Melbourne's Creative Spaces program: Reclaiming the 'creative city' (if not quite the rest of it)

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ABSTRACT

Declining availability and affordability of inner-city space for cultural production were identified as major issues for Melbourne in the 2000s. The city's Creative Spaces program was designed to redress this by providing affordable space for creative use in the public and private sectors. Rather than following the global 'creative city' strategies of the time, in which low and non-profit-making artists are relegated to the service class or displaced, the program's advocates used the language of culture-led regeneration to win political support for the fundamental place of the arts in the city. Avoiding temporary, 'activating' uses of space, the program gives access to long-term affordable studio space, and as part of the largest arts program of any local government in Australia, helps maintain Melbourne as a site of cultural production as well as consumption.

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Introduction

In the last two decades central Melbourne has changed profoundly, with a program designed to increase the residential population and attract late night businesses proving spectacularly successful. The residential conversion of former factories and warehouses reduced the space for production, and the growing demand for a central city residence put upward pressure on property prices. This resulted, predictably enough, in the displacement of those who were taking advantage of those spaces and cheap rents – artists mainly, and small businesses in the as yet ungentrified shop fronts, along with other low income occupants of the city. The problem of recapitalisation of the urban environment reducing local diversity dawned quickly on the City of Melbourne.

This paper outlines the city's response to that problem. Rather than adopting the global 'creative city' strategies in vogue through the 2000s (Porter & Shaw, 2009) with their business-as-usual focus on economic development (Atkinson & Easthope, 2009; Berry, 2005; Peck, 2005), the

Creative Spaces program was designed to provide long term space and advocate for the essential role of cultural producers in the city. The paper introduces the local context and discusses the global creative city discourses of the time before examining the way the tensions between economic and cultural development played out among the two levels of government responsible for the planning of inner-Melbourne. We turn then to an outline of the city's Creative Spaces projects and the obstacles they face, and conclude with an analysis of the impact of global creative city rhetoric on Melbourne's cultural development.

Melbourne's transformation

In 1978, architectural commentator Norman Day described Melbourne as 'an empty useless city centre'. The city's transformation since the 1980s has been dramatic. Today, Melbourne is internationally recognised as one of the world's most liveable cities, with a vibrant, urbane downtown. There are many reasons for this dramatic turnaround but the return of residents to the downtown 21 years ago is generally acknowledged as a major contributing factor. Comparisons to Paris, New York and even Hong Kong have been made by many to describe and market the nature of this change, and

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certainly Melbourne has in small part similarities with these cities. But at its heart Melbourne is distinctive. (City of Melbourne, 2013).

The centre of Melbourne (Fig. 1) has indeed been transformed in the last two decades, from a place that office and retail workers vacated at 5 for their homes in the suburbs, to a 24-h "international cultural city" (City of Melbourne, 2010:17). In the 1980s there were around 800 recognised dwellings in the city centre, and just a handful of restaurants open in the evenings (City of Melbourne, 2007a). A motley collection of pubs was barely kept in business by the regular waterside and railway workers at the western end, down by the docks, and the politicians and public servants at the eastern end up around Parliament House.

For well over a century the city was the centre of a bustling manufacturing and export economy, but in the 1970s most of these jobs were relocated to the outer suburbs or off-shore. Changing shipping technologies meant fewer wharfies were employed on the docks, which were being relocated downstream anyway to the mouth of the river where the bigger ships (increasingly laden with imports) could get through. Factories and warehouses throughout the inner city were closed, and by the early 1980s the city centre was profoundly disinvested.

Thirty years later there are 16320 dwellings in the CBD, 1179 cafes and restaurants, and 168 bars and pubs operating well into the night (City of Melbourne, 2013). The transformation was deliberate and government-led. The council for metropolitan Melbourne's central municipality – the

City of Melbourne – and the State government of Victoria embarked on a combination of initiatives in the early 1990s that were extremely successful in reactivating the city. Postcode 3000 – a program designed to bring a residential population into the city – used a suite of incentives including reduced regulation, various forms of financial assistance, street improvements and extensive promotion to encourage the conversion of factories, warehouses and older office buildings to residential apartments (Adams, 2009). Reforms to the liquor licensing regime greatly eased access to permission for licensed venues, and planning system changes allowing outdoor drinking and dining in streets and laneways brought inner-Melbourne slowly but surely to the urbanist ideal of the 'city that never sleeps'.

All this activity brought unintended consequences of course, including an increasing volume of complaints from new residents who found they were indeed kept awake. In truth, the city never had slept – there were illegal clubs and bars in the vacant upper floors and basements of old warehouse buildings and empty office blocks from at least the 1960s. For decades these were patronised by artists and bon vivants who had lived and worked in the factory and warehouse spaces they informally converted into studios and homes. With no legal residents to disturb, the city centre after dark was the perfect place to party.

But with the formalisation of residential uses came expectations and rights, and an associated increase in property values. Disinvested spaces, while they can be replete with realised use value, are more economically valuable for their exchange. To engage Neil Smith's (1979) theory
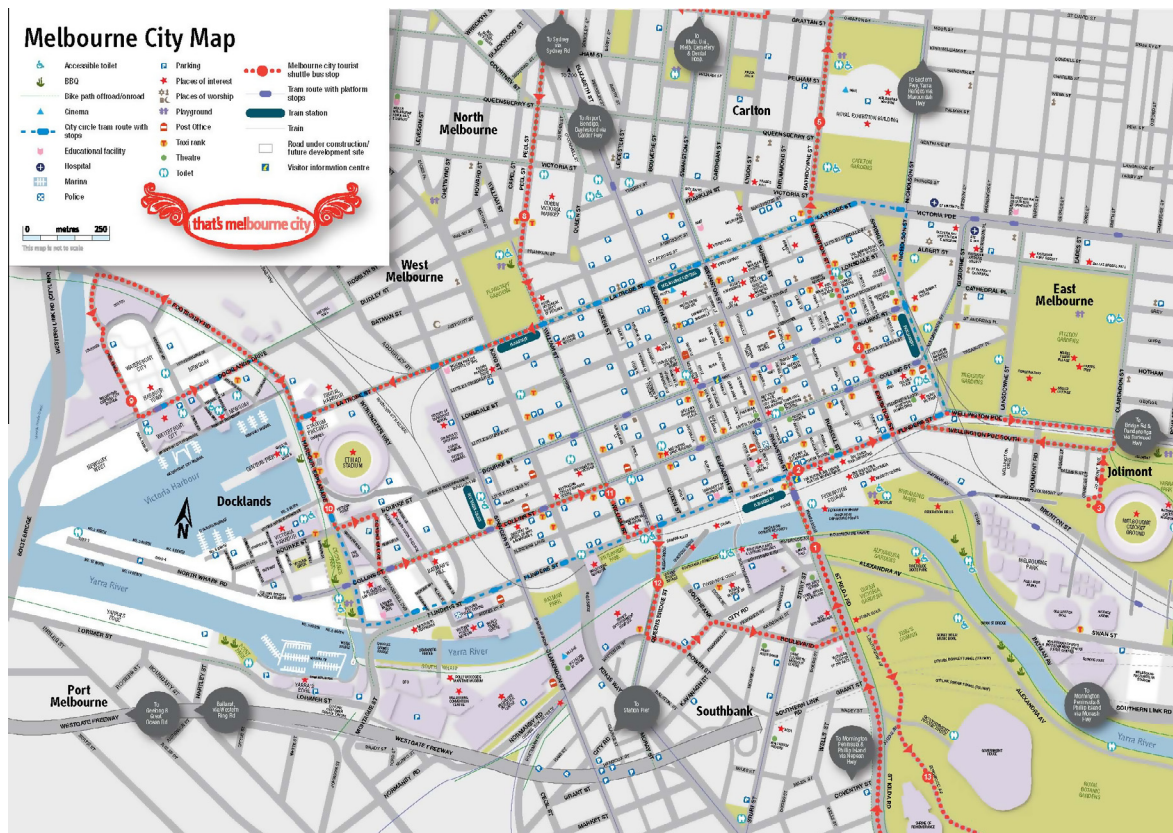

Fig. 1. Melbourne's city centre (its 'downtown' or central business district – CBD) is represented by the tight grid of streets in the centre of the map (courtesy of the City of Melbourne).