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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 011. How to establish a sense of community in strata schemes with Rachel Cosentino

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Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer and this is Your Strata Property. Today we welcome Rachel Cosentino to the show. Rachel is a lawyer working in specialised litigation services at Slater and Gordon Lawyers in Perth, Western Australia.

Rachel is the President of SCA Western Australia and one of the WA's most respected strata lawyers. Rachel is here today to talk to us about what makes a great strata community. Welcome, Rachel.

Rachel Cosentino: Hi Amanda, thanks for having me on your program.

Amanda Farmer: Absolute pleasure. Now, Rachel, you are joining us from WA so it's bright and early over there and I appreciate you making the time for us.

Rachel Cosentino: It's a pleasure.

Amanda Farmer: I'm really excited to be talking about this topic, it's a great one, and it's something that I know you're particularly passionate about. I want to start by asking you Rachel, why do you think it's so important for people living in strata and community schemes to feel a sense of community?

Rachel Cosentino: Well Amanda, I think everybody knows that a sense of belonging and connectedness is important for people's well-being, and it's important for having strong, vibrant communities. And what sociologists have told us is that since the 1970s, in societies like Australia or in the U.S., is that civic society has been declining, that opportunities for having that connectedness and that sense of belonging have declined where people used to be involved in their suburban church, and their kids all went to the same school, and they might have worked in the same workplace or factory, same sports clubs... they had all of these intersections where they could get that sense of community and belonging.

We know that's declined and we need to look for things to put in its place, and I think strata living is one of those opportunities, to find that civic involvement and that sense of community again.

Amanda Farmer: I think that's a really fabulous way to look at strata living, that it's an opportunity for the community. It's not about trying to find your own little space, and your own little box, and your own privacy that you feel like it might be missing out on because you don't have a free standing home... it's actually an opportunity to find what others are missing out on in this modern day. I really like that take on it.

Rachel Cosentino: Yes. I hope that when people decide that that's where they want to live that they do it for those reasons and the opportunities to be involved in a democratic process of having decisions made by the people who live and own in the strata scheme, or contribute to those possibilities.

Amanda Farmer: Great, and what do you think makes a great strata community?

Rachel Cosentino: I don't think there's one thing, I would say three important things, and the first is volunteers. It's people who are willing to take up that challenge and be part of the management committee, or the council of owners, or sub-committees, that influence the decision-making, the running and management of the schemes. So volunteers are important in a sense of people contributing in that way. One of the other things is by-laws that are suitable for the scheme. A standard set of by-laws does nothing to promote community...



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Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: and amenable living. So, by-laws that are suited to the people and the types of uses in the scheme is critical... and the third one is the built environment of the scheme.

Now, that's not necessarily how the building itself is designed... it can be that the building is in an area that has some sort of connection or theme that the community can identify with, for example it might be close proximity to a football oval or a local theatre or a children's hospital, or something that gives it a connection to its sense of place, or alternatively the built environment itself might have a sense of place: community gardens or children's facilities, those sorts of things.

Amanda Farmer: I like to think that developers these days are becoming more attuned to that, and they're thinking about these things when they choose the development sites, when they are engaging with architects to design their buildings, and it was only just this week that I was talking to someone – a conveyancer actually – and she sits on the board of a not-for-profit, and part of what that organisation does is provide advice to developers about how to find these types of spaces, how to build communities within them that work, and work for the future, and if you don't have that good foundation, it can be hard. It can be hard to establish that community feeling after the fact.

So it's something that I believe developers really do need to be attune to, and it's good to see – from what I'm hearing and from the people I'm talking to – that that's actually happening.

Rachel Cosentino: Yes, that's my experience too Amanda. I think it is happening, and I heard recently about conversations that were happening between the Cat Haven and a building developer.

Rachel Cosentino: So, yes. Those fabulous opportunities... and developers are a part of communities too...

Amanda Farmer: That's right.

Rachel Cosentino: and the developer happened to be a cat lover and talking to the Cat Haven about the possibilities for incorporating cat runs in a scheme...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: which is great to hear.

Amanda Farmer: And we want these communities to work, and developers obviously want to get the most bang for their buck, so this is a really great avenue, I think, to achieve that kind of success.

Rachel Cosentino: And if the market expects those things, if the public expects that from strata then, again, developers will follow suit. So, it's up to everybody to make the change in the right direction.

Amanda Farmer: You mentioned by-laws there as well Rachel, which I think is a fabulous point because all too often, we see communities saddled with a set of by-laws that just doesn't work for them.

And they often come to me a little bit confused as to how to make them work, where do they start, and they end up with a complete overhaul, which is often for the best. Has that been your experience as well? Are there any by-laws that you can think of that you've been able to put in place to help strata communities get to that next level of a sense of community?

Rachel Cosentino: Yes, I think one of the keys with by-laws is to build in enough flexibility and discretion for the council of owners. The tendency, I think, and one of the challenges for strata companies is that a council of owners that might be inexperienced in decision making – you know, these are volunteers, and they are inexperienced, and they can be a little bit nervous or fearful of

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making innovative decisions so they use the by-laws as if they were police officers...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: And you know, 'if the by-law says something then we won't allow it because we don't want to set a precedent' and I think that's counterproductive...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: and it's partly empowering – educating and empowering – the management committee or the council of owners, to use their discretion, where it exists, and innovative ways and ways that incorporate diversity and facilitate the theme or the nature of community that they want.

Amanda Farmer: You're using some terminology there... "council of owners", just for our New South Wales listeners, I understand that would be equivalent to the "executive committee", soon to be called under the new legislation the "strata committee". So there you go.

Rachel Cosentino: Oh! I didn't know that that change was on the books, but yes...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: the council of owners is essentially the management committee...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: that's elected at the AGM.

Amanda Farmer: The beauty of having different legislative regimes in different states of this country [laughing].

Rachel Cosentino: Different terminology... might always be the case.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Okay Rachel, could you share a story with us around how you've helped someone living in strata, or helped a strata building, to find that sense of community?

Rachel Cosentino: One of the examples that is quite memorable for me is a scheme which was mixed commercial and residential. The residential component was, I have to say, quite a conservative demographic, and there was a proposal to tenant one of the commercial lots with a tattoo parlour.

Amanda Farmer: Right.

Rachel Cosentino: And this caused a great deal of uproar and perhaps understandably some concerns, and the council of owners was dead-set on preventing this particular use, and came to me for advice on whether they could put a stop to the use of one of the commercial lots as a tattoo parlour.

While some of the concerns were certainly legitimate, and I was able to give them advice on steps they could take if they did want to restrict the use, I also encouraged them to look at alternatives.

Because I could see that restricting the use was going to cause acrimony and division, and potentially very costly if decisions were challenged.

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Rachel Cosentino: So, really I encouraged them to talk more to the landlord and to the tenant, and to get involved in those, the tenant's and the landlord's decision-making, around the fit-out, particularly so that they had an idea of what was planned or what was possible in terms of appearance and the clientele that would be attracted. The communications and the conversations went really well and that scheme today has some artwork at the entrance which the strata council commissioned the tattoo tenant to design, so...

Amanda Farmer: Fabulous.

Rachel Cosentino: They ended up being quite impressed with the creativity and the artistic-ness...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: of the tenant. So that went really well and the key was communication. The key was "okay we've got power and we can make a decision but let's find out more and let's work together."

Amanda Farmer: Yes. A really good point, and just opening up those lines of communication, going to the other owner and saying: "Hey, what is it exactly that you're doing? What is your shop going to look like? What kind of services is it going to provide? What kind of clientele are you are going to have?" And instead of imagining all sorts of weird and wonderful, actually getting the facts and getting a proper grounded understanding can really change your point of view, and allow something like this to blossom really.

Rachel Cosentino: Yes, and the concerns that they had around insurance and security they found ways to address those concerns.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, it's very similar to, I suppose, a resident lot owner who might be wanting to renovate their apartment and simply puts forward a by-law saying "I want to knock out walls, I want to put a new kitchen, I want to put a new bathroom" and instead of perhaps the committee saying "well no, that's going to be noisy, that's going to be risky from a structural perspective" and blanket refusing to provide approval, actually engage with that owner, go and see the apartment, go and see their plans, get them to explain to you exactly what it is that they're doing, and finding a way for, not only that owner to enjoy their unit, but for the value of the building as a whole to be increased, and it all comes back to that sense of community, getting to know each other, and having the lines of communication open instead of guessing and assuming.

Rachel Cosentino: Yes, it does, that's right.

Amanda Farmer: Great. Okay. So Rachel, what kinds of challenges do owners, buildings, or managers face when it comes to building a sense of community and how do you think they can be overcome?

Rachel Cosentino: One of the big challenges is the limited education or limited experience that a council of owners might have in making decisions.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: So, as I said earlier, I think it's about educating and empowering council of owners to get a bit creative and innovative and strategic in the ways that they make decisions.

The by-laws are often the other challenge, if the by-laws are not suited to the scheme. But in terms of overcoming those challenges, the key is for a council of owners or a management committee – strata committee...

I think you were talking about in New South Wales – finding a sort of crux of what the scheme has in common; what's something that binds everyone together; what's the thing that brings everybody together?

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Rachel Cosentino: And from that base, then also using the diversity in the scheme to grow the sense of community... I think those two levers are important: what do we all have in common...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: and how do we address the diversity, and make it a vibrant place as well, through that diversity?

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I've certainly seen buildings that have done that really well, where they've identified for example, that they've got a lot of mums living in that particular building, and they all have kids around the same age, babies around the same age, and so they put together a mothers' group, and so they all get together at a certain time, certain day each week and they pop out to the common courtyard or they go down to the local coffee shop and they have their mum's group, and...

Rachel Cosentino: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: that's something that really successfully brings that sense of community that you're sharing that unique interest, I suppose, and that...

Rachel Cosentino: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: thing that you have in common with others who live in your building so that...

Rachel Cosentino: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: when you do need help, maybe late in the afternoon when your husband's not home, and you've got a screaming baby and you're trying to cook dinner, that you can go and knock on your neighbour's door and say: "Hi, lovely to have a coffee with you earlier, would you mind coming and giving me a hand?"

Rachel Cosentino: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: and that makes a huge difference, I think, in our day-to-day life.

Rachel Cosentino: I mentioned the hospital example as being something that might give a community a sense of community, and I mentioned it because I know of a scheme where there's a group of people who volunteer to a children's charity that takes place in the hospital, and it's coordinated through the strata company.

Amanda Farmer: Fabulous, I like it. And different cultural interests as well, I know in Sydney we're hugely multicultural, and to have different groups who might be able to teach us bit about their cuisines or their cultural interests.

I know another building who has a Tai Chi group, you know, wonderful opportunities for privileging that diversity and just learning more about your neighbors.

Rachel Cosentino: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. So Rachel, have you got any quick wins or quick action steps that our listener can take today to get started creating a better sense of community in their strata scheme?

Rachel Cosentino: Yes, I think if you're on a council of owners or strata council management committee, think about strategic planning or a meeting to specifically identify what are the goals of the scheme in terms of building community. How do we build community building into the goals and the plans that we put in place?

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Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: Reviewing by-laws to make sure that they suit those goals and those plans and can facilitate those goals and plans and having conversations around what do we have in common, and how do we harness the diversity to make this a vibrant community?

Amanda Farmer: Yes, great. A really practical example that I've seen worked well is where larger buildings and large communities – they might be actually community associations and so there's a number of different status schemes involved – they actually nominate a sub-committee that they might call the 'social committee' or the 'cultural committee', and these aren't necessarily people who sit officially on the executive committee for their strata scheme, but they're owners who are interested in building that sense of community and might have something to offer because they themselves are events planners or they have companies that are involved in social things...

And they have something to bring to the table and they have great ideas. So they are the kind of people that might put their hands up and say: "Look, I'm not really interested in financials, accounts and scheduling meetings, but I'm interested in building that sense of community. I'm happy to sit on the sub-committee that's specifically devoted to that" So that's something I've seen worked quite well as well.

Rachel Cosentino: It does work well and it's a great initiative. There's always going to be individuals who don't want to participate in those same ways, and insuring that the scheme doesn't marginalize people who choose not to be involved in the social aspects is also important, so it's getting the right balance.

Amanda Farmer: I agree. Okay Rachel, time for the book question: what books have had the greatest impact on you and why?

Rachel Cosentino: Ohh, there's so many fabulous books...I could talk for ages about books, but I thought I had to talk about the most recent book that I read which was Bob Brown's memoirs...

Amanda Farmer: Fab.

Rachel Cosentino: which he titled: "Optimism"...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Rachel Cosentino: and I loved it because he was clearly motivated and energized to be active, and to do things that he believed were right for our society. The title, the optimism, through seeing beauty in people and in the environment. So yeah, being energized from something that's very positive I think, I really enjoyed that concept.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and it's definitely something that then shines through, I believe, in the work that you do. If you're passionate and if it's something you believe in, then people can't help but sit up and listen, hey?

Okay, before we wrap up Rachel, how do listeners find out more about you and is there anything you'd like to add before we say goodbye?

Rachel Cosentino: I do have a profile on Slater & Gordon's website...

Amanda Farmer: Great.

Rachel Cosentino: so people can look up Slater and Gordon and they'll find my contact details there. I guess, Amanda we're two lawyers talking about strata, but we haven't really talked about law very much at all, more about sociology.

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Amanda Farmer: Great.

Rachel Cosentino: But I think from my point of view, you know, it's that strata occurs in this social context is what makes me so passionate about the law in the area and it's the reason why I enjoy practicing law in the area and I suspect that you're probably the same.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, definitely. Thank you so much for your time this morning Rachel. You're no doubt heading into the office after a full-on start of the day. So thank you again, and you've got a lot to offer the strata sector and I'm really grateful that they have the privilege of having you over there in WA.

Rachel Cosentino: That's very kind. Thank you very much Amanda, it's been great fun.

Amanda Farmer: Thank you.

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