A BLAST FROM THE PAST:

TOWARDS A SOCIAL HERITAGE OF PUBLIC SPACE

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Carlyle says that NOISE is one of the chief characteristics of BARBARISM, & by gradual efforts towards its elimination the civilised world seems to recognise the axiomatic nature of his assertion.

Swanston Street was always intended to be a place for the people, a meeting place, a social place, a place for fun and entertainment. The arrival and subsequent domination of the car changed all that.

A social heritage

In 1903, a photographer in the south end of Melbourne’s Eastern Arcade employed William Johnstone to act as a tout at the Bourke Street entrance. Johnstone accosted passers by with the words “Would you like to have your photo taken?” Every time J. Bloomfield came to town he and his friends were pestered to have their photos taken: “Last time I told him to go to the devil. Surely this sort of fellow ought to be stopped. I said last time that I would not go up to that end of the town again & if I do I will see it is on the other side of the road.” Johnstone was cautioned by police, but touts were notorious for their persistency: Russell Street’s second-hand clothes dealers caused pedestrians to run a gauntlet from Bourke to Lonsdale Streets.

Public space has cultural and historical as well as architectural dimensions, and I have elaborated elsewhere the use of the street in such a context for street processions and itinerant street traders. The following discussion, in considering historically another dimension of the social use of public space — sound in the city — will serve to contextualise not only interpretation of the street as historic public space, but also to inform current debates on the role of the central city and controls over its public places. A recent proposal, for example, to amend the City of Melbourne Public Activities Local Law 1992 “to prohibit spruiking in or on a road, public place or premises adjacent thereto” invokes spurious historical stereotypes, ignores a unique inheritance of urban social life and, I would argue, essentially misconstrues the vital role of the central city as a vibrant and public social place.

As municipal authorities continue to evacuate the street of its social possibilities, it is commonly bemoaned that our present-day city centres need rejuvenation or restoration to their “former glory”. Yet is there not a contradiction in that lament, and in the claims for public space made, for example, by the City of Melbourne’s Chief Executive Officer quoted above? The streets of the past, spruikers and all, were in fact more lively human places, which might alert us to the fact that there has historically been an ongoing and pernicious characterisation of the street as a barbaric, uncivilised, unrespectable and pathological place.

Put simply, it is the very fact that spruikers, hawkers, street musicians, street processions and a plethora of other human behaviours in public space were marginalised, particularly in the period from the 1870s to the 1910s, that has left us with a city needing revitalisation in the first place, and it is strange logic that would argue otherwise.

There is little doubt that the motor car’s impact on the public life of our cities has been immense. That is not to say, however, that there have not been other regulatory frameworks, both before and after the advent of the car, which have impacted upon the use and control of public urban places and on interpreting the city as a historic human setting. Historians have long been used to the notion of built heritage in the context of the historic urban environment, but in this brief article I would like to introduce the notion of social heritage. More invisible than the built architectural legacy though intimately connected to it, social heritage might be regarded as a set of social practices and possibilities which over time, both in their performance and regulation, have been quintessentially related to the ongoing meaning, integrity, indeed viability, of the city centre. They are not set in bricks and mortar, but ideally are negotiated and transformed in relation to contemporary mores and thresholds of social acceptability.

A heritage of heterophony

The acts of building, moving, travelling, communicating, made the city an intrinsically noisy place. Noise in the city could symbolise both its vitality and its corruption. The early sounds of axe on wood or hammer on nail were necessary auditory accompaniments to city building, but the rattle of the tramcar, the shout of the hawker, the screech of the steam-whistle, could by the late nineteenth century be as much a sign of urban ill, even barbarism, as of social or technological progression. The bustle and hum of the street traffic, vehicular or pedestrian, most often positively evoked business and activity to the newcomer;
Sound in the city: 'Some Voices of the Night', The Illustrated Australian News, March 6, 1887 (La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria)
city residents found the quotidian screeches and rumbles of the city invasive and distracting. Ironically, while the twentieth century city had been overcome by the sound of the tram and the motor car (despite regulation of brakes, whistles, horns), its human sounds — the tones of the street musician, the cry of the newsboy, the hawkers' chant — were being legislated against.

As the land surveyed from the late 1830s was cut up and sold to land hungry settlers, the sound of the auctioneer's bell-man augmented the clanging of the bullock team bells as a ubiquitous street noise of the 1840s town. By-Law No. 12 in 1845 regulated the ringing of bells in the streets, and while the city bell-man had been a traditional bringer of news in England, applications for such positions in Melbourne — both in an official corporation capacity and as criers in connection with auctioneers or places of amusement — were declined from the 1860s to the 1910s. Brass hand-bells rung about the streets attracted secular attention to sales and show-rooms, while church bells not only attracted the Christian faithful to prayer, or sounded in muffled peal as a funeral procession passed by, but were rung to signify occasional or calendrical festivals. Religious and secular tintinnabulation was an auditory feature of the town, though not all those in the vicinity of the churches were happy with the sound. Ironically, regulations were enforced to reduce noise in 1880 by limiting vehicles passing churches during Sunday services to no faster than a walking pace, while the 1918 Motor Act required drivers to make as little noise as possible when passing churches on Sundays during divine service.

Of more general and ongoing concern than the musical merits of pealing bells was the question of street musicians. German brass bands, Italian organ-grinders, French hurdy-gurdy performers, and Hungarian musicians, were found on Melbourne's streets in the 1850s and 1860s, particularly outside public houses. In Fergus Hume's 1887 novel, 'on the verge of the pavement' could be found:

a band, consisting of three violins and a harp ... which is playing a German waltz to an admiring crowd of attentive spectators. If there is one thing which the Melbourne folk love more than another, it is music ... Any street band which plays at all decently, may be sure of a good audience, and a substantial remuneration for their playing.

Human noise (and an assumed relationship between street musicians and begging) was controlled by Clause 3 of the 1879 Regulations: 'Any street musician or vocalist shall, when requested by any householder or his servant, or by any member of the Police Force, depart from the neighbourhood of the premises of such householder.' In 1883, nearly 40 smoking and spitting musicians gathered every afternoon in front of the window of 117 Swanston Street: 'I have tried [sic] my best', complained the itrate shopkeeper, 'to make them understand that my business will not allow any respectable person to enter when they are watched by so many'. These musicians had assembled in this locality for many years but according to police in 1892 were not such a nuisance'. By 1899, street musicians were more stringently regulated under By-Law No. 105, and were often derided because of their lowly status and lack of respectability, many being blind beggars or immigrants. In 1907, the Professional Musicians' Union of Australasia protested against 'the begging musicians evil' and asked the Council to 'prevent these aliens from begging, annoying the Public, & seriously interfering with out members' work'. In the 1890s and 1910s, musicians were regularly complained of as distracting from the respectability of the streets they frequented, 'We are trying to make Little Collins Street ... a good retail shop street but our Friday night trade is utterly ruined by the nuisance', complained shopkeepers of harmonium players attracting loafers in front of hotels: 'The result is that ladies will not pass along the street'.

By-Law No. 83, passed in 1885, regulated the blowing of steam whistles at city factories, the steam whistle nuisance having been notable in the period not only at factories, but on steam engines and saveloy carts. The final decades of the century also saw a rise in complaints about the noises of the general street traffic, which disturbed the judges at the Law Courts, made the new smoking room at the Australia Club in William Street 'at times almost intolerable', and disturbed Collins Street churches during divine services. Noisy lorry brakes were prohibited in December 1913 by By-Law No. 130.

By 1915, the mechanical noise of motor transport heralded a new era of urban noise, demanding new regulatory provisions: 'This beautiful city of ours is fast becoming the "City of Dreadful Noises," and yours is the only authority powerful enough to prevent Melbourne becoming a second Chicago!'

The Motor Car Act provided for the use of silencers on cars and motor cycles, and while all vehicles were fitted with silencers upon registration, some drivers opened the cut-out on the silencer. By-Law No. 176 was passed in 1925, 'for the prevention and suppression of the nuisance resulting from the emission of loud and offensive noises by motor cars.' Yet at the end of the day, it was the pedestrian who was problematised in the face of the new technology with its promise of freedom, speed and mobility: 'foot passenger traffic shall fit in with new conditions of things brought in with the noiseless swift moving motor traffic'.

Mr. Calton was entranced in Hume's novel by the city's sounds — the crowd, the street band, the street Arab, and the traffic's rattle — though his companion Kilsp, 'with whom familiarity with the proletarians had, in a great measure, bred indifference, hurried him away'. The city's human sounds evincing class suspicion were regulated by the end of the nineteenth century by By-Law No. 105 of

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1899, relating to violent outcry in the streets. The provisions of the regulation prevented the making of noise in public places to the disturbance of passers-by or adjacent inhabitants, singing or the playing of musical instruments within 50 yards of a dwelling house or business premises after being asked by a constable or resident to desist, and the attracting of crowds through the making of noise. London and Chicago had passed laws regulating the cries of newspaper sellers, and the approaching Royal Visit to Melbourne in 1901 caused many citizens to look to overseas example to suppress what they considered a flagrant and persistent nuisance:

Melbourne should be brought into line with the cities of the old world ... a man was fined 10 marks [in Berlin] for whistling in the street to call a cab; 'The Times' quoted the incident with approval ... it has been impossible to pass along Collins, Bourke, Swanston, Eliz., or Flinders Streets [without] being beset by a bevy of bellowing boys, leather-lunged & brazen throat, each one yelling out 'prize-ticket-o'-th-'gay-larr' as if his life depended on making a more hideous noise than his rivals ... it seems a great pity that the existence of this one blot should be allowed to mar [sic] the undoubted charm of our otherwise well-ordered and attractive thoroughfares.

By the 1910s, the by-law was being regularly enforced against boys calling out 'wear your colors,' 'book of the races,' or selling newspapers, books and journals on the streets. By 1920, the peak hour din at Town Hall corner — of tram bells, pointsmen's whistles, horns, the shouts of drivers, the screams of women almost run down by the traffic — had become reminiscent not of progress but of disorder, even barbarism; far from suggesting civilisation and urbanity, it evoked 'an Oriental beating of tom-toms.' Yet while the artificial noise of the machine could in practical terms justly demand suppression by the net of ordinances, human sounds had been indiscriminately swept up in the cacophony, often to mask more covert and discriminatory social prejudices. The 'unwanted intimacy' of the resultant tumult enhanced the separation of public and private space.

**Public space/people place**

Every night and every day
The awfulisers work away
Awfulising public places
Favourite things and little graces
Awfulising lovely pleasures
Common joys and simple pleasures
Awfulising far and near
The parts of life we held so dear
Democratic, clean and lawful
Awful, awful, awful, awful.

In the early 1850s, Mossman had proudly described in Bourke Street on a summer evening the 'crowds of noisy urchins ... playing jing-a-ring': by the 1880s, the use of the street for public recreation and performance, as theatre or playground, was directly attacked by the exponents of free circulation, respectability, rational recreation and aesthetic conformity. The gendering of public space through stereotypes such as 'female delicacy' manipulated the public landscape of the streets. The nuisance of the noise of auctioneer's bellmen in 1841 necessitated the female purchaser 'stretching her voice to a roar: — who loves to hear a lady roar?''The noise of boys selling papers and race-cards in 1901 may have been 'a great annoyance' to most people, but to ladies in particular, it was deemed to be 'distressing beyond measure'. Most crowds were an anathema in streets rationalised for the circulation of traffic: crowds, that is, that were brooding, idle and hindering, a threat to respectability and appearances, to the shopkeeper's takings, and to the free flow of traffic. Other crowds could be welcomed as examples of the efficacy of municipal organisation — the rush hour crowd, purposeful though lack-lustre, for whom the speed of going was a prime concern.

The question is not whether in fact order must be imposed upon people in space to preserve physical safety or to obviate total congestion — that much is undisputed. The point is rather that throughout the history of the control of Melbourne's public street life, clear and conscious decisions have been made, particularly at a municipal level, which fundamentally preclude the broad possibilities of social interaction in public space. There is no question that over the course of nearly a hundred years, the streets were at various times in a filthy condition, or that different classes of people found each other obnoxious or offensive. But the amelioration of many physical and social conditions — decreased infant mortality, increased life expectancy, the structural safety of buildings — have too often been confused with abstract notions spuriously standing for progress: speed, order, visual unity, cleanliness.

In the nostalgic minds of contemporary city planners and administrators, Melbourne's heritage of heterophony would have the potential merely to add colour and vibrancy to the city of the past. Pavement spruiking may well be 'a blast from the past', and it may well be desirable to limit noise to unamplified levels, but its total elimination is only symptomatic of narrow-minded demands on public space. Melbourne's urban designers may have a 'A vision splendid on historic foundations', measuring Melbourne's putative success in the last decade by its sacred architectural icons, riverside developments and opening vistas. While such improvements are important in themselves, they must be complemented by more deliberate social solutions encouraging human diversity on a local scale. It is admirable to appreciate, as many do, the historic value of a pier, viaduct, ship or building, but the spaces in between not only have a history...
too but are charged with the possibilities of contemporary social meaning and value.

Paul Carter, in discussing the urban acoustic environment, differentiates urban sound before and after the invention of the machine. Human sound communicates, machine noise blocks out. Carter’s acoustic thesis suggests rendering cities more fully habitable by prioritising the human voice, and supports an increasing body of critical urban commentary linking the retreat of life from the streets and a fear of unwanted intimacy to the decline of the modern city. Graeme Davison sees the urban problem in terms of a civic morality which must go beyond the economic, and questions the integrity of city strategy plans which on the one hand determine that cities are about social diversity while on the other hand forging ahead with the marginalisation of public spaces through social and architectural compromise.

It is a modern tragedy that the success of public places is measured by retail turnover or architectural acceptability. Melbourne’s Southbank is a putative success, but the possibilities as interactive and imaginative space of those spaces outside the terraced cafes are more unclear in what is in fact a semi-private zone invigilated by private security guards. Bans on spruikers in Swanston Street do not even enforce a theoretical public democracy, but like many nineteenth-century moralising strictures are designed to purify social space for the council’s ‘right kind of person’ and ‘quality retailer’. Why should the streets be ransomed to the fanciful notion that there is an inverse relationship between the elimination of noise and a city’s urbanity? Why should city-goers be forced to retire to the sanitised echo chamber of privately managed complexes such as Melbourne Central, which only imitate the public street with a rhetoric of accessibility and where spruikers are called ‘professional in-store audio marketers’?

We would like to ‘revitalise’ our cities, but are afraid of our shadows. We fear the intimacy of the street encounter, and in so doing continue to visit the sins of our predecessors on our loveable but problematic city centres. Melbourne has come a long way since in 1890 the noise of neighbours’ geese bothered William Street residents. Yet in many other ways, little has changed. Those managing our ‘community and cultural services’ might briefly pause on the street corner, and if they can hear themselves think above the roar of the motor cars, just for an instant consider that on the one hand while the rationale of our great city is indubitably economic, it must on the other hand continue to be a public stage which can entertain or annoy but always challenge us to be human.

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Endnotes
1 Victorian Public Record Office Series 3181 unit 870, 1901/1534.
3 VPRS 3181/642, 1904/1205; 3181/873, 1903/3038; 3181/885, 1908/5374; Melbourne City Council Archives, Series 120/1. 1913/5210.
6 VPRS 3181/841, 1883/1156; VPRS 937/337. Victoria Police, 8/12/1892.
7 VPRS 3181/880, 1907/3177.
8 MCC 1914/7733.
9 VPRS 3181/848. 1887/486; 3181/860; 3181/862. 1895/1649.
10 MCC 1915/7291.
13 VPRS 3181/870. 1901/1534.
14 Age. 26 February 1920.
18 Port Phillip Patriot. 8 April 1841.
19 VPRS 3181/870, 1901/1534.
20 Age. 17 May 1994.
21 Age. 16 May 1994.
22 Carter. ‘Just a token’.
24 VPRS 3181/673. 1890/1509.