Measuring Up?: Assessing the Liveability of Australian Cities

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of liveability and benchmarking indices and studies have been published to assess the relative position of various 'global cities' against each other in various categories. These liveability measures are typically used as a tool to make comparisons between cities with various outcome 'scores' receiving widespread media attention. Results are increasingly publicised by cities that score highly, particularly to secure business and human capital, and by companies to determine remuneration and conditions for expatriates. In Australia, there has been considerable attention devoted to focusing more on the general quality-of-life of a city from the perspective of existing citizens under the guise of 'liveability'. There is growing evidence that such measures are being taken up increasingly by larger urban local governments to track progress in improving elements of liveability in the community. However, to date, there is no established theoretical framework or uniform definition of liveability. This paper seeks to 'unpack' both a) the liveability literature as it applies to Australia's cities and b) the range of measurement and indicator frameworks that currently purport to assess urban liveability. In doing so, the paper will draw attention to the significant gaps that exist in both these literatures, particularly with respect to comprehensively understanding urban quality of life. An alternative paradigm that draws on the more considered and burgeoning international community wellbeing indicators movement will be proposed as a more helpful means of sustaining progressive urban social and public policy.

ONE in five Sydneysiders are so sick of traffic and the high cost of living they are considering moving to another city. And in a blow to Sydney's creative energy, NSW is falling behind the rest of Australia as people in artistic and cultural jobs abandon the state.

'The Great Sydney Exodus', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 3, 2008

On precisely the same day that the SMH was reporting that hundreds of families per week were deserting the city's western suburbs frustrated with increasing commuting times and decreasing housing affordability, the city was congratulating itself for being acknowledged with a 2008 No.1 rating in the Anholt Cities Brand Index. The paradoxical story reflects an ongoing tension in the perceived legitimacy of city liveability indices and their growing popularity in defining the performance of metropolises around the world.

In recent years, a number of liveability and benchmarking indices and studies have been published to assess the relative position of various 'global cities' against each other in various categories. These liveability measures are typically used as a tool to make comparisons between cities with a variety of outcome 'scores' receiving widespread media attention, not the least because print media is still overwhelmingly reliant on its city of origin readership. Hence, no matter the particular topic in mind, if it is able to produce a 'league table' of city performance, it is almost guaranteed to generate widespread media discussion. Just in the first half of 2009, there have been 'best and worst city' lists produced for men, women, travellers, families, GenYs, office costs, pets, recreation, jobs, street art, book-buying, architecture, coffee drinking and partying, not to mention the vast array of city lists that exist for virtually any demographic and/or hobby/interest within North America and to a lesser extent, Europe, led by the popular work of Richard Florida (2002; 2004).

However, beyond the superficial nature of the vast majority of these 'rankings', little attention has been afforded to assessing just what these 'liveability' indices actually measure or what significance they might practically have for the planning and development of Australian cities. What they do appear to represent is an increasing recognition of the importance of global competition amongst cities in attracting all forms of capital, an argument that has been acknowledged by the OECD (2007: 14) in its 'Competitive Cities' report. This burgeoning sense of global competition is reflected too in the increasing popularity of city benchmarking, of which notions of liveability form an important component. However, the literature on the application of benchmarking to cities is sparse. Accordingly,

there is no agreed definition of 'city benchmarking', although any definition is likely to stem from its original roots in business management. One of the few definitions provided (Luque- Martinez & Munoz-Leiva, 2005), defines city benchmarking as, "the systematic continuous method that consists of identifying, learning and implementing the most effective practices and capacities from other cities in order to improve one's own city to improve its action in what it offers". City benchmarking then can be conceptualised as measuring and monitoring the performance of cities against a number of comparable and/or 'best practice' cities.

Any city benchmarking exercise attempts to respond to two types of questions (Luque-Martinez & Munoz-Leiva, 2005). The first are those pertaining to comparison bases - what are the dimensions of a city that one would like to compare (for example quality of life) and what cities are appropriate for comparison? The second type of questions refer to what the comparison cities are doing in terms of policy and projects to achieve these outcomes, how they are doing it, what results they are obtaining and what the city being benchmarked needs to do to compete. For the purposes of this paper, attention will focus on those benchmarking studies that explicitly address quality of life or liveability.

Defining and Measuring Liveability

There is no established theoretical framework or uniform definition of liveability, and the liveability literature consists mainly of empirical studies, which generally involve a direct comparison of a composite measure over different geographic areas. There are numerous studies which rank the liveability of cities or countries. Some are created to assess the 'hardship' of particular destinations, while others focus more on the general quality-of-life of a country or city from the perspective of existing citizens.

Although livability cannot be defined precisely or measured quantitatively, it is recognized as a very important concept and consideration in the societies of developed countries. Vuchic (1999: 7) is commonly cited for his view of urban liveability as "generally understood to encompass those elements of home, neighborhood, and metropolitan area that contribute to safety, economic opportunities and welfare, health, convenience, mobility, and recreation". A livable city is difficult to

define precisely, but one can recognize elements that contribute to making an urbanized area livable. By the same token, one can quickly recognize the city that is nonfunctional, that is riddled with problems, that has no social life and few cultural functions (*ibid.*: 233). The concept of *livability* is thus a qualitative one; it represents the characteristic that "depends on the attractiveness of an area as a place in which to live, work, invest, and do business." (*ibid.*: xix)

At international level, liveability has tended to be treated in a very broad sense, and with only limited distinction between it and sustainable development. In the United States, for example, 'liveability' encompasses a wide array of issues relating to overall 'quality of life' and 'well being'. In the United Kingdom, liveability instead has been adopted in a much narrower and more operational sense; the "cleaner, safer, greener" agenda. Although it is still considered an 'umbrella' term that refers to a number of interrelated concerns, its focus is strictly upon the local environment.

The link between liveability and sustainable development is not altogether clear. In some cases the two terms are used interchangeably, in other contexts liveability is regarded as being a subset of a sustainable region or city. The consultancy group Brook Lyndhurst (2004: 6) referring to the United Kingdom concludes that:

Our research suggests there is a general lack of discussion in the recent research and policy literature about the possible interplay between liveability and sustainable development. While each agenda is increasingly discussed in its own right, little attention is paid to whether they are mutually reinforcing or whether they potentially conflict. Indeed, in many instances we note that they are taken to be synonymous and interchangeable terms.

In Australia, Melbourne has clearly been the city that has embraced the liveability terminology. Indeed, it became so enamoured with the notion that it established a full state inquiry on behalf of the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission (2008). Through the large number of submission to the inquiry, the Commission (2008: 10), in examining definitions of liveability, identified a number of common elements and developed a working definition of liveability that it considers encapsulates in broad terms the key issues identified by its consultation:

Liveability reflects the wellbeing of a community and comprises the many characteristics that make a location a place where people want to live now and in the future.

The City of Melbourne (2007) also published a research paper on city benchmarking and liveability that guided some of VCEC's early inquiry discussions. The Inquiry initially produced a concise staff discussion paper, concluding (p.16) that

".. many liveability measures and rankings are used for direct comparison of international and domestic cities and regions. The subjective nature of the inclusion of factors relating to liveability, the weighting of these factors, and the vastly different indicators being included, results in different measures providing different rankings of the liveability of cities. There is a lack of theoretical underpinning for these measures, particularly for composite measures. It is questionable whether any of the above composite measures would be directly relevant for informing public policy. A mix of locally relevant factors could, however, be selected and used for the purposes of public policy analysis".

Current Liveability / Quality of Life City Indices

To date, a number of major international liveability studies have been conducted. These include:

Mercer Quality of Living Survey

Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Quality of Life Index

Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey

Jones Lang LaSalle City Governance Index

Anholt City Brands Index

GaWC World Cities Index

Monocle Global Quality of Life Survey

Broadly, these benchmarking studies can be categorised as 'quality of life surveys', 'cost of living surveys', and 'other specific surveys'. Each of these studies varies in their scope, methodology and comprehensiveness. Focusing on those (Mercer and EIU) that purport to measure quality of life in major cities and are the most commonly cited in Australia, the following summarises their main characteristics.

The EIU ranks cities on their liveability as part of the Worldwide Cost of Living Survey. Living conditions are assessed using around 40 indicators, with each city being given a value between one

and five for each indicator. These scores are then grouped into five weighted categories to allow a rating of between 0 per cent and 100 per cent to be determined for each city — the lower the score the more 'liveable' the city. The five weighted categories of the EIU Quality of Life rating are:

- Stability (25 per cent) — prevalence of petty crime, prevalence of violent crime, threat of military conflict, threat of civil unrest/conflict, threat of terrorism

- Healthcare (20 per cent) — availability of public and private healthcare, quality of public and private healthcare provision, availability of over-the-counter drugs, general healthcare indicators

- Culture and Environment (25 per cent) — climate (humidity/temperature rating, discomfort to travellers, cultural hardship), corruption, social/religious restrictions, level of censorship, recreation (sports, culture, food and drink), availability of consumer goods and services

- Education (10 per cent) — availability of private education, quality of private education provision, general public education indicators

- Infrastructure (20 per cent) — transport (quality of road network, quality of public transport, quality of regional or international links), housing (availability of good quality housing), utilities (quality of energy provision, quality of water provision, quality of telecommunications infrastructure).

In recent years, Melbourne has ranked highly in the EIU's liveability surveys, and as the world's most liveable city in 2003 and 2004, helped by favourable scores with regard to violent crime and climatic conditions. In 2005, Melbourne slipped in its international rankings to second behind Vancouver, a result largely due to Melbourne being judged to have less recreation activities relative to Vancouver (City of Melbourne 2007). In 2009, Melbourne was ranked third (97.5%) behind Vancouver (98.0%) and Vienna (97.9%), with Perth (96.6%) third and Sydney (96.1%) equal ninth. (http://www.economist.com/markets/rankings/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13809770)

Mercer Human Resource Consulting's annual worldwide quality of living survey is designed to assist people moving internationally and companies who relocate employees to decide on appropriate remuneration. It is a measurement based on 39 factors that are grouped into 10 key categories. These are:

- political and social environment - eg, political stability, crime and law

- enforcement

- economic environment - eg, banking services

- socio-cultural environment - eg, civil liberties

- health and sanitation

- schools and education

- public services and transportation

- recreation

- consumer goods

- housing

- natural environment - eg climate.

Cities are then weighted and ranked against the base city, New York, which has a score of 100. In 2008, Zurich was ranked the world's top city with a score of 108.1. Sydney was ranked tenth behind other Asia-Pacific cities such as Vancouver (fourth) and Auckland (fifth), Other Australian cities –were ranked: Melbourne 17, Perth 21, Adelaide 29, and Brisbane 34 (Mercer 2008).

The other commonly cited global cities liveability study is the London-based global affairs magazine Monocle's Quality of Life Survey which uses a combination of both objective data and subjective opinion to come up with a list of the top 25 most liveable cities in the world. Melbourne was ranked the highest of Australian cities at ninth (Zurich first) and Sydney thirteenth.

Methodological Limitations

While each of these annual surveys generates significant media attention, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, there are more fundamental limitations of these studies that must be emphasized. Using indicators to benchmark cities according to its liveability is a useful tool for both communicating how well a city is performing against its competitors and for helping to establish targeted policy directions. However, as Holloway & Wajzer (2008) note, "city benchmarking also has a number of limitations that undermine their validity for measuring and monitoring performance and for informing urban policy". These limitations include the integrity and compatibility of data among cities, the

overstatement of the cause and effect relationship between indicators and city outcomes, and the subjectivity of the analysis and conclusions (Stokie 1999).

Data integrity and compatibility

All city liveability indicator exercises are limited by the availability and comparability of data. From the outset, these issues limit the scope, depth and diversity of what can be measured, in turn limiting the extent to which indicators can be used to compare and monitor city performance. It remains far too tempting to select indicators based on availability of data, as opposed to selecting data that would provide meaningful and relevant information. Key problems include data gaps across indicators and comparator cities, the reliability and regularity of published and unpublished data sets, and the methodological differences in data collection, classification, and reporting specific to national contexts. Another issue with data compatibility is large variance in geographic size of each city with administrative boundaries for which data is collected varying significantly, and in turn, impacting on the data results. While some indicators attempt to manage this by reporting per capita or per area, these techniques have their own limitations.

Indicators

Holloway & Wajzer (2008) remind us that "indicators only provide a proxy for performance and are not a perfect or total measure of performance". Therefore, the relationship between liveability indicators and overall city performance is not straightforward, and no direct cause and effect relationship can be attributed. Many city benchmarking exercises often overstate the relationship between indicators and city performance, and data alone will not provide an adequate assessment of the performance of a city (Stokie 1999). Benchmarking studies often use too many indicators and complex scoring and ranking systems that hide findings within the complexity. In particular, indicators of averages (such as 'per capita' indices) tend to omit the range and distribution of data. Averages do not adequately capture 'highs' and 'lows' of performance in cities and indicators therefore risk inappropriately 'hiding' spatial variation in performance across a city. They can also hide variations within categories experienced by particular socio-economic groups or sectors. Similarly, the use of composite indicators, is problematic. Composite indicators result from aggregating a range of indicators representing complex and multi-faceted issues (first applying various weights to the components to reflect their perceived relative

importance) to develop a single indicator. A single composite indicator permits comparisons to occur over time and between the entities being examined. The Mercer Quality of Living Survey and the EIU Liveability Rankings are composite indicators, both of which were developed to assist businesses to determine remuneration levels for expatriate staff. The validity and relevance of composite indicators in informing policy debate and assisting in policy development is generally limited as their component measures have lost their separate meaning through aggregation, with the nature of the components and their respective weightings in aggregation being the result of subjective decisions. Composite indicators say very little about how 'liveable' a city is for all who live and work there as the composition of the indicators reflects the preferences of a specific audience.

This problem is also evident in league tables. League tables can fail to take into account deviation from the mean over time. For example a city's position in a league table may fall and thus interpreted as a decline in performance. However, over time, all cities may have improved across all indicators. This would mean that whilst a city has "fallen down" the list of cities, its performance may actually be improving over time. League tables are also problematic in that they do not reward well-rounded performance. Good scores across all indicators and dimensions may not be reflected as highly as a city that has performed exceptionally in some indicators or dimensions and poorly in others. This issue is exacerbated when indicators or dimensions are weighted using different rationales and criteria. Incorporating social and cultural measures has traditionally proved to be the most challenging dimension in assessing liveability, due to the more subjective and less tangible aspects of these indicators. Holloway & Wajzer (2008) again note that benchmarking exercises are "understandably attracted" to the more objective quantifiable indicators in the social and cultural realms to equate with similarly well-founded basic economic and environmental indicators.

Subjectivity

A notable feature of virtually all of the prominent city liveability studies is that they take very little to no account of the perceptions of day-to-day residents about city life, a critical methodological weakness given these perceptions are critical in assessing any city's performance. Analysis of benchmarking results must also consider that cities are heterogeneous entities (Luque-Martinez and Munoz-Leiva, 2005). Cities have specific cultural, social, economic, geographical and political contexts that influence

the performance of a city. Different cities may also be at different stages in their urban development cycle (Stokie 1999). These are not often considered in the interpretation of results, with too much weight given to the relationship between performance and indicators. Finally, many of the existing benchmarking studies are not specifically designed for public policy.

These prominent liveability studies should not overshadow important scholarship with regard to urban liveability indicators occurring in Australia. It is acknowledged that several prominent indicators of disadvantage studies have been particularly influential in Australian urban areas, particularly those of Baum (2008), Saunders et.al. (2008), Vinson (2007) and Cummins et.al. (2007) with his especially influential *Wellbeing Index* developed by the Australian Centre on Quality of Life at Deakin University. Commensurate intent lay behind the Leventhal etal (2009) Common Cause Report into Sydney's Key Social Issues drawing on a range of data from sources such as the ABS, government and academic reports, to assess social exclusion and disadvantage across various areas within Greater Sydney. In a similar vein, the MacroMelbourne Initiative led by the Melbourne Community Foundation in partnership with a range of organisations including Deakin University and the Victorian Council of Social Services has also produced a study (Hancock & Horrocks 2006) on disadvantage across Melbourne. The report identified the significant challenges facing Melbourne ensuring that plans to limit urban growth do not unfairly impact on the most socially excluded groups. Another study using existing ABS data, the BankWest Quality of Life Index (Bankwest 2008) measured the quality of life in 590 local government areas across Australia, ranked against ten criteria, all given equal weighting. Its results showed much higher levels of quality of life in urban areas and again, the popularity with which this liveability survey appeared to be greeted, pointed to a desire for a more nuanced and localized suite of liveability indicators that could be more readily taken up by public policy and planning.

Indeed, the large response from individuals and groups throughout the state to the VCEC inquiry generated significant criticism of existing city liveability measures, including the finding (4.1) that "composite measures of liveability, like the EIU index, are of limited use for Victorians for assessing liveability and for informing policy decisions; although there is a range of liveability indicators available for Victorians to draw on, they are not assembled in a comprehensive fashion to enable easy dissemination of the information; and a suite of indicators can provide information to assess the

performance of government programs and policy, and to assist governments, businesses, communities and individuals in decision making".

Community Wellbeing Indicators

While the conceptualisation of liveability indicators has largely been confined to Australia's urban areas, there are striking parallels with the rapidly growing interest in community wellbeing indicators. Internationally, and in Australia, there has been a growing movement toward using community wellbeing indicators to support more informed and engaged approaches to community planning and health promotion and social inclusion (Salvaris & Wiseman, 2004). There is growing interest in exploring approaches to understanding and measuring the progress of societies which extend beyond GDP to more inclusive, holistic and multi-domain frameworks (ABS, 2006). Wellbeing indicators and sustainability frameworks seek to complement understandings of economic wellbeing with social, environmental and cultural understandings (Gahin and Paterson, 2001).

The community indicator movement has expanded internationally in a context of a general upsurge of interest in community engagement and place based responses to complex social issues (Dluhy & Swartz, 2006). It represents a 'rush back to the idea of community' by governments and policy makers (Adams and Hess 2001) and is matched by growing evidence that citizen engagement contributes to better policy outcomes and a stronger sense of inclusion, participation and community (Callahan 2007). The literature reflects:

- An upsurge of interest in social capital and community building (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000);

- The reawakening of interest in citizenship, democracy, governance and social justice (Smyth, Rydell *et al.* 2005); and

- The influence of systems theory, complexity and the striving for joined up government, innovation and new efficiencies in public administration (Chapman, 2004).

In Australia, there are several emerging examples of indicator sets for measuring community wellbeing at a State level. These use triple bottom line approaches that embrace social, economic and environmental outcomes and include frameworks such as Growing Victoria Together (Victorian Government, 2000) and Growing Tasmania Together (Tasmanian Government, 2001). The

Commonwealth Government Summit 'Australia 2020' in April 2008 acknowledged the importance of developing a set of outcomes focused goals and indicators for measuring progress. Advanced work in Australia stems from very local community wellbeing projects and efforts by local governments and their partners to understand and measure community wellbeing at a local government area level. Most community wellbeing indicator research has focused on the establishment of appropriate platforms and systems, including identifying relevant indicators and data sets; building relationships between partners and establishing data sharing agreements. Empirical research on how these frameworks and platforms are being utilised to better understand, and thereby improve the health and wellbeing of communities and the difference they are making is largely lacking. Certainly more research is needed to increase understanding of the ways in which wellbeing indicators are being used across a number of contexts and jurisdictions and consequently how their use might be enhanced to support the quality of public policy making in Australia.

There is nonetheless plentiful evidence that local governments are increasingly interested in the uptake of social and community indicators (Rawsthorne & Vinson, 2007; Cairns City Council, 2006; Victorian Community Indicators Project, 2005; City of Sydney 2007). Community wellbeing indicators can improve councils' knowledge, responsiveness, effectiveness and accountability and help strengthen their local communities, in direct and practical ways. Arguably the most applicable model for Australia is New Zealand's *Quality of Life Project*, initiated in response to growing pressures on urban communities, concern about the impacts of urbanisation and the effects of this on the well being of residents. The key purpose of the 'Big Cities' project, as it is more commonly known, is to provide information to decision-makers to improve the quality of life in twelve major New Zealand urban areas, including the laudable objectives: i) consistency of indicator use and monitoring methods among participating cities; ii) provision of data to support advocacy on urban issues; iii) raising the profile of urban issues within central government; iv) collaborative working of bigger cities to monitor and address quality of life issues and v) monitoring across the cities enables participating councils to develop a consistent set of indicators, identify urban issues and trends, and provide a platform to develop comprehensive responses. Under the Local Government Act (2002), local authorities are required to work with their communities to identify their desired outcomes. Councils then develop plans or initiatives to achieve the outcomes and monitor progress towards meeting them. Many of the

councils' community outcomes match the domains used in the three reports (2001, 2003, 2007) thus far produced by this project. Limitations of the 'Big Cities' project are noted by Crothers (2006), particularly its use of large number of indicators precluding any easy analysis of changes, limited disaggregation other than in spatial terms and the difficulties examining differences across so many cities. However, the same authors note the importance of the project's capacity to work closely with national governments and Statistics New Zealand in aligning with similar social indicator initiatives.

Translating Urban Liveability Indicators into Policy

The emergence of cities as the unchallenged site of human development for the future and the goal of sustainable development have pushed hundreds of cities around the world to seek better means of assessing urban trends. Many forms of assessment, audit, and indicator systems for guiding and better evaluating the effects of urban development are now in place. However, their utility is still in question (Holden, 2006). For Holden (2009: 430), "the major challenge currently facing the urban indicators movement internationally is to successfully incorporate the collection and reporting of indicators into decision making processes" (see also Michalos 2007; Gahin *et al.* 2003; Sawicki 2002). The urban indicators research community tends to focus on remedying the needs for data, computational methodologies and technology infrastructure for indicators development and use (Wiek and Binder 2005; Wong 2002). Only more recently developed is research into the specific social and political factors that determine whether and how indicators get developed and used, despite widespread recognition that these factors present the biggest barriers to effective application of indicators in any context (Rydin 2007; Herzi and Dovers 2006; Dluhy and Swartz 2006; Reed et al. 2006; Eckerberg and Mineur 2003; Besleme *et.al.* 1998). Differing types of communities in the urban realm affect the way an indicator system is perceived and consequently sets specific barriers and conditions to its uptake and implementation.

For Holden (2009: 430), "the logic for urban indicator systems is clear: with better information and benchmarks for performance, better management and planning decisions can be made that will be less prone to error and more adaptable to long-term thinking than decisions made in the absence

of this information". This logic reflects a quest for objectivity in urban governance processes. While objectivity in knowledge creation has provided undeniable results in physical and engineering sciences, the application of objectivity rules to social sciences, public policy and urban planning has been fraught with shortcomings. Despite the contested terrain of objectivity in practice, many expectations of truth, transparency, neutrality and universality are implied when the term is articulated. In general, numbers and quantification embody objectivity which ideas expressed in language are unable to do. The quest for objectivity "in this higher and mightier sense" (Holden 2009: 430) has spread throughout urban policy and development contexts around the world, such that many expect numbers to be able to speak universal truth to power, fulfil the promises of democracy, neutralize political battles and overcome ideological differences.

New research into the utility of indicator systems from a community-based perspective can begin from the characterization of indicators and their uses provided by Herzi & Dovers (2006) and Hagerty *et.al.* (2001). They both typologize not the population groups using indicators but the types of use to which they are put: instrumental, conceptual, tactical, symbolic, or political. They offer a conceptualization of indicator systems as a bridge between knowledge and policy and posit that the length of this bridge, or the distance of different users from decision-making authority, determines the type of function the indicators fulfill as well as the costs of invoking them.

How then to translate the participatory basis of urban community wellbeing indicator systems into indices of urban liveability? The description "world's most liveable city" is so familiar that it verges on a cliche. Most of Australia's urban inhabitants are too busy living their lives to feel any great need to reflect on its meaning – for the city or for them. In any city as diverse as Australia's capitals, one person's view is likely to be quite different from another's, as is their concept of what makes their part of it 'liveable' or not. This complexity of liveability was made clear by an *Age*-commissioned survey in 2005 that rated the liveability of Melbourne's 314 suburbs, then attempted to explain the findings over a week of special features that generated considerable feedback, many noting the survey's 14 criteria excluded many socio-economic indicators while others wondered at the exclusion of factors such as housing affordability, job availability, freeway and road access, proximity to sporting clubs and other hubs of community activity. The study authors explained that the criteria were "chosen to be

characteristics of the place, not the characteristics of the people who live within that place" (*The Age*, 27 August, 2005). But the characteristics of people must be known to answer the obvious question: liveability for whom? Working couples with children are likely to have quite different priorities from elderly retirees, for instance. Good public planning must aim to distinguish between an endless list of wants, which reflect people's status and values, and the key needs that should be met in every suburb.

A Liveability Index for Australian Cities?

The May 2009 conference convened by the City of Melbourne and the federal government's Major Cities unit, titled *State of the Cities: Unlocking the Data* served to underline the significant challenges faced by Australian cities in collecting, collating and assessing the sort of data that might not only serve to promote a viable liveability index but that can trigger necessary policy changes. It also highlighted the problem that Australian cities unquestionably remain challenged by, as articulated by Holden (2006: 170):

Indicator-based approaches to better guide our cities' development get stuck at conflicting understandings of the components and frameworks of sustainable development, at the deplorable state of much of the information available to plan for and act in our cities, and at the failure of the 'rubber' of indicator reports to meet the 'road' of decision making traffic jams. The means by which urban indicator projects can encourage a synoptic view, act as levers for strategic change, and facilitate sustainable development, remains to be discovered.

There would appear to be a fundamental role for Major Cities Unit in promoting a holistic suite of urban liveability indicators as a means to better informing Australian urban development, and to broaden the almost obsessive turn to infrastructure planning in Australian cities (Dodson 2009) in the face of a global economic downturn. This paper has hopefully provided some persuasive and collaborative means by which such a suite of indicators could be readily developed and implemented to assess urban liveability in Australia.

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