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# Dense, urban and walkable: The lived experience of apartment dwellers in post-suburban Sydney

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## Abstract

Urban density is commonly identified as factor that contributes to active transport, including walking, across all age groups. While a significant body of literature explores the factors that influence the likelihood of walking for commuting, leisure and or strolling, the experiences of residents in rapidly densifying outer suburbs have been much less well considered. Recovering these experiences is important as factors influencing walking – such as greenspace, leafiness and quieter streetscapes- are unevenly available and often shaped by wealth effects. However, investment-driven densification continues regardless across Australia's eastern cities with little understanding of whether (and how) residents negotiate and practice active mobilities in these rapidly densifying spaces. Drawing on a sub-set of interviews and neighbourhood tours with apartment dwellers who live in the Central Business District (CBD) of Liverpool, Sydney, Australia, this paper highlights a set of established and emergent walking practices in Sydney's Western Cities. While revealing established and emerging practices of 'walkability' within the CBD, these journeys are also shaped by car-dependency, violence/aggression and services gaps that intersect to restrict 'walkability'. The paper concludes by advocating incremental diversification of transport infrastructure along with gender-transport audits to support the emergent practical and social accomplishment of walking in the post-suburban city. It also highlights the importance of engaging with the lived and embodied experiences of those negotiating suburban transformation to ensure urban design and planning policies leverage residents' knowledge base as a resource.

**Key words:** *Interviews; active transport; urban design; shading; quality.*

## Introduction

Local governments managing population growth and urban intensification face a difficult balancing act: how to preserve neighbourhood strengths while making the most of growth. While city centres have long been recognised as nodes of intensification - drawing in finance, investment and residents - competition for land, housing and infrastructure (including transport) means that suburban neighbourhoods are emerging as globalising nodes in the 21st century (Keil, 2017). These new geographies of intensification are changing the ways residents engage with suburban space and infrastructure, creating new sensibilities, socialities and expectations (McFarlane, 2016). Recognising the potential for active transport as cities become more densely settled, this paper focuses on one aspect of resident engagement with densifying suburbs - walking. While a significant body of literature explores the factors that influence residents' decisions to walk (Cao et al., 2006; Giles-Corti, 2012; Rodriguez, 2009; Shigematsu, 2009) the realities of investment-led development and uneven distribution of greenspace means that these factors are experienced unevenly (Cook, 2015, Institute for Sustainable Futures, 2014).

As Young and Keil (2010, p.90) point out, post-suburban cities are characterised by both 'state presence and state retreat' shaping opportunities and gaps in infrastructure and service provision. It is therefore important to start with the cities and contexts in which people live, as infrastructure, greenspace and car-dependencies intersect unevenly. Because of the situated and embedded nature of residents' experiences, their engagement with suburbs as they intensify provide important insights into the changing frontier of urban design and planning in globalising suburbs, and this includes the City of Liverpool in Sydney, Australia, the key focus of this paper.

Located in Sydney's Western Suburbs, Liverpool has within its boundaries the Badgerys Creek airport and the emerging Aerotropolis – an airport with city-like aspects (Kasarda, 2011). A calculation on the stated population projection for Liverpool Local Government Area displays a 55% growth in population from 2016 to 2036 (NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment, 2018) and 60% increase in households. A significant proportion of Liverpool's growth will occur in its 25-hectare central business district, where

through the provision of high-rise housing development, the resident population will double (Liverpool City Council, 2019).

Drawing on residents' engagement and experiences of intensification, this paper reports on a subset of data from a pilot project examining citizens' lived experience of denser urban worlds, foreshadowing both new roles and opportunities for local government. We report here on one part of the wider project, focusing on residents' experiences of walking in their neighbourhood. The normative assumption underpinning this paper is that those who live in dense suburban neighbourhoods, should have a quality public realm in which to enjoy social life and travel safely by foot. Pilot interviews reveal the rich diversity of walking practices supported by the Liverpool CBD. The transition to a walkable city is nonetheless incomplete with car aggression and security inhibiting walking practice. The interviews suggest a list of policy actions – informed by using global best practice for equitable access to public space – to support positive 'density done well'<sup>1</sup> strategies (Beasley, 2019; Committee for Sydney, 2016). These actions are listed in the conclusion.

## Methods

Recognising that mobility is shaped by a diverse set of habits, materials, bodies and affects (Bissell, 2018; Clement and Waitt, 2017; Harada and Waitt, 2013), this study draws on a mixed method approach combining interviews with the embodied practice of a neighbourhood walk. Through neighbourhood walks we sought to capture something of the sensory, emotional and kinesthetic experience that Harada and Waitt (2013) identify as integral to the people's mobility preferences, choices and habits. Given that patterns of mobility are 'held together' through the adaptive practices of residents as much as formal infrastructures (Simone, 2004), the paper departs from more detached measuring tools such as *Walkscore* and *Streetscore*<sup>2</sup> in order to foreground participants' embodied experiences and competencies in densifying suburbs.

In the analysis that follows, we draw on a subset of ten interviews and neighbourhood walks undertaken as part of a pilot study examining the lived experience of denser urban worlds. The research received ethics approval in May 2019 and interviews were carried out in July-September the same year. Recruitment occurred through letterbox drops in the Liverpool CBD and social media, Participation was restricted to those living in apartments in the CBD and participants were awarded a \$50-dollar voucher towards a grocery store in return for their time and insights. The complete interview – only part of which we report on here - comprised six sections relating to housing (and apartment) careers (1), reflections on the current apartment (likes, dislikes and governance) (2), financial values (3), neighbourhood values (4), frequently visited places (including mobility) (5) and common spaces (6). Interviews were undertaken during a home visit and neighbourhood walk lasting between 2.5 and 3 hours. During the neighbourhood walk, participants were prompted to reflect on aspects of the walk they liked and disliked, and their future vision for the city. The home and neighbourhood interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, averaging 15,000 words per interview. These wide-ranging discussions generated detailed accounts of living in a densifying city. In this paper we work with a subset of five participants, focusing explicitly on experiences of walking to determine what they enjoy about these walking journeys (1), and what depresses or dampens their enthusiasm for walking journeys (2).

In the remainder of this paper, an overview of housing in Liverpool, and its anticipated growth with respect to Western Sydney's Aerotropolis, is presented. Drawing on interview transcripts, the neighbourhood tours, showing how walking sediments social and family relations in densifying worlds, are described next. We then highlight the dimensions of proximity and connectivity that compel participants to walk in Liverpool CBD, so that it becomes habit-forming. In the fourth section we contrast these motivating forces with the demotivating effects of cars, aggression and services gaps. We note repetitive reference to aggression-

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<sup>1</sup> "Density done well" refers to dense urban areas with public amenities (i.e. quality hard and soft public spaces) and private services (i.e. retail) commensurate to the increase in density; slim towers with space between them to reduce overshadowing of streets; increased fine grain of public spaces; building walls with multiple opening and 'eyes on street' from windows, and; streets with interest and safety (i.e. pedestrian priority).

<sup>2</sup> Walkscore Methodology: <https://www.walkscore.com/methodology.shtml> and Streetscore, FAQ: <http://streetscore.media.mit.edu/faq.html> . Accessed July 2019. Though highly objective, there is still an appreciation of the issues regarding walkability to subjectively score a place.

most often of cars, and car drivers- in depressing bodily capacities to walk. With a clearer sense of what is working (and what is not), we make the case for an incremental diversification of transport infrastructure along with gender-transport audits. In addition, we call for greater attention to the lived experience of apartment dwellers in formulating policies on the frontier of densification.

### **Liverpool: Western Sydney**

Liverpool sits in Western Sydney, a physical description and a cultural construct (Chrysanthos and Ding, 2017, Lee, 2018)<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>. This area remains materially, socially and economically distant from harbourside Sydney yet it is quickly urbanising and will form one of the three hubs in the new “Metropolis of Three Cities” as envisioned by the State of New South Wales (Greater Sydney Commission, 2018). Completed and under construction in the Liverpool CBD are new multi-elevator shaft towers entirely for private ownership as higher end units, or ‘condominiums’. This marks a change. The western parts of Sydney have been viewed by government agencies responsible for social housing as a place with sufficient space to accommodate a measure of such housing. Unfortunately, as witnessed in many cities globally (Marshall, 2015)<sup>5</sup>, there have not been the commensurate amenities, services, parks and open spaces, ‘eyes on the street’ designs, transport options or job locations provided alongside the increase in population.

Apartment dwelling – no matter the ownership or rental status - comprise 58% of Liverpool State Suburb Code (SSC level) housing type (compared to 13% for Australia). The reported number of bedrooms in ‘occupied private dwellings’ show two-bedroom accounting for 50% of dwellings in Liverpool’s CBD area. This is compared to 19% being two bedrooms in Australia while 73% are three bedroom or more in Australia whole (ABS, 2016). Renters comprise 56% (31% in Australia) with rent being 40 dollars less per week than the New South Wales average even though 31% of these renters have rent payments higher than 30% of their household income (ABS, 2016). This small room per unit count, and that so many are in apartments, matched with higher than average proportion of rent as a significant household expense is not uncommon in Australia, but rare. Liverpool’s CBD area is dense and urban, but whether it is becoming more walkable is uncertain. Liverpool also has a highly diverse population. Less than a third, 31.1%, of residents are born in Australia (the Australian average is 66%) with the highest reported countries of birth being Iraq, India, Fiji, Vietnam and Croatia (ABS, 2016).

### ***The future state: More jobs, more people, more need***

There are many residential towers planned and anticipated before 2025<sup>6</sup>. There will be an increase of both local jobs and many new residents, the balance being weighted towards residents more than jobs in the CBD. Jobs are envisioned as being at the Aerotropolis – an airport with city-like aspects (Kasarda, 2011) – under construction within the boundaries of Liverpool on the lands at Badgerys Creek. The mix of a new airport and the existing Hume Highway envisages that freight and logistics handling will be expanded at this crossroads. Jobs will be plentiful, people will be needed, and people need homes and amenities.

The Central Business District will become even more of a 24 hour ‘Downtown’ of living, working, shopping, education, recreation and entertainment. Liverpool’s central area, in the Hoddle Grid<sup>7</sup>, will be a place with high density living, with well-designed streets suited to strolling and shopping, with new riverfront parks and playgrounds. Furthermore, the future transport options will need to be walking, cycling and transit. The grid, already quite congested with cars, cannot carry many more cars than already travel there. There are other options, but they must be planned and budgeted for.

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<sup>3</sup> The Red Rooster Line “...has since entered common vernacular as a dividing line which separates Sydney’s west from its more affluent areas. The formula is simple: sketch the points of all the Red Roosters in Sydney and you get a surprisingly neat indication of the border of Western Sydney.” This website has an interactive map to view.

<sup>4</sup> The similarly traced ‘Latte Line’.

<sup>5</sup> From Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis to Tensta in Stockholm there are many such sites perfect in social housing idealism, but lacking in detailed resolution.

<sup>6</sup> Despite numerous contacts with staff at the City of Liverpool an indicative number of homes, persons or jobs was not available.

<sup>7</sup> In Liverpool the Colonial surveyor general, Hoddle, had had practiced rotating the surveyed grid slightly to meet the river before Melbourne.

The step change in density will require a supply of sufficient amenity of parks, riverside trails, treelined streets, recreation, art centres and schools. These are among the physical assets that hearten the public to activate the city as a social space. Yet, to understand what steps to take to facilitate walkability, is imperative to ask what works well now, what works poorly and how to improve the physical setting to enable active transport to thrive.

### **The neighbourhood tours**

To better understand resident experiences of walking in Liverpool CBD, we draw on a subset of five interviews with participants undertaken as part of the *Western City Project*, funded by University of Wollongong's Global Challenges Program (Seed Funding 2018-2019). As part of the interview process, participants were invited to take us on home and neighbourhood tours comprising a walk they would 'normally do' in their neighbourhood. All participants in this subset were women (reflecting a bias in the sample overall), and four out of five participants had small children under the age of six. The chosen walks for these four participants incorporated leisure/relaxation, commuting (to school and preschool), playing and shopping. Walks were seen as integral to the process of parenting, supporting recent work by Clements and Waitt (2017). The final participant, Marion (age 60-64) who lived alone, invited us on a walk that she undertakes for relaxation.

### ***Walking practice in Liverpool Central Business District***

Walkability is seen to increase with proximity and connectedness (Owen, 2007). Among the many academics, Lawrence Frank and co-authors have written extensively in the correlates of urban form and walking trends (Frank and Engelke, 2001, Frank and Pivo, 1994). Neighbourhood walks with participants reveal the ways that connectivity and proximity support practices of walkability. Naomi (30-34) who works part-time as an administrative assistant, captures the importance of proximity in her neighbourhood walk, sharing a journey with her four children (under the age of six) to the mall, park, church and library (Figure 1). This walk and its different elements — including time in dedicated children's spaces at the library, exhibitions and the water play park— is one she does two to three times a week and one she sees as especially supportive in her role as a parent, providing play and learning opportunities for her children. Reflecting on the walk she concludes 'I feel as though its got everything... cause the library's here, the church is here, the shops are there, and then our apartment is back there'.

**Figure 1 Designated Child-spaces at Liverpool City Library (Naomi, age 30-34, four children).**



Source of all photographs: Sophie-May Kerr. June 2018 to June 2019.

The proximity to schools, services, shops and amenities was also a key feature of Amy's (40-44) walk. A stay-at-home mother with two children under five, Amy's walk incorporated school and pre-school drop off, shopping and medical appointments. Reflecting on her experience of walking during hot or very wet weather, Amy shared her 'short-cut' through Westfield Shopping Centre (including the carpark that has to be negotiated with gumboots during heavy rain). Using the shopping centre lifts/elevators, Amy would shorten her walk to school; and through Liverpool hospital to her younger child's childcare centre. The mall, that includes the bank and post-office, provides access to services, the school and the medical centre, so that 'everything is, you know, pretty much on foot'.

The relationship between parenting and walking as observed by Clements and Waitt (2017) was a strong theme for the four participants with children. This is perhaps best captured by Sarah (30-34) working part-time and minding her young child (less than a year old) two days a week. Living in close proximity to Liverpool Hospital, Sarah recounted walking across the road from her apartment to give birth to her baby, walking home four days later, observing that this 'takes convenience to the next level.' Sarah also shared places of refuge on her walk, where she stops to care for and play with her child including the church grounds where she would find 'a bit of privacy' to feed her baby; the cemetery surrounded by jacarandas (Figure 2); and the park where she would spend time with her husband and child playing on the grass. While she had thought about moving to a house outside the Liverpool CBD, she and her husband decided to buy an apartment in the Liverpool CBD as 'we would miss out on all of these convenient things'. These narratives of parenting and walking in densifying suburbs suggest entrenched patterns around motherhood and driving (Dowling, 2000) may be shifting in and through processes of densification. As Amy put it, walking was preferable for people with prams, especially 'full-time mums like me'.

**Figure 2 Liverpool Graveyard: 'Surrounded by Jacarandas that flower and we like to go and sit there sometimes' (Sarah, age 30-34, one child)**



Recognising that parenthood can also be an isolating experience, walking is also critical to well-being and mental health (Clement and Waitt, 2017). As Ayasha (30-34), a stay-at home mother who lives with her two-year old child and her husband conceded 'I can't stay at home with my daughter all the time, it makes me really paranoid'. Instead, Ayasha walks every day, to shop, go to the library or 'just for a walk'. She enjoys walking in the sun and looks forward to her morning coffee and burek, something her daughter also

loves. Ayasha's regular walk includes specialist retailers selling spices for lentils and masalas, where she insists she can find 'everything'.

Improvements to public spaces were enthusiastically embraced by Naomi, Sarah and Amy, who felt that the development work in the park, increasing the size, organisation and outdoor gym equipment encouraged people to visit the park which she felt was 'very good'. While planned events, such as food festivals and open-air cinema were also highly valued, neighbourhood walks included less formalised activities such as 'watching the diggers' on building sites, an activity Naomi's children enjoyed as a 'bit of a novelty'.

The influence of greenspace in encouraging walking is also widely observed in the literature, a point reinforced in neighbourhood walks (drawing Sarah to the graveyard and the parks) and the value of shade (noticed by Amy when it *wasn't* available). Marion (60-64) who lives alone, captures the way that the presence of trees on her walk to the river, deepens her sense of warmth and conviviality, making the area 'more friendly'. Walking for leisure for the first time in over a month (having had exams and assessments) Marion reflects on the sense of freedom she feels in a range of more-than-human encounters 'seeing different birds' when walking at different times of the day; and pausing by the river to admire the ducks (Figure 3). Unlike the two Western Cities of Parramatta and Campbelltown, she notes that in Liverpool 'you can hear the birds'.

**Figure 3 Liverpool River: Observing the ducks (Marion, age 60-64)**



## **Dampening mobilities**

### **'Accommodating' cars**

Despite the evident walkability of Liverpool's city centre, interviews reveal uncomfortable car-encounters where pedestrians must still accommodate, work-around, and worry over the intrusion of cars. Like all participants, Amy raised concerns about crossing multi-laned freeways where accidents occur and where 'somehow the car will come onto the footpath'. Marion similarly flagged concerns while waiting to cross a three-way intersection identifying the threat of speeding cars. As she approaches Milperra Road, Marion elaborates further, identifying the trade-off between extending the journey to cross at distant traffic lights or risking crossing against the traffic:

*'that's a really busy road and that's the one I was saying we have to cross against traffic, without traffic lights. So we need something, like there's traffic lights at one end and traffic lights at the other end but nothing in between'*

Walking around Liverpool for all participants is a lesson in accommodating cars and can be, as Marion puts it 'a bit hairy'. Sarah suggest that people often park illegally 'too close to corners, and you can't see the traffic and you know that they won't see you until you are in front of them'. She adjusts her behaviour to accommodate this risk, being 'careful when I'm near corners' and expects the worst, that 'somebody might come around and not see us'. The dominance of cars is also evident in street design that makes active transport for parents and children difficult. Reflecting on an intersection whose pedestrian breaks force walkers and cyclists towards oncoming traffic (Figure 4) Naomi asks 'how do I cross this intersection with the kids on bikes?'

**Figure 4 Road Intersection: 'How do I cross this intersection with the kids on bikes?'**  
(Naomi, age 30-34)



The process of densification also creates new concerns for pedestrians where, as Amy observes with new apartments, 'some people drive very fast, even out of their driveway' so that walking and cycling with her children can be 'a bit tricky'. Still, familiarity and frequency of trips can produce new competencies in densifying cities, as captured by Naomi who, observing her children running ahead, recognised their mastery of the journey, able to 'predict where the cars and driveways are' and knowing 'where we're going, they recognise it'. Given these everyday practices of 'managing' cars, it is perhaps unsurprising that participants made a range of situated, and incremental suggestions that could be implemented to create a more pedestrian friendly city. This included:

- Footbridges

*'Something, even a footbridge, especially with all the new apartments going in and people walking this way'*  
(Marion)

- Paths between key activity zones

*'..from the park to the library'* (Naomi)



- Accessible services by multiple modes

*'...designated bicycle lanes' (Amy)*

- More cameras and fines for speeding cars

*'People drive really rough here' (Ayasha)*

### **Avoiding violence and aggression**

Dominant car cultures also intersected with precincts associated with violence and aggression to impose restrictions on walking journeys. During the walk with Ayasha, a car passed and its passengers and drivers yelled out the window, 'probably' Ayasha suggested, 'because it's Friday and they are too excited'. While brushing off verbal harassment, Ayasha routinely modifies her behaviour to avoid a corner pub that is 'notorious for mostly violent people at night-time' and people who are 'very rough'. Ayasha's avoidance of this space persists in the day when 'aged people' often 'call out' and 'harass' people from 'migrant backgrounds'. For Marion too, avoidance of 'violence and other social issues' often means taking detours that increase pedestrian journeys, in her case adding 15 minutes to the journey from the station to avoid encountering. While women in particular cultivate defensive and protective practices when walking (the result of gendered experiences of urban space), the persistence of aggressive, violent and or racist threats sits uncomfortably with the ideals of compact, walkable cities imagined by planning and design theorists (Gehl, 2001; Gehl, 2010) and others (Jacobs, 1958; Jacobs, 1961) foregrounding the ongoing (if renewed) significance of gender in densifying worlds.

### **Employment, services and education shortfall**

Despite the effort of accommodating, and worrying over cars, and violence, all five participants simultaneously enjoyed living in Liverpool CBD and, as seen above, engaged routinely in active transport with their families or on their own. As Naomi summed up 'I feel as though its got everything'. Despite overall satisfaction living in Liverpool's CBD, including for expected growth, the lack of maintenance and upgrade of infrastructure, services and amenities; and lack of high-quality schooling were recurring themes in the transcripts.

Focusing first on infrastructure, services and amenities, there is a perception that there are infrastructure and services gaps that could (or should) be improved in light of the increasing number of residents in Liverpool CBD. All participants observed the increase in density and conversion of stand-alone houses, and empty blocks into apartments. However, as Naomi, who travels to Sydney CBD to work observes, 'this has not translated into jobs' leaving her trapped in a long commute. At the same time, the location of larger sports fields beyond the CBD means she spends up to two and a half hours in the car driving her children to sporting commitments. While supporting densification and population growth in Liverpool, she thus expects to 'have the facilities to go along with it'. Marion similarly has an expectation of enhanced services- in this case, water and vegetation generation and management- as more people access the River; and all participants flagged concern with 'debris' on footpaths and roads, ranging from mattresses, to heaters and discarded household appliances to shopping trolleys.

Second, Alaysha and Sarah both flagged concerns about sending their children to the local public school. Despite the affection with which both Sarah and Alaysha views the neighbourhood and the spaces that it affords them in caring for their children and for themselves, Sarah insists that she will move as soon as her child starts school because 'we want to go somewhere where we know there's good schools'.

### **Policy Implications and Conclusions**

The interviewed residents are knowledgeable about their city of Liverpool. They actively use the spaces on foot to arrive at places. Their comments would not be out of place in a high-density urban area anywhere in the world. They have chosen the location, appreciate the amenity, have ideas of what works and what doesn't as an urban setting and understand that change can bring benefits, if done well. That the interviewees expressed casual correlation with many well cited authors on urban design speaks volumes to the experience of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century city building, which often forgot the human in place of the machine and fiscal expediency.

We report here on one part of the wider project, focusing on residents' experiences of walking in their neighbourhood. It is considered of great concern that those who live in densifying and urbanizing neighbourhoods should have a quality public realm in which to enjoy social life and travel safely by foot. The transition to a walkable city has many physical barriers, which can be redesigned when necessary, but there are also many social and cultural barriers such as car aggression and a reported lack of security. The interviews suggest a list of policy actions – informed by global best practice for equitable access to public space – to support positive 'density done well' (Beasley, 2019; Committee for Sydney, 2016), including a central 'pedestrian first' (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, 2018) strategy. The policy action recommendations are as follows:

1. Given that changes to laws and statutes regarding development practices is a long slow incremental process, there is time to take in communicating with residents. It will be worthwhile in having several formats of citizen forums, deliberative democracy and participatory budgeting to elicit new ideas and to exchange points of view. The lived experiences of the places already of density will help guide future dense urban developments 'well'. Though this can be exhausting, it is better to be exhaustive.
2. Many urban design guides exist in Australia (Moore et al., 2015). These demonstrate a professional capacity created to craft the best urban setting for residents in Australian cities. The residents – as revealed in the interviews - will recognize the effort, use the space, and enjoy the safety and comfort delivered.
3. Parallel to the above, it is appropriate that a new set of 'Active Transport Guidance' be crafted. Such a guide will manage the design conflicts between pedestrians, cyclist, transit buses, transit users queueing and alighting, and private motor vehicles. This is important for all places, and especially those built as low density and car-served but now changing to a post-suburban urban condition. The guide will be useful to budget accordingly for, and expect certain safety and comfort outcomes from, redesigned streets for urban life.
4. The best means for a city to advance its own cause is with its own residents. Their sentiments, experiences, hopes, and aspirations for where they are and how they want to live there can be used to improve the city. Meaningful, earlier and more responsible public engagement gives people voice and can correct assumptions on 'what people want'. Design professions can sometimes lose sight of the people and especially the most vulnerable. By designing for everyone creates a city that more people will choose to be in. There are greater benefits to be found by including everyone than shutting most out.

People's voices are often not heard. The cacophony of academic theory, social media and media outlets each looking for a story to sell obscures the basic needs for safety of travel, comfort, and a rewarding social public realm. We were privileged to hear from a few residents about their city and the hope they have for the Liverpool, New South Wales, they wish to create.

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