

New Environmental Movements, Community Gardens and the Not-for-profit Business, Sustaining Settlements Inc.; an Obituary

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Imagine
Before you a vista
Of graceful white gums
Of plants growing in profusion
Of mulch and limestone and winding trails
Of water falling and giving life...
Please come and visit the Fremantle Community Garden Centre
An adventure is beginning...¹

BEGINNING: 'THE EVOLUTION FROM PRIVATE BUSINESS TO COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION'²

This sad but salutary tale begins in mid-1995 with a landlord's decision not to renew the lease of a private garden nursery business in Perth, Western Australia. Established only a few years before, this 'permaculture' centre had become popular with those in the local Fremantle community interested in practical ways of implementing sustainability in the city.³ Visits to this nursery in a decaying light-industrial landscape, bordered on three sides by busy roads and by the Swan River on its fourth, never failed to delight. In part, this was because the items on offer to the ecologically minded were at that time hard to find. But just

as important was the lush garden hidden between shabby warehouses and layered over bitumen. This jumble of plants with a pond at its centre was an oasis in neglected borderlands between working port and gentrifying inner-suburb. A rise in the value of waterfront land put an end to this neglect, and to this garden. In no time the warehouses were gone. In their stead was to be found a jumble of up-market housing embedded in the grassy fantasies of Anglophilic landscape designers.

In the process of casting about for a new site, one of the nursery owners responded to a call for tenders from Fremantle City Council for the lease of a defunct mini-golf centre alongside a main road. The tender notice failed to mention that this 3,000 square metre site was part of a recreational reserve and precluded by legislation from private commercial enterprise. At first disappointed by this news, the nursery owner was soon involved in discussions with the Mayor, a Councillor and Council staff about the prospect of converting their private business plans for the site into those of a community association. The Council, under pressure to follow through on their public commitment to sustainable development, was keen to see this visible corner of Fremantle's largest public open space developed as an environmental project.⁴ So keen, in fact, that they decided to invest over \$100,000 in redeveloping the site as a demonstration and retail centre for ecological horticulture with the nursery owner employed as the site developer, and to support an application by the nursery owner to the then State Ministry of Fair Trading for the incorporation of a non-profit community association.⁵ Upon approval of this application, the nursery owner (soon-to-be the association's salaried coordinator) approached a small band of customers to join them, the Mayor and other Council representatives on the association's Management Committee.

This chapter tells the story of Sustaining Settlements Inc. (SSI), the association thus created in April 1996, from the perspective of one of those customers turned member of its founding Management Committee. During its short but vivid existence until its dissolution in April 2004 through insolvency, this group generated several hundred thousand dollars a year through the Fremantle Community Garden Centre it created, employing between four and ten part-time staff and

attracting a membership that, in early 2004, numbered around 230. The aims of this organisation were ambitious, encompassing all aspects of local environmental sustainability while simultaneously seeking to reduce social disadvantage (see Box 1). Reflecting this, the activities of SSI included: facilitating community garden projects in partnership with schools, child-care centres, community arts organisations and others; providing occupational programs for people with disabilities, vocational training for unemployed people and 'young offenders', an apprenticeship in sustainable horticulture and support for local sustainable business projects; and delivering education programs, publishing a newsletter, managing a small library and hosting public events.

BOX 1: AIMS OF SUSTAINING SETTLEMENTS INC.⁶

To protect and enhance the natural environment, particularly of the Fremantle area, through activities which encourage the local community to live in ecologically sustainable ways.

To ensure that these activities benefit the health and welfare of our local community, especially disadvantaged people.

To develop an education program which promotes ecologically sustainable and environmental protection.

As an academic who sought through this community project to embody ideas rehearsed (over and over again) in sustainability literatures, I aspire to do more than tell this story on its own, idiosyncratic terms. The detail of this unsustainable experiment in sustainability—a fact that does not by any means imply that it was worthless—belongs to the complex lives and times of Australian environmental movements in an era of global corporate capitalism. To interpret this detail we need to know something of this wider context.

'NEW' ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

At first glance, SSI's short life might seem merely to add another footnote to Boris Frankel's claim in 1987 that 'moral exhortation is just not

enough, if radicals cannot answer the serious questions as to feasibility, organisation and finance'.⁷ Yet this story is more interesting than that of a lack of pragmatism and much has happened since 1987 to place Frankel's claim in a new light. Indeed, the publication in that year of the Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future*⁸ marks the rise of a second wave of postwar environmentalism that was to swamp the radical, first wave that Frankel knew somewhere in the early 1990s⁹. Whereas the first wave emphasised biophysical limits to growth, the goal of the second wave has been that of sustaining growth. Riding the sustainable development wave, environmental concern has been brought ever closer to the social mainstream. 'The environment' has been institutionalised through its translation into educational curricula, scientific research, political platforms, economic theory and consumer habits.

The second wave of environmental concern subsumed and recomposed earlier forms of environmentalism. Its impact on Australian environmental movements has been complex, is on-going and remains poorly understood.¹⁰ On the one hand, surveys of the public find that the majority now participate in recycling, with a growing number adopting energy and water conservation measures.¹¹ Environmental 'care' groups have sprung up across rural and urban Australia. Sustainability has become a catchall found in everything from television news to Federal budget papers. On the other hand, the proportion of the population claiming to be concerned about environmental problems has declined in the period 1992–2004 from 75 per cent to 57 per cent, with the membership of environmental groups remaining relatively static.¹² At 7.2 per cent, the primary vote of The Greens for the lower house at the 2004 Federal Election remains well below that of a genuine third political force, despite the fact that a majority of electors might now admit that they are 'a bit of a 'Greenie' at heart'.¹³ As the then conservative Federal Environment Minister, Senator Robert Hill observed with relish in 1997, 'the whole environment debate has changed... Everyone now is an environmentalist'¹⁴.

In response to the 'routinisation' of environmental concern, some have argued that Australian environmental movements have ebbed from their high-water mark of the late-1980s.¹⁵ Perhaps, but it is also

the case that the diversity and extent of these movements has been underestimated because conventional analysis has overlooked their informal underpinnings.¹⁶ This oversight is of growing significance as environmental movements increasingly fragment and reassemble within informal and fluid networks. From office-workers implementing waste minimisation practices to a parent turned contaminated sites activist in response to their child's illness to surfers involved in marine conservation, environmental action has diffused far and wide.

This fluidity is not unique to environmental movements. The typically class-based political struggles against the status quo that characterised social movements of the first three-quarters of the twentieth century have been overlaid in recent decades by 'new' forms of social movement. Associated with phenomena such as information and communications technology, 'identity-based' politics and 'postmodern' cultures, such new movements do not exist in any straightforward opposition to prevailing structures of social power.¹⁷ In fact, they are often founded on the assumption that such structures have fractured and that in place of a status quo, even in place of anything deserving the name 'society', there exists an increasingly accessible, open-ended and unpredictable contest for political legitimacy.

SSI was an experiment in local sustainability thoroughly, if unwittingly, shaped by these wider changes. To adopt the language of Manuel Castells¹⁸, this group sought to organise itself simultaneously within the 'space of places', the space of local embeddedness, and the 'space of flows', the space of the global economy. Schemas that attempt to hold apart radical and conventional politics or local and global forms of action poorly explain SSI. It cannot be adequately understood, for instance, as an example of 'green consumerism' which assumes sustainability can be reached 'through the actions of rational, utility-maximising individuals, as they vote in the marketplace with their shopping trolleys' and, thus, that 'there is no need to join a green political movement in order to do your bit'.¹⁹ On the contrary, SSI was an inherently political intervention into the working of the economy that sought to harness consumer demand related to gardening—Australia's still most popular leisure activity²⁰—to a non-consumerist

vision of the public good. The demise of this project, although in part the result of specific failings, returns us to a question never far from the centre of all debate about sustainability, a question defying any easy or equivocal answer: To what extent can sustainability be approached as a strategy of social change from within centres of institutional power and to what extent does it demand an oppositional politics of resistance and subversion?

THE BUSINESS OF SUSTAINING SETTLEMENTS

There is a new garden centre in town!...With its unmistakable permaculture emphasis, it is a unique attempt to blend business and community interests. It is also not surprising that it has occurred in Fremantle with its strong community spirit.²¹

Thus enthused a local pioneer of permaculture in the *Fremantle Herald* in August 1996, just days after the opening of SSI's Fremantle Community Garden Centre. It was indeed no surprise that this project had taken root in Fremantle. From the early-1970s this working-class port had become a hub for Perth's counterculture. Hippies, artists, greenies and leftist intellectuals repelled by Perth's suburban frontiers gathered around the Southern and Eastern European postwar immigrants who had made Fremantle their own. By 1979—the year after the Permaculture Association of Western Australia was formed, attracting 250 members²²—community activists were lobbying Council to help them establish a permaculture community garden on a 'wasteland' in North Fremantle.²³ The Appropriate Technology Centre (APACE) that opened on this land in 1983, and that is still going strong, combined allotments for organic food production with a wholesale indigenous plant nursery and education programs for ecological restoration and appropriate technology.²⁴ Council was to receive several other community garden proposals before agreeing in 1993 to provide a small park to a new group, Fremantle Inner City Agriculture (FINCA), for the purpose of establishing a community garden in South Fremantle.

Brought to scholarly attention by Laura Stocker and Kate Barnett,²⁵ this latter project is almost certainly what recently prompted

English academic Leigh Holland's claim that 'Fremantle in Australia has an LA21 plan that has in part been informed by its community gardening movement'.²⁶ However, Council has no such plan. Its environmental credentials remain a matter of intense local dispute.²⁷ Nor does there exist any coordinated community garden movement in Fremantle, or within Perth more generally, with the two projects mentioned above and that of SSI being developed independently of one another. In this setting, the insolvency of SSI, and the all-too-evident decay of this popular community venue behind padlocked gates, has not just left Council with financial debt. It has also left no small legacy of resentment and conflict within the local community, within Council, and between Council and sections of the community.²⁸ It is encouraging that an entirely new group was formed within weeks of the closure to lobby, with some recent signs of progress, for re-opening the site as a resource centre for community environmental education.²⁹ Yet, in the short term at least, this legacy is likely to make partnerships for sustainability in Fremantle more difficult.

In August 1996, the enthusiasm felt by the commentator above at the opening of a community-run permaculture nursery was understandable. Propelled by heavy machinery Council's investment made possible, and by the generosity of local businesses donating materials and labour at cost, the faded pastel cement slabs of the mini-golf links were replaced in only a few weeks by ponds linked together by a pump-powered creek and embedded in heavily mulched gardens of local reeds, tropical fruit trees, bamboo and much more. Running through the site was a maze of knee-high limestone rubble walls on which sat plants for sale. Two uninspiring cement block sheds had been joined and enlarged by sliding panels of wrought iron and glass. A new insulated roof, thick benches of salvaged Oregon pine atop more rubble walls, and woodchip mulch laid over a concrete floor helped create, for relatively small outlay, a retail building both functional and charming (see Figs 1 & 2). Perhaps more than anything else, it was the smooth professionalism and rapidity of this redevelopment that set this second wave experiment in permaculture apart from those earlier projects that grew with inching slowness out of the graft of volunteers working with sparse resources and unhelpful authorities. After the event, it is hard to avoid the

conclusion that, once again, 'smart' money was on the tortoise and not on the hare.

On the compost heap
Take no time to weep
Lay me, bare as I was born
On my compost heap³⁰

Holland has suggested 'the community garden movement could act as a model for the implementation of social, economic and environmental policies at the local level'.³¹ He is not alone. There is now a substantial body of literature on the virtues of community gardens as a means of enhancing local sustainability.³² The growth in this literature mirrors the on-the-ground proliferation of community gardens over the last fifteen years, especially in 'First World' cities. Between 1990 and 1999, for instance, the number of Community Gardens in Minneapolis grew from fourteen to more than eighty,³³ while in Toronto the population of community gardeners grew from 2,000 to 3,600 between 1993 and 1997 alone.³⁴ This is not to say that community gardening is a recent phenomenon. Today's community gardens can be traced back, first, to the allotments and vacant lots of the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries that sustained many in British and North American cities during times of war and economic depression, and, second, to older traditions of urban agriculture that today still ensure that many European and '(Two) Third(s) World' cities are important sites of food production.

SSI, with its commercial engagement in private gardening practices, fits poorly within this literature. It is nonetheless relevant to it through the ways it sought to undermine conventional distinctions between private and public aspects of gardening. SSI was built on an awareness of the ecological arbitrariness of this distinction, and it understood the potential for increased sociability that might arise if this awareness was to spread widely. As a result, this project not only equipped private gardeners in the arts of ecological gardening, it facilitated their spilling onto street verges, school grounds, public open

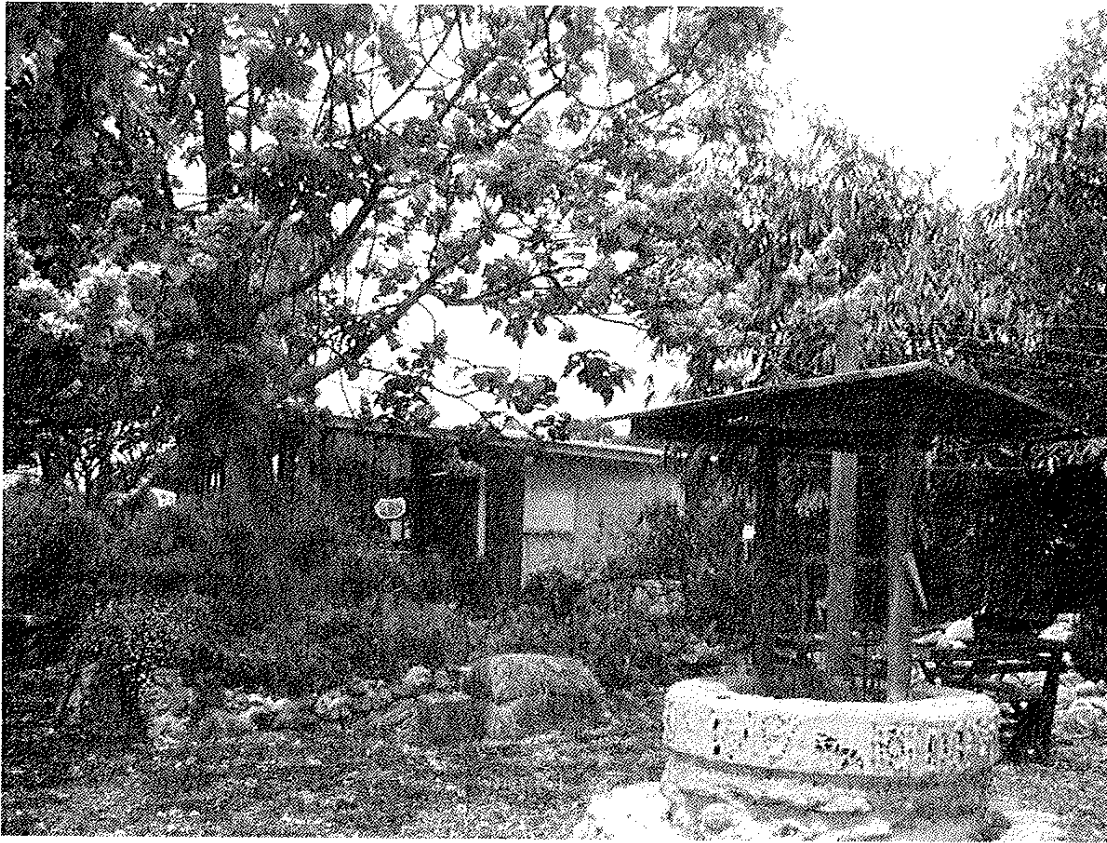


FIGURE 1: The Fremantle Community Garden Centre
(Photo by Anne McNeill)

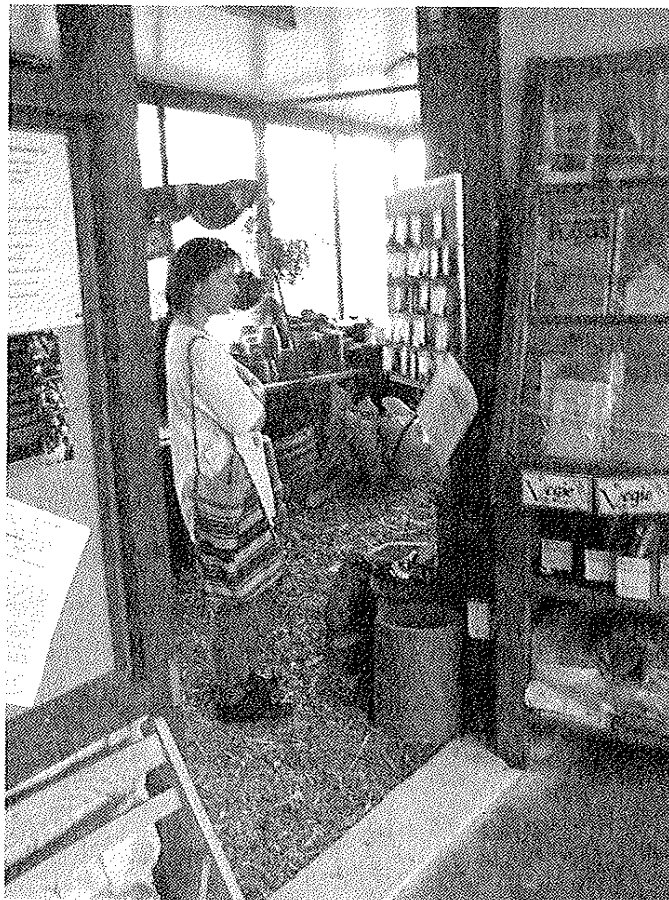


FIGURE 2: Shopping for sustainability
(Photo by Anne McNeill)

space and remnant bushland. It sought to join gardening to issues of human health and of energy, water and waste metabolism in the city. It encouraged neighbourly collaboration in the sharing of surpluses, problems and tricks borne of local experience, and it recognised the significance of private strategies, such as backyard agriculture, in addressing very public environmental problems, such as greenhouse gas emissions. It sought, in sum, to locate community gardens and the extensive Australian 'suburban forest' in the wider context of the social change required to create more sustainable cities.

In his review of some community garden projects in Britain, Holland notes that 'social and environmental aspects' are typically 'far more in evidence than economic or business activities'.³⁵ It may be that this observation is less true of Australia's (under-researched) community garden projects. As noted above, one Fremantle group has long run a wholesale plant nursery, while one of Australia's most successful projects, Melbourne's Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES), encompasses a range of commercial activities with an annual turnover in excess of \$3 million.³⁶ Or it may simply be that research has to date been skewed toward projects lacking a strong commercial dimension. Whatever the reason, I take Holland's call for 'greater consideration of the economic benefits that community gardening could deliver'³⁷ to highlight the potential importance of lessons that could be learnt from the short, vigorous life of SSI.

LESSONS IN THE GRASSROOTS DANCE OF DREAMS AND POWER

SSI...was trying to do many things and maybe that was the problem.³⁸

The original goals were lost in the quest for financial survival.³⁹

Take nothing and no one for granted at any time.⁴⁰

What, then, are these lessons? There is no simple or single answer to this question. A comprehensive response would no doubt need to consider such broad issues as the recent high rates of small-business failure in the

multi-billion dollar Australian garden nursery industry, as well as attempts within this industry to cater to the green consumer, and the place of environmental issues in Fremantle's Machiavellian local politics. Then, turning to the specifics of SSI, there is the fact that no two members of this group are likely to explain these lessons in the same way; a fact evident in the quotations above. Some could be expected to agree on little. I shall therefore resist the temptation to produce a neat but ultimately arbitrary list of discrete lessons. I offer instead, and by way of conclusion, an unavoidably partial account, but one that attempts to convey something of the dance of dreams and power that took place at the core of this project.

SSI created a space within which friendships have been made and broken. In its shadows lurk the usual human excesses; the everyday dramas of birth and death, sex and drugs, and the rest. Although relevant, such dramas must here be left in the background. Suffice it to say that sociologists are right to observe that organisational reliance on networks of friendship and trust can prove to be 'both an asset and a liability' for, although they can 'generate a high degree of unselfish dedication', they 'can easily collapse'.⁴¹

What can be made clear here is that SSI never recovered from the uneven distribution of power created by the founding alliance of senior figures within Council and a local businessperson. Although this alliance enabled practical obstacles that normally attend such projects to be quickly overcome, not least being lack of resources and stubborn bureaucracies, it took place without wide community consultation and saddled the project with a heavy burden of expectation. Council expected not just the benefit of substantial kudos within the community, but a reliable tenant and rapid repayment of their investment. The businessperson expected not just the opportunity to embrace community responsibility but the guarantee of a salaried role and considerable autonomy in the running of the association. The voluntary members of the Management Committee, the body invested with legal responsibility for the Association, expected not just the satisfaction of promoting sustainability in their community, but the ability to direct substantial resources to community projects.⁴²

These un-met expectations were to evolve into misunderstandings, resentments, inertia and, finally, rupture. The following three examples serve to make the point.

- 1 The lease between Council and SSI was a source of protracted debate between the parties over the original financial terms under which the association was created.
- 2 The 'Community Resource Centre' first proposed by SSI in July 1996 as a hub for environmental education was never built, despite architectural plans, the interest of a granting body, and access to an adjoining parcel of Council land being obtained by 1997.
- 3 Organisational relations between staff responsible for managing the business and voluntary members of the Management Committee were often characterised by poor communication and limited understanding of each other's roles.

With hindsight, much more could have been done to redress this uneven distribution of power, particularly as a broad community membership and customer base gathered around the project. Yet this membership, much of it cultivated by the provision of a discount in the nursery, proved difficult to draw into the group's dreams of community change. The focus on private gardening, in the newsletter and education programs as well as in the retail functions of the nursery, remained the predominant point of contact between SSI and its local community. This fact also seemed to make it more difficult for SSI to work closely with Fremantle's other community garden groups that had very different beginnings and quite different internal processes and dynamics. While these problems were well recognised within SSI, management of a thriving business soaked up greater economic and human resources than anyone had predicted or was prepared for, while the revenue it was hoped would flow from the business to community projects never eventuated. Early enthusiasm for dreams of a revitalised community and trust in the partnerships involved in setting up the project leached away as management tasks continued to demand whatever energy and

initiative remained. Armed with many exciting plans for the future, newcomers to the Management Committee, in particular, found themselves bogged down in the complex workings of the business, discussing turnover, taxation law, business plans and stock control rather than the matters of social and ecological vision that had motivated their involvement.

Such voluntary managers, while ultimately having the responsibility of employers, were typically unable to invest sufficient time and/or lacked the expertise to engage on a level footing with staff involved in the day-to-day running of the business. As is frequently the case in environmental groups, no management training was provided to these volunteers, although Council, when it first became concerned about the financial condition of the group in 2001, did assign a senior officer with expertise in business planning to the Management Committee. Perhaps understandably, but nonetheless unfortunately, the salaried managers of the business often responded to the contributions of the Committee as if they were undue interference. The acrimonious departure of SSI's first coordinator in 1998 led to a new staff structure in which the roles of the Association's administrator and business manager were separated, and to the preparation of a comprehensive set of policies and procedures for the running of the Association. These welcome innovations were followed by a period of relative harmony, but eventually the pattern of souring relations between the business manager and those responsible for the wider aims of the Association was repeated in a series of events leading up to the dissolution of the Association in 2004.

Looking back, I wonder if the beginning of the end can't be found in a 'visioning workshop' attended by members of the Management Committee in June 2002. This event sought to understand why SSI had failed to draw the energies of the wider community into its dreams of a better and different society, energies without which it was destined to remain simply keeping itself financially afloat. The workshop launched a process of 'navel gazing' that was to continue until the dissolution of the Association, producing along the way a discussion paper on ways of improving internal processes of management, communication, governance and participation. Although well intended and although a few

minor moments of good luck might have led this chapter to be a celebration rather than an obituary, this introversion only created further barriers between SSI and the community it sought to open itself up to.

Unlike so many others, this community group did not die of exhaustion on the grant-writing treadmill. As a result of its commercial activities, this group enviably relied little on external funding. Nonetheless, SSI was finally unable to hold its own in the grow-or-die competition of the marketplace. Although a not uncommon fate in the private sector, this lack of competitiveness need not have been fatal for a not-for-profit association with aims that extended well beyond that of selling garden products. Unfortunately, however, this organisation was able neither to create a sufficient role for itself within the local community nor with local government outside of the paradigm of a business catering to its customers.

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Chapter 14

Local sources: material relating to Sustaining Settlements Inc. and Fremantle is drawn from: Fremantle City Council records; the Local History Collection, Fremantle City Library; the SSI archive; personal communications between the author and key informants; and anecdotal information and records related to the author's time on the SSI Management Committee (1996–98, 2000–02, Treasurer 2001, Chairperson 2002). I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Tom Birch of Ferrier Hodgson, David Duncanson of Fremantle City Council, Zanni Waldstein of CERES, and Ric Gledell, Nicole Hodgson, Isabella Jennings, Megan Joceglav, Anne McNeill and Julie Webb of SSI.

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Conclusion

- 1 See McGrath & Marinova, chapter 6.
- 2 Those who are not locals but have chosen to live in the village and commute to work in larger centres rather than in traditional rural occupations of farming and its service industries.
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- 5 See O'Byrne, chapter 10.
- 6 Gregg, Sam (2005) 'Localism' discussion in Counterpoint, Radio National, from Acton Institute, USA, 27 June.
- 7 Hamilton, C. (2003) *Growth Fetish*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, p. x.
- 8 See Palmer, chapter 4.
- 9 See Davison, chapter 14.
- 10 See Hartz Karp & Newman, chapter 2.
- 11 Duff, J. (2004) pers. comm.