

## **URBAN CULTURES PAPER 2: the origins of urban culture**



*“What is the city but the people?”*

(William Shakespeare. Coriolanus, Act 3, Scene 1.)

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**Introduction:** This Discussion Paper provides an exploration of the evolution of urban cultures and the benefits to the city of cultural diversity that brings complexity and different cultural frames of reference to the planning and design of cities.

***What is the city but the people?’ A city is a blend of people with all their cultures, complexities and differences, their hopes and fears and psychological make up. A city without people is an empty shell. A people focus looks at the city from within a 360° perspective. This lens helps seeing the needs and priorities of differing groups – the young, the old, women, men, differing ethnicities and origins, abilities and lifestyles. Only when these are aligned do cities work well.***

(European Commission, 2019: 34)

This Discussion Paper considers the discourse associated with demographic reality that is the of growing cultural diversity in our urban settlements. Throughout, I will be acknowledging that Australia is recognised as a culturally diverse country with some 300 different cultural backgrounds from the First Australians to the newest arrivals living with a great diversity of cultural frames of reference and therefore ideally needing diverse built-form options. Therefore, this paper will investigate the different ways of understanding cultural diversity in our contemporary cities. I will review a range of relevant academic and demographic terminology, in an attempt to clarify the diverse and at times interchangeable terms. The aim is to better understand how planners and designers can address the diverse cultural needs of evolving communities when delivering built environment outcomes.

In his 1990 book *Community Design and the Culture of Cities* Eduardo Lozano explores the impacts of urban cultures and the resulting evolution of urban settlements and reminds us that “*Cultural factors have always*

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*affected urban typologies.*" (1990:62) He discusses the evolution of urban typologies through history influenced by the changing patterns of cultural diversity and associated community values, behaviours and needs and suggests that:

*Conditions change, and cultures evolve, and urban typologies become obsolete stereotypes riddled with contradictions of increasing severity.*

Therefore:

*Designers, as agents of change, and citizens at the forefront of the most progressive sectors of society should recognize the need for new design solutions and bold actions. In order to provide urban solutions that acknowledge the public realm's needs and concerns.* (1990:63)

Additional Discussion Papers can be accessed in the *Urban Places* section of this site where I will explore the impacts of urban diversity on the built environment. In addition, we consider the impacts that globalisation and migration are having on our cities and how the trends are affecting local 'Culture' and challenging the way we plan and design for our diverse populations. In the *Urban Practices* Discussion Papers, we will explore the opportunities for planners and designers to understand and work with diverse communities to achieve culturally sensitive outcomes.

## The Origins of Urban Cultures

***The city has always been the neural centre of freedom, culture, and political and institutional innovation in its broadest sense. The exchange of ideas and experiences, the cultural "mix" that is consubstantial to cities, has meant an enormous positive externality for society as a whole, to the point of Jane Jacobs' affirmation "The city, the wealth of nations", which perfectly summarises this powerful idea.***

(Rausell-Köster et al 2022:2)

Throughout history we can see the evolution of urban cultures from the remote small-scale settlements to today's mega-cities. Traditionally, rural, and isolated settlements tended to have homogenous shared values and patterns of behaviours; therefore, a homogeneous societal culture is one in which the shared meanings are similar and little variation in beliefs exist; that is, the culture has one dominant way of thinking and acting. Today varying degrees of diversity exists in all nations, but the critical factor is the degree of variation in the shared meanings within the society. Louis Mumford stated that cities have: "*complex entangled histories unfolding over time – they may have sudden beginnings from remote gestations; and they are capable of prolongations as physical organizations through the life-spans of more than one culture*".

Monoculturalism can manifest as the active preservation of a country's national culture via the exclusion of external influences. Japan, South and North Korea have traditionally been seen as examples of this form of monoculturalism at various times in their history. Further examples can be found in the Gulf States, in Dubai over 80% of the populations are foreign workers. The UAE has established limited opportunities for non- Emiratis to gain citizenship, this can only be acquired through the Rulers' and Crown Princes' Courts, Offices of the Executive Councils and the Cabinet based on the nominations of federal entities.

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In the case of these countries, factors such as geographic isolation, historical cultural homogeneity, and or political isolation can be identified as influencing factors. Therefore, as Desirée Campagna & Daniela Angelina Jelinčić (2018) remind us:

*Monoculturalism represents the hard stance on a compact and monolithic national culture firmly grounded in 'Volkgeist', the national spirit, which must be clearly outlined and protected from the negative influences of other cultures so as not to become 'entartet' – degenerate. (2018: 50)*

By contrast in the south of Europe and particularly around the Mediterranean, the cities have for millennia experienced wave after wave of invading armies, foreign trading and peaceful migration, each wave bringing their own cultural values to stamp onto pre-existing city cultures. For example, the cities of Spain have over time developed their local cultural identities enriched by layer upon layer of cultural identity each with their architectural styles and artifacts. Professor Arzu Çahantimur, writing in *Culture and Identity* (2018) discusses the evolution of city cultures in the context of Turkey. She suggests that the city of Istanbul and its previous incarnations as Byzantium and Constantinople situated on the strategic crossing of the Bosphorus where Europe meets Asia is a classic example of layer upon layer of cultural influences. Referring to the city of İznik, a Turkish city that has been ruled by Roman, Byzantine, Seljuks, and Ottoman civilisations over the centuries, Çahantimur reminds us that:

*Because of Turkey's location on important commercial routes like historic spice and silk routes and the advantage of its mild climate and rich soil, Turkey hosted many different civilisations in different times. All these civilisations made their own settlements. However, in time, because of wars and natural disasters, they were wrecked and partially disappeared and became layers that were buried underground. These buried layers of history gradually increased throughout time and turns Anatolian land into a palimpsest structure. (2018:25)*

The metaphor of a 'City as Palimpsest' is a powerful concept of stories from successive overwriting of one culture upon another while leaving traces of the previous culture to still show through. In many ancient cities there are tantalising signs of visual elements of earlier civilisations to be found in buildings and public spaces where previous structures were not totally destroyed but built upon or elements repurposed in successive structures. Therefore, as Çahantimur suggests *'the urban tissue becomes the support on which successive waves of actors build, demolish and rebuild their environment, imbuing each change with different uses and meanings, some responding to past phases, others not'*. (Çahantimur, A 2018:5)

The concept of the city as palimpsest and the reading of multiple material and cultural expressions, both visible as well as invisible and yet formative is clear in many European and Middle Eastern cities, however we need to consider its relevance to the Australian city! Clearly in Australia western style urban settlements as we understand them have only existed on this ancient land for just over 200 years, with the first official building in Sydney dating from 1788. However, as Libby Porter proposes in her 2018 article, *"From an urban country to urban Country: confronting the cult of denial in Australian cities"* that in the Australian context:

*All places in Australia, whether urban or otherwise, are Indigenous places. Every inch of glass, steel, concrete and tarmac is dug into and bolted onto Country. Every place that is the subject of analysis and urban intervention is knitted into the fabric of Indigenous law and sociality. (2018: 239)*

Unfortunately, in contemporary Australia this concept as proposed by Porter is for some a contested one! There are, however, advances in terms of recognition, acknowledgement, and cultural awareness of the First Nations perspective across the planning and design professions. For example, the 2024 Planning Institute of Australia's National Awards for Excellence in Planning include a "Planning With Country" category. The award description states that: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander planning may take many forms, but at its core is recognition and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connection to and responsibilities for managing and Caring for their Country.*

A further example of greater recognition of First Nations culture in urban planning policy activities comes from Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute's (AHURI) National Cities Research Program which states that:

*The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, knowledge and traditional practices could greatly benefit Australian cities policy and the planning of Australia's urban future. An urban research agenda that is informed by Indigenous perspectives would invite this transformative change and there is a need to understand how this could occur in practice.*

## The Evolution of Urban Culture

The notion of Urban Cultures has been focused on the city, its institutions, lifestyles and cultural forms that have evolved in each individual city and its population. Therefore, leading to evolving cultures over time with the phases of urban development and population demographical change.

Richard Fox, in his 2022, article *Urban Cultures* for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, proposes that urban cultures denote the predominant cultural role-played by cities and highlights the phases of urban development by the following typologies: the Ritual City; the Administrative City; the Mercantile City; the Industrial City; and the Mass-communications City. Fox argues that we need to understand the different urban cultures pre and post the capitalist world system and suggests that in the pre capitalist world system the '*ritual cities represented the earliest form of urban centre, in which the city served as a centre for the performance of ritual and for the orthogenetic constitution and conservation of the society's traditions. Ritual was the major cultural role of such cities, and through the enactment of ritual in the urban locale, rural regions were bound together by ties of common belief and cultural performance.*'

Fox suggests that the Administrative City tended to feature flamboyant architecture and monumental public works as a demonstration of great wealth and a heterogeneous society based on ethnicity, religion, caste, or race. Whereas the Mercantile City tended to be places of innovation, achievement, freedom, and mobility.

Following the industrial revolution and the growth of the Industrial City. Fox reminds us that '*populations with very different cultural characteristics came together in the city, such as the Irish in the British Midlands or the many ethnic groups that formed the urban American melting pot*'.

The Mass-communications City has greatly influenced the growth of a new middle-class urban culture. Leading to the growth of suburbanization and gentrification, '*two characteristic urban residential patterns of the middle class, become important cultural forms in such cities*'. Resulting in a demand for '*new urban spaces (the suburbs) or the renovation of old ones (gentrified inner-cities)*' (Fox 2022).

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I would argue that today we are not only in an era of mass communication but also mass migration, leading to the Culturally Diverse City, sometime called Multi-ethnic or Multi-cultural City.

Leonie Sandercock, planner and academic with a focus on the relationship between culture and urban planning and author of the highly influential books *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities* (1998) and *Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century* (2003) suggests that there is no going back to a “static or homogeneous urban/regional culture” such as Fox’s Ritual and Administrative Cities. Sandercock argues that:

*Linked with the destabilizing effects of global economic restructuring and integration, these forces are literally changing the face of cities and regions that are becoming much more culturally diverse.*

*And therefore:*

*Multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-populations are becoming a dominant characteristic of cities and region across the globe, and this is causing a profound disturbance to the values, norms and expectations of many people. The multicultural city/region is perceived by many to be much more of a threat than an opportunity. (1998:164)*

Sandercock also argues that “Modernist planners have become thieves of memory” erasing all traces of the past in the interests of forward momentum. An argument further developed by Michael Burayidi in the following quote.

***Modernist planning in the postwar years did a good job of eliminating the vestiges of cultural identity in urban form and architecture as ethnic enclaves were bulldozed to make way for new development. The current attraction of neotraditional planning is in part a reflection of the rejection of the homogeneity in urban form and architecture that modernist planning produced over the years. In a sense, it is a way of injecting culture back into the built environment and into planning.***  
(Burayidi, M. 2000)

I agree with Michael Burayidi, whose writing has been an important influence on my thinking over the years, that the international modernist movement and the development of an international style that generally excludes local Urban Cultural norms, resulting in a loss of local identity and cultural richness that was found in more traditional and diverse built form. Other writers such as Tanja Glusac have reinforced Burayidi’s point about architecture losing ‘cultural identity’ when she states that:

*To date, neither the issues of diversity caused by migration nor the threat of diminishing cultural and regional expression through architecture have been genuinely tackled by the architectural discipline and profession. (Glusac, T. 2015: 228)*

While I am generally supportive of Burayidi’s statement above, I am not specifically arguing for a neotraditional “New Urbanist” approach to urban planning and design, rather my position is that to achieve human-scaled urban outcomes, built environment professionals should be planning and designing culturally! This I argue can be achieved within a modernist design aesthetic when approached with cultural sensitivity. Therefore, throughout the book I shall refer to “Planning and Designing Culturally” and seek to provide insights into not only “why” we should plan culturally but also provide a framework to inform “how” I believe we can deliver culturally



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sensitive and relevant outcomes for: our increasingly diverse communities; the planning needs of the First Nations People; all within the context of addressing the concept of 'country' within a contemporary planning system.

Canadian cultural development consultant Greg Baeker suggests that we need a cultural approach to many facets of city planning and development to address the cultural needs of local communities and to understand the potential impacts of planning and design decisions. This awareness can support decisions that allow for diverse approaches to the provision of housing stock, retail environments and public space to meet the needs of a culturally diverse community (Ruth Fincher, 2003). I would also suggest that in Australia, many of our cities have developed, as argued by Burayidi, a modernist international style rather than seeking to express a local feel. The city planners and designers have moved beyond the traditional urban planning and design typographies that were greatly informed by the local cultural frames of reference. Frames of reference based on a people's way of life, patterns of behaviour, their institutions and artefacts that should have an important influence on the look and feel of their local built environment, especially in relation to our increasingly culturally diverse populations and deep First Nations heritage.

In terms of evolving urban cultures, planners and designers need to be aware of the demographic changes taking place over time in the city and the various evolving settlement patterns of cultural/ethnic groups. For example, although cultural clusters have obvious advantages for new arrivals to be among other members of the diaspora, it has been argued that clustering of recent migrants in proximity to shops, religious and dedicated community facilities that cater for their cultural needs can lead to 'parallel lives' being lived without opportunities for Intercultural Dialogue with the broader community (Cantle 2008). Cantle observed through his work as Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission that:

*The inner city 'ghettos', mono-cultural schools, separate employment patterns and distinct faith and cultural associations, are simply seen as part of the natural fabric of many cities. But whilst it is the case that some segregation is due to purely economic factors (which, in itself is problematic), settlement patterns are also reflect preferences of both a positive nature, such as people choosing to live in an area which is supportive of their culture and also, for negative reasons, for example, because people feel unsafe and insecure in different areas. (Cantle, 2008:14)*

Over time in cities, we often see shifting patterns of recent migrants clustering in an area until they become more established within the broader community and more financially independent allowing them to move out to new areas. Richard Sennett in *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (2018) writes about the migrant experience in Sweden where recent adult refugees struggle to settle into the community due to the lack of language skills. He points out that there are issues for the adults in the family as the younger members readily adapt to local language and customs, creating a situation where the "more integrated the children become, the more dissociated they might feel from the suffering and traumas which brought their parents there in the first place." I found similar issues when I was undertaking the Intercultural City research in the London Borough of Lewisham within the African and Asian communities where language barriers had created the situation where the parents had to rely on their English-speaking children to act as the family representatives when dealing with local authorities. This resulted in a changed dynamic within the family structure thus undermining parental authority, especially the fathers of the families.

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I would also suggest from observations that it is often the children or grandchildren of migrants who make the move from the initial settlement area. It is therefore important that urban planners are familiar with the changing demographics characteristics of their regions of influence.

The notion of Planning Culturally is my way of addressing these issues of ensuring the vitality and authenticity of local Urban Cultures. This concept is supported by Julian Agyeman, a professor of urban and environmental planning at Tufts University who, proposes that “culturally-competent” planners, landscape architects, architects are needed to create more just places.

## Conclusions:

From the perspective of Planning Culturally this paper has raised the challenge of the need for urban planners and designers to not only be aware of the diverse cultural values and behaviours of local communities, but also to develop the skills and cultural literacy skills required to deliver culturally relevant built environment outcomes. This is especially the case in Australia where urban professionals must be sensitive to the First Nations People's relationship to Country.

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## *Author's Note*

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