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From hotbeds of depravity to hidden treasures: the narrative evolution of Melbourne's laneways

Abstract:

Places are both sustained and shaped by the stories we tell about them. In turn, stories of place are influenced by cultural, political, and socioeconomic forces. A form of 'unplanned' urban architecture, over almost two centuries Melbourne's inner-city laneways have been inscribed with multiple layers of narrative. This paper tracks the unfolding tensions around these evolving urban spaces, from Melbourne's founding up until the present day. Drawing upon site visits, theorists of place, narrative and memory, and analysis of select historical and contemporary texts, the article explores how the uses of Melbourne's back lanes have changed over time, and how these changes have been both reflected in, and influenced by, narratives of place. From their genesis as makeshift service lanes, to their early reputation as sites of moral disorder; from shanty towns to celebrated tourist destinations; from public health risks to sites of urban renewal and cultural memorialisation – the transformation of these atmospheric passageways illustrates the fluid and contested nature of place, and its intrinsic yet unstable relationship with narrative. In considering how narrative has been deployed to stake or negate claims to the laneways, the article traces the role and impact of various actors: government, social reformers, slum residents, novelists, journalists and media outlets, business interests, street artists, and people experiencing homelessness. Melbourne's inner-urban back lanes emerge as liminal sites where questions of spatial exclusion, cultural capital, and belonging are navigated in complex and shifting ways.

Biographical note:

Dr Meg Mundell is a Melbourne-based cultural geographer, novelist and journalist. As an early-career researcher, her academic work focuses on place, spatial justice and narratives of homelessness, with a particular interest in the psychosocial dimensions of both natural and built environments. She runs the research/engagement project 'We Are Here: Writing Place', which uses creative writing and semi-structured interviews to explore understandings of place amongst people who have experienced homelessness, and is editor of the forthcoming book *We Are Here: Stories of Home, Place and Belonging* (Affirm Press, October 2019), a collection of place-themed writings by people who have been homeless. Her novels, *Black Glass* (Scribe 2011) and *The Trespassers* (UQP 2019), employ plausible dystopias to explore the emotional and cultural implications of displacement, while her journalism has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Monthly*, *The Australian Financial Review* and *The Weekend Australian*. Meg is currently a Research Fellow in Writing and Literature at Deakin University, and a member of the steering committee for the HOME Research Hub, a Deakin-based interdisciplinary research network focused on community-led solutions to homelessness, affordable housing and social inclusion.

Keywords:

Creative writing – narrative and place – place-making – laneways – urban renewal – spatial justice – homelessness – street art

It's tricky to take notes while wandering down Hosier Lane. With each step the uneven bluestone cobbles punctuate your progress – jostle your pen, add random hieroglyphics, render words illegible. Pay no heed to the wonky paving and you're liable to roll an ankle. In photos from the 1970s, Hosier Lane looks half-asleep, its walls blank, the only decoration a 'To Let' notice and a faded sign marking a hosiery company, a clue to the lane's century-long contribution to the local rag trade. Today this narrow slice of urban space is packed with tourists and schoolkids, phones aloft, snapping selfies against the vibrant backdrop of graffiti that covers every reachable surface. *Click. Share. Post. Tag: #hosierlane.* The images skim through space, populating the virtual walls of social media feeds around the world.¹

Walk down Hosier Lane today and you'll smell coffee, urine, perfume, garbage, spray-paint. In adjoining Rutledge Lane, clients of the local homelessness service perch on milk crates, swapping news, while a vaping social worker watches a graffiti artist add another layer to the palimpsest. At the artist's feet, a sign: *Welcome to our city. Like our art, cool take a photo. However we don't get paid for our work. Help us continue to buy paint.* Words and pictures crowd the walls: a corporate logo masquerades as street art, while woven graffiti urges: *Free West Papua!* Overhead a huge mural depicts an Aboriginal child gazing south toward Birrarung Marr. Window-seated patrons scan menus at chic laneway bar MoVida, where the top drop costs \$440 a bottle. The alcoves opposite, which once sheltered rough sleepers, are boarded up.



'Hosier Lane' (1972), Karl J. Halla, State Library of Victoria; Graffiti artist, Hosier Lane, 2018 (author);
'Indigenous Boy', Matt Adnate, Hosier Lane, 2018 (author)

Hosier Lane's ongoing metamorphosis illustrates the fluid and contested nature of place, and the role of narrative as a place-making mechanism. Over the past two decades Melbourne's back lanes have undergone an accelerated transformation, morphing from shadowy interstices to coveted slices of real estate, from forgotten dead ends to lauded cultural

destinations. Many are now contested sites, where different groups lay competing claims to belonging and control.

This article explores the narrative evolution of Melbourne's inner-city back lanes, examining how narrative has been deployed to articulate and bolster particular understandings of place. Drawing on site visits, textual analysis, and theorists of place, narrative, and memory, I explore the role of narrative in reflecting and shaping how the laneways have been imagined and used. In written accounts of the lanes, which narratives have come to dominate, and why? Why do certain narratives gain traction, while others fade away? And how have shifting narratives of place helped shape these liminal forms of urban architecture? Texts analysed include newspapers, periodicals, novels, and memoirs published during Melbourne's gold rush era and subsequent economic decline (circa 1850-1900); government reports dating from the city's founding to the Great Depression (circa 1830s-1930s); and more recent newspaper articles and government-funded culture/tourism websites, dating from the beginnings of Melbourne's 'revitalisation' to the present day (circa 1980s-2018). Site visits were undertaken using 'immersive techniques', involving heightened attentiveness and multisensory engagement with place (Mundell 2018: 5).

I conclude that narrative is used not only to construct place, but also to establish, reinforce, or discredit *claims to place*; and further, that it can be deployed to *displace* particular people and groups, and to destroy place in both figurative and concrete ways. Offering interdisciplinary insights into the role of narrative in urban place-making, this paper contributes to an ongoing conversation between literary studies, urban studies, and human geography. Specifically, it helps illuminate the dynamic interplay of built form, local culture, public policy, commercial forces, and textual representation in creating, claiming, and re-imagining place.

'Place' is variously defined, but my usage rests on two definitions: "'space" imbued with meaning' (Vanclay 2008: 3), and 'meaningful location' (Agnew 1987: 27).² Places are not fixed, but mutable and dynamic: shaped and reshaped over time in the shifting narratives that coalesce around them. Places can transform gradually or rapidly, and narratives can both reflect and catalyse these changes. Stories, after all, are potent place-making tools: they lend a site character and resonance, granting places a foothold in the public imagination. Words and stories, writes human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, 'have the specific power to call places into being', imbuing seemingly static sites with colour, emotion, and meaning (1991: 686). Place meanings accumulate over time in narrative layers of 'gossip and song, oral history, written history, essays and poems...' (Tuan 1991: 692). Yet for all its generative power, narrative can also be a destructive force: stories can unmake, warp, or obliterate place, paving over memory and staking new claims to old ground. Narrative is thus complicit in not only place-making, but also place-breaking.

'A disgrace to our city': bad air and gutter dwellers

A form of unplanned architecture, Melbourne's back laneways³ evolved organically from the city's quadrangular layout. Surveyor Robert Hoddle deliberately omitted rear access lanes from the Hoddle Grid, his 1837 template to transform a ramshackle illegal township into an orderly future city. Hoddle subscribed to the miasma theory of disease, a popular medical narrative of the day whereby deadly illness was spread by foul-smelling 'bad air' (Otto 2005: 68; Halliday 2001). By this logic, narrow laneways were hazardous, their stagnant confines harbouring noxious vapours in which cholera, malaria, or typhus might lurk. Yet as the city grew, its buildings required back entrances where grunt work could be discreetly carried out. As allotments were divided and re-divided, a network of unofficial

back lanes cross-hatched the austere white space of Hoddle's grid. Most began life as private service-ways, allowing servants to enter premises, goods to be shifted by horse and cart, 'night-soil' collectors to haul away human waste, and factories to assume extra workspace. Shanty towns sprang up in some lanes, while others became home to stables, brothels, laundries, opium dens, boarding houses, or artisans' workshops.

Melbourne's colonial surveyors strove to inscribe social order through spatial regulation, imposing an imagined city onto the landscape the local Wurundjeri peoples called Narrm. Haunted by the spectre of London's slums, writes Kathryn Ferguson, early planners 'struggled against the phantoms of disarray that they believed would cripple the burgeoning city'. Anxious to stave off disorder, they laid down a formal, regular design to tame the wayward colony. This architectural vision sought to embed a particular narrative of place: 'a mythology of early Melbourne as an orderly centre in an otherwise chaotic hinterland of Empire' (Ferguson 2014: 7). The city's narrow back lanes, unruly and unsanctioned, threatened this aspirational narrative of disciplined colonial space. In 1839, Samuel Perry, NSW Deputy Surveyor General, advised against naming Melbourne's nascent back lanes, lest they tempt citizens into 'serious mischief' (Cannon & Cannon, 1981). His warning went unheeded: by the mid-1850s, the city had 80 named lanes and 112 rights-of-way, in which hundreds of people lived (Bate 1994: 12; 59).

Meanwhile, stories of Melbourne began circulating in print. The 1850s gold rush sparked a huge wave of immigration, social upheaval, and rapid urban development. Lavish civic architecture sprang up, including the Town Hall, the State Library, and Parliament House, alongside a flourishing publishing industry, producing newspapers and periodicals, and eventually novels and memoirs, depicting life in the fast-growing colony (Dowling 2011).⁴ But the goldfields wealth was unevenly shared, and the city's back-lane 'slums' became a target for government concern and voyeuristic public fascination. The slums presented a stark contrast to Melbourne's burgeoning prosperity, and this polarisation provided grist for sensationalist stories. From the 1850s, notes historian Andrew Brown-May, 'Slum depictions, fashioned in words and illustration, endured as a powerful genre in Melbourne's cultural landscape' (Brown-May n.d.). A compelling narrative will readily leap genres, and the city's sensationalist journalism and fiction often cross-fertilised each other (Martin & Mirmohamadi 2011: 23-24). In 1847, a local merchant complained to the *Port Phillip Patriot* that his adjacent lane was a 'nest of wretched hovels and a complete den of infamy' (Annear 2014: 218); in 1876 the *Argus* condemned the red-light alleys around Romeo Lane (re-named 'Crossley Street' thereafter) as 'a plague spot to the city', full of 'hovels...vile haunts...thieves and bad characters' (Argus 1876: 2). An 1896 sketch titled 'A Melbourne Laneway' describes a 'sordid, odoriferous world' of rotten vegetables, mangy dogs, a resident drunk, and a filthy baby playing in the gutter (Leonardo 1896: 11). In Benjamin Fargeon's popular 1886 novel *Grif: the Story of a Colonial Life*, a street urchin ekes out a hardscrabble existence in a Melbourne of harsh extremes, 'where poverty and vice struggle for breathing space, and where narrow lanes and filthy thoroughfares jostle each other' (Fargeon 1898: n.p.). Wealthy merchants banquet in grand mansions, while the poor subsist in cramped back-alley tenements owned by greedy slum lords. Grif's lowly social status is symbolised by his affinity with its architectural equivalent: the gutter: '[Occupying] the lowest rung of the social ladder... Grif did not object to gutters; he had formed their acquaintance in his earliest infancy, and time and association had almost endeared them to him' (1898: n.p.). Romanticisation aside, the subtext is clear: the city's most degraded architectural elements – its back lanes and gutters – are the preserve of the poor.

'Metaphorically', writes historian Weston Bate, 'you could take the city's pulse and temperature from the condition of its lanes' (Bate 1994: 86). By the 1860s, the laneways

were maligned as disease-ridden, but their moral health was suspect too. Popular accounts painted the lanes as sites of crime and disorder, disreputable settings for ‘nuisance’ behaviour – urination, boozing, prostitution, loitering, larrikinism. By the 1870s, their unchecked depravity was routinely depicted in stark contrast to the more controlled space of the city grid. While fashionable Melburnians partook in the public ritual of ‘doing the block’ – strolling Collins, Swanston, and Elizabeth Streets – the lower classes were apparently skulking in the laneways, indulging multiple vices. Proto-gonzo journalist John Stanley James (‘the Vagabond’), who scandalised respectable readers with tales from Melbourne’s underbelly, called the lanes ‘a disgrace to our city’. These ‘foul neighbourhoods’ harboured inferior human specimens: ‘low, degraded, brutal-looking’ (James 2016: 30-31). By the late 1800s, the lanes were damned in the popular imagination as ‘dirty, alive with vermin, close and foetid’, full of ‘disreputable inhabitants’: ‘women who have retained nothing that is womanly; men dead to every manly sentiment; and children in whom nothing that is innocent or child-like can be found’ (Freeman 1888: 14-19). The laneways had become a form of shadow architecture: space run rampant, out of control.

The moniker ‘Marvellous Melbourne’, bestowed by visiting journalist George Sala, captured the sheen of the 1880s economic boom. Yet behind the moneyed facades, a contrasting narrative persisted: if grand civic architecture was the face of Marvellous Melbourne, the back lanes represented the city’s shadow self. The shadows were not just metaphorical: the main streets were gas-lit from 1857, but the laneways remained dark. In Fergus Hume’s best-selling crime novel, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886; 1971), the protagonists enter the ‘darkness and gloom’ of the city’s back lanes as if descending into hell: ‘[They] kept for safety in the middle of the alley, so that no one could spring upon them unaware... [saw] a man cowering back into the black shadow... a woman with disordered hair and bare bosom... children playing in the dried-up gutter’ (Hume 1971: 100). Hume’s novel found an eager local audience, writes historian Lucy Sussex⁵: ‘a highly literate, book-loving population with disposable income, living at the centre of the Australasian book trade’ (Sussex 2015: 94). His juxtaposition of ‘the block’ with ‘the slums’ reinforces one of the novel’s key themes: the colony’s fragile social order, in which hardship, violence, and vice simmer beneath the surface of genteel respectability (Caterson 2012).

The concept of ‘collective memory’ illuminates how place-based narratives play out over time. The term’s various uses⁶ can be distilled into a working definition, as it relates to place: ‘collective memory’ thus refers to shared understandings of place, which can manifest in texts, symbols, artefacts, buildings, events, rites, exchanges, traces, and landscapes. These understandings need not be factual, unanimous, or homogenous – different groups and cultures produce different versions of the past (Halbwachs 1992) – but they help a community contextualise place, and articulate their relationship to it. Anthropologist James Wertsch writes that collective memory ‘tends to be loyal to a narrative at the expense of evidence’ (Wertsch 2012: 13), while sociologist Jeffrey Stepinsky argues that it ‘rarely refers to a single memory but is coincident and inseparable from the idea of narrative’ (Stepinsky 2005: 1387). Alongside ‘specific narratives’, tied to discrete past events, Wertsch posits that collective memory is also underpinned by ‘schematic narrative templates’. These deeper narrative patterns tend to produce replica accounts that ‘reflect a single general story line’ (Wertsch 2008: 123).

The dominant narrative schema of Melbourne’s laneways was laid down early, reinforced often, and proved hard to budge. Its precise expression varied, but the underlying pattern was consistent: *Melbourne’s back lanes are zones of moral disorder; a threat to the civilised city; a shadowy netherworld harbouring sickness, vice, crime, and bad people.* The laneways were an urban manifestation of what Ross Gibson calls a ‘badland’ – a malevolent, mythic,

untameable no-go zone, into which a society mentally projects and quarantines its most disturbing, shameful, or unacceptable elements (2002: 7). Badlands are places ‘where evil can be banished so that goodness can be credited, by contrast’, to adjacent areas (2002: 17).⁷ With the back lanes thus designated, the main streets could claim the contrasting virtues of progress, decorum, and sophistication.⁸ By imaginatively corralling evil within the laneways – a kind of feral internal frontier – a society founded on the dispossession and displacement of Aboriginal peoples sought to contain its shadow side.

Lost for words: place erasure and counternarratives

Whose ends were served by these tales of back-lane filth, depravity, and vice? Not the laneway’s residents, who included families, labourers, domestic servants, artisans, bricklayers, bakers, tailors, and clerks (Bate 1994: 61; Victoria 1913). As historian Alan Mayne notes, slums were ‘not tangible features of urban spatial form’, but ‘products of the imagination...elements of discourse’ (1995: 81, 102). Slum narratives remind us that stories are seldom innocent; that they can be used to suppress, silence, or subjugate, to reinforce dominant power structures.

Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that narrative has a ‘shadowy epistemology’, and is ‘indifferent’ to factuality (1990: 55, 50), while narrative scholar Catherine Riessman notes that stories are implicated in ‘the flow of power in the wider world’ (2009: 8). Discussing the recent fetishisation of storytelling, writer and cultural historian Maria Tumarkin warns: ‘stories can lead you down foxholes you cannot fact-check your way out of’ (2014). As Jean Mandler argues, narrative not only frames human experience, but also ensures certain accounts endure, while others fade: ‘Framing pursues experience into memory...what does not get structured narratively suffers loss in memory’ (1984: 56). Melbourne’s founding was an exercise in wilful forgetting and erasure: while Aboriginal tribes had thrived in the Port Phillip Bay region for some 40,000 years, one colonial surveyor declared the area ‘desolate and unproductive’ (Ferguson 2004: 2). As long-term custodians of Narm (Melbourne), the Wurundjeri peoples had accumulated their own knowledge-rich stories of place, but these narratives were swiftly excised from the official cityscape.

Publication amplifies a narrative’s place-making power: when stories of place circulate widely, writes Yi-Fu Tuan, they ‘take a hold on public consciousness’, gaining greater stability and permanence (1991: 686); Dickens’ novels, for example, helped imprint a particular vision of 19th century London vividly in readers’ minds. Phillip Mackintosh articulates how metropolitan newspapers shaped the imaginative and physical landscape of 19th and early 20th century cities: press barons built prestigious skyscrapers, editors amplified the interests of property owners, and journalists campaigned to pave city streets (2017: 38–40).

Yet just as narratives can conjure place, they can also threaten, distort, or destroy it. Early Melbourne’s social-reform culture forged influential alliances between government, churches, universities, newspapers, and literary magazines (Howe n.d.). Championed by social reformers and newspaper editors, the ‘evil laneways’ narrative helped fuel a century-long push to eradicate Melbourne’s slums. The ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ myth – so emblematic of colonial progress and prosperity – was dealt a blow by the 1890s Depression, bringing high unemployment, a banking crash, and widespread repossession of homes. Poverty suddenly became more proximate, and more alarming.

In 1908, using warlike terminology to effect a noble tone, *Herald* editors called for a ‘crusade against slumdom’ (Mayne 1995: 85). In 1913, anti-slum crusader Arthur Pearson decried the

city's back-lane slums as 'a perfect disgrace...[not] fit to keep a pig in' (Victoria 1913: 1). In 1923, Methodist social reformer F. Oswald Barnett waxed poetic, lamenting 'These children of the slums... / Who play in evil-smelling lanes / Whose mothers cannot keep them clean / In body or in soul...' (1945: 24). A 1937 government report on the 'slum menace' expressed 'horror and amazement at the deplorable conditions... Hidden behind wide, spacious streets there are slum pockets which are hotbeds of depravity and disease' (HISAB 1937).



'Behind the Scenes', F. Oswald Barnett (photographer) (1935?), State Library of Victoria; 'Homeless Man in Laneway' (1968?), Alan Jordan, State Library of Victoria

These emotive narratives catalysed the destruction of laneway neighbourhoods. Spurred on by outraged newspaper articles, vocal social reformers, and its own dramatic report, the state government launched a 'war on slums', levelling many back-lane dwellings (Mayne 1995: 98). In their alternative portrait of the Little Lonsdale Street precinct, Alan Mayne and Tim Murray reveal how a dominant narrative can obscure, elide, and ultimately destroy place. From the late 1800s, 'Little Lon' and its laneways were subject to a 'homogenising slum myth', a middle-class construct that conflated slums with brothels and obscured a long-standing, close, and 'vibrantly cosmopolitan' community (1999: 49–51). The *Truth* dubbed the neighbourhood a 'tawdry citadel' (1932); the *Age* 'the heart of slumdon' (1931). In 1948 the government razed two whole city blocks, obliterating the Little Lon neighbourhood (Mayne & Murray 1999: 53). Sensationalism, stigma and projection had cast the laneways as bad places; while ostensibly motivated by social good, the destruction of laneway neighbourhoods was largely due to the resonance and success of this prevailing narrative.

Other writings of the day, however, offer alternative glimpses. The back alleys had no monopoly on filth and immorality: the muddy main streets were also prone to mayhem, vice, and larrikinism, and slum-dwellers were not the sole culprits. Journalist Marcus Clarke (1869; 1972) often documented respectable Melburnians behaving badly in the streets after dark. In the mid-1880s, poor sanitation earned Marvellous Melbourne a rival nickname: 'Smellbourne' (Doyle 2012: 49). Aboriginal people were made unwelcome in the city (Edmonds 2010: 88), but nature proved harder to banish: after heavy rain, humans and livestock drowned in the flooded main streets (Brown-May 1998: 32; Nisbet, 1891: 94).

The 'evil laneways' schema also obscured the lanes' differences. The rag trade prospered in alleys around Flinders Lane, Chinese and Jewish cabinetmakers occupied laneways off Little Bourke and Little Lonsdale Streets (Doyle 2012: 44), while the north-eastern lanes housed builders and craftsmen (Bate, 1994: 12). Gordon House, on Little Bourke Place, was a

homeless men's shelter from the late 1800s to the 1970s; the Salvation Army ran a hostel in Watson Place after WWI and a soup kitchen in Bennett's Lane in the late 1920s. Laneway neighbourhoods included businesses, charities, schools, and a multicultural mix of residents: Scots, Chinese, Indian, English, Irish, Italian, Greek, and 'Assyrian' migrants (Victoria Parliament 1913: 21). O'Brien Lane, in Little Lon – described by John Henry James as the 'headquarters of Melbourne vice and crime', home to the 'criminal and degraded' classes (2016: 36, 178) – had its own gospel hall and secular school. Visiting in 1876, James saw well-dressed adults singing hymns and cheerful, healthy-looking children taking lessons. Nevertheless, the schoolteacher invoked a familiar architectural motif: her charges were 'all gutter children...children of poor people' (2016: 191).

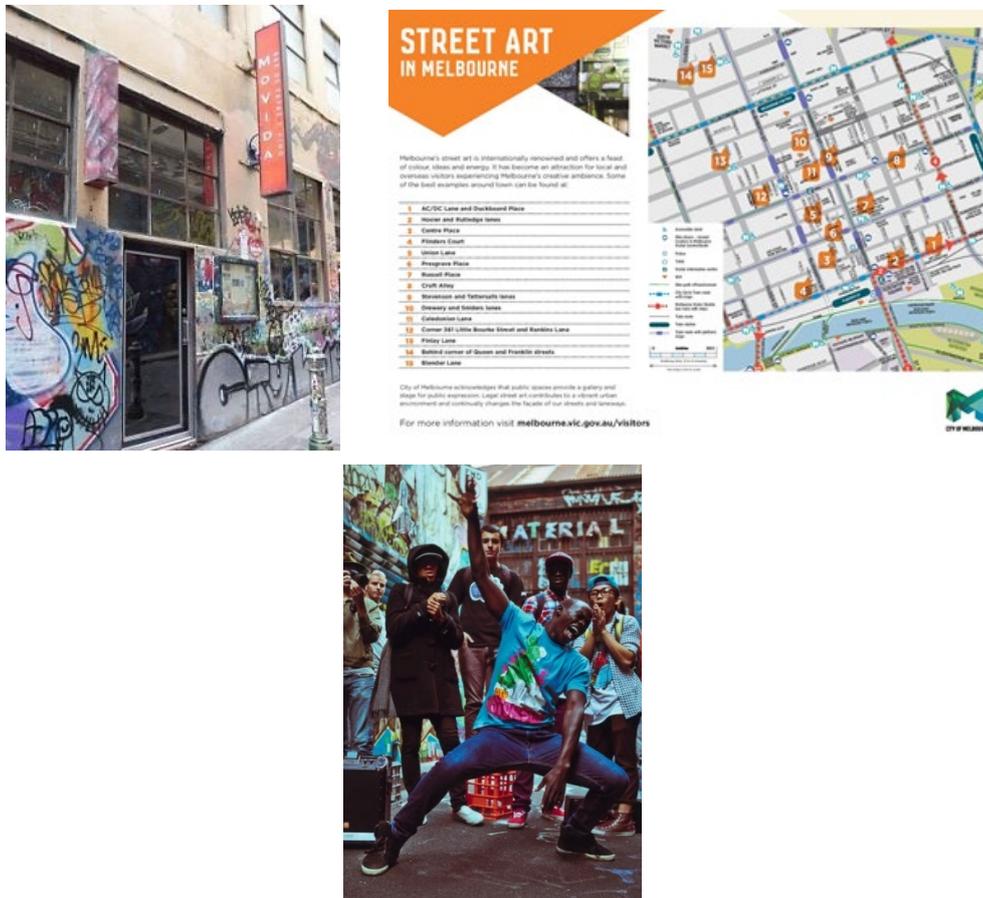
Counternarratives of place are often faintly inscribed, hard to excavate, and muffled by official accounts. Media proprietors wield great power as cultural gate-keepers, selecting which stories a society tells about itself. James' sensationalist slum tales, argues historian Michael Cannon, 'became one of the chief props of middle class morality, which was not his intention at all.' However, had James critiqued 'the structure of laissez-faire capitalism which bred the dreadful slums...the *Argus* could not have published his articles' (Cannon 2016: 7).

The writing on the wall: from city scourge to urban destination

Here my own narrative leapfrogs several decades – from the laneways' first century of existence, to their more recent past. Since the early 1990s Melbourne's lanes have transformed dramatically, bringing new tensions and narrative revisions to the fore. In the 'long boom' following WWII, Melbourne sprawled outward, and the city's inner grid gradually lost much of its verve. High-rises and large-scale developments eroded street life (Goat 2014), and residents and businesses gravitated to the fast-growing suburbs. In a 1978 *Age* article, architect Norman Day criticised Melbourne's 'empty useless city centre' (Whitzman & Ryan 2014: 8); in 1985, the paper dubbed it a 'ghost city' full of vacant old buildings (Eccleston 1985: 9-10). Government programs were launched to revive the ailing metropolis. From 1992, the Postcode 3000 strategy – led by Rob Adams, Director of City Design – sought to re-animate 'redundant' urban spaces and attract people back to the inner city. Laneways were enlisted to the cause: recast as underutilised urban assets, they became targets for 'revitalisation'. During the 1990s recession small cafes, galleries, and bars rented cheap laneway premises. Aided by relaxed liquor licensing laws and rising inner-city apartment living, Melbourne's 'laneway revival' was soon underway.

Conveniently for whoever tells the story, 'bad' places can readily be positioned as ripe for reclamation. The narration of Melbourne's back lanes as degraded or defunct spaces has helped bolster the case for destroying or reinventing them. City design chief Rob Adams has described the laneways as morphing from 'derelict and dangerous wastelands' to 'global tourist attractions' (Dovey, Adams & Jones: 2018). During the 1990s, as Postcode 3000 gained momentum, media reports of the city's heroin epidemic were reviving the 'evil laneways' narrative. John Fitzgerald and Terry Threadgold (2007) explore how these media narratives mobilised public fear by creating 'non-cognitive' (emotionally charged) maps of the city. In 1999 the tabloid *Herald Sun* published a map of urban 'no-go areas' frequented by heroin users, with a dozen laneways marked in red ink (2007: 118). Yet again, the criminal classes were misbehaving in the back lanes. The key difference: those laneways were now being recast as valuable real estate, and described in media articles as 'overlooked', 'forgotten', and 'underused'.

Graffiti or street art, a form of ‘incidental architecture’ (Pertz 1990), played a central role in Melbourne’s ‘laneway revival’. Increased foot traffic provided a readymade audience for street artists. In 1998 Hosier Lane was graffiti-free, a ‘blank canvas’ (Arbus 2010); by the early 2000s a flourishing street art movement was lending Melbourne an aura of gritty authenticity, youthful irreverence, colour, and life. In 2006 Melbourne was dubbed the world’s stencil graffiti capital (Smallman & Nyman 2006), while a 2008 Lonely Planet poll named its laneway street art as Australia’s top cultural attraction. As street art won acceptance, migrating from back lanes to galleries, government policy struggled to keep up. In 2006 the State government ran a ‘zero tolerance’ graffiti crackdown, with steep fines, expanded police powers, and potential jail time; the next year Council began issuing street art permits. When Tourism Victoria exhibited a mocked-up graffitied laneway at a 2008 Florida tourism expo, Premier John Brumby shut the exhibit down, calling graffiti ‘a blight on the city...not the way we want Melbourne to be promoted to a global audience’. In 2010, facing public backlash after Council cleaners damaged a Hosier Lane stencil by famed UK street artist Banksy, the state Planning and Arts ministers praised the ‘unique heritage value’ of the lane’s street art and vowed to protect it (Gill 2010).



MoVida exterior, Hosier Lane, 2018 (author); Street art map courtesy of the City of Melbourne; ‘Krump Event, Hosier Lane’, Rachel Main (2011), SLV

Cultural cachet soon translated into cash. By 2010, the old narrative was overwritten: the laneways had become desirable epicentres of urban youth culture, and the gate-keepers wanted them back. Since then, government and business interests have mobilised Melbourne’s laneways and their ever-changing walls to promote the city as a tourist

destination. The City of Melbourne website offers a street art ‘gallery’, with a downloadable map to help locate examples; laneway imagery dominated Tourism Victoria’s \$14million ‘Play Melbourne’ ad campaign (2011); Visit Victoria’s \$12 million campaign (2017) depicted young people discovering laneway attractions; the National Gallery of Victoria hired 100 artists to repaint Hosier Lane for its best-selling *Melbourne Now* exhibition (2013). Council’s ‘Love your Laneways’ program enlisted ‘Laneway Champions’ to keep the now-lucrative alleyways tidy, while a \$1.8 million ‘Green Your Laneway’ program added a sustainability slant. A veritable laneway industry sprang up, with walking tours, music events, and arts festivals celebrating these once-reviled sites.

Many laneways are now heritage-protected, with names bestowed in a process of cultural memorialisation: Corporation Lane was renamed AC/DC Lane after the Australian rock band (2004), Brown Alley became Dame Edna Place (2007), Literature Lane was christened to mark Melbourne’s UNESCO City of Literature status (2012), and Amphlett Lane was named in memory of singer Chrissie Amphlett (2015). Government-funded tourism websites rhapsodise about Melbourne’s laneways: they are *celebrated, iconic, quirky, cool, eclectic, vibrant, bustling, creative, charming, hip, famous*. The bad old alleys have been tamed, their stories sanitised – but not completely. History has been co-opted to bolster their appeal: hints of prior notoriety woven in to add narrative spice, a frisson of dubious provenance. Laneway bars and cocktails are named after long-dead brothel madams and sex workers (Knowlton, 2018). The lanes are now *gritty, grungy, dingy*; they have a *shady history, a dark past*. While easily found via Google Maps, laneway businesses are routinely narrated as *secret, tucked-away, covert, hidden*.

Whose public space? Laneway gentrification, city branding and homelessness

The sheer density, size, and diversity of cities make them prime breeding grounds for turf wars (Uitermark et al 2012: 2546). Places become contested when different parties make competing claims on them; these claims are often embedded in, and mobilised through, narratives of place. Analysing the narrative construction of Washington DC’s gentrifying Chinatown district, sociolinguist Jackie Jia Lou argues that to understand how power and ideology play out in narratives of place, we must ask ‘who tells the story using what resources and in what contexts’ (2010: 626). Public discourse contains multiple stories, Lou writes, but some are louder than others: the deeper the teller’s pockets, the higher the volume dial can twirl.

Since the early 2000s, Hosier Lane has transformed into a popular tourist destination. In 2016, it became a flashpoint for two clashing narratives: Melbourne’s lucrative seven-year run as the ‘world’s most liveable city’, and its fast-growing visible homeless population. The *Herald Sun* has often depicted Melbourne’s rough sleepers as opportunists, trouble-makers, aggressive beggars, criminals, and junkies (Martinkus 2017). In 2016 and 2017 the tabloid ran a string of articles claiming they were ‘ruining the reputation of the world’s most liveable city’ (Herald Sun 2016a); one columnist claimed parts of Melbourne now ‘resemble a Third World Ghetto’ thanks to its homeless residents (Panahi 2016). Hosier Lane – which the tabloid deftly re-christened ‘the Hosier arts precinct’ (Herald Sun 2016b) – had become a ‘crime hotspot’ and ‘thriving drug den’ (Allaoui 2016b). Editors warned: ‘Hosier Lane has become a dark underbelly... a magnet for misfits. Life in the lane known for its colourful street art has become down and dirty’, and urged authorities to ‘clear up a cesspit that frightens off passers-by who might otherwise visit restaurants such as the highly regarded MoVida’ (Herald Sun 2016a). Then-Lord Mayor Robert Doyle said, ‘We’ve kind of lost control of Hosier Lane... It’s just not safe’ (Masanauskas 2016).

Framing homeless residents as undesirables who tarnish Melbourne's image and hurt local businesses, these media narratives catalysed the eviction of long-term homeless residents from Hosier Lane: in August 2017 they were removed by police, their sleeping alcoves boarded up (Francis 2017). The *Herald Sun*'s coverage bore a striking resemblance to early Melbourne slum narratives, describing the troublesome old laneways and today's rough sleepers in similar terms: *dirty, dark, blight, criminal, out of control, disgrace*. Such hostile media narratives compound the stereotyping, stigma, and blame rough sleepers endure; these prejudicial attitudes can have real-world harmful effects, including lowered self-worth and psychological wellbeing, discrimination, and social and spatial exclusion (Donley & Jackson 2014: 49-50, 59; Phelan et al 1997).

The tabloid's campaign coincided with a steep rise in visible homelessness, fuelled structurally by a chronic shortage of affordable housing, the disbanding of inner-city 'homeless camps', and the sale of rooming houses and caravan parks to developers. But coverage was also aided by MoVida's owners complaining to media about the homeless presence in Hosier Lane (Herald Sun 2016a; Allaoui 2016a). MoVida has leveraged Hosier's 'street cred' to generate significant profits. Back in 2011 the company turned over more than \$15 million (Mundell 2016); it now owns three Hosier Lane businesses, all festooned with street art. While the laneway is officially public space, in 2017 and 2018 MoVida filled it with punters, throwing a 'Spanish street party' at \$123 per ticket.

In 2017 Council launched an unsuccessful attempt to ban rough sleeping in Melbourne's city centre (Mundell 2017). Now its most vulnerable residents are being displaced from the back lanes. According to the public sphere's loudest voices, these 'reclaimed' urban spaces now belong to tourism and consumption. Once the maligned domain of the poor, the laneways are now being claimed by the rich, their gritty backstories co-opted to translate cultural capital into dollars. The real-world consequences of this shift pose a threat to spatial justice, defined by Edward Soja as 'fair and equal distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunity to use them' (2009: 2).

A deeper irony is that many of the street artists who decorate Melbourne's laneways are themselves homeless; their artwork is welcome, but they are not. Academic and artist Chris Honig writes that 'practising graffiti and street artists are over-represented in the homeless population,' and that more than a dozen rough sleepers regularly paint Hosier Lane. Their work attracts tourists and benefits local businesses. As one artist explains, their connection to this place is not trivial: 'It's a lot deeper than what people think... There's a community that's developed here and a support network' (Honig 2017). After the Hosier evictions, some artists stopped painting the lane in protest: 'I'm not interested if it isn't a space for everyone,' says one (Francis 2017).

Melbourne's 'revitalised' laneways and their street art are now central to the city's branding, deployed to narrate it as a desirable destination in the global marketplace. Yet as architecture professor Kim Dovey warns, 'Place-branding attracts capital but also has the potential to reduce urban identity to a logo' (2018: 284). A hotel near Hosier Lane offers a 'graffiti loft', where guests can 'immerse themselves in Melbourne's creative arts scene' – sleeping on graffiti-tagged sheets, eating bespoke 'graffiti snacks', and watching street art films (McLaughlin 2017). Hosier Lane recently gained a new tenant: Culture Kings, a corporate streetwear chain that 'trades on a gritty urban aesthetic.' The lane's renowned graffiti art was described as 'a key influencer' in the brand's choice of location (Johanson 2017). The new arrival seems at odds with its surroundings, its slick monochrome design, mass-produced wares, and uniformed security guards incongruous against the laneway's riotously daubed walls. The brand's spatial incursion and co-option of street culture have met with resistance:

in August 2018 Culture Kings staff called police on a graffiti artist painting over a commissioned mural on the shop's exterior wall, sparking the ire of the street art community. Facing vocal online criticism and a protest rally on its doorstep (Hill 2018), the store issued a written apology, which drew a largely cynical response (Reddit 2018).

Places are sites of meaning, repositories of value, tangled zones of attraction, multiplicity and contradiction; like Walt Whitman's narrator in 'Song of Myself', they contain multitudes. While many factors shape their transformation, narrative plays a critical role in how – and by whom – they are understood, used, and claimed. The narrative evolution of Melbourne's laneways sheds light on how writing can alter the material, social, and imaginative contours of a city – shaping its architectural profile, modulating its ambient qualities, forming and fracturing communities. As the lanes' backstory reveals, narratives can affect place in profound and unforeseen ways, bolstering certain claims and negating others, welcoming one community while displacing another, determining who belongs where. When place is at stake, not all narratives hold equal sway, and power tends to have an amplifying effect: the stories that prevail are often backed by significant resources, and serve specific agendas. In staking their claim to place, the powerful and well-resourced can more readily shape the story in their own favour. The co-option of public places by corporate interests seeking to profit from their narrative cachet poses a threat to the character, viability, and social value of such places, and risks excluding the very people who helped create them.

Prevailing narratives, however, may face their own incursions. In recent years the lanes have hosted both impromptu and commissioned artworks by Aboriginal artists, including Reko Rennie, Destiny Deacon, Robert Michael Young, Yhonne Scarce, and Steaphan Paton. As author Tony Birch has noted, these artists have 'intervened' in the narration of the city, weaving their own stories into the urban fabric (O'Callaghan 2012). Amplifying and embedding alternate accounts of urban place – counternarratives, Indigenous perspectives, embodied and vernacular accounts, marginalised stories that unsettle or contradict the dominant version of events – may constitute a valuable form of spatial justice, and an important step toward creating a more inclusive and multifaceted city.

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Notes

¹ In February 2019 there were 160,634 Instagram posts bearing the hashtag #hosierlane, while #melbournезoo had 132,712.

² As sociologist Frank Vanclay notes, 'because place is personal, a particular location can contain a range of meanings' (2008: 3-4).

³ Since their inception the terms 'alley', 'back lane', 'lane' and 'laneway' have been largely interchangeable, but 'laneways' is now most commonly used, particularly in site branding.

⁴ Early periodicals included the *Illustrated Australian Magazine* (1850-52), the *Melbourne Monthly Magazine* (1855), the *Illustrated Journal of Australasia* (1856-58), the *Australian Journal* (1865-1962) and the *Australian Monthly Magazine* (1865-67; renamed *Colonial Monthly*, 1867-70) (Stuart n.d.).

⁵ First self-published in October 1886, Hume's novel sold 5000 copies in three weeks. By year's end, 20,000 copies had been printed in Melbourne. The book had sold 750,000 copies when Hume died in 1932 (Caterson 2012).

⁶ Collective memory has been defined as 'a representation of the past shared by members of a group' (Wertsch 2008: 120), as 'publicly available symbols shared by a society' (Olick & Robbins 1998), as 'an active process of sense-making through time' (Olick & Levy 1997), and as 'individual memories shared across a community that bear on the community's identity' (Coman et al 2009: 129). Bodnar discusses the tension between state-sanctioned 'official' memory, and 'vernacular' memory, which is 'derived from the lived or shared experiences of small groups' (Bodnar 1993: 20).

⁷ Coined 200 years ago by American settlers to describe the impassable landscape of South Dakota, a terrain that defied colonial ambition (Gibson 2002: 13-14), 'badland' has become both a geological and a mythic descriptor.

⁸ Badlands can also be produced through racist fear-mongering, policing, and spatial governance. For a discussion of how San Francisco's Chinatown has been constructed as a site of depravity, see Shah (2001).

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