

The struggle to belong: Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.
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**Maintenance of the public realm in the face of rapid inner city densification: A
case study of West End in Brisbane, Australia**

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Abstract

In this paper, we use data from fifty interviews with residents of West End, an inner city neighbourhood of Brisbane, Australia, to explore opposition to the rapid densification of the area under Brisbane City Council's inner urban renewal project, *the River City Blueprint*. Rather than focus on resistance to these plans as expressed in terms of threats to everyday amenity, such as traffic, parking, overcrowding, noise and overshadowing; our attention is focused on participants' concerns about threats to what they see as a unique social environment. This is not the parochial or communitarian form of community but, rather, what residents perceive as an inner city community of diversity and tolerance, played out in a strong public realm with a tangible commons. It is the preservation of this public realm that will be explored in this paper, using residents' own suggestions of how high density development might undermine it, but also how such development might proceed in a more sympathetic way against the backdrop of developer and planning interests in this illustrative inner city suburb.

Introduction

The inner city in Australia, like its counterparts in many other western cities has undergone several quiet revolutions in the past half-century. From the abode of original settler working class residents, to European and Asian migrants, to the seedy and crumbling haunts of students, bohemians and the political fringe, the inner city suburb, typified by locations such as Fitzroy and St Kilda in Melbourne; Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Glebe in Sydney and, Spring Hill in Brisbane, have taken on a more hybrid personality in the past three decades as gentrification, urban consolidation and other pressures compete in the marketplace of land, politics, culture and aesthetics. In Australia, the process of displacement of earlier working class inner city neighbourhoods nears completion and in most inner city neighbourhoods there are fewer vestiges of the earlier cultural and ethnic diversity that made these areas attractive to gentrifiers at the outset of the transformation.

In this paper I will be taking one of these locations, West End in Brisbane, an area in an earlier stage of gentrification and an example of one of the last of its type, and using it to describe the ways in which residents are responding to period of rapid change, manifest in a local authority plan to at least treble the size of the population of West End in the next two decades. West End has been selected for the study because it is one of the few inner city areas left in Australia that is at the beginning of the gentrification process rather than the end. Rather than dwell on the empirically evident, but nonetheless important, issues of congestion, overcrowding, public transport, overshadowing and the like, the paper will concentrate more specifically on the issue of threats and responses

to changes in the terms of the more abstract idea of changes to the public realm in West End. The purpose of this paper is to use resident accounts to argue that locations like West End, have much to offer the wider city in terms of the preservation of a vital public realm and that the inevitability of the familiar pattern of gentrification needs to be questioned in this light.

Context – West End

The inner city neighbourhood of West End is part of Brisbane, the capital of the state of Queensland and Australia's third largest city, with a population of just over 1 million, and located within the South East Queensland conurbation with a population of approximately 2.5 million people (ABS, 2011). West End, with South Brisbane, is located on the southern edge of the Brisbane's central business district, enclosed on three sides by the Brisbane river, forming a rough peninsular. Its original indigenous inhabitants called the area Kurilpa. The early settlement of West End in the mid to late 1800s was by labourers and dockworkers. These were joined by other migrants, including a large proportion of Greeks beginning in the early part of the 20th Century, followed by significant numbers of Vietnamese migrants in the 1970s.

Like similar inner suburbs in other Australian cities West End, has changed rapidly over the last twenty-five years. If there was a watershed in the fortunes of West End, it was the 1988 World Expo, hosted in Brisbane, which transformed the South Brisbane area from dilapidated wharves, adult cinemas and boarding houses, to a cultural, culinary and increasingly expensive residential precinct. South Brisbane's newfound respectability also began to transform neighbouring West End. Property prices steadily rose over the next two decades taking it from one of Brisbane's cheapest suburbs to its current position approaching the city's more expensive neighbourhoods.

Although prices have increased, West End's housing stock consists predominantly of small timber worker's cottages on small blocks. There is a significant (but decreasing) number of low-rent boarding houses and a visible presence of homeless white and indigenous people, who use the parks and riverside areas and congregate around the central retail precinct. There is also high proportion of students taking advantage of the proximity to university campuses and the cultural attractions of the area. West End continues to preserve this hybrid character. Each historical influx of residents retains a particular stake in the neighbourhood, from the original indigenous occupants, a few representatives of the early Anglo-Celtic working class settlers, a significant remaining population of Greek and Vietnamese migrants, the homeless, artists, students and more recent affluent gentrifiers. Expensive architecturally sympathetic home renovations are beginning to appear alongside less sympathetic and opportunistic developer-led demolition and rebuilds. However despite incursions, it could be argued that in its current manifestation West End is one of the least gentrified inner city suburbs in Australia.

While this process of gentrification has been gradual in West End to date, more recently there have been urban planning decisions that will have a very great impact on the area. Common with other inner city areas in Australia, West End has been the focus of urban infill development as part of the 2009 South East Queensland Regional Plan (Queensland Government, 2009). To accommodate the increasing population of South East Queensland, the plan calls for residential development of former industrial sites in inner city locations to ease pressure on agricultural and recreational space surrounding major cities. West End falls under the South Brisbane Riverside Neighbourhood Plan (Brisbane City Council, 2010), which aims to increase the population on the peninsula from its current level of approximately 6500 to estimates as high as 25,000 (Searle, 2010) in the next two decades. Most of the development, which has already started, will occur as medium to high rise apartment developments (7 – 30 stories) along the Brisbane River in a belt of consolidated former industrial sites. It is this urban infill and the resultant rapid increase in population that formed the backdrop to our case study.

Method

We interviewed 50 residents and representatives of community groups in West End in the second half of 2010 and early in 2011 as part of a study on 'Threats to Liveability from Urban Consolidation'. The research was an internally funded University of Queensland project and was designed to capture subjective constructions of urban consolidation from existing residents in different affected areas in Brisbane. We targeted three areas: West End, the suburb of Wynnum on Moreton Bay and Mitchelton, a suburb in the North of Brisbane. This paper will concentrate on West End only.

The residents we interviewed in West End were part of a sample based on a letterbox drop asking for volunteers to talk about the impact of high-rise development in West End. We achieved a diverse sample from that recruitment strategy, including students, professionals, retired residents, recent arrivals and lifetime residents. We also used existing contacts and some snowball techniques to access some other harder to reach community members, particularly older people in the neighbourhood. Interviews were analysed using an inductive categorical approach, coding themes based on the articulation of a range of threats from rapid urban densification to amenity, lifestyle, aesthetics and community in its broadest sense.

The public and parochial realms

There is an existing literature on threats to urban liveability from consolidation which tends to concentrate less on the social aspects of the threat and more on the threat to individual amenity such transport congestion, lack of recreational amenity, overshadowing and wind effects. In fact, in a recent planning study of West End, Searle (2010) pointed out some of these very important planning shortcomings of the South

Brisbane Neighbourhood Plan, including vastly inadequate provision for green space, public transport, cultural spaces and educational facilities. These factors were all important in the accounts of research participants and contributed in a general sense to resident misgivings about the rapid increase in population planned for West End, however, what we will concentrate on in this paper are the ways in which this rapid population increase was understood to impact on the more abstract concept of the 'public realm', and why this might be important in the case of West End and for the city of Brisbane as a whole.

The public realm for the purposes of this paper is a social territory, but tied to places where public identities and norms of behaviour are formed and where justice, manifest in generalised norms, is cultivated (Arendt, 1958 ; Lofland, 1998). It is a place where one moves beyond family, friends and acquaintances if one so chooses, where public identity is formed (Lofland, 1989). There must be very few barriers to participation for the public realm to be truly public, and that includes symbolic barriers to entry such as a particular level of affluence, cultural or lifestyle homogeneity, or a particular implied habitus. The public realm is a creature of industrial modernity, of the modern city, a place where we engage with Simmel's (1964) cultural or symbolic stranger and where our norms of behaviour toward the stranger are formed. The public realm is where civic norms that allow people the freedom to coexist in cities should be formed and practised. Examples of the public realm in the modern city could include city parks, mixed-use open retail precincts, public transport and cinemas and theatres, provided that entry is open to all both physically and symbolically.

Lofland (1998) in her conceptualisation of the public realm, importantly, does not create a binary distinction between the public and the private realms. For Lofland, the private realm exists in households, with kin and with the closest of social networks, and comprises a social realm that exists metaphorically and literally across the domestic threshold. But between the private and the public realms exists the *parochial* realm, characterised by a '*sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within "communities"*' (Lofland, 1998, p 10 [italics in original]).

It is this parochial realm that that conforms to the ideal of communitarian community where the self is *a priori* a member of a community and identity is bestowed by membership. The normative ideal that people should belong to a community has gained political traction in Australia and the developed West in the last two decades and is implicit in terms such as 'social capital', 'community resilience', 'community capacity building' and 'cohesive communities' (Adams & Hess, 2001). Communitarianism as a political ideology emphasises social responsibility and the promotion of policies to strengthen local communities and to slow the erosion of community-based social institutions (Etzioni 1995). It is the discourse favoured by many policy makers and other opinion shapers when they refer to the (often mythical)

urban 'local community' using imagery and romantic visions of a pre-modern co-existence of shared outlook and purpose. As Bauman (1997) observes, communitarianism is an invention of modernity, under circumstances where choice rather than fate is the basis for community. However, paradoxically, its proponents use pre-modern tropes, such as the 'village' as its utopian form (Walters & Rosenblatt, 2008) which attempts to encourage citizens to reconstruct their identities in the midst of 'the collapse of frames in which identities were habitually inscribed' (Bauman, 1997, p 191).

This form of community, the parochial realm, is restrictive in that it foregrounds sameness and the comfort of the socially known and the socially knowable. It is the conservative community of Robert Putnam and the dense webs of social capital that this implies. But as Putnam himself (Putnam, 2000 ; Wills, 2000) has acknowledged, it can only exist in terms of an 'other', it is not the easy companion of diversity. In many senses, the public realm is the antithesis of the communitarianism that has become particularly prevalent in an ideological and political sense in the developed West. It is a place where people not only do not need to know each other in the biographical sense, but also not in the cultural sense (Lofland, 1998, p 8).

Where the public realm as conceptualised by Lofland describes a very important function, particularly in terms of wider social norms, it can come across as less than intimate, with everyday familiar interactions served by the private and parochial realms. In important ways, the cosmopolitan vision of Iris Marion Young (1990) addresses this dimension. Young argues that the 'urban relationship' is the natural form of the city, providing a 'welcome anonymity and some measure of freedom' (1990, p 317). Young's normative call for a 'politics of difference' speaks of a type of community that transcends boundaries, leading to a more civil general society (Young 1990). Criticisms of bounded community are made by Young in the context of the community as part of a metropolis and relate to issues of civil society in a broader milieu, underlying one of the fundamental dilemmas of community, for groups that are likely to suffer from isolation such as the old, the infirm and recent migrants. However, supporters of Young's cosmopolitanism would argue that the communitarian model is potentially less accommodating of the 'other' than a metropolis with strong generalised norms, or the 'being together of strangers' (Young, 1990, p 318) which respects difference and accommodates it (see also Jacobs, 1961). The exclusive community implied by communitarians creates group identities 'blotted by racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, suspicion, and mockery' (Young 1990, p 319)

Diversity in West End

I have never felt more comfortable in my own skin since moving to Jane Street. I can tattoo myself, shave my head, sing, skip without so much as a

blink from passersby ('Girl from Jane St' on the 'Save West End' website, (2011)).

In West End, there is evidence that the public realm is, for the moment, alive and well. Spatially, the main commercial precincts, Boundary Street and Hardgreave Road retain the look and feel of urban main streets from the past with strips of largely independent retailers, bars, cafes and restaurants. Notably absent, with a few exceptions, are franchised retail outlets, parking stations and the strict climate controlled barriers between interior and exterior characteristic of so many other, newer, retail and recreation precincts in Australian cities. Wide footpaths (sidewalks) provide space for a range of actors, including the homeless, the drunk and the confused. It is difficult to categorise the passing procession of young and old, migrant and indigenous, student and professional into any one parochial demographic or cultural category. The area changes character by day and by night and by weekday and weekend, in particular, when people from beyond West End congregate in its coffee shops, books shops and bars. There are few barriers to entry for reasonably law abiding citizens. It's an example of a space largely confined to the inner city that was more widespread in Australian cities before shopping malls and more regulated, homogenous and corporate-owned urban precincts became the norm (Kapferer, 2006).

If the public realm leaves space for diversity, there was a consistent theme in our interviews about the value people in West End placed on it. This participant, a long time resident who worked in the performing arts noted the growing difference between West End and other inner city neighbourhoods, most of which were at a much more advanced stage of gentrification:

It is very different to other inner city places [in Brisbane] like Paddington or Kelvin Grove. It's much more diverse than those places, and I really like the fact that there are lots of Greeks and lots of Vietnamese and - well there were more - but, Aboriginal people and homeless people (P7).

This resident reflected the view that the production of space in more contemporary urban settings might contribute to a certain cultural homogeneity:

It was very important to me not to live in an area where everything was in an air-conditioned shopping mall and everybody has blonde hair and blue eyes. I like to have different people around (R12).

This allusion to what Lofland (1998) described above as the 'parochialisation' of other suburbs, where gentrification and capital have produced spaces that provides a sense a commonality, is at odds with the needs of those who require a backdrop of diversity in which to find expression for their own particular form of cultural or sexual expression.

West End has higher than average proportion of LGBT residents, particularly women (Thomson, 2007):

I guess given my values and own lifestyle choices, West End fits with a lot of those values in terms of having diverse culture, diverse gender, diverse sexuality, diverse choices of groceries...(R1)

In addition to its commercial precincts, West End also includes a long string of public green space along the Brisbane River, largely undeveloped except for some children's playgrounds and council barbeque areas. This strip provides democratic access to the river, one of the few long stretches of riverfront in Brisbane that is not developed with private riverfront property.

There are parks; the parks are quite nice, we go to Davies Park and Orleigh Park occasionally, you know Saturday mornings there's the green flea market. A lot of people play Frisbee there. There's a lot to do, you don't actually have to leave, which is nice because it [forms its] own kind of complex society (R10).

The diversity in West End formed a singular defining feature for research participants. Accordingly, the South Brisbane Riverside Neighbourhood Plan was seen as a looming threat to this diversity. In the next section, residents use this threat to depict themselves as custodians of a fast disappearing public realm not just for West Enders, but also for Brisbane.

Custodians of the last of the 'authentic' public realms

Well I'm a bit afraid of it. I'm a bit scared that it will homogenise West End and that by bringing in a different sort of person, people who have a lot of money who can afford this sort of thing. But then they want a different sort of café, they want a different sort of restaurant; they want a different sort of lifestyle (P20).

Authenticity is a contested term, and perhaps no more so than in studies of gentrification and inner urban development (Zukin, 2009). In the case of West End, authenticity is subject to a 'tug of war' between activist residents, embodied in organisations like the West End Community Association (WECA, 2011)¹ and property

¹ WECA is a politically active community association that has conducted numerous campaigns in opposition to inappropriate developments in West End. It describes itself as 'a not-for-profit, non aligned, incorporated association of residents and friends of Kurilpa (West End, Hill End, Highgate Hill and South Brisbane). Formed in 2004, WECA celebrates and promotes our values, events and people that make Kurilpa a vibrant and diverse community' (WECA, 2011 website)

developers who have appropriated this authenticity for their own marketing purposes with campaigns such as this one, by the private developer of large luxury riverfront apartment complex in West End:

Come and see for yourself why so many have chosen Riverpoint as their prestige address. Consider the waterfront location, the proximity to the Brisbane CBD and the culturally eclectic fabric of West End (Stockwell, 2011 website).

Developers offer their affluent prospective residents the dual benefit of a secure sanctuary behind locked gates, but with the opportunity to:

...venture out and sample West End's exotic specialty shops and a feast of dining delights, virtually at your front door...When you've enjoyed the best of what one of Australia's most exciting city has to offer, you can return to the sanctuary of your private retreat (Praedella, 2011 website).

That research participants had strong views about the rapid increase in residential density was implicit in their agreement to be interviewed for our research project. There were certainly a more individualised responses to the increase in population, expressed as threats to amenity, however the other, more interesting response was in relation to the retention of the 'authentic' expressed as the public realm in West End. For many of the participants, the main concern was the threat to the character of West End expressed as its tolerance of diversity or, in other words, its access to a vibrant and accessible public realm. This participant, a woman with small children, articulated the process by which West End might be rationalised according to the more parochial needs of affluent newcomers as they began to arrive in greater numbers:

West End's a little bit messy. It's got a lot of local characters I guess, the guys with some mental illnesses; people don't want to squash the diversity here. I feel as though sometimes in places where people have paid massive amounts [of money] for their properties, they don't like what they would describe as 'undesirables' hanging around, messing up their suburb. (P17)

Brown Saracino (2004 ; 2007), describes the social preservation of authenticity as 'the culturally motivated choice of certain people, who tend to be highly educated and residentially mobile, to live in the central city or small town in order to live in authentic social space, embodied by the sustained presence of old-timers. Social preservationists view old-timers as indispensable to preserving a pristine "social wilderness" and as arbiters of authentic community' (2004, p 135). This element of preserving West End's sedimentary layers of culture was certainly evident. West End was seen as the 'last of its kind' and there was strong desire for it to remain a place which continued to display

the various manifestations of its history. This participant spoke of a set of unique values that were worthy of preservation:

Well, sense of history is quite important, because I think it's the birthplace of a few things in Brisbane. I think it's quite an important neighbourhood and one of the last ones to be gentrified in the inner city. In that sense for me, I think it holds some values for the whole city that should be protected. (R9)

This elderly lady had lived in West End since the 1950's could also see that once the neighbourhood was 'lost' to development that a unique heritage, of value to those lived beyond West End, would go with it:

I think it's all for money. I'm really disappointed that the Lord Mayor doesn't take more notice of West End the way it is, and keep it. Because these places are places of interest to the next generations. The travellers who come here, they want to see the old West End (P11).

A recurring comparison was made by participants with the nearby inner city riverside neighbourhood of Kangaroo Point, where indulgent planning approvals since the 1980s had resulted in a transformation of the area from its working class origins, in a similar style to West End, to a succession of riverfront luxury high rise apartment developments, robbing the area of much of its street life and diversity. This was seen as the possible fate of West End, also expressed as loss in wider terms than just those living in the area:

I guess I don't want to lose what West End has. I feel as though what West End has is precious for Brisbane. If Brisbane loses what West End has it will lose its diversity and character. Like if West End becomes Kangaroo Point...Brisbane, as a bigger city will be the loser in that (P19).

This reflexive awareness from participants about what was at stake extended to an awareness of the counterfactual. Many of our participants articulated an alternate vision for the future of West End.

Alternatives

I understand obviously why they're going down there, but I think that high-rise development all through here - I mean, this is really access to our parkland, the extremely limited parkland we have, and the river. This will just - I think it'll just make it their space. I don't think it'll feel like public space down there. (P21)

Most participants accepted the logic of urban consolidation that population pressure and environmental concerns constrained the extent to which the city could expand outwards. Many wondered at just how many people could be crowded into the peninsular. The concerns were more centred on West End losing its unique qualities and how this might be preserved given the inevitability of the changes. For most people the concern was to keep development at a human scale and there was a remarkable level of knowledge about what planners should already know to be a workable human scale of high density living, of around five stories, with small local green spaces (Jacobs, 1961) and attention to appropriate mixed use and contemporary environmental concerns:

I think that anything above four storeys doesn't work for humans. They've got to have courtyards and they've got to have four storeys. When you start putting in 10 storeys, you get dysfunction. (P10)

Very few residents were completely opposed to development in West End, most recognised the realities of population pressure and the need to create more dense cities rather than further urban sprawl, however, as this participant lamented, the opportunity was being lost to incorporate what she saw as the values of West End and its public access into new developments:

I think you know one of the most disappointing things so far about the development that has gone on is that there is nothing about the type of high density development in West End that reflects anything about West End. I mean how marvellous it would have been to build these seven or eight storey buildings, whatever they are, along Montague and create green space for a market garden; and building them in such a way that they're passive solar. Having green roofs. Doing a range of things that could have been a model, high-density green community. (R1)

One of the more serious failures of the Brisbane City Council's South Brisbane Neighbourhood Plan is the lack of planning for additional community infrastructure, the spaces and places that provide a setting for the establishment of a thriving public realm, such as green spaces and spaces for art and cultural pursuits:

They talked about extra green spaces. If there's 6,000 and they're adding another 25,000 who live here, that's a lot. Where are the green spaces, where are the community centres, where's the art making and presentation spaces? Because everyone knows that you can argue that art is useful for the economy but it's well known that art is useful for people's social and wellbeing on other levels. (P9)

Another concern was the lack of low cost housing as a means to retain diversity in West End. In a developer-led model of urban consolidation, there is very little scope for circumventing the logic of the market to cater for low income residents, ensuring that most new residents will be affluent tenants and home owners:

Where is the diversity? They say that they will build - the Lord Mayor says that they're hoping to put some social housing here in West End. But social housing in very small spaces - is it a really good idea to have a little ghetto of poor people in one little cheap block of units, surrounded by all these wealthy people, if you're living in a suburb where everything, the prices have increased? (p17)

At this point, before concluding, we should also acknowledge the existence of a counter discourse amongst our sample in West End. We purposely identified some older residents of West End, both Anglo and Greek², people who had been living in the area for 50 years or so. Many of West End's older residents see the neighbourhood in a different light to the younger more recent arrivals. For these residents, their view of West End was centred primarily on its convenience and its history. For many the more bohemian nature of West End was of little concern, although by no means resented. For these people Boundary St was less a site of a public realm and more of a place where it was impossible to get a car park. There was also a very strong sense of inevitability about development, a less reflexive view of the abstract concepts such as community, authenticity and the public realm. We will not dwell on this aspect of our research here, it needs to be explored more deeply and taking into account issues of the life course - there may be a certain instrumentality that comes with needing accessibility and convenience as one gets older. In the cultural and historical context of their lives in West End, for many Greeks in particular, their experience of West End was one of communitarian community and their perspectives were quite parochial, consisting of strong and supportive networks of relatives and old friends. A fuller discussion of this aspect of West End is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to acknowledge that not all of our participants saw the threat of development in similar ways.

Conclusion

Utopian thinking: the capacity to imagine a future that departs significantly from what we know to be a general condition in the present (Friedmann, 2000, p 462)

West End is not unique in the challenges it faces from an influx of affluent new residents. The existing population of 6,500 people supports a remarkable diversity of

² Older Vietnamese residents have been more difficult to access for language and cultural reasons, but we hope to succeed soon!

cultures, ethnicities, occupations, lifestyles and sexual orientations. This diversity was seen by many of our research participants as the defining characteristic of the area.

The gentrification story is now a familiar one, as is the desire by early gentrifiers to preserve the social and architectural authenticity that first attracted them to the area (Brown-Saracino, 2009). West End perhaps has a particular claim on the imagination as it the last of its type in the city and one of the last in the country to retain a significant remnant of its pre-gentrification character. The particular nature of space in West End has much to do with the retention of its character. In particular its main streets with their diversity of independently owned shops, cafes, and eating establishments, the tolerance of the homeless, the drunk and the vagrant provide an increasingly stark contrast with the homogenised and regulated spaces in the rest of the city.

The particular threat posed by further unsympathetic gentrification and the sheer weight of numbers who will soon occupy the expensive high rise developments along the Brisbane River can only lead to what Lofland (1998) termed parochialisation, transforming West End into a replica of a something that has occurred elsewhere in the city. The logical outcome of this parochialisation is an effective filtering of residents between those able or willing to conform to a new spatial and social order and those who no longer fit. The subsequent loss of diversity leads to further intolerance for any diversity that remains, weakening the neighbourhood's strong public realm.

What this means for Brisbane is that the city will have erased from its collective consciousness both the form and function of a well established and valued example of a public realm, where people learn and practise the norms required to deal with the stranger. West End is a contemporary example of what is possible as a counter-discourse to the utopian communitarianism that pervades much contemporary policy and popular discourse. There is no doubt that many communities co-exist in West End among its various ethnic groups, sub-cultures, and socio-economic strata, however they are allowed to co-exist in an urban environment without the need to pay tribute to any particular ideal of a commons. This is a more credible and achievable model upon which urban planning should take place.

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