

## **Urban Villages – or Urban Wasteland?**

### **Planners are out there doing it while others just analyse and criticise!**

It is easy to be critical and wheel out vivid, colourful, clap trap about what is right or wrong about our cities, towns and concepts such as the “urban village”. It must be nice to be an armchair critic, a demographer, a social commentator or to deal with numbers and trend data, and not have to worry about people, impacts and outcomes.

Planners, by contrast, work on making cities and towns function effectively and work for real people in the real world. It is not possible in the life of the planners to focus on a single concept. The real world is a messy, complex place. Planning requires high levels of skill and the capacity to think in an integrated way about the drivers and levers at our disposal to create communities that meet current and future needs.

Cities and towns need to cater to all tastes, needs and wants, be effective economic hubs, operate efficiently, as well as be human scaled places in which we can each fulfill our personal aspirations. That means we need private places, public places, places for industry, commerce and recreation, opportunities to interact or to be anonymous.

A highrise apartment lifestyle may appeal to some more than the concept of being part of an “urban village”. An apartment as a “sanctuary” from workday life is not a rarity precluded by planners, it has been a burgeoning part of our cities and has been provided for in plans and by the market. No heresy there.

But an apartment lifestyle, desires for anonymity, not wanting children or pets as neighbours, doesn't mean that these same people don't shop, eat out, want coffee on the run. Many want the low maintenance, high access option of a city apartment, but they also want to take the elevator to the real world, see people, feel engaged. Whether they want to talk to the proprietor and exchange names and phone numbers is clearly their call.

Equally, the notion of the urban village, is well catered for and community demand has been growing, in the inner and outer rings of our cities. Lets take a closer look at Manhattan. Manhattan is far from harsh and sterile and devoid of conversations and name swapping between butchers, deli owners & residents. In fact, it is a thriving, diverse, integrated community in which commerce flourishes, people live, work, have access to some sensational cultural and recreational facilities.

Far from being a sea of sterile, functional skyscrapers and high rise with no places for neighbours, or idle chat, it is a city stepped in history with a strong sense of community. Here is the “urban village” writ large – Little Italy, SoHo,

Greenwich, the Meat Packing district, Wall Street, Harlem, and so on. This is what makes Manhattan so attractive, a dynamic hub and a great place to live. Stay in your apartment if you want – and you can if you wish - but why?

The nomenclature is far less important than the concept. Urban villages describe a concept - places that accommodate diversity and provide a sense of community – participation is not compulsory. Planners can only create so much – infrastructure, land use designation, streetscape, facilities, then the community takes over and makes it their own. How people use those spaces will be a key determinant of how they evolve.

Planning provides a framework for contributing to the design of our built environment. Governments, industry and other design professions also play key roles. Planners are engaged in strategic planning of our cities, towns, urban and regional places, making them the integrators of complex needs and ideas and influencers of outcomes.

The ultimate planning policy or rule makers are usually elected representatives. Planners then become the gatekeepers - administering statutory rules and regulations applying to building and the wider built environment. Or as consultants, helping others navigate the planning process.

Planning is not singular and monolithic, and the best planning must be inclusive. Like demographers, planners listen, collect data, reflect, analyse. But planners then act on that information, creating plans and working with the community to design vibrant places that meet the needs of those who live in them.