



## **Houses and sheds in Australia: an exploration of the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community settings**

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*This article reviews research into the genesis and spread of both neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Victoria and community-based men's sheds in Australia to identify some similarities and differences. Our article asks questions about the gendered communities of practice that underpin houses for women on the one hand, and sheds for men on the other. Our particular interest is with the gender issues associated with the development of the relatively mature neighbourhood house 'sector', and those associated with the very recent and developing community-based men's sheds 'sector'. Our underpinning research question has to do with the desirability (or otherwise) in each of these sectors of political and strategic decisions being either gender specific or gender neutral. We identify a number of tantalising parallels between the rationale behind the establishment of both sectors, for women and men, albeit in very different circumstances, along with some obvious differences.*

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### **Introduction and context for the article**

This article is written at a time in 2008 when neighbourhood houses and learning centres (referred to in this article as neighbourhood houses), catering primarily for women, are well established, having been in existence as an organised association in Victoria (and elsewhere in Australia) for over 30 years. By contrast, community-based men's sheds in Australia catering primarily for men (which we will, for simplicity throughout the rest of this article, refer to as 'men's sheds') are a new and relatively recent phenomenon. Almost all such men's sheds have been in existence for less than ten years, with national and Victorian associations forming only very recently (in 2007). For that reason, there is a better and longer documentary and academic record of the development of neighbourhood houses than of the development of men's sheds. Our comparison, whilst it provides some tantalising parallels and obvious differences, is limited by the relative immaturity, in developmental terms, of community-based men's sheds and, because of their unique nature, their lack of obvious parallels.

The particular interest in this article is with the gender issues associated with the development of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds. Our research question has to do with the desirability (or otherwise) in each sector of being either gender specific or gender neutral. Our article is an exploration of the complex, strategic political choices that have been made around gender. One choice is to be overtly gender specific and therefore have neighbourhood houses for women and sheds for men. A second choice is to be gender neutral and de-emphasise gender as part of an inclusive politics. The naming of a house as a neighbourhood house and a shed as a community shed would reflect this second position. These choices can be paramount when consequent educational decisions and strategies are developed relating to the design and establishment of learning environments, pedagogies and programs conducive for women, men or both.

Our essential purpose in writing and raising these questions is to assist both sectors to recognise what we see as the importance and desirability of catering informally, in community contexts, for men's and women's different needs for learning and wellbeing, sometimes in different places and spaces. We are particularly interested in critically unmasking some of the unspoken gender issues involved in both sheds and houses in community contexts.

It is important to recognise at the outset that, while neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community contexts can be located within and studied as a part of the broad Australian adult and community education sector, both can be located elsewhere for the purposes of analysis. Both are diverse in terms of the types of organisations that auspice them: many do not have learning, particularly formal learning, as their primary role. Because they both tend to focus wholistically on individual and community well-being rather than learning *per se*, many neighbourhood houses and men's sheds can equally be regarded also as health, leisure, social support, community development, cultural or recreation organisations.

Since both are regarded for convenience of analysis in this article as adult and community education (ACE) organisations, it is important to work out where they fit within an Australian ACE typology. What makes such a categorisation more complex is that ACE is differently organised in each Australian state and defined in different ways by practitioners, community members, states, territories and government bodies (Foley 2007; Golding, Davies & Volkoff 2001). Because ACE is defined differently in each state, so too is the role of each state's neighbourhood house sector.

McCrae (2001) recognised three categories for ACE. The first of these, 'community owned ACE', not only includes neighbourhood houses that we focus on in this article, but also University of the Third Age (U3A) and Indigenous learning organisations. McCrae's second category, 'ACE/TAFE organisations', tend to be found in states such

as Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia where there is less funding and emphasis on the first category. These include non-accredited programs run by TAFE such as foundation, general education, further education and recreational programs. McCrae's third category, 'universal adult education' (p.1), includes all other community education. This category, as Foley (2005: 2) notes, 'can include self-directed learning, local clubs and societies, museums, national parks, social movements and public education campaigns'. It also includes more recently recognised, important, informal learning sites for men, through volunteer fire brigades (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004) and many community-based men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.* 2007).

### **A brief history of the development of neighbourhood houses and learning centres for women in Victoria**

#### Neighbourhood houses

Kimberley (1998: 21) noted that 'by 1976, twelve centres, which had discovered both each other's existence and their commonalities of belief and purpose, formed a coalition to approach the government for support for their activities'. The first network of neighbourhood houses was established in 1978 with a 'peak body, the Association of Neighbourhood Learning Centres (later known as the Association of Neighbourhood House and Learning Centres) formed in 1979' (ANHLC 2003: 1). Initially most houses and centres were operated by community-based management, staffed through significant volunteer involvement and received very little government funding. While many were primarily focused on community development, some, such as Diamond Valley Learning Centre, Mountain District Learning Centre (formerly Mountain District Women's Cooperative) and Nunawading Neighbourhood Centre, sprang from a commitment to provide community-based education opportunities for women.

The ANHLC (2003: 1) estimated that there were one thousand neighbourhood and community houses throughout Australia. However, these vary greatly among states and territories in their focus on provision of services. The first neighbourhood houses and learning centres sprang up in Victoria in the early 1970s, as ANHLC (2003: 1) observed, 'from the grass roots out of local community need, particularly the isolation of women in the community' as well as to 'provide an informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment that supported individualised learning' (p.1). In this sense they are very similar to men's sheds.

#### **Background about where neighbourhood houses sit within ACE**

Foley (2005: 3) provides evidence that neighbourhood houses comprise only one reasonably recent innovation in the non-Indigenous history of adult education in Victoria. According to the *2004 Victorian Government Ministerial Statement on ACE*:

Adult Community Education has a proud history, beginning in 1839 with the foundation of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institutes. Other milestones were the opening of the Council of Adult Education (now CAE) in 1947; the provision of the first Adult Migrant Education Service (now the Adult Multicultural Education Services) in 1951; the opening of neighbourhood houses in the 70s; and the proclamation of the Adult, Community and Further Education Act [in Victoria] in 1991. Today there are 450 community-owned and managed organisations eligible to deliver adult community education programs across the community of Victoria (Kosky 2004: 5).

Foley (2005: 3) observed that neighbourhood houses have formed an important part of ACE in Victoria since the 1970s by meeting community needs and offering an informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment for people to gather and participate in community-based education. Foley notes that, during the 1970s, the strength of ACE was through the notion of grass roots community,

giving opportunities for local people to 'gather in a social setting and participate in community life' (p.3).

During this time, the (then) Whitlam government in Australia established the Australian Assistance Plan (AAP), funded to promote policies that focused on local community consultation. At that time the main themes coming from community houses and learning centres was empowerment of the individual, caring and sharing (Buckingham, Aldred & Clark 2004). While there are fragments of the original AAP model remaining in the culture and philosophy of ACE, by 2008 there had been a significant shift towards skills-based, vocational learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are focused on policy priorities that step in line with Australian VET (vocational education and training) policy reform. Many of these trends in ACE are reflected in trends in those neighbourhood houses that are also ACE providers.

### **A recent history of the development of men's sheds in community contexts in Australia**

Golding, Foley and Brown (2007) have identified a rapid and remarkable growth in community-based men's sheds in Australia, most of it in the five years prior to 2007. Very few sheds existed beyond personal backyard sheds ten years ago. To 2006, sheds were most common in regions, suburbs and states in southern Australia where the proportion of men, particularly men over 65 years of age, were more likely than in other locations not to be in paid work. Being essentially grassroots in their origins like neighbourhood houses, community-based men's sheds have grown in somewhat different ways in different states and regions and have tended to take on many of the characteristics of the earliest or best known 'iconic' sheds developed in each state. For example, there are more sheds associated with aged care facilities and war veterans organisations in South Australia, and with adult and community education and

health centres in Victoria and with churches in New South Wales. Not surprisingly, shed practice has typically been learnt from the experience of similar sheds nearby and in the same state. Unlike at the time of the development of neighbourhood houses in the 1970s, the advent of the internet in the past decade has made the sharing of information between shed organisations somewhat more immediate. As an example, the Lane Cove Men's Shed (in New South Wales) has mentored a number of sheds on-line in other states.

Illustrating the consequence of the separate development and different origins of sheds in different states, we have found significant differences in participant surveys between the five states based on data from Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.* (2007). The highly significant differences<sup>1</sup> observed included comfort with women participating in the shed ( $p < 0.001$ ), attitudes towards the positive health attributes of the shed ( $p < 0.007$ ), the likelihood of the need for support in getting to the shed ( $p < 0.001$ ), the likelihood of being referred to the shed by a health or welfare worker ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the likelihood of the participant having a leadership role in the shed ( $p < 0.003$ ). In each case, the observed, highly significant differences are largely demographic, as a consequence of the different ways in which sheds have targeted different men in different states from different shed models.

Hayes' and Williamson's (2007) Victorian shed typology identified at least five different community shed types: occupational, clinical, recreational, educational and social, with somewhat different ethos and function as well as instrumental and emotional support. As Hayes and Williamson stress, 'since all men are not alike, neither are the sheds that they prefer' (p.60). It is important to remember that

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<sup>1</sup> Significant differences are established using a statistical Chi square test. The probability (p) of the observed survey result being significantly different due to chance is expressed as a number less than one. A very small probability (p less than 0.01) is regarded as highly significant.

community-based sheds, despite a decade of practice and experience in some individual sheds, are still in an early stage of development in terms of innovation, development and particularly in terms of government policy and funding.

Not surprisingly, we have previously observed (Golding & Harvey 2006) many significant differences between diverse shed types and characteristics and the demographic background of the men who use them. Despite national community shed diversity, the issues men tend to face as participants in sheds across states are otherwise very similar. For example no significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) were observed between states in terms of participant attitudes towards the shed they participated in. For example, men felt similarly positive (90%+ agreement) about the shed as a place to meet new friends, get out of the house and to keep them healthy. Many of these reasons for participating in sheds are shared by women in community houses.

#### **What do neighbourhood houses and men's sheds claim to do?**

Before more closely examining the gender issues, we turn to what Victorian neighbourhood house and Australian men's sheds associations claim to do in 2008 via their respective public websites. According to the website of the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (2008):

Neighbourhood Houses are known by many different names. These names include: Community Houses, Living and Learning Centres, Neighbourhood Centres, Learning Centres. Whatever the name, these places are local organisations that provide social, educational and recreational activities for their communities in a welcoming supportive environment. Neighbourhood houses are managed by volunteer committees and paid staff. They offer many opportunities for volunteer participation in all aspects of the house activities and management. Good quality affordable childcare and playgroups are offered at most houses. Activities are generally run at low or no cost to participants. Activities offered could include:



English as a second language, Handling credit for people with disabilities, Children's art classes, Gentle exercise for over 50s, Yoga, Men's health and well-being, Singing, Gardening, Introduction to computers, Internet and email access, Car mechanics for women, and much more!!

According to the Australian Men's Sheds Association (2008) website:

There's nothing new about men gathering together in their own space to talk, share skills, swap ideas, solve problems or just discuss life in general – it's been happening since the beginning of time. There's nothing new either about men spending time in their backyard shed – an acknowledged Aussie pastime. What is new is that men, particularly retired men, are combining these two activities in a communal space simply called a 'Men's Shed'. What is also new is how strongly men have embraced this new identity – being a member of a Men's Shed. Men's Sheds, as such, are a peculiarly Australian phenomenon. In the past decade, a wide range of community-based Men's Sheds has sprung up – each with its own unique identity and purpose. Activities within Sheds are many and various: woodwork, metalwork, restoration of old cars, portable Sheds taken to Alzheimer facilities or mobile Sheds for remote country areas. The membership is diverse too. Men from all backgrounds, ethnic and social mixes can enjoy a Men's Shed, bringing their unique cultural characteristics to enliven the activities.

The common theme in all Sheds is about men feeling useful and contributing again to their communities, learning or sharing their skills, making friends, networking and availing themselves of health information programmes and opportunities. Men's Sheds are under the auspices of a variety of organisations whose ethos they tend to exemplify. Communities are keen to provide activity, identity and meaning for vast numbers of older, unemployed, job-redundant, 'downsized', isolated, depressed and happily retired, active, creative, enthusiastic men. Men's Sheds are fast being recognized as vital, viable places to fulfil these needs and provide relaxed, happy creative spaces for men to enjoy.

In summary, while the Victorian neighbourhood house sector acknowledges the broad range of names used to describe their providers and de-emphasises gender in terms of its diverse programs, the emphasis is on activities for people in the 'house' which often flow into the community. By contrast, the Australian men's shed peak body repeatedly emphasises men as the targeted participants, gathering as active participants in the 'men's shed' and contributing to the community.

### **Some gender issues associated with neighbourhood houses**

There is no room in this article to provide an extended account of the complex gender issues associated with neighbourhood houses in Victoria. At the risk of over-simplifying, we will look briefly at research in successive decades from 1976 to the present to identify some recurrent gender issues. It is interesting to note that there has been more extensive exploration of the history of these centres as places for learning than as places for community development. This may be because they organised initially for political purposes focused on attempts to secure funds to support alternative models of education for women.

Lonsdale (1993: 71) observed that the initiators of the first 'learning centre' (in Diamond Valley in 1973) were overwhelmingly 'women demanding access to educational opportunities', with learning environments specifically reflecting women's needs, including provision of child care, class times in hours that fitted in with school children, and graded class fees. It is interesting to note that, although Diamond Valley operated from a community base and collective principles, its approach to community development was education-based rather than sociological. As Kimberley (1998: 12–13) observed, at that time '[s]ociety generally did not regard women's education as important or even desirable ...'. Reflecting critically in 1998 on the apparent dilemma posed by this early, deliberate

emphasis on women, and despite the stated aim of the Diamond Valley centre on 'openness, community [and] acceptance' (Lonsdale 1993: 45), Kimberley (1998, p.13) asks 'how an organisation with a feminist focus could be committed to the ideals inherent in the notion of including all members of a community'. Lonsdale (1993: 71) succinctly frames this early dilemma for feminism by noting that for some feminists,

... 'female domination' is a cause for celebration as women take up leadership roles and gain control over their lives in new and exciting ways; for others it is not female domination that is needed, but a balance between male and female values, and thus places like the Centre need to offer men the chance to be influenced by values associated with nurturing and cooperation.

By 1976 there were twelve neighbourhood centres in Victoria, which (somewhat like men's sheds by the time of the first national conference in Lakes Entrance in 2005) had 'discovered both each other's existence and their commonalities of belief and purpose [and] formed a coalition to approach the government for support for their activities' (Kimberley 1998: 21). The neighbourhood centres prepared a paper noting characteristics which, they felt, distinguished them from other organisations currently providing adult or further education. This was the first public announcement of their commonalities of belief and purpose. Kimberley observed that the document these centres prepared for this purpose in large part 'reflected the women's liberation movement's commitment to raising the status of women and to what progressive educators were espousing at the time' (p.23). Kimberley (1998: 23) noted that the statement to the Minister only included the word 'women' once, despite the fact that the neighbourhood centres, by ANHLC's (October 1976 Archive Documents) admission, had been 'largely established by, and predominantly for women'.

While in practice women have since consistently comprised the vast majority of workers and participants in most neighbourhood

houses, there has tended to be a deliberate de-emphasis of gender (gender neutrality) in its public and policy face. Kimberley (1986), in a comprehensive study of Victorian 'community providers', concluded that participants 'are predominantly women who have not completed secondary education' (p.3) and that the sector was specifically targeted towards 'catering positively for extended non-earners' (p.5). Other data in Kimberley (1986: 5) confirmed that a route to vocational education through a community provider was around six times as likely in some regions of Victoria for women than it was for men. The 1986 view of enhancing such well-used 'pathways' for women through community providers was consistent with the (then) Victorian State Premier John Cain's social justice policy (Cain 1986). It included specific reference to developing employment programs to ensure that 'those who have been non-earners for extended periods (e.g. women who have been rearing children) are not excluded but are positively catered for' (Cain 1986, cited in Kimberley 1986: 9).

In considering Kimberley's study, it should be noted that community providers and neighbourhood houses should not necessarily be confounded. Some place a greater emphasis on education in a community setting. Others focus more strongly on community development while others consolidate the two perspectives. While all fifteen organisations that responded to Kimberley's survey offered learning activities, there was considerable variation in the emphasis they put on formal versus informal or non-formal learning. Moreover, eleven of the fifteen organisations surveyed did not offer education as a major activity, but were more specifically focused on community development and regarded themselves primarily as a community of neighbourhood houses.

In 1990 the ANHLC undertook an exhaustive and collaborative consultation process to develop a comprehensive *Statement of Philosophy and Practice* which, other than indirectly, was again silent

on the role of women. As Kimberley (1998) summarised, missing from this comprehensive statement was

... any specific reference to women despite their comprising more than 80 per cent of the cohort of workers, volunteers and group participants. The opposition of views among Neighbourhood Houses about explicit reference to women was an issue too conflictual to resolve except by omission.

As Gribble and Davidson (1991: 138) observed, women remained the 'invisible owners' of neighbourhood houses.

Despite their continuing, almost complete, omission from ANHLC's subsequent formally stated philosophies and practices, women's involvement and needs have clearly continued to play a critically important role in the development and maintenance of the neighbourhood house sector in Australia. As an illustration, nowhere in the body of the ANHLC (2003) *Sector Framework*, including in its sector 'Purpose', 'Philosophy' and 'Practice' statements, are women or gender mentioned. The document, created collaboratively by a Working Party of nine women, and informed by comment from six other women, stresses in its Sector Principles the need 'to ensure fair and equitable access to **all** people' (their emphasis, p.4). Within the 2003 ANHLC Practice Statement (p.6), it is emphasised that

People come to neighbourhood houses because they are local, accessible, welcoming and non-threatening, and because programs are designed to meet the needs of participants and prospective participants.

The only point where gender is mentioned or alluded to is on the 'Sector Practice Diagrams' where, consistent with the stated delivery principles of flexibility, adaptiveness, responsiveness and inclusiveness (p.6), 'Men's sheds' and 'Women's Groups' are included within a long list of possible delivery options.

In a more recent, comprehensive (55 page) study of outcomes of the neighbourhood house and learning sector (Humpage 2005), there

is again an emphasis on principles of community participation and ownership, empowerment, lifelong learning, access, equity and inclusion, social action, advocacy, networking and self-help. There is again a silence about women. Consistent with the equal access theme, gender (women or men) is not mentioned directly. In the conclusion there is only a brief and passing mention of 'women's groups' when discussing the importance of houses and centres to create an environment, where people

work and take recreation together, forming bonds from which they obtain something personally or collectively. This is done by creating and building communities of interest, such as playgroups, women's groups, support groups, community lunches and walking groups. (p.46)

#### **Some gender issues associated with community based men's sheds**

Golding, Foley and Brown (2007) broached the question of the desirable role of women in the evolving Australian men's sheds movement. In this section we draw heavily on some of that research, informed in turn by our field research (Golding Brown, Foley *et al.* 2007) to confirm that women **do** play a vital and invaluable role in shed organisations and in the support of men attending sheds. As an example, in many of the sheds that we studied, women played a vital role in securing funds for the shed. The key to women's effective role in sheds appears, from our research findings, to acknowledge that there are times when men need, for their own, their families', and the wider communities' sake, to share positively the regular company and friendship of other men. As is the case for men associated with neighbourhood houses, it is apparent that women know how and when to take a step back, but also to acknowledge that they are often invaluable to the organisation's wider success.

While our research identifies older men as the primary beneficiaries of community shed practice, men's partners typically actively encourage them to participate. Female partners, along with their

men who regularly use sheds, get respite from 'underfoot syndrome': the phenomenon of a couple both being at home full-time together, often but not always in retirement. This contrasts with attitudes of women's partners toward neighbourhood houses, at least earlier in their history, who often found them very threatening. As Kimberley (1998: 13) put it: 'Society generally did not regard women's education as important or even desirable and many women avoided telling their husbands about their participation, scraping the fees out of their housekeeping allowances'. We have also found evidence of the critical importance of female professionals in setting up and supporting community-based men's sheds, particularly their role in obtaining the necessary funding. Golding, Foley and Brown (2007) found little evidence of animosity towards women and plenty of evidence of welcoming inclusion. There was little evidence in our interviews of misogyny (a dislike of women).

However, there are differences of opinion amongst participants as to the most appropriate and effective role women should play as participants in community shed practice. One third of sheds we studied were 'men only'. Another one third of sheds tolerated women as participants, effectively on the condition that they not inhibit the opportunity for men to feel relaxed in the shed setting. A further one third of sheds would theoretically admit women as equal participants (though few did), but tended to say they did in order not to fall foul of what they (wrongly) perceived to be equal opportunity legislation that made affirmative action towards men illegal.

#### Sheds and masculinities

There has been considerable recent interest in academic circles about where men's sheds might fit generally in terms of gender relations with women and specifically in terms of masculinities. There has been a tendency in some feminist discourse to go further than (accurately) acknowledging men generally as having inappropriately held *most* of the power in *most* societies, to (inaccurately) identify *all* men

as negative in relation to *all* women. Whatever the merits of such arguments, there is acceptance that men generally may benefit from existing gender relations. Yet Karoski (2007: 86–87) accurately recognises the complexities of the masculinities crisis when he writes that

... both adherence to and rejection of hegemonic masculinity comes at serious costs to men. These include anxiety and depressive disorders, suicide and attempted suicide, physical illness, certain criminal behaviours, violence and differences in the mortality rate between men and women. For a number of years now, the masculinity crisis has emerged in public discourse to reflect the costs associated with masculinity.

Throughout this discussion, and Golding and associates' other recently published papers, we have deliberately taken to talking more about *men* than masculinities. Our reason is that, as Karoski's (2007: 70) informants argued in his study of men's movements in Australia, '[i]f the concept of masculinity indicates a concern with the nature of manhood and the object of concern is men, then why not talk about men?' Where we **do** refer to or cite 'negative hegemonic masculinity', as in Karoski's quote above, we are using it in the terms of Donaldson (1993) as it refers to a particular (and we would argue, inaccurately global) stereotyping of all men by means of a negative and hyper-masculine paradigm. That paradigm includes 'homophobia, misogyny and domestic patriarchy' (Connell 1995: 218), as well as 'aggression, ambition, competition, individualism, self-sufficiency and heterosexuality' (Telford 1996: 130). We specifically reject such a paradigm in the current research about community-based men's sheds because it simply does not fit the research evidence.

Importantly, men typically involved as participants in community-based men's sheds are not coming to sheds from the men's movement generally, nor from any one of the three typical Australian 'men's movement' positions identified and discussed by Karoski (2007).



Once their positions **are** analysed using our research data, men participating are not accurately or easily described in Karoski's terms as 'Profeminists' (male activists working in support of feminism), 'Mythopoeics' (with a focus on personal healing for men through men's ritual) nor 'Father's rights' advocates (with a focus on divorce and custody), though a small number of men hold some of these positions. As a group, men's shed practitioners come closest to holding views consistent with what Karoski's (2007) typology calls 'Inclusives', accepting that

It is essential to the well-being of the whole society that men make themselves healthier and more fulfilled. They also argue that, until men make themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy, the whole society will not function well because men still hold the hegemonic position in society.' (p. 216).

Men's sheds practitioners and participants do not generally attribute their problems to women generally or to femininity in particular. As bell hooks (1992: 565) notes, while most poorer, older, working class men who use sheds have been socialised by the sexist ideology of male privilege, in reality they have had few, if any, such privileges bestowed on them. Karoski (2007) expresses it in this way:

Poor working class men, more than any other, are caught up in the contradiction of masculinity. They have been brought up to adhere to the masculine ideal but are not able to live up to it. (p. 93)

Or as Donaldson (1991) puts it, 'working class men have basically one asset to market – their bodily capacity to labour – and their bodies are, over time, consumed by the labour they do' (cited in Connell 2000: 187). In essence, as Karoski (2007: 92) explains,

Working class men have experienced the masculinity crisis most acutely because of their strong adherence to traditional masculinity. ... Now working class men feel alienated, frustrated and angry because they no longer feel secure with themselves as men.

Men not in paid work are particularly alienated since they are no longer able to be a provider and head of a household. Such men, if also living on their own, are particularly isolated and potentially vulnerable. In several senses, men's sheds are about men seeking a brotherhood or 'mateship' with other men to cease to be isolated. The regular, shed-based practice provides an acceptable pretext for participating, meeting and informally discussing and resolving several of the contradictions imposed on them by the inappropriateness of labelling them with 'negative hegemonic masculinity'. Crudely, while some men are bastards, not all men are bastards, and very few men who currently use men's sheds appear, from our research evidence, to be bastards or to dislike women. What they particularly enjoy, for at least some of their week, is the social company of other men. They seldom seek to scapegoat or settle a score with women. As one of Karoski's informants put it (when talking about the men's movement and men's gatherings in Australia), the general purpose of men's sheds can be likened not to challenging

... some visible or invisible enemy, but introspection and self-reflection. The focus is on gaining a better understanding of who [they] are as men; as men in society, as fathers, as husbands, as lovers, identifying and addressing men's emotional needs, and learning to relate in a non-domineering and exploitative way. (Karoski 2007: 286-7)

The difference from previous and existing men's movements in Australia is that sheds in community settings provide a new, safe, neutral and acceptable place at the level of community and neighbourhood for men to meet, socialise and contribute regularly and positively to their communities. While essentially and mostly for working class men who are not in paid work, they are not tinged with some of the negative and hegemonic connotations seen to be associated with men who have traditionally met and socialised in hotels and in sporting venues in Australia. What is new and effective about sheds in community contexts is that the hands-on activity in

the workshop setting becomes a publicly acceptable, shared pretext for older men to meet, usually with women's active support.

### **A summary of some parallels and differences**

The similarities, differences and likely future trends that we identify below are necessarily tentative given that they are based on separate research into independent developments in different sectoral contexts approximately two decades apart.

#### **Some parallels**

On the basis of the literature we have reviewed, we identify some tantalising parallels between the grassroots development of neighbourhood houses in the mid-1970s and community men's sheds since the mid-1990s. While the sectors developed separately in different contexts at least 20 years apart, what they share is a commitment to the different needs of women (in the case of neighbourhood houses) and men (in the case of men's sheds).

Both neighbourhood *houses* and men's *sheds* identify the preferred territory for establishing their communities of practice. Neither has been able, at least overtly in public spaces funded in part by governments committed to gender equity, to promote one particular form of masculinity or femininity. Sheds (mainly for men) and houses (mainly for women) in community contexts are simultaneously both conservative and revolutionary. On the one hand, they both reinforce the status quo of gender stereotypical roles – of houses as places for women and sheds as places for men. On the other hand, they are revolutionary in that they both draw lines in the gender sand and recognise there are times and places where some women and some men benefit from gendered communities of practice. To borrow from and paraphrase Neville and Kennedy (1983: 122), both neighbourhood houses and sheds,

In their acceptance of biology **and** of women's [men's] activities for their own sakes, [are revolutionary in that they] have

provided an altogether new position from which women [men] may examine and possibly question the alternatives which are available to them in terms of their current role and future aspirations.

One other broad similarity is the demographic of men who tend to use sheds and women who use neighbourhood houses. Perhaps more so than for women who participate in neighbourhood houses, men's sheds' participants, particularly those men referred by health workers to sheds, including the half of men who have few other community affiliations, tend to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The difference is that men who use sheds tend to be considerably older (median age 65), more likely to be rural and less likely to be middle class or 'ordinary suburban' as described by Kimberley (1998: 50).

In terms of the preferred pedagogies there are close parallels. Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.* (2007) identify preferred pedagogies of men in sheds that are very similar to those described for community providers in Kimberley (1986: 32). Kimberley emphasises that community providers provide time and space for reassessing a participant's life and directions and offering support for making changes and taking risks. As for men in sheds, women in neighbourhood houses, as Kimberley describes, are encouraged through their participation to suffer no loss of face or self-esteem, to move in and out of learning experiences, to learn as well as teach, to match their learning with changing stages in their lives to take control of their own learning. Finally but importantly, both emphasise success 'as the development of confidence, growth, fulfilment and increased contribution to society in a number of ways' (Kimberley 1986: 34).

#### Some differences

We identify several important differences. The main and obvious one is that women have been unable or unwilling to effectively and officially claim their house space or sector as gendered other than

through practice. It is interesting to ask why this is so. Whatever the answer, unlike in most (but not all) men's sheds where men in each shed effectively decide whether women are welcome, explicit reference to mainly (or only) women as participants in neighbourhood houses has been too conflictual to resolve. While women remain the invisible owners, and in recent times have extended a new and significant hand to men through neighbourhood houses in all Australian states, their parallel commitment to access and equity for all has prevented them, unlike for men, from formally claiming or gendering the space.

We also suggest that the women who worked to establish neighbourhood houses and learning centres were apparently more overtly political than the men who recently set up or participate in men's sheds. The 1970s and 80s was an era of women feeling oppressed by the role they were cast by society. They wanted not only equality with men but also for women's knowledge and processes to be equally valued or even more highly valued than the hierarchical structures of organisation and education which constituted the norm. Ironically it is these feminist values and processes, providing time and space for reassessing a participant's life and directions and offering support for making changes and taking risks, that underpin the model common to most if not all men's sheds.

#### Some likely future trends

It remains to be seen how men in sheds will, in the longer term, formally address the role of women in their relatively new and embryonic sector. To date women are accepted as important stakeholders in sheds, including as managers and facilitators, as well as partners who typically benefit from men's separate, regular practice. What we observe to date is that most men's sheds are tending to adopt organisational principles akin to those of feminism, as reflected indirectly in neighbourhood houses via the ANHLC (2003) principles. These principles tend to be non-hierarchical

and include community ownership, community participation, empowerment, access and equity, lifelong learning, inclusion, networking, advocacy, self-help and social action.

### **Conclusions**

Our comparison raises a number of new, unanswered and tantalising questions about the nature and effectiveness of gendered spaces in community settings, their link to health and well-being and the value of such spaces for community connectedness in both neighbourhood houses and men's sheds alike. Only some of the questions we set out to answer have been addressed in this brief article. We conclude that both neighbourhood houses and community-based men's sheds in Australia come out of grassroots community practice. They provide women and men separately and respectively with effective communities of regular, cooperative, hands-on practice particularly conducive to informal learning. They are very well suited to the needs of women and men not in paid work and to the development of gender-specific friendship networks developed through such regular activity in trusting communities of practice. These gendered communities of practice appear from our research to be particularly appropriate and effective for women and men with poor self-images as learners as a consequence of negative prior learning, life and/or work experiences.

In the case of neighbourhood houses, the early rationale about being primarily for women broadened over time to become gender inclusive in terms of policy, while the pedagogies and programs have tended still to cater mainly for women. There has been a tendency amongst those writing about neighbourhood houses to write in a strategic, policy-focused style that de-emphasises gender, adopts inclusivity and appears as gender neutral. Nevertheless those writing in a research-orientated genre for academic purposes about both houses and sheds tend to be more overtly and explicitly gender-specific. While it is too

early to predict what eventual gender trajectory community-based men's sheds might take, they are tending in 2008 towards being named and operated as men's spaces.

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