

PLACES WOMEN MAKE

Unearthing the contribution of women to our cities

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Press

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INTRODUCTION

THE CITY IS OUR LIVING ROOM

Up amongst the treetops of the old figs that circle the driveway of Number 8 Birtley Place, Elizabeth Bay, I first became an apartment dweller. This mansard-roofed, textured brick building is a local landmark in Sydney's east. A flat in one of Australia's first high-rise apartment buildings, designed in 1934 by the architect Emil Sodersten, was my first real experience of urban life. It was Sydney, but inside the building with its art deco flourish, it felt like Manhattan.

Before that, like many baby boomer Australians, I had lived in a house that had a garden. For me it was in a quiet street in Adelaide. Elizabeth Bay and Potts Point, where I now live, is Sydney's mini Manhattan, not so quiet, yet maybe Australia's ideal urban village. Moving from a house and garden to live without my own backyard meant that the city, its street cafés and parks, and especially its harbourside parks, quickly became my outdoor living room, a retreat on Sunday morning with a book or the papers. I learned that the way public places are designed and what they offer us changes our mood and how we feel as we live every day. And more and more Australians – and indeed global citizens – will be living in apartments in the twenty-first century. Shared public places and the way they are created will be crucial to successful, enjoyable urban life.

Places Women Make tells stories of the nurturing places that

women have given us. It is about the kinds of places women have made in our cities that make them better places to be. It is about how people can live with a greater sense of belonging in cities. Women are the uncelebrated urban heroines of our cities. They have done much to make Australia's cities and communities better places to live in; however, their stories are not as visible as those of the men who mostly design the buildings in our cities. Cities are man-made places, and mostly the work of men, but there are places shaped by women. The stories told here have been remembered and gathered over more than twenty years of working with communities and with leading women city-makers and they recognise the enormous contribution of women to making Australian cities more beautiful, lively and full of delight. *Places Women Make* shows there is a body of urban work by women who have made places happen in Australian cities. My investigations on the influence of women on our cities revealed that in many of the places I have visited and fallen in love with, women had been responsible for making them.

In Australia men have been the hero architects of most of Australia's city buildings, leading the design, even if women were invisibly designing the detail behind the scenes. The stories in this book celebrate the places in cities we know women have given us, places that nurture, surprise or cocoon. I have chosen places that provide delight and enjoyment; I am not proving a theory about the skills of men versus those of women, but simply suggesting that women need to be more involved in the future shaping of our cities, as we can all benefit from the sensibilities that women bring to the planning process. When we look back at the inspired decisions and magnificent places created by women in this country, it is clear we need feminine sensibility to solve the challenges of life in a more urban world. We need more contributions from women, and certainly their creativity, their intuition and their often lateral approach.

We know a female perspective is different from that of a man. It is needed more than ever in the complexity of contemporary urban life. Women from all walks of life have used their gifts, their courage, their

imagination and their generosity to create places to make the lives of others better; they have used their creativity and ingenuity to claim abandoned places to improve, change, preserve or reuse. They have given us places that enrich us, lift our spirits, teach us, excite and surprise us and sometimes just make life a little bit more beautiful.

Making change and building anything in cities is a slow process, often difficult, sometimes tedious, and almost always fraught with community politics. Some of the most exciting places in cities are accidental, but most are made. They touch generations beyond the time of those who inspired them and created them, and they influence other cities and communities to grow and change.

Cities are the playrooms of our lives, holding our past and promising our future. As we crowd into cities to live and work and as jobs force us to become more mobile, our cities are becoming shared places, places in which we stay and spend time when we are not at home and not at work. People are increasingly aware of how cities can make them feel and choose one over another because of what it offers. The generation born in the 1980s, who urbanists call 'the millennials', are likely to be Australia's first apartment-dwelling generation, having opted to live closer to work and choosing the sense of belonging, convenience and connection of an urban rather than a suburban lifestyle. Those who leave the city for a town by the sea or in the mountains or for a house in a smaller city will still want good places to share village life, places where they can connect and make communities. And now with more mobility and with more people living alone, belonging to a community becomes even more important to a meaningful life.

Although cities have grown hugely over the past one hundred years, people remain villagers at heart. Children growing up in apartments still need trees to climb. We need to see the green of a garden and the blue sky above.

The city is now our living room. We want the 'house and garden' comfort and style of home in our local streets and parks and in the shared places of the city. At weekends we go out for coffee, to galleries

and libraries, or just to walk and hang out with strangers in charming, lively public places that enable us to feel alive, stimulated and aware that we belong to a shared humanity. We don't live in one house for our entire adult life anymore. At each stage of our life, and as we live longer, we redefine our needs and where we want to be.

Places Women Make is mostly concerned with Australia's major cities and the Australian women who have contributed to shaping them. For each of the women and places about which I write there are many other untold stories. I hear new stories every day in my work in communities. Many of the women have achieved their work with the help of supportive men; they have stood behind capable women, as women have stood, less visibly, for centuries behind the success of men.

Listening and talking is the way women love to work. It is both instinctive and quickly learned. Women are natural storytellers and homemakers. These are essential skills for working with communities to construct places that meet other people's needs. Today, in communities across cities everywhere there are sisterhoods of women working together to build successful neighbourhoods, cities and communities.

For more than two thousand years, since the Greeks designed the public square and the Plaka, men have been the architects of our cities; yet women have worked in complex, often indirect, ways to make the places we need. Now women make things happen as catalysts, advocates, activists, commissioning clients, donors, influencers, philanthropists, decision-makers, architects and urban planners; but it is still rare for women to be the hero architects of public buildings and places.

Many of the women decision-makers involved in shaping cities tell the same story. They begin as activists, agitating for change, often at their own kitchen table and then take up the cause of creating better places in their neighbourhoods and cities. Some of the most exciting initiatives have occurred when communities, often led by female campaigners, have demanded more from governments and

developers. The US urbanist and activist, Jane Jacobs, guardian of Manhattan's Greenwich Village in the 1960s and 1970s, can still be a role model to young people today. Jane Jacobs changed the way a whole generation of planners, architects, civic leaders and activists thought about the shaping of our cities. The human qualities she argued for in cities are just as relevant to the young millennials today, who will be shaping the way they live. Jane Jacobs was fearless in her advocacy and unafraid to speak out against car dominance, freeways and the loss of local heritage, arguing for human-scale buildings and healthy cities. Now the neighbourhood she saved, Manhattan's Greenwich Village, is on the way to the High Line, the ultimate outdoor living room. The High Line is a place she would have loved. The baby boomer generation grew up with the protest songs of that time and a generation of women listened to the sweet voices of Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell and Mary Travers, encouraging us to believe we could change the world, defeat racism and sexism, and save the environment, heritage and nature from the excesses of modernity. Most of these challenges are still with us, as are the songs. And women continue to be strong voices in calls for change and for more room for women in every sphere of urban, community and professional life.

Why *Places Women Make*? Why write about women and cities when mostly men are the architects of our city buildings? Almost all of the major accolades for city-making in history and in contemporary awards systems, such as the Pritzker Prize for Architecture and the Nobel Prize, have been awarded to men. Female architects who have won major awards for public places and buildings are still too rare. As one leading woman architect I interviewed explained to me: 'since the Greeks created the Plaka as a gathering place where women were not allowed and since the Romans created civic life, men have led as the architects of our cities all over the world'.

Having worked in the mostly male-led world of city-making for the past twenty years, I am convinced that our cities would be different if more women were involved in shaping them for tomorrow's children. As more women graduate from architecture, engineering, design

and planning, perhaps cities can change to become more nurturing, friendly and humanist? Will communities gain from more women leading the design of places? Would our cities be different or more welcoming if women had played a larger role in their design? These are questions explored in *Places Women Make*.

Research into the contribution made by women to Australia's cities uncovers a plethora of hidden stories. The walks and parks, private gardens, music bowls, museums, secret gardens, libraries and sea pools described in these stories carry the warmth and spirit of the women who inspired them.

As a young woman I was drawn into the politics of city-making to help transform inner-city Adelaide into a better place for its people and to preserve its colonial heritage. Adelaide is a city of one million, the capital of South Australia, and where I grew up and had a family. There are all kinds of ways to become involved in making our neighbourhoods and cities connected, more delightful, surprising and beautiful. Community leadership is just one.

Melbourne, where I was born, with its focus on redesigning the inner city and reinventing its heritage, inspired me as a young civic leader. Adelaide led me to act to preserve aspects of the city I valued – to keep its sense of history and of being a big country town under a desert sky, although still a city. Community service led me to Canberra, first to serve on boards, and later to work with government and the community on changes to government urban policy to ensure a more urban, less suburban and more sustainable future. Sydney is home now and, as Australia's global city, it has all the challenges of a fast-growing metropolis. These are the cities I know well and so I share the stories of what women have given them, and to Australia's other major cities.

In the book *City Limits* by the team who led Australia's leading think tank on cities, the Grattan Institute, Jane-Francis Kelly describes Australia's cities as broken, although she argues that they can be fixed. They may not all be broken, but many places in our cities and neighbourhoods have never been cared for. Governments won't

The city is our living room

make the cities and places we want: we have to shape them ourselves, first into places and then into communities. And then they shape us.

By sharing stories about women and the places they have made in our cities, I hope to inspire a new generation of women to imagine and create the kinds of places that will be loved and enjoyed by tomorrow's children. For cities are the playrooms of our lives, holding our past and promising our future.



*Still admired, young **ELIZABETH MACQUARIE**'s influence
on contemporary Sydney has enriched city life.*



**A
WOMAN'S
PLACE**





*Civic leader and humanist, **CLOVER MOORE**,
who made the villages of inner Sydney places for everyone.*

SAFE HANDS

*As you grow older you discover that you have two hands,
one for helping yourself and the other for helping others.*

AUDREY HEPBURN

As soon as we step out of the door, the city landscape is everything we see and experience. It is as complex as any ecosystem. Architects have not always designed places that make us feel alive and comfortable when we are in shared places. Could women do this better? We don't know, since our cities have been almost completely designed by men.

What we do know is that a woman's place is no longer only in the home. We know too that city-making and achieving what is desirable for your town or suburb are complex activities and hard work. We know that when cities work for women they work for everybody. We pass on magnificent places from one generation to the next, but places change and community needs change, and each generation must be part of the process of making the places in which they will live.

The work of creating cities is always concerned with balance: what to add, what to keep and what to change. It takes moral courage to hold onto *and* to add the kinds of places we need for our time and for those who follow. Women leaders have demonstrated they can be trustworthy custodians of our cities – a pair of safe hands.

Making wholesale change in cities can be a fraught and difficult process, while developing new places, parks and buildings can be slow. Changing some parts of our cities and, therefore, community life may

take two decades. Designing change in the city is a skilful job, one that requires sensitivity, imagination, courage and intelligence. It is a long tough process, involving more than design and funding, but also political and community acceptance. Australia's cities are blessed with natural beauty, rivers, mountains, harbours and heritage, and these add to the quality of our life. However, it is the places we make ourselves that allow us to enjoy city life in fulfilling and engaging ways and which add to a place's beauty and attractiveness. The best of these places arise from their communities, not from governments. We need to guide governments, hold them to account and call for what we want.

In Sydney there are places that have endured and which have been loved by generations. Mrs Macquarie's Road is a walk that remains a hugely popular destination. First created in the early 1800s for the afternoon walk of Governor Lachlan Macquarie's wife, Elizabeth, it was a place to stroll in the cooling sea breezes. Still snaking around the glorious shaded edge of the harbour, it has become for people living in city apartments in the twenty-first century an exercise track or a beautiful path into the city; it is also a popular tourist mecca. Cities are enriched by places of enduring beauty and interest. The best cities can be walked, and have parks and paths where we can meander and experience a little connection to nature, even if it's just blue sky and birdsong.

The High Line in New York is a contemporary model for an old idea, a place for the locals to wander and encounter friends, a place people can identify with. The designers have created a patch of wild planting – nature in the city! The High Line developed from a community idea of reusing an abandoned rail track high above the traffic of Manhattan. It made the transition from an idea to a project with the support of powerful women in New York – Chief City Planner Amanda Burden and Democrat City Councillor Christine Quinn, with early funding from fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg. It has become a model for other cities, as more and more people want places to walk, enjoy the sunshine and meet friends.

Sydney has the Goods Line, its own version of the High Line: a connection from the Central Station to Darling Harbour as a new walking connection. The late Robyn Kemmis, a former Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney, is given credit for the idea of this brilliant walkway and for being determined to see it delivered, as it was by landscape architect Sacha Coles and the team of talented young women in Sacha's studio. The Sydney Goods Line has creative spaces and places for pop-up cafés, galleries and bars. A generation of millennial entrepreneurs using social media can create a marketplace anywhere. In a world where so many connections take place online we need attractive, safe, shared public places in our cities and towns to enable 'real' – face-to-face – connections that build belonging.

People want places to delight and surprise and calm them in the streets, squares, parks, and footpaths. They love public art and even when particular pieces are disliked, it causes community argument and is something shared to talk about.

Landscape architecture as a profession began in America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and women were immediately drawn to it. Women as landscape architects began to claim the places between the buildings for their designs – as the men focused on being the architects of the great buildings. In cities, the places between the buildings are often more important because they are the places everyone uses. It was not until the 1950s however that landscape architecture acquired professional status in Australia and now many more women practise as landscape architects here than as architects. The records of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects estimate that about forty per cent of the practising profession are women. Perhaps the holistic 'house and garden' approach of urban design still attracts women.

In Australia, Melbourne's Edna Walling was known as a gardener rather than a landscape architect, but she was certainly a designer. Her art was to blend house and garden, to work to shape the whole in tune with the sense of place. She is a leader in the movement of

women in Australia choosing landscape architecture as a way to shape the city and how it is used. More of Edna Walling's story later.

In the late nineteenth century, society accepted this extension of the gentle art of drawing and gardening – landscape architecture – as suitable work for the women who were drawn to architecture; the power play of the creation of the metropolis was claimed by men. In America the story of women architects is quite different from that of Australia and Britain. By the early twentieth century in America women were enrolled in architecture, with large numbers in Chicago and San Francisco particularly. Their male counterparts went off to Harvard or to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris!

America has long celebrated the work of famous women architects: Julia Morgan, one of the best known of women architects in the US, designed William Randolph Hearst's fantasy castle on the hills outside San Francisco. This elaborate castle-home, with its dreamlike confusion of styles, including part of a Roman temple, took more than a decade to build. In her book about Julia Morgan, *Architect of Dreams*, Ginger Wadsworth writes:

Julia turned 35 in 1907. At that time, only a handful of women were architects and they had to work full time to succeed in a career dominated by men. If Julia dreamed of marriage and children, she never talked about it.

She has no peer in Australian cities. Julia Morgan left a large body of work: in her forty-seven-year career she was commissioned to design seven hundred structures, including many great twentieth-century buildings in San Francisco, at Berkeley and in the national parks.

It was to be another American architect, Marion Mahony Griffin, who would become Australia's most celebrated woman architect and role model, but not in her lifetime. Australia's most prestigious award for a woman's contribution to architecture carries her name.

Architectural scholars agree now that Canberra is the one city in Australia that has been drawn by the hand of a woman. We can only speculate that Canberra would be an even more beautiful city had