

Urban Sustainability in a Frontier Country

I would like to thank the Langara Research Committee for their support of my research, in the summer of 2013. I was able to utilize the funds awarded by the LRC to help offset travel and per diem costs, which were incurred as a result of my research having been situated in Australia.

Objectives

The goal of my research was to utilize a case study approach to research aspects of sustainable urban development, in two urban centres in Australia: Sydney and Melbourne. More specifically, research was focused on sustainable urban infrastructure, and public attitudes towards sustainable development initiatives in the urban context. Data was collected by means of site visits, observation, questionnaires and an in-depth interview.

Methodology

The initial research plan proposed that approximately 10 in-depth interviews would be conducted, with representatives of municipal planning authorities, educational institutions, businesses, and local environmental NGO's. Prior to travelling to Australia, I initiated contact with approximately 25 individuals and organizations, providing them with details regarding the research project, and requesting their participation in a confidential interview. The vast majority of those individuals and organizations either elected not to participate, or did not reply to my requests.

Greater success was experienced in achieving the objective of 40 completed questionnaires. More than 50% of those approached declined the request to complete the questionnaire, but completion of the target number of questionnaires was eventually achieved.

Selected Initial Research Results

The in-depth interview was analyzed, and the questionnaire responses are in the process of being analyzed and organized into a number of distinct classes and themes, some of which are discussed below.

A majority (89%) of questionnaire respondents indicated that they were concerned about environmental issues, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, etc., and most (83%) either mildly or strongly agreed that it was worthwhile becoming involved in initiatives to address such issues.

In terms of the actual behaviours of respondents, 89% indicated that they frequently utilized public transit, despite almost one-third disagreeing with the statement that Melbourne had a 'good transit system', and over three-quarters indicating that they felt that public transit fares were not affordable.

A selection of questions attempted to identify factors that would either encourage or discourage questionnaire respondents' changing their daily behaviour so as to render it more sustainable. Preliminary analysis of this group of questions and responses seem to indicate that lack of awareness in regard to how to change their behaviours is a significant disincentive to change. Additional frequent responses were to the effect that such change is difficult, that safety concerns are a factor (for example, in the transportation choices they make, such as whether or not to ride their bicycles or walk, instead of driving), and is also too expensive.

Conclusions and Future Research

It should be noted that the high questionnaire refusal rate may have contributed to information gaps, and possible biases in the results. Future research should address these concerns, and could also attempt to more clearly identify incentives and disincentives to the adoption of sustainable behaviours in urban communities. Please feel free to contact me, should you be interested in further information in regard to this research. kerdos@langara.bc.ca