

Ships, Planes and Automobiles – The Perils and Pluses of Place-making in an Outer Melbourne Suburb

Louise Johnson, Fiona Andrews and Elyse Warner
Deakin University, Victoria Australia

Abstract: Building a new suburb is increasingly seen as creating a “place” as well as a set of houses and neighbourhoods. Developers view “place-making” as a way to differentiate one estate from another and to capture a market segment; planners see the practice as the basis of good master planning. Local governments too support the concept to give residents a sense of pride and identity. While usually seen as a contemporary exercise, imprinted on the blank slate of greenfield sites, the experience of at least one outer suburb suggests that place-making is as much historical as contemporary and may be both a welcome element of a community and a focus of disaffection. The example of Point Cook in Melbourne’s west offers a range of iconic “places” – historical and contemporary markers of identity and difference – which have formed both the basis of local pride but also tension. Thus the RAAF base, Point Cook Homestead and Werribee Mansion long pre-dated the expansion of the city but they have been embraced as centres of pride, historical achievement and as tourist attractions. In contrast, a massive pirate-ship playground built in the centre of a park by a developer as a marker of difference and centre of community attraction was widely appreciated before being burned to the ground! This paper will report on a sample of resident experiences of place-making in outer suburban Melbourne which highlights some of the local complexities of place-making.

Introduction

If space describes the container which we inhabit, *places* represent connection, the collections of meanings that emerge and are associated with the practices of everyday life. For geographers, place represents a distinctive type of space, one that is defined by, and constructed through, the lived experience of people; a site within a landscape which has a name and a particular human resonance (Oakley and Johnson 2013: 343). Places then are localized, named and lived in, but they can also be where contestations over meaning and interpretations are played out. For Meinig, place has a stability and is contingent “upon some public agreement as to name, location, character; some legibility, some identity commonly understood” (Meinig, 1979: 3). In contrast, Massey sees any place as a multiple and dynamic social construction which “does not have a pre-designed, singular and non-conflictual identity, because it is constructed as a result of encounters, crossings and expressions flowing from a multitude of social relations” (Massey 1991: 502 and Massey 1993). Establishing those meanings, name and identity often takes time and may not be a smooth process, instead resulting from dominant social groups triumphing over others. Thus Oakley and Johnson (2013) have documented how British imperial power and notions of desirable landscapes obliterated Aboriginal meanings and uses around what became waterfront redevelopments in Sydney and Adelaide. The meanings of such places are therefore not stable or uncontested but can shift dramatically in the face of human actions or an environmental catastrophe. The process of mass migration, in particular, has been associated with both the decimation of some places – as a result of such outward movement and the triggers for it, such as war famine, flood, earthquakes or hurricanes – but also the constitution of others, as communities rebuild or migrant groups seek solace, sustenance and identity in their new locales (Hamnett 2014; Puleo 2014).

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

It has been argued that with accelerated globalization, the particularity of places and the genuineness of attachment to them has been declining, generating a sense of alienation, “topophobia” (Tuan 1974, 1977) or “placelessness” (Relph 1976). Thus Massey describes that with increasing mobility and complexity, how we relate to place and what we mean by it is increasingly uncertain which in turn generates a longing for place, a desire to connect and achieve consistency in the face of geographical fragmentation and spatial disruption (Massey 1991). In contrast though, Horvath in his comparison of inner city Sydney and Los Angeles over the last 50 years, shows that such concerns are misplaced and documents how these two locales were more alike in the 1960s than in the new century with the triumph of “glocalization”, the local manifestation of global flows and processes (Horvath 2004). Despite such studies, in the face of concerns for the demise of place and place attachment, one response has been to designate planners and policy-makers the task of “making” places, to attempt through their designs, consultative practices and public spaces, to facilitate the development of places as well as feelings of attachment and respect for them (Winnikoff 1995).

Thus, for Patsy Healey, “making better places” should be the focus of the planning project in the 21st century (Healey 2010). In this exercise the motive for such interventions has varied, with Kearns and Philo (1993) emphasizing the role of place-making in the differentiation of cities from each other to enhance marketing and attracting entrepreneurial capital, wealthy migrants and tourists. Such an agenda has also been adopted by developers to similarly differentiate their project and ensure its marketing success. This agenda has been strongly linked to a neo-liberal planning agenda, which puts image-making, marketing and selling the entrepreneurial city into the global agenda of capital flows above the concerns of residents. So place-making can and has been about selling places rather than enlivening them for those who live there. One response has been critics and movements such as the Project for Public Spaces, which aims to “create and sustain public spaces that build communities”. For the non-profit, New York based Project for Public Spaces, planning and design rooted in community forms the cornerstone of their work, with activities involving people collectively re-imagining and reinventing public spaces as the heart of their communities to strengthen the connection between people and the places they share (Project for Public Spaces 2015). For this group and many other critics of place-making (such as Roe 2014), the critical defining element of success is the involvement of the community in defining and realizing the agenda. Thus for Cilliers et. al. (2015), while “place-making is a socially constructed process that’s shaping cities largely through capital investment designed to generate economic growth and promote cultural tourism”, they argue that it should be a process by which people can transform the locations they inhabit into places where they live through their active engagements in “green place-making”.

Whether planning has been successful in this task of place-making can be assessed in part by the experiences of those living in these communities. What follows is an examination of one outer suburb of Melbourne – Point Cook –deliberately created by at least one developer as a desirable place. It is a greenfield site, with the assumption that its sense of place has to be “made” as part of its suburbanization, but it has also been constituted as a place through the mobilization of its history – by residents and local

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

authorities alike. This example, through the qualitative methods used to document it, also allows insight into the contested process by which value is ascribed to various place-making artefacts. So alongside the affection and elevation of historical remnants of the pastoral and military history of this area, there is the story of the much-lauded “Pirate Park”. Installed by the developer as a community building and place-defining element, the park was widely embraced and used. However, it was also a site for what some regarded as unsavory activities and was ultimately destroyed in a spectacular act of vandalism. This act and its subsequent neglect by local authorities can reveal much about whose place is being realized here and the importance of local views in its creation and maintenance. After first outlining the research methods, this paper focuses on a number of place-making icons to unpack just how they were experienced, challenged and, in one case, actually razed in this locality. The planning and policy lessons of the case study affirm the importance of anchoring place in space and in the community while also admitting that both are contested and multiple.

Methods

The focus here on place-making is part of a larger project focused on the experiences of residents in a relatively affluent suburb within Melbourne’s western growth corridor. Point Cook in the City of Wyndham, 30 kilometres from the CBD, was chosen because the researchers had previously conducted research in the area to develop principles for the building of better suburbs.

Residents’ everyday life worlds and the meanings they ascribed to their experiences were explored using the phenomenological approach. This was further enhanced by photo elicitation interviewing (PEI), where photographs are used as an alternate to verbal-only methods within interviews (Harper 2002). The use of photographs not only elicits memories and experiences that cannot be easily expressed with words alone but also prompts new perspectives (Collier and Collier 1986).

Snowball sampling was used for participant recruitment. Personal contacts of the researchers known to reside in the target community were approached. These contacts were asked to distribute flyers to members of their own social networks and, where possible, post messages regarding the project on community Facebook pages. Individuals over the age of 18 were eligible to participate if they were residents of the chosen community and English speaking. Those interested in participating were invited to contact the researchers, when further information about the study was provided via the Plain Language Statement.

Eight participants were recruited for this study. Seven were women; seven married and one in a de-facto partnership; seven had children (five with two children and two with one child); seven were employed (including 3 self-employed) and there was one stay-at home parent. Residents had lived in the suburb between 3 and 13 years. This group was appropriate for qualitative research (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005) and phenomenological studies, where a sample between six and ten is deemed ideal (Morse 2000).

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

Participants first took part in a preliminary interview/camera training session. The researchers obtained written consent and began recording the conversation. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic details; information regarding their housing histories; and preliminary insight into the positive and not so good aspects of living in their suburb. The latter part of this session focused on the digital camera provided to the participant, including its operation and strategies to ensure safe and responsible use.

Over a three-week period, participants were asked to photograph at least 10 aspects of their suburb that they perceived to be good and not so good. Participants were encouraged to reflect their overall feeling about living in their community in the images. When the photography task was complete, the researchers collected the camera. Participants' photographic diaries ranged from 10 to 19 images. Diaries were digitally uploaded to a secure server and printed in preparation for the follow-up interview. Hard copies gave participants' increased control over their interview and allowed them to present images in their preferred order.

Interviews were undertaken in settings chosen by participants, including their own homes and local cafes. Participants were presented with each photograph and asked to explain what each image represented and why it was included in their photographic diary. Emerging themes from each photograph were further questioned to ensure participants' lived experiences were explored more deeply. For instance, when discussing photographs representing less than favourable aspects, participants were asked to suggest solutions that could alter the situation. Participants' commentary concluded with them captioning the image.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed, with each member of the research team reviewing transcripts in terms of participants' lifeworlds. Overarching themes focused on positive and negative aspects and the strategies residents' used to live well in their community. Approval of these protocols was obtained from the ethics committee at the researchers' university. Data was managed according to university guidelines and numerical codes were assigned to participants to maintain confidentiality (registered here as "P" or Participant 1, 2, 3 etc).

A number of themes emerged from this work, one of which was place-making. The lived experience of place here related to the importance of its newness but also its history, registered in key built icons – a squatter's mansion, the RAAF base, a settler's homestead – which became part of residents' images of the place, an element of its attractiveness and focus of their pride and city-wide distinctiveness. While these elements of this place were genuinely anchored in it, they were also elevated into part of the image-making of the locality by local government and tourism authorities, and so it was with some surprise that they were so warmly embraced by residents. The other key focus of place-making was one built by the developer – Villawood Homes – as part of their community building and marketing strategy for a near-by estate. This Pirate Park was very large, covering an area far exceeding local open space requirements, and elaborately designed and expensively decorated as a place-making attraction, distinguishing element for marketing purposes and focal point for the young children assumed to be numerically dominant in the surrounding master planned

estates. The Pirate Park then was very much a deliberate place-making statement in the neo-liberal, place-marketing tradition of planning. Its fate is perhaps prescient of the limitations of such an agenda and suggestive of the need to ensure stronger connection to a community in any place-making activity. The following sections will detail the two models of place-making that were planned into this area.

Organic place-making: 'Old' and 'new' in making this place

Although typically drawn to Point Cook because it was "new" (P5) and offered the opportunity to build a modern yet affordable home suited to their needs, the residents acknowledged its heritage as one of the key positives of living in the area. Several participants took photographs of historical sites, including the Werribee Mansion, RAAF base and Point Cook Homestead (Figures 2 and 3):

I think between the homestead and the RAAF base, there's a lot of people that don't realise the heritage that Point Cook has in Australia but I think it's really important that we promote that and keep maintaining that as a community and, whilst we've got a lot of the new, there's some really old here as well, it was really one of Australia's first suburbs and settlements. (P2)

Residents were proud that their community was home to historical sites. In particular, they placed great emphasis on the status of these sites as the "oldest":

Point Cook RAAF base is actually the oldest RAAF base in the world and it's in Point Cook, that's very cool so it's a local attraction and it's a great museum down there but probably not too many people know about it and yeah it's the oldest RAAF base in the world and it's amazing... (P5)

That's the old Point Cook Homestead, that's one of the oldest homestead in Australia, and I just love the fact that it's just down the road and it is a heritage listed site, I do like the fact that you do get this old world country feel five minutes down the road so yeah, just really enjoy that. (P2)

There was also a sense that the significance of these sites was a "hidden secret" (P2) that not all members of the immediate community knew about. Those who had lived in Point Cook longer-term were able to explore the history of the area on their own terms, creating a separate identity to the one associated with the continual development of 'new' estates and the influx of residents.

Residents also recognised the value of heritage sites in terms of bringing outsiders into the community. The sites, as well as the events held there, gave others a reason to visit and were a way of showcasing what the community had to offer. In doing so, locations such as the Mansion, RAAF base and Homestead gave Point Cook its own identity, setting it apart from other developing areas on Melbourne's outer fringes:

...well it brings people in, like when they have the Air Show on it brings a lot of people to Point Cook that wouldn't normally, it wrecks our road than what it normally is (laughs) but you know it brings money into our community, you know people will stop and they'll buy their food and they'll eat there, the function centre that's just near there, they've got accommodation and that weekend they booked out so I think it's good to have events that bring people in because one it gets them to see the community but they also spend the money in the community as well... (P4)

Ongoing development in the area continually raised questions as to the longevity of the RAAF base (Figure 1) and Homestead (Figure 2). However, the residents indicated that the significance of the sites meant they should be retained:

...it sort of feels like they might be going to shut it [the RAAF base] down which would be a shame cos that's something that no other area has, it was the first, don't quote me, but I think the first air force base in Victoria or something so it's historic and it's valuable and it's different, I think they should keep things like that, they should invest in it... (P3).

Figure 1: 'Local planes in Point Cook' (P5)



Figure 2: 'Point Cook Homestead' (P11)



New place-making – the Pirate Ship Park

Whereas the pre-established heritage sites appeared to be assigned meaning by the residents, many of the new features in Point Cook were purposefully built to foster place-making. The 'Pirate Ship Park', as it became affectionately known, was one such feature designed (and marketed) by a developer to attract families to their particular estate. However, it ultimately became part of the wider Point Cook identity:

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

everyone knows the Pirate Ship Park in Point Cook, like if you live in Point Cook you can use that as a point of direction, 'Oh you can go to the Pirate Ship Park and then you go da da da di da' so it was sort of like the local icon, it was called Bayview Park because at the top you could actually see to the city, you could see the bay, it was quite a good elevation to look around... (P10)

...it was a little bit like we didn't have anything else, no other big parks around so the ones that opened everyone just sort of went crazy on it, it was a bit like, you know, kids that might get to a party or they don't get out often and then they suddenly eat all the food and then get sick, it was a little bit like that, everyone sort of went crazy over this park... (P5)

Residents described the “iconic” nature of the park, yet over time its value was seemingly clouded by the unfavourable activities that took place there. The park was therefore acknowledged as “something that everyone thought was fantastic, something that actually brought a lot of joy to the community [but at the same time] actually had a whole other side to it” (P5). The original slide was replaced after a child suffered a broken limb and there were ongoing issues with drug use and teenagers at the park engaging in “inappropriate” behaviour:

...there was some negative aspects about the park, about the ship, obviously it was enclosed down the bottom so it created anti-social behaviour, from kids going there and smoking, someone ODD there once, some druggie guy but you know school kids having sex, smoking cones, doing what teenagers do, it's not like it's unusual and if it wasn't in that park they probably would have just gone to a park anywhere so I didn't really love hanging out at the actual ship... (P10)

The wooden ship ultimately burned to the ground in an act of wanton local destruction, resulting in the overall closure of the park (Figure 3). Residents recalled how community members shared their ‘grief’ on social media, with parents genuinely concerned as to how their children would react:

...it's really sad and when my boy, actually when he first saw this had burnt down, he burst out crying, he's 10 years old, 'cos he'd remembered everything that'd happened there, he just absolutely burst out in tears, we told him, he knew what was happening and then we thought we'd show him 'cos he wanted to see it but we didn't realise the emotional impact it was going to have and so many people in the community are hurt over this because it was an icon, outside of Point Cook, you'd do a search for 'pirate parks Melbourne' and it was one of the key things and it's just a tragedy... (P6)

... Facebook just exploded, the Point Cook pages just exploded with 'Oh my God it's burnt down', 'How am I going to tell my children? They're going to wake up soon, they're going to be devastated', but it wasn't just a devastation there was no park, it was like someone had died...it was like a person... (P5)

Members of the community were said to question how someone “could do this to us”, while others “wanted blood basically” (P5B). Residents later became outraged when a teenager was charged with setting the ship alight, with some taking to social media to blame the teenager’s parents and others calling for the children in the community to confront the person responsible about the devastating effects of his/her actions. Here then was an example where a place-making exercise driven by an outside developer to achieve effective

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

marketing and identity for a place worked, in that it was widely embraced by many in the resulting community. But its uses other than for playing and ultimate destruction also raises the obvious question as to whose place was being made with the Pirate Park? While developers and planners put great effort into building and marketing to young families on the urban fringe, they are not the only residents and the children do grow up and need to be entertained, accommodated and have places that they can call their own.

Figure 3: 'Pirate Park gone' (P6)



However, despite the reactions to the destruction of the park, both the developer and the local Council were reluctant to rebuild. One resident, who attended a community meeting about the future of the park, commented:

...we went to a information session and basically Council said 'Oh, [the developer] built that Pirate Ship Park to attract people to come and build houses in the area', it was sort of built as an attraction, there's actually no incentive for them to rebuild it because obviously everyone's built and there's no more land left, it wasn't insured adequately enough by the Council so they can't even pay for it to be rebuilt the same so there's actually a really big question mark over whether we're actually going to get anything back there, which I think is quite disgusting, only because, like people used to travel from all over town to come to that particular pirate ship park... (P10)

Likewise, the community members' reactions to the destruction of the park also failed to translate into actions. The "amount of people that were upset on Facebook about [the burning of the park] didn't equal the amount of people who went to the meeting" (P5), thereby questioning the true meaning of the park for those living in Point Cook as well as suggesting the need to actively build communities around place-making icons.

Discussion and Conclusion

These examples from one part of suburban Melbourne give real insight into the process of place-making in this locality. Here in Point Cook, the identity of the place was partly determined by the master planning of

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

its new suburban housing and related facilities. However, the sense of place here was also built on a deep sense of the past that was primarily packaged and presented to outsiders as tourist attractions. But these tourist icons were embraced by residents as critical to their sense of distinctiveness and history in their place. The place was also built by planners and developers as part of marketing and making a place attractive, functional and ultimately profitable. The case of the Pirate Ship Park – created as a marketing tool by the developer and widely embraced as an iconic marker of this place by residents and their children – highlights the dangers of creating icons for only one sector of the population and doing so without their active involvement. For the meaning of this park and other icons is about how people relate to and connect in a real way. It is a question as to how this can occur in a new place, how can it be built in and facilitated? So place building can be seen both as a valuable, organic thing but also somewhat more cynically as something that is related to planning and marketing a place to benefit social stability, house prices and profit. The fact that the Pirate Ship attracted undesirable activities and people – teenagers - and then was destroyed is a clear indictment of the limited nature of the place-making agenda pursued in this locality.

There is also the obvious neglect of the prior Aboriginal presence in this place and the Aboriginal meanings and attachment to any and all places in Australia, which are conveniently ignored or marginalized in the place-making literature and experience. Why wasn't an Indigenous presence researched and re-inscribed onto the suburban landscape of Point Cook? Why is a particular sense of the "historical", such as a grand mansion, squatter's homestead or an air force base, singled out? In relation to the first two, this comes out of a heritage discourse that is deeply imbued with colonial and middle class values of what is "important". At least in the case of the air force base there is more of a sense of a working city, of a place that had a different and particular historical function that can also be valued as the city moves towards obliterating it with housing. But an Aboriginal presence in this place – past and present – is not recognized in the place-making agenda.

This case study also highlights the specific challenges of place-making in a new, suburban locality where a major part of the attraction is its newness and absence of deep history but also the fact that any part of Australia does have a history – Indigenous but also perhaps as in the case of Point Cook, one that involves pastoralism and military land use. We have noted how this past was included in the place-making discourse but there is also the question as to why. It seems in this fringe suburban community that there is a need for the "old" in new communities to set them apart and maybe establish stability and sense of history in a place that is in a state of flux. Such icons and place-making artefacts have the effect here of drawing people to the area- why else would they visit a new community? – but also offering the focus for a sense of pride in the area and a sense that good things happen in this place, that it has a 'hidden secret'.

For policy makers we see the implications of this study as three fold:

1. Place-making does indeed need to actively occur but it has to be grounded genuinely on the deep history of the area

State of Australian Cities Conference 2015

2. Place-making needs to involve all in the community as active makers and re-makers of the icons and sense of place
3. Within new suburban areas there can be a real sense of place despite its apparent absence, people make places out of where they are, they give meaning in spite of, not always because of, planning and developer decisions.

References

- Cilliers, E. J. et.al. (2015) "Green place-making in practice: From temporary spaces to permanent places", *Journal of Urban Design* 20 (3), 349-366.
- Cilliers, E.J. and Timmermans, W. (2014) "The importance of creative participatory planning in the public place-making process", *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 41 (3), 413-429.
- Collier, J. and Collier, M. (1986). *Visual anthropology*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Hamnett, S. (2014) "Transcultural cities: border crossing and placemaking", *Australian Planner* 51 (4), 367-368.
- Harper, D. (2002) 'Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation', *Visual Studies*, 17 (1), 13–26.
- Healey, P. (2010) *Making better places: The planning project of the 21st century* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Horvath, R. (2004) "The particularity of global places: Placemaking practices in Los Angeles and Sydney", *Urban Geography* 25 (2), 92-119.
- Kearns, G. and Philo, C. (1993) *Selling places: The city as cultural capital, past and present* Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press.
- Liamputtong, P., Ezzy, D., (2005). *Qualitative Research Methods*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press.
- Massey, D. (1991) "The political place of locality studies", *Environment and Planning A* 23 (2), 267-281.
- Massey, D. (1993) "Power geometry and a programmatic sense of place" in Bird, J. et.al. (eds) *Mapping the futures* London: Routledge.
- Meinig, D. (1979) *The interpretation of ordinary landscapes: Geographical essays* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morse, J.M., (2000) Editorial: Determining sample size. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10, 3.
- Oakley, S. and Johnson, L.C. (2013) "Place-making and place taking in waterfront renewal, Australia", *Urban Studies* 50 (2), 341-355.
- Palermo, P.C. and Ponzini, D. (2015) *Place-making and urban development: New challenges for contemporary planning and design* London: Routledge.
- Project for Public Space (2015) www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/ Accessed 8.7.2015.
- Puleo, T. (2014) "Art-making as place-making following disaster", *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (4), 568-580.
- Relph, E. (1979) *Place and placelessness* London: Pion.
- Roe, P. G. (2014) "Analysing place and place-making: Urbanization in suburban Oslo", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38 (2), 498-515.
- Tuan Yi-Fu, (1974) *Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes and values* Inglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Tuan Yi-Fu (1977) *Space and place: The perspective of experience* London: Edward Arnold
- Winnikoff, T. (ed) (1995) *Places not spaces: Placemaking in Australia* Sydney: Envirobook.