From Accidental Planner to Agent Provocateur:
60 years of women in Victorian planning

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Lecki Ord, Helen Gibson, Chris Gallagher, Jane Monk, Jenny Moles, Roz Hansen, Kathy Mitchell, Barbara Norman, Claire Sim, Kellie Burns, Caroline James, Hang Do

Additional interviewees:
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1. Introduction

In 2008, the Women’s Planning Network undertook to celebrate the 100th anniversary of (non-Aboriginal) Victorian women gaining the vote, by commissioning a research project on the history of women in planning in Victoria.

The Women’s Planning Network (WPN) is an organisation that brings together women in the area of urban and regional planning and related built-form professions, in order to network, and more importantly to research issues particularly related to how women are impacted by (and can impact on) the planning of our towns and cities.

WPN’s 2008 research project was to document a history of women planners in Victoria and to:
- Focus on the women who were among the first planners in Victoria (in the period from the 1940s to today);
- Outline what their role was in helping to make Victoria what it is today;
- Provide insights into how Melbourne was planned and how women influenced the process; and
- Identify the accomplishments of Victorian women in celebration of the centenary of women’s suffrage.
After discussion with the WPN Advisory Team and consideration of the project brief, the form that the project took was to tell the stories of the times and events, through the lives of individual women. Eighteen women identified by WPN and other key informants were supplemented by an online survey advertised through WPN, the Victorian Planning and Environmental Law Association (VPELA), and the Planning Institute of Australia Victoria Division (PIA – Vic) in November and December 2008, which garnered 13 additional responses. Not all of the women we talked to were professional planners; some were key activists, academics, or decision-makers who also influenced planning and development decisions.

This study traces both the opportunities and challenges women have faced, and continue to face, within urban planning and related professions, and the challenges facing the profession. While women planners have accomplished a great deal in Victoria, both individually and collectively, challenges remain.
2. The 1950s: Pioneer Women in Planning

The profession of ‘town planning’, as it developed in Australia in the early 20th century, was concerned with improving the domestic sphere of homes, as much as the public sphere of workplaces, shops, and recreation areas. In all but rare instances, women were excluded from the early planning process in Australia, as they were from many similar decision-making spheres. Robert Freestone suggests that women were “systematically... excluded from all the significant state planning initiatives prior to the Second World War” and that on the basis of such exclusion, “it is not surprising that [early] women planning advocates have been largely written out of the historical record.” (Freestone 1995: 260).

A few notable women operated in the first half of the 20th century. Dr Jane (Jean) Greig (1872-1959) was an informant to the Victorian Royal Commission on the Housing Conditions of the People in the Metropolis in 1914, and a “stalwart member of Sir James Barrett’s Victorian Town Planning Association, serving on its executive for some two decades” (Freestone 1995). Edna Walling (1895-1973) was the most notable landscape
architect of her day, trained at Burnley Horticultural College and working largely in and around Melbourne for most of her adult life. Walling planned Bickleigh Vale, a suburb near Croydon.

Marion Mahony Griffin (1871-1961) worked on architectural and planning projects with her husband Walter Burley Griffin in Melbourne between 1914 and 1926. The Griffins were responsible for five suburban subdivision plans including two at Eaglemont, where they lived while working on their plan for Canberra, the new national capital. Though she was a feminist, Marion Griffin tended to minimise her own talents and it is usually assumed she played little part in Walter’s planning activities, beyond preparing perspectives and publicity for them.

The era prior to the end of the Second World War was, in essence, a time in which work in the planning sphere was piecemeal and fragmented. The Metropolitan Town Planning Commission Report was completed in 1929. Although the report was not implemented in any meaningful sense, the existence of the Commission itself had focused attention on planning matters during the 1920s. Similarly strong attention had been turned in the 1930s towards the question of slum abolition and, during the 1940s, post-war reconstruction. While these were all issues directly affecting the whole of society, boards or committees promoting these issues contained very few women. This situation would gradually change from the 1950s onwards.

After the end of the Second World War, Victorian women were expected to retreat from the paid workforce and contribute to a new generation of family formation.
Certainly, they had made numerous inroads into the public sphere as manual workers and in administrative positions, but were in the main stripped of these ‘privileges’ and expected to return to the status of housewife and bearer of children, or to some other undervalued and less public role.

Nonetheless, an increasing number of women in tertiary education and in bureaucracy slowly made inroads in the planning profession. The conservative federal government of Robert Menzies, while encouraging and reinforcing the conventional family unit, also increased funding to universities – allowing women greater access to study across all disciplines.

Julia Gatley (2005: 139) has pointed out that “it was the 1940s before women would enter municipal planning practice in Australia.” In Victoria it was not until the 1950s that this occurred. Women began to find places in the early Diploma of Town Planning established by the University of Melbourne. The first woman to graduate (in 1952) appears to have been Erika Rathgeber, whose subsequent career is unknown. It was another 16 years before Connie Wong was the second woman to do so, after which women graduates in planning became more common. This, of course, is only part of the story of women in planning in Victoria.

Josephine Johnson

Born in England and relocated to the Melbourne suburb of South Yarra at the age of six, Josephine Coombes was persuaded away from her first two career preferences – music and law – by her parents and her headmistress respectively. She took architecture as a third choice, and had become “very inspired by the whole concept of planning” towards the end of her degree.
“I suppose I was just passionately interested in society,” she now says, “and could see that if you could bring everything together, the transport, the land use and so on then that would be a worthwhile thing to do.” Having attained her qualifications, and hoping to travel overseas, she applied for a two-year, part-time course at University College London, funded by a scholarship.

She was accepted, the only woman in her class – a situation she feels was unproblematic: “because we were a novelty... by and large people were very respectful.” She was then offered another scholarship, on the basis of her previous work, for a project on British new towns.

Returning to Melbourne, Coombes took a position as a Planning Officer at the Metropolitan Melbourne Board of Works (MMBW), which had recently launched its comprehensive plan for Melbourne, prepared by 55 men and five women, three of whom were ‘typistes’. She also lectured in the then-new Town Planning course at the University of Melbourne. Twenty five years old in 1956, she found herself teaching her MMBW superiors, who were furthering their qualifications.

Her next career step was entering the employ of Len T. Frazer, ”a real little terrier of a man”, who had successfully tendered for Ballarat’s planning scheme. In 1957, while employed by both Frazer and the University, Coombes married the architect Blyth Johnson. By the middle of the following decade, the Johnsons were running a practice, each concentrating on their own specialty: “We had two and a half children at that stage,” she recalls, “and we ran our own practice until we retired.” The couple operated from their Melbourne home, “on the dining room table”. She counts a series of detailed social profile studies for the Anglican Church, which assisted in diocese amalgamations and rationalisations, as her most challenging and satisfying work.

There was a feeling that in England you could easily just sit and exist, while I had a real sense of how raw and exciting it was in Australia.

-Josephine Johnson
Johnson’s varied and distinguished planning career took her through various manifestations of planning practice, and she retains her interest in local planning issues in Bendigo, where she now lives.

At the same time that Josephine Johnson was carving out her career in the planning world, women elsewhere in Victoria were contributing comprehensively to new movements which would go on to inform the future shape of planning in the 1960s and 70s. These were women who, building on and taking cues from the work of ‘progress’ and other local lobby associations, began agitation for facilities and amenities in their own suburban areas. Women such as Ellie V. Pullen were active in campaigning for new kindergartens; women gained increasing prominence in groups such as the Parents’ and Citizens’ Association of Beaumaris, founded in 1950, which argued for local control of planning and zoning decisions made by state government. Later in the 1950s, groups such as the Park Orchards Progress Association – led by resident MaryAnn Carmen – addressed issues of amenity provision, governance, roads and open space (Nichols 2007). These roles for women would increase in the 1960s and 1970s and come to complement the increased presence of women at the ‘coalface’ of the planning profession itself.
3. The 1960s and early 1970s: Modern Melbourne is Shaped

In the period between the late 1960s and early 1970s urban planning was shaped by the concerns of a typical mid-century conservative state government, led by Henry Bolte. Experiments in corridor planning and decentralization (in the form of a new town based around Seymour, 170 km north of Melbourne) were mooted to manage what was seen as a future of unfettered growth into the 21st century. The Housing Commission’s commitment to large-scale ‘slum clearance’ in central Melbourne was proceeding unabated.

Aside from the low-key East Melbourne Association of the 1950s, the first prominent Residents’ Action Group was the North Melbourne Association, which began as the North Melbourne Community Development Association in 1965 with the dedicated involvement of Anthea Eyres.
She and her husband David would leave North Melbourne in the late 1960s for Richmond, where the Richmond Association – owing its existence also in part to the conscientious Annemarie Mutton – served a role as advocate for new arrivals in the suburb, particularly those from a non-English speaking background, and also for residents affected by the demolition activities of the Housing Commission of Victoria.

These were formative Residents’ Action Groups, and they were soon joined by similar organisations in other Melbourne suburbs, including the Fitzroy Residents’ Association, in which Renate Howe was an early member.

**Ruth Crow**

Ruth Crow (1916-1999) and her husband Maurie joined the North Melbourne Association in the late 1960s, at a time when both were working on their three-volume *Plan for Melbourne*, based primarily on community consultation.

Crow had been a founder of the Union of Australian Women, a breakaway group from the Housewives’ Association, and was also columnist for the *Northern Advertiser*. There, under the banner ‘Ruth Writes’, she might hold forth on issues of child care, the value of health centres, or ‘people’s power’ in town planning. Political activism, brought to the fore by women and men in Melbourne in the late 1960s and early 1970s, inserted new ideas on community inclusion, consultation, space and social mix. Ruth Crow was posthumously included on the Victorian Women’s Honour Roll in 2008. Issues she raised would inform planning practice at state and local levels from the 1970s onwards.

**Belinda Dale**

Like Josephine Johnson, Belinda Dale was a University of Melbourne graduate. However, she emerged from the University over a decade later, in the late 1960s.
Like many planners – to the present day – Dale’s interest in planning was not sparked until she had completed a degree in a related field, in her case Geography. Geography graduates, in particular, have spoken of the theoretical breadth of the discipline as an excellent preparation for urban planning, and the ‘romance of cities’ it instilled.

Dale was told by a professor in 1967 that the Town & Country Planning Board required a geographer, and that she should apply:

“It was a perfect apprenticeship in the Town & Country Planning Board in those days, we actually did statutory planning, we were the planning authority for some key areas, coastal areas and some other specific places and the Board of Works was the other main planning authority at the time, they were doing the metropolitan planning … I was the only woman and I was the first woman to be employed by the State Government as a planner and I know that because they had to pass special legislation to pay me less than the men because it was before equal pay.”

Indeed, equal pay became law five years after she began her first job, in 1972. Dale sees her choice to work in planning as largely positive. In part, no doubt, this is because her profession has supported her work-life balance choices: she has worked part time since she had children: “as a female, I’ve been able to have my cake and eat it too, and there wasn’t the resistance to me doing that fairly early on.”

I made a point about being paid less than my male colleagues, and someone said: “Oh well, men need more money because they pay for you when you go out on dates.”
-Belinda Dale

When I went to the Strategic Planning Section at the Town & Country Planning Board there were literally six of us that were doing strategic planning for all of the state. There wasn’t a lot of spare time to consult.
-Jenny Moles
Jenny Moles

A planner with a similar background to Dale’s is Jenny Moles, who also studied Geography at Melbourne University, in the late 1960s. She was, she now recalls: “the only one amongst the Honours Students - I think there must have been about eight or ten of us - who wasn't bonded to the Education Department. So, when they were setting up strategic planning at the Town and Country Planning Board, virtually for the first time under the revised legislation, Keith Tyler I think it was came to see the professor of Geography at Melbourne Uni to see if there were any likely sort of candidates who might be interested in planning… I was the only eligible one. But I nevertheless was… interested in the area and I kind of fell into it because I really had no other idea, other than just staying on again and doing a Masters and being a tutor... I had no other real plans so that transpired…”

In 1971, Moles became one of six personnel in the Strategic Planning Section at the Board: “There wasn't a lot of spare time to actually consult… and we did a lot of projects like dividing the state into regions for regional planning… we did the statements of planning policy on Yarra Valley and Macedon Ranges and highways and aerodromes and all of those things and most of the projects were theoretical, abstract sort of exercises which, you know, were undertaken by the six of us really…”

While studying for her Town Planning Diploma, Moles and fellow students set up a Planning Aid Service in North Fitzroy “which was associated with the Fitzroy Legal Service and was run out of the basement of the Fitzroy Town Hall… that was all part of the empowerment of people in planning, I think we were quite keen to ensure that people who would otherwise not be involved in the planning process… have expert advice”

This might be seen as an early manifestation of the new role of women in a reinvigorated area of social and political change.
4. Planning, Women and Politics: the Major Shift of the 1970s

During the mid to late 1970s, the proportion of women in planning was slowly becoming equal to men. When Jane Monk attended the University of Melbourne in the 1970s, she was one of three women in a total of 12 students. These women came from a variety of family backgrounds. Kathy Mitchell, who came from Elizabeth, a ‘battler’ suburb of Adelaide, worked as a shop clerk after family circumstances forced her to leave secondary school in the early 1970s:

“I came across a person who had done an adult matriculation course and I was shocked that this person who used to work in makeup did this course… I remember thinking if Maureen in makeup can do matriculation, I could”

When there was a careers visit from the University of South Australia, she “put up her hand saying ‘is there a course I can do related to urban geography?’ and this guy said ‘do you mean town planning?’”.
In her planning course “there were about three girls and 25 guys… I think it was a new discipline… A lot of planners were previously surveyors, engineers and the like”.

By the mid-1970s, when Barbara Norman graduated, the ratio was closer to 50/50. As these women graduated, they found a new era of planning activism galvanizing their actions.

Norman was a senior secondary student in the years that Gough Whitlam was Prime Minister, from December 1972 to November 1975. Her motivating impulses find resonance in the reasons many women had for moving towards planning in the 1970s: “He had a cities program,” she recalls, “and that was getting a lot of coverage – we were very aware of that… when I was doing my selection, that was a very positive horizon.”

The ascension of Rupert Hamer to the role of Premier on Bolte’s retirement in 1972 was another sign of a new era in planning. It followed shortly after the MMBW’s Planning Policies for the Metropolitan Melbourne Region Report, which recognised new concerns of public consultation and conservation, including dedicated ‘green wedges’ where development would not occur, under an umbrella of future development for a Melbourne of between four and five million people by 2000. Hamer’s commitment to ‘quality of life’ – including heritage and parkland provision, and striking out a vast quantity of proposed freeways – marked him distinctly from his fellow Liberal party member Bolte.

**Jane Monk**

Jane Monk, who like so many other of our interviewees had a geography background, found herself in 1976 entering the Melbourne City Council at a time of strong commitment to community planning. This was the time of:
"the Brooks Crescent battles to save some of Carlton and Fitzroy from further demolition squads by the Housing Commission and so it was a good time… for setting up community groups and looking for the ways forward”.

Women who worked in local community activism, such as Ruth Crow, also wrote and agitated on behalf of planning in Melbourne; but a new generation of planners and other people coming from an activist viewpoint also moved further into policy work.

Renate Howe

Renate Howe is a good example of this change. Howe has been active in planning and other local community issues since she moved to Fitzroy in the late 1960s after a period spent studying at the University of Chicago. With a background as a historian, she was able to use her skills and knowledge in aiding the formulation of an inclusive and sustained campaign of organised resistance to the Housing Commission’s demolition program in the Fitzroy area, most notably Brooks Crescent:

“I suppose just doing urban history in Chicago was such an eye opener because in Australia even though we are such an urbanised nation, and I studied Australian history, I don’t think Australian cities were ever mentioned! It was sheep and gold. And then I began teaching urban history here in Melbourne and at Deakin University and we taught the architects urban history… and that’s really how I became interested in planning as an issue academically then I think just as important is that experience that I think we’ve all had… at a local level.”

Fitzroy’s local government changed considerably in the early 1970s as a result of local activism, connected in some respects to what would now be seen as the gentrification of the area. Howe tracks a direct connection between the activist groups and changes in government style:

“There was quite a lot of resistance to people who were starting to demand a different way of doing things… I think that’s why the Residents’ Associations were probably quite powerful in the inner city area. That they were in many ways an alternative local government. And a lot of people later moved in to local and State Government, so they were a good training ground.”
Howe was herself being ‘trained’ for positions at VCAT and the Heritage Commission, a complement to her career as a historian, beginning at the Planning Appeals Board in 1983 where she was the first woman employed there in a full-time position. Here, her background and, she feels, her gender gave her a more rounded perspective on the issues involved.

**Helen Gibson**

Though her educational background is different – she is a lawyer by training – Helen Gibson’s career has many similar touchstones to Howe’s. A solicitor in Sunbury, she served for nearly eight years as a councillor for what was then the Shire of Gisborne, starting in the mid-1970s: “that was my introduction to planning related matters”. Here, she says, environmentalism was burgeoning: ‘the old attitude of… subdivide everything was being challenged. And it was also a time actually with a growing awareness of what is now called sustainability but we called it conservation.” After this, Gibson “became involved with planning panels and the Planning Appeals Board as a sessional member and gradually that was my introduction to planning and my involvement with planning has really been as a decision maker.”

**Lecki Ord**

Lecki Ord, later to become first female Lord Mayor of Melbourne, studied architecture in the late 1960s when she was one of five women in a class of 300. It was a move to Melbourne, and her North Melbourne experience, she now says, that politicised and inspired her:

“It wasn’t until I came to Melbourne in ’68 and then lived in North Melbourne and started to get involved again in residents’ associations… The time when Maurie and Ruth Crow were very active in local planning issues in North Melbourne and involved every likely suspect in the area into their planning issues. That was a great inspiration to me and I think that has assisted me to make it not just a professional type of thing but also a very personal involvement with planning issues.”
The greatest challenge has always been being in a room where I am almost the only woman making decisions. You don’t realise how stressful it is until you’re in the same situation with a room full of women, and suddenly it just flows much better.

- Lecki Ord

In all of these examples we can see the influence of informal networks, which have contributed to women’s increasing presence in planning since the 1970s – particularly, as suggested above, through the heightened role of residents’ action groups in local areas, and the strong presence of women within those groups.

Of course, to suggest that women were or are of one mind in this regard would be ludicrous. Birute Don counts her greatest accomplishment as “seeing the Monash Freeway built”, at a time when she “was responsible for community consultation and assisting in various planning studies to get the freeway built near the Gardiners Creek”.

The anti-freeway movement was traditionally a core concern of the Residents’ Action Groups. Don’s pride in both the result and the consultative process of the construction of the Monash (at that time, the South Eastern) Freeway signifies the diversity of women’s roles in planning by the late 1970s – a paradigm shift from the previous decade – at the same time as it highlights what are often perceived by women planners as core strengths of their approach, that of talking and negotiating with diverse interests.

For instance, Jenny Moles says that many women’s balancing of work and family life leads them to “a sort of facility which is useful in planning, because you’re kind of juggling lots of balls, playing out different values, all of that sort of thing and so the decision making perhaps comes easier or in a more complex way to you”. Chris Gallagher, a planner who also began her career in the 1970s, adds: “You’d need to contact someone in Treasury and my instinct would be to find out who and ring them, yet I’d find them drafting great long letters which was not the shortest line between two dots… so I think we are used to being social…”.
Jane Monk speaks of recent “testosterone charged decisions… such as the Mitcham Towers… it was driven by a different mechanism to what I would suggest is the more intuitive approach that I think comes out of the female side of things”.

The question of whether being a woman makes a difference to how planning is practiced was soon to be raised by women entering leadership positions within the planning profession.
5. The 1980s: Women in Planning Leadership

In Victoria, the long Liberal Party domination of state politics came to an end with the election of John Cain (junior) in 1982. Gibson, Howe and others speak appreciatively of two mentor figures who came to greatest prominence in the Cain governments of 1982-1990: Andrew McCutcheon and Evan Walker. Of Evan Walker, Helen Gibson recalls:

"Evan was a very dominant figure. His actions resulted in much change and real flowering of the planning profession… It was a period of expansion, there was difficulty in getting people on to appointments… I can’t remember whether it was [called] the Planning Appeals Board or the Administrative Appeals Tribunal at that stage. There were three full time positions which they were having difficulty in filling. He appointed five women on a part-time basis and that brought into the arena: myself, Jenny Moles who is now with Planning Panels Victoria, Jane Monk who is with the Priority Development Panel, Angela Smith who is not in planning any more and Andrea Atkinson. That was a wonderful opportunity for people who had young families to balance those needs between family and your involvement with the profession. Certainly Jenny, Jane and myself have all gone on to become full time panel members, tribunal members and that was the leaping off point, as it were, to our subsequent careers."
Another person who mentions Walker and McCutcheon as her two heroes is Lecki Ord, who was elected as a City of Melbourne councillor in 1982 and ascended to the mayoralty in 1987 (and was later inducted into the Victorian Women’s Honour Roll for her leadership).

Chris Gallagher

Similar testimony comes from Chris Gallagher, who began working in the field in the 1970s but who has more recently distinguished herself as Chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria for six years, from 2002-08:

“I was lucky to get into planning at a time when a decent boss had time to spend with you, and I had some really good bosses. John Buckley, for example, at the Town & Country Planning Board (TCPB) was terrific with me and I think he was really keen to see women that he thought were okay get on. I think there was then a whole period where you were sort of encouraged by your peers also rising up through the ranks. Roz Hansen and I used to share a house together, we did for a number of years, and we’d egg each other on. I think a really key influence for me was David Yencken. When I saw him in the Planning Department he was the Secretary and he was also very keen to make sure that women were well represented in key positions and I learnt a lot from him. They’re mostly men, I hate to say, but there was that band of women around you that kept you going as well. I worked for Evan Walker as a Ministerial advisor and so I did have the privilege of working with some really terrific people who would take the time to really make sure that you were coming along as well.”

Chris Gallagher also speaks about how women were inventing policies and processes during the 1980s. In her initial work at the TCPB, where she worked from 1977 to 1983:

“my very first job was issuing planning permits for four Gippsland Lakes municipalities… we issued the permits from Lonsdale Street, we’d go down and do the occasional inspection, we’d talk to the odd person, but it was a fairly autocratic kind of role”

But her work quickly became more interesting: “I think we got our breaks because we were pretty empowered really, there weren’t heaps of people to be delegating things to, you stood out.” Jenny Moles says:
"When I went to the Strategic Planning Section of the TCPB there were literally six of us who were doing strategic planning for the state… we were very pioneering in regards to the work that was being done because it hadn’t been done before. So we kind of made it up as we went along… and developed our own methodology… Some statements are still actually in State Planning Policies…”

Despite the move from a Liberal to a Labor government, the 1980s in Victoria were, like much of the rest of the nation, a time of rampant speculative development. Public-private partnerships were nurtured by the Cain government in Victoria, and major inner city redevelopment projects such as Southbank were launched. *Shaping Melbourne’s Future*, the metropolitan Melbourne plan, was developed in mid-decade, the first of many strategies to emphasise urban consolidation and the reduction of sprawl.

**Roz Hansen**

Like her friends and colleagues in the State government, Roz Hansen found herself rising within the profession during the 1980s. Starting as a planner with the Town and Country Planning Board in 1976, she moved to the City of Fitzroy in 1978. She joined the private consultancy sector in 1981, and between 1986-97 operated a partnership with John Henshall as Henshall Hansen Associates. She was notably the first female chair of the Victorian Historic Buildings Council. She had challenging moments as a female planning consultant with her own business in those years:
“I mean, most of my clients were males and I think that certainly in rural and regional Victoria when I was doing work out there... some of the people you had to liaise with... would look at you and say ‘oh what does she know, she’s only a woman.’ I can always remember going out and looking at a site somewhere out in the Boonies... and you had to hurdle a few post and wire things and of course I get out of the car and they’re looking at me because I’ve got the high heels on... and the guys saying ‘how the hell is she going to do this?’, and I opened the boot of the car and got out the gumboots and said ‘okay let’s go’... Fortunately, I was agile enough in those days to be able to get over the fences and walk the field and step in the cow dung and be one of the boys.”

More fundamentally, “when you get excited about things you were accused of being emotional as opposed to actually demonstrating a passion for the profession”. In 1997 Hansen formed Hansen Partnership.

Another barrier to women in leadership positions was work/life balance. As Jenny Moles, one of the women in the planning tribunal job-sharing arrangement, says:

“To move to three days a week where you actually knew which three days a week you were working with young children was just perfect. Before that, you had people ringing you from the registry saying ‘can you come in tomorrow?’, and you’d go ‘I don’t know.’”

Jane Monk adds, however, that all five women ended up working at home as well: “You could do a five-day case and then decide to take the next week off, which you would probably spend writing the case even though you’re not on and that’s why they definitely got their pound of flesh out of us.”
Willi Carney, who was a councillor in Eaglehawk, outside Bendigo in the 1980s, “was the first woman and a lot of the men were older . . . At that stage my husband wasn’t all that thrilled either . . . because our kids were younger . . . so at the end of the term I didn’t go back”. It was only when her children got older that she was able to return to local politics, eventually becoming Mayor of Eaglehawk twice as well as Mayor of Bendigo in 2002-2003.

Other women we interviewed delayed or decided not to have children because of their work commitments. Even for women without children, like Chris Gallagher, “not having a family made it different but not any easier, you still get exhausted, you still get five days a week, you’re still carrying bags [of groceries] home”. Several women we interviewed spoke of taking care of elderly dependents or of relatives who were ill or disabled.

There were concerns that the Royal Australian Planning Institute, as the peak body representing planners, was not responding to the needs and concerns of women planners. These concerns would finally be recognised as women began to lead professional associations in the 1990s.

When they heard I joined the Council, this was the ’70s, they said: “How are you going to do your washing? How’re you going to look after the kids?”

- Willi Carney
6. The 1990s: Women Planners Organise

The early 1990s, like the early 1970s, was a time of national interest in urban issues. It saw the launch of the Commonwealth Better Cities program, which included models for best practice development and innovation. New federal initiatives such as the Green Cities strategy paper also took a proactive approach to resource and environmental issues.

Meanwhile in Victoria, the economic downturn in the state caused the fall of the Labor government of Joan Kirner, the first female premier of Victoria, in 1992. Jeff Kennett’s Liberal government presided over the forced amalgamation of Victorian local governments, including a period where elected governments were replaced by leaders appointed by the State to tender local services. The end result was often controversial in local constituencies, as was the state government’s introduction of privatised roads, public transport and community services.

In 1995, Renate Howe provided a rejoinder to an oration by Evan Walker. In it, Walker bemoaned the lack of a 20th century version of the influential housing and poverty reformer Oswald Barnett.
“Undoubtedly,’ she said, ‘the new Os. Barnett will be a young woman… Young women… are more committed to social change and community values.” (Howe 1995: 25).

Certainly, the odds had increased for a new prophet in planning being a woman. The anecdotal evidence of our interviews suggests that equal number of women were graduating from the University of Melbourne by the mid-1970s (which at the time was the only accrediting planning course in Victoria; this would change by 1980, when RMIT and then other tertiary education players joined the scene). Again, some women were reaching planning and local government political decision-making prominence by the 1980s. But it was only in the 1990s that women began to play an equal role in planning decision-making. Megan Carew, who graduated in 1993, says:

“When graduating there was not a predominance of women in planning – you would be on project teams often as the only female. That has changed significantly now where you might have an all-female team.”

Several women spoke about the importance of female peer support and mentors in helping them cope with work/life balance and other stresses. Perhaps one of the most significant developments women have cultivated for themselves within the planning field is the establishment of the Women’s Planning Network in 1994. The organization was intended to focus on “local government reform; safety in the city; suburbs, and regional Victoria; heritage issues; environmental concerns; professional development for women in planning fields; and other planning-related topics (Office of the Minister of Planning and Development media release, 1994, cited in Whitzman 2007).

Roz Hansen was a key figure in establishing WPN, and also served as its inaugural president. For this work, as well as her other achievements in the planning field, she was inducted in the Victoria Women’s Honour Roll.
The membership of WPN includes planning lawyers, professional planners in government and private practice, as well as smaller groups of people in related fields such as urban design, landscape architecture, and engineering. The organization has been supported by the Planning Ministry since its inception. For the first years of its existence, it was housed within the state planning ministry, but it has recently co-located with the Planning Institute of Australia’s Victorian Division, with whom it has a collaborative relationship.

The Women’s Planning Network provides bi-monthly professional development events, an annual research project, and with Hansen Partnership, an annual Rising Star Award for a student who demonstrates excellence in gender and planning research through an essay. It has also worked on increasing the number of women in local government, helping to establish a Women’s Participation in Local Governance initiative in 2001. Since 2002, it has sponsored a mentorship program for young women planners, a program which Helen Gibson, Lecki Ord, and Kellie Burns, amongst other interviewees, describes as a wonderful experience for both the ’mentor’ and the ’mentee’.

Kathryn (Kathy) Mitchell

Even before the formal mentorship program, industry leaders like Roz Hansen were providing support to other female planners. Kathy Mitchell “basically worked at home” when she had three young children:

“Roz rang me up one day and asked whether I’d be interested in being a sub-consultant on a particular project and I said ‘well, I would, but I’m about to give birth to my second child next week’…. Roz said to me ‘give me a call when you are ready to do some more work’, so about nine months later I rang her up and said ‘I think I can do some consulting’. She said ‘we’re not really busy at the moment’ – this was the early 1990s and we had that recession…. She said to me ‘However I know Andrew McCutcheon (the Planning Minister at the time) is looking to increase the membership of Planning Panels, why don’t you give him a call?’.
“I said ‘I couldn’t do that, I’m not experienced enough’, and Roz said ‘Go for it, you’ll be really good for it’.”

Kathy moved from being a member of Planning Panels Victoria to be coming Chief Panel Member in 2004. She is also the President of the Victorian Planning and Environmental Law Association, an organization she helped found in the late 1990s.

Barbara Norman

The third woman we interviewed who led a professional organization in the 1990s was Barbara Norman. Barbara Norman was not the first female president of the Royal Australian Planning Institute – that honour goes to Sandy Vigar. But in 2000-2001, she was the last president of RAPI and the first president of the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). The name change was part of a radical overhaul of the organization, which for the first time recognised social, transport, and environmental planners, as well as land use planners. The recognition of social planning, a largely female-dominated specialization, was particularly important in boosting the prominence of women in the organization. As Norman says, “Leading the reform of the… Planning Institute and providing the foundation for a much more inclusive, progressive organization… was a lot of work and took some courage at times.” But her biggest challenge, as a woman, occurred when she moved into academe immediately afterwards. There were:

“hardly any senior women teaching, always women doing sessional teaching and part time but not in leadership positions… Grumpy old men in the middle… who had been there forever… I actually found it quite difficult for me as a non-traditional academic [and] I think there’s still a huge change to be achieved in the University sector generally.”
7. The 2000s: Women in Planning – the Next Generation

For Melbourne planners particularly, the first decade following the turn of the century has been dominated by Melbourne 2030, the latest in a succession of metropolitan strategies for Melbourne. Elected in 1999, the Labor governments of Steve Bracks and John Brumby have sought to distance themselves from the unpopular planning decisions of the Kennett government. Melbourne 2030, launched in 2002, is part of a suite of new planning policies that are intended, like their predecessors since the 1980s, to increase densities in the built up city and suburbs, and decrease urban sprawl. However, like their predecessors, the plan has not proven popular with the public or with local governments, and has largely proven ineffective to date in its goals.

Despite these setbacks for planning as a profession in Victoria, the number of professional planners continues to grow. Since the 1980s, the anecdotal evidence of the women interviewed suggests that women are less likely to be ‘accidental planners’.
They were more aware of the existence of urban planning (as town planning is now generally called) before they came to university. That said, the reasons for entering the profession nevertheless remain diverse. Thus, Mary-Anne Taranto, who graduated in 1993:

“never had a burning desire to become a planner from my school days but I always had an interest in design, writing, social justice and environmental issues. Planning naturally fell out of these combination of interests. I hoped that I would be able to make a difference to people’s lives and the built and natural environments.”

Kellie Burns asserts that she “specifically didn’t want to do planning when I left year 12, even though I loved geography and basically did town planning related research projects in Year 12.” Burns’ decision to take planning as a career choice was connected primarily to the greater likelihood that she would find work as a planning graduate, than in arts during the lean economic times of the early 1990s.

Melinda Wealands, who studied planning in the mid-1990s, was inspired to enter this profession having become “interested in planning in my last years of [secondary] school… I was really interested in how places are put together, through geography studies we did at high school.” Her ambition was to have “an influence on how places are made.”

Hang Do, who chose planning as a field some fifteen years after Burns and ten after Wealands, did so from a position that might almost be considered contrary: her feeling, she now says, was that she would “do something that no-one knows about.” Her comparison was to her cohort, “the culture I grew up in”, and a primarily “science background.” She adds:

“I was looking through the VTAC guide and I found urban planning and property construction and I thought well I’ll give that a go and that way I can, it’s still quite broad, I’ve got the property side and the planning side and if I do a range of subjects I can see what I like.”
Women entering planning in the 1990s and 2000s found a very different profession from that of the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, there are now a roughly equal number of women in planning education and in the profession, although there is still a gap in leadership. On the other, there is a sense, particularly amongst older planners, that planning has lost respect as a profession, that the planning process is too complicated and frustrating for both planners and community activists, that there are too many players who don't communicate well together, and that the pro-active capacity of urban planning has been lost.

For instance, Kathy Mitchell, like PIA's 2004 *Inquiry into Planning Education and Employment* (2004: ii) points to the 'toxic workplace' of local government:

"We're losing planners... because of what happens in local government. For the industry to thrive, it really needs to have really good young people who are given a chance. When they go out to local councils and they're not doing what they thought they were doing – strategic planning or thinking or writing reports in the way they thought they would because they are genuinely assessing the issues – and they are overruled constantly. Most... young people are actually bypassing local government now, they go straight to consultancy... because that is where they will be listened to, where they'll be able to actually contribute."

Roz Hansen adds:

"I think this is a real issue about the credibility of the profession and the integrity of the profession.... There are people leaving the profession, particularly at the middle level, which suggests to me that perhaps they are being beaten around the head one too many times and they've just had enough. Which is actually a real shame because they're actually the leaders of the future... it's actually not doing planning and the development of our cities any good because we're ending up with some very mediocre, ordinary decisions from people who are not listening to their technical advisors and it's a shame."

And, according to Barbara Norman, the toxic workplace has expanded to the entire profession:
"I do think planners will need to move professionally and collectively… stand up very strongly in Victoria and say, not in a whinging way, ‘this is the positive contribution of planning’"

For some of the older women we interviewed, there was a more fundamental aspect to planning having lost its way. Jane Monk says:

“We have a big ship to turn around… we haven’t really got ‘urban’ under our belt in Australia… That true urban model is something we need to explore more as a vehicle for community and place. Because I think our suburban addiction that we’ve really fostered with a car base has happened during our watch.”

Jenny Moles agrees with this diagnosis of failure of planning to come up with popular alternatives to urban sprawl:

“Australia is still a frontier society and it comes from that background of ‘there’s lots of land available’, the car that goes with it… The urban model must be… not just attractive to those who can afford to live in the inner city, it’s got to be attractive to the cheaper parts of the metropolitan area as well… District centres… have been part of the metropolitan strategy since the 1950s… [but] these places have to become more than windswept places… at the moment it is still seas of houses marching out to beyond the growth boundary”

And Chris Gallagher echoes this sense of the failure of the profession as a whole:

“I think my biggest disappointment is that we are still doing what I call physical planning. You know it is 30 years since I finished my planning course… and we were lectured about social planning and how suburbs need to have public transport arrive at the same time as the people. That’s not fixed… I think the next frontier for planning is cracking some of those big… socioeconomic challenges.”

Jane Monk concludes:

“I think that there needs to be a strong voice in local government… the opportunity to be more pro-active… [to accept] that those issues of affordability and environmental and social sustainability are actually within the remit of the planning profession because it gets… ambushed… or diverted into these little battles of solving someone’s satellite dish or solving someone’s fence… We’re not able to capture what I think is innate within the planning profession… just being that agent provocateur or creative irritant.”
What do younger planners think about the challenges facing the planning profession, and their future within it?

Work/life balance continues to be an issue for many female planners and women continue to leave the profession in disproportionate numbers. Claire Sim sees this as ‘a big thing on my agenda’:

“When I started work, I was so eager to please and too scared to say no that I just took on anything and everything. I set incredibly high standards for myself as I had always done right the way through high school... so when I found that I was struggling at work I was just like, ‘right, I need to work harder and harder’ until I finally burnt out in a massive way.”

Sim took a two-month leave of absence from her consultancy position in 2008, after three years of full-time work: “I wasn’t able to handle the stress… I needed to learn how to set boundaries and stick to them”. Because of a supportive workplace, she was able to return to a four-day week position, but other workplaces are not as supportive. Kellie Burns, who has been in the profession since 1991, says: “You know, what might happen in the future, with children, is incredibly daunting.” At least, adds Claire Sim, “someone’s done it before…” Yes, Kellie responds, “People work it out, it’s not inventing it for the first time.”

Every young planner interviewed found it a considerable shock to enter the workplace after the relative idealism of their planning course. Caroline James says: “my first planning job was after I graduated [in 2007], so that was really a shock to the system.” Again, the importance of mentors was brought up by Hang Do:

“In my previous workplace in local government the… coordinator has become a mentor after I finished working there, given me guidance as to workplaces I should apply for… what type of jobs I might be expecting… how to get your name out”.

Claire Sim
But young planners echo the older planners when it comes to the challenges they face, particularly in local government. Caroline James says:

“Working in local government there is always the… conflict there [between] the public and what you are trying to achieve, trying to contribute something positive to the community but being recognised for doing something positive at the same time… No one thanks you for it”.

Kellie Burns reiterates the critical role for professional organizations in this work of increasing the profile of the positive role of planning, as well as developing a new role for planning:

“I think there is a need for planning bodies, including the Women’s Planning Network, to be looking at how planners can contribute to a dialogue with other people, other professionals, other experts… to really start calling for action and change… It was brought home to me looking at a billboard on the Nepean Highway regarding the water storage levels of the Thompson Dam and in 1997 you can see half the top of this little marker and now it’s like a dirty little puddle… Planning has the opportunity to affect change and yet we all walk around with a planning scheme that’s a forest worth of paper for one thing, and second thing, completely counter-productive to a new way of thinking about a sustainable society.”

She adds she’s glad of the opportunities planning has given her:

“Planning… really is a very small tight knit community and I know over the years my friends have been quite envious either of my work place relations and work conditions and of the women’s planning network, the mentoring program, the fact that we are very social with each other, there are a lot of events and there is a lot of support…

“I think in that regard it’s really special.”
8. Conclusion: from Accidental Planner to Agent Provocateur?

The purpose of this research (and the accompanying film) has been to document the history of how planning in Victorian cities and towns has been influenced by women over the past 60 years. But as we spoke with, and got emails from, female planners, a collective story began to emerge.

It appears that many respondents stumbled into planning in university. Many of the women we interviewed, like Roz Hansen, Jenny Moles, Kathy Mitchell, Kellie Burns and Caroline James were interested in geography in high school. Then they found out, through vocational councillors or peers, that there was a profession called ‘town planning’ and it was a practical way to apply their interests in cities and the social good. Also, there were jobs available. Others, like Helen Gibson, Lecki Ord and Renate Howe, became involved in planning through community activism in the 1970s.

Some women were inspired by their planning education in relation to what Belinda Dale called “the romance of cities”. Others were frustrated by the emphasis on the physical rather than the social aspects of planning, or the lack of practical work experience.
While women were a minority in planning education until the mid-1970s, they slowly became equal in terms of numbers. However, as Barbara Norman reminds us, planning education is still dominated by an older generation of men.

Women spoke about the importance of supportive mentors. While this report has emphasised Evan Walker, Andrew McCutcheon, Roz Hansen, and Ruth Crow, others mentioned by more than one interviewee include David Yencken, David Whitney, Kathy Mitchell, Helen Gibson, and Jane Monk. Les Kilmartin, Leonie Sandercock, Mario Gutjahr, Toni Logan, Margo Huxley and Kate Kerkin were also mentioned as academic/intellectual influences. Some respondents also talked about the importance of supportive family members – Roz Hansen and Caroline James both talked about the support of parents. As discussed in the report, several respondents specifically talked about the importance of the formal WPN mentoring program, as well as more informal mentoring by workplace managers or employers.

Several of our respondents spoke about how women working in planning – or any other government profession – were required to resign when they married; this rule was true until 1973. Since then, part-time work and flexible hours have become more common. Still, both more experienced and younger planners speak passionately about the difficulties they face in balancing work with their personal commitments. Broadly speaking, there were three responses to this difficult balancing act. Some women delayed having children, or did not have children at all. Some stayed at home, either taking on paid work or not, during the early years of their children, although, as Barbara Norman pointed out, responsibility for children continues as they become adolescents. Other women intervened in the nature of their employment, either demanding a better
arrangement such as job-sharing, or finding a workplace with a supportive attitude to parenting. Even amongst younger planners without children or other dependents, there was a concern about overwork. Many older generation planners remarked that their workloads have increased in recent years. But there is no easy solution to this problem.

There is also no easy solution to the challenges facing the planning profession – and Victoria as a whole – in terms of liveable cities and regions. The older generation planners spoke of a heroic era when a few planners could write a metropolitan strategy or set up a local planning legal clinic. Some feel that there are too many stages in the planning process, too many stakeholders, perhaps even too many planners now. What is certain is that there is a shared malaise about the pro-active capacity of planning. Some feel, in the words of Dalia Cook, urban planning has become “bogged down with the details, but surprisingly less certain”.

Yet younger planners, such as Claire Sim and Caroline James, are brimming with ideas for future change. Sim feels she’d like to see planning ‘be much more proactive,’ she welcomes the fact that ‘people are being a bit more visionary...’ James is cautiously optimistic about the possibility of ‘educating people a bit more about what’s involved’ in planning, and that while ‘changes are inevitable... we can achieve that in a positive way.’

Ending on a positive note, most of the planners interviewed loved their profession and felt that they were making a positive contribution to society through planning. Many were able to look back on a particular achievement, or a sense that they were part of a major achievement, like Lecki Ord being proud of her contribution to revitalization of Melbourne’s Central Business District, or Barbara Norman feeling that she helped set the Planning Institute in a new direction.
For Helen Gibson and Kathy Mitchell, improving the decision-making process was more important than any single decision, while Chris Gallagher and Jenny Moles looked back on some of the planning legislation their generation set down as an accomplishment that has stood the test of time.

The final word is left to Jane Monk, who says:

"I think it's a great career, and the more you put into it the better it is... We live in a changing society and we are actually about being change agents or facilitators, supporters and facilitators of appropriate change. So there is never anything that could become boring"
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