communities to redevelopment. The conceptualisation of 'deep engagement' emerged from 'deep play' (Geertz, 1973), arguing that our role, as researchers, is to endeavour to access to community perspectives-towards socially sustainable redevelopment. For this, 'deep engagement' comprises nurturing dependability among involved communities, to better embed socio-cultural diversities and local know-how in the processes of urban regeneration. This paper presents two case studies in Victoria (Australia), where the proposed methodology was tested in mid-suburban regeneration, at precinct scale. In result, 'deep engagement' clarified the diversity of community concerns towards urban redevelopment. Additionally, this research demonstrates the importance of developing 'deep engagement' methodologies, integrating casual actions with communities, to enable the identification of opportunities for urban regeneration, and to encompass the diversity of socio-cultural needs at local scale. 'Deep engagement' can support a better embeddedness of local know-how in urban design, planning processes, enhancing the quality of regeneration outcomes while reinforcing the participation of communities in the processes of decision-making.

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, increasing urbanisation is forcing planners to think creatively about how to solve issues related to urban sprawl, densification and infrastructural supply. With individual private ownership comprising the vast majority of urban land, questions arise about how to acquire the space necessary for increased densification and the optimised infrastructural retrofitting of existing residential areas. Though a legally available option, compulsory acquisition is a rarely used and politically dangerous option. It is therefore necessary to be exploring methods that engage with private landowners to find solutions that can, cumulatively, and from a grass roots level, begin to address metropolitan scale issues. This paper presents research into this arena, illustrating how, what will be referred to as "deep engagement", can be used to develop

mutually beneficial redevelopment solutions for landowners, local residents and governments.

Population and urbanisation are increasing globally (OECD, 2012), placing considerable pressure on cities to accommodate new housing demands (UN Habitat, 2003). In previous decades, suburbanisation was the typical response, but the recent awareness on the disadvantages of urban sprawl (Trubka et al., 2010a; Trubka et al., 2010b; Trubka et al., 2010c) has illustrated the need for the densification of already established residential land (Landis et al., 2006; McConnell and Wiley, 2010; Murray et al., 2011; Phan et al., 2008; SGS, 2011). Designated 'infill', this process refers to the replacement of existing housing stock with new types of (typically denser) housing. The two main models of infill are 'lot-by-lot' and 'brownfield', referring to single lot redevelopments and utilising former-industrial land for residential use, respectively. The benefits of brownfield projects are broadly related to their size and feasibility; industrial land is generally large, under single ownership and allows projects of a scale that larger developers are attracted to. This in turn generates economies of scale, allowing the potential of significant sustainable infrastructural investment. The down-side is

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that brownfields are reasonably rare, and infrequently redeveloped in comparison to lot-by-lot infill.

Lot-by-lot infill is far more prevalent in contemporary cities (Newton, 2010). Across greater Melbourne, this form of infill produced 65% of new dwellings between 2004–2012 (Newton and Glackin, 2014). Unlike brownfield, lot-by-lot infill comprises smaller land parcels, each with separate ownership, so acquiring sites of strategic scale requires developing consensus amongst landowners (Newton, 2010; Newton and Glackin, 2014; Newton et al., 2012). Additionally, regeneration typically breeds community resistance, resulting in building permits being refused or delayed, adding significant costs to redevelopment. These challenges have largely prevented state and local governments from strategically engaging in this area, which, given its scale, and opportunity to significantly improve the quality of urban form, is problematic. However, current practise (Glackin and Newton, 2015) indicates that through effectively engaging with community and key stakeholders, effective narratives can be developed so as to actually encourage urban regeneration, particularly through utilising the concept of 'precinct' regeneration.

Precinct regeneration involves land amalgamation (Fig. 1), which guarantees a larger scale of residential redevelopment and which can arguably sustain the basis for a strategic regeneration; allowing state and local governments the opportunity to:

- Achieve greater densities, through the construction of denser housing typologies.
- Provide a greater diversity of housing, targeting a wider variety of housing submarkets.
- Provide additional urban amenities, such as walkways, parks and services.
- Reduce infrastructural redundancy, e.g. construction of driveways, canopy trees, and turning circles.
- Implement better stormwater management, through the construction of more permeable surfaces.
- Retrofit larger areas with sustainable infrastructure, such as water capture, distributed energy systems, and composting (Newton et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2015).

Despite the difficulties, when the benefits of precinct regeneration are taken into account, the opportunities are too significant to be overlooked.

Community and stakeholder participation are considered critical condition for this form of sustainable urban regeneration (Glackin, 2013; Newton et al., 2012; Dionisio et al., 2015). The diversity and complexity of factors influencing community participation in response to housing redevelopment (Newton et al., 2011; Newton et al., 2012), established the need for an improved research methodology, aiming to capture qualitative and 'deep' information on community values and responses. This article presents 'deep engagement' as an applied methodology for community participation in urban regeneration, and the main outcomes of the observations conducted in our research.

### 1.1. 'Deep engagement' background

'Engagement' refers to the formalised set of methodologies that grew from the citizen/public participation theories of the late sixties (Arnstein, 1969), the application of these theories to governance (Bergeron, 1977; Fagence, 1977) and problem-solving more broadly (Godbout, 1991; Coit, 1984; Ortecho et al., 1984; Skinner, 1984). In this instance we will be explicitly using 'engagement' to address urban redevelopment (see Brody et al., 2003), which, through involving communities, has been shown to overcome significant obstacles and provide far greater levels of success than projects that fail to do so (Godschalk and Mills, 1966; Burke, 1979;

Fainstein and Fainstein, 1985; Day, 1997). While 'deep' refers to Geertz (1973) 'deep play', or the ethnographic tradition of cultural emersion, for both developing trust within the community and effectively understanding specific cultural motivations from the perspective of the observed culture. Effectively this equates to spending significant time with communities so as not only hear their concerns, but to understand the rationale behind these fear, hopefully placing researchers in a better position to address these concerns and potentially turn them into opportunities. Used together, 'deep engagement' attempts to solve problems using public participation, seeking to place the researchers/practitioners within the community, where they can both develop trust as well as develop an understanding of their lived reality regarding the regeneration issue critical to the future of sustainable cities.

Public participation (or engagement) has been discussed as fundamental to generate dependability, trust, and assurance towards the implementation of urban policies and the development of social capital (Innes et al., 1994; Innes, 1996; Burby, 2003). Further, Forester (1999), and Moore (1995) expand the debate, arguing that public participation adds important value to plans through the integration of local knowledge and community perspectives. Conversely, public participation guarantees rightful and long-lasting urban planning results, securing the interests of communities and stakeholders more efficiently. In the past four decades, relevant research has been developed in the scope of community engagement. Citizen participation, the conceptual antecessor of community engagement, had its roots in the 50s and broader expansion in the late 60s with the recognition of collaborative citizen participation in decision-making for urban development (Brody et al., 2003).

More recently, relevant research has placed focus on the methods and policy frameworks to implement public participation and attain better collaboration outcomes (Brody et al., 2003; Cavaye, 2004; Aulich, 2009; King and Cruickshank, 2012). This latest research has placed emphasis on the need to develop clear methodological frameworks to attain sustainability governance (Hartz-Karp and Newman, 2006) within the processes of decision-making in urban planning. Public participation events in Australia and New Zealand are often organised referring to the 'spectrum of engagement', as defined by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), where different levels of engagement are considered in relation to distinct objectives. The spectrum comprises five levels of engagement: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering (IAP2, 2015). The objective of 'Informing' is to keep the public informed of government-led decisions, to grow community's awareness of problems, solutions, and opportunities. Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum, 'empowering' implies that communities have the final decision on a solution to a specific problem; with governmental agencies only responsible for implementation. Thus, different methodologies to implement public participation are available, in relation to different levels of community engagement targeted for the process of decision-making.

Despite these developments in public participation, sustaining policy frameworks to integrate community engagement with redevelopment, while incorporating achievements from co-design (Sanders and Stappers, 2014; Howard and Somerville, 2014), are still necessary. Similarly, given the multiple complex socio-cultural composition of cities (Zukin, 1996; Sandercock, 2000) methodologies for effectively capturing this diversity of local know-how are lacking (Ameyaw, 2000). It is these factors which the methodology attempts to address. As such, 'deep engagement' is a novel methodology for community engagement in the context of urban regeneration that attempts to address these challenges by nurturing the trust, dependability, and empathy of researchers, planners, and designers among the communities involved. The complexity

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