

The Formation of CRA

by Dr Sue Chambers, Foundation President

(an edited version of an address to a CRA General Meeting on 21 November 2011)

As our children reached tertiary studies time, Don and I decided to return to Carlton having lived here in earlier times. In 1994, having just sold our home at Aireys Inlet, we drove into Faraday Street, Carlton, and saw 244 Faraday Street was for sale – with an auction the following Saturday. The two adjacent town houses were being sold (244 Faraday and 276 Cardigan Street) separately. We thought we could never afford the building, but wouldn't it be a great location – and didn't we remember the building? On the following Saturday, Don, with a crowd of more than 100 (it seemed), bid on 244 Faraday Street (while I waited in Readings, being stressed out with being present at Auctions). He was successful, and we were to move in during January 1995. The Age the following day referred to the interest in sales of unrenovated buildings in Carlton. Our children were shocked at the state of the house. Parents were “mad”!

During 1995 Don undertook a major renovation of the house and did some historic research about the architect, Levi Powell, who built the house in 1872. Don was also able to find out that my great grandparents were married from Carlton, with one living in Dorrit Street and the other in Tyne Street. So it felt very right to be living there.

Don was on the National Trust Buildings Committee which registers heritage buildings and wrote listings for many heritage properties in Carlton. He was able to obtain an Australian Heritage Commission registration of the streetscapes along Faraday and Cardigan Street. Many of the houses were in dire need of renovation, but when renovated would make a positive contribution to the village feel of Carlton. The University had an Eastern Precinct Masterplan drawn up by architect Darryl Jackson for developing low rise buildings along a laneway complex for the Faraday/Cardigan/Elgin/Swanston Streets block. In the past the University had tried to expand into Parkville, but had been resisted by the Parkville Association, and had a strategy of developing to the south of the University (later embodied in the University Square project). There had also been past attempts by the University to expand east as evident in the ‘brutalist’ Earth Science building, and also plans to develop a Music school to the north of Elgin Street. It seemed possible with community support to resist the University's eastern expansion and hold it to the Jackson plan.

In December 1995, Don and I spotted a small planning application displayed behind a bush, indicating the University wished to demolish houses along Faraday and Cardigan Street and replace them with a 5 storey student housing complex. We were appalled. In my chapter in the Carlton History “The Community takes Action” I have described the public outcry, the meeting at the Carlton Baths, and the commitment to oppose the planning application.

Support came from the Parkville Association, veterans of the Carlton Association, the Carlton Traders Association, members of the South Carlton Association, academics and residents. The Carlton Association had been disbanded following the incorporation of North Carlton into the City of Yarra in 1993.

The South Carlton Association was a small group formed primarily to oppose the design and construction of the Museum in the Carlton Gardens. In particular the “Blade” which would destroy the view of the dome of the Royal Exhibition Building from the north looking toward the city. By 1996 the decision on the design and placement of the Museum had been taken. Many of the same issues the Carlton Association had relating to residential amenity, traffic, greening the environment, heritage, and unsympathetic planning applications remained as ongoing issues. The loss of the residents from North Carlton was almost a body blow for community action in Carlton.

During 1996 Don and I, together with some interested residents worked towards formation of an incorporated Carlton Residents Association. A public meeting in early 1997 at the Salvation Army Hall in Drummond Street formalized the CRA. A logo with the help of Sue Coffey was approved. CRA Newsflashes began. A website was launched. Don began taking well-attended monthly Heritage Walks in Carlton.

Planning applications for developments in Carlton began to be monitored on a monthly basis by a Planning Committee. This became a very important component of CRA action, and led to many modifications and improvements to the design of buildings in Carlton. There was a gung-ho mentality for building student accommodation for the many overseas students coming to study at Melbourne University and RMIT. The College Square development by Becton, advised by Darryl Jackson, had renovated the former Traffic Department building on the corner of Princes and Lygon Street. There was talk of public housing in the area being redeveloped – perhaps for a Commonwealth Games village. Becton was also redeveloping the public housing estate in Flemington.

Building heights permitted in Carlton for new developments were a continuing issue – and represented two distinct views on Carlton’s future. Would it be a diverse community with some common interests and amenity for the people living there? Or would it be used to accommodate the interests of key non-resident stakeholders: the University (more student accommodation and academic space), traders (more parking and 24 hour activities), hospital (more parking and space), public housing (no loss of the number of accommodation units), traffic hub (more trams in Swanston Street, daily visitors to Lygon Street, Universities, hospitals, and through traffic to and from the City)? With little representation on Melbourne City Council or State Government, Carlton residents had some formidable competitors.

CRA became increasingly engaged in MCC and State Government strategic planning for Carlton’s future. The C20 Amendment represented a milestone in establishing height limits for Carlton. But they still go challenged today. It is great news that Jackie Watts is now a Councillor on the MCC and that there are moves to reintroduce Ward Councillors.

Melbourne University had two hotly contested major planning applications: the University Square development (1998) and the Eastern Precinct development (2004). In both cases the public outcry was huge, and the result were modified but very unsympathetic developments for those interested in Carlton’s heritage and liveability.

I do remember the VCAT case relating to the Eastern Precinct development. CRA, MCC and the National Trust were on one side with the State Government, Becton and Melbourne University on the other. The case went on for 21 days or so, and was hotly contested. We won the case, but the modified project is still, to my mind a blot on the landscape!

There were many other CRA activities happening – most of them are mentioned in my chapter in the Carlton History book. I will elaborate on just a few: the history project, CORA, traffic, a community centre and politics.

History project: Carlton is a microcosm of Melbourne. There are many organizations and institutions represented in Carlton – to an unprecedented level relative to other Melbourne suburbs. The story of how these have all evolved and interweaved with the residential life of Carlton is an important Melbourne story of more than 150 years. Getting the story told by the many historians that contributed to the CRA history project was no mean feat. Many of the authors were Carlton veterans who lived and breathed Carlton. Historians from Melbourne and Monash Universities contributed. In fact there was no shortage of authors or amount of text which could have gone into the book - which has 570 pages. Most authors' contributions were cut by at least half. We were fortunate to be able to employ Peter Yule, an old family friend of Don's and me, and an eminent historian. Don researched and wrote chapters about some of the gaps – Koori times, the development of Carlton, street names and the early history of the Museum. Peter wrote a substantial chapter on medical history and did a great job of shaping and editing the wide variety of chapters by diverse authors. Raising the funds to have Melbourne University Press publish the book was a long and difficult process. I was criticised in the Age for allowing a contribution by Becton. My view was that developers making fortunes in Carlton should be making contributions to community projects. The contribution did not stop CRA strong opposition to Becton's Eastern Precinct development. I turned to the MCC for the last bit of funding, and we were very pleased to be successful. What a wonderful day the launch was at La Mama theatre, with David Williamson doing the launch and later as a speaker in a Carlton Conversations session at the BMW theatre in Federation Square. It is great that the book was received so well by reviewers, community history awards in Victoria and NSW, and went into a second edition. I found it a good read this year when hospital visiting Don. Each chapter is succinct and very readable. We also had pleasure in watching a DVD recording of the launch at La Mama that Eugene Schlusser sent us.

CORA: Across the municipality there are several residents associations, all with a common interest in residential amenity, and in many cases heritage. In many MCC meetings I met representatives of the other associations, and it seemed a good idea to formalize the group into CORA – the Coalition of Residents Associations. We had regular meetings with our local MP (Bronwyn Pike) and MCC Councillors. It is pleasing that the initiative is continuing and now includes Business groups. Come MCC elections there seemed to be little cohesion across the municipality relating to residential amenity. The non-residential vested interests are powerful. This contrasts to the situation before 1993 when some of the more residential areas (North Carlton) were included in the municipality. It also seems to differ from the more progressive ideas Clover Moore has for Sydney.

Traffic: We all know about the “cars that ate Carlton”. The ever-present cars which are parked and passing through Carlton are a continuing threat to residential amenity in Carlton. It does not always need to be like that. When there is much under-utilized off-street parking, why are cars allowed to park on-street and be considered more critical for the area’s survival than street trees? Think of Toorak Village, or Chelsea Village in London. Turn the corner from the strip shopping in Toorak Road or Kings Road in Chelsea, and you have decent residential amenity without car dominance. You also have accessible public transport (trams and rail). Carlton is actually now well served by trams. But there is little government will to improve the greening of residential streets in Carlton. With regard to through traffic, there has been considerable debate about whether there should be a tunnel to take traffic in Princes Street. The argument against the tunnel is that the money should be spent on public transport and also that there is a saturation point that performs an upper limit. I always think of the people living along Princes Street and the massive divide the traffic makes between north and south Carlton. Any calming of traffic in the Carlton area in my view should be considered positively. This is a very regressive view I know – but there it is.

Community Centre: Unlike some of the suburbs in the Melbourne municipality Carlton has never had its own Town Hall or community centre. The establishment of the library in North Carlton, never seemed to me to be able to meet the need for the residential community of Carlton south of Princes Street. Yet residents need to have meeting places where residents from all parts of the community can come together to meet and do activities together. Where is the heart of most communities? Where is the heart of the Carlton community? Several possible sites were considered, and the Kathleen Syme Centre looked the most promising. It was central and is an historic building related to Carlton life – as the Faraday School. I tried to persuade MCC and local MPs to secure the building for a Carlton community centre, and I am delighted that the MCC has now purchased the building and will be watching from the sidelines to see what kind of community centre will be fostered here for the Carlton community.

Political: I came to the gradual conclusion that to get things done, one not only needs the facts, community support, good communication and negotiating skills, but one needs the numbers to get results. My time in the local ALP branch was pretty unenlightening from that point of view – and the closer I got to politics, the more I was turned off by the process. Getting things happening seems to take years and is frustrating.

One needs to keep in mind the small wins – the elm avenue alongside the trams in Swanston Street, the Carlton history book, the heritage listing of La Mama, the lanes named after Carlton identities, the graffiti campaign, the small favourable changes in the Melbourne Planning Scheme, the many Carlton residents who have worked hard and long to achieve change. I am delighted with the website, the securing of the Kathleen Syme Centre, and the continuing of many of the early activities of the CRA and its predecessor, the Carlton Association. Congratulations to you all! May you carry on the good work for a worthy cause!

May I especially congratulate Cr Jackie Watts, Greta and Ian Bird, Warren Green and Lyn Cracknell. You are certainly becoming Carlton veterans. Carlton certainly has a great following of former residents outside Carlton who are cheering you on.