



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# Transnational and Temporary:

students, community and place-making in central Melbourne

FINAL REPORT 2009

SUMMARY



This is a summary of the full report which can be downloaded at  
[www.transnationalandtemporary.com.au](http://www.transnationalandtemporary.com.au)

Transnational and Temporary  
is a project funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant Program  
and conducted by researchers at the University of Melbourne  
in collaboration with the City of Melbourne,  
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## BACKGROUND

Students make up half the residential population of the City of Melbourne. Many live in the 'university quarter' on the northern fringe of the city centre, between RMIT and the University of Melbourne. Most of these students are temporary residents of central Melbourne, and many are transnational and enrolled from overseas.

Students make significant contributions to Melbourne's culture and economy. The most lively and productive parts of the city—the busiest streets, laneways, exhibition spaces, clusters of new small businesses—are continually made and remade by students, new graduates and other young people. The economic benefits of generative activities like these are unlimited. Students from overseas alone (for whom basic expenditures are collected) brought \$14.2 billion into Australia in 2008 in fees and other onshore spending. Education is now Australia's third largest export after iron ore and coal, ahead of tourism. One-third of Australia's overseas students come to Victoria, and most of them live in Melbourne.

This project looked at the experience of students at RMIT and the University of Melbourne who live in and around the central city. The great majority of these students report high satisfaction with their education. The research did not look at practices within the classroom; neither did it go into the practices of private education providers. The object was to consider the kinds of learning that occur outside the classroom, through social interactions, and to look at the contribution the city makes in turn, through its public and private spaces, to students.

## THE RESEARCH

Students in Melbourne have the opportunity of meeting other students from over 100 countries. The city is relatively safe and easy to negotiate, with a proud history of cultural diversity. Yet preliminary findings indicated that students are not getting as much from their time studying in Melbourne as they could be. A surprising number of students feel isolated and their experiences of the city are narrow.

The research sought to find out why this is, and examined in particular the role of institutional practices and characteristics of the built environment. How does the type of housing provided in this area affect the student experience? What opportunities exist for interaction between students and the longer-term residential communities? In what places beyond the classroom do overseas and local students interact?

We are specifically interested in how a 'place-making' strategy might encourage broad social and cross-cultural interactions. What social policy, architectural and urban design frameworks can facilitate meaningful experiences of place-based community within a transient and diverse population? How might this 'university quarter' on the northern fringe of central Melbourne contribute to a positive student experience of diverse social connections, and in the process make a lively and creative district of Melbourne for the broader public?

The data for this study was collected through mapping sessions and in-depth interviews with students in which they discussed photographs they had taken of the places they go in the city. It also involved detailed architectural analysis of 31 student housing buildings in the study area containing more than 5,000 apartments and 10,000 residents, and historical and observational analyses of the public spaces in the study area.

## FINDINGS

Here is a brief summary of the findings:

- most local institutions in the area (universities, government bodies, social organisations, housing providers) have developed practices over time that encourage administrative efficiencies but discourage interaction between students and the longer-term local communities, and between 'domestic' and 'international' students (as they are designated by these institutions).
- a handful of these institutions—especially those with an arts focus—disrupt the distinction between 'domestic' and 'international' students and, using careful and deliberate strategies, facilitate cross-cultural interaction.
- housing near the universities is often poorly designed and expensive. Living further away from the universities adds to students' travel costs. This dilemma is exacerbated for students from overseas as they are not eligible for student concessions on public transport. Alternative housing options and information about them are limited. As a consequence, students from overseas are the main occupants of the high-density, high-security purpose-built student housing in the study area, and interaction between them and local students and the surrounding communities is again restricted.
- some forms of housing exist that encourage more diverse internal and external interactions—especially the smaller (and often cheaper) student housing complexes with common facilities, and traditional share housing.

- the design and uses of public space (both on and off-campus) contribute further to separations among students, and between students and other communities in the central city.
- some spaces in the city—generated or regenerated in some way by students themselves—become spaces where distinctions between ‘local’, ‘international’ and ‘cultural origin’ don’t seem to matter.

It is important to note that our interviewees showed us repeatedly that, while people choose their own social groups and that sometimes these are relatively culturally homogeneous, cultural affinity is not the same as having common interests. Cultural affinity allows people to remain in their ‘comfort zone’. The findings of the study showed that the most engaged students, community groups and institutions interact routinely, simultaneously and comfortably with many different cultures, and that this is crucial to individual and collective senses of belonging. It is also necessary to the development of common interests.

The study showed that there are different kinds of ‘place-making’ going on in central Melbourne. One is an informal, ‘bottom-up’ kind of place-making that creates positive interactive experiences for the more engaged of the students we interviewed. This occurs where students are able to devise lively and varied social interactions for themselves in the private and public spaces of this city. There is another kind of place-making, a ‘top-down’ process consisting largely of coping strategies devised by local institutions and in response to the development industry, that is not enhancing the meaning of place for students. In these situations, students’ interactions are confined to relatively narrow social groups and commercial spaces. The challenge for all these players is to develop a place-making strategy in

which all participate—neither top-down nor bottom-up. This would allow the development of narratives and stories and the imaginings of futures that are necessary to planning, designing and investing a place with meaning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The full report makes extensive recommendations regarding institutional practices, building design and the design of public space. A summary of the key recommendations is as follows:

### Institutional practices (universities, government bodies, social organisations, housing providers)

- University administrative practices should disrupt the current separation of ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ students, getting rid of the different queues, different orientation programs, and different service provision for local students and students from overseas.
- Attention needs to be paid to providing a suite of affordable housing alternatives for students, in locations away from the central city as well as near it.
- The following features of student housing should be considered:
  - a) unit sizes can be small—especially if this contributes to lower rents—*if and only if* they are accompanied by communal areas that become part of standard living space;
  - b) well designed communal areas, especially cooking and eating areas, must be provided;
  - c) smaller complexes, with fewer numbers of students, should be encouraged;

d) a range of lower-security housing options should be made available.

- The cost of student housing must be at least commensurate with, and preferably below, equivalent private market rentals in order to achieve a basic level of attractiveness to local students as well as those from overseas.
- Build student housing in areas with lower land values on good public transport routes at further distances from the central universities.
- Make student concession for public transport travel available to all students.
- Universities should leverage desirable attributes of the housing provided by private partners and/or endorsed by them. These attributes would include design features and rent levels as outlined above.
- Different models of housing provision should be considered.
- A student housing policy should be prepared. It should be aimed at encouraging social and cultural diversity among the tenants of a student housing complex.

### Building and neighbourhood design

- Developers and architects should have access to design guidance that explicitly recognises ways of living in small apartments. This guidance would include recommendations on:
  - a) socialisation and communication with others in small places;
  - b) minimum requirements for physical and psychological sleeping comfort;
  - c) the requirements of work/study at home;
  - d) the minimum requirements for convenient, effective and safe cooking;

- e) the minimum requirements for the management of heat, odour and moisture associated with personal hygiene within a small apartment;
- f) recommended minimum storage space;
- g) the ability to modify and control the environment within a small dwelling.
- Building positioning and sections should take advantage of environmental aspect and location within the fabric. Streetscape stitching, neighbourhood permeability and block penetration are the natural results of this line of action, which no longer privileges the internalisation of communal space but encourages a series of progressively more public spaces within a development that can facilitate controlled interaction between residents and the street.
- Develop a Carlton masterplan that explicitly articulates the role of high-density housing in:
  - a) the preservation of Carlton's low-rise, fine-grained residential areas;
  - b) the defining and articulating of identified active public squares including the Federation Roundabout, the old Queen Elizabeth Hospital site and the CUB site;
  - c) the strengthening of east-west links across Carlton along Pelham, Queensberry and Victoria Streets in the south and Cemetery Road and Palmerston Street to the north;
  - d) the creation of genuine urban boulevards along Swanston and Elizabeth Streets;
  - e) the creation of quiet pockets of open space adjacent to major traffic thoroughfares.

#### Design of public space

- Increase the existing efforts to pedestrianise the university campuses. This means gradually eliminating car parking on-site, and enhancing pedestrian routes by increasing permeability.
- Create places on and off-campus for creative youth communities and activities (for students and non-students).
- Create easier access to on-campus meeting and gathering places, more cafés and places for public performances.
- Review the availability of university facilities to the broader public—lecture theatres, sporting facilities, libraries and so on.
- Remove the Swanston Street tram barrier in front of the University of Melbourne.
- Relocate the tram shunting yard to Swanston Street north or Elgin Street (or reconsider the need for a shunting yard at all).
- Redesign Swanston Street along its length as a place rather than a thoroughfare. Emphasise east-west links and a variety of pathways from the universities to Lygon and Russell Streets.
- Develop strong partnerships between Melbourne City Council and the universities in the study area on public space design, including a process of recognising existing and future user groups.

#### An alternative place-making strategy

- Provide opportunities for on-going dialogue, or story-telling, among the study area's inhabitants and the many organisations and actors with whom they interact. Places are formed in dialogue and reflection, where experiences are revealed and made sense of.
- Recognise the important student presence and nature of the transnational and temporary and longer-term communities in this 'university quarter'.
- Devise institutional practices that obfuscate the current boundaries and separations between students from Australia and students from overseas.
- Devise a broader strategy for ensuring that the new student housing buildings do not exploit the public spaces of this part of the city, and ensuring that new and refurbished buildings actually contribute to the area's public realm.
- Identify for review the assembly and presentation of the public spaces that might contribute an improved experience of place to inhabitants, starting with the edge spaces, where city and campuses meet.
- Provide a designed and regulated built environment that contributes positively to the stories told about the place, and enables that place to be given meaning, to be understood and valued.

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