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Urban Research and Action

New Metropolitan Mainstream Melbourne

The City of Melbourne, capital of the State of Victoria, Australia, is celebrated for its cool. It is repeatedly listed as the world's most (or second, or third … most) liveable city. Sydney, Australia's first city and Melbourne's major competitor, is so … colourful. Melbourne people wear black. Melbourne is Australia's design capital, its intellectual capital, its cultural capital. Central Melbourne and the surrounding inner-city districts have live music and graffiti and street art scenes to die for.

Melbourne is built on the land of indigenous people who were violently displaced. It became one of the world's largest metropolises in the late 19th century on the strength of Victoria's gold and wool resources. It built an extensive train and tram network and many fine public buildings, developed a diverse manufacturing sector and Australia's largest docks.

Melbourne is the home of the mighty Trades Hall, strong unions, and the eight-hour working day. Post-WWII immigration built a highly multicultural community with 40 percent of the population still born overseas, mainly from eastern and southern Europe, south and south-east Asia, and more recently Africa. From the 1960s till the 1980s the inner city was dominated by low-income people: the working class, immigrants, students, artists and hippies. The shift of the industrial base to the suburban fringe in 1970s and 1980s added to the expansion that began with the middle-class residents

abandoning inner-Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s, leaving the undervalued city centre ripe for gentrification.

An active, government-led stimulatory strategy in the early 1990s resulted in close to 10,000 new and converted apartments being added to the centre. A redevelopment of the docks produced another 3,600 apartments with weekly rents double that of the Australian median. The number of cafes and restaurants in the centre increased by around 500 percent.

There are 40,000 people on Victoria's public housing waiting list. Beyond the inner-metropolitan region is a sprawling expanse of low-density suburbs, measuring 75 kilometres from west to east. Metropolitan Melbourne now has 4 million people, though its public transport network has barely grown over the last 60 years. Melbourne is a divided city: those with greatest wealth live in the inner areas where access to public transport is excellent, and those who live further out are forced to rely on car travel on the ever expanding road network.
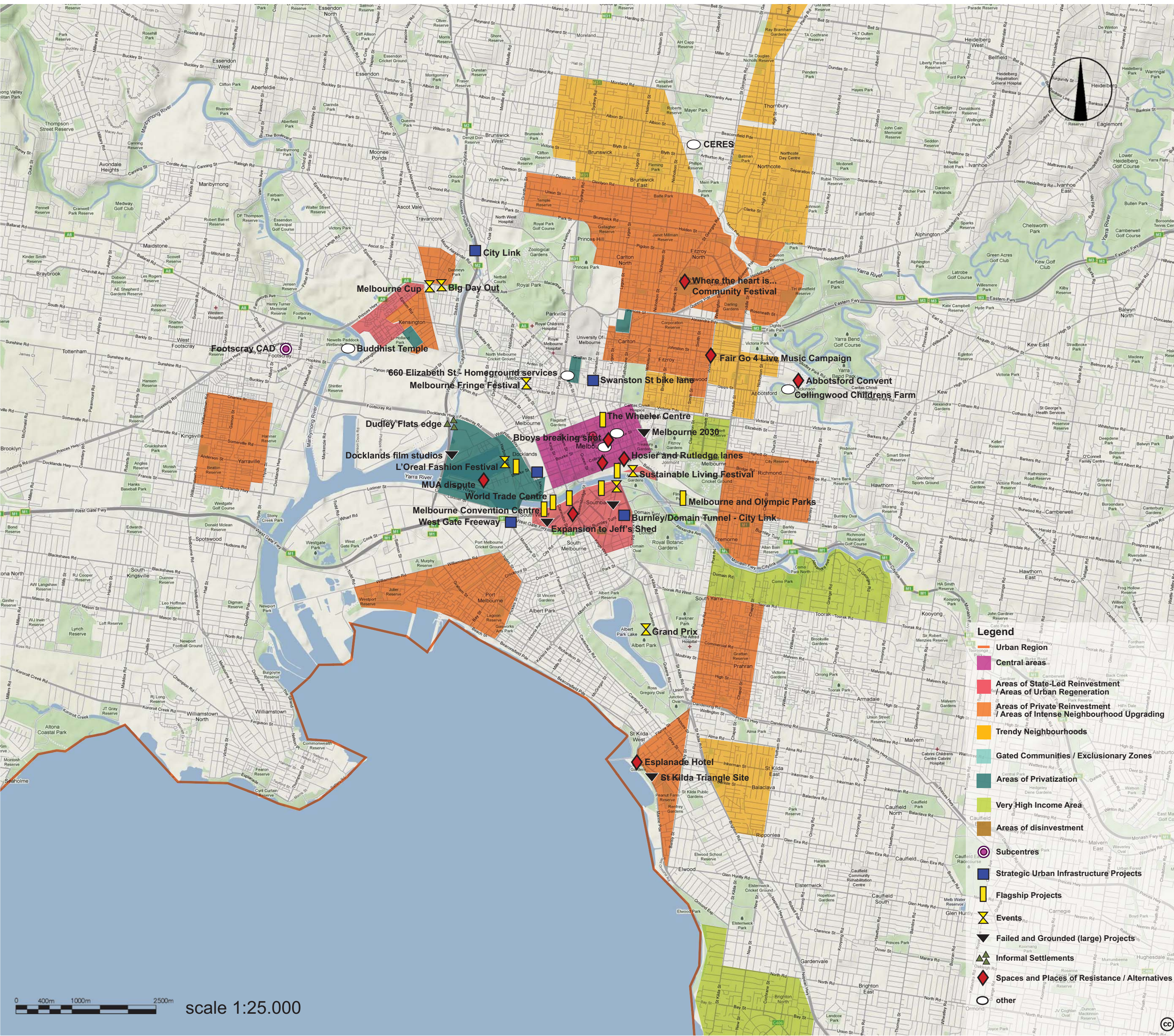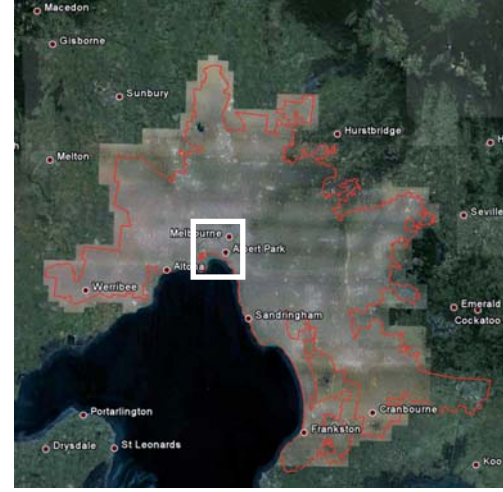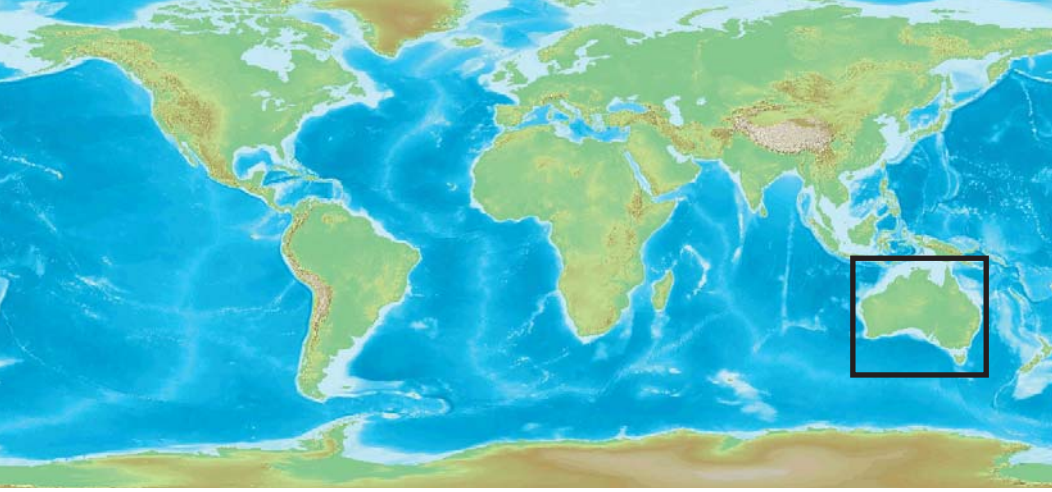
Seven years ago an urban growth boundary was introduced with the intention of providing 25 years of population growth if the average housing density increased from its suburban low of 10 dwellings per hectare to 15. Since then the boundary has been extended twice: the result of a combination of no increase in suburban den-

sities due to the absence of any requirement, the average Australian house size somehow becoming the largest in the world, and entrenched land banking by private developers limiting the release of land in order to keep land values high.

With Melbourne's population projected to exceed 5 million by 2030, major issues these days for middle-Melburnians include border protection, immigration and the occasional boatload of "illegal immigrants" (asylum seekers). A national argument is developing around 'sustainable' population levels. A strong case for those on the green left and xenophobic right is Australia's delicate ecological balance, in particular the very serious shortage of water.

The prospects of reducing profligate individual consumption levels, introducing recycling, and constraining rural Victoria's rice, cattle and dairy farming practices, rarely enter the public discourse. Instead, Melbourne is concentrating on a building desalination plant and a pipeline from the drier north, and nurturing its main industry: real estate investment. In the land of the fair go, the buying, selling, demolishing, building and renovating of property is the national pastime.

Australia	7'692'030Km2	* Inhabitants 21'874'900
Urban Region		* Inhabitants 4'000'000

Legend

- ▬ Urban Region
- ■ Central areas
- ■ Areas of State-Led Reinvestment / Areas of Urban Regeneration
- ■ Areas of Private Reinvestment / Areas of Intense Neighbourhood Upgrading
- ■ Trendy Neighbourhoods
- ■ Gated Communities / Exclusionary Zones
- ■ Areas of Privatization
- ■ Very High Income Area
- ■ Areas of disinvestment
- ◉ Subcentres
- ■ Strategic Urban Infrastructure Projects
- ▮ Flagship Projects
- ✕ Events
- ▼ Failed and Grounded (large) Projects
- ▲ Informal Settlements
- ◆ Spaces and Places of Resistance / Alternatives
- ○ other

scale 1:25.000

0   400m   1000m   2500m

Melbourne, AUSTRALIA

The new metropolitan mainstream Melbourne is a collection of precincts: Docklands, Southbank, the sporting precinct. The university quarter and the arts precinct. We do not design buildings, we design precincts. We work in public-private partnerships, where the private calls the shots. Melbourne's precincts are mega-precincts. They use lots of space, with multiple architects working on individual features within. We don't need starchitects from overseas: no Richard Rogers or Zaha Hadids here. Inner-Melbourne has a multiplicity of architects, more per hectare than any city in the world! and we know who they are.

Melbourne focuses on the spectacular. We have multiple high-rise mega-projects and nearly the tallest building in the world. We have nearly the largest casino and some expansive waterfront promenades. We never really know how much they cost. Behind the flagships are private roads that lead directly into the luxury entertainment facilities and apartments – carpark: elevator: view! Behind these are snarling traffic sewers that only the bravest cyclists will tackle. Between the flagships are disconnected, windswept non-lands, as though pedestrians were somehow forgotten.

People take safety in Melbourne's bars and restaurants – you guessed it, the best and most diverse cuisine in the world. And here there is something for everyone. Inner Melbourne's cultural diversity is reflected in its food, its range of styles, presentation and prices. The old city has laneways, arcades, nooks and crannies and a genuinely valued heritage. In the between parts of the city are the live music venues, comedy and theatre venues and graffiti and stencil art that many Melburnians do appreciate as long as no-one goes on about it.

Political foment breeds in these cracks, and Melbourne's resistances are as diverse as its festivals. We have an international arts festival, an international film festival, a comedy festival and a fringe festival. A food and wine festival, jazz festival, fashion festival and design festival. There's the next wave festival, queer film festival, writers' festival and anti-gentrification festival. There is a festival and a resistance for everything (including festivals).

The resistance itself is a festival and the streets are our theatre. Melbourne's resistances are embedded in our psyches and multiple resistances radiate, out to staid middle-suburbia, to the anti-tax paying fringe, to the environmental battles on the coasts and in the forests and then right back in the city centre where the activists go to court. New metropolitan mainstream Melbourne is like the new Federation Square: scattered like fragments of glass. We know it, we resist it, we move around it. We understand it, we temper it. It would be worse if we weren't all here.
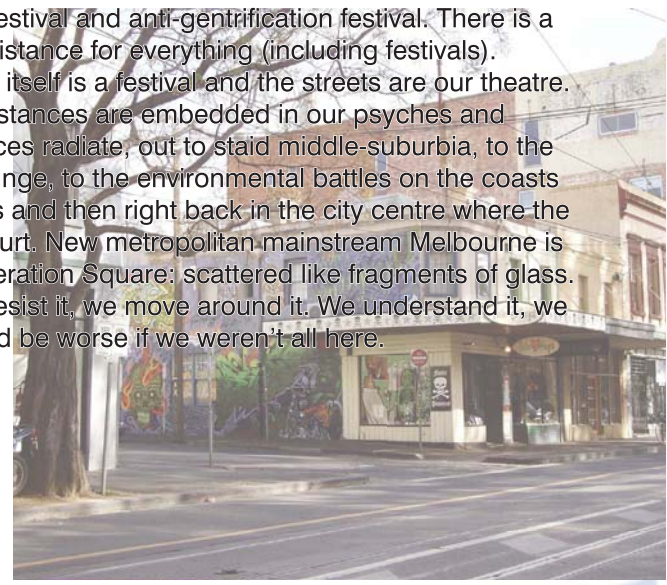
Down on the Docks
A flagship project

Melbourne Docklands is a waterfront development of 220 Ha – the largest urban redevelopment in Australia. The former docks – once the proud crucible of the Australian trade union movement – were 'regenerated' in the 1990s under an aggressively neoliberal State government. The land was sold in large parcels to a small number of developers on the premise of no cost to the public. With a clear focus on giving 'the market' free rein ("You're the ones with the ideas", the Minister for Planning told assembled developers at a business-leaders' forum) planning and design controls were minimal. The developers received every assistance, buying the land at unimproved valuations, benefitting from publicly-funded decontamination works and, eventually, the provision of substantial stimulatory infrastructure.

A decade on, the redevelopment has absorbed a billion dollars of public funds. Docklands is a uniformly high-rent commercial and residential precinct made up of poorly-connected high-rise buildings on large consolidated blocks. There are no small street frontages and few ambiguous spaces. Its political history has been evacuated. The too-large public squares allow for little other than controlled consumption (patrolled by private security guards).

A former State architect attributes the failure of Docklands to the design being left to the developers, and argues that the design should have started from a heart in the precinct and built slowly outwards. Many commentaries pronounce the area dead.

But the global financial crisis and capitalism's 'creative destruction' have given the docks a second chance. The next phase of construction has stalled, and there are still large areas of unallocated or undeveloped space. Suddenly, the government corporation that oversees the redevelopment is expressing an interest in place-making and discourses of sustainability. An opportunity exists for a different kind of planning that seeks several (however faintly beating) hearts from which to build a variety of building forms, laneways, affordable housing and work spaces, connecting the existing structures in ways that make sense. It is conceivable that some of the site's history can be salvaged, and the surviving warehouses still have the potential to become something other than expensive restaurants.

Might this alternative approach represent a departure from the new metropolitan mainstream? Not really: it is an opportunistic seizure, seizing the opening created by market failure to introduce forms and practices into the docklands that would otherwise be excluded, through more participatory processes than have previously been the case. It is a place-making exercise encouraging accessible and equitable space that will quite probably increase the exchange value of the existing commercial and residential buildings. Certainly, if such an approach is comprehensively enabled, it will have been judged as in no way detracting from the capacity for existing building owners to profit on their assets.

But neither does this approach allow the embedding of privatised power. It is a postmodern response befitting the context, exploiting mutual interests, and extracting what gains it can for social equity in a period when the State government has all but given up this role. This is the nature of contest in New Metropolitan Melbourne.

Landmarks! Landmarks!
More flagships than you can poke a stick at

Southbank is the new half of Melbourne's Central Business District, located on the other side of the Yarra river. Originally a loose collection of industrial buildings and bridges, it was transformed into high-rise residential, commercial and entertainment precinct from the early 1990s as a part of an urban revitalisation program. Apart from a few heritage buildings and Victorian Arts Centre (built in the 1980s) the entire area is less than 20 years old.

The transformation of Southbank was originally conceived by a 1980s Labor Government with a vision of diversity that included social housing and a four-storey height limit. But when developers gained a free hand with the deregulation of urban planning in the 1990s, it resulted in laissez-faire urbanism: unconstrained by design guidelines, community interests, democratic participation, or equity concerns, public-private partnerships (PPPs) were an attempt to revitalise Melbourne's economy during a prolonged downturn.

Southbank could be a textbook example of neo-liberal city planning. Every building, it seems, was built as a flagship something or other, each having at least a few years in the tourist brochures: from Eureka Tower ('the tallest residential building in the world', with 'the highest observation deck in the southern hemisphere'), the Crown Casino ('the biggest casino in the southern hemisphere'), to the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre ('the largest pillarless floor space in the southern hemisphere'). As an urban environment Southbank is charmless. Shopping malls grafted onto high-rise apartment complexes, privatised impermeable stretches of public waterfront, a public realm devoid of any authentic diversity. Southbank houses over 9000 people, mostly in high-rise towers protected by secure entry foyers (no junk mail or leaflets here). Expecting only childless professionals, developers provided no community facilities but a plethora of private gyms, pools and expensive eateries. While every building competes with every other for landmark status, life between them is desolate.

One block back from the glitzy riverfront, Southbank is all wind tunnels, fast traffic, dead frontages and endless underground carparks. But Melbourne's economic recovery has resulted in a housing shortage, and there are families and university students – with nowhere to go bar food courts and the casino, which has generously contributed to gambling addictions and alcohol-related violence.

Melbourne City Council has attempted to ameliorate the problems. But rather than providing schools or public spaces, the council designed in public symbols of multiculture and diversity: representing multiculture on the former rail bridge and excavating indigenous names for the surrounding parks, adding to the cacophony of architectural and semiotic statements.

Southbank is a showcase of state strategic planning failure, but in conditions of planning deregulation it may be more accurate to speak of market failure. It is also a condensed image of what is happening to Melbourne. Imagine Southbank as a junkyard of every urbanistic idea Victorian planning has had in the past twenty years: thematic precincts, high-density living, PPPs, flagship projects, public art, alfresco dining, waterfront revitalisation. But while all of these might be imposed onto a 19th-century neighbourhood without significantly disfiguring it, on an urban tabula rasa without a strategic masterplan, it demonstrates the inability of private capital to create genuine urbanity on its own.

Save Our ...
Les grandes et les petites resistances

Counter-cultural projects are everywhere in Melbourne, but invisible to the naked eye. Resistance is so much a part of what makes the place a vast, scaleless suburban blandness, yet believed to be totally unique by its inhabitants. But before this milieu can be apprehended, temporality and spatiality must be accounted for.

Ask local left-leaning activists to nominate sites of resistance, there will be the memorable fights and demonstrations: for example, the battle on the docks by the Maritime Union of Australia in 1998 to retain its power against a stevedore company backed by a conservative government intent on dismembering the union movement (ultimately unsuccessful), or the several thousand at the anti-World Economic Forum blockade at Crown Casino in 2000 (delegates arrived via helicopter, struggled to get in, met, left). Then, the anti-Iraq invasion rally at Federation Square of 2003 that baptised the new private space with an aura of public authenticity (150,000 demonstrators), and perhaps, the occupation of a central city park by indigenous Australians for the world's media during the 2006 Commonwealth Games (they were evicted).

There are more such sites of ephemerality and failure, as is the Australian way – this is the city that celebrates Burke and Wills, two Victorian explorers who never returned from an expedition to cross the continent. And then there are the local, the tiny and not necessarily memorable, but cherished nonetheless – activists in decaying warehouses, spontaneous eruptions of illicit community art in smelly central city laneways, a plethora of web-based and online activism and chatter, a world-class graffiti culture, and so on.

Melbourne has all of this, but the most enduring, pervasive and effective kind of activism in this metropolis is so mainstream it would be taken for granted in any other forum. Saving things – this neighbourhood, that pub or post-office, such and such a park – is the great collective resistance project of middle-Melbourne to its own dark side: the sacred right of landowners to do what they will with their property.

'Save the Espy', 'Save St. Kilda', 'Save Albert Park', 'Save Carnegie' for example, while diverse in their politics and provenance, cover the spectrum from social and cultural equity to protection of turf. From saving live music, social housing or grungy urbanity, to public open space and suburban place-identity, the dispersed, fragmented and sometimes contradictory nature of political resistance in Melbourne means that resident 'action groups' have most of the metropolitan area on standby to protest against change of almost any kind.

All this complexity and diversity notwithstanding, there is one place that stands as the epicentre for resident re-actionism – Camberwell, the heart of middle-suburban Melbourne. Here, the will to protect a patch of ground drew national attention in 2003 as two of Australia's most famous performers led a street rally to oppose a spectral plan to redevelop over the local railway station. Though there are factional differences, 'Save Our Suburbs' (SOS) stands for a nostalgic fantasy of a cosy suburban 'way of life' behind white picket fences, only a stone's throw from the less homely ideology that Australia is full.

The New Metropolitan Mainstream ostensibly resisted by these suburban defenders is the shiny apartment towers of the Docklands and Southbank (no live music, children or poor people here) as much as new townhouses or low-rise apartments and social housing built with local finance by local labour, making this the authentic counter project par excellence for Melbourne; much more so than the celebrated graffiti, the laneway activism or the attempts to stop global capitalism from holding its meetings on the waterfront.

City of Brunch
The eternal festival...

The emergence of brunch – a meal eaten in the morning combining breakfast and lunch – reflects the reinvention of Melbourne's inner city as a zone of cultural consumption and the associated proliferation of cafes, bars and restaurants. Following little more than a decade of rapid residential development in the Central Business District, Melbourne has built on its national reputation as Australia's cultural capital in a variety of scales, from high-profile festivals and blockbuster exhibitions down to tiny venues and boutique events, often connected to the city's maze of anonymous laneways. In effect, the eating of brunch bears many similarities to a festival, albeit on a tiny scale: the meal exists as a cultural event, fusing refined judgements of taste, and displays of wealth with carefully designed venue and exotic consumption.

Before brunch, there is the desire for brunch. That is, brunch speaks of appetites that are not simply strictly biological, but cultural. On the one hand, brunch indicates a certain indolence and conspicuous display of leisure time, especially as cafés and eateries spill onto the footpaths and the few car-free outdoor malls. In this mode, brunch is part of a 24-hour temporality: a late breakfast following a late night at the city's array of events, bars or parties. However, as forms of labour transcend industrial models – especially for certain classes in inner Melbourne – brunch is also an opportunity for business. Equally for those engaged in legal/financial sectors or forms of more "precarious" labour, brunch coincides with meetings, networking and mobile phone and email chatter.

In Melbourne, brunch often includes domesticated versions of established migrant cuisine: toasted focaccias and pide breads and ever more specialised versions of (largely) Mediterranean cuisine and coffees. The choice of a brunch venue and menu items have become an expression of serious ethical and moral economies. Salt, sugar, gluten and GI content, organic status and carbon miles, are part of a series of minute qualifications and distinctions - in Bourdieu's terms, the careful judgements of the consumer which function to stratify the consumers themselves into infinite sub-strata. In this, the narrative of Melbourne as an open, convivial, democratic, singular and available city competes with a counter-narrative of a city, where cultural consumption is fragmented into niches of exclusive, "authentic" zones that are not advertised but discovered: for instance, the network of hidden bars and difficult to find cafes with anonymous facades, catering for a movement against the democratisation of the city.

Brunch is part of the New Metropolitan Mainstream's aestheticisation of everyday experience, in which inner Melbourne appears as a kind of self-consciously Europeanised and cosmopolitan theme-park, a city that is creative, dense and vital and determinedly set against the 'other' Melbourne – the vast middle and outer suburbia.

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