DIRECTOR’S WELCOME

This edition of Urban Concerns carries a feature article on the growing issue of food in our cities. A recent Economist report described the global food supply crisis as a ‘silent tsunami’. Just as with oil and minerals, rising demand for food from India and China is driving up world food prices. A thirty-year period of cheap food may well be over, says the Economist.

Alongside rising demand, rising oil prices and global climate change will also have a major impact on the price of food in the years ahead. Intriguingly, though, there is little debate in western nations on food security, especially food security in our cities. The expansion of urban areas into prime agricultural lands is generally seen a good move as it puts downward pressure on house prices. Yet, as we argue in our feature article, the time has come to re-examine the wisdom of sacrificing agricultural lands adjacent to our cities to new residential sub-divisions. These lands may well be critical in the delivery of sustainability, quality of life and health outcomes in the decades ahead. Our Feeding Sydney project is designed to deliver the research needed to address Sydney’s food supply issues.

Feeding Sydney will involve large and small scale projects with various partners, combining funding from university, industry, community and government sources. The venture will be a long-term interdisciplinary examination of Sydney’s changing food needs and habits. Feeding Sydney aims to generate useful, relevant data and knowledge which can inform policy and improve practice. Feeding Sydney also aims to be a voice of advocacy, providing input into key debates and policy surrounding Sydney’s food systems. The Urban Research Centre welcomes stakeholders and potential partners with an interest in any of the identified research areas to participate in the development of this exciting research venture. For enquiries regarding Feeding Sydney, please contact Dr Louise Crabtree, l.crabtree@uws.edu.au, 02 8833 5931.

MODELS OF SUSTAINABLE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Urban Research Centre is partnering with Parramatta City Council to develop a replicable housing model integrating affordability and sustainability. Parramatta Lord Mayor, Paul Barber, has acknowledged housing stress in the area and noted that this has a knock-on effect of “community stress”, where householders faced with financial stress participate less in their communities. This partnership project aims to identify a model for affordable and sustainable community-oriented housing in the Parramatta LGA.

Cooperative housing has proven successful in delivering stable, affordable housing in Sweden and the United States. Sweden’s cooperative housing sector houses over 1 million households, representing some 20% of the housing market. The US has 1.2 million households in cooperative housing, with 425 000 of those in limited- or zero-equity cooperatives. These either index (limited equity cooperatives) or remove (zero equity cooperatives) the equity gain to the resident, for the purposes of retaining affordability in perpetuity. With several decades of experimentation to draw on, there is evidence from the United States that limited equity cooperatives are highly effective at retaining subsidies and preserving affordability in perpetuity.

The need for affordable housing to be sustainably designed and built is also becoming acknowledged. Designing houses to reduce utility costs is beneficial in reducing the living costs to residents, as well as reducing greenhouse emissions and water use. Similarly, universal design allows for ageing in place and accommodates changing in mobility without need for expensive retrofitting. This project is using a case study of a land parcel under Parramatta City Council to model the integration of sustainability and perpetually affordable housing in an urban Sydney context.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

This is the 2nd issue of Urban Concerns, the free newsletter of the Urban Research Centre. Each issue will feature commentary from our researchers and highlight the Centre’s courses, research activities and events. Urban Concerns is relevant to urban academics, practitioners, policy makers, decision makers and community groups.

To obtain a free subscription to this newsletter or to change your mailing details, please email urcadmin@uws.edu.au with the subject heading “Subscribe Urban Concerns” and include postal details in the email text. If you do not wish to continue to receive this newsletter, please email urcadmin@uws.edu.au with the subject heading “Unsubscribe Urban Concerns.”

CONTACT DETAILS FOR THE URBAN RESEARCH CENTRE

Level 6, 34 Charles St, Parramatta NSW 2150
Ph: +61 2 8833 5912 Fax: +61 2 8895 5600 Web: http://www.uws.edu.au/urban Email: urcadmin@uws.edu.au

ISSUE 2

RESEARCH AND TRAINING FOR BETTER URBAN LIFE

FEEDING SYDNEY

Food supply is fundamental to the vitality and sustainability of a city. Yet, research into Sydney’s food systems is piecemeal, uncoordinated and incomplete. We know little about where Sydney’s food comes from, the importance of the Sydney basin’s agricultural lands, the significance of Sydney’s food manufacturing sector and the role of Sydney’s vast array of food cultures and consumption habits.

Access to nutritious and affordable food is a key determinant of health and wellbeing. Internationally, the provision and consumption of food are receiving growing attention in urban and economic planning as well as in health and social programs. The concept of food security draws attention to the rights of all groups to have ease of access to food that is affordable, of good quality and culturally appropriate. In Australia, research shows that while the prevalence of food insecurity is low – at around 5% of the total population – it is significantly higher among vulnerable groups; in particular, the unemployed, single parent households, rental households, those on low incomes, young people, and refugees. Worryingly, we are seeing statistical links emerging between poverty, food insecurity and obesity. For instance, the risk of obesity in women who are food insecure has been found to be 20% to 40% higher than in the general population.

We are aware, then, that urban form, lifestyle, socioeconomic opportunity and dietary habits interact to produce health outcomes that vary across a city. At one scale we can speculate about the sustainability of food supply chains based on broad acre agriculture located long distances from a city, and linked to high-volume food processors and supermarket retailers. Such food supply chains need assessment using robust energy, health and diversity criteria. At another scale we can observe the emergence of innovative urban food supply chains based around domestic production, community gardens and growers’ markets often involving attention to organic and ethical production and labour practices. Can such approaches to food production and urban land use become genuine alternatives to the high volume supply chains? How can food supply chains be altered to generate improved health outcomes? These questions need sound answers as agricultural land disappears from our cities’ edges, as fuel prices soar and as health problems like diabetes and obesity persist.

Eating, of course, is a good thing. Eating should be pleasurable. Alongside an increasing awareness of food, health and equity, we still see food as a desirable thing. We like to keep watch on the new forms in which food is produced and consumed. Food stories – availability, process, contamination and so on – are big news stories; recipes, restaurant reviews, food tourism and so on, in books and magazines in our newsagents and book shops. Food is embedded in our daily lives and in all our urban cultures. The search for sustainability and better health outcomes should not erode the pleasures of food consumption.

The rich variety of food retailing and consumption spaces in our cities are also important to urban cultures and identities. Food has always been a close marker of ethnicity, for instance, often in very stereotypical ways. Our ‘eat streets’, too, build food into the ways we live our lives.
Food is all around us, a key part of Sydney’s urban fabric; yet it is unwise of us to assume its presence is assured.

Of course, the explanation for the disappearance is urbanisation. The re-zoning of agricultural land for housing subdivisions continues apace. Our concern is heightened by the absence of a major long-term plan for the protection of Sydney’s agricultural lands. Sydney’s urban expansion into rural lands needs closer monitoring and probably the imposition of more, not fewer development constraints.

Beyond a knowledge of the formal food economy, we need to know more about the types of food production and consumption in our cities, of food growing in backyards and annexed open spaces such as railway embankments and road verges. The extent and role of these activities in food security may become integral parts of a sustainable urban future.

The study is currently examining options for moving the western Sydney economy towards more durable regional employment outcomes where commuting distances are contained and the quality of employment outcomes enhanced. Urban Concerns will carry news of this work in future editions.

The re-zoning of agricultural land for housing subdivisions continues apace. Our concern is heightened by the absence of a major long-term plan for the protection of Sydney’s agricultural lands. Sydney’s urban expansion into rural lands needs closer monitoring and probably the imposition of more, not fewer development constraints.

From a research point of view, there are major information and analysis gaps before appropriate planning, risk analysis and scenario development for Sydney’s future food supply chains can occur. There is a need to update data on the location of agricultural activity in the Sydney basin and its value. There is a need, too, to assess the pressures and politics of urban land use within the Sydney basin with a view to safeguarding existing urban agriculture and establishing a framework for nurturing urban and fringe agriculture within Sydney’s planning regimes. So too we need to know more about what is happening in food manufacturing in our cities, now the nation’s most important manufacturing sector. Likewise, food retailing and consumption, the drivers of the food supply chains, need major study.

WSROC REPORT

The Urban Research Centre is leading a consortium to prepare sub-regional plans to promote employment growth in western Sydney over the next twenty five years. About a quarter of a million new jobs are needed simply to contain commuting distances at their present levels, though one hopes that a reduction in commuting distances is possible.

The consortium includes Eric Sidoti from the Whitlam Institute, Professor Libb Fagan from Macquarie University’s Centre for Research on Social Inclusion and Graham Lancaster from Strategic Economics. Preliminary research from the project indicates that while western Sydney experienced significant employment growth over the last decade, this growth has in the main reinforced the region’s traditional employment specialisations. The regional economy continues to be under-represented in the high value added professional services sectors. These sectors have typically experienced stronger employment growth rates and higher levels of remuneration in recent times. In contrast, western Sydney retains its dominance in sectors where job shedding due to technological change and economic downturn are more pronounced. In other words, despite the experience of job growth in the longest period of economic prosperity in Australian history, the western Sydney economy has yet to produce the diversified, economic base that should be expected to underpin employment opportunities for a region of over two million people.

The study is currently examining options for moving the western Sydney economy towards more durable regional employment outcomes where commuting distances are contained and the quality of employment outcomes enhanced. Urban Concerns will carry news of this work in future editions.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Urban Research Centre’s short courses provide a mix of theory and practice that extends professional knowledge, skills and judgment for a variety of urban professionals. Courses are designed for those who would like to learn more about a range of urban issues including planning, sustainability, governance, urban design, planning law and affordable housing.

Completion of short courses offered by Urban Research Centre can be counted as credit in the Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma or Master of Urban Management at UWS subject to the completion of appropriate assessment tasks. Most of the courses are held at Parramatta. The Urban Research Centre also offers in-house customised training around the topics listed above. Please contact the Centre for more information. Below is a listing of short courses that will be offered in the next few months.

- An Introduction to Urban Design for Planners 17-18 July
- Urban Governance: Cities, Communities and Workplaces 7-9, 14-15 August
- Introduction to Climate Change 22 August
- Financing Cities 11-12, 18-19 September

Further information: Peter Pihlis, Academic Program Coordinator, p.pihlis@uws.edu.au, 0420 303 867
Susan Lundy, Business Development Officer, s.lundy@uws.edu.au, 0424 156 572

For a full description of short courses and registration, please visit our website: http://www.uws.edu.au/urban

A THRIVING PARRAMATTA

The Urban Research Centre is located in Parramatta. Not surprisingly our attention is directed on a daily basis to the major developments taking place in this part of Sydney. It is now clear that Parramatta has consolidated itself as Sydney’s prime urban centre away from the Sydney CBD. Latest employment data from the 2006 census show how important Parramatta has become as business and administration centre. The census records that the Parramatta local government area in 2006 contained 11,350 managers, 22,816 professionals and 21,192 clerical and administrative workers. This places Parramatta LGA ahead of the much vaunted business growth centres of Macquarie Park and Norwest as a generator of professional services, business and administrative services employment. Moreover, the concentration of health and social assistance services in the LGA, including the key health precincts at Westmead, is responsible for over 15,000 local jobs. Parramatta is well and truly a major urban centre in its own right, and a centre with much potential for further growth. We watch its progress with close interest.