A progressive role for heritage movements in neighbourhood retail accessibility: reimagining the milk bar into the future

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Abstract
This paper will examine the importance of corner store suburbia in creating sustainable, liveable and walkable neighbourhoods, via an illustrative examination of the historical role of the Australian milk bar. It poses several provocations aimed at overcoming hege-monistic governance systems and norms, and reimagining collective strategies for achieving more just provision of basic capabilities for Australian suburbs. Key to planning for just cities that facilitate individual access to life necessities is centring the capabilities of individuals without cars and with other forms of restricted mobility, and therefore assuming within retail and urban policy movements a need for walkable neighbourhood access to grocery basics. It is proposed that the core value apparent within Australian’s nostalgia for the milk bar is the neighbourhood walkability and access provided in the more abstract urban fabric, as well as the milk bar’s role within a particular retail hierarchy. Within the context of a structurally weakened formal planning and public policy system, it is suggested that there is a substantial role for a reinvigorated progressive urban heritage movement located in more informal spaces in reinterpreting the urban past to collectively develop new collective futures. This paper explores and seeks to organise a number of ideas together from various disciplines and policy fields, and funnel them into as a series of questions and provocations for further research and advocacy work, including reflection on political activist roles for heritage proponents.

Introduction
In light of the focus of this special issue, the particular boundary this paper explores is that of the concepts of heritage value, and its relationship to just city concepts, and neighbourhood accessibility. While ostensibly focusing on the heritage of the Melbourne milk bar as an illustration of a broader proposal, I will develop several key provocations regarding a reinvigoration of heritage advocacy. Firstly, I will propose that one of the most valuable essences of Australian’s nostalgia for the milk bar is the fundamental walkability sewn into the nature of its urban fabric qualities, and also its particular hierarchical role within a retail system. Secondly, that in light of the structural challenges of the formal planning and public policy spheres, there may be a substantial role for a progressive and active heritage movement in re-interpreting and realising innovative new conceptions for community provision of well-being. Heritage has the particular characteristic of interpreting collective memory into potential collective futures, perhaps making it uniquely well-suited to the task of reimagining the essence of heritage into substantive urban visioning. This paper explores and seeks to organise a number of ideas together from various disciplines and policy fields, and funnel them into as a series of questions and provocations for further research and advocacy work, including reflection on political activist roles for heritage proponents.
The corner store as a key component of walkable neighbourhoods, and socially-just suburbs

At its core, this paper is concerned with the realisation of socially-just community provision of basic needs, and in particular, grocery retail and its accessibility role in social and transport justice. To this end, I will ultimately focus on the historical role of small corner stores to illuminate key elements of accessibility provided by small, neighbourhood retail models. To justify this view, I will underpin the discussion with a look at transport and land use related social disadvantage related to food access. The capabilities approach (CA), derived from the social justice theories of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (2011), is the theoretical framework argued as a necessary basis for a comprehensive approach to transport and social accessibility in land use planning and just city visioning. It serves as an important theoretical foundation for a socially-just perspective on transport accessibility. It is underpinned by a clearly articulated needs-based human rights approach focussed on the capabilities of individuals, as opposed to groups, communities or households. This is a crucial distinction for social provision policy as it aims to ensure comprehensive provision of a set of basic capabilities to each individual, rather than evaluating policy from the perspective of provision for the ‘majority’, ‘many’ people, or ‘particular groups’. Capabilities are not simply derived from individual circumstances and abilities, but also from those imposed by the external environment and context.

Commonly, urban policies since the 1990s in Australian cities have been normatively oriented towards alleviating car dependence and improving community sustainability and liveability via pursuing integrated transport and land use planning, and seeking to fill mobility gaps in poorly serviced municipalities. Many individuals and communities are vulnerable to transport disadvantage, which is an uneven and inadequate provision of mobility capabilities with which to meet one’s key needs. It is associated with social exclusion and diminished well-being, and those most vulnerable tend to be youth, the elderly, women, and those socioeconomically disadvantaged (Currie et al 2010; Delbosc & Currie 2011; Rachele et al 2017), often due to their structural disadvantages in achieving independent mobility without access to or the ability to drive within a society that often presumes car access. Walkable neighbourhood environments reduce transport disadvantage and increase social inclusion (Ma et al 2018). These neighbourhoods are characterised by diverse land uses and accessibility to amenities and services, such as local shops. Children’s independent mobility, as well as the independent mobility of other groups such as the elderly and disabled (Ker 1997), is often associated with walkable neighbourhoods as a pre-condition (Villanueva et al 2014), including local distribution of key services (Whitzman et al 2010).

A growing literature on ‘food deserts’, places associated with restricted access to key nutrition options, serves as a useful illustration of the relationship between transport, land use, social disadvantage, and grocery retail. Most of the literature examining food deserts comes from the medical and population health fields, and often focuses on nutrition and food choice, and access impacts on obesity and physical health (Beaulac et al 2009). Many studies focus on differences in provision between higher and lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods, with a range of contradictory findings (Bell et al 2009); however these types of studies rely on an assumption of a certain geographical unity in community type, failing to account for fundamental individual disadvantages based on transport mode options. Similarly, many ‘corner store intervention’ studies are concerned with altering the particular food options at an existing corner store, rather than examining the impacts of access to a store in general. While the varieties, and specific options of groceries available have important socioeconomic implications in terms of health, affordability and equity for communities and different groups, this paper is specifically focused on the provision, or lack of localised grocery retail options that are accessible to non-drivers. Increasingly common to much transport disadvantage and food desert research is that while lacking car access can fundamentally exacerbate accessibility and social disadvantage, this is only the case in urban environments without a density of retail options that allow alternative forms of transport such as walking and public transport (Sharkey et al 2010; Rachele et al 2017). Some studies find that daily groceries are being accessed via convenience and corner stores as opposed to the traditional research focus on large supermarkets (Sharkey et al 2010).
Key to planning for access is centring the accessibilities of individuals without cars and other forms of restricted mobility. As a local example, a Melbourne study measured accessibility to a major supermarket in the City of Casey, and found just less than 80% of residents lived within an 8 to 10-minute car journey of a major supermarket (Burns & Inglis 2007). By bus, this figure was only 50%, and by foot, only 4%. It is likely that given historical patterns of urban development and retail and land use policies that this reflects many municipalities within metropolitan Melbourne to some degree. From a capabilities perspective, this paints a dismal picture for car-free access to groceries and daily provisions for much of Melbourne’s population. Around 8% of Australian households, and 8.5% of households in metropolitan Melbourne have no car (Loader 2017), and even this doesn’t account for the capacities for independent mobility of many individuals within households. Similarly, while net car ownership is still rising across metropolitan Melbourne, it is falling in many specific areas, some of which are outer and fringe suburbs (Loader 2017). I argue in this paper that ultimately, the most comprehensive and broadly effective way to address the problem is by reducing the car dependent nature of places with integrated transport and land use planning. Key to this approach is ensuring land use planning prioritises, and assumes a need for, walkable access to daily life necessities.

Car-centric urban development and retail structure shifts such as a reliance on ‘out of (traditional) centre’ shopping malls (among many other factors) have contributed to a highly entrenched erosion of walkable urbanism, particularly in new and fringe suburbs that accommodate most of the new population growth in Melbourne. Reliance on shopping malls catering to drivers are a significant social equity issue as those who cannot or do not wish to drive are disadvantaged. Goodman et al argue that reducing car usage and car dependence should be part of the remit of retail policy, and the accessibility of retail centres should cater ‘to the broadest range of people’ (2016 p. 110). Additionally, as opposed to traditional centres with separate ownership and management, shopping malls have single ownership and central management, effectively resulting in a bias towards certain store types, often a higher cost to establishment of new stores, and a kind of homogeneity that ‘does not allow local communities to express difference or identity in the way that traditional, multi-owner shopping streets frequently can and do’ (2016 p. 111).

At odds with this contemporary model of retail provision is the concept of the 20-minute city, community, or neighbourhood. It has been proposed, and nominally adopted in to-date abstract forms within metropolitan and some local policies (Lowe et al 2018) as an umbrella concept for more sustainable local areas that offer most key services with which to meet personal and community wellbeing needs within reasonable active and sustainable transport access (Stanley & Davis 2015). Current 20-minute city conceptions often suffer from poorly-defined particulars at the local level, in direct contrast with other development and land use policies (Lowe et al 2018), and generally lack the ‘teeth’ to achieve their allegedly transformational aims. The abstract nature of the concept puts it at risk of capture by interests seeking to dilute more radical formulations of the idea. At best however, in seeking to shift from the abstract towards the tangible, it is a potentially cohesive organising concept via which policy integration can be sought, visions and proposals can be interrogated, and with which to provoke political discourse about underlying assumptions and structural challenges to achieving accessible neighbourhoods and public provision for all urban citizens. Importantly, a strong formation of the concept offers the potential to satisfy the practical requirements for transport justice (Martens 2017) of a minimum threshold of accessibility provision as an evaluative, and prioritising mechanism for policy targets. In essence, this broad concept has particular potential as the combination of a political critique and movement, and a measurable demand for local access to life basics.

An examination of Melbourne’s milk bars and their historical value

The corner store, general store or convenience store is certainly not unique to Australia. These small-scale neighbourhood retail establishments largely appeared throughout Western cities in the late 1920s and 1930s. They developed any number of local variations on names (milk bars and delis in Australia, bodegas in the US and dairies in the UK), and uniquely local physical forms and characteristics, often borrowing from overseas models or reflecting new trends. They invariably serve important functions within communities, from provision of daily necessities and goods, to places for social interaction, community connection and local identity.
While influenced by the popular US soda parlours, milk bars were first developed in Australia, the first in Sydney by Mick Adams (nee Joachim Tavlaridis) in 1932. They spread rapidly, with around four thousand across Australian suburbs within five years (Janiszewski & Alexakis 2011). Bogle (2015) details their appeal to customers as coinciding with modernist shifts and trends towards leisure activities, Americanisation, and ‘cool’ design and youth culture. For milk bar owners, particularly many from working class immigrant families, the business format was accessible as existing urban and suburban retail tenancies could be used for the set-up ‘with credit assistance for shop-fitters, supplements from milk suppliers and assistance from family’ (p. 6). While it is clear that many recounted childhood memories focus on stories of walking to the milk bar for ice-cream or candy, or savory food such as pies or sandwiches, milk bars also carried groceries, fresh fruit and vegetables, and a range of other goods (sometimes referred to on the exteriors as ‘mixed business’) from newspapers and magazines, tobacco, fishing tackle, and ice (Willis 2016). As Greek and Italian migrants bought up corner stores, ‘corner stores and milk bars became the same thing’ (Donnelly 2015). While the 1950s trend towards coffee shops threatened the more traditional ‘parlour’ element of the inner Sydney style of milk bars (Bogle 2015), it is clear that the more diverse milk bar elements such as that of the corner store evolved to take greater prominence.

Though no comprehensive historical or contemporary mapping of milk bars in Melbourne could be found, Wadelton’s (2018) ongoing informal mapping project has to date compiled nearly 600 former or existing milk bar locations (though doesn’t distinguish between either) (Figure 1). More qualitative research indicates that neighbourhoods around the mid-twentieth century were generally very well served by milk bars, Donnelly (2012, p. 2) claiming they were ‘on nearly every third corner of the Australian suburbs’ serving them with ‘everything you needed to live day-to-day, save for the weekly pilgrimage to the SSW or Franklins’ [larger supermarkets]. He explains that, ‘If you had a late night, no-milk-for-a-cuppa crisis, Dad could duck out in his gown and slippers in between ad breaks of Prisoner’. These levels of walkability are reflected in the maps seen within figures 1 and 2. Research by Loader (2016) demonstrates changes in milk bars in the nearby regional city of Bendigo that likely serve as illustrative of changes in Melbourne. Whereas in 1971 in Bendigo, there were 76 milk bars roughly comprising one store per 600 people, by 2016, there were 8 that had retained their original function, making only one per 1852 residents. At the time, 21 were residential homes, a handful of others converted into other more specific businesses or services such as cafes or dentists, and several left vacant (such as in figure 3).

Figure 1: Snapshots of David Wadelton’s ongoing mapping project of former and still-existing milk bar locations in Melbourne, with a close-up of the inner and middle suburban areas north of the CBD. (Source: Wadelton 2018).
Milk bars in Melbourne and other cities are fondly remembered by many who grew up with them, and the subject of a range of individual and community-based heritage efforts such as photographic archives and exhibitions (Donnelly 2012; Connor 2015), walking tours (Hare 2013) and online community indexing, notably the efforts of David Wadelton’s FaceBook page ‘Milk Bars of Melbourne’. Clements (2016 p. 167) refers to existing milk bars as ‘a stable hub for communities in a rapidly changing world’ and an ‘important social locus’, and Hare (2013) refers to them as the ‘cornerstones of the community’. Many existing heritage efforts are focused on built heritage, such as their signage and billboards (Clements 2016), internal fittings, and specific buildings. These are worthy efforts for heritage advocacy. However, I argue that the primary focus of a reinvigorated heritage movement should shift and broaden beyond built features towards a definitive focus on walkable suburban provision of necessary basics. Essentially, it is not the bricks and mortar, the specific lot or location, the building typology, the ownership or the wares per se that are central to milk bars as ‘cornerstones’ or ‘stable hubs’ (though worthy of heritage preservation). Instead, it is the particular characteristics of daily goods provision, the general fine grain distribution of spatial location, and the role within a retail hierarchy and system that matter the most to socially-just neighbourhoods. These accessibility characteristics comprise the particular heritage value to metropolitan Melbourne; the fact that they were easy to walk to, and existed in most neighbourhoods. In order to progress facilitation of walkable, accessible and liveable suburban neighbourhoods, an important question for urban planners and heritage proponents is to ask what a twenty-first century reinterpretation of those fundamental elements and characteristics would be, and how to achieve them within contemporary cities.
The historical policy context of shifting retail function in metropolitan Melbourne

Contemporary challenges to local retail transformations are contingent on major historical shifts of industry structure and the political nature of its governance. We must therefore examine the policy context of Melbourne’s shift from a corner store economy to a highly centralised product of the market-led planning of the neoliberal era. In the following, I will draw heavily from ‘Planning Melbourne’ by Goodman et al (2016), keeping in mind that these shifts took place intertwined with a vast multiscale complexity of changes such as changing demographics and relationships, the erosion of modernist social structures, postmodern economic and industry changes, and the suburbanisation of Australian cities entrenching car dependence within much of the built landscape and culture (Davison 2004).

In the late nineteenth century, department stores and large retailers began expanding into the CBD, and subsequent specialisation cemented the central area as Melbourne’s ‘pre-eminent, specialist shopping centre’ (Goodman et al 2016 p. 109). However, suburban centres (numbering around 380 retail strips in the mid-twentieth century) still thrived for much of the twentieth century. In this hierarchy, milk bars commonly served as the place of purchase for daily goods, ‘dotted at regular intervals throughout the inner and middle suburbs’ (Goodman et al 2016 p. 110), while larger suburban centres were for weekly shopping trips for groceries and other items. A trip into the CBD was for specialised items and shopping day trips.

Retail policy in the 1950s was largely aimed at ‘dispersing’ retail function to the suburbs to relieve pressure on the CBD which was experiencing post-war boom growth pressures. While ‘little was done to assist the build-up of the five suburban centres it named’ (Goodman et al 2016 p. 112), the policy of facilitating car parking provision assisted the arrival of US style malls seeking to respond to the constrained car parking conditions in the CBD. In the 60s and 70s, US style shopping malls came to dominate suburban shopping, designed to replicate the central city experience, but typically located away from major fixed-rail public transport routes and oriented in both design and promotion towards motor vehicle access, disconnected with their surrounding urban environment. This effectively killed off, threatened, or led to the dispersal of much of the retail function of pre-existing shopping centres and thousands of small businesses. The city expanded outward in the 1960s and 70s, coinciding with heightened environmental and urban issue awareness, creating a tension that led to the 1980 District Centre Policy, which aimed to concentrate activity within existing centres and better facilitate transport options and local employment. Enabled via Amendment 150, it had regulatory strength and a rational approach to incentivising staged concentration in over a dozen suburban centres served by rail, and limiting mall expansion.

Corporate interests, prominent among them, the Myer Corporation, strongly resisted this intervention into the market. The newly elected Cain Labor government and Planning Minister Evan Walker, keen to avoid confrontation, eventually capitulated and removed expansion limits, Cain later regretting the position. The policy was inadequate for dealing with corporate power, a view supported by the subsequent independent Moodie report of 1990, which also criticised the lack of integration with supporting transport infrastructure upgrades, ad hoc process exclusive of local government input, and poor resourcing. The response in the form of the 1992 ‘Cities in the Suburbs’ policy was killed off by a government change, in the form of the pro private growth Kennett government, and Planning Minister McLellan, beginning an unprecedented, massive expansion of existing malls and new ‘big box’ retailing. Retail policy was eradicated, decision making privatised for the next decade, and the District Centre Policy narrative was rewritten as a failure.

While the 2002 ‘Melbourne 2030’ metropolitan activity centre policy was in many ways a return to the aims of the District Centre Policy, it crippled itself with inconsistencies, over-nominating 114 centres with an internal hierarchy that reflected existing conditions rather than a planning vision, and included large-scale malls, not only shying away any limitations on their growth, but effectively encouraging their expansion. Additionally, regulatory power was weak and ineffective, often relying on vague statutory statements with no force or
clarity. A 2007 audit recommended an Activity Centres Authority to coordinate stronger planning and regulation. The metropolitan plan ‘update’ ‘Melbourne @ 5 Million’ introduced yet another set of five centres (Central Activity Districts, or CADs) to effectively function as outer suburban CBDs. While the vision of a polycentric city has merits, these plans suffered chronically from weak regulatory strength, fundamental internal conflicts, poor integration with crucial supporting policies and forces (such as employment) and in delegating important clarity to future negotiations. Plan Melbourne in 2014 expressed yet another articulation of the polycentric city with little acknowledgement of centre relationships. Ultimately, few activity centres have experienced any of the desired growth, and little of that has been attributed to planning. Between 1993 and 2012, the proportion of corporate retail floor space in Melbourne grew from 26% to 38%, under policy conditions normatively aiming to limit car-based mall expansion. In 1993, only 6% of the retail floor space in inner suburbs was corporate malls, with 134 in total throughout Melbourne. By 2008, this grew to 187, many in the new fringe suburbs, and the total floorspace had grown by 67%, indicating many existing centres had expanded. ‘Policy appears to have surrendered’ (Goodman et al 2016 p. 115) to deregulatory forces and large corporate interests which have ‘imposed a retail experience unrecognisable to the Melburnians of 40 years ago’.

A 2010 report on the contemporary barriers to out-of-centre retail confirms that in Victoria and across Australia, current planning system arrangements create regulatory barriers to grocery retail outside of, or on the fringes of existing centres, creating barriers for new market entrants (SGS 2010). Some of the regulatory barriers mentioned include planning authority reluctance or refusal to alter planning schemes, or to issue a permit due to inconsistency with existing policies. Alternatively, responses may involve issuing a permit with onerous conditions (such as floor space requirements) rendering the project unworkable. There are often specific guidelines for planning authority consideration of impacts to incumbent retail operators (‘adverse impacts on existing centres’). Barriers related to competition can include incumbent operators objecting via planning procedures, increasing the cost and risk to the would-be entrant. In essence, there is a strong tendency toward status quo arrangements. Typical retail and activity centre policies may be poorly suited to pursuing change, in part due to issues with integration and control, the slow pace and challenging context of institutional change, and also existing policy arrangements focused on maintaining the integrity of existing regional retail hierarchy. Similarly, market dynamics are also unlikely to produce the incentives for fine grained neighbourhood access to grocery retail, in part because of the existing, entrenched, and powerful grocery retail duopoly within the contemporary Australian context, and also specifically due to the market tendency to fine grain provision in city centres with higher financial gains, favouring car-based models in suburban locations.

A role for progressive heritage movements in neighbourhood retail provision

If traditional regulatory avenues and market dynamics are unlikely to provide for a high degree of neighbourhood access, is it possible to look towards heritage as a potential avenue for restoration of community access provision? Arguably, heritage preservation is less a servant to market dynamics and status-quo regulation, and more to community values across time. One of the major reasons for the decline of the milk bar, and the suburban corner store model is market competition (Donnelly 2015). One of the major roles of public urban policy within a capitalist system is to fill the gaps of market failures, and similarly to protect essential social provision where the market would otherwise erode it. My contention is that heritage may theoretically, even if not in formal or ‘authorised’ modes, be fundamentally less vulnerable to capture by neoliberal conceptions of competition and market-oriented forces than strategic and land use planning.

Planning has not simply been passively dominated by or surrendered to neoliberal and corporate interests and forms. It has actively facilitated the rise of the ‘category killer’ (Goodman et al 2016, p. 120) dominating corporate retail models disconnected from urban centres, and the decline of a large range of independent goods providers, and related transformation of walkable, mixed use neighbourhood centres. Goodman et al paint a bleak picture for the future of retail
and centre planning, claiming the real power in Victoria lies in recent deregulated commercial zones, which will strengthen the status quo, making strategic retail planning ‘impossible’ (2016 p. 119). Nevertheless, they offer several measures for preventing a regrettable waste of vast public and private infrastructure in Melbourne’s existing suburbs, including protecting existing centres from further out-of-centre mall expansion, residential infill near centres, protection of traditional centre architecture and prevention of the mall-as-centre model, achieved via tighter regulation, more explicit planning requirements and direct planner involvement. These would be welcome developments but these hopes appear at odds with not only the pattern of decades of failure, but the wider crisis of planning’s capacity to protect public interest within a neoliberalised system.

The paradigm of privatisation and retreat of public-interest planning continues to dominate Victoria’s urban development, and passionate efforts to claw back substantive public interest seem often to be an inch forward and two steps back. Formal planning spheres in Victoria are often heavily influenced or captured by neoliberal ideologies and powerful interests which are often able to operate at scales beyond that of the state or local government planning system. The urban products of this neoliberal regime lie in a frustrated and under-resourced profession (Goodman & Coiacetto 2012) frequently revising local and metropolitan reports and plans unimplemented, ignored and erased with each government change, a disconnection between development and community provision, and a growing inequality crisis. Respected RMIT urban planning professor Michael Buxton recently retired with the dispirited critique that, ‘People have lost control of their city to the development industry and government acting on behalf of vested interests instead of the voter’ (Worrall 2018). In amongst widespread disillusionment with the ability of traditional strategic planning systems within Victoria, I question their ability to recover retail policy from within their present neoliberal bind. Planning policy for retail centres has dismally lost the battle against power and capital, so there should be little reason to believe this dynamic will change from within planning spheres without substantial disruption. Goodman et al (2016) offer two normative ways forward, despite their bleak forecast; developing a clear idea of the role of shopping centres to communities, and a commitment to needs-based provision of access. This is the view supported in this paper, but here I suggest that there is a substantial role for a broader heritage movement to interrogate and pursue these aims, deploying formal and informal activist approaches towards developing an interpretation of Melbourne’s past into its future.

Victoria’s formal heritage tools and mechanisms of course overlap with, and operate within the planning system that I have argued is largely ineffective at internally producing transformational change at odds with powerful market interests. Melbourne’s heritage regulatory system is criticised as deficient, with ‘serious shortcomings’, open to discretion, with regulations able to be ignored, and heritage frequently destroyed (Goodman et al 2016). In particular, the inclusion of ‘economic viability’ as a factor in applications, particularly in as much as refusal would cause ‘undue financial hardship’ to the owner, gives developers ‘a powerful basis on which to argue for the destruction of heritage’ (Goodman et al 2016 p. 127). Another weakness is that the Heritage Act 1974 has strong protections for buildings and places, but not for streetscapes and landscapes, effectively excluding much heritage significance. Additionally, decision making guidelines are weak, leaving much open to discretion, and there is a lack of third party objection and appeal rights. The controls are currently seen as weak and ineffective at preserving heritage in the face of strong development pressures and interests. The community can nominate places of potential heritage significance, which are then assessed for significance at local or state level, including place history, condition and statement of significance, and if successful, protected by a heritage overlay (a form of zoning) which means a permit is required for alterations. However, a key weakness is that overlays are a weak measure with vague wording, subject to interpretation and easily undermined. Secondly, application of overlays can be uneven due to the high costs of producing studies, or inconsistent between councils, making piecemeal approaches potentially onerous and ineffective at metropolitan levels. For these reasons, I argue that a transformational heritage movement will likely need to amass its power outside of its operations within a weakened planning system, and instead focus on reinvigorating community consciousness.
Australian urban heritage, however, has an exciting foundation in a particularly urban, progressive and radical activism that may be particularly relevant to reenergise towards the aims of this research. Lesh (2017) paints a picture of an ambitious urban heritage climate developing in the 1970s. This was in response to both a ‘new nationalism’ rejecting a colonial settler identity and boldly expanding the consciousness of what Australian heritage was, and included, into the progressive new concept of the ‘national estate’. Similarly, key protagonists such as Lewis and Kerr were among many influential academics who played a role in challenging and constructing a uniquely locally-oriented Australian approach to heritage in the Burra Charter, in direct rejection of the traditional European focus in the Vienna Charter. The Burra Charter has in turn influenced a broadening of heritage philosophies internationally, including Europe, with its ‘emphasis on managing change rather than conserving sites and monuments in situ’ (Goodman et al 2016 p. 122). The Burra Charter has also sprung from activist urban heritage movements in the 1970s, including construction union ‘green bans’ to prevent modernist urban redevelopment. Even the ‘Burra’ in the charter’s name represents a purposely crafted radical act of symbolism in ratifying the charter within a town with a name that stood in direct contrast to the ‘genteel’ Venice Charter.

It still took several decades for the ‘spirit’ of the original conception in practice and norms to resolve a tension between two divergent views of heritage as ‘a narrow activity dedicated to a limited number of basically exceptional places’ and ‘broader urban change management’ reflecting the contemporary practitioner view (Goodman et al 2016 p. 129). However, it seems clear that the celebrated essence of urban heritage in Australia is oriented towards the progressive challenge of status quo, a radical broadening of imagination and conceptual limits towards future-oriented social justice aims, and a radical reforming of approaches and mechanisms. Progressive imaginations and imperatives for urban heritage and urban norms are already being explored, particularly in light of social and environmental crises of sustainability, postcolonial indigenous justice, and massive social and economic inequality. Bold re-imaginings and decidedly urban, and justice-oriented developments are growing legitimacy, such as the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach.

If the Australian approach to urban heritage is fundamentally capable of progressive and radical movements and restructuring, what shape might some of the potential pursuits take towards the challenges set within this paper? The overall ask is that a range of possibilities be explored, as well as the contentions of this paper further critically interrogated, but that the provocations of capabilities approaches to neighbourhood amenity provision be kept in view as an orienting vision to efforts.

One potential role for urban heritage actors is to explore effective methods of not only protecting existing milk bar establishments, but maintaining their relevant use in local daily goods provision where no other alternatives are available to locals within walkable reach. These locations are most likely residential areas within fairly established suburbs, where much land has been rezoned to General Residential, creating strong incentives for developers to convert old commercial use land to higher yield residential. However, this may be an inadequate, and ad hoc approach that does little in terms of scalability, or for newer (or future) greenfield suburbs.

A second avenue for exploration is identifying the essentials of the urban fabric in question in terms of use and accessibility and perhaps translating this into new approaches to zoning and statutory planning, or new modes of planning altogether that can better achieve the outcomes. To what degree existing heritage theory and practice relating to urban fabric preservation are satisfactory is an open question for further work. However, a movement that can act upon the planning system itself has the potential for scaleability, and application to new greenfield and infill development if the regulation of development can be altered.

A third task could be identifying what contemporary local needs are suitable or necessary for innovative new forms of fine-grained neighbourhood provision. Milk bars are a product of their time, and perhaps there is room to translate the accessibility characteristics of the past into new and more relevant collections of neighbourhood provision that either create better financial sustainability or serve other sustainability needs. Here, a key question for heritage work is to
what degree the field is capable of a kind of ‘reconstruction’ where no tangible continuity is present. This is even more vexing in the case of newly developed greenfield suburbs, however this is where applying the ideas of accessibility firmly within planning structures may successfully interpret the heritage of urban fabric into urban growth patterns.

A fourth role for heritage movements in this context is to interrogate power relations. Heritage movements can play a key role in city shaping questions involving structural power imbalances, political contestation of values and norms, and potentially destructive loss that can entrench new powers. Destructive skyscraper projects in the 1970s and 1980s in Melbourne were realised ‘with the authorisation of heritage regulators and consultants’ (Lesh 2018, p. 1) and resisted by heritage activists, speaking to both the perpetual potential for the complicity of any professional body in reinforcing status quo power relations, and the important role of resistance movements within the necessarily contested nature of urban development and change. Lesh (2018) shows that within the period of tension over skyscraper urbanism, crucial questions were avoided as heritage ideas were bent to serve workable forms of compromise between the will of skyscraper proponents on one side, and the limited extent of planning regulatory power on the other, resulting in facadism, obliteration of heritage, and the general co-option of heritage narratives to serve pro-development narratives. Acceptable boundaries were effectively pushed only by the dominant force of private capital. This also highlights the importance of well-articulated value and rights definition during these periods of potential upheaval, and the need to explicitly acknowledge, interrogate and confront power relations that may co-opt and steer discourses. The role of a justice perspective is to focus attention simultaneously on both of these elements, carefully distinguishing and prioritising collective and individual needs from other interests such as profit, and to attempt to explicitly overcome unjust power relations. Collective memory and interpretation, central to the urban heritage fields, are key in disrupting power rationalities (Flyvbjerg 1998).

In this paper I posit that the particular value of heritage intervention is the careful development of, and active orientation towards a just vision of walkable neighbourhood access that is derived specifically from what is valued in Australia’s urban history. The nostalgia for the Melbourne milk bar is illustrative of this value, and I argue that it derives more from its daily retail accessibility characteristics than what much of the existing heritage discourse and mechanisms are focused upon. A reinvigorated activist role could be undertaken in imagining and strategising the realization of accessible suburban neighbourhoods via a political movement, justified by the explicit position of the urban heritage advocate as an actor concerned at their core with interpreting and projecting the value of the past into the present and future. If heritage has the potential to shape perceptions of place, then it is capable of active, political intervention in fostering new imaginations and rationalities to counter otherwise unjust realities, norms and resignations. Central to radicalism in general is a grounded but firm development of, and grip on clearly positioned values and aims, and a willingness to re-evaluate, and possibly subvert or reinvent, the tools, structural norms, epistemologies, ontologies and boundaries in order to work towards them. Conversely, beginning with the limitations of the hegemonic system and context itself is fundamentally binding your imagination of possibilities to the status quo.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how the milk bar serves as an illustration of an essential urban, social and economic relationship that should be reinterpreted in our current endeavours to develop sustainable, liveable and equitable urban and suburban neighbourhoods. Walkable shopping and corner stores certainly existed within urban fabrics before milk bars existed, and milk bars are only one historically-contextual manifestation of this neighbourhood role, themselves evolving over time with new social and economic contexts and cultural trends. However, the milk bar in Melbourne and similar corner store typologies in other cities serve as an important locus for reflection as they sit somewhat fresh in social memory, and still often sit visible (in some form) on the street. They are an illustration of what has been, and is being eroded, but in many cases not replaced or reimagined with a new form capable of delivering broad access to daily necessities without driving. It was the particulars of the historical social, cultural and
economic relationships and systems throughout the twentieth century cities that brought forth and sustained the corner store model of Australian suburbia. The valued roles that milk bars played are capable of being reimagined in new twenty-first century contexts.

I argue that there may be a stronger role for heritage advocates and critical theorists to not only help bridge gaps left by the formal planning apparatus in addressing public interest and social justice, but to radically open up the imaginations of Victorian citizens to what core principles from the past may be worthy of future innovations. This may involve growing the relevance and power of the heritage spheres by identifying formal and informal spaces and methods to reignite public interest debates, and question the rigidity and legitimacy of existing norms. Ultimately, planning in Melbourne has experienced a concerning paradigm shift in the form of decades of politicisation, the location of independent planning agencies within state government departments, and the imposition on local governments of a standardised deregulated planning system. Planning has become a product of state government, and government has both overloaded itself with responsibility, and retreated from planning and control, leaving development and growth to market interests. Is heritage practically restricted to rigid operation within a deeply flawed planning system? Or can heritage approaches operate simultaneously independently of, and integrated with the planning system, and the broader practice of city making, and urban sustainability and resilience?

A neighbourhood corner store model, particularly one based on independent ownership, may simply be incapable of scraping together any competitive or conventionally economically-viable niche. Public policy, planning and heritage, outside of their market fundamentalist and neoliberal conceptions (Dardot & Laval 2014; Berry 2017), are arguably normatively charged with actively protecting and pursuing the public interest where market failure risks loss of valuable social relations. Moreover, applying a capabilities approach asks us to focus efforts on ensuring a minimum threshold of specific provisions to all, which in contemporary contexts must involve active resistance and side-stepping of power dynamics that effectively erode these outcomes. Can more radical and progressive conceptions of heritage play a role in finding scaleable provision of walkable amenities to neighbourhoods? If the celebrated nature of the radical Australian heritage practitioners was that of resisting, overcoming and reimagining the hegemony of heritage philosophy, management practices and limitations in a ‘renewed national assertiveness’ (Lesh, 2017, p. 127), it seems entirely possible that this revolutionary spirit again engender and drive a reimagining of the mode, role, remit, and strategy of heritage spheres, adapting in direct response to contemporary urban and social crises.

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