



going to town

Gender, youth and the city

2011 Rising Star Scholarship essay entry

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Going to Town: gender, youth and the city

As a city for people, Melbourne's public spaces will be inclusive and inviting, with new opportunities for social interaction, conversation and debate continually created.

(Future Melbourne City of Melbourne, July 2008)

At best, the city is a place where strangers can become friends, anxiety about difference is overcome through familiarity, social worlds expand and locational disadvantage is countered (Amin, 2002; Sennett, 2008). At worst, it is a place where individuals are excluded, feel unsafe, vulnerable and experience socio-spatial constraints borne out of fear. David Harvey argues that (Harvey, Sept-Oct. 2008, p. 23):

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city... The freedom to remake our cities and ourselves is...one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

The unique intensity of a capital city, like Melbourne, makes it a destination for all Victorians. Fincher and Iveson's view of the 'right to the city' refers specifically to the 'right to encounter' (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p. 13). They argue that all citizens should be able to access the opportunities available in the city for social engagement, identity formation and development of different kinds of social capital. For individuals to have and maintain a 'stake' in the city, they need to be present, be involved in planning processes and encouraged to participate.

The right to the city is compromised by subtle exclusionary practices. Examples include, public transport scheduling and cost, media representations of violence and heightened regulation of public space. Feminist planning has addressed many of these exclusionary mechanisms that continue to limit women's access, mobility and presence in urban public space (Koskela, 1999; Laub, 2007; McDowell, 1983; Pain, 2000). Young people (under 18yrs) have similarly experienced such restrictions. Confounded by their lack of full citizenry rights in an adult-centric city, young people are effectively constructed as citizens-in-waiting (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p. 108).

Conceptual links can be made between women's experiences of right to the city, with those of youth. Many of the exclusionary mechanisms experienced by both women and young people persist despite a substantial feminist planning literature and a global push for Child Friendly Cities. Following these conceptual links, this paper looks to feminist planning's insights into women's experiences of public space, as a frame for exploring young people's right to the city in Melbourne.

Right to the City

As the central location of the *public realm*, the city is a social and political space. The potency of the city, as a space that is socially constructed, means that a right to the city is necessarily seen as a right to shape and participate in the society that exists within it (Harvey, Sept-Oct. 2008; Lefebvre, 2006; 1996). Robert Park suggests that the city 'takes on something of the character and qualities of its inhabitants' (Park, 2005, p. 29). Therefore, for the city to truly reflect the diversity of its users then they must participate in its day-to-day and must have a presence. With familiarity comes comfort amongst strangers and an understanding of customs and standards of behaviour that promote social cohesion and safety (Mitchell, 1995, p. 215).

In a democratic society, such as ours, it would be assumed that all citizens would have equal access to public space. This is how *Future Melbourne* envisions Melbourne as a city (City of Melbourne, July 2008). However, as Bredan Gleeson points out, public realms are never intrinsically democratic (Gleeson, Feb.2006, p. 20),

Their capacity for social inclusion must be deliberately fashioned and continuously safeguarded.

The necessity for ongoing and critical conversations about the right to Melbourne is vital to the formulation of democratic, cohesive and inclusive public space.

Women's right to the city

Historically women have not experienced equal access to public space (Wilson, January-February 1992). In an age of spectacular urbanisation, the late 19th century saw men acquire the liberty of folly, to wander the streets as flâneurs. Meanwhile, 'virtuous' women were contained to private and respectable spaces (Wilson, January-February 1992).

Even with the rise of the automobile and rapid suburbanisation in the mid-20th century, women remained enclosed in private domestic space (Hayden, 2005; Huxley, 1994). Early depictions of women in feminist planning discourse found a suburban woman entrapped in her suburban home, a stage set that enforced the sexual division of labour and gender inequality (Hayden, 2005). Women suffered isolation, disadvantaged access to the labour market, reduced presence in urban public space and thus reduced citizenship (Hamilton, 1998; Huxley, 1994). Feminist planners attacked a 'conservative male-dominated' design profession that has 'presumed' to know what women wanted and needed, without asking them (Hayden, 2005).

Most recently, feminist planning literature has focused on personal safety and fear of violence against women as a cause for women's socio-spatial containment (Koskela & Pain, 2000; Laub, 2007; Pain, 2000). Limitations

imposed on women's socio-spatial worlds reproduce previous restrictions and continue to limit women's participation in the public realm (Koskela, 1999). Fear of personal crime impacts most on women's lives (Snedker, June 2006). It leads to avoidance of places and locations associated with crime, thus limiting women's general access, independence and mobility (Koskela, 1999; Liska, Sanchirico, & Reed, March 1988). So despite liberation from the enclosure of the domestic sphere, women remain restricted by characterisations of vulnerability and by their perceptions of personal insecurity.

The more individuals experience feelings of fear and anxiety in public space, the more constrained their social and spatial environments become (Liska, et al., March 1988; Tranter & Pawson, 2001; Watson, 2006). Access to encounters, through which social worlds can be expanded and different kinds of social capital developed, are consequently reduced. In terms of the right to the city, women's access to urban encounters continues to be severely inhibited by a culture of fear and sense of vulnerability.

Young people's right to the city

Young people are constructed in a manner similar to the way women have been portrayed – as vulnerable and in need of protection (Kanes-Weisman, 1992). It is likely that children inherit their parents' anxieties and fears of the city, expressed through supervised city visits and cautionary warnings. Further, institutionalised recognition of young people as citizens-in-waiting, who cannot vote, drive or drink, means that young people's needs and opinions are often not considered as legitimate as those of adults.

Subject to changing conceptions of childhood over time, what is in the 'child's best interest' is not consistently and objectively understood. Initiatives like Child Friendly Cities (UNICEF, 2004) outline the right of young people to participate as full citizens in urban life and to be able to walk city streets independent of adult supervision. However, young people are increasingly subject to 'paranoid parenting' (Pain, April 2006), stranger danger, moral panics (Valentine, 2003), and intersubjective identifications with the 'youth problem' (Iveson, 2007).

Just as women have historically had lower levels of access and mobility, young people under the age of 18 rely on public transport for independent mobility (Dodson, Gleeson, Evans, & Sipe, 2006). Similarly too, young people are regularly chaperoned in urban public space (Tranter & Pawson, 2001). Adolescents today are increasingly supervised when visiting the city (Nolan, 2010). For example, in a focus group I conducted recently in Ballarat, students were asked about the places they avoid in Melbourne city, one young man responded (Nolan, 2010):

Umm wouldn't have a clue 'cause dad mostly drives.

(Male, 17 yrs)

Another, when asked if he felt comfortable navigating the city without supervision, exclaimed (Nolan, 2010):

By yourself? I could never do that!

(Male, 16 yrs)

The effect of constant parental supervision is seen in the lack of young people's exploratory city visits and trepidation towards encounters with strangers. Further, adult supervision conveys messages about young people's lack of capacity for independent decision-making and socio-spatial confidence.

Both young males and females experience many of these effects in a similar manner. However, their experiences of the city diverge, in particular, in relation to images presented in mainstream media: of young male hoons and female victims. In this instance, young males are not imagined as vulnerable, as women have been, but as their biggest threat.

Currently, the prominent mediatised image of young men in Australian cities is a sensationalised anti-social one (Millar, 11 August 2009; Ross, 30 June 2010). A recent *Today Tonight* special, saw reporter Tim Noonan interview a group of young Broadmeadows men, who identified themselves as members of the notorious 'Broady Boys' (Noonan, 15 February 2010).

Noonan: *How often do you go into the city and cause mayhem?*

Broady Boy: *Every weekend. Every Friday, Saturday night. Tonight. [...] Whether it's a girl, whether it a boy, whether it's a f**king Dad – I'll cave their head in.*

Though *Today Tonight* is a pulp current affairs program and must therefore be viewed as such, the images it produces imagine the city as a place of violence and fear. Associated with aggressive, drunken and risk-taking behaviours, young men are frequently depicted as the major threat to the moral order of the city (Iveson, 2007). However, young men are also at risk of victimisation in the city more so than most other groups (Goodey, 1997; Pain, April 2006). They experience the city paradoxically: vulnerable to the victimisation by other males and framed as violent perpetrators.

Images such as these further prevent recognition of young males' experiences of fear and vulnerability in the city. In a recent interview with students in a disadvantaged peri-urban area of Melbourne, a number of 16-year-old male students expressed frustration at the stereotype of 'youth problem' and their subsequent sense of exclusion in Melbourne (Nolan, 2010). Asked of their experiences of exclusion in Melbourne city, two young men responded:

P1: *YES, all this security stare at you*

P2: And then you see a mum or something walks out and the beeper goes off and if you're behind them when the beeper goes off they're just like, nup.

(Males, 16 yrs)

These young males recognised themselves as being recognised as troublemaker, problem youths. Their experiences of the city were thus shaped by this apparent misrecognition. While the city is a place where these young males could come to seek out alternative ways of being, not available to them in their local environment, these identifications shape experiences that are likely to be detrimental rather than contribute positively to identity formation. As purported by feminist planning literature, for more inclusive urban environments to be created, planning itself must decentred, and consider multiple publics, rather than fall back onto stereotypes based on the prominent images of masculinity, femininity or youth.

While young men reportedly cope with fear privately in order to maintain hegemonic masculinity (Goodey, 1997), young women are more forthcoming in expressing fear (Snedker, June 2006, p. 167). In consultation of young women in the same area of Melbourne, female students reported fear associated with train travel to the city. The pull of the city was great and therefore their anxieties did not prevent travel to Melbourne. However, it meant that encounters with others were framed with intense apprehension. As one young woman expressed,

Oh ma god, there was a paedophile on the train once. And he just kept smiling at me and then I got off the train.

(Female, 16 yrs)

Another young woman went on to speak of perceived safety threats in the city: of stabbings, gangs and terrorists.

Oh, there's heaps of stabbings, um there's heaps of stabbings when the festivals are on

(Female, 16 yrs)

These perceptions of the city, possibly framed by media representations and parental anxieties, appear to have been internalised. Whether there really was a paedophile on the train, or this young woman has been witness to stabbings in the city is irrelevant. The fear associated with the travel to the city, and the city itself, shapes socio-spatial experiences of Melbourne. An apprehension of new potential social bonding was revealed when students in Ballarat were asked how they would respond if someone they didn't know in the city began talking to them (Nolan, 2010):

P1: Run

P2: That they're after something

P3: Run (laughter)

P4: Sometimes they're nice

P1: Just leg it

(Ballarat focus group)

As demonstrated by these students' comments, the right to the city is compromised by fear and trepidation. Opportunities and openness to a diversity of meaningful 'encounters with difference' are prevented, along with the vision of an inclusive city.

Facilitating encounter

The idealistic vision of the city, described by Harvey (2008), Lefebvre (1996) and *Future Melbourne*, requires optimism and openness. Planning that considers women's sense of safety has been shown to promote environments that are generally more inclusive (Markovich & Hendler, 2006). The value in feminist planning is not just in its focus on female-specific urban issues, but in the promotion of participation in planning that gives voice to multiple disempowered sub-groups, like youth. In effect, this contributes to the production of more inclusive publics (MacGregor, 1995).

Women and young people's apprehension toward encounters with strangers undermines the inclusive vision that Melbourne so desires. To facilitate more positive experiences of the city, that support youth identity formation, promote gender equality and productive encounters with difference, safe public transport is essential; greater diversity of land use needs to support more safe and 'adventurous' socio-spatial patterns; women and young people need to feel welcomed into the city; and parents need to feel comfortable with their children traversing it independently.

Attention to women and youth in planning is not just about creating environments specifically for these user groups. Instead, it encourages an inclusive urban environment in which openness to the opportunities the city offers is matched with openness to encounters with other citizens. Planning practice alone cannot eliminate inequalities between men and women, adults and young people. However, planning and urban design can influence the construction and management of public spaces, land uses and policies in a way that promotes and supports gender equality, equitable and welcoming city spaces. By addressing feelings of insecurity, exclusionary stereotypes and vulnerability in urban space, access to random social encounters with difference can be facilitated in Melbourne city.

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