

# Virtual Renewal: can a network build community?

**Scott Ewing**

Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

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## **1. Introduction to Reach for the Clouds**

Reach for the Clouds is a project aimed at addressing the so-called 'digital divide' between Australia's information 'haves' and 'have nots' by providing second hand computers along with software, computer training, wiring and network access<sup>1</sup> free of charge to residents of Atherton Gardens, a highrise public housing estate in inner city Melbourne. Each household of the estate will receive a free personal computer, on completion of a ten hour training module. The machines are refurbished models, mainly end of lease machines donated by government departments when those organisations upgraded their own hardware. Computers, monitors and printers are refurbished through a program called "Green PC", funded through the State Government Community Jobs Program and employing long-term unemployed people to carry out the work. A large pool of volunteer trainers drawn from the estate and the wider Melbourne community carries out computer training.

Atherton Gardens consists of four twenty storey tower blocks, with ten flats on each floor, comprising a total of eight hundred dwellings, housing some two thousand individuals. While a significant minority of residents on the estate have arrived in Australia from Vietnam and speak Vietnamese as their preferred language (around 40%), there are more than thirty languages spoken by residents who come from countries including Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Spain, Greece, Iran, Iraq, China, Laos, the Philippines, Somalia and Ethiopia. Less than thirty per cent were born in Australia. A significant proportion of residents suffer from problems of substance abuse, mental or physical ill health and social isolation. The residents are generally on very low incomes, with 80 per cent receiving some form of income support from government and only 20 per cent having private or other income sources. Problems around the estate include a drug trade, violence and the fear of it, graffiti and vandalism of public areas. Not for profit agencies involved with or working on the

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<sup>1</sup> See the electronic-Atherton Gardens Enterprise website at <http://www.highrise.infoxchange.net.au/> See also <http://www.infoxchange.net.au/> to investigate the background to InfoXchange's activities. Publicity from partners in the project can be found at Victorian Department of Human Services <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/peoplefocus/mar01/website.htm> and on the City of Yarra site: [www.infoxchange.net.au/yarraweb](http://www.infoxchange.net.au/yarraweb)

estate include the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Outreach Victoria and Jesuit Social Services, each of whom are involved in this project.

The project is still in the early stages. Nevertheless it has seen some success. Many tenants have expressed strong interest in having a computer and in undertaking training. As at February 2003, over 400 residents have been involved in training, 400 computers had been given out, servers and routers have been installed in each building, wiring connected to all apartments, an intranet was under development, and access to the Internet was being arranged. It is too early to know whether the project will meet its aim of becoming a resident run and resident owned initiative.

From the beginning the project has been a social partnership with Infoxchange (a not for profit internet service provider that has been the lead agency) attracting interest from a range of partners including government agencies, welfare organisations and private firms. This has involved 'selling' the project to prospective partners, and necessarily involved some reformulation of the project and its objectives as the project is pitched to different audiences. This process of reformulation is not just important in attracting support and funding; it also has the potential to change the implementation of the initiative as some aspects are prioritised and others given less attention. This will also alter the way in which the project is evaluated.

## **2. Wired High Rise Research Project**

Wired High Rise is a three year Australia Research Council funded research project analysing the impact of the Reach for the Clouds project. Our industry partners are the Victorian Office of Housing and the Primary Health Branch (both within the Department of Human Services) and InfoXchange.

Primary research undertaken thus far includes focus groups with residents, interviews with key individuals and a survey of residents, involving face-to-face interviews using translators and designed to be repeated in a years' time, when the network is well established. In addition we have been following the implementation of the project and attending various meetings of residents and agencies related to life on the estate.

Our research to date has shown that the project has had success in increasing computer access at home. We estimate that just over half the households on the estate now have a computer in their home compared to just over twenty per cent

prior to the project (Census, 2001). In addition we have found that educational uses were the overwhelmingly most popular reasons people gave for wanting a computer. Our research has clearly shown that the large migrant population on the estate are keen to use email to keep in touch with friends and family. In addition a significant proportion of these residents are dissatisfied with their current access to news and current affairs from their country of origin emphasising the potential importance to these people particularly of web access.<sup>2</sup>

Those involved in developing the project tend to describe it in three distinct (though not mutually exclusive) ways: as a project addressing the digital divide; in more traditional welfare terms as an initiative to improve service delivery and encourage education, employment and training participation; and, as an exercise in building community and community capacity.

In terms of evaluation the digital divide perspective is perhaps the most straightforward. At its simplest level a project that provided computers and network access to people who previously did not have this access would be seen as a success. Moving to more complex understandings of information poverty would require investigation of skills development and use.

Evaluating the project in terms of the second perspective would require assessing how residents are using their access to engage with online services and to achieve education, employment and training outcomes. Have residents used the network for education purposes such as children's homework or online study, have they searched for jobs online, are more residents involved in education etc?

Evaluating the project as a community building exercise is more complex. This approach is not inconsistent with the other two, but it stresses the importance of participation, trust and communication as a precursor to improving other outcomes. In our study we have used the concept of social capital (examining friendship networks, associationalism and feelings of trust) to help analyse this issue. This has allowed our work to articulate to a broad contemporary literature and debate but has not (as yet) answered two fundamental questions; can a wired network build community and can this be measured?

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<sup>2</sup> Further information on our research findings to date can be accessed at <http://www.aifs.org.au/institute/afrc8/meredyth.pdf>.

In the rest of this paper I will explore the theme of community building through a narrative history of the development of the Reach for the Clouds, placing it in its physical (Atherton Gardens estate) and public policy context. As I will show the project has, through the process of reformulation to attract funding and its incorporation into a broader neighbourhood renewal program on the estate, become more closely tied to the concept of community building. Neighbourhood Renewal is a key element of the Victorian government's community building strategy. Through examining the process of neighbourhood renewal on the estate I hope to shed some light on what community building means in practice and what this implies for the Reach for the Clouds project.

### **3. Irrational exuberance: community building and neighbourhood renewal**

According to Rose (1999) 'Community emerged as a rather unexpected theme in debates about the governability of liberal, democratic and market-based societies in the closing decades of the end of the twentieth century.' Community of course is one of 'those' words; it means everything and nothing. Famously George A Hillery identified ninety-four definitions of the concept and sixteen distinct elements.

Likening the concept of community to democracy, Plant (1974) observes that a 1949 UNESCO inquiry into the ideals associated with the concept of democracy came up with the following two points:

- A. There were no replies hostile to democracy
- B. The idea of democracy was considered to be highly ambiguous

Community shares this characteristic of ambiguity and universal popular appeal, giving the term considerable rhetorical power (Schofield 2000).

In the Victorian state government context, the rise of community as a key theme of government was given a significant impetus by the election of the Bracks government in 1999. A few examples of the various ways in which this government is more attuned to community than its predecessor provides a neat practical example of the contestability and complexity of community as a concept.

The government took power in its first term with the support of three independents, three voices of the community that would provide a brake on the party machine and the professional politicians. The three independents were based in rural electorates and so spoke on behalf of rural communities, adding further to their organic authenticity. The government would have to at least consult with these authentic voices of the people before enacting legislation.

More broadly, the Kennett government was seen by many as non-consultative, too eager to push things through and get things done. So the Bracks government would be consultative, would listen to the community. One example of this approach was the government's implementation of Community Cabinet, a process of holding cabinet meetings in rural and regional areas combined with Ministerial Community Consultation' meetings.<sup>3</sup>

The Kennett government had downsized the public and welfare sectors generally throughout its time in power and the Bracks government came to power with great expectations that this attack on community fabric would be redressed. This is community in the sense identified by Rose as 'community of welfare reformers...a network of professional institutions and services for social citizens that was spread across the territory of their everyday lives.' (Rose 1999, p172) The community sector would be rebuilt.

In its first term the government restructured the Community Support Fund that had been established by the previous administration when it legalised poker machines and established a state-regulated casino. A proportion of these funds from gambling taxes were now to be used for community building projects. Policy announcements were made using the term community building from the start of the new administration. Towards the end of its first term a Community Building Unit was created within the Department of Human Services. In its second term a Department of Victorian Communities was created in which the Community Building Unit now resides. Community embedded in community. Or borrowing from another program of the government, community squared.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.premier.vic.gov.au/cabinet/>

#### **4. How Reach for the Clouds became part of neighbourhood renewal**

When the Bracks government came to power in 1999, the future of highrise estates in Melbourne was uncertain; they were underfunded and public housing generally was being targeted at people with high and complex needs thereby increasing their resource needs. In addition Atherton Gardens had become the centre of a flourishing drug trade accompanied by an increase in violent crime;

High rise estates such as Atherton Gardens were resourced with up to five community development workers at the height of investment in social infrastructure and they accommodated a mixture of incomes due to broader public housing eligibility criteria. By the late 1990s high rise estates were receiving very little capital investment and the previous State Government was looking at the possibility of selling five high rise estates across Melbourne to private developers (including Atherton Gardens). At this point there were no community development workers on any estate in the City of Yarra. (DHS, 2002)

This resulted in broad range of local service providers and government agencies developing responses (both in cooperation and independently) and a number of resident meetings being held to discuss the problem(s). InfoXchange chose Atherton Gardens as the site for Reach for the Clouds because it was earmarked to be the site of the state government's key response to security issues on highrise estates; an electronic controlled access system. This would necessitate wiring the estate's four towers. This wiring it was hoped could be used for the Reach for the Clouds intranet.

The new government introduced its policies of improving public housing estates, retaining inner city housing stock, introducing environmental initiatives and community participation. (Smyth 2000). A number of major estate redevelopments were announced with a process of community participation. This consisted of establishing Community Advisory Committees for the strategic planning stage and Community Liaison Committees to inform the community through the redevelopment stage.

In December 1999 InfoXchange submitted a \$20,000 proposal to Multimedia Victoria – a government agency that was primarily responsible for the state's nascent internet and information policy – to develop a Social and Technical Business Plan to wire up the Atherton Gardens estate. The proposal described the venture as an 'Information

Technology project with a community development focus that will see every resident of the Atherton Gardens high rise estate offered the opportunity to access Internet Technology' (InfoXchange 1999).

InfoXchange's role as a major provider of IT solutions in the not for profit sector enabled it to forge a coalition of welfare service providers in support of the project, including the Bedford Street Outreach Service (now Outreach Victoria), RecruitNet, City of Yarra, Yarra Community Health Service and the regional manager of the Office of Housing itself. This network was in place by early 2000. InfoXchange's existing profile in the sector was crucial in developing the credibility of the project. InfoXchange, the relevant regional manager in the Office of Housing and a number of community organisations jointly wrote the original proposal.

Multimedia Victoria (MMV) in response to InfoXchange's submission provided a \$10,000 grant to prepare a project initiation document (PID) that could be the precursor to developing a fully fledged business plan. InfoXchange submitted an application to the Community Jobs Program, a state government program that supports community organisations, local government and other government agencies to employ jobseekers on community projects. This application was for funds to employ long-term unemployed people to rebuild older PCs donated to InfoXchange by a range of public and private organisations, which were intended to be the PCs that would be distributed to the high rise tenants. An application was also submitted to BYTE, a program being administered by the Australian Youth Foundation on behalf of Lucent Technologies, a major global player in the commercial development of the internet which has subsequently fallen on hard times.

The major task for the RFTC project team for the remainder of 2000 was developing a budget (through work undertaken on the PID), identifying potential funding sources and, where appropriate, making formal applications. Although much hope had been placed in MMV being the eventual funder of the project, it had become clear through the MMV representative on the steering committee that this was unlikely to be the case. It had become apparent to MMV that this was a 'social' rather than a business development project and that other arms of government were better placed to provide support. In addition the Office of Housing had decided to trial their electronic security system on another estate significantly increasing the infrastructure cost of the project.

MMV's position led to a reconsideration of the best way to involve the various levels of government. One approach suggested was to position the project as a form of service delivery to various government agencies, understanding that this depended on establishing a measurable community benefit related to existing agencies. The project crosses a number of departments at all three levels of government, which presents a significant challenge in establishing financial support. One suggestion was to try and get a 'whole of government' approach at the state level by dealing directly with the premier.

After several meetings between key players in the steering group, Office of Housing senior executives and the minister's adviser, a significant step forward took place with the agreement in November 2001 by the Office to fund the wiring of the estate independent of the trialing of the electronic security system. RFTC now had official support, but this did not extend to recurrent funding.

To address this problem, the steering committee agreed to solicit the support of a newly restructured government agency that had been given the task of developing a program of community building. The Community Support Fund (CSF), established with funds from state gambling taxes, was identified as the agency most likely to support the non infrastructure elements of the project such as training, and the director of the Office of Housing committed to make representations to the CSF on its behalf. The PID, written to satisfy the requirements of MMV, would have to be substantially added to, highlighting the project's community building aspects. In July 2001, reminiscent of the MMV experience, the CSF deferred on the request for recurrent funding, but agreed to provide \$10,000 to develop another application for funding.

According to InfoXchange in its application to the CSF, Reach for the Clouds was a "a community building project" designed to "assist the development and maintenance of community capacity and cohesiveness at the Atherton Gardens estate, by utilising new technologies." (InfoXchange, 2001).

In May 2002 the Minister for Housing and Community Services announced the Fitzroy Neighbourhood Renewal Project that 'is to improve the quality of life of residents on the estate, to increase resident interest, control and involvement in their environment and to enhance participation in building and estate management'. Reach for the Clouds had officially become part of the Fitzroy Neighbourhood Renewal Project. A

month later the Minister announced that the Community Support Fund was to provide \$820,000 over three years for staff and support for the Reach for the Clouds project.

In November 2002, the government released a document announcing its Neighbourhood Renewal initiative:

...a new approach that brings together the resources and ideas of residents, governments, local communities, businesses and community groups to tackle disadvantage in areas with a high concentration of public housing. (Office of Housing 2002, p1).

It initially consisted of ten projects that had been underway since 2000. Atherton Gardens is one of these projects.

Neighbourhood Renewal has six key aims:

- Increase people's pride and participation in community;
- Enhance housing and the physical environment;
- Lift employment, training and education opportunities and expand local economic activities;
- Improve personal safety and reduce crime;
- Promote health and wellbeing;
- Increase access to transport and other key services and improve government responsiveness. (Office of Housing 2002, p3)

I will discuss in this next section how these objective have been translated into a neighbourhood renewal process on the Atherton Gardens estate.

At the end of this process then the Reach for the Clouds project had become part of the State government's Neighbourhood Renewal initiative, a key element of its community building strategy and was being funded as a community building project through the community support fund.

## **5. What does it mean?**

What are the implications for the Wired High Rise project of being a community building endeavour? One way of responding to this is to look at the process of Neighbourhood Renewal on Atherton Gardens to date. This has involved instituting a Neighbourhood Advisory Board that includes tenant and agency representatives. Taking the objective of Neighbourhood Renewal outlined earlier the Office of Housing

has overseen a process to identify major issues and potential projects addressing three of the Neighbourhood Renewal objectives:

- Crime and safety;
- Health and wellbeing;
- Employment, learning and economic development.

Interestingly the objective most closely linked to building community (increase people's pride and participation in community) is not an identified theme.

Public meetings were held with residents and agencies to discuss issues related to each objective and identify potential projects related to them. A second round of workshops then prioritised the identified projects. This process has just been completed and the results (ie the priority projects) were relayed to participants at a recent public meeting.

These projects are to be considered by the Neighbourhood Advisory Board that will create three working groups to more fully articulate the proposals. Once this is done NAB will take the project descriptions to various existing resident groups on the estate for their comment. When (if?) there is broad agreement on the projects they are to be submitted to the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

The objective of the program is to be revenue neutral for the Office of Housing so that projects will need to redeploy existing services by negotiating with service providers and/or identifying new funding sources. It is the responsibility of NAB to take these Action Plans and negotiate with relevant government departments where appropriate to achieve, for example, better integrated services or a different mix of services. Welfare professionals (including Office of Housing staff) will be on NAB to help guide the process, deal with technical issues, navigate the system and help with funding opportunities and making applications.

Community building in this process is about taking a whole of government approach to service delivery for a particular location. There is potential for service deliverers to better attune their practices through information provided by residents through the Neighbourhood Advisory Board. One bureaucrat at a public meeting through this process described it as 'making service deliverers accountable to their clients'. These service deliverers included both government agencies and third sector organisation (albeit often receiving government funds to deliver the services). Here is what

Schofield points to as the use of the idea of community by the state to influence and direct civil society organisations (Schofield 2002). In addition building community in this example does involve enmeshing resident (representatives) in the decision-making of the state- residents are being asked to be involved in the prioritisation of projects or programs and to negotiate with various departments and agencies to achieve whole-of-government approaches. This both empowers residents and implicates them in decision making: they become accountable to the process.

Another important function of community building appears to be as a branding device. Taking advantage of the popular appeal of 'community' it enables interest to be generated in what would otherwise be a messy network of disparate programs and projects (many of which have operated for a long time). Just as importantly community building acts like a software user interface. 'Non-experts' (ie residents) are able to engage without having to understand the underlying workings of the various programs. Government programs are necessarily complex and unwieldy involving organisational structures that are difficult for outsiders to understand. This is exacerbated when private firms and the third sector are added to the mix.

The role of community building as a branding device is clear, at least initially both at a macro and micro level. In terms of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, all ten of its projects were underway before it was formed. At Atherton Gardens the same was true. Again this is not to discount its importance but to recognise its rhetorical value and more obviously that we do not make the world as we like.

## **6. Implications for Reach for the Clouds**

Community building is not empty rhetoric, it has potential to play an important role in a process of fine tuning and better integrating services and increasing tenant participation. It does not in this case study of Neighbourhood Renewal appear to constitute a revolution in government. It is not apparently interested in building community per se but it does not to rule this out as a consequence (externality) of Neighbourhood Renewal.

As researchers attempting to evaluate this project we are interested in this for a number of reasons. As part of our funding bid we, perhaps strategically, adopted the concept of social capital and made it an important component of our research. We have undertaken a survey of residents that among other things asks questions

related to social capital. We always understood that in a relatively short time frame we would be unlikely to detect significant changes in friendship networks and associational behaviour. Attitudinal questions regarding trust and feelings about the estate may change, but are difficult to attribute to a single cause, particularly with the dynamic policy environment of Atherton Gardens. A greater understanding of the role of community building as 'managerial process' (Schofield 2002) rather than a concept or objective will help put this information in perspective.

Secondly this approach by government in the particular case of Atherton Gardens supports our (the research team's) impression from involvement in research on the estate that there is a highly developed organisational and associational structure in place relative to the neighbourhoods in which we reside. This is not to deny that a significant proportion of residents are socially isolated but to recognise that there is a healthy associational life which provides a potential resource for residents and those that seek to govern them. In discussing this with two bureaucrats involved in the process, both agreed that they were not so much community building (which clearly implies a lack that needs to be remedied) but rather developing a better understanding of the resident community(ies) to enable them to utilise their capacities and refine service delivery.

I started this paper with two fundamental questions with which our research was wrestling. Can a wired network build community and can this be measured? Perhaps I am left with a more important and interesting question; 'Is community building really about building community?'

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