Producing Multicultural Belonging: The Possibilities and Discontents of Local Public Spaces in Suburban Sydney

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Abstract: The paper follows calls to examine the everyday, micro-level interactions between migrants and city spaces to better understand how more inclusive cities can be achieved (Amin, 2002; Caglar and Glick Schiller, 2011; Ehrkamp, 2005). The discussion addresses the often-neglected site of public space in suburbia, and argues that there is a need to better theorise urban citizenship, socio-cultural diversity and the role of public space in the transformation of suburban settings. The paper draws on doctoral research exploring place-making practices of recent migrants in a multicultural suburb in Sydney, Australia. More specifically, it examines the role of new residents in the production of local public spaces, which are framed as shifting configurations of multiple actors, representations, governing narratives and everyday practices. This paper uses the example of the redevelopment of one public space – a pedestrianised mall – in the highly diverse suburb of Campsie, Sydney to examine the gaps between different representations and uses of the space for local planners/public officials and local migrant residents. It is argued that studying everyday modes of inhabiting suburban public spaces is important to understand how these spaces are constitutive of forms of local belonging. Moreover, migrants' everyday practices in public space are mediated through the local spatial articulations of discourses of multiculturalism and diversity, civicness and productive space use. By examining the differently located social actors and divergent narratives that produce a suburban public square in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood, the paper highlights different ideas about who constitutes the legitimate dweller in, and producer of, (multicultural) public space.

Introduction

Contemporary research on migration and the city has increasingly focused attention on the spatial dimensions of multiculturalism and migrant incorporation. This research interest is not new: understanding the role that migration and diversity play in the production and transformation of urban life has long been a concern of urban phenomenologists, urban sociologists and others researching the relationship between space, strangerhood and the city. Studies that bring together theories on urban governance and the everyday politics of belonging offer valuable insights into the ways in which human mobility can be grounded in the life of the city (Amin, 2002). Others have focused more explicitly on articulating the connections between neoliberal restructuring, urbanisation and the management of socio-cultural diversity in cities (Harvey, 2012; Sassen, 2001). There is a significant history of literature looking at the relationship between the construction of socio-cultural difference and local planning narratives, and the important role of spatial governance in social inclusion in Australia (for example Sandercock, 2000; Fincher and Iveson, 2008; Bugg, 2013; Bugg and Gurran, 2011; Iveson and Fincher, 2010; Stewart et al., 2003; Dunn, 1998; Thompson and Dunn, 2002; Wise and Velayutham, 2009a) and internationally (Trudeau, 2006; Valverde, 2012; Hall, 2012; Keith, 2005). The study of the intersection between diversity associated with migration, micro-spatial belonging and the production of urban landscapes in Australian cities is particularly relevant in the current climate in which migration and migrants' contribution to Australian society continues to be politicised. Indeed, migrant subjects are often viewed through territorialised and singular notions of belonging scaled at the level of national citizenship. This framing tends to ignore the changing reality of human mobility and the complex and multiple registers of belonging that migrants draw upon – including transnational, cosmopolitan and locally embedded identities (Hage, 1998; Anderson and Taylor, 2005; Castles et al., 2013; Carruthers, 2013).

This paper seeks to understand how we can better understand the localised forms of socio-spatial belonging in highly diverse neighbourhoods by studying a multi-ethnic suburb in Sydney. More particularly, it examines how migrant belonging is mediated through ordinary public spaces which are socially constructed through a range of social actors and institutional knowledges. It uses the lens of a proposed regeneration project to examine the gaps between migrants' modes of inhabiting space and the way multiculturalism and diversity are engaged from a planning perspective, and asks what this might mean for forms of substantive citizenship in Australian suburbs.

Case Study: Shaping multicultural landscapes in suburban Sydney

The following discussion draws on doctoral research that involved a place-based study of Campsie, a suburb located in local government area of Canterbury, approximately 17 kilometres from Sydney city centre. The suburb is an established residential area with some commercial and industrial land use.

The town centre is a popular shopping destination, dominated by Chinese and Korean small businesses, and known for its inexpensive goods, green grocers and 'Asian supermarkets'. The suburb is part of the Canterbury-Bankstown region which sits between the gentrified Inner West and the South-western and Western Sydney regions of Sydney; these latter regions are aging, middle-ring suburbs that are typically characterised as working-class, ethnically diverse, with relatively high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and a legacy of post-war migrant settlement and declining manufacturing industry (Randolph and Freestone, 2012). Like most places in Sydney, the area's own histories and micro-geographies of migration and planning fit uneasily in the dominant spatial imaginaries of suburban Sydney with its centre-west dichotomy (Butler, 2007) and conflicting representations of crime and degeneration, unsustainable sprawl, and Australian aspirational dreams of home-ownership (Allon, 2006; Murphy and Watson, 1997; Powell, 1993).

Figure 1: Campsie's location within Sydney
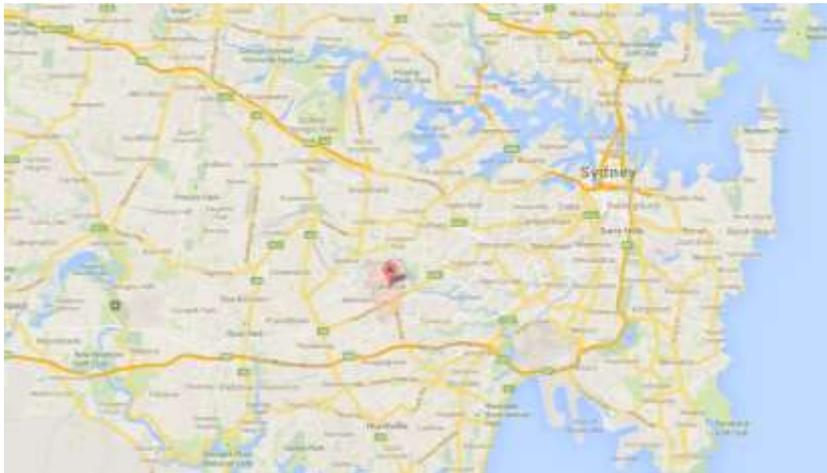
Source: Google maps

The population of the suburb is highly ethno-culturally diverse: of a total population of just over 21,000, 28.8% of the population was born in Australia, while the most common birth countries for those born overseas were China (excludes SARs and Taiwan), South Korea, India, Vietnam and Lebanon (see Figure 2) (ABS, 2013). Based on the 2011 census data, 88.6% of people living in Campsie have had parents born overseas, and only 17% only spoke English at home (ABS, 2013). The most common ancestries in Campsie were Chinese (30.4%), Lebanese (7.5%), Korean (5.6%), English (5.5%) and Australian (5.5%) (ABS, 2013). It also serves as a 'gateway' for new migrants, with 28% of the overseas born population arrived in the area after 2006. According to my interviewees, the suburb is attractive to new migrants because of its location, good transport links, the presence of ethnic community groups and ethnic businesses, a well-developed infrastructure of non-profit and government agencies providing settlement-related services, and a relatively high number of places of religious worship (mainly Christian). Affordable housing is another draw card, with relatively inexpensive units in two- to three-storey apartment blocks that constitute approximately 60% of the local housing stock; the remainder is low density housing (ABS, 2013). While local real estate agents are quick to talk about the area as becoming gentrified, it is an area of relatively low household incomes (the medium household weekly income is $945, compared to the Australian average of $1,234), and there is a relatively high unemployment (9.7% compared to the Australian average of 5.6%). The SEIFA Index figures rank Campsie-Clemton Park the fifth most socio-economically disadvantaged out of the sixteen small areas in the City of Canterbury.

Figure 2: Campsie's population - country of birth
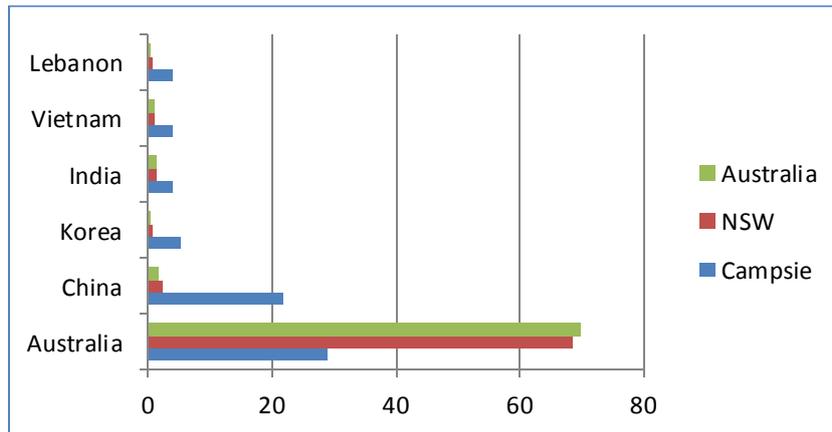
Source: ABS. (2013) 2011 Census Community Profile: Campsie. Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Methodology

This paper is part of doctoral research that explores forms of migrant belonging by examining place-making practices in multi-ethnic suburban public spaces. The study addresses calls to better understand both the 'place' of migrants in contemporary Australian cities, and the role of migrants in producing places. The study used a mixed methods approach to investigate the multiple actors, scales and dimensions (social, economic, cultural and political) involved in the production of local spaces. Drawing on agency-centred approaches that recognise migrant's agency in processes of urban transformation (Caglar and Glick Schiller, 2011; Varsanyi, 2006), migrant voices and experiences were included in the study through 20 semi-structured interviews. Some interviews involved participatory map drawing of the local area to investigate the 'mental maps' of migrant residents. Participants were mainly recruited through migrant support services and snowballing, and were selected based on their residence in the local area and experience of migration – the majority of participants had arrived in Australia less than 10 years ago, although several had resided in Australia for longer. A place-based approach was taken that aimed to avoid privileging ethnicity as the sole determinant of socio-spatial belonging (Glick Schiller and Caglar, 2011). Reflecting the demographics of the area, most participants were from non-English speaking backgrounds and were permanent residents or temporary visa holders applying for permanent residency in Australia. To examine the structural conditions and 'landscapes of opportunity' shaped migrant incorporation in this locality, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local migrant and housing support workers, community leaders, real estate agents, residents and key informants involved in local urban and social planning. Other methods included participant observation at community events, and the observation, mapping and photography of public spaces in the neighbourhood. Drawing on the methods used in Low's study of public plazas (2000), this involved observing and documenting the spatial layout, activities and interactions in several public spaces that were part of migrant residents' daily local trajectories. Observations were carried out over a ten-month period from April 2012 to February 2013 (and included a six months of residence in the suburb). These methods were supplemented by a review of the statistical profile of the area and a discourse analysis of documents relating to local city and social planning, as well as a review of relevant state and federal policy.

In this paper I explore how the local pedestrian mall was produced through migrants' quotidian spatial practices, and compare this to the envisioning of this space through official discourses of place and multiculture. I begin by briefly touching on some of the literature relating to suburban regeneration and diversity, before describing the everyday rhythms of the mall. I then discuss, from a critical sociological perspective, how the mall has been imagined through redevelopment plans before analysing the disjuncture between the lived and representational dimensions of this space, and discussing possible outcomes in terms of socio-spatial in/exclusion. In doing so, I draw mainly on data gathered from observation and discourse analysis of local government documents, however, the following discussion is also informed by migrants' and community workers' narratives of local space use.

Producing multi-ethnic public space? Regenerating the suburban mall

A renewed interest in suburban geographies in recent years has seen suburbs recast as 'emergent landscapes' (Anderson, 2006: 2) that are no longer viewed as parochial and passive, but constitute an arena for new types of assemblages of the global (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). A '(post)suburban turn' has highlighted the fragmentation of the global city along multiple dimensions

such as class, ethnicity, employment, investment, amenity and accessibility and many scholars have pointed to migration and socio-cultural diversity as an important factor in a highly differentiated and polarised urban fabric (Allon, 2006: 18; Murphy and Watson, 1997; Burnley, 2000; Anderson, 2006: 1). That the 'traditional' linkages between urban public space and participatory urban citizenship have been reconfigured through the neoliberal restructuring of urban space and the encroachment of private interests into the urban commons has been well demonstrated. Very little of what we conceive of as 'public space' is in fact public (Valverde, 2012; Blomley, 2011) and it has perhaps become more pertinent to study the 'spatialities of publicness' (Iveson, 2007: 9).

City spaces are best understood as assemblages of administrative and regulatory regimes that overlap with social, cultural and economic systems of meaning (Valverde, 2012). In cities of diversity, this means teasing out not only the history of urban planning discourses and municipal governance, but also how concepts of diversity have been variously managed in and out (often indirectly) of certain urban localities. Notions of 'diversity' – and in Australia, multiculturalism – are notoriously fluid. Diversity can be tied to ideas of 'authenticity' (Zukin, 2010), emancipatory urban politics, inclusive social planning agendas, or employed as a marketable brand in discourses of creative cities. In Australia, the idea that diversity or multiculture is a valuable, commodifiable resource is part and parcel of the national myth of multiculturalism and an important part of marketing Australian cities as cosmopolitan, globally connected spaces. This has been variously articulated, for example, through the 1990's discourse of 'productive diversity' and the promotion of ethnic precincts where "where the symbolic economy of space is constructed on representations of ethnicity and 'immigrantness'" (Collins and Kunz, 2009: 39). While it has been argued that the development and marketing of cultural quarters for touristic consumption create a 'thin' multiculturalism that better accords with dominant notions of 'tolerance' than fully inclusive forms of citizenship (Collins, 2006; Hage, 1997), it is important to explore how these multiple meanings of diversity are entangled 'on the ground' in everyday suburban spaces.

The everyday rhythms of the mall
I now turn to the lived space of the mall as observed during my fieldwork period. The pedestrianised mall is an open-air public square that connects at one end with Beamish Street, the main retail strip in the town centre, and at the other end with a road and public park. Pedestrianised in 1994, the mall features several sets of benches, small trees and shrubbery, shade covers and a small automated toilet block and a female-only rest centre at the western end. It is ringed by a range of businesses including several restaurants, a medical centre, beauty therapists, a café, and real estate agents, a couple of empty shop premises and occasional pop up shops (see Figure 3). The mall is a site of ethnic entrepreneurialism, with the majority of the shops operated by both recent and more established migrants, and several catering specifically to local migrant populations. It is daily produced through a range of migrant activities (see Figure 5-6). For elderly migrant residents it was a meeting point and a site for socialising, particularly in the morning. The benches are often well used by a range of regular groups: an elderly Greek contingent who sit daily outside the Greek green grocers, the elderly male Chinese residents who set up make-shift checkers tables out of milk crates, and sit playing and drinking tea, and several other groups of predominantly Chinese residents who sit and chat in the mall, some after their early morning Tai Chi sessions in the park. For local women residents the Women's Rest Centre at the end of the mall – decorated with an anti-domestic violence artwork – not only provided a convenient, safe and clean rest stop but also operated as a node of local gossip, intercultural encounter and information exchange about migrant- and women-specific services.

The mall also functions as a transit space and part of individual geographies of consumption, health and welfare: for many of the elderly migrant residents or mothers with young children, it provides a useful resting point midway through a shopping circuit, and connects to Centrelink and other social services or the medical centre at the west edge of the mall. The mall is also used as a hang-out spot for young teenagers after school, but only to a limited extent. The local frozen yoghurt shops, Internet cafes, shopping mall, library and the youth centre tend to be more popular. In the evening, a group associated with one of the local Chinese community organisations holds regular dance practices in the space, accompanied by music piped through an old tape player. Interviews with residents and community workers suggest some of these practices instantiate a blurring of public and private space connected to higher density living and associated lack of private space or communal space in local residential developments.

Figure 3 and 4: ANZAC Mall and the Sunday market

Photo: Rebecca Williamson

Figure 5 and 6: The socialities of the mall

Photo: Rebecca Williamson

In the weekend the mall is enlivened by a multitude of shoppers that flood the town centre, or on Sunday, by the more informal trade of the Rotary markets (see Figure 4) held in the middle of the mall, a space dominated by established (and mostly non-local) East European migrants and some more recently arrived Chinese and Vietnamese sellers. The area is also an important stage for annual rhythms of commemoration and multicultural 'celebration'. ANZAC Day memorial events are held at the war memorial at the eastern end of the mall every April, while in June the suburb's annual Food Festival is held along the main street with the main stage set up in the mall. The civic functionality of the space tends to be prioritised by local government and is managed through the administrative rhythms of the community festival calendar. Thus, the space is constituted through a constellation of activities across different temporalities.

Re-envisioning the mall
The council's strategic plan for regenerating the mall (adopted in 2012 but not yet implemented) offers a somewhat different vision of this local space and the activities that produce it. The plan proposes re-opening the road to one-way traffic, and the creation of a cosmopolitan eat-street where alfresco dining would be encouraged. Based on a relatively small consultation with 12 local business owners and tenants, the plan creates 'smaller, separated civic open spaces'. It involves potentially moving key public facilities such as the Women's Rest Centre (which may not attract the "right mix of people" (MacroPlan Australia, 2011: 29))[1], although an existing Anzac memorial clock tower and a decorative commemorative mosaic would remain in place (MacroPlan Australia, 2011). The re-envisioning of the mall is based on an evaluation of the existing space as somewhat problematic based on poor commercial viability and vitality materialised in shop vacancies, the perceived under-utilisation of the space, and a perceived threat of anti-social behaviour. The perceived under-utilisation of the space is not surprising given the spatial layout of the mall which positions furniture, shade umbrellas, trees and shops around the edges of the square, leaving a large paved area in the middle that seems to be used mainly as a thoroughfare, occasional children's play area, or site for parking police cars during the

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[1] The socio-cultural importance of the rest centre has however been acknowledged by council staff (Interview with council staff member, February 2013).

local area command's 'high visibility', community engagement exercises. Fear of civic disorder is partly used to justify returning the space to car traffic, for the reason that cars serve as 'eyes on the street' or passive surveillance, which in turn reduces the opportunity for out of place, criminal behaviour. While crime and anti-social behaviour is an important issue, the conversion of the space to one shared by traffic and pedestrians is not considered a significant safety problem.

As Valverde has shown in the highly diverse city of Toronto, parks, sidewalks and other spaces that are deemed 'public' are not actually 'common' property at all, but are the private property of the municipal corporation, although the extent to which it is defined as such varies depending on the context (Valverde, 2012: 35). The 'publicness' of the mall is also partially complicated to the extent that the project is a public-private partnership involving finance from developers. While the part privatisation of public services is unexceptional in the current financial climate, it begs the question of the extent to which the multiple publics that make up the community are factored into design decisions. While in an appendix to the report the use of the space by children, senior citizens and other groups (for example, the Tai Chi practitioners) are acknowledged, little in the preceding plan seems to directly account for their spatial needs. The 'publicness' of the space – as well as being discursively constructed through notions of public safety, economic vitality, and cosmopolitanism – tends also to be channelled into local government notions of 'civic space' involving officially sanctioned congregation and expressions of community and local belonging (largely scaled-down versions of dominant articulations of Australian national belonging), for example, through the multicultural food festival, or ANZAC memorial services. Indeed, these council-sponsored events – along with the Rotary market – constitute the few instances that the road will be closed to traffic and reappropriated as a community space. Other articulations of multicultural difference in the suburb tend to be corralled into other, safe spaces: the local town hall for citizenship ceremonies or the library for organised, educational events celebrating the cultures of community migrant groups. While these articulations reflect a history of proactive and inclusive social planning agendas in the local council and local library in particular, they remain managed spaces.

Like the existing uses of the space, the plan does not mention diversity or multiculturalism, nor refers to the existing demographics of the suburb. References are instead made to cosmopolitanism, which appears to be framed as a mode of middle-class consumption that involves converting significant parts of the mall into privatised café or eating spaces, rather than a lived reality of, and open attitude to multiple, culturally-inflected ways of inhabiting space. The absence of such a discourse is telling, and like the municipal bylaws that Valverde analyses, it "does not mean that diversity is not constantly being managed, minimised, channelled… produced, or swept under the rug" (2012: 77). Transforming the space into a 'vibrant eat street' capitalises on the ethno-cultural diversity of the suburb and its business, but in a way that potentially excludes certain segments of the population (for example, elderly residents who cannot afford to purchase food and drinks in cafes). While it accords with similar urban regeneration strategies in other parts of the city, such image making involves a sanitised vision of culture is largely tailored to a middle-class gaze, but it fails to implement a multiculturalism that goes 'all the way down' to include the home-making practices of migrant groups (Hage, 1997; Jordan and Collins, 2012). However, such a reconfiguration of public space obviously does not exclude all migrant residents – class remains an important dimension. Indeed, residents of migrant background are often highly active in processes of urban regeneration and entrepreneurial innovation, whether or not this form of agency is recognised by local or city planners (Hall, 2011). Moreover, the regeneration of this area may better serve migrant and non-migrants alike whose habitus is more aligned with café culture and regulated public spaces. Improving the area through place-marketing and greater investment and development is undoubtedly an important imperative for local governments and planners; what is interesting in this case is whose modes of inhabitance are being prioritised and instantiated into local public spaces, and thus *for whom* these changes will be beneficial. Disconnecting existing spatial practices from the envisioned transformation of the mall may exclude certain residents and practices from this space, despite local governments' aims for a stronger community that embraces diversity (Canterbury City Council, 2013).

Concluding Comments

Understanding the different ways of inhabiting public space and how "material interventions enable and constrain the potentialities of spaces and their publicness" (Koch and Latham, 2011: 515) enables a better understanding of the 'normative terrain' upon which everyday forms of belonging and dwelling are monitored and negotiated (Trudeau, 2006). This paper explores how the everyday spatial practices of migrants in suburban spaces can intersect, appropriate and sometimes contradict public and official visions of space. Discourses of migration, multiculturalism and community harmony are variously drawn into such representations and work to further emplace – or displace – some groups of migrants in certain spaces of the city. And while the myriad, banal forms of place-making,

congregation and intercultural encounter continue to play out in local spaces through 'everyday multiculturalism' (Wise and Velayutham, 2009b), I would suggest that recognising the gaps between spatial practice and representations is important to investigate how local residents – particularly those marginalised in local decision making processes – can be better integrated into local planning processes and future framing of community spaces. As Fincher and Iveson (2008: 119) have argued, the way urban space is managed and governed plays "a key role in shaping the terms on which inter-ethnic relations are organised and conducted". Exploring how everyday spatial practice is linked to the management of the local built environment is therefore crucial to understanding the nexus between migration, diversity and more inclusive suburban space.

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