Two new books look at the places where social ecologies take root and flourish, writes Ian McShane

Saturday lunchtime in a Bondi pub, Sydney, 1951. Tooth’s Collection/Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour

The Australian Pub
By Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins and Chris McConville | UNSW Press | $49.95

Community: Building Modern Australia
Edited by Hannah Lewi and David Nichols | UNSW Press | $59.95

THIRTY years ago two little-known American sociologists, Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett, coined the term “third place” to describe the locations – other than home and work – that make up our social habitat. They mourned what they saw as a loss of opportunities for informal socialising in a world where people shuttle between where they live and where they work, increasingly cut off from wider social contacts.

Oldenburg’s book, The Great Good Place, extolled the virtues of hairdressing salons, coffee shops, bars, bookstores – the sorts of local places where “unrelated people relate.” If his catalogue of interests seemed eccentric at the time, it wasn’t long before writers like Michael Porter, Robert Putnam and Richard Florida began to take an interest in the ways in which social networks sustain economic, political and civic life. For these writers, though, third places were mostly a backdrop for larger stories of regional and national competitiveness, and the decline of trust and social capital.

Oldenburg saw threats to third places in the dynamics of urban planning and property markets, and in changing patterns of work and leisure. The chief culprits were suburbanisation, car dependency and chain retailing. But a powerful undercurrent is his criticism of the failure of many academics and government policy-makers to comprehend the value and vulnerability of local community facilities, pubs, corner shops and unplanned public spaces.

The Australian Pub and Community: Building Modern Australia can both be read as responses to Oldenburg’s challenge. These two scholarly but highly accessible books document significant parts of Australia’s local social and civic infrastructure. Remarkably – and underscoring Oldenburg’s concern – each is a pioneering work in its field.

Given the central place of the pub in Australian culture, it seems extraordinary that the last national history of Australian pubs – by the architectural historian J.M. Freeland – was published as far back as 1966. As The Australian Pub’s authors – cultural historians Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins and Chris McConville – write, Freeland’s interest in pubs was on the margins of Australian historical scholarship at the time, although his architectural focus chimed with emerging concerns about historical preservation. The Australian Pub is a richly detailed cultural and political history that demonstrates its authors’ claim that the pub is “at the heart of modern Australian history.”

Community’s editors, Hannah Lewi and David Nichols from the University of Melbourne’s architecture faculty,
use the term “modern” more precisely to give their handsome publication its conceptual bearings. Modernism united politics and architecture to promote community welfare and social progress through a new language of public architecture. Community picks up the story in the 1920s, showing how new ideas about progressive education, public health and recreation fed a reaction to Victorian architectural styles and a new environmental sensibility. Modernist public architecture featured sun-seeking, stripped-down, efficient and hygienic built forms: kindergartens, schools, libraries and community health centres. Modernism in this form implied both a government commitment to providing services and a new architectural ethic of social responsibility. That combination produced fine examples of community facilities that, argue Lewi and Nichols, are under increasing threat because they represent the ordinary and the recent rather than the canon of architectural heritage.

At first glance, these two books seem to chart alternative visions of Australian social and civic life. Among the early rationales for providing local education, recreation and civic facilities was the desire to provide alternatives to the pub and create avenues for self-improvement and socialisation that would assist bright young members of the working class. Temperance advocates were important players. As The Australian Pub notes, the growth of Australian colonies, especially during the gold rush, coincided with the global spread of the temperance movement. In Australia, Melbourne became a focal point, hosting a world temperance convention in 1880. Municipal councils gave ratepayers a “local option” to legislate for “dry” suburbs, and coffee palaces and temperance halls provided new social outlets. The subsequent decline in mutual societies, together with a concern to provide universal, secular social services and improve local finances, meant that municipal councils – often in partnership with community groups – became more active in building local infrastructure.

But, as Kirkby, Luckins and McConville make clear, pubs have a longstanding role as providers of services. In colonial Australia, pubs provided a range of social services, including accommodation and sustenance for travellers, rudimentary street lighting, and postal services. In many districts the pub was the only public facility, meeting place, even place of worship. Many local governments were formed at public meetings in local hotels, and much business was conducted there. Pubs served as recruiting stations during war and refuges during peacetime civil emergencies. Licence conditions required publicans – who were often women – to live on the premises and, argue the authors, the availability of accommodation gave many Australian pubs a domestic character.

This portrayal of pubs as places of informal socialising and conviviality – a picture vividly painted by Oldenburg – is qualified by The Australian Pub’s discussion of policing and criminality. While temperance never hardened into US-style prohibition in Australia, restrictions on liquor sales and the policing of sly-grogging were reinforced by laws that closed pubs to casual drinkers after six o’clock in the evening and all day Sunday. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Licence Reduction Boards began to close “undesirable” pubs around Australia. Between 1880 and 1930 Australia’s population doubled while the number of pubs halved.

Six o’clock closing was introduced in most states during the first world war, and wasn’t completely lifted until the 1960s. There is, according to the authors, no evidence that early closing reduced alcohol consumption, which had been declining per capita in Australia since 1880. Instead, it boosted private, mostly home-based consumption and fed the culture of public binge drinking that nineteenth-century commentators such as Anthony Trollope found so abhorrent. Even J.M. Freeland appears to have misinterpreted its impact on pubs. Where he criticised the “disembowelling” of pubs to cater for the six o’clock swill, Kirkby and her co-authors argue that other factors were at play in changing pubs’ appearance and operation. In Victoria, for instance, the requirement that pubs have only one public bar inevitably meant that the bar was as big as possible.

Six o’clock closing also put an end to the free counter lunches that fiercely competitive hotels had increasingly been offering. In the late nineteenth century, the French critic Oscar Comettant expressed amazement that Australians paid for a glass of beer but ate for nothing. Threats by the breweries (who had been lobbied by smaller hotels) to withhold supplies to any hotel offering free lunches effectively killed off what had become an unsustainable practice. Soon, the rise of department store cafeterias catering for the city lunch trade introduced a new alternative to the monotonous fare of hotel dining rooms. When hotels re-introduced counter lunches after the second world war, quick service and a more varied cuisine signalled a transition to modern-day pub dining. By the late twentieth century, many Australian pubs had come full circle – no longer beer halls, they had become interesting places to eat and central to travelling and tourism in Australia.
Pubs were not the dangerous and vice-ridden places described by temperance advocates, but neither should they be idealised as cozy and sociable. The authors of *The Australian Pub* argue that the illegality centred on pubs may have been overstated, but their folklore does overlook recurrent violence at the margins. The loss of the domestic attributes of Australian pubs contributed to this reputation: new pubs in new suburbs often lacked the intimate scale and informal social controls of their inner-city counterparts, and the number of inner-city nightclubs with extended trading hours multiplied. Longer trading hours have seen an increase in pub violence, which has brought restrictions on “late night” (or early morning) trading. Yet, as the authors note, the most dangerous place in Australia is not the public bar but the private home.

THE reputation of community facilities as over-programmed and over-regulated – reinforced, perhaps, by the negative connotations of the term “public works” and the petty officialdom portrayed in television series like *Grass Roots* and *The Librarians* – is also an oversimplification. As the contributors to *Community* argue, a self-help ethos lies behind much of Australia’s local infrastructure. Kindergarten and free library movements, swimming pool fundraising, public reserve committees of management and local building cooperatives played a central role in campaigning for, financing and, in some cases, building community facilities.

Here, too, there’s a risk of idealising a complex phenomenon. Lewi and Nichols are among many commentators who see the development of “community” as a new avenue for government control. Part of the modernists’ creed was an unquestioned faith in the expert, and community facilities – baby clinics and kindergartens, for example – included design features that reinforced the authority of newly emerged professions. These institutions promoted scientific knowledge and expert intervention over the knowledge of mothers, and reinforced class, gender and race distinctions. In the 1920s, for example, the Country Women’s Association answered the NSW government’s call to help provide rural maternal and child health services, eventually operating 138 sites. But racial tension flared in the late 1950s when the white membership of the association’s Kempsey branch refused to share the baby health centre with the Aboriginal members of the nearby Burnt Bridge–Greenhill branch.

As Hannah Lewi argues, the design and management of municipal swimming pools also promoted physical and moral safety, especially for young people. Segregated bathing for men and women had ended in Australia at the start of the twentieth century, but segregated changing rooms, costume standards and strict monitoring of behaviour reinforced existing social mores. Again, this is not a straightforward story. Progressive educators and local officials, especially after the second world war, recognised a need for young men and women to socialise in informal settings away from parental oversight. The municipal pool provided such a place.

Community facilities were also important sites for testing citizenship rights in Australia – for identifying what the “public” meant in local public settings. The informal racial segregation at some pools was famously exposed in 1965 by Charles Perkins and the University of Sydney “Freedom Riders” in the NSW town of Moree. Citizenship is also an important theme in *The Australian Pub*, particularly in relation to full access for women and Indigenous people. In the same year as the Moree pool protest, two University of Queensland academics, Merle Thornton and Rosalie Bognor, chained themselves to the bar of Brisbane’s Regatta Hotel, starting a wave of action to liberate pubs across Australia. The abolition of a colour bar has been more problematic, however. In the space of twenty years, argue Kirkby and her co-authors, the focus of attention shifted from the campaign to allow Indigenous people to drink in pubs to mechanisms for monitoring the impact of alcohol on Indigenous people. Giving Indigenous people the right to drink, they observe, did little to overcome persistent social and health issues.

IN COLONIAL Australia, sports clubs and sporting competitions were established in pubs, and sporting contests were often staged on open ground around pubs. Urban development and the growth and formalisation of sporting codes broke this link, and sporting organisations turned to local councils and public reserve managers. Sport became a key motivator in acquiring public parkland, and local authorities began to develop one of their most important roles by creating major facilities, such as swimming pools, and by providing sporting clubs with land and planning approval.

*Community* singles out lawn bowling clubs as a case study. While some of Australia’s leading architects made their names by designing major local facilities, the history of bowling features ordinary and often makeshift buildings and substantial voluntary commitment. Bowling, argues Hannah Lewi, played a significant part in
ordering and greening the modern Australian neighbourhood, and its facilities are remarkable not for their architectural merit but as a catalyst for social networks. Bowling also had exclusive aspects that it has never fully shaken off. Until the middle of the twentieth century, women were excluded from club membership or assigned an auxiliary status. Bowling greens were a prominent feature of typical multi-use municipal parks, but – especially as the sport’s popularity declined – this privilege came to be questioned.

Just as Robert Putnam thought the lone ten-pin bowler indicated the erosion of social capital in the United States, the decline of lawn bowling says something about social and physical changes in Australian neighbourhoods. As bowling clubs close, opportunities for social contact and recreation, especially among older people, decline. (And, Lewi points out, research indicates that younger members of bowling clubs are not inclined to volunteer for the off-green roles that keep clubs running.) In the event of closure, the fate of club assets – land and buildings often financed by community contributions – has also been contentious.

Many factors have highlighted the vulnerability of the local public realm in recent years – pressure on local governments to reduce their outlays and “rationalise” facilities, the dynamics of urban planning and property markets, and changing patterns of work and leisure. As Australian cities’ populations become denser, pubs and community facilities are affected in different but equally significant ways. Publicans battle to continue staging live music amid growing populations in inner suburbs, but they also find new markets for more intimate, socially oriented spaces. Urban consolidation places stress on community facilities and public open space, underscoring the folly of some earlier decisions to dispose of public assets. The remarkable success of rail trails, with the cycling boom giving disused railway easements a new life, amply demonstrates the value of keeping public land in public hands.

The survival of local places requires intelligent and prudent public policy. But it also depends on the ability of these places to adapt and transform. Reinvesting in community facilities has been a key element of urban regeneration, but the single-purpose facilities of earlier times are giving way to multi-purpose sites. New design interests in flexible or “vague” community spaces echo Ramon Oldenburg’s plea for more informality and closer attention to the places in which social ecologies take root and flourish. *The Australian Pub and Community: Building Modern Australia* make substantial contributions to understanding the return of the local.