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Urban vitality, culture and the public realm

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Abstract
The urban public realm is critical to creating and maintaining vital and inclusive cities. There has been a welcome acknowledgement of the importance of the urban public realm in Australian urban policy, with increasing amounts of energy and resources devoted to its improvement. However, while there is apparent agreement on the significance of public space there is less clarity over what constitutes ‘good’ public space and the degree to which it can be deliberately created. Beyond this, urban public spaces and institutions are being transformed by urban redevelopment trends, culture-based and creative city planning strategies, shifts in management and ownership arrangements, and by the impact of concerns regarding public safety and security. This is a timely moment at which to evaluate contemporary challenges to the urban public realm and to focus on coherent policy recognition and response.

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The problem

The urban public realm is critical to creating and maintaining vital and inclusive cities. There has been a welcome acknowledgement of the importance of the urban public realm in Australian urban policy, with increasing amounts of energy and resources devoted to its improvement. However, while there is apparent agreement on the significance of public space there is less clarity over what constitutes ‘good’ public space and the degree to which it can be deliberately created. Beyond this, urban public spaces and institutions are being transformed by urban redevelopment trends, culture-based and creative city planning strategies, shifts in management and ownership arrangements, and by the impact of concerns regarding public safety and security. This is a timely moment at which to evaluate contemporary challenges to the urban public realm and to focus on coherent policy recognition and response.

Analysis

Urban culture can be thought of as the lifestyle and values associated with city living. These values are expressed through social interaction in urban public spaces, such as streets, public squares and shopping areas. These interactions, often based around the daily flow of the workday, combine with chance encounters and special events. This daily social life of the city drives its vitality and vibrancy in important ways. Globalisation has deepened the social diversity of urban populations and lifestyles (see the 45 entry on multiculturalism). Urban cultures are therefore shaped by difference around social class, ethnicity, culture, lifestyle and value systems. Cities are made up of different ‘publics’ who come together through social interaction in the public spaces of a city.

Urban culture also refers to the cultural and creative activities harboured in and around museums, galleries, libraries and public performance spaces. The depth and richness of urban cultural activities have long been mainstays of urban vitality but in recent years they have also been assigned a central role as drivers of urban regeneration and economic development: as being at the core of ‘creative’ and competitive cities.
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The importance of cultural production and creative industries to urban economic prosperity and liveability has led to a proliferation of cultural and creative city strategies across Australian cities and to culturally-led urban redevelopment projects, for example Melbourne’s Federation Square, Brisbane’s South Bank and Darwin’s waterfront. However, problems have been associated with these developments:

(a) The prioritisation of large-scale redeveloped precincts centred on formal public spaces can result in over-planning and over-regulation. Vital cities are as much disordered as they are ordered. Over-formalised public spaces may not best catalyse the everyday, often banal, interactions that underpin a truly creative and vibrant city.

(b) The reproduction of ideas about what public spaces should look like has often led to the development of homogeneous places, with a loss of distinctiveness.

(c) A concentration on the inner city has come at the expense of suburban areas. The focus of strategies promoting urban culture has not been distributed in ways that have maximised the social value of these approaches. Nor have these strategies adequately reflected the changing nature of the urban creative economy which is growing in a spatially uneven fashion, being more suburban than previously thought, nor the need to nurture local community-based culture.

(d) The displacement of low income residents and small-scale cultural producers has been driven by the impact of urban redevelopment on rent inflation and loss of a genuinely diverse and vibrant urban public realm.

There has been a growth in the development and management of public spaces by private agencies and corporations. The consequent commercialisation of public space has tended to constrain the openness of the public realm. A key problem has been the way that security is often aligned with seeing public spaces as places of consumption, often to the exclusion of activities and groups that do not fit with existing pictures of the ‘creative city’. Sometimes particular social groups (both young and old) are identified as unproductive, anti-social or otherwise threatening to the function of some public spaces which are managed through excessive surveillance and regulation.

Urban culture and vitality fundamentally shape and depend on an open and diverse urban public realm containing the spaces and institutions around which people can come together to engage with one another, participating in events or engaging in common projects. These are the collective spaces in which various publics encounter and engage with one another and they are the spaces where creative and cultural activities are enacted: streetscapes, community centres and clubs, parks, playgrounds and sporting areas, public performance spaces, festivals and community celebrations, formal civic spaces and institutions.
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However, there is some evidence of a tendency in Australian cities, particularly among the affluent, to withdraw from these everyday public spaces and into residential and leisure spaces that are characterised by high levels of social control and social homogeneity. The trend towards planned community title developments regulated by environmental and behavioural covenants is one market response to this tendency. This may be a response to intensified urban security fears and it may be an indication, as research has suggested, that some city residents are overwhelmed by intense urban diversity and react with avoidance. The impact of this growing social privatism also threatens the role of cities as places nurturing social contact across this diversity.

Both the commercialisation of public space and these urban fears and discomforts are problematic because of the limitations they place on social cohesion. Limiting our encounters with social diversity is likely to produce more rather than less fear, as residents retreat into private residential areas that they contrast with dangerous public spaces. So the role of welcoming, high quality and well-managed urban public spaces in engendering senses of belonging and community cannot be underestimated.

Three policy ideas

1. The commitment of State and Federal Governments is needed for sustained investment in the small-scale social and physical infrastructure that supports a vibrant public realm that is accessible across urban and suburban populations. A commitment to invest in the development of urban public spaces must extend beyond formal civic spaces to include the encouragement of informal and unstructured public spaces. These include local parks and playgrounds, plazas and urban design elements to encourage urban encounter and conversation (e.g., shaded seating areas on main streets). Places like community centres, clubs and cultural spaces, recreation spaces catering to a diversity of age groups, levels of mobility and ethnicity are also essential to this mixed-use of public space.

Currently such spaces are largely funded by local government authorities including via developer contributions schemes (S94 contributions in NSW). State budgets on the other hand more commonly support larger scaled, ‘monumental’ high-profile development projects. Fiscal and political pressures on local government make them unable to cater fully for broader city vitality. Local planning instruments must ensure consideration is given to availability and accessibility of such spaces in the assessment of new residential and mixed-use developments, both in inner urban...
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and in suburban settings. We need to prioritise the production of spaces that facilitate diverse everyday encounters that generate cohesion and strength from urban social diversity.

2. The development of funded local authority public space management strategies that:

- attract diverse users and resist domination of public spaces by a single identity group: places attracting families, older people, women, youth, groups and individuals;
- avoid marginalising specific user groups and/or the non-consuming public, and;
- nurture uses and events that encourage people into public spaces for non-commercial purposes.

These strategies need to include attention to the provision of everyday micro-infrastructures that provide pragmatic encouragements to diverse public space use: bike racks, lockers, public barbeques in parks, wheelchair accessible streetscapes, public notice poster-boards, and good lighting on main streets to support night-time mingling. The establishment of Federal or State community development funds is recommended as a means of supporting and financing these management strategies.

3. Policies are required that counter the gentrification of city housing and the current squeeze on informal and creative uses of central city spaces. Inclusive city planning should support vernacular cultural production, foster creative ‘scenes’ in the arts, music, design and other fringe activities that have enough critical mass to nurture talent and provide supportive audiences. At the same time, creative city planning needs to counter gentrification/rent rise cycles that drive housing, studio space or living costs beyond the reach of grassroots creative producers. For this reason a wide range of urban policy interventions are necessary:

Creativity-specific strategies: provision of low-cost studio spaces, for example, Marrickville Council’s Addison Rd community arts complex for visual artists, theatre companies, musicians, support of neighbourhood cultures via popular culture programmes supported throughout the suburbs, using

neighbourhood community facilities and existing arts and youth organisations such as visual art and music strategies in Western Sydney. Integration of existing public institutions with vernacular creative scenes, for example community arts programmes with galleries; live music venues at universities special events designed to showcase local creativity using public space to enable free, equitable access for audiences and to maximise exposure for local artists, for example Sydney’s Sculpture by the Sea.

Wider urban, State and Federal policies supporting inclusive creativity: provision of low-rent social housing for artists, such as Seattle’s Artspace projects which have pooled philanthropic donations, city and state money and in-kind support to provide low cost, rent-controlled housing for registered arts workers wage support for arts and creative workers and incorporation of creative activities as legitimate ‘work’ in unemployment benefits/income support schemes revision of licensing and noise pollution laws in specific precincts and public spaces to enable better use of existing areas as festival and live music spaces and facilitate special events, after-hours family/child-care provision acknowledging that many creative workers work most at night.

Clearly this range of policies requires a mix of local, State and Federal initiatives. Devising an appropriate framework to carry them will clearly demand a whole-of-government approach.