**Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House**

Street Connections Project Final Report, 2011 Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House

# Connections and Perceptions

The Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House and social cohesion in Port Melbourne and South Melbourne

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**CITY OF PORT PHILLIP**

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# 1. Executive Summary

## *Introduction*

The Street Connections project draws on census data, focus groups, interviews and surveys in order to explore social connections and the role of Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House (PMNH) in the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area. Rather than focusing solely on people who participate in PMNH, this project sought to engage with a diverse range of people and groups in the City of Port Phillip. A wide range of often contradictory views have been collected.

The data indicates that there is significant socio-economic diversity in the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area. While people are not necessarily anxious about a threat to community cohesion, this does provide specific challenges for fostering social connections. The PMNH is well known within the Port Melbourne area and, with its range of courses and programs which already attract a diverse group of people, is well placed to advocate for and foster increased community cohesion.

## *Summary of findings*

### The Port Melbourne- South Melbourne area

- Port Melbourne in particular has seen strong population growth, accompanied by a change in the make up of who lives there.
- While newcomers may find people they identify with and existing groups of residents may find ways to reach out to newcomers, this requires a range of resources including physical resources, personal qualities, and time.
- Socio-economic change, which can be described as gentrification, is happening within the City of Port Phillip. While the newcomers to a gentrifying area may still develop a connection to the place and community, it is accepted by the City of Port Phillip and other groups in Australia that there is a role for policies which limit the displacement of lower income groups and foster a sense of connection within the diversity.
- There is socio-economic diversity in the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area, which appears in the census data as pockets of disadvantage concentrated at sites of public and community housing.
- Using the measure of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage, Port Melbourne has some pockets of people who rate around the middle of the scale. This is not the case in South Melbourne, where most census collection districts are clustered around the most advantaged ratings with a few pockets clustered around the most disadvantaged ratings.

### Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House

- Port Melbourne residents are aware of the PMNH, while residents from elsewhere in the City of Port Phillip often are not.
- Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House (PMNH) is providing the range of courses, programs and general community support typical of a Neighbourhood House.
- PMNH's program has a reputation for being broad and well managed. Courses and programs are generally full or nearly full. Space is a limiting factor for growing the program.
- While many suggestions for new courses and programs were received, organisations like PMNH take on a risk when they provide a new course or program.
- The perceptions of some people are inaccurate, such as the labelling of some courses and programs as being for people with a disability because a few visible members appear to have a disability.

- Front desk volunteers are positive about their role, but some people are critical of the arrangement if they have queries that are unable to be dealt with immediately by a volunteer.
- There are also different perceptions of how easy it is to get to PMNH, perhaps based partly on the degree of mobility of the person and their awareness of public transport in the area.

## Social connections and attitudes towards community cohesion

- There has been a large amount of change in the City of Port Phillip. Earlier research suggested changes were having a negative impact on social connections and community cohesion.
- Different people have different experiences when it comes to social contact in their street and neighbourhood. Being a newcomer has been seen as a challenge to community connection, but newcomers may also seek out opportunities to meet other people. The nature of the built environment, access to physical and social resources, and having time available all impact on social contact.
- Social connections have been seen in research and social policy as leading to better outcomes for people and communities.
- There are different types of social connections, with bridging across socio-economic and power differences being particularly challenging. Social contact between people is most likely when people have things in common.
- There seems to be a degree of ambivalence about the importance of community cohesion. Many people are not optimistic about the potential for PMNH to provide activities suitable for people in different socio-economic positions.
- PMNH does provide opportunities for different people to come together both in terms of encounters and more sustained contact which can build relationships.
- The nature of Neighbourhood Houses suggests that PMNH will remain well placed to continue to support people building social relationships with a range of people in their local area.

# 2. The Street Connections Project

## *Street Connections Project aims*

The Street Connections project by Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House (PMNH) offered an opportunity to talk with people in the City of Port Phillip, moving beyond neighbourhood house users, in order to seek input in course planning, strategic planning, and improving the understanding of the neighbourhood's social and learning needs.

PMNH has a history of research, with reports coming out in 2000 (Borrell 2000), 2006 (PMNH 2006) and 2008 (Buckley 2008). This most recent project provided an opportunity to seek feedback on some of the 2006 findings, notably in the areas of
- The neighbourhood, with a focus on change, attitudes and cohesion
- Socio-economic differences and disadvantage
- What are the learning and social needs in the Port Melbourne-South Melbourne area
- Who participates and what the Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House's role should be in the community

## *Methodology*

Three different methods were used to explore priorities for short term and long term planning for the Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House as well as perceptions of community connections more generally. This information has been put together with previous research reports and ABS data.

## Survey

A survey was conducted at a South Melbourne BBQ in October 2010, organised especially for this project. Surveys were also conducted at the Port Melbourne Carnival. In total 36 Surveys were completed.
The survey covered awareness and interest in the Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House, awareness of and interest in activities or local services more generally, and neighbourhood perceptions.

## Focus groups

Six focus groups were held with different groups in the City of Port Phillip. Focus groups provide an opportunity for discussion, collaboration and disagreement. The conversations were under an hour. The venue and times were organised in collaboration with the groups. Groups promoted the conversations with their own members.
The schedule of questions for the focus groups covered involvement in and interest in activities, neighbourhood perceptions, participation and aspirations for the future of their community. Engaging with existing groups meant that there was some common ground shared between participants and the group could offer their own experiences of connections. These groups were mostly found outside of the Neighbourhood House.

## Interviews

Ten interviews were held with people involved in the Port Melbourne-South Melbourne community identified by the project team.
The interview schedule asked interviewees to reflect on their own experience and what they know of the experience of others to comment on: the significance, strengths and weaknesses of the neighbourhood house planning; social connections within their neighbourhood; and the significance of changes in demographics.

# 3. The Port Melbourne-South Melbourne area

## *Summary*

Port Melbourne has seen a higher rate of population growth than South Melbourne. The City of Port Phillip supports the notion that there is an active role to be played to minimise displacement that may occur through gentrification. Earlier research projects undertaken on behalf of PMNH have indicated that the Port Melbourne-South Melbourne area has significant pockets of disadvantage. SEIFA data which measures relative advantage and disadvantage broken down into census collection districts suggests that South Melbourne is polarised. Port Melbourne also has pockets of disadvantage, but does have some census collection districts that rate in the middle band of the relative advantage and disadvantage scale. Other research has concluded that fostering a sense of community is valuable for both groups at risk of displacement and newcomers. As will be discussed further in later sections, the demographic changes in the area have not resulted in the complete collapse of community connections, although establishing these connections has drawn on the efforts of individuals and community groups, as well as what opportunities have been available through the physical environment.

## *Area background*

Port Melbourne and South Melbourne are neighbouring inner suburbs, located in the City of Port Phillip. At the 2006 census Port Melbourne had 13,293 residents and 29.4% of households were lone person households (ABS 2007a). South Melbourne had a smaller number of residents, with 8,790, and a larger share of lone person households, 33% (ABS 2007b).

## Cultural And Linguistic Diversity

Although there are more people born outside of Australia and who do not speak English at home in the Port Melbourne-South Melbourne area than Australia as a whole, this project offers little insight into the significance of these factors for community connections.

Port Melbourne has a smaller proportion of its residents born in Australia (62.4%) compared with Australia (70.9%), while South Melbourne has an even smaller proportion (57.8%). The proportion of residents who speak English at home



The migrant legacy of the area is represented on this toilet block. Photograph by Kate Kelly.

is also smaller in South Melbourne (67.5%) than Port Melbourne (70.5%), and Australia (78.5%). Other than English, the five most common languages spoken at home by residents of the two suburbs include four of the same languages (Greek, Russian, Mandarin and Cantonese). In South Melbourne 3.0% of residents speak Indonesian at home, while in Port Melbourne 1.7% of residents speak Italian at home.

Port Melbourne is seen as having non English speaking groups represented, but these people are more established so have a suitable level of English language skills (I1,I2) and this is an issue

people are able to work around (I5). In response to the question: "Is there anything that does/would make it difficult for you to join in our activities?",nobody selected language as a response in the survey. However, there was one person surveyed who struggled to respond to the questions being asked in English. Only one person surveyed said they spoke a language other than English at home. Therefore the methodology used in this project could have contributed to the language and settlement issues discussed in an earlier study (Borrell 2000) not being picked up in this project.

# Population growth

While Port Phillip as a whole was expecting an average annual change in population numbers of 1.49% over 2001 to 2016, for Port Melbourne the annual rate was 3.04% with 6,269 more people expected from 2001 to 2016 (Pop and housing forecasts 2006: 3). South Melbourne's expected rate of change was more typical at 1.75% per year, or 2,275 more people (Pop and housing forecasts 2006: 3).

Although in the past decade Port Phillip residents appear to have become less transient (Community Pulse 2011: 7-8), Port Melbourne has seen an influx of new residents through an increase in housing stock. Many former industrial sites have become residential developments. Part of Port Melbourne  around Bay Street is designated as an Activity Centre Mixed Use Zone, with high rise residential developments appearing in this area. There have also been high rise developments along the foreshore. The Beacon Cove development includes five high rise towers along the waterfront. While the rest of the development is low rise development of generally two stories, Beacon Cove was a significant addition of housing in an area previously used for industrial purposes.

***Port Melbourne in particular has seen strong population growth, accompanied by a change in the make up of who lives there.***

## *Population growth and social cohesion*

Increasing density is seen as necessary for reducing climate change risks driven by consumption and as creating a favourable environment for 'more equitable social characteristics and access to essential services.' (Adams 2009: 211). However, it is not just that more people are living in these suburbs. Earlier studies have highlighted 'emerging polarisation in Port Melbourne along socio-economic status lines (and the associated 'new' and 'old' housing)' (Borrell 2000: 27). Some of the implications for local connections of the particular nature of the change in the Port Melbourne-South Melbourne area will be discussed after a brief consideration of the impact of the high rate of population growth in Port Melbourne.

While population growth and demographic change is often spoken about as a threat to community, Port Melbourne demonstrates that development projects can be a motivator for community mobilisation and the sense of a shared project and future. Such community mobilisation may not be a campaign against change so much as a demand to have a say for what sorts of changes take place. Early community mobilisation in the Beacon Cove area included those who moved into the earlier stages of the Beacon Cove development and were concerned about the development plans for the final stages of Beacon Cove (F5). Many people put in long hours on a voluntary basis to try to achieve the best outcome (F5).

While clearly newcomers can foster and be party to instrumental connections, the rate of people moving into the area may make it difficult for people to foster ties. Earlier research on the Port Melbourne area demonstrated some of the extra barriers when newcomers are seen as being different to 'the traditional community'. For example, one playgroup mother said,

> *'New residents are not considered part of the traditional community and sometimes they can raise barriers. As a new resident you have to 'earn your stripes' and take the initiative to be friendly. There are all different types of people living in Port Melbourne. When I first came here I thought that everyone was really rich or really poor and that there was no-one in the middle. However, this was only appearances.' (Borrell 2000: 59).*

Ultimately this mother was able to find people she identified with, at least when it came to not being rich or really poor. However, developing a sense of belonging took time and initiative on the part of the newcomer.

By a non-Beacon Cove resident, Beacon Cove residents were described as a 'good group' and 'friendly' (I7). This contrasts with the views of some that newcomers, while they may be willing to exchange greetings, do not speak with people (F1). Some residents spoke about how they are trying to make a village (F5) and a number of Beacon Cove residents have also become involved in various groups, activities and causes.



Former industrial sites and a former HMAS Lonsdale Navy Depot have been converted into apartments. Photograph by Kate Kelly.

> *You think that this is my neighbourhood, you seek out people who are similar perhaps or retired or have got a dog. … I don't want to sit at home I need to join in things. … [Of the people I play Bridge with,] most of them are my neighbours. (F5)*

One longer term Port Melbourne resident said it was important that new residents are able to feel a part of what Port Melbourne was. In an attempt to help make this happen the Port Melbourne Historical and Preservation Society used to walk a flyer around to new apartments titled, 'To the new kids on the block'. This was discontinued as the rate of development meant that so many new units of housing were being added that this could not be kept up (I3).

> *We'd always hoped we'd be able to draw in the new demographic. It's not that easy. ... [Of the people who live in the new apartments,] Some of them may be isolated. […] On the other hand, you [-- or they --] might prefer to be isolated. (I3)*

When it comes to cohesion, the demographic changes related to population growth may matter and so can the physical environment people move into. Although, social – over functional and physical – characteristics of a neighbourhood have been found to be the most significant for how neighbourhood reputations are assessed (Permentier, Van Ham & Bolt. 2008), physical characteristics – such as public space – have been seen as key to changing social characteristics such as social inclusion (Fincher & Iveson 2009; Iveson 2006).

Beacon Cove residents spoke about meeting in the small green spaces which many of the houses face onto (F5).

> *The design of the squares,... in summer you often sit out there chatting to people. When we first came that's how we got to know people, and got to know people through the gym. (F5)*

One Beacon Cove resident remarked that she was delighted to find that the area did not just have retirees living there, there was also a mix of people (F5). However, working full time does make it harder for people to meet (F1, F5), and parenting young children can also result in little time available regardless of where people live (F1, F4).

> *- I'm pleased there's a mixture [of age groups, including young children]*
> *- We were delighted (F5)*

> *I think it's very hard when you're working full time to meet people. … I didn't meet some of them [-- my neighbours --] until I was doing gardening. (F5)*

***While newcomers may find people they identify with and existing groups of residents may find ways to reach out to newcomers, this requires a range of resources including physical resources, personal qualities (e.g. being able to take initiative), and time.***

## Socio-economic change and displacement

The inner suburbs of Melbourne can be described as undergoing gentrification, which means that not only would the populations of the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area be changing, but it is expected that there would be a greater proportion of people who can afford to spend more on housing.

> *'Gentrification... in its simplest form, it describes the displacement of low income groups by higher income groups.' (Housing strategy 2008: 89).*

Affordable housing is the only indicator in the Community Pulse snapshot which is currently rated as, 'moving away from sustainability' (Community Pulse 2011: 4). With affordable housing rates decreasing over time, the perception across focus groups and interviews that newcomers are better off financially appears to be accurate.

Demographic change, in the form of gentrification, is taken to be an issue relevant to council planning. One of the ways the City of Port Phillip works to avoid the total displacement of low income groups is through supporting the community housing sector.

> *'Port Phillip also has a strong community housing sector with at least 2.1% of total dwellings comprising community housing. If independent community housing is included however, the proportion is higher at approximately 3.4%. This is concentrated in St Kilda and South Melbourne. Independent community housing refers to the distinction between the smaller amount of community housing on the Office of Housing's database (with an interest of the Director of Housing, either owned or part funded by the Office of Housing) and other community housing without such interest (e.g. provided independently by churches, charities or philanthropic trusts).' (Housing Strategy 2008: 63).*

The high cost of housing is seen as not only influencing who lives in the City of Port Phillip, but also their ability to participate in the local community. Having to work to service a large mortgage was seen as a reason why people are not participating (F1). The other side of this, as recounted by an interviewee who had been speaking with a parent of young children, is that this person saw

himself and his local friends as tied to the place through their large mortgage (I3).

One of the positive outcomes ascribed to gentrification is that it reduces crime rates and behaviour seen as problematic. Such a claim was included in Atkinson, Wulff, Reynolds and Spinney's 2011 AHURI report on gentrification (Atkinson et al. 2011: 62- citing Atkinson 2008). In PMNH's 2000 report there was some mention of an improvement in the relationship with police.

> *'One key informant was of the view that, although there is a history of distrust between the community and police in Port Melbourne, community trust is improving in a general sense.' (Borrell 2000: 48).*

However, Atkinson et al. claimed in summary that:

> *Where displacement and replacement take place it can seem as though neighbourhoods 'improve', when the reality may be that poorer groups are thinned out or re-sorted through the housing system—often into private rental and public housing elsewhere. The 'gain' of higher income households to one political jurisdiction, thought of in 'global' terms, may be cancelled out by the migration of lower-income displacees to others.* (Atkinson et al. 2011: 3)



The former court house and police station have been converted into office space, a tile showroom and a bar. Photograph by Kate Kelly.

Social diversity is described by Atkinson et al. as 'critical as a principle for social and economic planning.' (Atkinson et al. 2011: 62). Difference is described by Australia's Social Inclusion Board as a source of opportunity.

> *Divisions and differences within a community are almost inevitable. They may present challenges but do not necessarily prevent the development of vital and resilient communities. Consider the different perspectives and knowledge of divided communities. See if there are ways to cater to different needs and aspirations, rather than forcing a consensus or disenfranchising some sections of the community.'* (Social Inclusion Board 2009: 2)

The provision of community housing in the Port Melbourne- South Melbourne area has enabled some income residents to live in the area. However, as will be discussed further in the next subsection, the pattern has been one of pockets of disadvantage (PMNH 2006).

In Port Melbourne, 7.6% (553) of occupied dwellings are rented from a State housing authority and South Melbourne has a higher number of public housing properties (630). Rates of rental are higher in Port Melbourne (42.1%) and South Melbourne (49.3%) than Australia as a whole (27.2%)[1]. Over the past three censuses the percentage of social compared with private housing has decreased across the City of Port Phillip (Community Pulse 2011: 4).

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[1]  It should also be noted that the 'note stated' rate in regards to tenure type for occupied private dwellings was 13.3% in Port Melbourne compared with 7.1% in Australia.

According to 2007 City of Port Phillip data,

> *The distribution of Port Phillip's rooming houses is varied across the municipality – 74% are located in St Kilda (accounting for 95.5% of Port Phillip's private rooming houses), 21% are located in South Melbourne (mostly community rooming houses), and 5% are located in Port Melbourne (all community rooming houses).* (Housing Strategy 2008: 21).

There is evidence that many people living in public housing do participate. 43% of people surveyed for this project lived in public housing, suggesting that they attended the BBQ or the festival and agreed to participate in the survey. The link has been made between community strength and 'the ability of governments to achieve the goals for long-term, sustainable growth set out in documents such as *Melbourne 2030: Planning for Sustainable Growth* (DoI 2002), *Growing Victoria Together* (DPC 2001) and Local Government plans.' (Humpage 2005: 5).

Supporting residents with a strong sense of community who may be vulnerable to being displaced is not only a service to those residents. Activities which foster connections may be able to provide a supportive entry point for newcomers – who are a significant group in this area due to large scale residential development. However, inclusion has been a process which earlier research suggests requires supportive policies and some facilitation.

***Socio-economic change, of the sort which can be described as gentrification, is happening within the City of Port Phillip. While the newcomers to a gentrifying area may still develop a connection to the place and community, it is accepted by the City of Port Phillip and other groups in Australia that there is a role for policies which limit the displacement of lower income groups and can foster a sense of connection.***

## *Pockets of disadvantage*

Earlier reports demonstrated that there has been 'growing social and economic polarisation occurring in Port Melbourne' (Borrell 2000: 26).
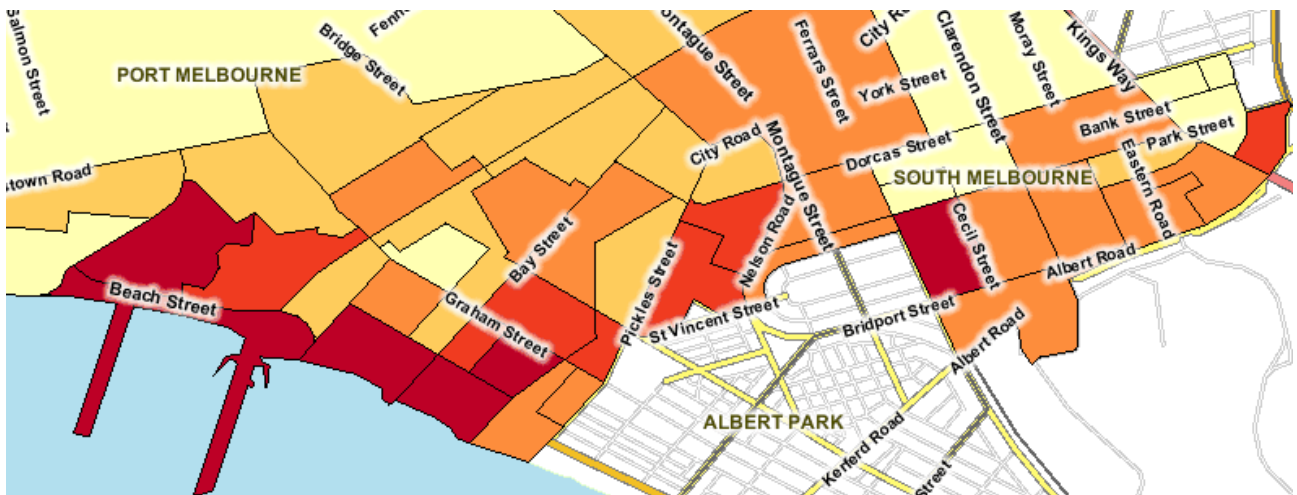


*Illustration 1: Percent of population earning $2,000 a week or more, 2006 Census ABS*
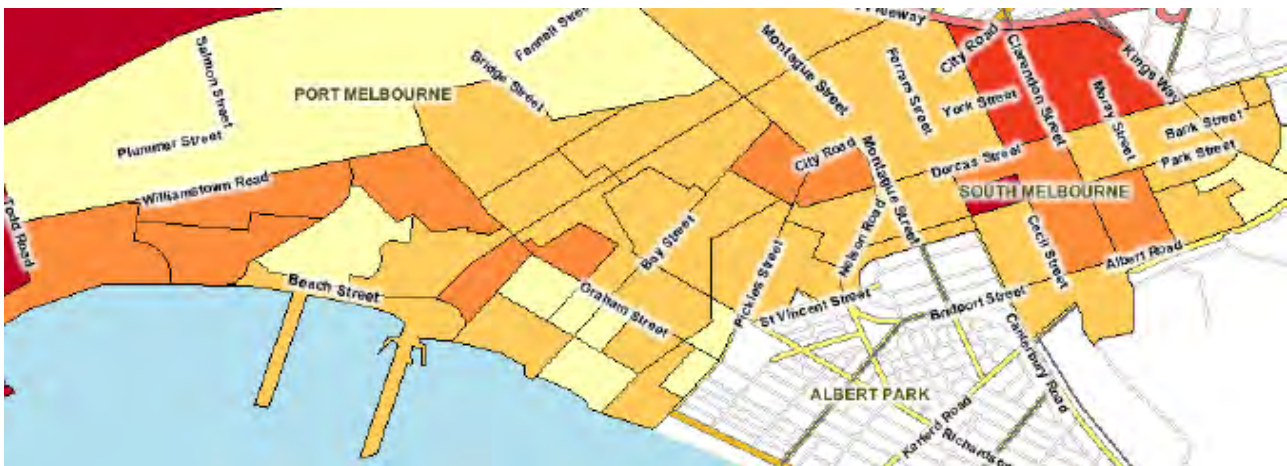
*Illustration 2: Percent of population earning $0 to $499 per week, 2006 Census ABS*

There are some expected patterns in the geographic distribution of incomes across the suburbs with Beacon Cove, a recent development in Port Melbourne, having a relatively high percent of its population earning $2,000 a week or more and a relatively low proportion earning $0 to $499 per week. The inverse is true for the census collection district in South Melbourne where Park Towers (a public housing development) is located.

Of course, incomes do not measure wealth. Another measure used by the ABS is the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage.

> *Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage: a continuum of advantage (high values) to disadvantage (low values) which is derived from Census variables related to both advantage and disadvantage, like households with low income and people with a tertiary education.* (ABS 2006)

Both Port Melbourne and South Melbourne appear towards the top of Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage rankings, where a higher ranking means the area has more advantaged people. However, exploring the Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage rankings for those census collection districts that make up the suburbs presents a picture of both extreme advantage and disadvantage. Both suburbs have over half their census collection districts ranking in the top decile (so the top 10%), but have a significant number of census collection districts ranking much lower down. This inequality between parts of the suburb is most marked in South Melbourne, where there are no census collection districts in the middle rankings.

Illustration 3: The proportion of Port Melbourne's census collection districts at each Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage ranking, 2006 Census



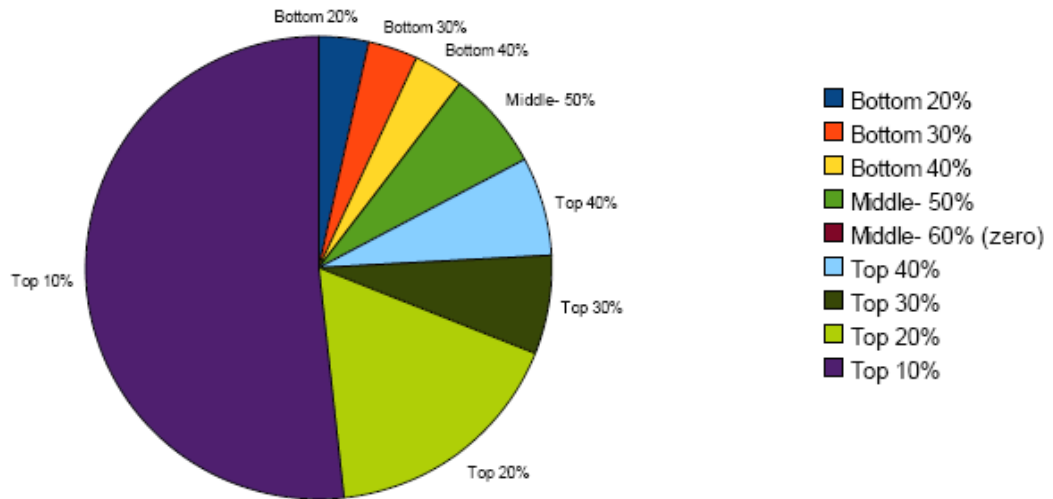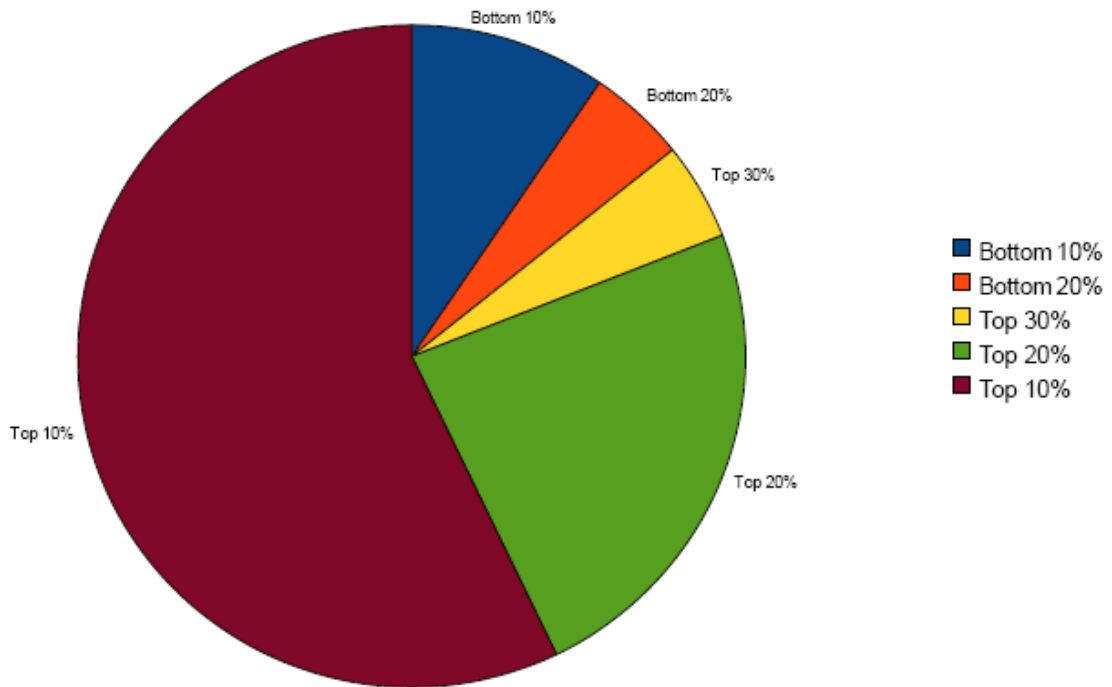Illustration 4: The proportion of South Melbourne's census collection districts at each Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage ranking, 2006 Census

Median individual ($852 per week) and family incomes ($2,092 per week) in Port Melbourne are around 180% of median incomes across Australia ($466 and $1,171 per week). However, mothers who live in private housing still spoke about the importance of free spaces that are inclusive.

This is even more significant when considering the high level of socio-economic inequality.

> *An analysis of the occupations held by the resident population in the City of Port Phillip in 2006 shows the three most popular occupations were Professionals (18,074 persons or 37.8%), Managers (8,462 persons or 17.7%) and Clerical and Administrative Workers (6,669 persons or 13.9%).In combination these three occupations accounted for 33,205 people in total or 69.5% of the employed resident population.* (Housing strategy 2008)

As suggested by the Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage rankings for census collection districts, patterns of incomes also indicate inequality within the suburbs of Port Melbourne and South Melbourne.

***There is socio-economic diversity in the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area, which appears in the census data as pockets of disadvantage concentrated at sites of public and community housing. Using the measure of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage Port Melbourne has some pockets of people who rate around the middle of the scale. This is not the case in South Melbourne, where most census collection districts are clustered around the most advantaged ratings with a few pockets clustered around the most disadvantaged ratings.***

## *Conclusions*

There are patterns of difference in the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area. While this project is unable to make substantial claims regarding the significance of CALD groups in the Port Melbourne- South Melbourne area, data from the 2006 ABS census and collected through this project demonstrate the nature of some of those types of differences and the potential impact on actual community connections and perceptions of the community. The demographic patterns in Port Melbourne and South Melbourne are different. South Melbourne has a more polarised population according to the ABS Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage rankings. While Port Melbourne has census collection districts which rate in the middle band of the ABS Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage rankings, meaning it is less polarised, Port Melbourne has been dealing with a higher rate of population growth. The demographics of both areas suggest there could be challenges for community connections, which will be discussed in greater depth in the rest of this report.

# 4. The Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House

## *Summary*

Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House (PMNH) is providing the range of courses, programs and general community support typical of a Neighbourhood House. People who lived in Port Melbourne are aware of PMNH and PMNH's program has a reputation for being broad and well managed. While PMNH does have a good profile in Port Melbourne, the perceptions of some people are inaccurate or would change through increased information. The popularity of PMNH is demonstrated through the fact that its courses and programs are generally full or nearly full. Space is a limiting factor for growing the program. While many suggestions for new courses and programs were received, organisations like PMNH take on a risk when they provide a new course or program.

## *The Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House*

> *The Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House provides a warm welcoming environment where people come together and facilitates the realization of people's goals, ideas and identity through the provision of courses, projects and groups.* (PMNH 2011)

Neighbourhood Houses have been part of many Victorian communities since they were established from the early 1970s (Humpage 2005:13). The Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House (PMNH) was opened in 1986, and was first located in a Bay Street shop front (Grainger 2011: 12). Today PMNH is near the Bay Street shopping strip, at the site of the 1892 Sandridge Temperance Hall on the corner of Liardet and Nott Streets in Port Melbourne (Grainger 2011: 3). The site is of significance because it has been continually in use for community purposes since 1892.

Neighbourhood Houses had their origin in grassroot action arising 'out of local community need, particularly the isolation of women in the community, with a vision to bring people together and enhance the opportunities of people and communities.' (Humpage 2005:13).  While Neighbourhood Houses provide courses and organised activities, there are also social connections fostered. Today, according to the Department of Planning and Community Development,

> *Neighbourhood houses are not-for-profit centres where people of all abilities, backgrounds and ages can come to:*

- *Meet, talk and make friends*
- *Develop new skills*
- *Transition to work and further study*
- *Volunteer*
- *Become involved in community events*
- *Find out about other services or activities in the area*
- *Join a class or support group*
- *Take up an activity for fun and enjoyment*
(DPCD 2010)

PMNH has a timetable out each school term offering activities, courses, groups and drop in. Activities are pursued for a range of reasons: company, interest, health and well-being, improved literacy, to keep up with technology, to gain a recognised certificate, and with the hope of transitioning into paid work. PMNH provides opportunities beyond courses and programs. One example is the administration training program which also incorporates volunteer experience on the front desk of PMNH. Membership fees are kept low ($5/2.50), and members are welcome to drop into PMNH at any time during opening hours. In 2006 it was found that 25% of the

participants at PMNH have a disability, but the only targeted programs are three mental health groups (Email from K. Kelly, Manager PMNH, 19 July 2011).

Each school term, PMNH delivers approximately 80-90 program hours a week. In addition to this are special events, such as morning teas and lunches to celebrate Neighbourhood House Week and Learner's Week, and the annual Community Carnival (ibid.). There is an average of 31 courses or programs running for an average of 10 weeks each of the four terms a year at PMNH (ibid.). Seven of these courses and programs are ongoing, and all of the ongoing programs all are full and have a waiting list (ibid.). The strong interest in what PMNH offers is demonstrated by how full the courses and programs are. When it comes to the 24 term based programs, half of them are usually full or close to full each term and in the other half there is usually between 3-5 places available per term (ibid.).

Overall, PMNH's funding is approximately 30% DHS funded (co-ordination hours), 30% ACFE program funded, 35% COPP funded, and 5 % self generated (via room hire, fundraising and program admin fees) (ibid.). This mix of funding means a range of reporting requirements, with program hours and participant numbers being the main indicators used. In addition, some programs are funded by short term grants which have their own reporting requirements (ibid.). A few programs (mostly social groups) are self funded and/or run by volunteers (ibid.).

***Port Melbourne Neighbourhood House (PMNH) is providing the range of courses, programs and general community support typical of a Neighbourhood House. Courses and programs are generally full or nearly full. The perceptions of some people are inaccurate, such as the labelling of some courses and programs as being for people with a disability because a few visible members appear to have a disability.***

## Profile of PMNH in the community

Across the focus groups and interviews, people who lived in Port Melbourne were aware of PMNH. People who lived elsewhere in the City of Port Phillip seemed much less likely to be aware of PMNH (F2). Survey respondents were more likely to have participated in activities or courses at PMNH than those spoken to through the focus groups. This suggests an improvement in comparison with earlier findings that PMNH should have a higher profile among residents (PMNH 2006: 46).

The letter boxed flyer was widely cited as a way people found out about PMNH (F5, I8), although some apartments appear not to receive the flyer (I6). Finding out from neighbours was another way people became aware of PMNH (I6, I8).The building is not seen as being easily identifiable or increasing the profile of PMNH (I2, I8). On the other hand, it is close to the shops so it is a building which people might notice (F6).

***Port Melbourne residents are aware of the PMNH, while residents from elsewhere in the City of Port Phillip often are not.***

PMNH is seen as friendly. One member offered by way of an example of how she found the place friendly and welcoming was that she felt she could pop in to use the toilet while on Bay Street (I6). It was suggested by some interviewees that PMNH has demonstrated that it can provide a supportive space for people with long term mental illness (I5). Not only is it significant that some people say that they find a sense of home at PMNH, but perhaps this on its own shows the value of PMNH (I8).

Front desk volunteers and staff reported seeing people from a cross section of the community coming in for different activities. Different groups of people were described as coming for different programs or reasons. The exceptions are children and teenagers, who do not come in aside from the children who come in when parts of the building are used for Kumon (a tutoring program).

A neighbourhood house was described as a place to meet people (I3). Overall, it was not seen as problematic that not everybody participates in PMNH. However, it was suggested that the PMNH is not tapping into Beacon Cove or apartment residents (I7), while engaging with the 'new demographic' is something that the neighbourhood house had always hoped to do (I3). It appears that such a suggestion is based on a perception that does not necessarily reflect who is using the PMNH. Such a perception may prevent certain people from accessing the PMNH (and is discussed in the later section of the report).

## *The building*

PMNH is on the site of the 1892 Sandridge Temperance Hall on the corner of Liardet and Nott Streets in Port Melbourne (Grainger 2011: 3). The site is of significance because it has been continually in use for community purposes since 1892. The building has been modified over the years and significantly extended. In contrast with some people's expectations, the building does not look like a house (F6), however there are community housing units built on the upper floors. PMNH shares the ground floor with the Liardet Street Community Centre, which provides legal aid, material relief and other support services. There is also upstairs office space used by Port Melbourne Inc. (traders' association) and Day Links (a community transport and support service). While each group looks after their own reception, you see people from these other organisations passing through PMNH or coming in to use the kitchen. Rather than being an interruption, it appears that many of these people have come to know some of the PMNH regulars and will stop to exchange a greeting.

People who use the service regularly see the building as being too small, with its size limiting options for the expansion of what is offered. While PMNH uses a range of sites in Port Phillip, it was said that they needed more space and a bigger space (I7). Interviewees suggested PMNH should have management over the whole of the community centre building in order to have more space (I7, I8). The lack of accommodation for young children prevents play groups and other children-family focused programs.

There are many different opinions regarding the building in which PMNH is based. Some rooms were described as not providing a congenial space, due to the furniture, harsh light, and bare walls (I8), although an increasing number of the walls in the building display the work of participants. On the other hand, other people were very positive about the building (I10, F6). A number of years ago, some groups stopped using the building as a place for meetings due to finding it messy at the start of meetings (F4), although this seems to provide evidence of how long impressions last rather than actionable feedback as this was years ago and more recent users of the venue described PMNH as orderly. In fact, one interviewee remarked that the set up has been too orderly (I1). Small frustrations are the legacy of working in a building with limited space, such as when interviewees mentioned chairs needed to be taken out of a room while it is being used by another group (I6). The lounge area is seen as a space which feels comfortable and welcoming (I8, I10), and an increase in the size (I7) or patronage (I10) of the lounge room was suggested as a way to provide more social opportunities.

In an earlier report it was suggested 'that the facilities of the PMNH should be opened up more to the general public – either for equity reasons, to reduce stigma or both.' (Borrell 2000: 71). Over the past decade, this recommendation appears to have been carried through. A wide range of activities are held at PMNH, from arts and crafts to bridge and even Kumon.

**Space is a limiting factor for growing the program.**

## *Transport and access*

The PMNH is located just a few steps from the heart of Port Melbourne's shopping strip. However, the absence of a direct public transport connection to many parts of the City of Port Phillip and the difficulty of finding parking were seen as making the PMNH difficult to access (F1, F2, F5, I6). While the Community Bus stops nearby, unpredictability with time and timetable changes were seen as making it harder to use (I2). Front desk volunteers and staff field many questions about the Community Bus, so keep a timetable on hand.

While some people thought that PMNH is hard to access (F1, F2, F5, I6), others describe it as being very close to public transport (F6). The tram stop is approximately 800 meters walk away and a number of buses stop nearby on Bay Street. When the last focus group was asked about the discrepancies in how people describe how hard or easy it is to get to PMNH, it was suggested that people may not know the public transport in the area well enough (F6). People may also be less willing to wait for public transport to go a short distance.

***There are different perceptions of how easy it is to get to PMNH, perhaps based partly on the degree of mobility of the person and their awareness of public transport in the area.***



A bus stop nearby on Bay Street. Photograph by Kate Kelly.

## *Front desk*

People generally report having positive experiences at PMNH. Front desk volunteers and staff at PMNH are asked a wide number of questions, and they feel they are usually able to help people. Some people think PMNH is a community centre, so they come in with questions about the location of different services (e.g. the library), the Community Bus, or trying to get a taxi. Through the computer, a book with local information kept at the front desk and their own local knowledge the staff and volunteers are often able to help. For questions that really are directed towards community services such as financial aid, accommodation and legal enquiries, volunteers and staff said they simply send the person to the community centre at the front of the building. However, when people think that the staff and volunteers are employed by council it is seen as being more challenging because there are high expectations that specialist questions can be answered.

Having volunteers on the front desk allows PMNH to offer the students undertaking the ACFE reception training course an opportunity to gain experience. Using volunteers for front desk roles was seen as problematic by one interviewee when it means questions cannot be addressed immediately (I7). This was seen as a lack of professionalism and off putting for people who may be 'better off' (I7). On the other hand, many people spoke positively of their experiences with friendly people on the front desk. For example, the friendly smiles and welcoming nature of the front desk staff was highlighted as a strength of PMNH by one interviewee (I10).

People involved in ongoing groups at PMNH, rather than courses, said that their group members do not have much scope to feedback information to the neighbourhood house (I6, I7). On the other hand, people who work and volunteer at PMNH felt that members of some of these same groups did not have either the time or interest to have much to do with the neighbourhood house and thought that they preferred to keep to themselves. The suggestion box had been abandoned because it was not used. The preference of the PMNH volunteers and staff was to have all people who come in feel connected to PMNH.

*Front desk volunteers are positive about their role, but some people are critical of the arrangement if they had queries that were unable to be dealt with immediately by a volunteer.*

## *Courses and activities*

## Summary of suggestions

Suggestions and feedback collected during interviews and focus groups are summarised below. Suggestions extended beyond the current role of PMNH into issues infrastructure, such as playgrounds and sports facilities.Specific enquiries would be required to understand the level of interest in particular general suggestions and program suggestions, and in order to understand if what is being called for is already available????. However, through awareness of suggestions PMNH can advocate for and share information on infrastructure and programs in the wider community where its resources permit.

### *Positive feedback*

- The nice smiles from front desk people (I10)
- Carnival (I10)
- Casual, low key (I6)
- Computer classes- get a cross section of people (F5)
- Diversity of courses (I4)
- Quality of tutors (I4)
- The internet cafe (I10)

### *General suggestions*

- Activate the space between Bay Street and the Neighbourhood House (I8)
- Changing the times of groups between terms could be a way to allow different people to come (I2)
- High quality and challenging playgrounds for older children (F4)
- More local sports facilities for unstructured use (F3, F4)
- Support self run groups (F5, I5)
- Work with Port Melbourne Inc. (I8)

### *Program suggestions*

- Activities for teenagers (I1, F3, F5)
- Affordable children's dance classes (F4)
- Art (not drop in, more therapeutic focus) (I5)
- Bike groups (I4, I5)
- Juggling (I2)
- Language classes,e.g. Intro to Russian (I9)

- Learn to knit and other crafts (F4)
- Magic (I2)
- Men's Shed (F5, I7)
- More neighbourhood meals and get togethers for volunteeers and staff (I10)
- More opportunities to be with people (I10)
- Opportunities for ideas (social, current affairs) (F2, I5)
- Other card games such as Solo (F5)
- Outings (I1, I2, I9)
- Singing (F5)
- Weekends away (I2)
- Foster a cafe feel (I10)
- Foster people getting together (F5)
- Have drop in (I3, I9)
- Home away from home (I3)

## Courses and activities

PMNH has a reputation for a strong focus on organised learning programs (I3, I5). Some people expect that initially people would come to the PMNH for a course or planned activity, and then perhaps start to spend more time at the Neighbourhood House (I8, I10). Drop in, and opportunities for informal socialisation, were described by some interviewees as key elements of a Neighbourhood House such as PMNH (I3, I9, I10).

Free computer room access for members (when it is not being used for classes) was described by some staff and volunteers as a great thing which brings people in. Aside from coming in to use a computer, some volunteers and staff do not feel there is a large amount of drop in which happens at PMNH, although there are a few well known people who come in for a conversation. However, drop in activities such as the BBQ for men at Sol Green were described as providing an opportunity for dropping into a place when you know somebody will be around for a conversation.

In focus groups there was a low level of interest in becoming more involved, with the exception being a small amount of interest directed at IT courses (F1, F4). Time was a major issue for the people spoken with across the focus groups and interviews. One group also suggested that not all disadvantaged people are free during the day, so providing activities at a range of times could be important, although the range of options beyond the Neighbourhood House were acknowledged (F5).

Hands on and active programs were seen as important. Some interviewees suggested bike groups were missing from Port Melbourne, although there is BAC Bikes in South Melbourne (I4, I5). A few people suggested that the area would benefit from a men's shed (I7, F5) and other programs which could include young males (F5).

Many people spoke positively about the Carnival, especially as it was a larger event, and were in favour of the Carnival continuing (I1, I3, I10). The Carnival was described as a way for people to become aware of PMNH (I10), but it was suggested that the community carnival could have a better physical connection with Bay Street (i.e. be more visible) to increase its profile (I8).

Some women who had participated in the 'gentle exercise' feel they are no longer able to participate in the group as they would need a less strenuous group. However, they also said they would not have time to join in the group and had found another alternative for strengthening exercise which was also affordable (I3, I6). There is a range of other exercise options available in the area, meaning to provide such groups may result in duplication (F5).

The fact that people in interviews and focus groups were able to list programs that they thought PMNH could offer, but nearly never listed programs that they themselves would be interested in, suggests that while people are enthusiastic about having a PMNH in the area they may not feel compelled or have the time to participate. However, as the interviews and focus groups generally included people who were already active in local activities this may not be representative of the wider community.

PMNH responded to the needs raised in earlier research with a range of programs:
- Work skills groups
- Body corporate training
- Gardening classes
- Mother and baby yoga
- Affordable exercise classes

While some of these groups (work skills, body corporate training, gardening) were not taken up by people, others ran for a while. Mother and baby yoga was discontinued after attendance dropped off with a provider across the road starting, suggesting their needs were met by this new service. Affordable yoga is still running. In the past when PMNH has responded to community needs surveys by running out of hour and weekend groups, they have generated very little interest.

As community interests and needs change over time, with shifts in concentrations of different age groups, different migration patters and community awareness of different activities, Neighbourhood Houses need to continue to provide innovative classes. Part of the challenge that comes with this is that successful classes may be adopted by other groups or commercial providers. While competition is not necessarily a bad thing, community organisations such as PMNH may bear many of the costs associated with gauging need and building community awareness and interest in activities, but may not be able to have the benefits of any fees from running the programs long term.

The provision of very cheap ESL classes by a nearby organisation is providing people with greater choice in accessing ESL classes. However, if PMNH is unable to fill their classes their funding may be lost and if the model that these other classes are run on turns out to be non-viable then the area may not offer any ESL classes.

***PMNH's program has a reputation for being broad and well managed. While many suggestions for new courses and programs were received, organisations like PMNH take on a risk when they provide a new course or program.***

## Other groups or activities

Many other groups in the community are interested in being able to recruit more members, but the sense is that this is a difficult task (F1, F3, F4). Amongst some volunteers in other organisations struggling to find people to hand over responsibility to, it was suggested that people should step up if they are the ones to benefit (F4). Aside from time, barriers included a reluctance to take on more responsibility (F4) and disenchantment from lack of action (F3). Younger adults were seen as a difficult base from which to draw volunteers if you have to train them because if they are unemployed, Centrelink will require them to find paid work. Causes to mobilise around were seen as key to building a sense of community (F2, F3, F5, I3, I7).

## *Conclusions*

PMNH will need to continue to gauge community needs and interests, however its capacity to extend its programs and courses seems limited at present. Trialling the provision of different

programs and courses, and doing so at different times of the day or week, requires the organisation to be able to afford to take such risks.

PMNH is known amongst residents of Port Melbourne, and the letter box drop of the program each term seems to be how many people are aware of the Neighbourhood House. While programs and courses may not be looking for new participants, continuing to promote the organisation appears to be worthwhile. There are also opportunities to provide leadership when it comes to offering volunteer experience and mainstream groups which are inclusive of a diverse group of people. The value of supporting people to come together and form connections with others, as well as the challenges of bringing together diverse groups is discussed further in the final section.

# 5. Social connections and attitudes towards community cohesion

## *Summary*

As already shown, there has been a large amount of change in the City of Port Phillip. Social connections matter, and as demonstrated by the concept of social capital, and social connections across the diverse socio-economic make up of the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area, are worthwhile although challenging to foster. Earlier research suggests changes were having a negative impact on social connections and community cohesion. However, these concerns were not so prevalent in the interviews and focus groups held in 2011. While people may not be as concerned about cohesion, it is a loss if that is because the goal has been abandoned. As an organisation which already has diverse groups participating, PMNH should be supported to continue to provide opportunities for people to come together.

### *Bonding, bridging and linking relationships in Port Melbourne – South Melbourne*

The notion that social relationships can act as resources as they may allow people to access other types of resources or opportunities is often a part of how we understand 'community'. The concept of 'social capital' describes the value of such relationships[2]. In the work of Putnam (2000), social capital is seen as benefiting the wider society, not just the people who are a part of the networks. This section discusses social capital in the City of Port Phillip and, working from the basis that such networks are valuable, considers the role of PMNH in fostering such networks.

Social capital is a concept which is used in different ways by different researchers, theorists and policy makers. However, if social capital is taken to mean those social relationships or networks which can then be drawn on for access to other resources (information, employment, help), it can be a useful concept for discussing the nature of and the significance of connections between people.

Bringing people together through social and activity groups is part of what Neighbourhood Houses do. The potential for social or activity based groups to also combine a support component through the networks built has been found in groups at PMNH.

> *As a result many of these social groups are also support groups. Most courses and groups have a support component to them, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed. Participants come along to do an art project for example, and at the same time they are receiving social support and friendship from the other participants and workers. This support increases as the participants can link up with other groups or services, once they attend initially. These recreational groups help to reduce social isolation and assist in building stronger communities, as they operate on a drop-in, inclusive basis and they are open to all people.* (Buckley 2008: 9)

Focus groups provided an opportunity to see some of the contradictory understandings of whether or not the City of Port Phillip is friendly. For example, in one of the focus group sessions while one person said that people in her neighbourhood are not friendly any more

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[2]  Social capital features in the work of G. C. Loury (1989), James Coleman (1988), Robert Putnam (2000) and Piere Bourdieu (1986), amongst others (see Portes 1998). Bourdieu's work on social capital is often described as particularly useful because it brings social hierarchy into play (Carpiano 2006; Carpiano 2007; DeFilippis 2001, Siisiainen 2003).

another person said that everybody said hello to them. After some further discussion there was agreement that while people may say 'hello' back, in general there are not the sorts of relationships between neighbours that would lead to help or support (F1).

It was common to find expressed in interviews similar patterns of a shift towards people being friendly if social contact is initiated, but it being rare that such social contact would become the basis for a relationship which gives access to other resources or support. It was often expected that neighbours whose relationships extended beyond a polite greeting had been neighbours for a long time (e.g. I1), or had become friends through becoming involved in shared activities after meeting (e.g. F5).

The most frequently discussed example of relationships as a resource was not 'borrowing a cup of sugar', but rather joining together to work towards a common cause. This was a common theme across longer term and newer residents. The common causes discussed were to do with development. Some people get to know their neighbours through objecting to what was seen as an inappropriate development in their streets. Other, once off, campaigns were also discussed such as the campaign to save the train line from closing and, more recently, residents of the earlier stages of Beacon Cove advocating for a high standard of development in later stages of the project.

Existing relationships are also drawn on in getting things done. A small example was provided by a book club whose members were dissatisfied when a new manager took over the book shop they met at and altered the format. As the members had gotten to know each other they organised to take their group elsewhere and still run their book club using space at the local library. While avoiding paying to participate in the book club was not the motivation of the members taking over their group, it did mean that they were able to use their existing relationship to run for free a program that some people may pay for.

Research by academics into social capital included Dig In, a PMNH community garden, as a case study. Dig In was seen as demonstrating social capital, although it was in its early days and researchers found that the relationships fostered in the community garden did not transfer into other areas of life.

> The findings of this study indicate that 'Dig In' membership is associated with increased levels of social capital as defined by Putnam (1995). This is highlighted by members describing social support, connections and networking. Members also highlighted forms of cooperation, bonding and bridging social capital which Putnam (2000) saw as critical in achieving high levels of social capital. However, there was no evidence that these acts of cooperation were extended beyond the daily, minor exchanges of watering and seed sharing. (Kingsley & Townsend 2006: 534).

People may not cultivate relationships which go beyond being friendly or polite for any number of reasons and this report is unable to draw any clear conclusions. However, there are examples where the built environment, resources and time demands appear as factors in the types of social connections people make.

Changes in residential density may alter opportunities to get to know people. For example, an interviewee who had moved into a house in the 'old Port' part of Port Melbourne over a decade ago, and then moved into an apartment nearly three years ago, described the experience of living in a residential street and an apartment building as different. Both were friendly places but, while you could stop in the street to talk with someone gardening[3], a conversation in a lift is cut off when you reach your floor. This does not stop relationships developing; some apartment buildings have many social activities organised by residents. However the street, with many long term residents and people home during the day, was described as more cohesive.

While some people may foster relationships with other people in their neighbourhood through getting to know their neighbours, organisations such as PMNH offer opportunities for participating in programs and activities with others. As already demonstrated, through participating people may foster friendships and develop networks. In this way, barriers to participation may also be barriers to forming social connections.



One interviewee described the experience of living in an apartment as different to a house. Photograph by Kate Kelly.

The ''time poor': those who are in full-time work and/or work outside the council area,' are named by Braekertz and Meredyth as the people most frequently mentioned as being a 'hard to reach' group due to lifestyle and occupation factors. (2009: 162). In focus groups for this project, the idea of being 'time poor' featured across accounts. Not having the time to foster new connections in the local area was experienced not only by people when they were working full time (F5), but also by seniors who are already active and have some responsibility for looking after grandchildren (F1). Mothers, even those not in paid work or working part time, said they needed to drive places because of a lack of time (F4). While the people spoken to in this project who were time poor did not indicate that they in any way lacked social networks, there may be other people who do. It takes time to participate in order to grow and strengthen networks, and if you are a newcomer then you may be unable to establish new networks with people who do not have the time. Furthermore, if the time poor are not participating in general consultation processes then their views may not be represented.

Cost has been identified as "a major barrier to participation." (PMNH 2006: 29). It was the most frequently selected response in the survey to the question which asked: "Is there anything that does/ would make it difficult for you to join in our activities?" However, interviewees did not generally select it as amongst the three most significant barriers to access suggesting that course fees appeared to be affordable.

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[3]  The social contact that comes when someone is in their front yard gardening was also mentioned in a focus group (F5).

The $5 price point of Kitchen Survival Skills was cited as an example of being accessible by one person (I10), although another interviewee suggested certain people would not pay for anything (I9). That some people can afford more than others was considered to be significant in how much courses should cost (I1, I2, I4), with variable prices to access the same courses (I8). The need to cover costs was not far from the mind of interviewees, especially those who had been involved in running or overseeing community programs (I3, I4, I5, I8). The cost of a realistic fee for facilitators received specific mention (I4, I5, I7, I10).

Providing activities "cheap" was seen as a way of making them accessible (I1, I2, I3). However, the low cost also prevents participation. Some people choose not to access activities or courses at the neighbourhood house as they can afford to elsewhere (I4) and see the low price listed in the flyer as signalling it is not for them (F4). This may contribute to stigma preventing participation (PMNH 2006: 29). However, people who do not participate because they could afford to spend more could also believe that they are not taking away a subsidised place from another potential participant.

People may not participate simply because they do not need the support. Some mothers, in talking about what they would like to see in the area, did not talk about programs or activities but they spoke about infrastructure and spaces. The parents may already have strong networks which allow them to share child care responsibilities or be able to afford to purchasepre-prepared meals if they are unable to cook.

While it appears that different people will have different social experiences in the City of Port Phillip, interviewees often pointed out that social isolation is something that anybody could experience and it is important not to make assumptions about social participation based on stereotypes of disadvantage (I2, I5, I6, I9). In other words, while in Bourdieu's (1977) model of capitals different types of capital may be able to be converted into each other (economic capital, cultural capital and social capital), these are not clear exchanges. While there may be an increasing proportion of people in the City of Port Phillip with stronger purchasing power, this does not necessarily mean they will be able to develop social networks.

Social capital describes 'values and institutions' that can 'enable resilience' and a sense of safety at times of 'social upheaval or cleavages within society' (Woolcock & Lenore 2009: 8). Yet, at the same time, 'Authority and subjugation, inclusion and exclusion, are all facets of social capital at work.' (Woolcock & Lenore 2009: 9). Therefore, while striving to build social capital could be a key part of the mission of a Neighbourhood House, social networks do not necessarily lead to desired outcomes.

The categories of bonding (close ties), bridging (the bringing together of people who are different) and linking (across power imbalances) relationships within social capital are not always clear cut, but they can provide a framework for discussing some of the different types of networks and why they might matter. Neighbourhood Houses are well suited to fostering the close and supportive ties of bonding relationships and also bringing together people who might not see themselves as having a common cause otherwise in order to form bridging relationships. A discussion of other evaluations alongside responses to interviews and focus groups for this project demonstrates that organising activities can lead to the development of strong, supportive bonding relationships, bridging relationships are a greater challenge. Just as bridging across lines of difference can be difficult, it appears that people who are already more advantaged through access to material resources and formal education are able to have a more positive experience of working within formal systems and with people who hold offices of power.

Bonding relationships generally describe close ties between people. While bonding relationships are seen as providing the strongest access to the resources of others, bonding social capital is seen as having the greatest potential for being 'bad' social capital. For

example, collective efficacy may be useful for offenders (Browning, Feinberg & Dietz 2004). Bonding social capital has been seen to be more prevalent in disadvantaged (poor, minority) areas (Lupi & Musterd 2006).

'Start All Mural Experiments!' project was an art project which sought to engage with homeless people in St Kilda, run in the City of Port Phillip as part of wider research into consultation with 'hard to reach' populations. The case study report describes the understanding of Port Phillip Council at the time as people who may be socially marginalised but already participate in programs as not being the difficult to reach people (Gorjanicyn 2007: 12). The project was evaluated as succeeding in using 'creative arts as a means of engaging communities', with bonding relationships between homeless people fostered through the project (Gorjanicyn 2007: 44).

While the community garden is not targeted in the way 'Start All Mural Experiments!' was, there was a degree of homogeneity within the group.

> *Most participants suggested they had a similar social background to other*
> *members.* (Kingsley & Townsend 2006: 529).

This degree of homogeneity was seen as providing a challenge to the future contribution to positive social capital of the group.

> *Care will need to be taken to ensure that any development in the depth*
> *of social capital flowing from the garden does not occur at the expense*
> *of openness and inclusion.* (Kingsley & Townsend 2006: 535).

The 'Start All Mural Experiments!' project, even though it was targeted at homeless people, was seen as being positive for cohesion across the wider community. Special mention was made of the potential for connections when the project's workshops were linked in with other events.

> *There are benefits to combining council art projects with other community*
> *events in order to link socially disadvantaged people, and the general*
> *community, into social services.* (Gorjanicyn 2007: 44)

Bridging relationships describe when people who are different to each other develop a tie which allows them to access a greater range of resources. What these differences are will vary between settings, as the relationships in bridging social capital are seen as weaker than bonding relationships.

As demonstrated by breaking down census, and especially SEIFA data, to census collection districts, there are many lines of difference in the Port Melbourne-South Melbourne area. While there were a range of views expressed in the 2000 PMNH report (Borrell 2000: 43- 45), Borrell found that

> *...the majority of those interviewed spoke of different communities and new*
> *populations in Port Melbourne, with differing interests, habits and*
> *orientations as well as varying levels of cohesion and identification with the*
> *local area. In these accounts, once more, a strong sense of community was*
> *seen to be aligned with the more established residents who are largely from*
> *working class backgrounds and whose families have been part of Port*
> *Melbourne for several generations. In contrast, an 'air of mystery' was cast*
> *around the identity of more recent residents and there was a perception that*
> *they are yet to become part of the community in a meaningful sense. It was*
> *perceived that many are living separately from the 'old' community due to*
> *socioeconomic and related lifestyle factors (they tend to come from*
> *professional backgrounds and are working out of the local area for much of*
> *the time) as well as the positioning and design of the new housing*
> *developments.* (Borrell 2000: 44).

In 2011, people generally remarked that people in their area do not know each other as well as they did, or would have, a generation or two ago. However, the people spoken to in this project did not paint a completely bleak picture. Meeting people who live in the same area through activities was described as worthwhile, even if it just meant recognising and saying a brief 'hello' to more people on Bay Street (I6). That people may socialise within their own social strata was not seen as new, but that the groups have just changed (I7). The presence of families with young children is seen as positive, even if longer term residents do not get to know them (F1).

Cohesion requires the participation of all parties, and the role of both long time and new residents in allowing for a sense of community was still seen as significant in the 2006 report:

> *'The social cohesion of Port Melbourne/ Garden City / Beacon Cove and South Melbourne communities is being affected by growth in population and gentrification. Some new arrivals say they feel isolated, disconnected, alienated and unaccepted by older residents. Conversely, some older residents perceive that sense of community and neighbourliness are decreasing, as upwardly-mobile people move in. Some older residents feel they are being "pushed out" by a different socio-economic group. (PMNH 2006: 45).*

Therefore, earlier PMNH research has suggested that gentrification is not just a threat to cohesion because of the displacement of people who might traditionally have had strong ties to the area but they are not unable to afford to live in Port Melbourne- South Melbourne. The newcomers may also perceive the differences and so not have their social needs meet locally.

> *'Most service users [at the PMNH] thought it was perceived as being for specific groups- namely people on low incomes, people who are disabled and/or disadvantaged. It was generally though that people wouldn't use the neighbourhood house if they didn't need to or if they were wealthy.' (Borrell 2000: 63).*

The inclusion of newcomers was expressed in the 2006 report as an issue which PMNH could respond to.

> *'Concerns expressed by new and old residents about the changing neighbourhood are indicators of emerging divisions. However, opportunities exist for PMNH to help build community cohesion: New residents are acknowledging their need for connections. New retirees are looking for meaningful activities that will air their transition to a new lifestyle. A significant group of new mothers is casting about for activities and potential connections with others which will form the foundation of their role in the community.' (PMNH 2006: 44).*

Linking relationships are generally about linking people within the power structure so they not only know what people in power expect of them, but they have the ties to people in those positions which mean they are able to access resources or are able to change on their terms.

For some people, engaging with local and state systems of bureaucracy is seen as a positive experience. One interviewee involved in the PMNH and living in the City of Port Phillip but outside of the Port Melbourne- South Melbourne area described her street and immediate area as having affluent and well educated residents. People in her street knew each other partly because there were a few residents who were keen for people to know each other. Objecting to a building planned for nearby was described as 'galvanising' because it was a cause which got people together.

This account contrasts with that offered by some residents of a Port Melbourne public housing estate. While the people spoken with had been involved in PMNH or advocating for works on their estate, they suggested perhaps a lack of community spirit and outcomes contributed to the reluctance of people to get involved. It was suggested by these residents that 'better educated' people are able to work the system of lobbying.

## *Community Cohesion*

The bonding, bridging and linking relationships discussed suggest that there are significant limits to community cohesion. Many people are ambivalent about the need for true cohesion, and named social needs that may be met without cohesion. However, as a significant factor in local social connections, the limits to cohesion and attitudes towards the concept warrant consideration.

The absence of Neighbourhood Watch groups in the area was cited as an example of a lack of community connection (F1). While the Community Pulse report suggests that as rates of crime have decreased, perceived crime has increased (Community Pulse 2011: 20), mention of Neighbourhood Watch was not so much cited as a concern to do with personal safety. Fears for safety were not mentioned as a factor in people talking or knowing each other, although some concerns/ issues around behaviour were noted by residents of a public housing estate.

As outlined in the earlier section, there has been a great deal of population growth, especially in the Port Melbourne area. There has not only been growth, but there has also been a large amount of change in the City of Port Phillip. Earlier research claimed that this large amount of change was a threat to community cohesion. This is in inline with larger scale research in the USA which concluded increased neighbourhood diversity can reduce social interaction amongst all people (Putnam 2007).

A couple of the interviewees mentioned that some people use the language of "us and them", with the 'them' usually being the newcomers (I3, I5). However, this distinction was seen as being simplistic as it depends on the individual, with some newcomers being very involved (I1, I3). Moving house can be a catalyst for people to seek opportunities to meet people and get involved in organised activities. When people move into an area this can be a time to find out about opportunities for involvement and building new friendships (F5, I6, I8).

Focus groups and interviews for this project suggest that while people are aware of there being a great deal of change, many people did not describe their neighbourhoods as lacking cohesion. This could be due to community cohesion being able to be rebuilt or, alternatively, a change in expectations as to the range of people who can foster a shared sense of identity or depth of relationship in order for there to be cohesion.

As mentioned in an earlier section, Port Phillip residents have become less transient over the last decade (Community Pulse 2011: 7-8). The slowing in the rate of change in the area has possibly decreased anxiety about community cohesion (I8). One interviewee, when asked about earlier assessments of there being a risk to cohesion, went on to say,

> *In 2006 [Port Melbourne was] in such a perpetual state of... neither this nor that... [and] seething transition... [now] things have settled somewhat, and I don't think we've got quite that same level of anxiety. […] It doesn't matter if people have been here a long time or a short time, I think there is that very strong desire to feel part of a community.(I8)*

Some interviewees suggested that distinctions exist between who participates in the area and who does not, butthis may not be problematic. For example, people may not want to be involved in the area (I5), and there have always been different groups in the community (I7). In other words, there is acceptance of a looser form of cohesion.

In the earlier discussion of some of the barriers to participation, sometimes perceptions that a group is not for a certain person may mean they opt not to participate. In regards to PMNH, an example covered earlier was when the group was seen as being priced for people on low incomes. Discussions about specific classes and programs demonstrated this mismatch between the actual, as compared to the perceived, target group of programs. An art group may

be seen to be for very elderly people, even though it is not set up to only cater to this group. A day time cooking group was not set up as a group for people with a disability, but some participants received support services and so the group was viewed as being for people with a disability even though it had a range of participants. However, opting out of groups because a person is not that poor, elderly or disabled was often seen as a reality not necessarily a problem (F4, F5, I4). In other words, low cost and all ability groups are often seen as being only for people who cannot access other groups.

On the other hand, some interviewees spoke with passion about the value of groups not labelled as special needs, especially where people with disabilities and mental illness are welcome and included (I4). One interviewee said,

> *I love a group that takes in... [and] includes people with disabilities. [...] That's a wonderful thing that the Neighbourhood House can do is get the balance right - have the people mixing.* (I5)

The case study of Dig-In provides another example of the difficulty of fostering programs that include a broad cross section of the community. One member reflected on the demographics of 'Dig In' community garden as reflecting changes in the population of Port Melbourne, stating:

> *'The whole of Port Melbourne has changed . . . there is a rich belt and there are new people in the area . . . well I think Tim and Kosta have been here forever . . .generally from what I can gather the people that join are educated and professionals . . . a disabled group comes in as well.'*
> *The disabled group identified in this passage is a group of people with intellectual disabilities and their support staff/carers. They attend on Wednesdays, during the day, when the community gardens are relatively quiet. Although members do not have significant interaction with the group, they all described the relationship as positive.*
> (Kingsley & Townsend 2006: 530).

It appears that the interviewee can see that there is some diversity in the volunteer base, but that the authors are also aware that the interaction with the 'disabled group' is very limited.

Some of the staff and volunteers at PMNH described how contrasting groups of people used rooms in or participated in programs at the PMNH, but often did not have much to do with each other. The practicalities of how the spaces are used and activities are time tabled also stopped very different groups of people having sustained contact. When asked if this matters it was suggested that there is still a sense of cohesiveness as people are being brought together even if that is within their groups. One person explained that if you feel like you would not belong with a group of people then you would not join that group.

Bringing people together to foster social connections and increasing community cohesion are long standing challenges. As was said in the 2000 report, 'The balance between 'targeting' and 'main-streaming', and the practicalities of including newer residents if they are working full time is clearly a challenge.' (Borrell 2000: 66-67). Concerns have been expressed regarding targeting services.

> *Many social and learning groups are targeting particular groups of people; i.e. "people with disabilities" "people who are isolated" or "disadvantaged people" and are inadvertently reiterating the social structures which divide people of different classes and creeds. These findings suggest that there are more strategies to be devised that promote community participation to all people; not just disadvantaged groups.* (Buckley 2008: 14)

Targeted programs can be very valuable and are one way of addressing the group specific needs. Some groups offered by PMNH are targeted. For example, three mental health groups are funded by the City of Port Phillip. However, in general, PMNH sets out to offer groups which are open to the whole community, including people with disabilities.

In two of the focus groups it came out strongly that participants saw it as PMNH's role to define who it is for, and then evaluation of what it provides should be against this identity (F4, F5). If 'an increasingly segregated and unequal city is not in any one's interest.' (City of Port Phillip 2011) then there will need to be leadership on this issue.

## *Conclusions*

Social connections matter, but those which cross lines of difference (such as socio-economic status) can be particularly difficult to foster. It is a challenge to have the diversity of the wider community represented within courses and programs. As the example of the cost of programs demonstrates, what is seen as making a program accessible for some people, is seen as a signal not to participate by others. Of course, a Neighbourhood House should not only be concerned with preventing people with the means to participate elsewhere from opting out.

Taking a social capital perspective, whereby networks are valued for what other resources they may provide access to, runs the risk of valuing groups more highly if they have members with access to valuable resources. However, focusing on community cohesion through bringing people together acknowledges that social connection is a human need. While this sense of belonging can be fostered within groups of people who share a strong sense of common identity, the Port Melbourne – South Melbourne area has a diverse socio-economic make up which is already reflected in the different people who participate in the PMNH.

While it is a positive that there is less concern about the level of community cohesion, it would be a loss if this concern has been eased through abandoning, rather than achieving, the goal of a community where people feel connected in their streets and beyond. Just as PMNH provides the opportunity for people who do not have front desk experience yet to gain that experience, the organisation should be supported to continue to take the risk of providing opportunities for people to come together.

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# 8. Interviews and focus groups referenced in the report

## *Interviews*

| Reference used | Date of interview | Interviewer |
|---|---|---|
| I1 | 7 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I2 | 10 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I3 | 14 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I4 | 16 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I5 | 21 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I6 | 23 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I7 | 27 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I8 | 28 June 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I9 | 1 July 2011 | Tracey Pahor |
| I10 | 1 July 2011 | Tracey Pahor |

## *Focus groups*

| Reference used | Number of participants | Researchers present |
|---|---|---|
| F1 | 7 | Tracey Pahor, Kate Power |
| F2 | 11 | Tracey Pahor, Kate Power |
| F3 | 3 | Tracey Pahor, Kate Power |
| F4 | 6 | Tracey Pahor, Kate Power |
| F5 | 4 | Tracey Pahor |
| F6 | 3 | Tracey Pahor |

# 9. Lists of groups and people consulted

### *List of interviewees*

Rosa (PMNH past volunteer) & Vince

Peter Batten (Minister, community worker)

Ann Rochford (Dig in Community Garden, PMNH Committee of Management)

Janet Bolitho (Ward councillor- Sandridge)

Marlene & Helga (Park Tower Housing Tenants Association)

Stephen (PMNH Committee of Management & community volunteer)

Four Port Melbourne residents (preferred not to be named)

### *Groups/ organisations who helped promote focus groups*

Middle Park Bowls Club

Save Albert Park

Some Port Melbourne public housing tenants

Some Port Melbourne Primary School parents

Beacon Cove Neighbourhood Association

Front desk volunteers and staff of PMNH

\* None of the interviewees participated in focus groups

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