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MAURIE CROW AND THE MELBOURNE TOWN PLANNING RESEARCH GROUP

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The Town Planning Research Group (TRG) was a small informal "ginger group" which met monthly from 1967 to 1980. Its newsletters ("Irregular" and "Ecoso Exchange") are a useful resource on the grass roots community planning movements of the 1970s.(1)

Henry Mayer described the TRG newsletter as a "valiant effort" stating:

Ecoso has a lot of hard to get information relevant to the sustainable society/ecology movement and tries to foster links between it, the trade unions and some current left movements.(2)

Maurie Crow (1915 to 1988) was a key person in the TRG. He turned his attention to planning issues after about thirty years involvement in the trade union movement.(3)

Trade Unions and Life Beyond the Workplace

Maurie had an abiding commitment to finding ways of linking trade unions and other progressive social movements. From the early 1960s he campaigned through the unions for federal aid for local government, helping some unions to work out policies on urban issues such as housing and transport and other community concerns.

He was one of the initiators of the 1967 union-sponsored Living Standards Convention, bringing together a "steering committee" of trade unionists, planners, architects, civil engineers, solicitors, teachers, social workers, municipal councillors and members of community organisations.

Speakers at the Convention included representatives of the Australian Railways Union, the Municipal Officers' Association, the Victorian Council of Social Services and the Melbourne University Town Planning Department.

After the Convention, some of the participants decided to hold monthly discussions, calling themselves the Town Planning Research Group. It circulated a newsletter at first called "Irregular" and later "Ecoso".

Public Participation in Planning

Maurie welcomed the opportunities for public participation in planning which began to be popularised at the end of the 1960s.(4)

He encouraged urban action groups to collectively prepare alternative plans.(5) Some of these were published.(6)

Maurie brought to the urban action movement skills he had learnt in the union movement; such as, negotiating, efficiently studying official documents, effectively informing members, involving as many people as possible in deciding on common action and sharing leadership responsibilities. Maurie's contribution to participatory planning were described by Peter McIntyre in the following words:

Maurie was the sort of man who had a vision. A deep and profound belief that there was a way of bringing people together and with reason and reasonableness, put points of view to them and come to a common purpose.(7)

Spin-off Effect of TRG

The TRG and its newsletter had a spin-off effect, alerting its members to major current controversies, raising understanding and thus helping to indicate the scope of possible activity through analysis and suggestion for better alternatives. Its members, in their own fields and in their own style entered the joustings in many contests on such issues as urban renewal, transportation, suburban sprawl, regional plans, social justice, participation in planning, women and suburban isolation, children's services, community health, and a whole range of such urban issues which affect the quality of life beyond the workplace.

The contribution Maurie made through TRG and in other urban action organisations was summed up by Barry Pullen in the following words:

He opened my eyes to all the important things in community and political life... Maurie showed me the importance of planning to ordinary people in a way that has shaped my thinking ever since.(8)

The TRG newsletter's readership gradually increased to several hundreds and although most subscribers lived in Melbourne a number of subscriptions came from cities in other states. Over the years some subscribers to the newsletter were elected to State or Federal Parliaments and the number of subscribers who were municipal councillors increased.(9)

The Ecological and Sociological Crisis

In November 1972, a meeting of the TRG adopted four "Ecoso Guidelines" and renamed the newsletter "Ecoso Exchange" ("Eco" for ecological and "So" for sociological and "Exchange" to emphasise the non-authoritarian and non-manipulative role of the publication). The change in name marked the group's resolve that in future much more attention would be directed to the twin problems of the ecological crisis and the sociological crisis.

Late in 1972 the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Vic. Chapter) selected the TRG newsletter as an example of "an outstanding contribution to the literature of town planning" and awarded this amateurish, but innovative, publication one of the first Robin Boyd Environmental Awards.

This unexpected recognition gave the TRG confidence to seek support from other radical groups for some type of gathering on ecological/sociological problems. A National Radical Ecology Conference was proposed.

TRG and the Radical Ecology Conference

In 1973 sponsors for a Radical Ecology Conference (REC) were sought through the network of subscribers to the TRG newsletter.

A REC National Organising Committee was formed and REC Committees were established in Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart, Adelaide, Canberra, Melbourne, Newcastle, Wollongong and several other places. The four-day Radical Ecology Conference, attended by more than 500 people, was held in Melbourne in 1975 (10)

The Conference attracted a wide variety of participants including representatives of Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), the Conservation Council of Victoria (CCV), people from Nimbin and other new life style colonies as well as trade unionists (including those active on the Green Bans campaign), municipal councillors, and members of urban action and community organisations. It was radical not only through the issues discussed but in the networking, non-hierarchical way it was organised before, during and after the gathering. (11)

Issues such as the relationship between urban sprawl and the use of non-renewable energy were discussed. REC pointed out that as Australia is one of the most urbanised (suburbanised) countries in the world it was imperative to look for urban solutions to the world's ecological and sociological problems.

After the Conference six REC participants, including Maurie Crow, decided to produce a document on the need to conserve the world's unrenewable resources, especially looking at urban solutions. The result was the 500 page book "Seeds for Change", published by the CCV in 1978.(12)

TRG Runs Its Course

Towards the end of the 1970s both the ACF and the CCV began to be involved in campaigns on urban issues. The ACF brought together some trade unionists and urban activists to establish a national organisation known as Environmentalist for Full Employment (EFFE). At about the same time the CCV established the Conservation of Urban Energy Group (CUE).(13)

The TRG welcomed the emergence of groups such as EFFE, CUE and others which had kindred or complementary interests to it. It was decided that a "ginger group", such as TRG, was not as necessary as it had been in the late 1960s and earlier years of the 1970s. In December 1979 TRG decided it was time to dissolve the organisation and to cease the publication of the newsletter.(14) However, the Ecoso Exchange Newsletter (but not TRG) was revived in 1988. It is currently the newsletter for the Crow Collection.

TRG's Contribution to Planning

For about 13 years the TRG helped to promote the process of participatory "grass roots" alternative planning. TRG contributed to changing established planning practices by:

- Helping community organisations to analyse official plans.
- Emphasising the importance of collectively working out value judgements before preparing alternative plans.
- Popularising the process of creating locally based community.

- Directing attention to the potential of bringing local government closer to the community.
- Acting as a catalyst for the formation of temporary coalitions of diverse organisations.
- Warning of our intergenerational responsibility to conserve the world's unrennewable resources.

Maurie Crow's Contribution to Planning

Maurie Crow brought to the urban action movement some of the knowledge he had gained through his involvement in the union movement. 6.

He happened to become involved in urban action organisations when considerable changes in planning administration were taking place at Federal, State and Local Government levels, and when new ways of organising around urban issues were emerging. He helped to shape some of these changes through his writings and through his participation in the community planning movement.

Many people recognised the humanising effect of Maurie's contribution to social change. For example the quotes above and the following quote from Winsome McCaughey:

... in the process Maurie created countless links between groups that never realised the way the projects fitted into the "bigger" picture, had it not been for the "Crow overview". Think globally and act locally" was a maxim he lived by. (15)

Conclusions

The TRG aimed at breaking down the immensity of planning issues to human scale. It sought common ground for planners, trade unionists, municipal councillors and activists in community and urban organisations.

Through helping to initiate and maintain the TRG Maurie Crow made a significant contribution to community planning.

The TRG documents are a resource on the history of the grass roots planning movement in Victoria from 1967 to 1980. Some other documents in the Crow Collection supplement the TRG documents.

Notes

1. Newsletters and other TRG documents are in the Crow Collection at the Victoria University of Technology, Footscray Campus Library. They are catalogued on OPAC with CROW COLL. as the label.
2. Professor Henry Mayer (Sydney University) in an article in "Media Information Australia", August 89. He was the editor of MIA.
3. Maurie was a Clerks' Union organiser in the 1940s and he helped to establish the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations in the 1950s.

(5)

4. "People and Planning" published by the United Kingdom Ministry of Housing and Local Government" 1969. In Victoria the first official opportunity for public participation in planning was provided by the Melbourne City Council Strategy Planners in 1971.
5. Unpublished material such as working papers of various organisations have been listed and cross referenced to the publications in the Crow Collection catalogue. See 1 above.
6. "Citizen's Action Plan for North and West Melbourne"; "Frayed Nerves or Freight Centres", "A Charter for a Central Region", "Make Melbourne Marvellous" and many other published documents. See 1.
7. Prof. Peter McIntyre at the Memorial Service for Maurie Crow, May 1988. Prof. McIntyre (Melbourne University) was the principal planner for the 1971/73 Melbourne City Council Strategy Plan.
8. Barry Pullen was a municipal councillor in Fitzroy and later a minister in the Cain/Kimer Government.
9. Some of the subscribers to Ecoso in the 1970s who have been elected to leadership positions in parliaments or councils include: the Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Howe, the former Victorian Premier, Joan Kimer, former State Ministers, Evan Walker, Caroline Hogg, Barry Pullen, Andrew McCutcheon, Lord Mayors of Melbourne, Bill Gardner, Leckie Ord and Winsome McCaughey.
10. Radical Ecology documents (REC). See 1.
11. The networks were based on experiences of the Melbourne Learning Exchange and the School of Environment Design at the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education. A booklet listing network participants is in the Crow Collection. See 1.
12. "Seeds for Change - Creatively Confronting the Energy Crisis", Deborah White, Phillip Sutton, Alan Pears, Chris Mardon, John Dick, Maurie Crow, 1978. Working papers. See 1.
13. Conservation of Urban Energy Group (CUE) and Environmentalists for Full Employment (EFFE) documents. See 1.
14. Letter to "Ecoso" subscribers Dec. 1979. See 1.
15. Or Winsome McCaughey in an article in North Melbourne News, May 1988. Or McCaughey was Lord Mayor of Melbourne 1988/89. She represented the municipal ward in which Maurie and Ruth Crow lived.
16. The TRG received no funding. Subscriptions to the newsletter covered cost of postage and printing.

Appendix to
Maurie Crow and the Town Planning Research Group

Reproduction of statement prepared by the Town Planning Seminar of the Living Standards Convention which was attended by 118 delegates representing 33 organisations, 3 Government instrumentalities, 12 municipal authorities, 12 professional associations and 19 trade unions. This statement was presented at the final plenary sessions attended by participants from the other 5 seminars held during the Convention.

A U S T R A L I A N R E S O U R C E S

and

L I V I N G S T A N D A R D S C O N V E N T I O N

Melbourne

April 8, 1967

TOWN PLANNING - CO-ORDINATION OR CHAOS?

SEMINAR STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

The seminar welcomes the increasing attention being given to town planning and related subjects by the State Government and by sections of the press, radio and television stations. It urges all concerned to intensify this interest and to foster public discussion of planning problems and proposals.

Especially it calls upon Federal, State and Local Government bodies to allocate much more finance for the preparation of plans for urban development and re-development based on thorough surveys and research, and to support and accelerate training programmes to provide the necessary qualified staff.

The seminar does not wish, at this stage, to support any particular scheme, but it does urge that all plans for urban development should aim to incorporate the following principles :

1. Human values to be the central concern of all planning efforts and, therefore, for example, provision to be made for adequate cultural and recreational facilities of many kinds in an environment designed to enhance human dignity by providing for both family privacy and a full social life.
2. Co-ordination of all public authorities to secure the best overall efficiency and amenity in balanced development.
3. Better and cheaper public transport as part of a comprehensive transportation plan.
4. Residential, shopping, recreational, industrial and other areas designed so that the demands of motor traffic do not endanger pedestrians.
5. Growth patterns (including selective decentralisation) that minimise commuting yet give ready access to open space.
6. Suitable country areas planned and protected (partly, at least, by acquisition) as open space for nature conservation and recreation.
7. Experimental housing design and construction at various densities, and control of speculation in land and building materials.
8. Vigilant observation and control of noise, visual ugliness and pollution of air and water.