

“Sydney, A City Growing Within”: The Establishment of Buddhist Centres in Western Sydney

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Changing the established physical face and land use characteristics of the urban environment is always challenging and even more so when one of the agents of change is a less understood spiritual practice such as Buddhism. Buddhist communities in Western Sydney continue to struggle with unfamiliar regulations and in some cases local hostility to their presence. Planning law and protocols can seem static and even abstract in contemporary multi cultural society where existing instruments are held rigidly over the communities that they are intended to serve. More supportive approaches to consideration and assessment of the cultural issues of land use and urban and architectural design are required and these need to play a more central role in regional and local area planning. Buddhist centres in Western Sydney plays a role in securing the social and cultural sustainability of city growth and their establishment needs to be supported.

Accommodating growth and wellbeing within a changing city

Sydney continues to grow at a rate of about 34,000 people per year. The NSW Government’s Metropolitan Strategy indicates that 70% of those people will be accommodated within the existing fabric of the city and 30% will be in new green field locations (NSW Metropolitan Strategy, 2004). This means that in parts of the city, existing low density suburban neighbourhoods, town centres, road and transport corridors will change their existing built form and become more urban in character with higher density and more integrated living, working, recreational and cultural environments.

Historically Greater Western Sydney post European settlement has been a collection of townships dotted around the Cumberland Plain each with their own character and identity. Now the suburbs have expanded to fill the gaps and the communities that live in these places have undergone remarkable change as well. In Australia 84% of people born overseas live in Sydney, which is home to 1.2 million people who were born overseas, and 52% of Sydneysiders are either migrants or children of migrants. In NSW 2.2% of the population is Buddhist, and in the Fairfield LGA 17% of the population is Buddhist. In South Western Sydney the changing cultural landscape is becoming more apparent.

New residents and communities bring with them cultural practices and ways of living that have the potential to maintain community identity, promote wellbeing and assist the settlement process. The continuing emergence of Buddhist centres is part of a change of the physical and cultural fabric of the city, and presents an opportunity to consider the characteristics and merits of traditional land use practices. Urban environments characterised by more integrated land use, where housing, business, employment and cultural practices coincide are heralded as the characteristics of socially and

environmentally sustainable cities, and as a microcosm temples operate as a type of integrated land use.

While city planning looks at broad targets for housing and infrastructure, the finer grain of local planning that considers and provides for local communities and diverse cultures struggles to be accommodated. The cost and availability of land in Sydney makes it more difficult for recently arrived communities not only to afford housing, but also to establish meeting places that allow them to continue to practice their culture. Many communities also confront resistance to carrying out their cultural activities, where race and religion are sometimes attacked, when often it is the land use or building type that is the problem.

Sydney is growing within itself. This is a difficult process as suburban life makes way for a more urban one where new patterns of land use and diversity of built form and cultural practices continue to emerge. It is an interesting parallel that many people in Western societies are looking to Buddhism and meditation practice as means of “looking and growing within” in order to cope with the pressures of modern life.

While many lament the changes, there is also the potential for enrichment of the fabric and life of the reconstructed city. The growing pains are symptoms of change and within these difficulties are the ideas and building blocks of a rejuvenated urban environment. Change can be made easier with processes that acknowledge cultural planning, explain different cultural values, and establish careful land use and urban design that partners regulation with flexibility and a readiness to consider new and unfamiliar ideas.

Buddha in Suburbia - emerging Buddhist centres

Buddhism is a growing spiritual practice in Australia with 2.2% of the NSW population identified as Buddhist (Buddhist Council of NSW). Migrants from a range of Asian countries as well as growing numbers of western adherents make up the number of growing Buddhist communities in Australia.

Buddhist meeting places are strictly speaking not “places of public worship”. Buddhism is a non-theistic spiritual practice that concentrates on the development of wisdom, compassion and truth, leading to enlightenment about the human condition. The Buddha statue that is seen in temples is a representation of “the enlightened one” and is a reminder of the potential for enlightenment within oneself. Buddhists are not worshipping but rather paying respect to the teacher or “Buddha”, the teachings or “Dhamma”, and the spiritual community or “Sangha”.

The establishment of Buddhist centres forms an important part of the settlement process for migrant communities, as the temple or meditation centre becomes the focus of the community. Some temple communities have a longer history and have had support from their former home countries. These groups have established beautiful temples, some in a traditional Asian style. Many groups however are made up of economically deprived refugee migrants who don't have the funds to build a temple but have the need to carry out spiritual activity. House temples and meditation centres are a more affordable way of establishing meeting paces for growing spiritual communities.

Temples are not churches but are a whole complex of different parts. They are living cultural centres that have many functions. Nuns and/or monks live within a temple complex and are on hand at all times. Temple activities include cultural ceremonies, chanting, meditation, retreats, festivals, spiritual guidance, education and social centre, offering food to monks and nuns, and also a day centre for the elderly. The activities of Buddhist centres present a challenge to the normal activities of residential neighbourhoods and indeed can range across the categories of land use classification.

Wat Buddharangsee, a temple in the Thai forest tradition was originally established at Stanmore in 1974. The temple however had difficulties establishing a Sunday school (local people objected to the noise of children for 2-3 hours on Sunday), so the Wat community decided to establish a new temple at Leumeah in 1984. The community purchased a large parcel of land not far from the Georges River. However even here it was found to be very difficult to establish a temple and suit the planning regulations. It was acceptable to have a place of worship but not an associated residence for monks (although space for a caretaker was acceptable). Zoning did not account for mixed use in the way temples operate. The planning issues were further affected in that the location was in a scenic protection area. Eventually the monks accepted the limitations of planning regulations and decided that the centre would operate as a residence for monks but not as a place of public worship. The monks also felt the need to step back from a traditional Thai architectural style, as they were concerned it might not get approval. "If that fear was not there we may have done it better" said the Abbot, Venerable Tan Chao Khun Vibunsilaporn. The beautiful grounds also include a stupa and small shrines within landscaped gardens. Wat Buddharangsee is now recognised by the NSW Heritage office as a heritage site.

Land use Planning - the playing field

Spatial planning of cities influences how we live and use the city. Spatial conditions are regulated through planning instruments that nominate acceptable land uses and activities through the zoning of land. These conditions are set down in "Local and Regional Environmental Plans" (LEP's and REP's) as well as State Environmental Planning Policies (SEPP's), and more detailed prescriptions are contained in Development Control Plans (DCP's). When considering cultural paradigms it is worthwhile to remember that these instruments have descended from colder climate town planning concepts and also are linked historically to the industrial revolution and the resultant miserable urban townscapes that led to visions for a physically healthier way of life being championed. There was a move to leave behind the squalor of cramped inner city conditions, separation of different types of land use were proposed, where previously industry and housing were often mixed.

In Australia this approach to land use combined with the rise of car use, has separated functions and established single interest precincts resulting in a lack of variety of activity and building types, architectural style and neighbourhood character. There can be a visual blandness and a lack of activity that makes it difficult to orient oneself within such environments. Residential areas are separate from commercial precincts and distinct from industrial and so on. In recognition of the central importance of religious practice however, places of public worship have traditionally been permitted in residential areas.

There is of course a pre-existing cultural context where there is a fashioned conception as to the activities and form of a place of public worship. It was not until 1998 that NSW planning law was amended so that the term “places of public worship” became applicable to all religions instead of being restricted to Christian churches. Kevin Dunn refers to this “terminology” and legislative issue in relation to the establishment of a Mosque in the Bankstown LGA.

The settlement patterns and spatial representation of migrant communities within Sydney are pushing the boundaries of traditional neighbourhood activities, changing the face of commercial precincts and ways of doing business, and challenging the former role of a sleepy public domain. Different cultures are more visible to each other in the built environment and there are varying responses ranging from hostility to acceptance. Many groups are unfamiliar with local regulations and in dealing with regulatory authorities. Nuns and monks who are seeking to establish temples and meditation centres and come from backgrounds where there is strong support for temples find the new regulatory environment bewildering.

Neighbourhood amenity

Local government has the role as arbiter and regulator in the development process that accompanies the establishment of premises for different cultural groups. When considering changes to the fabric of the urban environment that development brings, Councils generally consider “maintaining the amenity of the area”. This encompasses a broad range of considerations that deal with bulk, scale height and character of the development, floor area (with a maximum), car parking, traffic impact, noise, architectural form, location and availability of public transport, minimum width block, site coverage and landscape.

The greatest concerns regarding the establishment of temples are the issues of traffic, parking and noise. Different levels of activity generate different responses. Smaller house temples that work with their neighbours in mitigating conflict may be less likely to attract disapproval. Larger temples that grow into regional centres where sometimes hundreds or occasionally thousands of people attend are not encouraged in residential areas. The scale of the centre needs to be compatible with the location. Councils encourage consideration of long-term growth prospects before choosing a site, but often the immediate need to establish a centre and the availability of affordable locations takes priority.

Councillor Thang Ngo from Fairfield City Council is someone who understands the issues regarding the establishment of temples when confronted with Councils’ regulatory role. Speaking about the difficulties encountered by the Thien Hoa Nunnery in Cabramatta he said,

[t]he house temples are not purpose built, but it is a slow conversion process into a temple. The temples do good work in teaching and helping local people. The nuns are not used to regulation, and in Vietnam car parking is not an issue. There are complaints, Council then intervenes and even if usage conforms, there may be problems with building regulations. Here there is a problem with fire regulations and fines have been issued. It is a difficult situation, as council would be liable if they had given permission.

Councillor Ngo believes there are access and equity issues that need to be addressed. “The application of chapter, verse and rule won’t work. There needs to be a change to the Development Control Plan, however it is difficult to conduct a public exhibition and debate in the current climate, and other issues have higher priority within council.” The temple is operating in a climate of uncertainty and the nuns have engaged urban planners to assist them in working with Council.

The Kmer Krom Temple in Rossmore, subject of SBS program “Over the Fence”, is another Buddhist community that has undergone significant struggle to develop a temple in the presence a hostile local community, and after some advice from local government that led to deeper provocation. The site is semi-rural was chosen to avoid the conflict associated with traffic and parking in suburban areas. Council required the preparation of a masterplan and advised the community that they should consider and illustrate the scenario for long term growth. The local response to the proposal was aggressive and damning including references to “frightening the horses and being an eyesore”, (in an environment where heavy haulage vehicles are parked and lay rusting in the landscape). The community have spent many tens of thousands of dollars on consultants and Council fees, the temple currently remains in the original poultry cold storage facility on site and was forced to remove the five metre high gold Buddha (the eyesore), from the site. Plans are being revised in light of local response, however the temple’s right to remain in that location was upheld. More careful planning and development processes that involve considered cross cultural communication strategies could alleviate much of the struggle for all parties.

Venerable Thich Quan Ba from the Nguyen Thieu temple in Canley Vale says, “Many of these temples are ministering to refugee communities. Monks and nuns come with empty hands, they are not part of a hierarchical structure and there is no central fund. They are encouraged to be independent and go out in to the community so they start in a small way and look for supporters. It is not possible to afford to rent a place of assembly as well as run the house temple. It could take twenty years to purchase a bigger property. Society needs to be generous” The venerable Thich Quan Ba asks for “flexibility and understanding by Councils in their approach to dealing with temples. A temple is not a place of worship; the gathering is for very varied purposes. If parking and noise are acceptable to neighbours then he sees this as a private civil matter, rather than an issue of regulating religious communities. Council’s planning role needs to evolve to develop new regulations. There are insufficient temples for the population and so finding suitable properties will be an ongoing problem. Many groups are mushrooming as there is need for moral education given the crisis in secular society”.

Bankstown City Council has released a DCP for Places of Public worship. Bankstown has a much higher proportion of non-Christian adherents than Sydney (19.1% compared to 9.5%) does and a greater proportion of non-English speakers (46.2% compared to 27.6%) (Bankstown City Council). Council’s research shows that the demand for buildings by non-Christian communities is likely to increase in the coming years as these communities currently have a disproportionately small number of buildings for the number of adherents. “The implication is that Muslims and Buddhists tend to go outside Bankstown to worship or that their small numbers of places of worship each involve large numbers of people and associated traffic movement”.

In planning for the likely growth of Places of Public Worship and to accommodate these places in ways that mitigate conflict within the Bankstown community Council has developed Development Control Plan No 19 - "Places of Public Worship" to establish a level playing field where all groups encounter consistent regulations. Of concern to Council was the potential for goodwill to decline between cultures, where issues of race became confused with matters of land use and neighbourhood amenity. Additionally Council has decided not to rezone land with "Special Uses" zoning as it becomes available for redevelopment, in order to maintain the availability of larger sites for non residential or cultural uses.

Bankstown's DCP 19 considers and prescribes location, height, setbacks, site coverage, parking, traffic impact, noise, landscaping, operation of establishment, ancillary uses, services, food preparation, safety, security and accessibility, water conservation and energy efficiency. Significantly the DCP limits the floor area of the assembly area in a residential zone 2(a) and requires a minimum allotment size of 800 square metres is required and ties minimum parking provision to the size of the assembly area.

These requirements are intended to establish parity in regulating the establishment of places of public worship within residential neighbourhoods. Smaller house temples usually fall outside these regulations and can operate providing there are good relations with the neighbours. There can be problems for the house temples however in regard to conforming to building regulations. Larger temples are encouraged to establish premises in industrial areas or business districts.

Creating territories of diversity

The character of temples and meditation centres varies from those that in character merge with their surroundings to the magnificent and ornate traditional styles. These varying architectural characters are testimony to the varied circumstances of the organisations, their confidence and the possibilities of their locations. Some temples that are well placed and have larger land areas are able to develop a full scale temple complex with monks' residence, community hall, shrine room, stupa's, graceful gardens and on site parking. Centres such as these in Bonnyrigg and Wetherill Park in the Fairfield LGA, have established buildings in traditional Asian style and present a remarkable respite from the surrounding brick and tile houses and act as points of orientation in the suburban landscape.

At Bonnyrigg there is a gathering of cultural centres, churches, temples, clubs, a mosque and a hardware megacentre around a district park at the town centre. The sites for these centres were made available in the latter part of the 1980's by the "Land and Housing Corporation" at the time of the Wran Government. The central parkland at Bonnyrigg is currently being developed by Fairfield City Council as "Sites of Contemplation", a meeting place in the public domain for the diverse cultures of the local area. Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao temples are part of this gathering of Places of Worship. Fairfield Council is developing urban design and public domain strategies which will include visual arts and cultural activities in the public domain with representation of local cultures.

The Lao temple “Wat Prayortkeo” has a “good neighbourhood policy” where neighbours are invited for food and drink, and people visit for advice in times of trouble. The Monks from the temple walk from Bonnyrigg to Cabramatta on a weekly basis on their alms round which helps further familiarise locals with their presence. Fairfield Council recognises the important role of good quality public domains in facilitating cross-cultural communication. Towards this end Council is also working towards the establishment of a cultural precinct in Cabramatta Town Centre, to be known as “Cabramatta Common”. Bankstown City Council has played host to “Wesak” (Buddha’s birthday) celebrations in the civic mall at Bankstown. As the presence of cultural activity in the public domain becomes more popular, broader understanding of Buddhism may lessen the fear that often accompanies people’s negative reactions.

More humble Buddhist centres such as the “House temple” are becoming more popular in ordinary suburban streets. These may not be places of worship in the sense of the larger temples, but are residences for monks or nuns who as teachers have developed a following, and where community members visit for meditation or pastoral care and where food is prepared and shared. Responses by neighbours and Councils to these establishments vary from hostility to acceptance and this is where the real work of developing good neighbourhood relations leads to acceptance of cultural diversity.

Approaching change in culture and urban form

There is a growing awareness that the values that established the post war Australian model of suburban life have limitations. There is recognition that growth determined purely by market forces (based on limited needs assessment and mainly driven by supply of a housing commodity) produces urban environments lacking in variety, interest and vitality. We are perhaps at a point where it is possible to acknowledge cultural diversity and consider better informed and more positive approaches to change.

It is important to look beyond Sydney to urban environments other parts of the world and consider more integrated and sustainable ways of living with a diversity of local activities and design approaches. Inter-generational housing, courtyard buildings, mixed land-use scenarios, shop top housing, smaller private domains, more active and well integrated public domains with a central positioning of cultural activity and venues need to be considered.

Integrated neighbourhood scenarios require a willingness and ability to accommodate a more public life, accept diversity and its challenges, and be open to new customs. It is important to recognise when positive drivers for change are in place and support these. The re-patterning of a city growing within itself needs to be informed by local needs and with local participation. An assessment of urban amenity that is limited to maintaining a suburban status quo or simply adopting a developer driven model may limit the potential for change that recognises local needs and achieves health and wellbeing outcomes related to improved social connections and access to spiritual practice in daily life.

Many people are struggling with a suburban life that lacks personal engagement. Empty streets, empty parks, quiet strip centres, fewer meeting places, many people living alone. Australia has so much space, so few people and so much isolation. The development of

Buddhist temples in suburban Sydney is part of a cultural change that is turning around that emptiness for people that are familiar with and enjoy more engaging urban environments. In a city with the cultural diversity of Sydney, healthy growth depends on acknowledgment and spatial representation of cultural diversity. For communities, developers and agencies that regulate change this means greater recognition and strengthened support of the cultural dimension of growth.

Note

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