The inner suburbs of Melbourne were at the centre of the most contentious issues of the 1960s, including housing, anti-freeway campaigns, ethnic power and heritage conservation. The battles were especially intense in the late 1960s to early 1970s, a crucial period of urban transition for Melbourne. The impact of urban growth and the radical restructuring of the Australian economy were felt in all capital cities but especially in Melbourne’s working-class industrial inner suburbs where the nation’s manufacturing industries were concentrated. The spirited response of activists to radical change was shaped by Melbourne’s strong suburban communities, a tradition of social reform and the involvement of institutions such as welfare agencies, unions and churches.

The major conflicts in Melbourne were over the development plans of Victoria’s powerful state government authorities. This was in contrast with conflicts elsewhere in Australia, such as those with international development capital and private construction companies in Sydney. In Melbourne, the entrenched quasi-independent planning and infrastructure authorities had scant accountability to state and local government. The Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, the Housing Commission of Victoria and the Country Roads Board were dominated by managers, engineers
and land-use planners who had little regard for the impact on local communities of their large scale strategic planning and development projects. The feeling of a need to take on state government spread in the late 1960s as plans for the redevelopment of inner-city residential housing with high-rise public housing estates, for freeways to be constructed through the inner-city to service Melbourne's burgeoning outer suburbs and for the redevelopment of the CBD were revealed. It is not surprising that Jane Jacob's influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, an angry response to the demolition of urban neighbourhoods by planners and engineers through large renewal projects (especially those of Robert Moses and the Port Authority in New York), had a special resonance in Melbourne.¹

**Residents' Associations**

Community identity fostered the emergence of inner-city residents' associations, initially as a response to the 'slum reclamation' and redevelopment plans of the Housing Commission. The new aggressive residents' associations were different from the former progress and ratepayers' associations and the more genteel East Melbourne Association formed in 1953 with its focus on protecting that suburb's Victorian heritage buildings. The alienation of residents from local government was a significant factor in the formation of the new associations. For example, residents who lived in the City of Melbourne felt disenfranchised from the business-based Melbourne City Council which, with the City Development Association representing the large retailers, supported the planned public housing projects. The Carlton Association, North Melbourne Association, Prahran–South Yarra Group and Parkville Association were all formed between 1967 and 1970. In the same period, the Fitzroy Residents' Association, Richmond Association, Emerald Hill Association (later the South Melbourne Association) and the Collingwood Residents' Association were formed in municipalities where Australian
Labor Party (ALP)-controlled local councils supported the re-development plans of the Housing Commission. Although membership figures of these residents associations are difficult to obtain, and anyway would only be an indication of support for what were largely networking and coordinating bodies, it would seem that the Carlton, Fitzroy, North Melbourne and South Melbourne associations were the most active and attracted widespread community support.

John Power, in an early analysis of the 'new politics in old suburbs', identified a key source of power in the range and expertise of the professional and strategic leadership of inner Melbourne resident associations. From Melbourne’s inner-city terrace houses came new social groups (called ‘cosmopolitans’ by Power) including community-minded academics, architects, engineers, business executives, lawyers and a new generation of tertiary-educated women. All were prepared to get involved in local politics formerly shunned as parochial. Power believes that the model of the professional, strategically-minded Melbourne resident associations influenced some of the Sydney residents’ groups, especially Balmain.

The Melbourne associations were underestimated by the leaders of the state infrastructure bodies, especially by the Housing Commission in the early conflicts over housing redevelopment. The Housing Commission managers did not fully comprehend the extent and significance of the social and economic changes in the inner-city suburbs or the potential strength of opposition from the new resident associations. Ray Burkitt of the Housing Commission, addressing a public meeting in 1969 at the Church of All Nations on the contentious Lee Street re-development in Carlton, accused the Carlton Association of being driven by nostalgia — of reading claret-stained copies of Jane Jacobs and ignoring the urgent need to replace run-down terrace housing with new high-rise affordable housing for Australian working-class families. Burkitt failed to recognise not only that there was a formidable and experienced opposition sitting in the pews
but also that his audience represented the changing social and economic structure of the inner-city. The rise of tertiary employment and decline of the inner suburban manufacturing industry made problematic the Housing Commission's policy of building high-rise residential towers for industrial workers and their families in inner-city locations.

The most intense period of resistance to the Housing Commission's 'scorched earth policy' was from 1968. The late Frank Strahan, a founder of the Carlton Association, recalled this was the year that residents 'drew the line with the Housing Commission in Carlton' and moved against Ray Meagher, the state housing minister. As resistance to the Housing Commission's plans spread, there was increasing coordination of inner-city protest. In 1970, the Committee for Urban Action representing fourteen of the residents' associations was formed as an umbrella group to develop broader strategies and policies. The success of the combined strength of the resident associations in stopping the Housing Commission's redevelopment plans in Carlton (Lee Street) and Fitzroy (Brooks Crescent) in the early 1970s led to the final demise of the slum redevelopment programme. However, substantial sections of Melbourne's inner suburbs had already been demolished for the Housing Commission's high-rise towers. As well as fighting the Housing Commission, resident and other inner-city community associations fought against Country Roads Board freeway proposals, a proposed industrial development on Carlton railway land, the demolition of heritage buildings, the increasing pressure for the construction of flats and office buildings, and the expansion plans of hospitals and educational institutions. It was social capital versus the resources of government authorities, developers, hospital boards and the University of Melbourne.

**Tradition and Motivation**

What then were the motivations of this new generation of activists who moved into Melbourne's industrial working-class
inner suburbs? There was a push and pull factor. A powerful push factor for the ‘return of the natives’ to the inner-city was to escape the conformity of Melbourne’s ubiquitous 1950s and 1960s suburbia. The pull factor was the attraction of the Victorian terrace housing and the ambience of Melbourne’s rich nineteenth-century urban legacy, while the scale and sense of community also appealed to those moving to the city from country towns.

The new generation of activists drew on a Melbourne tradition of support for social reform. Janet McCalman, in her study of Melbourne’s eastern suburban middle class in the 1930s and 1940s, identifies a strong sense of civic duty and public interest, a tradition reflected in the central role churches and welfare organisations played in the Melbourne urban protest movements of the 1960s. In Sydney, apart from the high profile Reverend Ted Noffs at the Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross, there was little support for urban protests from the more conservative churches and welfare organisations. In his study of the North Melbourne Association, David Moloney identifies two developments which stimulated the formation of the original North Melbourne Community Development Association in 1966—the Housing Commission plans for large scale slum reclamation and ‘emerging social activism on the part of the Protestant churches.’ Melbourne’s inner-city ministers and congregations, influenced by books such as Harvey Cox’s *Secular City*, were aware of the call for churches in urban environments to be experimental and become involved in community issues. Ministers attracted to inner-city appointments often had overseas experience of community organising and were active in residents’ associations; these included Andrew McCutcheon and Michael Oxer in Collingwood, Kevin Green in North Melbourne and Brian Howe in Fitzroy. Catholic communities influenced by American activist Dorothy Day were part of this network, such as the open house established at the Fitzroy church by Val Noone and Mary Doyle. The church-related Ecumenical Migration Centre in Richmond, the Centre for Urban Research
and Action and the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Fitzroy were also important resources for the protest movement in terms of fostering networks of grass-roots organisations, conducting rigorous applied research and formulating policies and strategies. The involvement of church-based organisations was an important contribution to the strategic nature of the inner Melbourne resident associations noted by John Power.

Support for residents associations also came from the union movement. There was a different pattern of union involvement in Melbourne compared with Sydney where Jack Mundey and the NSW Builders’ Labourers’ Federation (BLF) were so dominant. The role of the BLF in Melbourne was different, perhaps because urban protest was more community-based. Although the ‘green bans’ of Jack Mundey and the BLF in Sydney have attracted more national and international attention, union secretary Norm Gallagher and the Victorian BLF saved many important Melbourne buildings from demolition and provided crucial support for the Carlton Association in a dispute over a proposal to build a factory on public land. Other activists attracted to the residents associations drew on earlier alliances between political and community groups. North Melbourne activists Maurie and Ruth Crow had a long association with the Communist Party, and their involvement in the North Melbourne Association and the Town and Country Planning Association drew on their experiences of the 1930s alliances between communists and community groups in Melbourne’s peace and reform movements. The residents’ associations also made common cause with radical green and Marxist students, especially around the building and opening of the Eastern Freeway, although there were tensions over tactics with students crossing from the protests of the anti-Vietnam war movement.

Another important aspect of Melbourne urban protest was that it fostered the emerging ethnic organisations and drew support from progressive sections of the inner-suburban ethnic working class. Organisations such as Ecumenical Migration...
Centre and FILEF, an international organisation for Italian migrant workers and their families, had a community building agenda that differed from the existing church and charitable organisations such as the Italian support organisation CoAsIt and the Greek Welfare Society. The talented ethnic leadership in Melbourne included Giovanni and Ann Sgro (FILEF), George Papadopoulos, Jack Strocchi in Brooks Crescent and Anna Fratta of the Fitzroy Advisory Service. Further analysis of these cross-class partnerships and the range of resident involvement in Melbourne's urban protests would establish the extent to which they represented a new political paradigm and a significant contribution to international analysis of new social movements in this period.

**Political Agendas and Gentrification**

Social justice walks around Fitzroy, organised by Brian Stagoll and the Fitzroy History Society in 1999 and 2002, were a reminder of the range and importance of the initiatives that emerged in this period from one inner Melbourne suburb. The emphasis of the first walk was on local democracy and the flourishing of civil society, and served as a reminder of the contributions of individuals and small community groups, which in turn were often supported by larger bodies such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Centre for Urban Research and Action, and also included low cost rental associations, public and private tenant associations, family-based childcare, community childcare, the Fitzroy Community Health Centre and the Fitzroy Legal Service. Many of these community-based organisations became models for state and national programmes. The Social Planning Office on Brunswick Street was a reminder of the transformation of moribund inner-city government in Fitzroy by initiatives such as the people-focused community services pioneered by the 'new' Fitzroy Council and Jenny Wills.

The second social justice walk in 2002 focused on sites of conflict — the fight for the relocation and community
management of the Isobel Henderson Kindergarten, the long and fierce battle with the Housing Commission over the redevelopment of the Brooks Crescent area and the battle to stop the building of the Eastern Freeway which carved through Collingwood, Fitzroy and Carlton and where police were used to control protesters in a final violent confrontation over the freeway opening.

Active citizenship, democratic city government and innovative and participatory planning procedures dominated the political agenda of activists. Especially important for resident groups was the reconstruction of the inner-city ALP where a rump of the 'old' Australian working-class controlled local government. The remnants of Melbourne's inner-city 'Wren machine' had been weakened by the impact of the 1955 split on the Victorian ALP, and in the process of rebuilding, the party was able to accommodate the agenda of the new social movements and provide political support at local and state level. In Sydney the Sussex Street headquarters of the NSW ALP did not embrace the new urban activists while Melbourne inner-city local government became a training ground for state and federal politicians and an important policy base for the party.

In the City of Melbourne area the resident associations built a power base that was able to challenge the domination of business interests, forcing the Melbourne City Council to be more responsive to the demands of resident communities. Sheila Byard argues that effective alliances were established which challenged dominant interests and demanded 'a public right to plan the city'. The professional energy of the resident associations, especially the Carlton and North Melbourne Associations, focused on developing the first comprehensive social and physical plans for the fast changing inner suburbs. Two documents published in 1972, Urban Renewal in Carlton: An Analysis and Carlton Plan: A Strategic Policy were comprehensive plans coordinated by the Carlton Association bringing together a formidable range of expertise to convincingly rebut Housing Commission plans for the
redevelopment of Carlton. Another publication, *Seeds for Change*, researched and written by a group led by Maurie Crow, was ahead of its time in calling attention to the urgent need to consider environment issues and the contribution that community planning could make to building a sustainable Melbourne. These were sophisticated responses to this period of transition when established institutions were either unable or slow to respond to radical changes in inner-city areas. Due to the influence of activists, the Housing Commission was made more accountable, planning and heritage legislation was passed and professional planning at the local government level was vastly improved — reforms that began under the Hamer government in the mid-1970s.

The complexity and range of Melbourne's inner-city activism problematises the dominant explanatory use of the term 'gentrification', summed up by William Logan in his study of Melbourne's inner-city gentrification published in 1985 as 'the middle-class replacement or displacement of working-class communities for property speculation and locational advantage in the wake of economic restructuring and personal lifestyle reasons', as the dominant explanatory concept for inner-city change. In his early study of resident associations, John Power asked, 'are the civic action groups exotic flowers from the grove of academe, or are they of wider significance?' Urban analysis has leaned towards the former interpretation. Leonie Sandercock and Hugh Stretton in their influential books on Australian urban planning published in the 1970s reinforced this view of the role of the urban activists. Logan has been more cautious, pointing to the misuse of the term and to the limitation of narrow definitions. Internationally there has been a recognition that the term 'gentrification' has been indiscriminately used in the analysis of inner-city struggles.

Neil Smith, one of the few academics to research gentrification on an international scale, has argued that while gentrification has been an important and on-going factor in the re-vamping of inner areas, indiscriminate use of the term
has discouraged analysis linking residential change to the broader transformation of the urban economy and culture and the development of complex modern cities. As I have suggested, the protests and movements in Melbourne were driven by the rapid economic, political and social change in the city as population increased and jobs and people were transferred across sectors.

Glib gentrification interpretations also detract attention from the broad agenda of Melbourne’s social and political movements, as well as the cross section of support and involvement and the commitment, experience and diversity of the leadership of these movements. The issues of Melbourne protest went far beyond heritage and terrace housing. In the five-year battle over the Lee Street block in Carlton, Ann Tyson believes ‘the rights of householders faced with the arbitrary powers of the Housing Commission were probably as important as issues of heritage or streetscape.’ David Moloney found the North Melbourne Association’s objectives and actions were ‘the outcome of an on-going, two way interaction with broader ‘urban’ social movements and organisations’ rather than the reactive sectional resident action group that is typically portrayed. Thus, because Melbourne battles were focused on the state rather than the private sector, using interpretative frameworks that focus on individual hopes for a ‘desired space and cherished city’, such as that of Anglo/European neo-Marxist Manuel Castells, are problematic. Patrick Mullins used Castells’s framework in his study of Brisbane’s anti-freeway protests in the early 1970s, and concluded that Castells’s urban movement analysis typology was difficult to apply because of the more suburban nature of Australian cities and the different system of urban governance where the state rather than city or suburban governments control urban development. The Melbourne experience where the strength of inner suburban communities and the power of state government authorities shaped the city’s protests reinforces Mullins conclusions.
Urban Reassessment

The motivations of individuals, self-interest and altruism are often hard to pull apart, especially in a period when inner-city housing was undervalued and conveniently located to areas of growing professional employment. However, self interest cannot by itself explain the strength and range of commitment in a tough period for urban activists. In Sydney, lives were lost in the contests with unscrupulous private developers. In Melbourne public authorities and local government were also unscrupulous in their tactics and confrontations. Activists had constantly to put themselves on the line. Vivienne McCutcheon recalls that everything was a fight, not just the high profile struggles: 'Don’t forget how hard it was to hold the line and the high price that many people made in terms of their professional careers and their families.  

The late 1960s was on the cusp of change from the arbitrary authority and 'command' planning of the post-war period to the neo-liberal *laissez faire* planning of the 1980s and 1990s. As we reassess urban change and planning in the twenty-first century, the range and complexity of Melbourne’s activism, its reforming emphasis and impact on governance and community building has relevance to contemporary resistance to the urban impacts of corporatist planning and an internationalising economy. The Save our Suburbs movement, based in Melbourne’s middle-class south-eastern suburbs in the 1990s, was a response to the era of development-led planning of the Kennett government, that drew on the experience of earlier resident associations and the activist tradition of Melbourne. However, the extent to which this spirit of Melbourne and the legacy of the 1960s will be strong enough to confront the increasing power of international investment capital and the erosion of grass-roots democracy in the city remains an open question.
Notes

3 Author’s recollection of the public meeting; see transcript ‘The Challenge of the Inner Suburbs. Social Inquiry and Community Action in the 1960s and 70s’, City of Yarra Consultation held at Richmond Town Hall, 1 April 2000.
4 City of Yarra Consultation, contributions of Louise Elliott and Frank Strahan.
12 The Crow Collection, Victoria University; holds the papers and publications of Maurie and Ruth Crow.
Ecumenical Migrant Centre, EMC, Melbourne, 1996.


For example, see J. Chesterman, Poverty, Law and Social Change: The Shape of the Fitzroy Legal Service, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996.


A. Tyson, p.11.


W. S. Logan, The Gentrification of Inner Melbourne: A Political Geography of Inner City Housing, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1985, p. 56.


See also K. O’Connor and P. Rapson, Inner Melbourne: A Regional Profile, Inner Melbourne Regional Association, Melbourne, 1990.

Tyson, p. 1.


City of Yarra Consultation, contribution of Vivienne McCutcheon.