<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beattie, L &amp; Haarhoff, E.</td>
<td>Delivering Quality Intensification in the Suburbs: A Case Study of University Hill, Melbourne, Australia.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begert, C</td>
<td>Cross-pollinating Urban Design Approaches</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biju, Y</td>
<td>Urban Density – an Activity Centre Panacea or Placebo?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choudhury, B</td>
<td>Why the 1917 Geddes Plan did not Materialise: Planning for Planning’s Sake in the Case of Dhaka</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, G</td>
<td>The Opportunities inherent in an Urban Design Approach to contribute to the Productivity of Towns, Cities and Regions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darchen, S</td>
<td>Does place-making lead to socially sustainable communities? A Case Study of the Fortitude Valley Renewal Plan in Brisbane.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khor, L, Murray, S, Dovey, K., and Woodstock, I</td>
<td>Thinking outside the Big-Box: Design strategies for intensification of Melbourne’s regional shopping malls</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon A &amp; Palmer J</td>
<td>Innovative strategies to foster spatial and social resilience in high vulnerability suburban environments</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller, W &amp; Nazari, H</td>
<td>Occupant comfort, the housing industry and electricity infrastructure: understanding the synergies</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roos P &amp; Juvari M</td>
<td>Opportunistic Destinations: Transforming Railway Stations into Sustainable Urban Centres</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sammon, T</td>
<td>Urban Design Possibilities and Barriers for a Mid-Size American City</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schluter, J</td>
<td>Urban Informality in the Developing World: Opportunistic urban design processes and prototypes for the developed world</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soraganvi, S</td>
<td>An Integrated Approach of Urban Design &amp;Historic preservation.</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorton, W</td>
<td>The Idea of Small Urban Space</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucker, C</td>
<td>Mapping Urban Residual Space and Exploring Opportunities for the Re-use of Existing Buildings</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Does place-making lead to socially sustainable communities? A Case Study of the Fortitude Valley Renewal Plan in Brisbane.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the Fortitude Valley Renewal Plan (2007) from the perspective of social sustainability. The objective is to develop policy recommendations to incorporate social sustainability in a pro-active manner in the regeneration process. This research is based on the analysis of planning documents and on semi-directed interviews with urban stakeholders involved in the regeneration process. In conclusion, we present relevant social sustainability criteria to measure the impact of the renewal plan on the existing community.

Key words: Urban regeneration; Inner-city suburbs; Place-making; Social sustainability criteria, Fortitude Valley (Brisbane).
1. Introduction

Fortitude Valley is an inner city suburb that is currently being regenerated. It is an iconic suburb in Brisbane, known nationally to be a major entertainment precinct in Australia. Like other Brisbane inner-city suburbs (New Farm, Teneriffe, Newstead and Bowen Hills), Fortitude Valley was designated as a priority area for regeneration by Urban Renewal Brisbane (URB). In this paper we present the process that led to the adoption of the “Fortitude Valley Urban Vision” (2007a). We first contextualise urban regeneration in Australia and then we focus on the case study of Fortitude Valley. In the conceptual framework, we define the concepts of ‘place-making’ and of ‘social sustainability’ and we explain how the two are interrelated.

The objectives of the paper are as follows:

- To explain how the concepts of ‘place-making’ and ‘social sustainability’ are related in a context of urban regeneration;
- To analyse to what extent social sustainability has been incorporated in the renewal plan;
- To identify key criteria to measure social sustainability outcomes of urban regeneration in the case of Fortitude Valley.

2. Conceptual framework: urban regeneration, place-making and social sustainability

2.1 Urban regeneration in the Australian context

Inner city revitalisation and housing re-investment associated with gentrification has proceeded swiftly throughout the 1990’s in all of Australia’s 5 largest cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth) (Badcock, 2001). Major Australian cities are currently undergoing changes in character and structure (Forster, 2006). Economic growth is accelerating in Australia, but many researchers argue that social polarisation and exclusion are getting worse in the process (Forster, 2006). Despite this, social sustainability has not been widely studied in the context of the urban regeneration of Australia’s major cities, and there is evidence that it has not been a major focus of urban renewal projects thus far.

2.2 Defining social sustainability
It is first important to mention that social sustainability is considered as being neglected in mainstream sustainability debates; priority has been given to economic and environmental sustainability in particular in the context of planning (Woodcraft et al., 2011). According to Dempsey et al. (2009), social sustainability relates to the notions of ‘social capital’ and ‘social cohesion’. When considering community social sustainability, the overarching idea is meeting the social needs of community members today without compromising the communities future, and specifically, the following aspects can be considered:

- Interaction with other residents or social networks;
- Participation in collective community activities;
- Pride or sense of place;
- Residential stability (versus turnover);
- Security (lack of crime and disorder).

Misguided urban regeneration has been recognised to cause economic and social exclusion, and it is thought that a stronger focus on the provision of mixed housing should be taken as it can bring economic spin-off effects, and deliver community cohesion (Garner, 1996). In fact, the provision of affordable housing is widely recognised as a key catalyst to initiating social sustainability and promoting inclusion and cohesion (Randolph, 2004). Traditional methods of assessing social sustainability such as through employment, or poverty alleviation, as being replaced with concepts such as happiness, social mixing and sense of place, which are not as straight-forward to measure (Colantonio, 2010). Social impact assessment is considered appropriate from urban renewal projects, based on the typical timeline and nature by which they incorporate policy, planning and community involvement (Glasson & Wood, 2009). Assessment methods should go beyond employment to include issues such as health, crime, deprivation, social inclusion, community integration, community services, and public open space (Glasson & Wood, 2009).

2.3 Place-making and urban regeneration

The concept of ‘place’ is difficult to define and discuss in a consistent way, which is aligned with other ambiguous terms such as ‘identity’, ‘community’, ‘character’ and ‘home’ (Dovey, 1999). Theories of place, stem from a wide variety of realms such as philosophy, social theory and geography, being applicable to a wide variety of scales ranging from local to global (Dovey, 1999). Geographers look at place as socially constructed through many complex connected elements including interactions of
groups and people, institutionalised land uses, political and economic decisions, while the language of representation suggests place is a spatialised movement of global flows of labor, good and capital exchange (Martin, 2003). Place may be a convergence of all of these discussed theories and elements.

In the case of the practice of urban design, and urban regeneration and renewal, place is concerned technically with the built form and with spatial order (Dovey, 1999). From a more experiential perspective, place-making can be seen as the practice of creating urban character, atmosphere, feeling or ambiance of a local urban area (Dovey, 2010). We argue that urban regeneration must find a balance between incorporating the identity of place whilst developing an improved sense of place.

3. Methods

In regard to the methods the planning documents relevant for the renewal of Fortitude Valley: the “Fortitude Valley Urban Vision” (2007a) and the Fortitude Valley Neighborhood Plan (2010) were critically analysed. Semi-directed interviews with key stakeholders involved in the regeneration process (see list of interviews at the end of the document), were then conducted. A focus was taken on how social sustainability was integrated in the renewal plan. Based on a literature review, three key components have been identified to analyse social sustainability: 1. Urban design objectives (including urban transportation); 2. Achievement in regard to affordable housing; 3. Public engagement process.

4. Analysis of the Fortitude Valley regeneration process

4.1 Defining the “Valley” identity

Brisbane’s lack of urban tradition makes it unique as an Australian city; Brisbane has the reputation of being a largely suburban city (Fulton, 2011). The Valley has an identity that is multifaceted and it has a unique identity in Brisbane comparable to Temple Bar in Dublin; it has gone through periods of up and downs to become the place to be (interview May 24th 2012). Fortitude Valley is also a high density neighbourhood and is associated to the issue of entertainment noise, some residents having forced the closure of entertainment venues (Radbone, 2010). The ‘Valley’ is often referred as a ‘cauldron of culture’, it is also referred as a placed that is edgy and where individuality is encouraged (Valley Chamber of Commerce, 2007, p. 10). The Valley also has a low-income community that is transient, where homelessness and
social issues are still present, and still has a destitute side that contrasts with the entertainment district identity.

4.2 Increasing pressure for regeneration
Strategically situated 1 km north east of the Brisbane CBD, and approximately 130 hectares in size, the ‘Valley’ is ideally positioned to accommodate growth as a result of public transport infrastructure improvements, and its close connections to the CBD and the surrounding residential areas (Urban Renewal Brisbane, 2007a, p. 4). The Valley like other inner-city suburbs in Brisbane is being regenerated under the lead of (URB). (URB) was financed by the Federal Government in 1991; similar institutions have been set up at the same time in other capital cities (Interview July 6th, 2012). One of the rationales behind the creation of (URB) was to avoid the development of Brisbane as a ‘200kms city’, and the development of a “deadzone” in between the CBD and the outer ring of residential suburbs (Interview July 6th, 2012).

Since the 1990s there has been a steady increase in the residential population in Fortitude Valley. Between 2004 and 2008 the population grew from 4 820 to 6 141; as at June 2011 the estimated population was 6 376 persons (ABS, 2012). Despite the growth of residential population, there is increasing pressure on neighbouring areas close to the CBD to accommodate growth; Fortitude Valley as an inner-city suburb has been identified as key growth area in the SEQ regional plan (2008).

4.3 The urban regeneration process.
The process started in 2007 with the Fortitude Valley renewal plan, which was a command from the Brisbane City council to Urban Design group Hassell. It then led to the development of the neighbourhood plan for Fortitude Valley.

4.3.1 Urban design component
As stated by the urban designer who was in charge for the development of the Valley Urban vision, the plan focuses on the built environment, and social sustainability was not a priority identified at that time (Interview May 24th, 2012). The Chamber of commerce who was heavily involved in the process insisted that one of their priorities was to develop a day-time economy. Another objective of renewal is to progressively change the identity of the valley as an ‘entertainment precinct’, the idea of creating a precinct for the creative industries is now favored (Interview May 24th, 2012). A strong imperative in the Valley urban vision is to enhance the urban design quality in the
precinct adjacent to the train station, to improve the areas attractiveness for new residents and businesses (Interview May 24th, 2012). In regard to the improvement of transport connectivity two strategies were taken: 1. To increase the density around the train station; 2. A series of catalyst projects. For point 2, one of the innovative components of the plan is to oblige developers to provide a mid-block link to increase connectivity for pedestrians (Interview May 24th, 2012). Another important point is on the public realm, the neighbourhood is lacking access to the public realm and to green spaces (Urban Renewal Brisbane, 2007b). Catalysts projects have been identified, these projects are driven by several objectives: to enhance heritage elements, create landmarks for the Valley, create benefits for the community, and to enhance business development (Urban Renewal Brisbane, 2007b).

4.3.2 Provision of affordable housing
Our interviews reveal that there is a lack of effective mechanisms in Queensland to deliver affordable housing in a context of urban regeneration (Interview June 29th 2012). Given the pressure for redevelopment and the strategic location of inner-city suburbs like Fortitude Valley, preventing displacement of low-income households was a real challenge associated with renewal and, it was not a priority of the regeneration process. The Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) was created in 2002 and funded both the State and Brisbane City Council ($15 million each) to prevent the displacement of low-income groups in the inner city; (BHC) has three large developments in the Valley (Green Square, Warry Street and Bonnie Street); however our interviewee mentioned that this is not enough to cover the housing needs of the low-income group (Interview July 11th 2012). The Green Square project is a landmark for social housing delivery as the building includes social services and 80 affordable units in the heart of the Valley (Interview July 17th 2012). There are other initiatives (e.g., Project Micca – support agency to provide on the ground services to homeless people) but they are not directly related to the renewal plan (Interview July 11th 2012).

4.3.3 Public engagement process
According to our interviews, the public engagement process has included different stakeholders, but low-income community groups have limited power and are not organised enough to have an impact on urban planning decisions (Interview June 29th, 2012; July 6th 2012). Key stakeholders like the Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) - a task oriented business of creating viable and affordable buildings- have not been
heavily involved in the decision process during the framing of the Urban Vision for the Fortitude Valley Renewal Plan.; Two workshops were held in 2007: a ‘directions’ workshop in March and then an ‘options’ workshop at the end of April 2007 (Urban Renewal Brisbane, 2007b). Our research reveals that low-income groups in the Valley community, which are transient in nature, have not had a significant influence during the renewal decision-making process.

5. Conclusion

We have identified several obstacles in regard to the integration of social sustainability in the case of the Fortitude Valley Renewal Process. Social aspects are not a priority of the renewal plan and this can be explained by different reasons:

- The pro-development culture in Queensland;
- The strategic location of the Valley makes it a neighbourhood prone to gentrification;
- The low-income community in the “Valley” is not sufficiently organised to have an impact on the decision-making process.

We can state that the sole emphasis on “place-making” is not sufficient to create a sustainable community in a context of regeneration. We recommend that the enhancement of the quality of the built environment should be twinned with actions to prevent the displacement of low-income groups. Our research reveals that the Fortitude Valley Renewal Plan is likely to foster the gentrification of the area, as there is not sufficient pro-active mechanisms integrated into the renewal process to prevent the displacement of low-income groups. In summary we recommend two strategies to implement socially sustainable urban regeneration: 1. Proceed to a Sustainability Assessment (SA) to improve strategic decision-making in a context of urban regeneration; 2. Evaluate the regeneration process by using relevant criteria. For the case of Fortitude Valley we have selected a set of criteria based on the work of Colantonio and Dixon (2011): amenities and services (anticipate demand change over time); housing choice and access; local environmental quality (improve and maintain quality of public realm); social integration and diversity; community development (opportunities for self-expression). The next step for this research will be to apply relevant indicators to measure social sustainability achievements of the regeneration process.
6. References


Brisbane: Brisbane City Council.

**Interviews**
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Interview with Principal Designer Hassel Group, May 24th 2012.
Interview with Chamber of Commerce, June 29th 2012.
Interview with Urban Planner Brisbane Urban Renewal (Manager 2004-2010), July 6th 2012.
Interview with Brisbane housing Company (BHC), July 11th 2012.
Interview Green Square Project, July 17th 2012.