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Reconstructing Footpaths: Creating place and memory on urban pedestrian infrastructure

Abstract

Footpaths are an undervalued but important public space in our cities and urban environments. In addition to facilitating pedestrian mobility, they are a site for supporting everyday public life for citizens. This paper will highlight a disconnect between how footpaths are developed against how they are experienced by people. Planning strategies and design of present-day footpaths categorise them as road and transport assets to be managed and maintained. The problem with this approach is that the many nuanced ways which footpaths are inhabited are overlooked when these spaces are built. An individual's usage extends beyond pedestrian circulation and people create their own meaning and memories, using footpaths as a connective device between real physical space and the personal perception of place.

The research examines footpaths in the suburb of Footscray in Melbourne's inner west. Footscray has a highly diverse social mix, distinct ethnic districts, and a working-class history. It is also in a rapid state of change as densification, gentrification, and demographic shifts affect its population and street life. First-person videography as a research method reveals that an individual's experience on footpaths is highly subjective and relies on memories as well as physical landmarks to navigate through the urban environment. This paper examines one case study of a local resident and utilises mapping and spatial video analysis to observe the difference between physical pedestrian infrastructure versus a subjective knowledge of footpaths.

An emerging body of literature discusses the contested nature of footpaths, and academic research focuses on social rights, political and legal frameworks. This paper however examines footpaths from a design perspective through an ethnographic approach. Through revealing the disjunction between municipality policies and everyday life, this paper contends that footpaths should be recategorized as a public space. The purpose of this paper is to provide an alternative understanding of these overlooked and undervalued spaces.

Introduction

Footpaths in urban commercial strips are a notable space in which public life happens, yet their significance has been overlooked by planners, architects, local governments, and scholars. This paper investigates the interplay between the physical, social and regulatory factors which affect the morphology of footpaths, as well as how they are used by citizens. Footpaths are an important public space; in addition to enabling pedestrian circulation through cities, they are a site for everyday spatial practices, formal and informal commercial enterprise, and the interface between public and private realms. They are a space of representation, urban character, and the enactment of social and cultural identities. Common conceptions of public space often refer to open squares, parks and plazas, however it is on footpaths that the everyday urban life takes place. Their ubiquity and their everyday function means they are often overlooked, however they are one of the most visible public spaces in cities.

This paper will be present the following things. Firstly, it will outline an ethnographic methodology that was employed to analyse the human experience on footpaths, which was used to frame an alternative understanding of these spaces. It will then introduce Footscray as a site of study. The paper will discuss how the process of walking becomes a framework behind how footpaths are used and understood, however walking can be valued in two ways. Through policies in municipalities, walking is regarded as pedestrian transport and footpaths are a vehicle for mobility. However from a humanist perspective, they connect people to place and memory. The paper makes a case for treating footpaths as a public space, even though it is not categorised as such in planning and design practice, and then look at the personal ways in which people construct narratives on footpaths, using one case study as an example. The paper will conclude with a summary of the observations.

Throughout this paper, I will predominately use the term 'footpath' which is the accepted Australian term. However, many sources of literature on footpaths and urban spaces, particularly those produced in the US, use the term 'sidewalk'. When quoting the literature directly, I will defer to the terminology used by the author.

There are many different contexts in which a footpath located, however this paper is interested specifically in the footpath in commercial districts. The reason is that the urban fabric and social conditions are varied. Commercial areas are often central hubs with amenities servicing a

wider community, therefore they offer more opportunity for interaction between a variety of citizens than in areas of mono-use.

Spatial Ethnography

This paper draws from a broader design research project, where a series of walk-along interviews is being conducted with local users of Footscray's footpaths. These interviews are undertaken using first-person videography with a GoPro camera mounted to the body of the participant. One interview has been selected for this paper. The interviewee, Dot, was chosen due to her long-standing familiarity with Footscray both as a child growing up, and adult who returned to the area after living elsewhere. Dot's knowledge of Footscray is through the memories as a child of working-class Chinese migrant parents who visited the area for activities such as grocery shopping and eating out, and then as a tertiary student who has lived in multiple locations in the suburb and frequents the central precinct to shop and use public transport.

While the data in this example is not intended to be generalised into wider conclusions, what it does offer is a capture of a participant's personal and spatial experience while using footpaths. Shanti Sumarjoto and Sarah Pink argue that first-person videography is not to objectively record experience, rather it is a 'trace that enables a process of reflection, discussion and understanding' for the researcher¹. They explain that a video trace allows for an empathetic understanding of the mobile experience and state, 'recording is a springboard for knowledge-making rather than a record of something that already exists.'²

A semi-structured interview took place during the walk and the conversation was guided along broad themes around the experience of walking, perceived quality of the streets, change in the area, why certain routes held significance. Dot was encouraged to lead the way and follow a path that was interesting to her. Sarah Pink argues that interviews are 'a social encounter' through which the interviewee refers to the 'sensoriality of their experiences' through metaphor, gesture, haptic, sounds and taste³. The open-ended nature of the interview allowed Dot to talk freely about the things she observed which were personally meaningful or drew her into a space; her field of view could be seen in the video, alongside her motion and walking speed.

In later reviewing the footage of the walk, what became evident was that the quality of the urban space was at both externally observed as well as internally interpreted by the participant. The act of traversing using footpaths prompted personal memories and narratives which the interviewee used to navigate Footscray; footpaths became a connective device between real

space and a mental picture of the city. This observation helped provide a spatial understanding from an environmental-behavioural perspective which is both objective and subjective. The method also captured a view of urban spaces which showed 'messy' aspects and incidental encounters; these are a part of everyday urban life and the character of cities, which orthographic drawing, mapping, and reviewing planning policies do not reveal. Videography, as opposed to still photography, also linked moving image to voice narration and provided temporal information from the walk. Using videography as an ethnographic design research method, researchers can visually refer back to a point in time, which has potential to provide new insights for relationships they may have initially missed.

The Gateway to the West

The urban context examined in this paper is Footscray, a gentrifying suburb in Melbourne's inner west. It is an interesting case study because it has a diversity of street life, a variety of distinct ethnic districts, and is rapidly changing. Situated 6km from the CBD, the suburb is a former working-class suburb with a heavy migrant population. Footscray in the past had once elicited images of 'ghettos', gangs and grime, as portrayed in Geoffrey Wright's 1992 film *Romper Stomper*⁴. However, perceptions of Footscray is shifting. Lured by property that is relatively affordable compared to other inner Melbourne suburbs, a more affluent demographic is moving in and changing the physical and social landscape. Along with the most recent newcomers who in turn bring with them more 'upmarket' businesses, the urban realm is also undergoing an overhaul. The local council, the City of Maribyrnong, has initiated many urban renewal programmes to upgrade the central commercial core and cement Footscray's position as a cosmopolitan 'gateway to the west'.

In Footscray, the population is forecast to grow 153.19%⁵ in the next 20 years; this has potential impact on its streets, as public space is scarce in the central commercial area. Of the 23 hectares which make up Footscray's commercial core, open public space only constitutes 1%⁶. However, footpaths form 10% of the land area and the absence of open spaces, they become increasingly important to accommodate a diverse and intensifying social life. Under new urban infrastructure plans, footpaths are being upgraded within streetscape developments which seek to improve public amenity, the aesthetic of the urban environment, and pedestrian safety. Urbanists such as Jeff Speck⁷ state that one of the key roles of footpaths is to keep people safe from vehicular traffic to achieve a more walkable city. In early 2019, The City of Maribyrnong released a draft design for Paisley St, which runs east to west and connects the market to the medical precinct. A key aim is to improve flow, pedestrian connectivity, cycling infrastructure, and business. Tactics to achieve these goals include traffic calming devices and

footpaths that are protected from the road by a bike lane or landscape buffer. Walking as a mode of pedestrian transport is encouraged and carefully designed for.

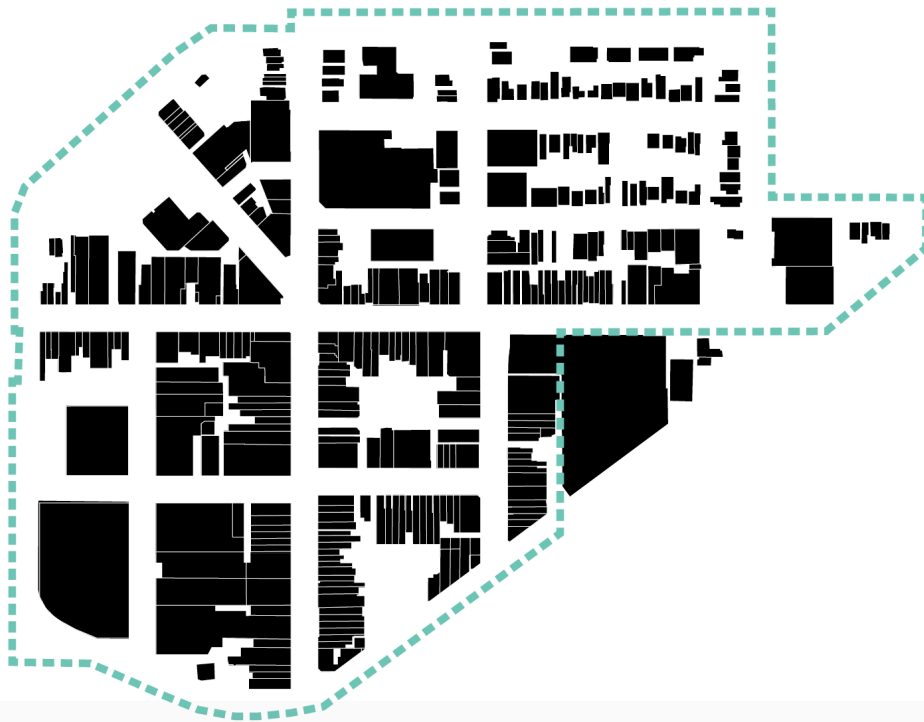


Figure 1. Footscray Central Precinct figure ground map. Image by author.

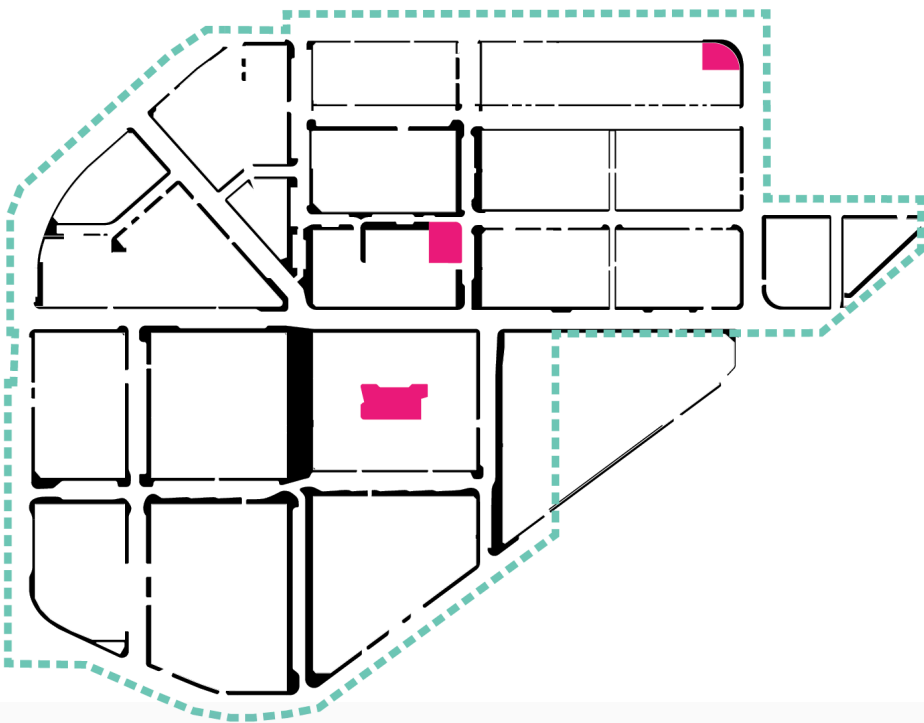


Figure 2. Footscray Central Precinct footpaths. Image shows 10% footpath area (black) in comparison with 1% public open space (pink). Image by author.

Footpaths are for Walking

Urban footpaths, in their most practical form, facilitate walking for pedestrians away from the dangers of vehicles on the roadbed. Modern footpaths are relatively recent urban space. In Western cities, documentation of footpaths date back to the third century BC Rome⁸, however after this period, recorded instances of footpaths disappeared into obscurity. Only in the mid-18th century construction of European streets did they become prevalent and gain popularity. This is especially seen in Haussmann's Parisian boulevards and in the reconstruction of London after the Great Fire; before this there was no real physical separation between pedestrians and the carriageway⁹.

Footpaths have a public role but also private benefit. As footpaths became more prevalent, their maintenance and construction was shared between public and private parties. For example in 19th century Paris as well as the United States, building costs were split between the state and the private owners of properties directly abutting the street. However, footpaths became more frequently provided by the state, who increasingly exercised more control over their use. The act of walking unobstructed became of primary concern and municipalities made efforts to remove anything which impeded mobility. In Melbourne, footpaths were scarce at the time the Hoddle Grid was laid in 1837 and not until the 1880s were the city's footpaths properly paved. They originally were covered by Victorian verandahs, but these were gradually replaced by cantilevered structures, as the posts which held up the Victorian originals were seen to attract 'larrakins' and 'vagabonds' who loitered in the streets¹⁰.



Figure 3. Verandahs over footpaths in North Melbourne Image by author.

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht observe,

'The pedestrian's unobstructed mobility became the justification that underlay other activity restrictions, and the pedestrian became the public for whom the sidewalks were being provided. The assumption that walking is the primary use for sidewalks has carried into the twenty-first century'¹¹.

Nicholas Blomley describes this assumption through the concept of 'pedestrianism' which he identifies as the underlying and often unchallenged rationality behind how footpaths are understood, managed, and produced. Pedestrianism is commonly adopted in city planning practices and Blomley explains,

'Pedestrianism values public space not in terms of its aesthetic merits, or its success in promoting public citizenship and democracy. Rather, the successful sidewalk is one that facilitates pedestrian flow and circulation.'¹²

By looking through the lens of three socio-legal faculties – the municipal engineering department, court jurisdiction and police regulation, pedestrianism favours flow and circulation on the footpath through managing people and objects in space. The personal characteristics of a person are not important, provided they do not compromise the primary objective of walking.¹³ Blomley's critique of pedestrianism is that it ignores the 'civic humanism' of public space and argues although the rationale appears 'mundane and everyday' the principles shape city footpaths and impact citizens' rights to space.

As a mode of transportation, walking connects people between destinations; however it can also be an act of leisure, recreation and exploration. Timothy Shortell states that although walking is by and large a practical activity, it is also a way of 'living in the city, a way of extending the social realm beyond, and between, home and work.'¹⁴ Michel de Certeau's *Walking in the City* highlights walking as a spatial practice where bodies and footsteps have a 'qualitative character' and their 'intertwined paths give shapes to spaces. They weave spaces together'¹⁵. De Certeau asserts that the act of walking is what creates meaning to the city. Walking through urban streets is a way of participating in public life and being visible to others, however the bodily experience is highly personal. The individual narratives experienced by each user is contingent on their familiarity and memories of the space they are traversing through. Walking transcends the pragmatic function of circulation, and the significance of footpaths is that they are the space in which people navigate the city both physically and psychologically.

Disconnected Footpaths

Footpaths frame the activity of daily life and the way in which people use them is varied. On a trip along an urban footpath, one can see many different activities performed, such as socialising, texting, eating, sleeping, begging and sometimes protesting. How people use and appropriate them can be unknown and spontaneous, however it is this unpredictability which adds to the vitality of public life. For urbanists such as Jan Gehl, diverse uses which invite people to walk and stay in streets contribute to versatile and varied cities¹⁶. Gehl was a proponent of good streets for lively cities and argues that a quality street has recreational uses in addition to walking.

There is a disconnect with how footpaths are dealt with and implemented in planning and urban design practice. Due to a long-standing and unchallenged rationale which favours circulation and mobility, many council policies categorise footpaths as transport infrastructure and treat them as hard engineering to control the movement of people, bikes, and vehicles. Often, footpath management appears in documents such as a Road and Transport strategy, where they show up as assets to be repaired and maintained rather than spaces which support public life. The Maribyrnong Road Management Plan 2017 provides the following definition to encapsulate footpaths:

'A "road" in the Local Government Act 1989 includes a street; right of way; cul-de-sac; by-pass; bridge or ford; **footpath**, bicycle path or nature strip; any culvert or kerbing or other land or works forming part of the road'¹⁷.

In council reports, narrow footpaths are deemed a contributor to poor walking conditions¹⁸, while wider ones are desired. 'Well maintained' footpaths are a priority and to improve walkability, and solutions often revolved around repairing cracks, ramps and kerbs, and removing obstructions such as overhanging trees¹⁹. Design guidelines are well documented in the council's City Design Manual however footpaths are reduced to kerb and paving details, surface gradients and service pits.²⁰ Measures to improve walking conditions are addressed by implementing traffic-calming devices such as kerb extensions and narrower roadbeds and this directly shapes footpaths. While often perceived as a continuous straight space, driveways break up the length of footpaths so they are actually not continuous. Traffic calming devices push and pull the footpath's edge, creating wobbly forms which are there to negotiate right of way and access between cars and pedestrians.

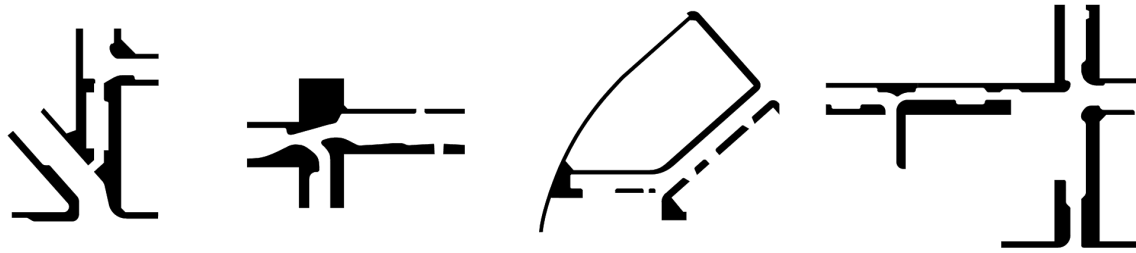


Figure 4. Footpath morphologies. The form of the footpaths are defined by traffic calming measures. Image by author.

Official municipality strategies ultimately shape the morphology of footpaths but this is problematic. The treatment of footpaths as a road and transport asset does a disservice to the very people who use them; they are a public space, with their own complexities, which extend far beyond hard infrastructure. Walking is not just a pragmatic act, nor does it occur at a consistent speed. Individuals stop, they interact; sometimes bump into one another. The intangible but complex relationships between identity, social rights, and the perception and creation of place influence how people use footpaths just as much, if not more than the engineered spaces themselves. Maribyrnong's footpaths are not the social or experiential spaces described by Shortell and De Certeau but are conceived of as pragmatic, neutral and mono-functional. With the exception of allowing street trading such outdoor cafes and sandwich boards, other uses are ignored almost entirely.

The City of New York offers a different interpretation. Footpaths are conceptualised as a 'room' to be inhabited and has four boundaries – the horizontal path, street wall, canopy, and kerb²¹. Under this framework, footpaths are a volumetric space where all parts need to work together to contribute to a good walking experience. Although this thinking brings up complexities in ownership and co-operation (the parts are owned and managed by multiple parties), it presents another way of thinking about footpaths which has more potential in connecting people to place.

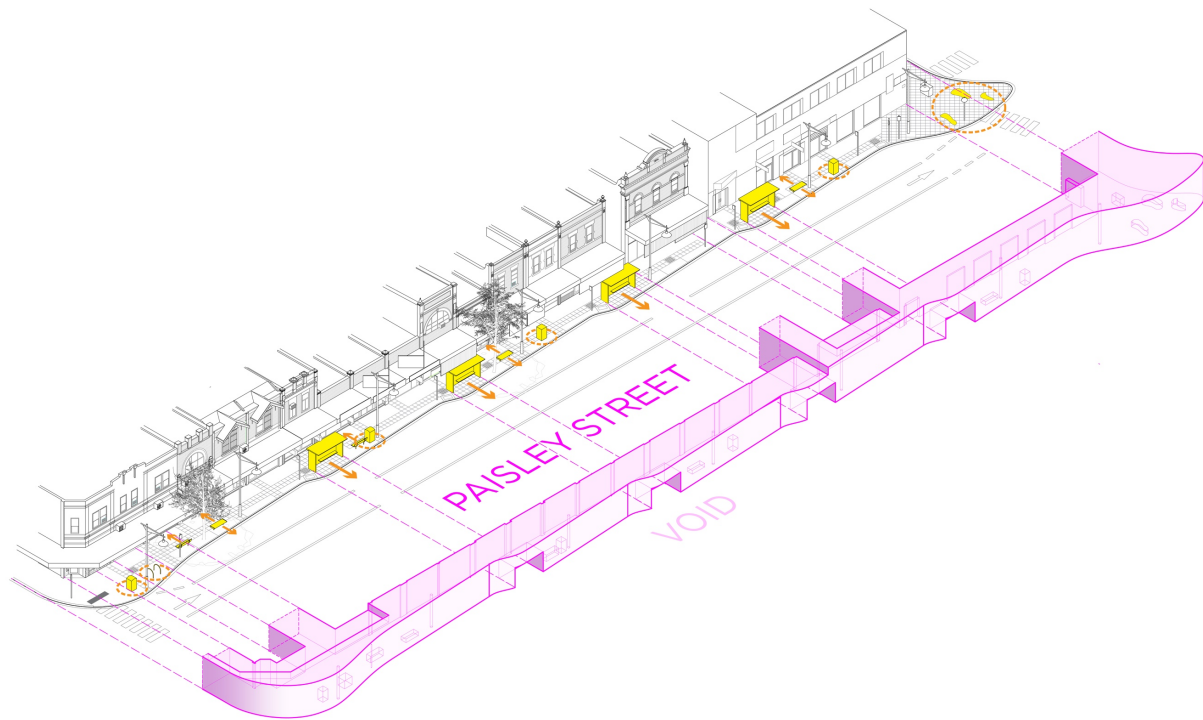


Figure 5. Paisley St footpath. Visualisation of the footpath space based on City of New York's concepts of the footpath 'room'. Image by author.

Public Space, Personal Place

What is missing from our understanding of footpaths? As previously discussed, one major issue is that footpaths are not acknowledged public space in its own right – and this thinking needs to shift.

Footpaths often constitute more square meterage in cities than large open spaces²² and while squares, parks and plazas may be the darlings of good urban planning practice, most people in urban environments will at some point in the day use a footpath when traversing through built-up areas; they may not use a square. As a public space, footpaths enable visibility for citizens and contact between strangers and different social groups. Sociologist Lyn Lofland argues that a locale has good public space when there is a diverse mix of relationships to ensure people's exposure to difference.²³ Footpaths can, and in many cases in Footscray, already have this mix. In her classic text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*²⁴, Jane Jacobs declares footpaths as the 'vital organs' of the city. Like Lofland, Jacobs acknowledges the importance of contact between citizens, and for her activity on footpaths is instrumental in creating lively neighbourhoods.

Jacobs' work has been influential and she is cited often, however in much public space literature after *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, footpaths seldom feature as a valuable public space in their own right, until relatively recently. Through the disciplines of sociology, geography, and urban planning, scholars such as Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht, Annette Kim, and Nicholas Blomely are focusing on footpaths as a distinct space with its own complexities and contradictions which make them unique and worthy of attention. These scholars assert footpaths are not valued as much as they should, and drawing from Henri Lefebvre's concepts around 'rights to the city', they make strong cases to reconsider footpaths as a public space. While the socio-cultural, socio-political and legal peculiarities are well addressed, what has not been clear or explored in depth are the individual experiences of urban footpath users, and the meanings they assign to their use.

Kim touches upon this; through the conceptual framework of property rights, she approaches footpaths as both a physical and social space. Kim's mode of spatial ethnography joins social sciences with physical space analysis to understand how footpaths are actually used, the social processes involved, and the meaning of that use. However, she considers the footpath's physical dimensions as a limitation to its ability to construct a meaningful narrative for users. Kim states that although public spaces shape our interactions and our polity, 'the challenge with sidewalks is that their thin and dispersed spatiality may fragment the narratives constructed on them'²⁵.

However, footpaths facilitate regular and intimate interactions due to their ubiquity, utility, and narrow form. The frequency of our engagement with footpaths means that the narratives we construct, although perhaps ordinary, are much more embedded in our everyday understanding of space and attachment to place. Irwin Altman and Setha Low define 'place' as a 'space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes'²⁶. Attachment is formed when an individual develops a bond to a place. Emotion and feeling are central to the concept of place attachment. Marika Lewika further states,

'Place attachment has a temporal dimension: it implies continuity of the relationship with the attachment object, connects its present to its past, with the hope that this relationship will continue in the future.'²⁷

Connecting Dot

Not long into our walk-along interview through Footscray, Dot stops to inspect something on a gate leading into an arcade.

'Sorry I was looking at that lock. That's what I do a lot, actually, whenever I'm walking anywhere. I'll usually take notice the types of locks people have.'

She admits that she is one of 'those' people who will slow down and walk into others because a security device has caught her eye. As a hobbyist lockpicker, she stops on several occasions on our walk through Footscray to critique the various ways in which people safeguard their properties.

'Often when I'm walking people will lose me. That's because I get distracted easily. It's always interesting what people will stop for. Like, everyone always has like their thing that they notice.'



Figure 6. Video still. A lock noticed by the participant. Video and image by author.



Figure 7. Video still. Participant pointing out insufficient lock. Video and image by author.

Dot lives in Footscray and also remembers the area as a child where her mother took her to go shopping for specialty Asian groceries.

'This is the carpark. The one the mum used to park in. There used to be a pho shop around here. I don't remember exactly where, but we used to have pho there and then go to the market'.

'Memory is a "glue" that connects people to their places'²⁸ and Dot's recollections describe a mental space and process which she uses to navigate the city on foot. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre states that space is socially produced, and it is a complex relationship between lived, perceived, and mental space²⁹. Space is not as simple as being an empty vessel, rather people create their own meanings which are linked to physical space. Asphalt, concrete and bitumen may be the surface on which walking occurs, however the narratives that are constructed through the process of walking shapes the way individuals perceive and orient themselves the urban environment. The notion of orienting oneself in cities through spatial elements such as paths, landmarks and nodes has been well investigated, from Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City*³⁰ to Quentin Steven's exploration of 'play' in urban environments.

Landmarks for Dot are businesses which prompt personal memories, even though not all physically still exist. As Dot walks through the streets of Footscray she sometimes points out things which are no longer there, for example, she notices an employment agency that was once a music store where her brother got a drumkit as a child. Using the footpath as a conduit, Dot connects the physical space with a remembered place which is unique to her alone.

Dot comments on the places which she likes to frequent and sit. Having a good spot to take a smoke is important to her, especially if it is out of the way of crowds (she doesn't like them) and close to a place where she can get a beverage.

'This is like one of my favorite benches because it's really close to the bubble tea place. I can get a bubble tea, sit on the bench and have a smoke. It's really nice.'

Her knowledge of Footscray is formed by both things in the external world which she likes or pique her interest - like the bubble tea and the locks - as well as her personal experiences. When commenting on the urban environment and whether she thinks it's safe, she nods and says yes. She draws from her personal experience of having never faced public conflict, and this forms her position that Footscray is no less safe than any other suburb.

It is through the everyday interactions in which we understand and situate ourselves in the city, and form our connections with place. Footpaths are urban settings which frame ordinary daily lives. John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski state that the everyday lived experience reveals complex social practices and meanings, which is 'more important than physical form in defining the city'.³¹ Drawing from Lefebvre, Debord and de Certeau's concepts around the production of space, experience, and everyday life, Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski attempt to refocus scholarly attention onto commonplace spaces and view them as legitimate urban forms. In a similar vein, sociologist Dolores Hayden argues that social history is 'embedded in urban landscapes'. Hayden states,

'Urban landscapes are storehouses for [these] social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbours, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes'³².

However, as discussed before, hard engineering ignores the human aspect of urban spaces. While an infrastructural framework does ignore footpaths as a public space, David Bissell offers an interesting perspective. Bissell argues that commuting is shaping urban environments and our everyday life. Despite hard-edge engineering, people construct their own meaning

from encounters in their commute, which is usually multi-modal. Commuting spaces are as much about transport and movement as they are how people relate and perceive these spaces; movement connects spatial practices. Bissel asserts that despite being constructed for transport, commuting space is nonetheless 'real, imagined, lived'. As such commuting spaces are not static and fixed, and rather like footpaths, 'space itself is transformed, as it is perceived and lived by social actors and groups.'³³

Conclusion

The paper produces several observations. First and foremost, footpaths are a public space, even though they are overlooked and undervalued. This is especially the case in planning and design practice where they are developed as road and transport assets which favours above all else unimpeded and efficient mobility for pedestrians.

However, space is perceived and lived by inhabitants, and it is understood in physical, mental and social terms. While walking is a practical and everyday activity, it also creates meaning for people and connects memories with real physical spaces which is used to navigate the city. Walking is the connective medium in which footpaths are used, experienced, inhabited.

A humanist lens is needed to reframe and reconceptualize footpaths as a public space. Ethnographic data derived from first-person videography can provide new empathetic knowledge of how footpaths are used from the perspective of the daily user. Where this discussion can be useful is in future strategies for developing urban footpaths. More is needed to understand how this knowledge can be applied in design and planning practice, however what this paper does show is that there is a vast disconnect between the how the physical space is constructed versus how the space is experienced. If footpaths are actively classified in official policies as public space, it has the potential to unlock its potential for supporting urban life. It is important to understand the perspective of the user to understand their significance in cities.

Endnotes

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