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Carrington: Community of difference?

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Abstract

Newcastle is a city redolent with images. Perhaps the most dominant of these is of a male industrial working environment deriving from the days of the 'coally seaport', while other aspects of its identity, such as the female and the Aboriginal, are suppressed and obscured (Dunn et al., 1995). Another recurrent image is of profound community, of solidarity. This is evident in the 'Our Town' epithet applied to numerous local businesses. Such an image is portrayed in the cartoon by Eggleston, where the SS Newcastle is under siege from economic, political and physical forces, where the (all male) inhabitants, clinging together in adversity, are ignored by the Canberra rescue service. Such imagery is demonstrative of community but it is largely negative. The community is parochial, defensive and whinging, complaining of discrimination against it by 'them', the authorities in Sydney and Canberra, yet expecting 'them' to be a saviour when in distress. It is also a community which is partial and exclusionary, consisting solely of the Anglo males in their sinking industrial ship (Dunn, 1992).

Keywords

carrington, difference, community

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

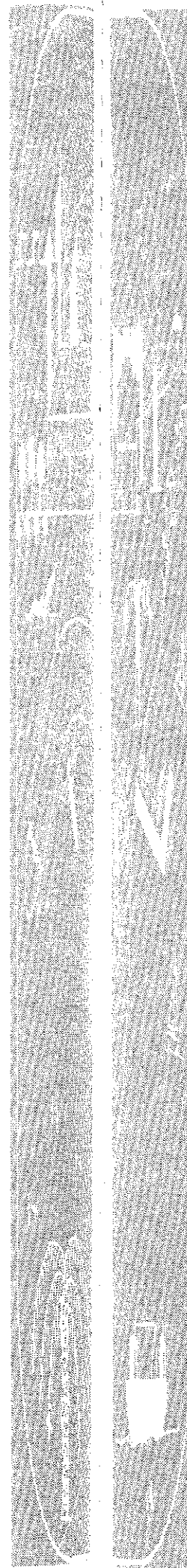
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In sum, while examples of best practice are few and far between in Australian workplaces, they seem for a variety of reasons to be more prominent in the Hunter. They have contributed to the transformation of manufacturing in the region, as well as to the rapidly growing services sector. The further development of best practice as a lever for cultural change and 're-imaging' will require employer commitment and union cooperation. The Coalition's proposed 'reforms' place these in jeopardy.

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Chapter 10

Carrington: Community of Difference?

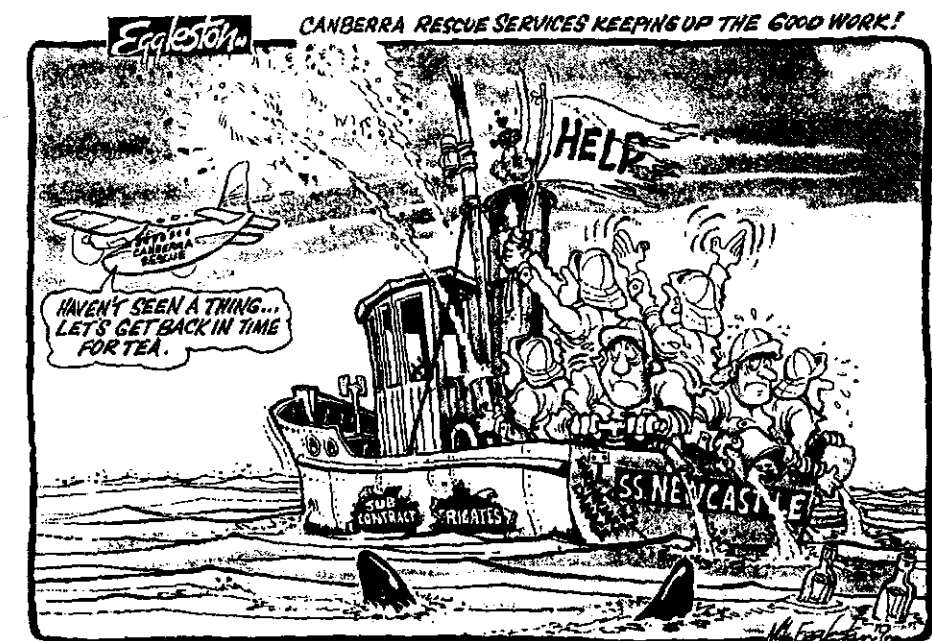
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Introduction

Newcastle is a city redolent with images. Perhaps the most dominant of these is of a male industrial working environment deriving from the days of the 'coally seaport', while other aspects of its identity, such as the female and the Aboriginal, are suppressed and obscured (Dunn *et al.*, 1995). Another recurrent image is of profound community, of solidarity. This is evident in the 'Our Town' epithet applied to numerous local businesses. Such an image is portrayed in the cartoon by Eggleston, where the SS Newcastle is under siege from economic, political and physical forces, where the (all male) inhabitants, clinging together in adversity, are ignored by the Canberra rescue service (Fig. 1). Such imagery is demonstrative of community but it is largely negative. The community is parochial, defensive and whinging, complaining of discrimination against it by 'them', the authorities in Sydney and Canberra, yet expecting 'them' to be a saviour when in distress. It is also a community which is partial and exclusionary, consisting solely of the Anglo males in their sinking industrial ship (Dunn, 1992).

Fig. 1 The S.S. Newcastle: problematic, defensive, whinging, masculine.



Source: Eggleston, *Newcastle Star*, 19.9.90
 (Used with the kind permission of the artist)

Our earlier research on the place-based identity and the landscape of Newcastle analysed the imagery of Newcastle from official sources and from the collective memory of fiction (Dunn *et al.*, 1995). More recently, the conflicts and activities of key urban managers in the Honeysuckle precinct have been addressed (McGuirk *et al.*, 1996). This study of the inner-city suburb of Carrington gives access to the voices of residents and to their experiences and descriptions of change within their community. Carrington residents express a tolerance of diversity and difference both in the past and of the present. The coherence of place-based community in Carrington is evident and lends some support for the idea of the development of an 'urban village' in constrained working-class environments. An openness to diversity, incomers and change is, however, a departure from the accepted literature on such urban communities (Knox, 1995:208-9; Wolch, 1980). This openness provides a positive image of community, one which is based in the past but is nevertheless an essential element for a progressive and vibrant Newcastle of the future.

Community in the 'Urban Village' of Carrington

The study of Carrington formed part of a larger research project on the imaging, institutions and community of Newcastle (Dunn *et al.*, 1995; McGuirk *et al.*, 1996). Community responses to the dramatic changes occurring in the vicinity were identified using multiple methods. These methods included oral histories, interviews with key informants and policy makers, and a community survey conducted by mail. This chapter draws solely on the oral histories conducted with a number of long-established residents by Angela Parkes, herself a resident of Carrington. The residents were selected for their length of residence in Carrington; hence they ranged in age from 59 to 79 years. Of the twelve residents interviewed, seven were women. A number of them had been active participants in formal and informal community organisations such as the Residents' Action Group or Neighbourhood Watch. Whatever their status in such organisations, their oral histories provided evidence of everyday life, attitudes and insights which flesh out the bones of more official records and bring the community's past and present vividly into focus.

Carrington is a distinctive inner-city suburb which is both physically isolated by its peninsular location and socially stigmatised by the overpowering presence of heavy industry. Its population, which has been declining throughout the postwar period, has a very skewed occupational structure dominated by labourers and production process workers. Increasingly, these traditional labour skills are becoming redundant and the level of unemployment (particularly youth unemployment) has been the highest in Newcastle since the 1980s. To 'outsiders', Carrington is perceived as different, as being a world 'across the bridge', where the presence of outsiders is noticed because Carrington people know each other. As such, the suburb gives an impression of community coherence which is very marked.

A number of cohesive inner-city working class suburbs have been categorised in the urban socio-geographic literature as 'urban villages'. The best known examples of these have been described in the West End of Boston, USA (Gans, 1962), and Bethnal Green in the East End of London, UK (Young and Willmott, 1957). Young and Willmott (1957: 89) considered that the residents of Bethnal Green exhibited "a sense of community ... a feeling of solidarity between people who occupy the common territory". This solidarity was reinforced by strong kinship networks, localised patterns of employment and other activities, and a shared on-going communal experience of struggle and hard times. It has been argued by Jablonsky (1993: 152) in a more recent study of Chicago's 'Back of the Yards', that such community feeling is inherently place-based, evolving from "spatial habits and territorial loyalties" and, therefore, particularly evident in places with highly constrained boundaries. Stacey (1969) considered that immobility within place is fundamental to the strengthening of kinship and friendship networks, and suggested that a period of stability of between fifty and eighty years may be necessary for such a community to develop.

Some of these characteristics typical of the classic urban village are evident from the Carrington oral histories. Although Carrington has been occupied by white Australians for a relatively short period (since the late 1860s) the residents there have family memories which date back almost to that time. One resident recalled her grandparents moving to Carrington in the 1890s:

there was nothing wrong with living in Carrington, it was fine. I'm satisfied to live here until I die ... my grandmother came to live here in ... early 1894, must have been early, no not 4, 6.

Another resident, herself in her late 60s, talked about her great-grandfather owning property on Carrington, at a time which is likely to have been even earlier last century.

there was terraces at the top end of Carrington, they called them the Scotland terrace, they belonged to my grandfather. Not my grandfather, his father, my great grand-father.

Such comments indicate that the present-day community has links back over a hundred years. Partly as a result of this stability, family networks are extensive and complex. The person whose grandfather's father had terraces on Carrington also had maternal grandparents long-established in Carrington: "My grandparents on my mother's side - then I had lots of aunts, uncles and cousins, all lived on Carrington". Another resident in her seventies talked animatedly about her extended family and the way that they kept coming back to Carrington, both from other suburbs in the Newcastle area and also from further afield:

I've got three cousins, I've got a cousin down here in Forbes Street, she left Carrington and she went to Hamilton to live, she bought a house and came back to Carrington. Her sister, Val, she went to live at Georgetown. Sold the house and came back to Carrington, she lives in Matheson Street. I've got another cousin down there, lives next door to the bowling club, there in Cowper Street. He and his wife went to live in Whitebridge. They came back to Carrington. I've got another one over here, my cousin's boy, in Forbes Street. They shifted to Queensland, and came back.

As a result of such longevity and family networks, other social networks arise from friendships between schoolmates and neighbours. Knox (1995:207) commented that "relationships formed among a cohort of children at school are carried over into street life, courtship, and, later on, the pursuit of social activities in pubs, clubs and bingo halls". Certainly such friendships are much in evidence:

As time went I would know people and I remember taking David the little boy down the street and he'd whisper grandma, do you know all those people? You must have a lot of friends? I said, love, I've known them all my life ... I take a couple of hours to get a couple of blocks. How long I am depends on who I see and they would say did you see so and so died? Or someone else is going to have a baby? Or someone else has had a baby ... who had the cold and I'd hear all about their arthritis.

Another resident in her sixties, whose parents built the house she still lives in during the 1920s, summed up the community as "everyone knew everyone" and described some of the social activities which bound the families together:

Everyone used to mix with everyone, they used to follow the football. Everyone used to follow North's football team everywhere. It was, everyone knew everyone ... you never used to lock your door, or if you did lock your door everyone knew where you put the key It used to be the Sunday afternoon walk, to take a walk down the wharf and the kids used to get a ride on the coal trucks. Hundreds of families would walk of a Sunday afternoon down the wharves. Have a look at the ships and that.

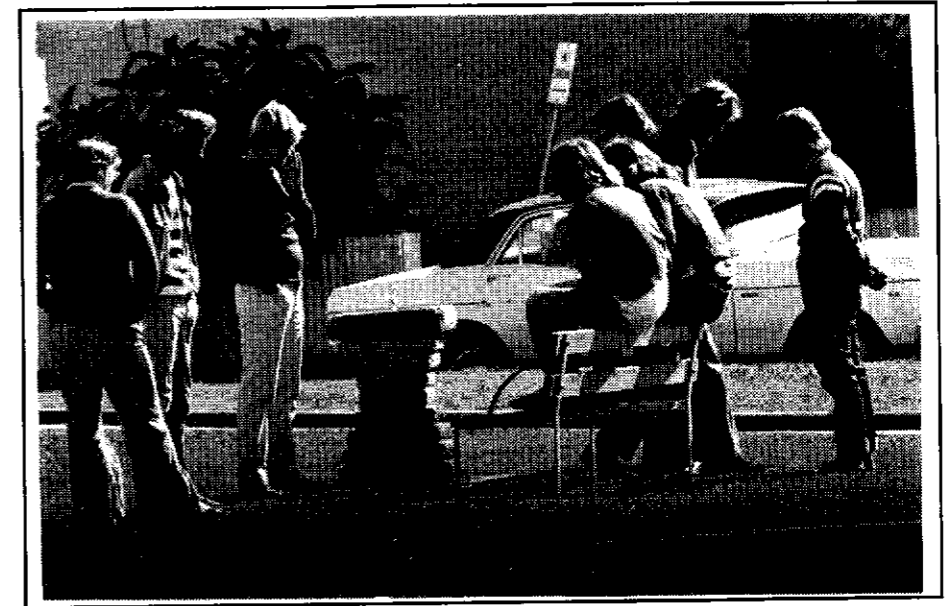
A more recent arrival from Sydney commented that in Carrington there existed a:

close knit situation. I'd hate to be against them, but there's no ways even thinking about it, being against them, most of them they are close knit, that's the way it should be.

The longevity, kinship and social networks deriving from a variety of activities including employment, schools and churches, produced a social situation which was 'close knit', in which 'everyone knew everyone', where relations were also friends, neighbours, workmates and helpers. As such, Carrington appears to have many of the characteristics of a stereotypical place-based community or 'urban village'.



• Photography by Allan Chawner



• Photography by Allan Chawner

Traditional Communities and Difference

Community has a common-sense meaning which is often taken to imply the longstanding cohesive interrelatedness outlined above. Eyles (1985) considered that the essential components of community were place, people and a sense of belonging. However, the literature on community is extensive, and it has been recognised that the concept of community is both elusive and multiply defined. Rose (1990), indeed, considered that the concept of "imagined community" is an abstraction created in the mind of each person. In an important study of community and the politics of difference, Young (1990) recognised that the ideal of community had usually been premised upon a denial of difference, and involved an accentuation of those defined as "outside" or "other" than the community. So, for example, an attachment to place within a community is often considered sufficient to override other structural divisions within society, such as class, gender, religion or ethnicity. A group of people who define themselves as a community are inevitably defining those outside that group as "other" on the basis of locality or of other characteristics.

The Carrington residents recognised a large number of differences which existed within their own community, but to a great extent seemed to be accepting of difference, even if it was problematic. One resident commented on the difficulties which used to be caused by the seamen 'hitting the grog' when they came ashore:

(my grandmother) ... said the trouble was the sailing ships would come in and the seamen would come ashore, and they'd been on the ships long time, and they'd head straight for the boozier. And they'd get into the booze... and the trouble is, when the booze is in the wit is out. And there'd be brawls and fights, that's what grandma used to say, my mum, grandma lived up here, and that's what she used to say about it. But I couldn't say that the Carrington people were anything but all right to me.

Such events, recalled by a number of residents, seemed commonplace, indeed part of the weekly routine. One person commented that "there used to be fights every Saturday down the pub" and "every Saturday the Mariah¹ would be down to pick them up". It was in this vein that differences between the religious groupings were accepted as part of the natural order of things:

It was just like a village. The church, the churches when I was growing up, more before the war than after the war, were very strong. The Catholics didn't talk to the Protestants. That was the same in all, I think that was Australia-wide at that stage. It was a very distinct, Catholics went to Catholic School, and they didn't speak to you, the Protestants. There was no animosity over it, was just a fact of life.

Ethnic differences were also noted but accepted in a fairly low-key way, although no resident offered evidence of the intimate level of relations outlined in the previous section:

When I was a child, when I was young there was only one dark family on Carrington ... and they were Kanakas. Old Mrs ... around here were Kanakas. No-one really took any notice, they were just the same as everyone else, we didn't take any difference to them.

Another resident commented almost as an aside about the 'Chinamen's Gardens' which were valued for their produce:

There was like a big pond over there, you used to get tadpoles and all that, that was over where the Aboriginal's place is built up there. That used to be pond. Wasn't it? Used to get tadpoles and all that up there. What else? Oh, we used to ride our bikes over to the Chinamen's Gardens at Tighes Hill there ... get the vegetables and that for our mother and ride back home.

Such comments indicate a surprising tolerance of difference within the community historically and an acceptance that behavioural, religious and ethnic difference was a part of urban life. The residents of Carrington express a preparedness to recognise the ever present internal heterogeneity of the suburb.

This acceptance of difference is more positive and outward-looking than the community image of the city of Newcastle depicted in times of crisis (Dunn, 1992; Metcalfe and Bern, 1994). Nevertheless, while tolerant of difference, the largely Anglo community of Carrington did not exhibit a propensity to embrace ethnic diversity, where "[n]o-one really took any notice" of black families, and where the occupational and spatial confinement of Chinese-Australians is reflected upon unproblematically. In this respect, Carrington residents were typical of the Anglo-Australian tendency to construct black and Asian-Australians as the national 'Other' (Hamilton, 1990).

Contemporary Community and Difference

As communities change under threat of external events they often become more inward-focused and more a caricature of themselves in an attempt to define their identity in the face of opposition. The Carrington community of Newcastle has experienced a number of events which have been imposed on them from outside, such as the establishment of hostels for disadvantaged groups, and the recent Honeysuckle development which has initiated morphological and social change. The hostels have been located here partly because of cheap property but also because of low community resistance in an area of mixed land use that is predominantly working class (Dear and Wolch, 1987; Wolch, 1980). The concentration of such services in north America has been described as initiating the formation of service-dependent ghettos (Dear and Wolch, 1987; Wolch, 1980). The lack of objections from working class residents is generally counterposed to organised 'NIMBYism' (not in my back yard) from middle class areas which in any case are protected by more exclusive zoning (Costello and Dunn, 1994:61-3,73-4). The lack of objections has usually been theorised negatively as a failure to organise rather than positively as an acceptance of difference. It is, however, in this positive light that the acceptance of such changes is reported by the residents of Carrington. As one resident commented "I suppose in a way, we've accepted a lot of things".

Another resident of Carrington rationalised the changing use of hotels to hostels in the following way:

The other hostel ... I reckon that was a good idea, we had too many pubs on Carrington. That's a good idea of the Salvation Army ... we don't need a lot of pubs on Carrington.

Other residents reiterated that the new residents caused no trouble or problems for those already there:

...a friend of mine, I went to school with, her and her husband, we went to kinder together here at Carro, she lives next to it, she said there's never any, never you'd know there was anyone there. You'd never hear the place, it's all very quiet.

One resident demonstrated more knowledge and tolerance of AIDS than is common among the general public:

We didn't have a problem with that, the AIDS Hostel. To us, anyone can have AIDS, you can get a two-year old kid with AIDS. It wasn't a problem, you're not going to catch it by walking past the place.

Another not only tolerated it but felt his life had been enriched and made more poignant by the addition of those most marginalised by society:

The AIDS thing was a beautiful thing. I think it done something to Carrington, the way people accepted it, I thought it was like a leper colony. Until they started to talk to these people and they, I'm very thankful they brought me into their little group, and I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I felt that I was a fragile human being. That was the message they got across to people, 'accept these people because you could be the same'.

Similarly, the massive improvement program associated with the Honeysuckle redevelopment along the foreshore opposite and adjacent to Carrington was viewed positively, if fairly laconically, by the older residents of Carrington. One commented that "I think it's going to improve it, don't you? yeah ... [answering her own question]". Another responded without going into details that:

I think it's a good idea, what they are doing. Changing everything ... doing a good job, I reckon.

A third resident saw positive benefits for the future and a resulting change in the image that Carrington has in the eyes of the rest of Newcastle:

It's leapfrogged us ahead by about ten years ... and now people are looking at Carrington to see how beautiful it is.

Some reservations were expressed about the changing demographic composition of Carrington, particularly in relation to the Aboriginal population, but also in respect of the changing social status of the suburb:

I see a change in Carrington of the people... yuppified, gentrified.

One woman grappled with the notion of neighbourhood change in Carrington and elsewhere, and concluded that Carrington had experienced less change than other places, which she thought was probably for the better. She attributed this continuity to a strong community feeling:

But I think, not only has Carrington changed, the world has changed. And I suppose compared to other places we haven't changed as much as other places when you think of it. I think the basis of it, there's a strong community feeling among certain people in the area, but I don't like the changes that have come, then I don't like a lot of things that have changed in the world either.

However, this statement fails to recognise the extent of the changes which have been incorporated into the community of Carrington and its willingness to accept change and diversity. The oral histories of Carrington have demonstrated a community tolerance of difference which is a distinctive and very positive feature of the suburb.

Conclusion

The community tolerance of difference is a feature which is also beginning to show through in other studies of gentrification in the inner city. These studies are finding evidence of an up-grading of housing stock but a maintenance of diversity in population (Rofe, 1996). Newcastle is already renowned for its community feeling. The Carrington study demonstrates that a positive and inclusive image of community should replace the negative and defensive image of Newcastle's crisis years. A community that is coherent in being based on a distinctive locality, but is at the same time able to embrace its own omnipresent internal heterogeneity, will be a forward-looking and progressive community. This acceptance will provide the basis for an effective and attractive image of place, building on the strengths of the past. A positive place-based community of difference would indeed make Newcastle as a city, as well as the suburb of Carrington, a socially sustainable and culturally vibrant place. Many people would be happy to live in a community which promoted such an image and may end up, like our resident of Carrington, "satisfied to live here until I die". The image of a community of difference, if carefully drawn, is a positive drawcard for Newcastle as a place to live.

Notes

- 1 'Mariah' means the 'Black Mariah' or police paddy-wagon used to take offenders to the police station or lock-up.

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