

# Transnational and temporary: place-making, students and community in central Melbourne

Ruth Fincher and Kate Shaw

The City of Melbourne has 23,777 students living within its boundary – 37 percent of the total population. In Carlton and Parkville the resident student population is closer to 50 percent. Just over half of these (12,600) are enrolled from overseas.

Policy-makers have been noting for some time that little is done for students and their cultural experience in Melbourne, despite their increasing numbers. Students are not the only residents of these areas of course, and their housing and recreational activities need to become part of Melbourne's history and future without swamping it entirely. How will this happen? What opportunities are there for interaction between students and the broader residential communities, and for that matter between 'international' and 'domestic' students? Most educators acknowledge that a great deal of learning, even the most important learning, occurs outside the classroom. How should the 'university quarter' on the northern fringe of central Melbourne unfold?

A team from the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne has been funded by the Australian Research Council to look at these issues. The three-year linkage project with Melbourne City Council, the Department for Victorian Communities and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, is motivated by the central question of how place-making – that practice of fostering communities in place – works when many residents are transnational and/or temporary. The research begins with the contention that public-private interactions, both in built spaces and in social relations, define the experience of place for those who are new to a locality and community, or temporary members of it, more than they do for long-term residents who are settled in their networks of belonging.

The Melbourne University research team is Ruth Fincher, Dean of Architecture Building and Planning; Paul Carter, Professorial Research Fellow; Paolo Tombesi, Associate Professor in Architecture; Kate Shaw, Research Associate; Michele Lobo, Research Assistant; and a PhD candidate, a Masters by Design candidate and two Honours students in Urban Planning.

The research area centres on the Swanston Street spine between the University of Melbourne and RMIT University. We are focusing on the connections students make – with the university, with housing providers, with public transport – and on how these are used as reference points for daily life. Transnational and temporary residents in particular seek out new knowledge, new friends, new sources of familiarity and ways of being at home, by using public spaces and facilities and social organisations beyond their limited, local, personal domain. The project is exploring the ways student residents of inner-Melbourne and South Carlton negotiate these public-private interactions. It asks what kinds of social policy, architectural and urban design frameworks facilitate meaningful experiences of community amongst a transient and diverse population in place?

In the course of this research we are clarifying ways of thinking about these concepts. *Transnationalism* is defined as belonging across nations, of having multiple national



affiliations or identities, of feeling at home in more than one national location. We use the term *transnational* to refer to immigrants to Melbourne who participate in social, economic and political networks both here and in their country of origin. They may be short-term or permanent residents. We use the word *temporary* to refer to people in Melbourne on a short-term basis, for example, rural and interstate students. The two categories overlap in most international students. For them, with often multi-focal identities and multi-local social networks, the notion of 'community' is complex. We are thinking of *community* as involving the presence of people in loosely affiliated groups, undertaking activities in a locality but not limited to it.

*Place-making* is the activity of giving meaning or coherence to a locale. Often it occurs through community arts activities as inclusive cultural planning. It can also refer to the imposed design of an urban landscape with a particular theme, like Chinatowns. The *public* and the *private* are contested terms. They are hard to separate cleanly – what is a private interaction in one context may be a public statement in another. Neither are public activities able to be defined as always occurring in public space, with private activities in private space. We are taking (pragmatically) a simple position on this anything but simple matter, and treating public spaces as built forms located outside private households and privately-owned enterprises. Included here are streets, parks, squares of the city, major commercial leisure premises (even if privately-owned!) and small interstitial spaces between or within houses and apartment blocks. Private spaces are within people's dwellings and businesses or offices. Social interactions in the public sphere are between individuals (as members of 'the public') and organisations like universities, local governments, large shops, festivals – they have the potential to involve people collectively.

The project emphasises the following:

- encounter among the population living and working in the area, largely university students, so as to enhance their cultural experience in place;
- arrangement and design of public spaces, especially streetscapes, to facilitate contemporary encounter and to mark memories of past encounters;
- review of regulation of housing and mixed land uses, asking



if they encourage the construction of intermixed and diverse housing, commercial and community facilities, without erasing the physical and social history of the place;

- proposal of building morphologies (public and private) that are specific to our place-making objectives but not currently supplied in the housing market.

## Encounter

The project recognises that traditional support structures in society are declining and that others need to be encouraged to replace them, to facilitate productive choices by people in new situations. Our place-making strategy is intended to facilitate the emergence of a better-functioning transnational-local community. On the basis that non-familial socialising and casual encounter are preferred forms of community among students, and that this guides the cultural experience they have of the city, we are seeking ways to maximise mixture and conviviality among resident and visitor populations. Freedom of association in large public spaces does not always develop a cosmopolitan urban civic culture, however. While not dismissing large-scale public festivals and spaces, it is ‘micro-public’ sites of daily interaction and conversation (like workplaces, universities, community organisations) where diversity, and a successful, lived multiculturalism, flourishes. We are including public spaces of different kinds in our design thinking, and looking at how we can enhance key, beneficial, public-private social interactions already being had by transnational students with local and non-student residents of the city.

## Public space

We are taking an innovative approach to place-making, replacing the usual arrangement of commemorative public artworks with a flexible ground template. This is a redefinition of public art and its place in public space design. We are contesting current orthodoxies about the scope, function and methodology of public space design. We reject the depoliticised notion of public space, in which it functions as a neutrally ‘safe’ network of leisure areas. Rather, public spaces channel and express plural desires and contradictory aspirations. To suppose that public art, which crystallises the symbolic function of public space, should be uncontroversial or respectably inclusive, is to forget its political nature.

We aim to understand ‘sense of place’ in a global context: what

does it mean to live (as many students in our study do) simultaneously in at least three ‘places’ (Melbourne, ‘home’, and the global city of electronic information)? To understand how temporary residents remember Melbourne, and how this translates into public space design, we will explore the ways in which transnationals and transients negotiate cultural differences and actively cultivate new, hybrid subjectivities. It is these creative forms of self-expression that may form the subject’s strongest associations with Melbourne. These qualities of self-production are what democracies incubate through their public spaces.

## Regulation of housing and mixed uses

The built fabric of any area enhances or hinders its use, its legibility, and the opportunities for spatial and social interaction within it. Apartment buildings for the student housing market are an important element of public-private interaction. They are a significant portion of the new building stock of private dwellings, occupying strategic positions along Melbourne’s circulation system and contributing heavily to the definition of streetscapes and public space. The project will examine whether these specific spatial outcomes have been influenced by internal property development constraints or were the result of explicit planning and design decisions. We are mapping recent housing developments – their internal configurations as well as their placement on streets and lanes – and the patterns of public and private use of the resulting urban fabric. This will reveal how architects and developers are responding to the opportunities in this area, and whether specific building forms and/or new development practices should be encouraged to facilitate the operation of meaningful community interactions.

## Building morphology

University residences through the twentieth century have contributed significantly to debates on minimum dwelling requirements, the relationship between private and communal building spaces, the investigation of environmental strategies, and the development of collective domestic forms. The provision of student accommodation has also served as an effective vehicle for urban renovation: Urbino, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Amsterdam, Berlin, Graz, Maastricht and Aarhus are cities benefiting from the integration of student structures into their historic fabric. In several cases the buildings themselves have become places of collective memory.

By bringing together consideration of public-private interactions, urban design, urban development and regeneration, we will suggest alternative place-making strategies that steer a path between gentrification and enclave-led decline. The objective of the project is that the design of public and private space engages with this notion of public-private interactions. Questions of regulation and governance will be brought to bear on outcomes in building construction. Stories from the public spaces of the past will sit alongside those of the multicultural present to identify a place as it broadens its points of reference beyond the local to the global. It is our intent that communities of transnational and temporary students be strengthened through their encounters and learning in the places where they live, as well as in the classroom.

***Professor Ruth Fincher is Dean of Architecture Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne.***

***Dr Kate Shaw is a Research Fellow in the same Faculty.***