Reflections on place identity and change in the twin historic coastal towns of Queenscliff and Sorrento

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Abstract

An ARC-funded research project, ‘Sea change communities: intergenerational perception and sense of place’, has investigated the qualitative and quantitative impacts of the ‘sea change’ phenomenon on the physical, social and cultural fabric of the historic Victorian coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff. As part of the research methodology, cross-generational focus groups ranging from primary school-aged children through to octogenarians were undertaken, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-two community members from the two towns. These included local residents and business people, council planners and former councillors. These focus groups and interviews were based on six themes: sense of place, neighbourhood character, planning, community, future vision, and belonging and attachment. This paper highlights the relationships between people, community and place revealed through the stories, memories, connections and reflections described as a part of these focus groups and interviews. The focus groups and interviews draw attention to cross-generational viewpoints and perspectives on the impact of ongoing physical, social and cultural changes in Sorrento and Queenscliff, especially in relation to perceptions of threat towards ‘sense of place’ and neighbourhood character in each town. Beyond the immediate discussion of these viewpoints, this paper analyses their implications for coastal and historic environments undergoing similar changes.

Introduction

This paper stems from research undertaken as part of an ARC Linkage project, ‘Sea change communities: intergenerational perception and sense of place’ (de Jong et al. 2011-2016). The economic growth of the last two or three decades has led to significant investment in the ownership of coastal holiday homes. This growth, coupled with the movement of those disillusioned with the increasing pace of urban living and seeking a different environment to raise families or enjoy pre-retirement years, has led to a change in the demographic of many coastal towns. In most cases, these new residents have unwittingly brought with them expectations formed in large metropolitan settings. New residents in coastal towns are no longer satisfied with the so-called ‘seaside shack’, though in scale and quality these did not conflict with the traditional architecture of coastal towns, nor the coastal environment. The expectations of new-arrivals are often in conflict with many of the long-established local residents and holiday homeowners. Barbara Norman, the past national president of the Planning Institute of Australia, vividly summed up the struggle that is occurring in many of Australia’s coastal regions, writing that ‘the Australian coastline is littered with exhausted communities battling to save the character and environment of their townships’ (Norman 2008).
The research originated in a context in which communities in coastal towns were battling with the ‘sea change’ phenomenon, where change had been constant, with development gathering pace and now seemingly engulfing place itself. In 2010, the academic and landscape architect, Raymond Green wrote:

“The upshot of these changes is that the locally unique constellation of landscape features that have traditionally defined the character of many coastal towns is slowly, but surely, being eroded and replaced by one of global uniformity in the built environment and a degraded natural environment (Green 2010: xi).”

These authors outline a situation where place identity is being challenged on Australian coastlines and both cite ‘character’ as one of the most important qualities of a place. However, character is also one of the most intangible, as it arises from the interaction of layers of use and interpretation of the place by its inhabitants over time. This means that character cannot be imposed, but as it evolves with time it leads to place identity. Character can also be tested when inhabitants modify buildings and infrastructure to meet their needs or express themselves and it is the nature of this testing that can either strengthen or weaken a place’s identity.

It is vital that tensions between the new and old generation of residents in coastal towns be relieved and improved if genuine sustainable communities are to be built. A key principle of sustainable development is participation (as articulated in the 1992 UN Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit recommendations). Participation in local development does not mean discussion with one’s architect or builder. A much broader concept is implied. Fowles (2000) claims that community participation in local development can strengthen social sustainability. Coastal historic towns are rarely homogeneous in terms of their architecture. This means that it is difficult and not necessarily appropriate to be prescriptive about the type and physical articulation of dwelling or building, whether it be height, construction materials or style. While planning codes may provide guidelines to achieve further differentiation—for instance, dividing towns into ‘precincts’ where the general character can be defined, and specific objectives and guidelines prepared to protect and manage that character, including appropriate change—such measures need to be tested in real situations.

The twin historic coastal Victorian townships of Sorrento (Figure 1) and Queenscliff (Figure 2), located either side of Port Phillip Heads, have been used as case studies for this research. The two Victorian townships have significant natural and cultural heritage values, as well as a long, shared history. They are located in the largest Shire (the Mornington Peninsula Shire) and the smallest local government authority and the only Borough (the Borough of Queenscliffe) respectively, in the State of Victoria, Australia. One of the key objectives of the research project was to explore place identity and the impact of change. Researchers documented change through a variety of methodologies. These included changes in built form character and vegetation cover revealed through aerial photographs, numbers of planning and building permits, and planning scheme amendments. The researchers also reviewed employment profiles, demographic data, Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) and planning panel decisions, and land and home ownership. The researchers documented views.
and perceptions through different generation focus groups and targeted full-length interviews in Queenscliff and Sorrento, evaluated the effectiveness of planning scheme provisions in achieving stated objectives and policies and created tools for communities, councillors and planners. With these actions, the research team established a methodology to evaluate the physical and perceived impact of the sea change process on sense of place, specifically on the built and natural environments of coastal settlements, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. The research team took the attitude that, while change is inevitable, communities can learn to better manage change. To that end, this methodological approach has been developed to assist communities to implement effective, place-sensitive sustainable planning and associated development practices. This paper focuses on the local ‘players’ who participated in focus groups, and/or intensive interviews. It highlights responses around the themes of sense of place and neighbourhood character, within which notions of community and belonging, and planning and future vision are entwined.

**Setting the scene**

Many coastal towns have an established character stemming from the relationships between the natural and built environment which have developed over time. This is partly based on township settlement patterns (linear in Sorrento’s case and grid in Queenscliff’s) and housing styles and size from previous eras. In Sorrento, the mostly single-storey houses were hidden by the local tea-trees and were rarely higher than the tree line. In Queenscliff, the single-storey villas were characterised by fenced cottage gardens (and big backyards). Although this typology is no longer uniform and can vary across town boundaries, it is still largely evident and has been greatly valued by established local residents and non-resident owners alike. Furthermore, it is often the reason they moved to, or bought property in these towns, if they were not actually born there.

The character—the relationships between the natural and built environment—is increasingly under threat in these towns because of internal and external development pressures and changing aspirations. While new arrivals to both Sorrento and Queenscliff are often attracted by their unique character, they bring with them values and expectations formed elsewhere, particularly in Melbourne and Geelong, as the state capital city and the largest Victorian regional city respectively, are both within an easy drive of Sorrento and Queenscliff.

One of the aims of this research project was to elicit and document intergenerational perceptions of sense of place and neighbourhood character. Focus groups with whom we worked were: primary school children at Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale Primary Schools; visitors to Sorrento and Queenscliff; and the age groups 50-65 and 65+ in Sorrento and Queenscliff. We were unable to progress the age groups 18-29 and 30-49; and were not able work with secondary school children, despite obtaining ethics approvals from Deakin University, as well as the Victorian State and Catholic Education Departments. The four secondary schools approached decided in the end that our project did not align significantly with their curriculum at that time. The questions asked of all our focus groups were:

- What word/phrase would you use to describe Sorrento/Queenscliff?
- What word/phrase would you use to say what Sorrento/Queenscliff means to you?
- What do you value in Sorrento /Queenscliff?
o Why do you live in/come to Sorrento/Queenscliff?

o What positive changes have occurred in Sorrento/Queenscliff in the past?

o What negative changes have occurred in Sorrento/Queenscliff in the past?

o What would you like future generations to still enjoy in Sorrento/Queenscliff?

o What do you think could threaten or jeopardise this?

As well as focus groups the researchers undertook twenty-two in-depth interviews with a range of people with connections to Sorrento (S) and Queenscliff (Q). These included: professionals such as planners and heritage advisors, developers, long-term residents, people with local businesses and real estate agents. The intent was to get a cross section of people to gain greater insights for our research. The questions asked include:

o What are five words that best describe sense of place in S/Q?

o What are five words that best describe the neighbourhood character of S/Q?

o What do you consider important contributors to sense of place in S/Q?

o What do you consider important contributors to neighbourhood character in S/Q?

o What changes (positive and negative) have you observed in S/Q?

o Who or what in your opinion are/have been the agents of change in S/Q?

o What were the key planning changes/debates/appeals during your tenure/residency?

o How effective are/were planning controls in protecting/shaping the sense of place/character of S/Q?

o How effective are/were planning instruments in protecting/shaping the sense of place and/or character of S/Q?

o How effective is the planning system in respecting sense of place and neighbourhood character? (State/local)

o Thinking about the sense of place/character of S/Q, if you were the council planner/heritage advisor, what five actions would you take?

o What would you like future generations to still enjoy in S/Q?

o What do you think could threaten or jeopardise this?

In setting these questions the researchers recognised the complexity of the notion of place. To ground the conversations in a shared understanding, a few key ideas were defined. David Salvesen’s notion of sense of place was used:

A sense of place provides a sense of belonging and of commitment. It is the repository for our shared memories, experiences and dreams. It is a place of family and community ties - of roots - that stems from our connection to a particular location and its people. When people feel connected to a place - emotionally, culturally, and spiritually’ they care deeply about it. (Salvesen 2002, p. 41)

The definition of ‘neighbourhood character’ used was developed by Planisphere, the urban design industry partner in this research.

Neighbourhood character is the qualitative interplay of built form, vegetation and topographic characteristics, in both the private and public domains that make one place different from another’ (Planisphere 2012, p. 21).

The idea of ‘change’ employed in the research was framed as being either ‘local’ and ‘global’. Green (2010) has been cited earlier in relation to the impact of change on coastal towns. Gebert and Gibson (2013, preface) note that ‘research has shown that while it is indisputable that the Earth’s physical resources are being depleted [global], distinct cultural practices are also being eroded by forces of development and homogenisation [local]’.
From focus group discussions and interviews it became clear that the two concepts—‘sense of place’ and ‘neighbourhood character’—were generally not clearly separated by the interviewees, and that a number considered the ideas completely integrated or intertwined with each other or dependent upon each other. One respondent summed up that ‘sense of place to me was the connection to the place and you know neighbourhood character is more form … [natural/cultural heritage]’. Theories support these intuitive findings. Relph (1976, p. 37) in the 1970s posited that place means ‘those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and specific landscapes are implicated and enfolded by each other’. While Rose (1996) observed that places are steeped in meaning and feeling. Duncan and Barnes (1992, p. 7) argued that ‘places are intertextual sites, because various texts and discursive practices based on previous texts are deeply inscribed in their landscapes and institutions’. Amundsen (2001) builds on this construct, suggesting that the narrative of place identity is one of roots, belonging and structures.

The two most prominent dimensions—individual place experiences and physical place experiences—underpin the responses made by the participants in our focus groups and by the interviewees. Place, for the participants in this research project, implies some combination of memory (stories, histories, narratives, traditions), sensual experience (seeing, hearing, touching) and interpretation (meaning-making). Place, as a geographical location, is also defined by the participants through these meanings, sentiments and stories. Overall, the research outcomes of the project clearly demonstrate how local knowledge and experience can contribute positively to understanding place. They also reveal that young and old have similar values, emotions and feelings about their place.

**Giving voice to place**

It is important to state at the outset that the researchers de Jong and Fuller were seen by the participants as both academics and as belonging to the local community: de Jong to the Nepean Peninsula, Fuller to the Borough of Queenscliffe. This was seen as critical to understanding how ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ articulate place identity. The participants in this ARC research clearly valorised the local, often echoing Hans Schmidt’s (2002, p. 2) sentiment that ‘we must remain locally anchored in a changing global world’.

One interviewee explained:

… it’s something perhaps unique to yourself and yet something you want to share with other people. And it’s made up collectively of experiences and quite often when we were driving down to Sorrento years ago … when we hit around about Dromana, I said look there’s a feeling I get and as many years later that I realised that I wasn’t alone with that feeling and I don’t know if I knew it as a sense of place. It’s many years later that I came across the wording, and I thought that’s just so appropriate.

Thus, sense of place and place identity are seen as relational, implying ‘some sort of deep [connection] to the natural and cultural heritage [of place]’. Another long-term Sorrento resident states categorically: ‘Well, to me, it’s certainly family … Sorrento’s always been to me the place’. Another touches on different emotional ties:

It’s to do with the water too and always being near the water, the smell. Yeah, strong connection to the sea, very strong. I’d say that’s one of the main things. Emotionally we can open this door in the morning, I get up at six and stand there, you can smell the salt air.

Others touch on memory and a tangible palpable history:

Yes it’s unsealed roads, and I’ve always in the fifty years I have been down here enjoyed coming on the unsealed roads. And I can feel the sort of weight lift off my shoulders as I drive onto those roads and remember that sort of sense of tranquility. So if you’re standing down on the ocean beach and watching the waves pound in whether it be winter or summer. It’s just beautiful to sort of know that you’re away from it all … a sense of place like that is bound up in all sort of things, it’s your memories … The other thing I have here is I have a sense also of the sort of history I suppose of the place.
Heritage, history and community, loomed large in the Queenscliff respondents’ minds too. ‘I think it is generally one of the really very important heritage towns in Victoria.’ Another voice picks up the theme:

The other thing that struck me about Queenscliff was its working past is clearly defined in its buildings and whether it’s guest houses or the fort or the harbour being the fishing or the pilots, you know … most of the historic context can be related to a functional past, pilots, houses, harbours, guest houses. There’s the sense of history with the former uses of the area. And so the built form is most important to the sense of place I think, but also the value that the community puts on that built form.

The past is perceived of as ever-present, in the shaping of place and identity:

Location, location sums up Queenscliff, because it is on an isthmus of land, an island if you like, where you can’t go any further, so it would always evolve by land as the end in its destination. But because through the 1880s with the paddle steamers creating this, as probably the most popular beach in Australia … the same people who built these buildings, [bought] the paddle steamers to bring Melbourne people out of Collingwood, Richmond, Abbotsford slums, to come and have a weekend off, or a couple of days of freedom, and that’s why the sea baths were evolved, so their vision was outstanding, so the history stands out’.

Others see Queenscliff as an ‘exposed’ place with a real sense of panorama and visual quality:

… that is the most striking as you arrive and then drive through the narrows or you have that view down from the hill…. its clarity of colour, of air, was probably for me, very strong. The word clarity for me, I guess is in the sense of everything about it that it was a place that I had a real beauty from the nature of light and play of light … and then Norfolk pines rising up and the skyline. I think the skyline is unmistakably sort of Queenscliff and there are very few places in Victoria, you actually get that sort of vista and a sense of a skyline that designates your destination.

The prevalent view is that Queenscliff’s identity is deeply tied to its topography and its geography:

It’s an extraordinary piece of land, small peninsula, surrounded by, you know, magnificent bodies of water. So it has the most extraordinary effect on people, particularly in the way that you have to drive across such a narrow peninsula to get there and once you’re there, you’re on this sort of almost an island and you’re surrounded by water, of different types of water. So the sense of place is so incredibly connected to the way the geography works.

These statements indicate that the coastal environment defines the place for those who live there permanently, as well as those who visit and choose to return again and again. As one interviewee states ‘I would think its coastal aspect, its heritage and conservation values, and strangely enough its people’ contribute to sense of place. Another states ‘seaside community, family community, so it’s very much community-based, which is why we ended up settling here. Peace … my youngest granddaughter is four and she is here. My mother is here and she is 84. So it caters for all ages.’

Conversations with primary school children in Queenscliff parallel the adult views, and reveal connections and relationships. Their recorded words in response to ‘what is special?’ highlight the qualities of a ‘small town’, with ‘lots of stuff to do’, and where ‘everything is close by’, within ‘walking distance to Swan Bay’, where there are ‘beaches and searching for crabs’. They told the researchers about ‘secret places’: ‘a tree house’, ‘a crab city (place where you find the most crabs)’. They like their community, the ‘people in community’, and characterise it as a ‘friendly community’. Sport and ‘football’ are important. The children also highlighted the seasons, and activities they associated with summer and winter. ‘Swimming in summer (with spots where you can swim and cannonball off the pier)’, ‘surf beaches’, ‘snorkeling in the kelp garden’ contrasted with the place as ‘freezing’ and ‘windy in winter’ (Figure 3).
Across generations, the Queenscliff and Sorrento ways of life are considered nourishing and nurturing for the human spirit:

… peace, outstandingly peace, comm-unity, social interaction and then you would look at the actual area itself, what it does, whether it be the sea or the marine environment … it’s ‘sense of place’ is very beneficial to health and wellbeing … this sort of idea of the restorative place.

But these are places that also welcome the holiday maker: ‘The sense of a holiday and a relaxed atmosphere, the maritime and seaside influences air, and the natural environment combined with all that I think helps me understand that sort of sense of place for Queenscliff.’

These interactions with the residents of Queenscliff and Sorrento show that relationships between people, community and place, revealed through stories, memories and reflections, provide deep insights into place identity. Overwhelmingly, they show that sense of place has to do with feeling, connection, family, belonging and experience of place. As one of the interviewees suggested, place ‘is an extremely complex concept’. The researchers’ focus group participants and interviewees understand that place in Sorrento and Queenscliff is multi-dimensional and sometimes hard to pin down: it’s geography, topography, water, bay and ocean; history and heritage; relationships between place and people, community and home; peace; holidays and visitors. Place and identity are intertwined; past and present slide into and through each other; at a deep level place reveals something about who we are. That is why place—Sorrento and Queenscliff—matters so much to the participants.

The challenge of a changing identity of place

The notion of a changing place was also raised in the descriptors and the explanation of the historic coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff:

Natural environment, disturbance, loss, pressure … Loss is when, as a result of that disturbance, you do lose certain elements of the natural environment, but also the built environment. Sorrento, as somewhat with Queenscliff is characterised by the buildings that were built during the 19th-century tourist boom and the use of natural materials like the limestone—very characteristic—so when those buildings are lost, or replaced and replaced by something that is not so empathetic, if you like, with the area … that’s sort of disappointing.

In Queenscliff too, change has brought with it a feeling of loss of sense of place:

I think the State Government taking over the marina here has been a really disadvantageous development for Queenscliff. The fact that, you know, there was Fisherman’s Flat down there which has all sorts of incredibly important historical associations with the way...
fishermen were treated quite appropriately in rural fishing communities, you know, many generations ago and the whole area has now been homogenised into a major tourist harbour. Now I don’t deny that it’s appropriate to upgrade what was there before but I think they’ve upgraded it with concrete and asphalt and glass and catapulted it out of a rural seaside village environment that it was in before, could be anywhere now.

The children commented on what they observe in their town and told the researchers that visitors are there ‘mostly in summer’ as is ‘traffic’. In summer, ‘lots of people come, it is crowded’, but in ‘winter, when it’s cold, less people come’. They consider ‘clearing out the Point to make new housing—might wreck a few things’. They ‘don’t want too many people to come’. For them Queenscliff is still a ‘secret town … not many people know about it’. However, they reflect that ‘too many people, too many houses, changes the feel so it’s like a city.’

The researchers’ focus group participants and interviewees show through their responses a deep understanding of place, that stems from their connection to place, and through reflection on what change has meant and what change might mean in the future. As a result, they are able to give voice to a real meaning of loss that accompanies change in the historic coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff.

Towards defining the character of the coastal towns of Sorrento and Queenscliff

The interviewees clearly documented the character of these two towns. From their reflections on neighbourhood character in Sorrento and Queenscliff, and the consistency of their considerations of what constituted important contributors to this, the researchers have been able to put together comprehensive picture of what neighbourhood character means in these two historic coastal towns. The rich data from these interviews has also enabled the researchers to record similarities and differences in defining these two towns. The sections below consider the character of Sorrento and Queenscliff, the impact of change and its effect on place as felt by the respondents.

Sorrento’s character

Residents consider that ‘part of the character down here was … it was just a township, nestled amongst mostly sand dunes … virtually surrounded by water’.

I think the historic nature of the township is very important and contributes to the overall neighbourhood character. Not only the township but places like Collins Settlement site and Point Nepean.

Clearly ‘the meaning of the landscape … is fundamental.’

Well the coastal aspect is a vital part of it. I think the coast is the greatest asset of the peninsula and in this case it’s dramatic, especially because there’s a quiet bayside side and within one or two kilometres, in most parts and some often less, there’s also a very dramatic ocean coast and then these two shores converge at Point Nepean on a very dramatic site overlooking the rip towards Queenscliff. That’s the landscape, but there’s also of course the vegetation. People love the distinctive … moonah woodland which is quite dramatic in the way it starts and stops just up the road where the banksias become more important … And the relationship of those natural and cultural features to each other is very interesting and I think it’s the interrelationship rather than the individual feature that gives the place the whole meaning.

Other voices pick up this theme too, highlighting the strong relationship between the town and its location on a narrow peninsula:

Sorrento’s position between the sea and the bay, I mean looking at the natural environment … this is Sorrento of course. I know, Queenscliff a bit as well. And there are a lot of parallels I think … But it’s special in terms of its location in a very … sensitive area environmentally, you’ve got a very limited amount of space. You’ve got the constant pressure of natural
change caused by the actions of the sea, and winds and movement of sand, and soil and that sort of thing. So there’s that sort of sensitivity which creates the place and you get interesting views and the difference between the bay side and the ocean side … The features of the natural environment have had a lot to do with the way that Sorrento was developed … And the issue of disturbance, because of this, the natural environment is sensitive and you’ve only got a small area of land to work with. Anything that’s done physically can and has had a significant impact on the natural environment, and the ability to keep the natural environment intact … then you’ve got the stand-out historical centre of town.

Another highlights ‘the use of distinctive local materials—limestone’, and the ‘high proportion of historic places, and ‘building typologies around holiday, leisure, recreation’.

The depth of feeling and understanding of this place is revealed in these words:

… to me, it is that sense of belonging, it’s about wild coast and bay. It’s about the juxtaposition between those two the very different places that they represent … I think limestone, wild coast, I think bayside again and it’s the thread that winds all the way along, it’s the precious corridor that matters a lot … I’d like to say that it is the fact that you still have dirt roads lined with tea trees. You still have twisted moonahs. You still have pockets of moonah forests that just look weird, and wonderful and gorgeous. And I think they’re huge contributors. Without those, if it was groomed and fenced then asphalted, it would no longer have that neighbourhood character. I think that’s a big thing. I think that we’ve still got big skies, and big landscapes and big seascape, huge open skies. We can see stars at night, that’s so important to me to walk outside and see millions of blazing stars and watch the moon.

Queenscliff’s character

The size and shape and location of Queenscliff defines its character too:

I think the question of the size of the place is important that it is actually limited to how many blocks you can get out of it now, to that extent it’s got that small town feel again … just to feel part of a smaller place. I think is more relaxing more restorative, more sort of communal.

The place is, in terms of its landscape and its relationships to the water and its hilliness … It’s an isthmus. All those things really do contribute to an awful lot ... [there’s] something about the actual built form too.

That there are friendly little spots in Queenscliff where small scale housing sits on and certain types of houses sit next to each other and it is quite friendly. It’s all sort of walking distance.

The children also comment on the scale and walkability of the town. They identify particular aspects that are important to them: ‘Swan Bay is peaceful with swans, ducks, cormorants and gummy sharks’; ‘I would like the fort to stay because you can play with friends and discover things’; ‘boating—Popes Eye, a place in the water where it is fun to snorkel, see seals’; ‘the cemetery—to get a sense of history’; and visiting ‘Sorrento on the ferry’.

Whereas the township of Sorrento has a linear layout, Queenscliff’s grid pattern is a recognised feature:

Beautifully laid out by our forebears, it has this lovely wide street, a grid pattern, it has this beautiful green buffer, this green park land and foreshore around it, and its coastal location I guess, with, that it was just nicely laid out initially … I always think I’m home when I hit the top of the Soma Park Hill and look down over Queenscliff and you can actually see the ships go through the heads, you can see the nice old buildings, you can see basically the peninsula that makes up Queenscliff, so that’s the sort of part I treasure that open aspect as you enter the town … we still have that green open non-private buffer between the two townships of Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale … Oh, it’s the nice big lot size we still have, predominantly single-storey housing … Again, you know, the nice wide streets and verges; another really important aspect to Queenscliff everything is within walking distance.
Another interviewee continues:

And I guess from that point of view, its setting, it’s an obvious thing. It’s almost an island. And when you talk about that, there’s a thing that attracted me to Queenscliff was this concept of limits. There is a limit and when you take in my original concepts about the government sponsoring building activity and growth, I was aware of that when I came here and I thought the heritage values and its natural limits to space would hold that back … Clearly the other thing that I value is the closeness to nature, you know the water. Yeah, you know the bird life, Swan Bay, that’s a tremendous appeal to me … and of course the last thing would be its heritage and its built environment.

It is noted from these responses that neighbourhood character and sense of place are inextricably linked.

I suppose then it comes down to the architectural qualities in some senses as well as the natural topography … The important contributors would be clearly the fact that the old buildings are still here and then just the closeness to the natural environment.

The interviewees, the participants who took part in the inter-generational focus groups, and the children who shared their thoughts and drawings with the researchers clearly articulate the neighbourhood character of Sorrento and Queenscliff. They highlight in word pictures, in reflections, in perceptive observations, and through analyses, the importance of the ‘interplay of built form, vegetation and topographic characteristics’, ‘in both the public and private domains’ of their towns. There has emerged from the interviews and focus groups a collective sense of place and a shared understanding of neighbourhood character. These research findings are significant—they demonstrate that community values can be articulated and these should underpin local planning schemes.

Thoughts on the perceived loss of character in Sorrento and Queenscliff

Some in the focus groups and interviews discussed how change has impacted and continues to impact on the character of Sorrento and Queenscliff and that change is seen to impact upon, rather than shape neighbourhood character:

I think another aspect that probably people don’t understand [in Sorrento] … now they come on the ferry. But when you come down from Rosebud, McCrae up that way in the boat, it is an absolutely beautiful view for coming into this tiny bay of Sorrento. Because coming into it off the bay, you can’t see what’s beyond the edge. You only see this lovely curved hill and the trees and the pointing to the heads. [But now it is] Totally lost in my mind, that’s it. Totally gone, absolutely ruined. There’s no doubt about that. It’s lost its character … People that come down to live now think this is how it was, but it’s all been buried. It’s all covered underneath. It’s all covered over by new houses. … Melaleucas they’re being replaced with date palms and olive trees … I love the Tea Tree and Melaleucas. That’s … how I recall it as a kid … And the limestone like the Conti [the Continental Hotel] that gets photographed like every day by lots and lots of people … terrific, what do you all call that when you come up, what is the big building, it’s a landmark. It’s a great landmark’.

A sense of loss and destruction runs deep:

My major impression is that the sheer cost of people coming down to something like Sorrento now to get a foothold here is bringing in a sort of person that perhaps feels much more comfortable having a massive house even though they only come down a few times a year, than the original people who came down here and sort of enjoyed the experience in their fibro shacks with their lino floors and so on without having to have all the latest modern cons and all of that.

In terms of neighbourhood character, in terms of flora and vegetation, we’ve seen a lot of the native animals driven out of this area and we’ve seen certainly vegetation disappearing at a great rate … Why can’t people build in keeping with the environment?
Another observes:

We've had people that have just built driveways through coastal vegetation without permission. You get all that type of thing and it’s never ending. And it’s going to only get worse.

An interviewee who lives in an unmade road area says:

Oh, yes, tea tree and understory shrubbery, ground cover, a lot of that’s no longer there... the recent development, they seem to destroy a lot of the vegetation ... I wanted to try to keep the vegetation and the unmade roads, because I felt that was just the character of the area, but of course, progress, so-called progress has destroyed it ... Well, the large suburban type houses that have been built, whereas once upon a time there were small holiday cottages, not necessarily cottages but holiday houses which weren’t so ostentatious as they appear to be now.
The researchers were informed by planners that while there isn’t a neighbourhood character study for Sorrento ‘the Design Development Overlays have had a moderating influence on development.’ Yet they also note that: ‘it’s really driven excellent design … [the] planning department find it hard enough to moderate some expectations let alone getting into redesigning things.’ One of the planners notes that vegetation removal is an issue:

In fact, I’m almost surprised that there wasn’t more of an impact from the bushfire clearing … there isn’t a really effective VPO … enough people do see the vegetation not as a nuisance or a threat but as a part of character of the area. There are some fairly active people in the community who are kind of landscape advocates, who I think probably have a bit of influence in that too.
The creeping in of change, the carelessness of losing a bit of the historic fabric here and there is observed and commented on in Queenscliff too:

It’s a big part of the economic development of Victoria, so it has another argument that we should be taking into account as each of these little cottage streets gets eroded. Yet we haven’t lost a significant building because we didn’t say it was significant. We haven’t lost a registered building, and we haven’t really degraded a heritage precinct but we’ve just knocked a little bit more off what makes it so attractive to visitors.

Findings stemming from the focus groups and in-depth interviews

The findings from the focus groups have been collated into a poster format, grouping responses to each of the questions (Figures 4 and 5). Perceptions of neighbourhood character and sense of place are shown to be remarkably similar across the generations from primary school children to octogenarians. What the participants value in Sorrento and Queenscliff is consistent across ages, as are the aspirations for the future of these townships.

The in-depth interview responses were analysed under eight themes: sense of place; natural cultural history; neighbourhood character; community; attachment and belonging; planning; change and future vision. Wordle diagrams provide a snapshot across these themes (see Figures
Summaries of the main issues and ideas raised under these theme headings have also been developed, enabling the rich data of the interviews and focus groups to be incorporated into the broader case study analyses, and integrated into planning recommendation tables.

Conclusions

Most of Australia’s population lives around the coastline of the country. Many now find they can either commute from or work part-time in small coastal towns because of the availability of low cost travel and/or electronic communications. This ability has brought advantages and disadvantages. It has revived some dying towns, but at the expense often of increasing urban expectations. Tensions and misunderstandings between rural and urban populations in Australia are well-known. This research has brought to the fore evidence that these are occurring in coastal towns.

The researchers’ work in Queenscliff and Sorrento clearly shows that place identity should be central to making good planning decisions. For too long planning has paid little attention to the socio-cultural values of place. As a result, the researchers have come up with five major planning recommendations, of which two overarching recommendations are relevant here:

- There needs to be clarity in the Local Government Authority (shire or borough) vision, and a clear connection to the desires of the community. New developments need to be primarily evaluated on their positive contribution to this vision.
The character of precincts should be the primary guides for decision making (rather than each case being taken in isolation). This is particularly important when dealing with ‘contributory’ buildings (ones that are not specifically covered by heritage overlays), and sites on the boundaries between zones and overlay areas.

The implications of the participants having overlapping ideas of ‘sense of place’ and ‘neighbourhood character’ suggests that the physical environment needs to be seen as integrated with personal memories and connections, and that this is an intrinsic problem in places undergoing demographic change (as new people arrive they cannot be expected to instantly have such a connection), so the task of current residents and local government authorities might be to make this apparent.

The core values of place identity need to be assessed critically, particularly as society becomes more diverse and fragmented (Hague 2004, p. 6). The sea change phenomenon has brought people with different values and expectations into Sorrento and Queenscliff. This influx of people is changing these places and challenges their existing place identity. The recommendations around formulating and articulating a clearer vision of the future for both Sorrento and Queenscliff, and then applying this vision to precincts, are key to communicating the shared sense of place and neighbourhood character to those who might want to change it. If such visions can be communicated in a positive sense, not just in the sense of what is not wanted, that might give pause to those who want to change the built and natural environments of these areas without due consideration to existing place identity. The commonalities of perception between elderly residents, visitors and local school children reinforce this: the fact that it is not just a case of the old being nostalgic, but that even the youngest residents perceive and value unique and intrinsic qualities in their local place. Developers and newcomers might too if they paused before thinking of making changes to their properties.

Hague (2004, p. 5) suggests that words like character and identity are often used by planners, particularly in respect to conservation and the impact of new developments on existing townscapes or countryside. However, their underlying meanings are rarely decoded. The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews of this research project give insights into how people see, unravel and impart values and meanings to place that go well beyond the visual or aesthetic. This shared identity is a powerful force that should be used to shape policy and influence practice. The focus groups and interviews conducted by this research project have given voice to the feelings, belonging, perceptiveness and engagement with two particular places, informing the opinions of people who make up their broader communities. While emotional and reactive community responses to protect coastal towns such as Sorrento and Queenscliff from change have had little real effect on ensuring that the values, character and heritage are preserved for future generations, this research has validated community voices and harnessed multiple views to deliver the booklet ‘Improving Planning Outcomes in Small Coastal Towns’ (de Jong, Fuller & Beynon 2016) to communities. Beyond the specific concerns of Queenscliff and Sorrento, this research should inform future decision-making for planning and development in other coastal towns and assist them to manage change. The approach the booklet advocates will help communities manage change, embrace the messy and experiential discourses of place and negotiate the tensions between new narratives of place identity and other narratives concerning place. Broadening the scope of such actions is critical if the sentiment and decisions of communities in Australia’s many other coastal towns are also to be validated.

References

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Endnotes

1 The ABC television program *SeaChange* ran from 1998 to 2000. It depicted a corporate lawyer who left her hectic city life and job for the quiet life of the seaside town Pearl Bay. Even while the program was showing, people who made a similar lifestyle change were being called ‘seachangers’ and the activity itself a ‘sea change’.

‘Sea change’ communities: Intergenerational perception and sense of place, a Deakin University led ARC LINKAGE PROJECT: LP1102000787, undertaken by Associate Professor Ursula de Jong, Dr Robert Fuller, and Dr David Beynon, from the School of Architecture and Built Environment, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, has been supported by the Federal Government’s Australia Research Council. This ARC Linkage grant has been administered by Deakin University. The five Linkage Partners are the Queenscliffe Community Association, the Queenscliffe Historical Museum, the Nepean Historical Society and the Nepean Conservation Group, and the strategic planning and urban design consultants Planisphere Pty Ltd.

The document, *Improving Planning Outcomes in Small Coastal Towns*, was prepared by the research team for the use of communities in small towns across Victoria, Australia, to improve planning outcomes in their townships. It is an outcome of this ARC Linkage project.