

**Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University**

**Lunchtime talk by Dr Wendy Sarkissian LFPIA  
22 February 2012**

*What's **Psychology** Got to Do with NIMBY?  
Exploring the Deeper Meanings of Community Resistance  
to Proposed Housing Density Increases*



My deepest gratitude to Eric Belsky, Kerry Donahue, Julie Hernandez, Pamela Baldwin and Mary Lancaster of the Center. And especially to my old friend and generous host, Ann Forsyth of the GSD.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to speak at Harvard and to share my bewilderment with you.

I have worked as a community and housing planner since 1966 – spending almost all my working life in Australia. Mostly as a consultant and occasionally as an academic.

My specialties are housing and community engagement.

I looked at the list of your previous speakers and I reckon not many come to your seminars to share their confusion and bewilderment. But I have come here to do just that.

And I hope that together we can have a good discussion – about issues that **MUST** concern all housing folks.

So here's my question – emerging from my perplexed, confused, state of mind.

I expect that we all know that community opposition to higher density housing and infill development is alive and well – in my country, your country, Canada, the UK – in *many* countries. It's such a common experience that we even have acronyms that we use to sum up and – let's admit it – dismiss the comments and perspectives of the opponents.

- *NIMBY: Not in my backyard*
- *BANANA: Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything*
- *NIMTOO: Not in my term of office*

And many planners and others in these countries are trying to understand the forces behind NIMBYism – and how to resolve NIMBY disputes, particularly related to proposed housing density increases.

Recently, I was talking with Ned Jacobs, Jane's son, in Vancouver. Ned commented that his mother really disliked the NIMBY label, largely because it didn't tell us anything about the reasons — and they may be numerous and quite distinct from one another — that people are opposed to a development. He said it lumps together people who may have very different reasons for their opposition, some of which may have nothing to do with being against increasing housing density, *per se*.

I believe Ned's onto something important.

But – here’s my question: *What if NIMBYism were justified because what is planned for your backyard was really something that shouldn’t be in your backyard?*

Now, I am not talking about *BANANA* – I’m talking about neighbor resistance to housing density increases that people experience as happening *in their backyard*. And **backyard** is important in this context. This is about the proposed new housing planned for a lower density neighborhood that has not had much of that – at least, not yet!

My second question today is this: *What if our new higher density housing were truly “home-like” and fitted well with and into neighboring housing and residential neighborhoods?*

(This is the central task for most planning: is this development going to be a good neighbor? And how can I create a dialogical space, during the planning and approval process, that might help this outcome?)

What if everything we learned – and knew – about housing – as planners, developers and members of the land professions generally – in the 1960s and 1970s – were brought to light and brought to bear in the creation of – and community engagement about – increased housing densities in lower density neighborhoods?

**Would it make any difference?**

**Are these issues important?**

Boston feels like the right place to be having this conversation:

- Herbert Gans, sociologist
- Chester Hartman, planner
- Marc Fried, psychologist
- Peter Marris, sociologist

These people remind us of the building blocks of community psychology as they explored the effects of the forced relocation of the multi-ethnic residential community from Boston’s West End. Marc Fried spent several years with West Enders researching the psychological effects of their dislocation. More than 90 percent showed symptoms of depression. Fried concluded that cohesive neighborhoods provide residents with a feeling of rootedness that is essential in maintaining a sense of identity and purpose. The study also helped establish the notion that people can grieve for the loss of something other than a loved *person*.

**As an aside:**

I went to visit that “50 acres of emptiness” last weekend.

I struggled to breathe. I could hear the voices of the women – still crying. Still grieving.

I found it cold, windswept, drab, bare – even though I was told it’s been greatly improved in recent years. Still, I felt much, *much* more shock than I had expected – having read about it as a planning student in the early 1970s.

Since physically it’s gone, for the displaced residents who are still *living*, the old West End is now only a “neighborhood of the mind”: a landscape of memory.

At least for a while – back in the seventies, we learned from this disaster: we learned that forced relocation – when you are physically torn from your core territory of home – breaks you and it breaks your heart. It destroys people, neighborhoods AND communities. And the grieving persists. Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s studies of relocation out of inner London showed same thing.

The British sociologist, Peter Marris, who lived in Boston in the seventies, writing in *Loss and Change* (1974) argued that:

“People cannot reconcile themselves to the loss of familiar attachments in terms of some impersonal utilitarian calculation of the common good. They have to find their own meaning in these changes before they can live with them” (1974: 156).<sup>1</sup>

Peter also suggested general principles for reducing the traumatic impact of an event before it took place, as well as assisting in psychological recovery after the change has been introduced. Instead of resisting, vilifying or dismissing communities’ resistance to change, we might be better off **slowing down to the psychological limits of what communities can handle** and preparing people well before we introduce major social change. He suggested giving affected communities a lot of advanced notice to prepare mentally for a change (as abrupt change tends to be more traumatic than expected change).

Just ask the descendants of the thousands of Aboriginal people – in your country, my birth country and my adopted country – who were forcibly removed from their traditional homes and lands. Giovanni Attili and Leonie Sandercock have documented that pain in their powerful new film about First Nations people in northern British Columbia: *Finding Our Way* (2010).<sup>2</sup>

We also know from the experiences of Sandy, Katrina, the tornado in Joplin, Missouri, where entire neighborhoods were destroyed, and decades of drought – and recently fire and flood – in Australia, that treating depression in survivors is a big part of post-disaster mental health care and involves collective as well as individual trauma.

In the sixties and seventies, when I was a researcher with the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and later a planner in Australia – sociologists and psychologists still hung out with planners. I was one of them.

But somehow we’ve forgotten the wisdom of those wise, heart-centered and thoughtful Boston researchers. We’ve had to relearn that material, helped by people like Mindy Thompson Fullilove at Columbia University’s School of Public Health – writing about the psychology of place: *Root Shock: How Tearing up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do about It*.<sup>3</sup>

Many Australians are highly critical of planning in the United States. Yet what we’ve done in Australia – tearing down public housing estates and destroying longstanding, close-knit communities, especially in southwestern Sydney – is a national disgrace.

So we must relearn these lessons because there appears to be no repository of this knowledge with its painful and hard-won lessons.

Perhaps this is an example of professional and institutional amnesia: the sort that occurs when a dominant paradigm cleanses history and excludes “the inconvenient truth”.

The same goes for the psychology of housing and the psychology of place...

For *that* body of core knowledge, we need to tie on our headbands and rainbow scarves and journey back to Berkeley, not Boston, in the seventies, not the sixties. In that decade, environmental psychologists all over this country (and a few in Australia) were contributing to an understanding of the psychology, meaning, symbolism and effects of the core territory of “home”. My mentor, Clare Cooper Marcus, was among them.

Yet that work seems – like the Boston work a decade before – to have sunk from sight. At least where municipal planners, developers and politicians are concerned. Sunk like a stone.

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<sup>1</sup> Marris, Peter (1974). *Loss and Change*. New York: Pantheon Books.

<sup>2</sup> Attili, Giovanni and Leonie Sandercock (2010). *Finding Our Way: Neba wheti hon’a e kwuznut*. 90-minute documentary (Vancouver: Moving Images distributor). See: <http://www.mongrel-stories.com/films/finding-our-way/>

<sup>3</sup> Fullilove, Mindy T. (2005). *Root Shock: How Tearing up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do about It*. New York: Random House.

What I'm saying is that there was a time when we in the land and community-building professions **knew** about the building blocks of good housing and good neighborhoods.

That knowledge influenced the education of thousands of planners and architects. And more than a few principled developers. Here, in my country – everywhere.

I know, as a practitioner, that we *did* discuss those matters – that body of research and knowledge – when we planned suburbs and residential neighborhoods. It DID influence us. I KNOW that. I was there in the thick of it planning new suburbs in Australia.

There was a richness and texture to our conversations in those days. But not NOW.

We've lost that – just as we lost the West End lessons. We've lost – or we've forgotten – the basic, fundamental building blocks of the professional practice that might – just might – help us create more *acceptable* higher density housing and encourage its positive reception in existing residential neighborhoods.

Today I'm going to share some of my recollections of this lost material, this forgotten discourse. The sixties and the seventies.

And to suggest how we could use those old/new insights to influence our *current* community engagement processes about proposed housing density increases.

*En route* I am going to show you *my* home – a small eco-village in a tiny village in New South Wales two hours' drive from Brisbane. My husband Karl and I bought half an acre of "community title" land in 2001; we've owner-built our house and have lived there for about six years.

Nimbin (how coincidental for this talk!) is a famous alternative community, known as "Australia's Woodstock". In Jarlanbah, our eco-village, neighbors are up-in arms about one proposed density increase: putting a kitchenette in one detached dwelling on a half-acre lot.

But before I embark on my wander down *Memory Lane*, I'm going to foreshadow what I believe a reconsideration of our forgotten knowledge might mean for community engagement practices.

The discourse I'm about to describe has a very "seventies" quality to it, like the village where I live. My model is based on a deep respect for the pivotal concept of "place attachment".

Daily, in my consulting practice, I encounter the dominant paradigm: the deficiencies of current community engagement practices. Everywhere – in my consulting practice: a meanness, a tightening, a harshness... Particularly in municipalities and among developers, the risk managers are in the ascendancy; their victims are harmony, collaboration, creativity and inclusiveness. It's almost impossible to be caring and impossible to be "loving" in such a harsh and alienating environment.

I have spent 44 years working in community engagement in every Australian state and territory and my considered view is that *only loving attention* can help us with this problem.

Truly, I mean it!

Academic planners like Leonie Sandercock, Libby Porter, Karen Umemoto and Aftab Erfan are now writing directly and explicitly about "What's Love Got to Do with It?" in *Planning Theory & Practice* (December 2012).

I'm with *them*.

I never thought I'd see the day!

Aftab writes:

*To know you is to love you.*

*Over the months of my so-called research  
You have emerged  
Like a three dimensional world  
Out of a pop-up book  
The flat version of which I had read  
too many times.  
Now you're standing before me  
With all your strength  
And all your vulnerability on display.  
To have seen your suffering up close  
Is to look at you with new,  
far more appreciative, eyes.<sup>4</sup>*

My model for community engagement addressing NIMBY issues is about **LOVE**. In my model, **L** is for listening, **O** is for openness, **V** is for validation and **E** is for community education.

I'm all for approaches that enable community capacity strengthening. We need to help community members understand the sustainability reasons behind housing density increases. However, I believe we make a *huge* mistake when we try to educate people *first* – before we listen openly to them and validate what they have to say to *us*.

As I am suggesting that we need to go back to the sixties and the seventies, I present my model graphically in an appropriately hippie fashion.

So, I'm advocating that we engage with NIMBY responses with engagement processes that are deeply respectful, with more than enough time for the **L** of listening (the *social policy of everyday life*, as John Forester would have it); that we model the **O** of openness and inclusivity in our processes; that we **V**, validate and respect community members' views.

In validating local views, we must work especially diligently to address the issue of the *influence* of community members – so brilliantly highlighted in Roz Lasker and John Guidry's latest book.<sup>5</sup> For them (focussing on marginalized groups) community engagement is like running in a relay (baton) race.

Unless you are actually in the race, start on time, are at the starting line, running in a lane, carrying a baton (your precious local knowledge or information), able to jump hurdles on an uneven track, keep the baton in your hand and pass it to someone who can cross the line and hand it to an "expert" [who will inevitably have a "blind spot"]...), your views have little or no chance of having "influence".

Our validation must include *influence*.

And finally (*not* firstly), we come to the **E** of **LOVE: Education**.

In this regard, we must also direct our educational activities to protecting the future of all beings on our living Earth. We must develop strategies to build and strengthen community capacity, literacy and knowledgeability about why housing density increases are important for sustainability. A huge battle has been waging for more

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<sup>4</sup> Erfan, Aftab and Leonie Sandercock (2012). "Plato's Lacunae: On the Value of Loving Attachment in Community-Based Planning Research and Practice" in Libby Porter, Leonie Sandercock and Karen Umamoto, eds. "What's love got to do with it? illuminations on loving attachment in planning", *Planning Theory & Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 593–627, December.

<sup>5</sup> Lasker, Roz Diane and John A Guidry (2009). *Engaging the Community in Decision Making: Case Studies Tracking Participation, Voice and Influence*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company Ltd.

than two decades about this matter in Australia: *Does housing density really achieve sustainability objectives?* (Please, God, we are *not* going down that road today...)

Today, so that we can all leave here before midnight, I am going to *assume* that increasing housing densities has ecological and sustainability benefits and that we ought to find ways to educate residents about those imperatives.

I discuss how that community education should occur in my book, *Kitchen Table Sustainability: Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability* (2009).<sup>6</sup>

I'd transform community engagement processes from the mean-spirited and stingy, mingy things they are today into a process based on love. My experience teaches me that processes infused with loving attention would work a certain magic on even the hardest heart. I've seen that happen. Often.

### **But what of housing design?**

We all know that some infill housing is simply awful. Woeful. Not home-like. It looks like offices or factories, is harsh, not domestic in scale or appearance... causes problems with privacy, overlooking overshadowing... It rarely "fits in" because many designers, seeking peer accolades and representation in the glossies, want their housing to "stand out". It does not look as though it belongs in *my* backyard. (There's a good thesis topic in that one!)

What to do in *that* regard?

We'll need more than loving attention to remedy the design of some of the new higher density housing I've seen in recent years – and it's not only in Australia!

Here's some new housing in central Adelaide on a bitterly contested site that had been pretty much promised by the City politicians and the planners to Urban Ecology for an eco-village. They built one highly successful village in central Adelaide (Christie Walk) but they failed to get this one approved.

In the home-like Christie Walk, developed from 1999 to 2006, the overall strategy was to use high internal mass within highly insulated envelopes with multiple user-controlled ventilation options and thermal flues. Vegetation and outdoor spaces were included as an integral part of the passive house design approach. Smaller house plan areas were favoured with quality of space considered more important than mere quantity. This is most clearly demonstrated in the first cottage built on the site, a two-storey, two-bedroom straw bale house of just 55m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>7</sup>

A range of dwelling types is represented in the project with differing configurations, orientations and construction systems that demonstrate the effectiveness of environmental design for various conditions and lifestyles. The two- and three-storey cottages are detached structures; the 3-storey townhouses are linked. Solar control for the cottages and the first six apartments is limited to controlling east/west sun penetration. The other dwellings have ideal solar orientation. Solar access angles dictated building heights and form and solar access to the neighbouring childcare centre was protected by careful design of roof profiles.

Well, this is where the lessons from grieving for a lost home in the sixties in Boston and the psychology of home in the seventies in Berkeley converge, in my opinion.

This is where place psychology, place attachment, the psychology of home and the interconnected fields of community psychology, environmental psychology and humanistic psychology come into play with regard to NIMBY responses to proposed housing density increases.

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<sup>6</sup> Sarkissian, Wendy et al. (2009) *Kitchen Table Sustainability: Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability*. London: Earthscan.

<sup>7</sup> [www.urbanecology.org.au/eco-cities/christie-walk/](http://www.urbanecology.org.au/eco-cities/christie-walk/)

Just as I am suggesting that we need to engage with **LOVE**, we need to design with **heart** and put the **heart** back into the design process. And that means understanding people's heartfelt attachments to *home*.

To explain what home really means to people would take a lifetime. (And I have to fly back to Australia in a few days...) But because the intensity of people's reactions to housing is such a huge issue for planners and developers, we must identify some of the building blocks of place attachment and the psychology of housing. That way, we'll have some insights into what's happening to neighbors when they get so upset.

### **What exactly have we forgotten?**

This is some of the 'psychological' material we've forgotten from the seventies. Ten major categories of information, just for starters...

1. Environmental psychology
2. Place, place attachment and placelessness
3. The territorial core
4. Housing messages
5. The threshold
6. Congruence or "fit"
7. Privacy: frontstage and backstage
8. Identity, image and housing form
9. Personalization
10. The house as mirror of the self

I've been discussing this matter recently with a long-standing colleague, Boston-based John Zeisel<sup>8</sup>, whose path-breaking book, *Inquiry by Design*, is now in a revised second edition.<sup>9</sup> In this new book, Zeisel argues that "if a new paradigm is to further the discipline of environment-behavior studies [which I believe have faded from the planning discourse], it must shed new light on old concepts and introduce new concepts, methods, theories and models." For Zeisel, *place*, *personalization*, *territory* and *wayfinding* are four topics that form the core of environment-behavior (E-B) theory and practice. Critically, they also "play a central role in the evolution of the brain in all animals, including *Homo sapiens*."<sup>10</sup>

So ... if we accept the importance of these old/new components of what we might call "residential satisfaction of the neighbors", then we can look more deeply into what's going on. And perhaps, armed with this forgotten knowledge, planners, developers and architects could start creating housing that is more home-like – in the deepest, most symbolic and significant sense of the term.

### **So where are we in our journey?**

I've suggested that mean-spirited approaches to community engagement that vilify NIMBYites won't work, but that approaches aligned with loving attachment and **LOVE** might. I've also suggested that creating housing that looks and feels like home, that obeys some basic, archetypal rules and acknowledges the psychological and symbolic components—for both residents AND neighbors — might help.

### **But, wait, there's more!**

What do you do when things get really rough in **YOUR** neighborhood about housing density increases?

I suggest that you "phone a friend". That's what I had to do when it happened to me. At *my* place. On *my* territory. In *my* neighborhood. In *my* backyard.

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<sup>8</sup> See Hearthstone Alzheimer's Care: <http://www.thehearth.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Zeisel, John (1981). *Inquiry by Design: Tools for Environment-Behavior Research*. Monterey: Brooks/Cole. Revised edition, 2006: *Inquiry by Design: Environment/Behavior/ Neuroscience in Architecture, Interiors, Landscape and Planning*. Revised edition. New York and London: W/W. Norton.

<sup>10</sup> Zeisel, 2006: Chapter 14.

So I'd like to conclude by telling you – very briefly – about the saga of the proposed dual occupancy (known as accessory units in the USA) in my 46-lot eco-village. And how having Professor John Forester from Cornell on email and at the end of the phone kept me from going completely nuts.

John's help was valuable *not* because he is an academic. It's because of **LOVE**. While I was climbing on my high horse, ready to ride off in all directions, John respected the voices and the views of my irritating neighbors. He felt they were saying something valid. He listened carefully for the feelings and the meanings – within and beneath – their words, not only to what was said.

Here's my home and here's what happened...

### **So to conclude.**

It's a great mystery to me why these discourses have sunk from sight in the land professions. If anyone understands *why*, I'd be delighted to discuss it. Please!

However, to the business at hand: I'm a planner. I believe that, as planners:

- We must take action without delay to support affordable housing and ethnically and culturally mixed communities, as effective NIMBY-type strategies work to defend neighborhoods against social and tenure mix and other forms of integration and inclusion.
- We must retrieve and embrace our lost sociological and psychological wisdom about what makes good housing and good neighborhoods.
- We must evoke the memory of Boston's West End (and all of the inner city African-American communities discussed by Fullilove) and remember what happens when we mess with the fundamentals of housing and neighborhoods.
- We must work to create more sensitively designed higher density housing – considering it as if it were going into our own backyards.
- We must pay careful – and loving – attention – to the fine grain. *The divine dwells in the details*. While we must work effectively at all scales to achieve what residents and neighbors experience as “good design”, tiny details matter greatly. In a high-crime neighborhood, if I can see who is at the door before opening it, it's a great boon. It won't cost more, but it needs forethought.
- We must be more curious about and respectful of the deeper messages that so-called NIMBYites are communicating.
- We must transform our weak community engagement processes with the principles of loving attachment and **LOVE**: *listening, openness, validation and education*.
- And if we are to develop higher density housing that is inclusive and welcoming, we must take decisive action. And quickly.

### **Here are my commitments and my suggestions:**

1. These are matters of direct relevance to everyone who cares about housing in our cities today. We urgently need cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary collaboration on these urgent matters. Could there be a role for the Joint Center in this work? I'd eagerly participate, coordinate, collaborate...
2. I have been working on this topic for decades and on this particular model for the past year. I am eager to pursue this work in practical terms and to collaborate with other scholars, researchers and practitioners in all the land professions. Please communicate with me: wendy@sarkissian.com.au.

3. I would be willing to offer a short course on the social design issues raised in this paper at any university (or universities) that would like to have such a course. Perhaps a summer course sponsored by a number of Boston-based universities in collaboration with the Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute in Perth, where the Director, Professor Peter Newman, is a passionate advocate for housing density increases. I am an Adjunct Associate Professor there and would certainly try to make something creative happen.

I know from decades of teaching that there is a great hunger for this learning and that, once it is offered, it is readily embraced. Initially, students and professors may not see the value of such a course. However, there is great material in the syllabi of many popular courses by prominent academics – courses that are no longer taught but are still relevant.

I have been told that Harvard GSD budgets are tight, new courses are currently being developed and that other courses need to be funded first. So the opportunity for a full course in the curriculum is not on the cards for now.

Nevertheless, I am making this sincere and heartfelt offering because this is a much more serious and urgent matter than many would imagine. I am looking for support for this idea and am eager to work with anyone who is interested.

We could call the course “Housing Density and Social Factors for Planners and Designers”, or, “How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love High-Density Housing”.

Is anyone interested?

4. I am currently working with a Vancouver-based developer, Stephen Hynes, on a housing development that could offer an important focus for these concepts and an opportunity to test and refine their operation in the real world. We are eager to talk to anyone – in the next few days – who might want to work with us and share our findings. We’d also welcome news of any new housing developments – or engagement processes – in the Boston area where these ideas might be put into practice.

I am honoured to be speaking at Harvard University today.

Thank you.

As a community planner, I symbolically pass the baton of local knowledge to the housing experts among you – from real people I know – those residents – and their neighbors– who are frightened by proposed housing density increases in their backyards.

And I close with the words of my dear Australian friend, Leonie Sandercock – from her article on loving attachment:

*The chemistry of attachment  
is relationship*

*The ethics of attachment  
is responsibility.*

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