

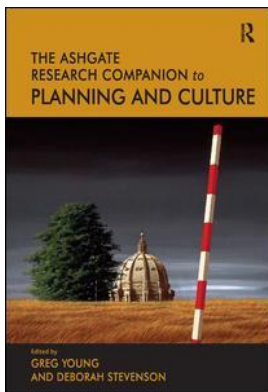
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning and Culture

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Planning and Place Identity

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613390.ch15>

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Published online on: 30 Sep 2013

How to cite :- Kim Dovey. 30 Sep 2013, *Planning and Place Identity from: The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning and Culture* Routledge

Accessed on: 08 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613390.ch15>

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Planning and Place Identity

Kim Dovey

Introduction¹

Concepts of 'place' and neighbourhood 'character' have emerged in recent decades to take key roles in the discourse and practice of urban planning – deployed in the defence and protection of existing urban neighbourhoods against transformational change, but also in the design and marketing of new developments (see also Low, Paddison, Nyseth and Montgomery, Chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20, this volume). This chapter explores the relationships of place identity to urban planning. How is neighbourhood place identity experienced in everyday life? How is it defined and constructed in planning discourses and legislative practices? How is it created through urban design and protected through regulation? The potency of experiences of place identity and character makes this a crucial issue in the politics of urban planning and the production of urban cultures. One clear finding is that conceptions of place and character are fundamentally both social and spatial, and that the production and protection of place can be complicit with the production and protection of social privilege. Perceptions of place and character are multiple and flexible; it follows that the implementation of such concepts in planning legislation can be problematic. Fluidities of place identity can open opportunities for creative urban design but also the creative destruction of deregulated markets. Desires to legislate place identity can protect valuable places, but also paralyse urban development and ironically kill the very phenomenon that is to be protected.

If we explore the discourse of urban planning since about the 1990s we find an increasing use of the term 'place' in the titles of books, papers and journals – a trend that extends across the disciplines of geography, architecture, cultural studies, landscape architecture and urban design. This emerged first through applications of phenomenology in geography from the 1970s with works such as *Place and Placelessness* (Relph 1976), *Space and Place* (Tuan 1977), *The Human Experience of Space and Place* (Buttimer and Seamon 1980), *Dwelling, Place and Environment* (Seamon and Mugerauer 1985) and *Space, Place and Gender* (Massey 1994). We also see the emergence of academic fields such as place marketing and management as well as journals such as *Places; Health and Place;*

¹ I wish to acknowledge the long-term collaboration of Ian Woodcock and Stephen Wood in the empirical and theoretical work that underpins this chapter.

Gender, Place and Culture; Ethics Place and Environment; and Journal of Place Management and Development. There has long been a 'Psychology of Place' (Canter 1977) and of 'Place Attachment' (Altman and Low 1992); followed by a more recent proliferation of planning and urban design books with the term 'place' in the title: (Beatley and Manning 1997, Corburn 2009, Cresswell 2004, Dovey 1999, Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom 2005, Eyles and Williams 2008, Healey 2010, 2005, Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine 2004, Levinson and Krizek 2007, Madanipour, Hull and Healey 2001, Massey 1994). Research on 'place' is not a phase. The term has a currency that enables it to span disciplines and scales – from interior design to urban and environmental planning; from the room to the nation state. It spans research methods from phenomenology to empirical psychology and post-structuralism. It also encompasses popular, commercial and political discourses. Disputes over urban development often focus on questions of 'inappropriate' development that, when probed, reveal questions of urban or neighbourhood 'character' which is largely synonymous with a sense of 'place'. Yet because of their popular understanding, it becomes convenient to presume a shared understanding of place experience and to deploy it in planning discourse and practice without critical depth.

Ontologies of Place

I want to begin with a brief discussion on the ontology of place as a prelude to presenting some empirical research. First, what is the distinction between 'space' and 'place'?² While there is much confusion in the literature about this I suggest there is much less in our everyday use of the language. In the Wittgensteinian sense that one finds meaning in the use of language, 'place' is more than 'space' – more primary, more social, more intense. To ask 'what kind of place is New York?' may generate a variety of answers but this question has a sense that 'what kind of space is New York?' does not. When we say 'this is a great place' we mean something more social and less formal than 'this is a great space'. A large part of what distinguishes 'place' from 'space' is that place has an intensity that connects sociality to spatiality in everyday life. We can say 'do you have enough space?' but not 'do you have enough place?'. While a space may have physical dimensions it is intensity that gives place its potency and its primacy. The ways that place makes sense in everyday life is the primary understanding of the sense of place. How we make academic sense of that sense of place is a different matter. In academic literature 'space' and 'place' are often indistinguishable or are distinguished in ways that best suit the theory, abstracted from everyday life. I cannot introduce the range of theory here but Cresswell (2004) does a commendable job from a geographic perspective.

There are a range of problems in trying to understand the experience of place in everyday life, foremost among them is that it is taken for granted, it is the *doxa*, the context, the ground that we are often unaware of. Yet another problem emerges when place is interpreted in terms of deep and intrinsic meanings. This is the view that is generally accused of essentialism – to see the sense of place as deeply rooted in stabilized

² For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Dovey 2010.

modes of dwelling (homeland and history) that can't be changed. This is also what is often referred to by a 'spirit' of place or 'genius loci' and related to the Heideggerian view of place as a primordial ground of being (Norberg-Schulz 1980). Such a view often conflates the sense and the ontology of place into one seamless whole, a reduction to essence that ignores social constructions of place identity.

The best case for an anti-essentialist theory of place is the avowedly anti-Heideggerian work of Massey in geography, centred on the notion of an open, global and progressive sense of place (Massey 2005, 1994, 1993). For Massey all notions of place derived from Heidegger are problematic and regressive. Against such views she proposes an open conception of place where place identity is provisional and unfixed. Massey's progressive sense of place is outward-looking, defined by multiple identities and histories, its character comes from connections and interactions rather than original sources and enclosing boundaries. Her example is a high street in London with mixed uses and ethnicities to which she ascribes character and identity without the Heideggerian primordiality. Such a sense of place is seen as primarily global rather than local, forged out of its connections with other places rather than local contingencies, privileging routes rather than roots.

There is little doubt that many Heideggerian approaches to place are regressive in the way Massey suggests, but there is an important distinction between Heidegger's argument about the spatiality of being on the one hand, and a much more spurious argument about a primordial sense of place with a singular identity, authentic history and exclusion of difference (Dovey 2010: 4–6). There is little doubt that Heidegger can be read in both these ways but the one does not imply the other. The claim that existence is spatial does not require that place experience is primordial or fully given. If we sever place from ontology then we are left with a weak theory about the relations of place to power, we have robbed place of its potency to construct ontological security and seemingly naturalized identity. The reason disputes over neighbourhood development can be so emotional is because places embody deep ontological investments in identity.

Researching Urban Character

As a means into an understanding of planning and place identity I want to discuss a project investigating the concept of place identity through the lens of urban or neighbourhood 'character' in Melbourne.³ During the 1990s a state-led policy of urban consolidation under a neo-liberal economic and political agenda produced a substantial deregulation of urban development in Melbourne. Taller buildings were permitted in low-rise districts and apartments in suburban streets. Resident groups emerged in response to defend their suburbs against developments they saw as damaging to the 'character' of the neighbourhood. The state's response was to demand 'respect for the neighbourhood character' in residential planning codes, although 'character' was left largely undefined. Neighbourhood character studies were undertaken, physical

³ This work was undertaken as part of Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP0344105.

characteristics mapped and character areas defined, but these were generally thinly researched stereotypes.

Issues of 'place' and 'character' were also high on the agenda of the property development industry where new suburban developments were designed with the overt goal of producing an instant sense of place, community and character. On both post-industrial inner-city sites and on the urban fringe we find large tract developments, often influenced by neo-traditional new urbanist principles with a sense of 'place' and 'community' enclosure focused on a common 'green'.

In both of these cases 'place' and 'character' became key criteria for planning and urban design decisions in the absence of any clear definition or research. Our key research questions were: How is urban or neighbourhood character experienced and understood in everyday life and what is its relationship to urban morphology? What is the relationship between character and practices of urban regulation? A series of six case studies were conducted in neighbourhoods where either the creation or protection of 'character' was an issue. Three were older neighbourhoods where urban character was being defended against change while the other three were new neighbourhoods designed with a self-conscious desire to create a sense of place, character and community. In-depth interviews were conducted primarily with resident activists in order to understand experiences and conceptions that were driving both the resistance and the markets.⁴ Morphological mapping was used to draw out connections between interviews and physical characteristics that were variously seen as salient – density, height, building style, pedestrian networks, streetlife, functional mix, open space, multi-unit development.⁵ I will begin with the older suburbs and proceed to the new.

Defending Place Identity

Camberwell

Camberwell is an older leafy and up-market 'middle-ring' suburb about 10 km from the city centre (Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2009a) developed initially in the 1880s as a railway suburb with detached houses on large blocks. The 'character' of the suburb was seen as under threat from multi-unit development, different housing styles and the densification of transit-oriented development. Interviews revealed a suburb characterized by its most vociferous residents in terms of 'comfort', 'consistency', 'modesty' and 'taste'. The consistency was often found in building styles, even when residents recognized they were defending a consistency that no longer exists. Descriptions of 'character' persistently slipped between the social and the physical: '[Camberwell is] old world, traditional, well preserved, and the people who make it up are of a solid base.' This 'comfort zone' was easily punctured by formal and social

⁴ A total of 52 interviews of between 1 to 2 hours each were conducted across the six case studies with residents active in neighbourhood associations. All quotes in this paper are from these interviews.

⁵ A full understanding of these studies requires graphic data that is not possible in this chapter. For illustrations see: Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2010, or www.placeresearch.net/urban-character-place-research.htm.

differences yet its identity was also constructed from what it is not: 'Around the area [one can find] what might be described as "nice" houses, not, not new modern monstrosities, not totally derelict old places, not high-rise, low-cost type housing' Camberwell was defended against differences of built form and style but also, more subtly, against differences of class and ethnicity: '... the trouble is we're getting all these people in who all they've got is money, you see, no taste.' Urban character was seen as a legacy inherited from a largely imagined past; the values that were seen to prevail were modesty and taste. One outcome, ironically, has been that the only new architecture to be approved is in neo-traditional styles and is seen by residents to lack taste. This is in some ways a familiar view of an older suburb defended against the differences of ethnicity and class; it is a good example of a relatively closed conception of place identity and is revealing of the ways in which character can be deployed as part of the politics of place.

Hedgeley Dene

Hedgeley Dene is a neighbourhood in the wealthy middle-ring suburb of East Malvern which became the first place in Victoria to become the subject of a legislated Neighbourhood Character Overlay (Wood, Woodcock and Dovey 2006). The neighbourhood is centred on a small linear park that was developed from a creek during the early twentieth century. Building styles are mixed with a predominance of inter-war housing, generally set behind well-treed gardens but increasingly replaced with multi-unit developments that are seen to damage the 'character' of the neighbourhood as a whole and the park in particular as they cluster around to capture the view. A highly political process led eventually to the state's first neighbourhood character legislation in 2003. The legislation ostensibly enacts an agreement between residents, consultants, planners, and local and state government concerning the particular 'character' in need of protection. Yet analysis reveals that parties to this agreement were rarely talking about the same thing. For some the protection of character was about '... family homes as opposed to multi-unit developments with a transient population ...'; while for others it was about protecting the park from overlooking and preserving an illusion of being in the countryside: 'you feel like you're walking by yourself, not subject to any inspection by anyone else ... the false sense of being able to get away from the suburbs in such a small space' For some it was about the enforcement of building style – one key outcome was a new urban design code controlling fences, materials and roof pitch enforcing all new architecture into a mock historic style. For planning consultants defining character was an issue of professional expertise; and for the Minister for Planning it was the politics of demonstrating support for the neighbourhood. The boundaries of this character precinct were repeatedly altered as different agents and definitions of character prevailed.

Fitzroy

Fitzroy is Melbourne's oldest suburb, within walking distance of the city centre, developed from the 1850s with a mix of factories, warehouses and working-class row housing, now substantially gentrified (Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2009b). The issue of character erupted first in 2002 when an architecturally innovative housing project

was proposed for a former industrial site filling most of an urban block and was fiercely opposed by local residents primarily on the basis of height. The proposed buildings ranged from 3 to 8 storeys in a context of 1 to 5 storeys and was seen to violate the local 'character'. The architect/developer, who was also a local resident, argued that the character was comprised of a mix of heights to which he was adding with further variegation. Other residents largely shared this understanding of Fitzroy's character as mixed: layers and juxtapositions of large/small, old/new and factories/housing. This conception of the mix involved an openness to difference in both formal and social terms – to new forms of architecture and different kinds of people: 'you don't get the sense that people really care what you look like or what you say or how you act because there's so many different people doing so many different things' Here character was defined not only as a place with a difference from other neighbourhoods, but also as a place where embodied differences become character:

(Fitzroy) is different, it is ... it has that 'edge' that people are interesting, that it has a good atmosphere. It has a sort of a seedy side, a sort of an underbelly that is in a way a little bit scary, but also has a community, it has character and it has depth.

The preservation of character in Fitzroy was found in opposition to bulk and height rather than differences of building style, social class or ethnicity: 'I think you can take some buildings that are three storeys, but eight – no. I think that does start to change the village quality that we historically had about Fitzroy.' The gentrifying residents who led the defence tended to idealize the place as more socially diverse than it is; indeed part of what they opposed was the loss of diversity represented by more of their own kind. This case raises the question of how to regulate for irregularity, and how to protect the values of openness to change?

Creating Place Identity

Beacon Cove

I now want to contrast these defences of neighbourhood character with examples of market-driven instant place-identity. Beacon Cove is a new inner-city waterfront project developed in the late 1990s on a former industrial site adjacent to the former working-class suburb of Port Melbourne (Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2010). Here the desired 'character' was a key driver of the design process, an instant place identity constructed largely from scratch using models from both the local context as well as 'new urbanism' and global prototypes. A limited number of housing types were replicated with many small variations to enclose a series of common parks or 'greens'. Minor differences of form were coupled with a strong consistency of building types, materials and landscape design, all fixed in perpetuity by detailed covenants. Residents purchase a collective identity, as the architect puts it: 'There's a family of colours ... coded to type ... it changes from precinct to precinct ... If you purchase the house in the white precinct ... It's felt that once you paint that house brown you're destroying the character.'

This sense of closure around the greens involved a spatial structure that excludes through paths as a form of 'soft gating'. In its development and marketing Beacon Cove was a self-conscious construction of place identity that depended on a bounded distinction from its surrounds. The repetition of types and the protected 'greens' led to it being labelled by outsiders 'Legoland' and 'Pleasantville'. Yet the constructions of identity in Beacon Cove are more interesting and contradictory than either the marketing or these labels indicate. Beacon Cove is not inhabited primarily by residents wishing to retreat from the context, but to engage with it – the more 'real' character of the adjacent port town is a key attraction for residents. While the project turns its back on neighbouring public housing, a remnant street of formerly working-class housing was incorporated into the project (after a long struggle to defend it) and some residents now proudly point to this much more socially and formally mixed street to show the real character of Beacon Cove. While the development is up-market it is relatively ethnically diverse and has attracted residents without the class connections of traditional Melbourne: 'people came here from (places) where they weren't accepted into the character of that area unless they'd been there 30 or 40 years'. The market turned out to be more diverse than the anticipated uniformity of empty-nesters – more tolerant of diversity and density, with a taste for contemporary rather than neo-traditional styles. Beacon Cove is a market-led development that appears to have been led more by ideology than the market.

Caroline Springs

Caroline Springs is an instant suburb on the urban fringe of Melbourne's traditionally disadvantaged western suburbs, developed into a series of 'villages' focused on waterways and parks with names like Brookside, Springlake and Chisholm Park (Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2010). These 'villages' are semi-separated and marketed to different sectors from first-home owners to new wealth. With their keynote slogan of Creating Special Places the developers have marketed and created a vision of place identity and character in which residents invest their faith. This is a suburb that claims to escape the conformity of suburbia with a stronger sense of place, community, identity, security and home. The developers build only the public realm with detailed covenants enforcing a consistency of character within each of the 'villages' through setbacks, landscaping, height and materials. This project represents another form of 'soft gating' with elaborate gateways (that never close) framing the entrances to named places marketed to social class segments. Some villages are clearly more upmarket than others and climbing the ladder of opportunity involves moving from house to house and village to village: 'I'm Chisolm Park. It's how it's marketed to you when you buy, you have your identity'

Consistency of housing type and bulk is coupled with a diversity of housing styles from neo-traditional to contemporary. The marketing invites residents to *Choose your look, select your favourite façade*. This mix of different characters within a common covenant reflects a market of social and ethnic differences: 'Caroline Springs has a lot of character about it, but it's all a lot of different characters put together.' Ethnic differences are not evident in the architecture where the range of styles camouflages rather than reveals ethnic difference: 'you wouldn't walk past this one and say oh this one belongs to an Indian, this one belongs to a Maltese'. This is a place for aspirations,

social mobility and identity formation. Interviewees speak of the faith they had in the developer's vision and its covenants – the swift creation of community and place identity. Here community and place identity is consumed from a brochure and then becomes a dream for the future within an ethos of individual self-reliance, self-creation and self-expression.

Kensington Banks

Kensington Banks is an inner-city housing development on the site of a former abattoir, driven by the ideal of a walkable 'urban village' with generous green spaces influenced by the ideas of 'new urbanism'. This was a public-private partnership driven by public interests such as community participation, sustainability, diversity, walkability, affordability and open space – all strongly mediated by market imperatives. A key desire was to replicate the valued character of the existing inner urban context with relatively low-rise small-grain development and a diversity of house types. The 'character' of Kensington Banks as understood by its most active residents is formed out of the intersections of these often-contradictory values and imperatives. While the project has been conceived for a mix of household types and social classes (including public housing) the market has determined that it has become dominated by young singles. The very generous provision of open space and pedestrian networks is underutilized, yet this highly walkable design has largely strangled car transport, producing traffic jams in peak hour. The open space is often lined with housing that 'faces' the park yet is entered from the 'rear'; back lanes lined with garages have become the main entries while the front becomes symbolic. The ideals of the urban 'village' have been deployed at a density too low for shops or public transport – the result is the village 'green' without the village: 'We find that in this estate particularly there's not a lot of character ... it doesn't have that interaction that we're looking for ... there's not that feeling.'

The naming, framing and enclosure of these new developments operates to construct and fix identity in urban form. They are designed to meet a market for a commodified community – the utopian ideal of *Gemeinschaft*, with citizens who know each other gathered in a circle around the 'green'. In each case the realities of this market are more diverse than they might seem.

What is Urban Character?

There are many themes that lace through these discourses and places: uniformity and diversity; building height and density; building type and style; community, class and ethnicity. There is not scope here to explore all of these but I want to discuss what this might mean for the ways in which we define neighbourhood character and place identity, how we might theorize it and how it meshes with practical issues of urban governance.

By far the most common definition of urban or neighbourhood character in all case studies is the 'feel' of a neighbourhood – character is 'the feel of a place, what it represents to you; the people, the buildings, the things that happen there are all part of the urban character'. The word 'feel' is generally used as a noun as if an emotion or

sensation has become stabilized and objectified in built form. There is often the sense that neighbourhood character has agency: 'Just something about it. You know you drive in some places and it makes you feel at home, and you drive in other places it makes you feel – I really can't explain it, why.' While there is a common understanding at this level, it often falls apart under probing; interviewees often begin with some confidence on the topic and end confused: 'Until I really thought about [urban character], I thought I knew what it meant. Does that make sense? And then you think: Geez, what is it?' At times this produces an oscillating discourse: 'it probably is "feel", but it's probably not how I would describe it. You see I'd probably think of it more as – yeah, no, it probably is "feel", in which case it's hard to move.' The concept is often unstable and can be changed by the quest for character: 'when you've had to fight for things, and had to analyse it in such a detailed way, I think you get to a point where you think – I don't know what I saw in it in the first place.' Some residents express frustration at the need to define it: 'We've got this concept of where we live – its specialness, the choices it offers people – how come no-one else gets it, how come we've got to somehow define this?' Others become cynical and portray character as entirely subjective: '... all (character) is, is a vehicle by which someone can say, "oh, I like it" or "I don't like it".' Place identity is variously portrayed as objective and as subjective; the challenge is to understand how it flows across this divide.

Pressure for higher density, driven both by the market and sustainability imperatives, is widely seen as the most serious threat to character and it has a number of dimensions: a change in house type from detached to multi-unit; a change in the public/private interface from garden setback to direct street frontage; and an increase in height and bulk. Perceptions of density are related to a general experience of spatiality linked to sociality – an unselfconscious phenomenology of the everyday that becomes self-conscious only when threatened. The social identity that is seen as threatened by higher densities is linked to a loss of individual identity – a preference for 'a low-scale area where I have a sense of my own being and not being dwarfed'. Debates about loss of amenity due to higher density development – primarily overshadowing and overlooking – take a relatively minor role in this discourse. When they are mentioned there is often an underlying issue of social class: 'It'd be like living under the housing commission ... we overlook one another here, but we sort of know one another, there's a relationship.' Thus concerns about height meld together the belittling effect of a dominant 'monolithic' form with the feeling of being juxtaposed against a social 'other'. Perceptions of density are embodied in the sense of home, the 'feel', the unselfconscious everyday *doxa* and the sense of social distance. Attitudes to density are clearly changing, and there is evidence in all case studies of some residents appreciating higher densities and the amenity and character they produce. Most residents, however, presume a right to maintain their neighbourhood at current densities: 'we have our fair share of units; to have more is not appropriate in this area.' Some of the opposition is based on building type and particularly the change from detached houses to multi-unit flats, seen also as a shift from stable to transient populations: 'I would hate to see lots and lots of flats, I think that does I think change the character of a place, it looks, would it be fair to say, more transient.'

Resident concerns about height are also linked to a fear that any increase that is conceded will become a precedent for further escalation: 'If they get that building in they'll say it's not viable then they'll make it bigger. There's no limit.' Here we find

a lack of faith in the planning system largely produced by market-led planning – the ‘viability’ issue refers to the way the market has come to replace public interests as a legitimating ground of urban planning within a neo-liberal political economy (Dovey 2005). The argument is made in planning tribunals that a certain height and density is required by the market. Planning has become fluid, it seeks flexibility of urban regulation and concepts such as ‘character’ and ‘place’, which, while they appear to serve resident interests, can also serve market interests.

In everyday language the term ‘character’ is primarily applied to people and has dual meanings as both normative and descriptive, as depth and as difference. Character is normative in the sense of a ‘character building exercise’ or the sense of valued identity formation over time; this is what Sennett sees as threatened in his book *The Corrosion of Character* (Sennett 1998). Character is also descriptive of particular characteristics or eccentricities of people in the sense that ‘she’s quite a character’ – whether valued or not. The term ‘place’ shares this dualism of meaning both a valued depth and a sense of difference. The meaning of character being ostensibly defended or created in the cases above is one of depth more than of difference, yet they are not easily separated. When urban character studies are undertaken by planning consultants we often find a list of formal characteristics that identify a neighbourhood and distinguish it from the context – building height, type, style, block size, setback, vegetation, street grid and so on. Character becomes identified with the internal consistencies of its characteristics and against its difference from other neighbourhoods. The deeper notion of character as ‘feel’ or ‘atmosphere’ is easily lost in this process as certain formal characteristics are selected and identified to stand for place identity. What is primarily established is differences between places rather than depth of character. The danger is that this selection of characteristics turns character into caricature.

The crucial distinction here is between two kinds of difference – differences between places and places of difference. ‘Differences between places’ are what distinguishes one building, neighbourhood or city from another. Such distinctions are firmly embedded in practices of power and they may well be driven by the quest for purification and the exclusion of difference. ‘Places of difference’, on the other hand, are about the degree to which an internal mix is constitutive of a particular place identity. The desire to establish differences between places can lead to the boundaries and gateways we see at Caroline Springs and Beacon Cove but also the closed sense of place pursued in Camberwell and Hedgeley Dene. Such purified places have a capacity to limit identity formation while places of difference can open up new possibilities.

This returns us to the open versus closed ontologies of place introduced earlier. The ideal of ‘place’ based on consistency and closure where neighbourhoods are differentiated by uniformities of character is the one being defended in Camberwell, constructed in Hedgeley Dene, and that largely drove the new morphologies of Beacon Cove and Caroline Springs. By contrast Fitzroy appears as a paradigm case of what Massey conceives as an open sense of place – progressive, globally connected, creative, multiplicitous. Yet it is not open to some kinds of change since the diversity of the mix is seen as threatened by further gentrification and greater density.

Slippages between social and physical aspects of character tend to confound attempts to operationalize it as a code of urban regulation. While planning codes and consultants’ studies generally try to reduce character to a set of formal elements, the ways it is experienced in everyday life tend to resist attempts to separate the social from

the physical; and this very slipperiness becomes attractive to proponents of flexible planning systems. 'Character' becomes discursively constructed in the field of politics where it comes to mean what different interests want it to mean. The problems here are threefold.

First, resident groups can use urban design codes as camouflage for social codes; struggles to prevent the wrong kinds of building can slip into the exclusion of the wrong kinds of people. When character is identified as consistency or uniformity then codes, regulations or covenants designed to discriminate against spatial difference may also discriminate against social difference. Second, lack of clear definition provides a legal loophole that can open the door to highly damaging developments. The experience in Melbourne has been that when 'character' becomes a key planning criterion then the system transforms from 'as of right' controls to site-by-site decisions in a legal tribunal where definitions of character are decided by lawyers. A further effect has been to shift debate into the field of aesthetics where height limits and amenity are traded against design quality (Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2009b). Finally, attempts to control character through the regulation of built form has a tendency to reduce character to formal characteristics, and can turn character into caricature. In the worst examples of this new buildings are only permitted in neo-traditional style – a new character is created in the guise of protecting an old one.

In sum, moving issues of place identity to the top of the urban planning agenda can be a mixed blessing. While residents may be eager to put 'character' at the centre of the planning process this is matched by the eagerness of developers to engage in site-by-site exceptions to urban regulation. While it may appear that character-based planning may be more sensitive to the nuances of place experience, the dangers are also profound.

Re-Thinking Place Identity

The phenomenon of place is difficult to define because it is so deeply rooted – it is a site where habit fuses with habitat and social ideology takes root. To understand resident resistance to urban change requires that we penetrate beneath NIMBY stereotypes and engage with social processes and the politics of identity formation. Place and identity are dynamic social constructions that we often come to see as fixed and natural. To understand the role of place experience in urban planning requires theoretical frameworks that can connect the ontology of dwelling with the larger structures of political economy. For Harvey the politics of place can be seen in the context of global/local tensions – at once grounded in a local phenomenology of dwelling yet subject to the appropriations of global capital (Harvey 1996: 297–8). From this view place identity attracts capital through a market desire for uniqueness and authenticity; capital seeks to retain or to produce a unique sense of place as a form of local monopoly (Harvey 2001: 394–411).

The experiences of place in everyday life, often taken for granted until threatened, surface as part of the politics of place where they are further constructed and shaped. The spatiality and sociality of place are inextricably intertwined; space is socially constructed as the social is spatially constructed (Lefebvre 1996, Massey 1993). This

reciprocity is apparent in the continual slippage between social and material aspects of character as defined by residents. In this context there is a clear need for concepts and approaches that cut across the sociality/spatiality divide, a need to move beyond a false choice between place as pre-given (fixed, essential) or as entirely socially constructed. There are two conceptual frameworks that I suggest may be fertile in this regard: Bourdieu's work that connects the everyday *habitus* to the *field* of power, and Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage.⁶

Bourdieu's conception of the *habitus* is a set of pre-conscious dispositions that structure the taken-for-granted *doxa* of everyday life: '... he inhabits it like a garment (*un habit*) or a familiar habitat. He feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of habitus ...' (Bourdieu 2000: 142–3). The *habitus* is described as 'a sense of one's place' but also a 'sense of the other's place' (Bourdieu 1990: 113), and as a 'feel for the game' of social practice (Bourdieu 1993: 5). The concept of *habitus* is derived in part from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied spatiality (Carman 2008: 217–19). The resonance between *habitus* and habitat can be a useful conceptual frame here because it parallels that between social and physical character, between the feel and the form. As we turn place identity into planning codes we move from the pre-conscious experiences of place in everyday life to the production of a discourse of 'place' and 'character' within institutionally structured fields of power (Bourdieu 1993): news media, housing markets, planning tribunals. From this view the taken-for-granted 'doxa' of urban life becomes a para-dox of urban design and planning. The *habitus* is the 'feel' that is threatened by the 'form'. For Bourdieu the *habitus* is aligned with an institutionally structured *field* of power. If the *habitus* is a 'feel for the game', the *field* is akin to the game board wherein certain resources are at stake in the form of different kinds of capital – social capital, economic capital, symbolic capital. Resident groups who unite to defend a neighbourhood against change often produce and rely on such forms of power as community solidarity. But the closed sense of place is also implicated in the production and defence of privilege through networks of influence.

From such a view we can understand neighbourhood place identity as being deep-seated without being deep-rooted in any essentialist manner. It is immanent rather than transcendent; grounded in the myriad particularities and everyday practices of particular places. Another useful conceptual framework in this regard is the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) on *assemblage*. Assemblage theory is a loose body of ideas primarily developed from a framework of Deleuzian philosophy wherein urban places and development projects are largely seen in terms of the connectivity and flow between parts of a socio-spatial assemblage (DeLanda 2006). Flows of people, traffic, ideas, capital and goods are linked to flows of desire for profit, views, amenity, sunshine, privacy, open space and access. Such desires play out in the politics of urban planning through the interests of developers, residents, retailers, commuters and neighbours – interests that variously intersect, reinforce and contradict.

Assemblage is both verb and noun, not a collection of things or a spatial container but a socio-spatial territory wherein material forms and discursive practices become aligned. Assemblage is thus a conceptual framework that potentially connects both the 'feel + form' and the 'social + physical' dimensions of place. The concept of place can then be seen not as bounded location but as an emergent property of the urban

⁶ For a more detailed account of what follows see chapters 2 and 3 of Dovey 2010.

assemblage. ‘Sense’, ‘feel’, ‘atmosphere’ and ‘character’ can be seen as intensities in the sense that desire, love, flavour, light, colour, tone and experience have intensity (while height and bulk have extension). When place identity becomes legislated, feel is reduced to form, intensity is reduced to extension. Urban regulation is a process of coding: character is coded into characteristics; parts are made to stand for the whole; place identity becomes fixed.

Here is the deep dilemma of planning for place identity – how to create or protect urban place identity in a manner that does not kill the very dynamism that produces it in the first place. It may be useful in this regard to conceive of place as a conceptual ‘plateau’ – a place defined by its situation between levels. While often associated with Deleuze and Guattari’s book *A Thousand Plateaus*, the term originates with Bateson (1972) where it is defined in opposition to schizogenesis: the way a positive feedback process (like an arms race) can escalate out of control. The way that one tall building in a neighbourhood can set a precedent that triggers the right to go ever higher is an example of schizogenesis. There are links here to Jacobs’ (1965) theory of the ‘self-destruction of diversity’ and to Harvey’s (1985) work on the circuits of capital leading to creative destruction. For Deleuze and Guattari the plateau is also a ‘plane of consistency’ in an assemblage that is open to change but not to suicidal escalation. The concepts of place, plateau or plane (note the shared etymology of these *pla* words) denote immanent fields of everyday practice that ground modes of thought and identity formation without transcendent ideals. The suggestion here is that place identity and character can be conceived as a socio-spatial plateau: an assemblage that is open to change but is resilient to escalation.

The Place Intensification Conundrum

In order to understand what is at stake in this issue we need to look at the larger scale of the assemblage where we find that what is being created and defended in the name of place and character is often an unsustainable low-density city. While it is quite possible to service low-density suburbs with high frequency public transport (Mees 2009) it is also very clear that low-density car-based urban assemblages generate significantly more carbon emissions (Newman, Beatley and Boyer 2009). While supporters of suburbia live in hope for green cars and public transport to save the suburbs, low-density/low-carbon suburbs are a vain hope without major technological change and massive long-term state subsidies. The best prospect to save the suburbs is to service them with an intensified network of higher-density, transit-oriented development that brings high-frequency public transport within walkable distances. It is the imperative of low-carbon cities that produces the conundrum – resident activists are often well-organized to prevent what they see as overdevelopment in their neighbourhoods and governments are fearful of losing power in a suburban backlash. If neighbourhood planning is democratic then existing densities are likely to be defended. In common interest developments where density is established by covenant, intensification is close to impossible – indeed protection from democratic planning is part of their market advantage. We need to find a way to reconcile the desire to create and protect place identity with the imperatives for low-carbon cities. The public debate becomes polarized

into those who think intensification is a threat to place identity and those who think that resident democracy is a threat to sustainability. Since whatever character the city currently possesses was created by intensification in the first place, why is it that further intensification is so often seen as a threat? How can we manage urban development in a manner that enhances rather than damages character and place identity?

In this regard the very problems we have in defining and legislating place identity can be seen as opportunities. Since urban place identity is not static, fixed or pre-formed; since it has emerged from the very process of intensification – then it can also be enhanced by further intensification. High-quality urban design can create greater levels of urban amenity, access and equity along with reduced car dependency, by raising densities within a walkable distance of public transport services. The low densities of suburban neighbourhoods – open space, sunshine, generous roof spaces, trees – can also be seen as resources that can contribute to a more sustainable city through urban agriculture, solar energy production and water harvesting. In other words places can change in incremental ways that do not trigger the ontological crisis of a perceived loss of identity.

The transformation we need most is from places that are closed, purified and static towards those that are open, multiple and dynamic. The difference that makes a difference is that between places of difference and places of purity; between places that have a place for the dis-placed, and places where identity formation is fixed and finished.

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