Independent creative subcultures and why they matter

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Independent creative subcultures and why they matter

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Independent creative subcultures, in their various hybrids of music, theatre, art, and new and old media, are the primordial soup of cultural evolution. They have the capacity for a highly definitive influence on their participants – catalysing the transition from consumer to producer for instance – often conferring much broader cultural and social benefit. Creative subcultures make continuing, well-documented, contributions to established city cultures for relatively low outlay. Indie creative activities in particular do not make much money and they do not cost much to set-up. They tend to cluster in areas characterised by low rents and non-residential uses such as retail and industrial areas, but as third wave gentrification reaches into the dark pockets of many cities, cheap rental properties are becoming scarce. This article uses time-series maps of inner Melbourne to show a pattern of tighter and tighter clustering of indie cultural activities as alternative spaces disappear. It looks at where they are going and why, considers the implications of this pattern for the ‘creative city’, and suggests some policy initiatives to help maintain and nurture independent creative scenes. As Melbourne’s live music scene is particularly vulnerable to displacement from increasingly dense and contested inner-urban space, the article focuses on interventions relating to music venues.

Keywords: creative subcultures; creative city; gentrification; urban planning and policy

Introduction

Independent creative subcultures, in their various hybrids of music, theatre, art, and new and old media, are the primordial soup of cultural evolution. It is within these indie subcultures that the new work begins, often with very low entry thresholds as, unlike other productive activities, participation does not demand much initial skill or experience. Creative subcultures have the capacity for a highly definitive influence on their participants – catalysing the transition from consumer to producer for instance – often conferring much broader cultural and social benefit. The continuing contribution that they make to established city cultures is well documented – an initiative to provide ‘breeding places’ for collectives of artists and activists in Amsterdam carries the slogan ‘No Culture without Subculture’ (City of Amsterdam 2003) – often for relatively low outlay.

Indie creative activities in particular do not make much money – they experiment and fail and explore for the fun of it – and they do not cost much to set-up.

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The sites of non-profit and low-profit creative activities tend to be clustered in areas characterised by low rents and non-residential uses such as retail and industrial areas, often without the proper permits, where they are unlikely to disturb the neighbours or draw unwanted attention from government planning and building inspectors. But third wave gentrification (Hackworth and Smith 2001) in many cities is reaching into the darker streets and industrial lands, and cheap rental properties are becoming scarce. This article uses time-series maps of inner Melbourne to show a pattern of tighter and tighter clustering of indie cultural activities as alternative spaces disappear. It looks at where they are going and why, and considers the implications of this pattern for the ‘creative city’. Finally, the article proposes some policy and planning reforms that, with relatively small government effort, would help maintain existing and nurture new independent creative subcultures.

On indie subcultures

Notwithstanding the often rapid incorporation of their products into the mainstream, all indie subcultures begin, by definition, in opposition to the dominant, commercial culture. Dick Hebdige, in his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) sees subcultures in general as ‘symbolic forms of resistance’ (p. 80). Indie creative subcultures are characterised by the difference from the mainstream in their music and art, and by the alternative politics that roam and redefine the edges of the dominant culture. They are countercultural, what used to be called the avant-garde: ‘innovative, experimental, challenging and devoted to the overthrow of orthodoxies’ (McAuliffe 2004, p. 103).

Indie subcultures are self-consciously marginal. They are first and foremost social groups in the sense defined by Young (1990) as ‘collective[s] of people who have affinity with one another because of a set of practices or way of life; they differentiate themselves from or are differentiated by at least one other group according to these cultural forms’ (p. 186). ‘Near the core of the radical project is the artist’, says Ley (1996, p. 188), and it is true that music and artistic subcultures have at their centre an alternative politics. Alternative cultures took clear form in the 1960s across the Western world, but they have an ancestry that can be traced back to Africa and the black roots of the American South (Hebdige 1979), to the dadaists and surrealists of early-twentieth-century Europe, to the existentialists in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s and later the situationists amongst other tangled strands (Marcus 1989). All contain elements of resistance, subversion, anti-establishment or anti-‘art’, deliberately defying reason or control, questioning and challenging. In his Secret History of the Twentieth Century, *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus points out that the lineage of alternative culture is complex, as ‘every new manifestation in culture rewrites the past’:

but in all times forgotten actors emerge from the past not as ancestors but as familiars. In the 1920s in literary America it was Herman Melville; in the rock ‘n’ roll 1960s it was Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson of the 1930s; in the entropic Western 1970s it was the carefully absolutist German critic Walter Benjamin of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1976 and 1977, and in the years to follow, as symbolically remade by the Sex Pistols, it was, perhaps, dadaists, lettrists, situationists, and various medieval heretics. (Marcus 1989, p. 21–22)
De Botton (2004) draws similar links when discussing bohemia in the proper sense:

One can wind the word around a number of different artistic and social phenomena of the last two hundred years, from Romanticism to Surrealism, from the Beatniks to the Punks, from the Situationists to the Kibbutzniks, and still not snap a thread binding something important together. (p. 277–278)

These threads continue unbroken; perhaps they are even thickening. Punk knowingly drew on blues and the situationists (Marcus 1989); new wave, neo-punk, post-punk, garage rock, alt rock and grunge acknowledge their political antecedents and each other in their sound, style and reasoning, referencing so many of their ancestors that the fusions and new forms they produce are infinite. If there is a single binding theme it is a rejection of mass-produced, commercialised culture.

The concept of the indie scene has thickened too, to include not only all the arrangements of proponents, participants, audiences, supports and infrastructures involved in the production of creative subculture, but the connections between particular forms (writing, music, theatre, art, film etc.). Geoff Stahl, following Straw (1991), uses the idea of the scene to refer to the ‘extensive inter-related networks, circuits and alliances formed both inside and outside the city’, allowing a description of the ‘many resources marshalled together to support cultural activity in the city’ (Stahl 2004, p. 54). He proposes further that over time, ‘any scene becomes spatially embedded according to a dense array of social, industrial and institutional infrastructures, all of which operate at a local and trans-local level’ (ibid.).

Scene carries a fundamental association with place. Stahl argues in relation to the indie music scene that ‘where bands come from and where they produce their music are significant aspects of how they register in the imaginations of fans and other music-makers’:

… the Olympia scene, the Seattle scene, the Dunedin scene and the Manchester scene are all signifiers that draw explicit links between the urban referent and images of a vibrant subcultural hub. Spatially coded in this way, city-as-sign and city-as-scene are often conflated in a manner that privileges an aesthetic experience of, and commitment to, the city. Indie bands and their music are understood by fans and artists alike to be deeply connected with specific places, a sign of their unwavering allegiance to an ideology of small-scale production, a deep sense of commitment to their region’s underground, and an awareness of their role as bearers of its subterranean values, which takes the form of (an often ironic …) civic boosterism. (Stahl 2004, p. 55)

The argument applies to other artforms: the Melbourne street art and independent theatre scenes are as closely associated with the city as its internationally recognised live music scene. It is the complex relationship between indie subcultures, the low thresholds they have to entry, and the places in which they locate that forms the basis of this article.

On the Melbourne indie scene
One of my favourite stories about creative subcultures and low thresholds is told by Rose Chong (personal communication, 2010) – a costume designer and Melbourne legend. Rose arrived in Melbourne in the early 1970s and through a friend who was a student at Melbourne University wandered one day into the nearby Pram...
Factory in Carlton. The Pram Factory was the home of Melbourne’s first independent theatre collective, the Australian Performing Group (APG). In the words of John Timlin:

The Pram Factory is a focal point of much of Carlton’s intellectual, artistic and political life. A refugee camp, housing dissidents of various political, theatrical and social complexion who find within its walls an attempt to forge a working structure which can effectively deal with the problems of theatre without the oppressions of hierarchical organization. In the beginning it was a loose assemblage of people most of whom emanated from the Melbourne University campus. The emphasis was theatrical rather than political though this was later to change … It was a rough and tough group, heavily iconoclastic and united in its contempt for theatres like The Old Tote and The Melbourne Theatre Company whose consistent programming of plays derived from Broadway and the West End typified the cultural cringe then endemic in this country. … Structurally, in terms of organisation, the APG described itself as a ‘democratic collective of actors, writers, designers etc.’ It was, in the accepted wisdom of those days, one person, one vote. All shared in the programming; roles were multi-functional – writers could act, actors write, administrators build the set. … Drama is a communal art. It needs writers and actors and technicians and ticket sellers and designers and painters of walls. Without each other, not one of these people would be meaningful. In so far as the APG is an alternative, it is so because its political form is such as to give each person a share in deciding what affects another. It is frightening to each of us at different levels, for different reasons but, for those of us who choose to remain, it is the best way to work; trust is the only way in which the theatre can take those risks necessary to create something new. (2006 cited in Ingleton 2006)

Rose Chong was hanging around the Pram Factory when someone asked if she could sew. She could, and began making costumes for APG plays, and then for Australia’s first independent film, *Dimboola*, and as her practice expanded, she bought a shop in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. Gertrude Street was one of the meanest streets of the time, full of rough pubs and vacant shops and cheap rents, and was the subject of many powerful songs from Archie Roach – an Indigenous singer-songwriter and legend in his own right, who lived much of his life in the area (see Shaw 2009). Rose settled there because it was ‘dirt cheap and no-one else wanted it’, to become one of Melbourne’s most accessible and quirky costume design businesses.

Many of Melbourne’s best-known actors, writers, designers and musicians found their medium in the APG. Max Gillies, Peter Cummins, Bruce Spence, John Romeril, Bill Garner, Helen Garner, Daniel Keene, Barry Dickins, Sue Ingleton, Peter Corrigan, Evelyn Krape and Jane Clifton made the transition into Melbourne’s mainstream from the APG. Others, including Lindzee Smith and Phil Motherwell, lingered on the edges, feeding the next generations of writers and musicians from Nick Cave to MKA’s (Theatre of New Writing) Toby Manderson-Galvin. Betty Burstall formed the Pram Factory’s stable mate, La Mama Theatre, around the corner, and Jon Hawkes founded Circus Oz, both of which continue today:

The Australian Performing Group was an agent of change and, some thirty years after its demise, its seminal influence on the cultural life of Australia is at last recognised. It stimulated a whole generation to see themselves in a new light, to see their culture emerge as truly Australian and to claim it thus. From the creative community that was the Pram Factory came many gifted writers and actors, directors of film, theatre and TV, artists, musicians and singers, circus performers, arts administrators and community artists. It is unique in the history of the arts in Australia, maybe in the
world. It was very much of its time, and was at the cutting edge of theatre, new left politics, comedy, popular theatre, new Australian writing, puppetry and of course, circus. Circus Oz remains the last, great living branch of the Pram Factory tree. (Williams 2006, cited in Ingleton 2006)

Dr Jean Battersby of the Australia Council of the Arts, 1970–1971, said in *The Age* at the time of the Pram Factory and La Mama receiving their first significant government funds ($9000 for the APG and $5000 for La Mama) that:

> These two theatres are doing the most experimental work. It’s absolutely vital to support experimental work. Unless you get people experimenting now you won’t get your great classics in a hundred years time. When you are supporting experiments in anything, you must be prepared for a great deal of wastage, you might support a hundred plays before you get a great play. (cited in Ingleton 2006)

The great cross-medium collaborations continued: John Romeril with Paul Kelly with Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter; Nick Cave with Richard Lowenstein, Sam Sejavka, Michael Hutchence; writers, musicians, actors, directors, often changing roles and all expressing a distinctive Melbourne identity and sense of place. Many years after the closing of the Pram Factory, Paul Kelly spoke at a rally to support Australian live music and stressed the importance of having the places to play:

> I came to Melbourne in 1977 and started playing in small pubs in the inner city. … You don’t learn how to write a song at school, you don’t do a TAFE course in how to play in front of an audience. These places were my universities. (Kelly 2010)

Some of the great institutions continue too: along with La Mama and Circus Oz, the independent Astor cinema, Gertrude Contemporary Gallery and the much-loved live music venues the Tote Hotel in Collingwood, the Corner Hotel in Richmond and the Esplanade Hotel in St. Kilda, which itself has been home to multi-media collaborations involving live music, visual art, film and TV and various kinds of performance for many decades, and of which a local comedian said recently:

> I often have breakfast at the Espy in St. Kilda. The Espy used to have Sunday-afternoon stand-up, which is where I first saw live comedy and got inspired to try it myself. Somehow I’ve made a living out of it for 20 years, but no one really knows who the hell I am. (Hardy 2012)

But these places are occupying increasingly valuable real estate, and the small theatres and dingy back rooms and beer gardens of pubs where people can walk in, get inspired, try out and make a lot of noise, are under pressure from the raft of issues that affect gentrifying cities the world over.

**On the place of indie subcultures**

Indie scenes need centrality for interaction and they need cheap space. In the last 20 years in particular, in the global third wave of gentrification (Hackworth and Smith 2001), under-capitalised sites in inner cities have become key targets for redevelopment and regeneration and spaces not put to highest and best economic
use are becoming harder to find. A further threat to indie subcultures exists in the new concentrations and reach of corporate ownership, where ‘corporate control in the urban environment and night-life economies is further usurping and commercialising public space, segmenting and gentrifying markets and marginalising alternative and creative local development’ (Hollands and Chatterton 2003, p. 361).

The marginality of indie subcultures and their activities has long ensured their lack of formal recognition, indeed, the antagonistic relationship between the indie scene and the dominant culture is a defining feature. But this relationship is changing. For participants in indie scenes, the threat to their place in the city is such that they have little room to move. Defined by images of opposition, and self-consciously marginal, they are faced with the invidious options of standing up for their place or being moved on (see Shaw 2005 for a discussion of this phenomenon).

Participants in indie subcultures are not always marginal in class terms, but they are usually economically marginal and under powerful pressure to conform to the dominant culture. Through constraining cultural policies and funding arrangements, inequitable planning practices and inadequate provision of affordable housing and work and performance spaces, the locational options for participants in the indie scene are declining. The threat to their place in the city has produced mobilisations in many parts of the world, often based explicitly on the claim to their right to the city.

At the same time, the pressure on city governments to support local culture is heightened with the increasing symbolic value of cultural diversity. The economic benefits of ‘creativity’ have spawned an industry of consultants on how best to build cultural capital (Bianchini 1995, Landry 2000, Florida 2002, Montgomery 2004). Their advice is usually on how to attract the corporate headquarters, tourists and middle class residents whose locational decisions are based on the qualities of place (all other factors being equal) and whose options are rapidly expanding. Local cultural scenes, whilst not essential to the ‘creative city’ (‘culture’ can be bought in), are being used to great effect in city place-marketing campaigns.

As with the currently popular strategies of ‘culture-led regeneration’ (Porter and Shaw 2009), however, the emphasis on arts and culture to boost the local economy creates a paradox. Not only does the attraction of new investors and consumers often require substantial state expenditure that is oriented more to the new businesses and tourists than long-term locals, but the success of the strategy is premised on increasing land prices and rents, driving out marginal cultural producers and destroying what genuine diversity the city had in the first instance. It is a familiar contradiction: David Harvey observed two decades ago that much of this kind of ‘postmodern production … is precisely about the selling of place as part and parcel of an ever-deepening commodity culture. The result is that places that seek to differentiate themselves end up creating a kind of serial replication of homogeneity’ (Harvey 1993, p. 8).

On the ‘creative city’
The contemporary global preoccupation with the creative city throws this contradiction into sharp relief. The idea of the city as creative, innovative, a meeting place for the exchange of goods and knowledge, has been around for centuries. People have been travelling to cities for work and human contact since cities began.
But 10 years ago an American economics professor reversed that analysis with the proposition that it is the jobs that follow the people – that is, that the corporate headquarters want to be where the ‘creative class’ is – and that any city wanting to attract high-end business should concentrate on attracting the ‘creative class’. Florida’s (2002) creative class consists of urban professionals in the arts and entertainment industries, IT, education, business, law and finance, the main criterion for membership apparently being white-collar salary-earning capacity. This class has been theorised in other ways: in 1984[1979] Bourdieu called it the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’, and in 1993, the ‘dominant class’. It is Ley’s (1996) ‘new middle class’, Brooks’ (2000) ‘new upper class’ or, as he calls its members, ‘bobos’ (bourgeois bohemians). Smith (2002) called them gentrifiers. McGuigan (2009) suggests they are what would ‘otherwise be called routinely the professional-managerial class’ (p. 293) – the inner and middle-suburban denizens that the Australian media know as the ‘AB demographic’, being high in both cultural and financial capital.

Florida’s (2002) The Rise of the Creative Class and league tables of more and less creative cities sent city governments all over the world into a competitive scramble for well-paid professionals from somewhere else, mainly through providing the cultural infrastructure, bike paths, al fresco dining, small bars and general authenticity that the creative class apparently desires. The creative city-inspired urban renewal strategies that accompany these efforts (Porter and Shaw 2009) have been analysed over the last decade by a range of theorists and commentators, many of whom conclude that they mostly do not work (e.g. Malanga 2004, Berry 2005, Kotkin 2005, Peck 2005, Vicario and Martinez Monje 2005, Shaw 2006, Atkinson and Easthope 2009). That is, they tend not to attract the footloose global elite unless the hard infrastructure is installed too – the starchitect-designed galleries, convention centres, luxury hotels, office buildings and car parks – which makes it look rather like neoliberal development-as-usual. Most creative city strategies are indeed economic development strategies which – if they are successful – become gentrification strategies. Their success is measured in terms of decreasing vacancy rates and increasing rents – anathema to the fundamentals of the independent creative subcultures that feed city cultures everywhere.

Creative city strategies do not easily accommodate practising artists. The national government arts funding body, the Australia Council for the Arts, has found that the relative financial disadvantage of practicing artists – musicians, composers and songwriters, visual artists and craft practitioners, actors, directors, dancers and choreographers, writers and community cultural development workers – has worsened over the past 20 years (Throsby and Zednik 2010). In the Australia Council report, Do you really expect to get paid? Throsby and Zednik find that a very few artists in Australia earn high incomes and that most earn very low incomes. More than half Australia’s artists have a creative income of less than AU $10,000 a year. Only 12% of artists earned more than $50,000 from their art in the 2007–2008 financial year:

Even when other arts-related earnings and non-arts income are added in, the gross incomes of artists, from which they must finance their professional practice as well as the demands of everyday living, are substantially less than managerial and professional earnings. Indeed their total incomes on average are lower than those of all occupational groups, including non-professional and blue-collar occupations. (Throsby and Zednik 2010, p. 9)
Porter and Shaw’s (2009) collection of stories of urban regeneration strategies throughout the world provides little reason to conclude it is much different elsewhere. The loss of cheap space to live and work and display and perform is creating very real tensions. The particular problem for cities that want economic development and cultural vitality is that one tends to occur at the expense of the other. This poses a dilemma for advocates of a genuinely creative city. For the many artists who make it out of the primordial soup and into fine careers, their art is often their salvation. For cities too, a fine local culture depends on healthy creative subcultures, and builds on local strengths. As a counterpoint to importing global strategies designed to bring in a ‘creative class’ from elsewhere, the larger research project from which this article is drawn examined the practices and locations of local creative subcultures in Melbourne’s already powerful indie scene. The object was to identify where the indie subcultures are in gentrifying Melbourne and why they are where they are, with the intent of determining the implications for city planning. The next section of this article discusses the methods used in the research, and shows where indie subcultures in Melbourne are locating.

On the method
Cultural activities in Melbourne were mapped over a period of 20 years at five-year intervals correlating with the Australian census years. They begin in 1991 and conclude in 2009 – a final map in 2011 was intended but not possible because of a shortfall in the funding received from the Australian Research Council. The key media selected were live music, theatre/performing arts, visual arts and crafts and film/screenings. Part of the reasoning for choosing these media is that they all advertise for audiences and therefore have searchable records of their events; in addition, the information provided in the advertisements allows an assessment of the formality of the medium (commercial, community-based, or independent). The sites of the activities were drawn from archival and contemporary listings: gig guides, theatre guides, gallery guides and film listings, in all the hardcopy mainstream, indie and street media available (albeit in different incarnations) throughout the 20-year period.

In classifying cultural activities as commercial, community or indie, the guiding principle was that these essentially differ in how profit-oriented the set-up for the activities was. There are five main sources of funding for arts-oriented activities:

- public funding, which includes long-term subsidies and project grants from funding bodies in all levels of government, and usually requires accountable acquittal of funds or programming requirements;
- private donations and benefactors, mainly endowments by private individuals or institutions, and corporate sponsors;
- commercial profit (which includes sales, box office takings, subscriptions, sales of related products and merchandise, and advertising);
- cross-subsidy, in which the profits from one activity are funneled into another, loss-making one;
- ‘gift economy’, which includes donations in kind, time, work, expertise, space, transport, technical know-how, and which the donors may expect to recover later, again in kind (publicity, social capital, skills, reciprocated volunteer work, etc.).
These are not mutually exclusive, but are resorted to in different measures in order to cover the costs of artistic production (Table 1).

The fundamental dividing principle is that ‘commercial’ activities are essentially profit-oriented, and would not exist if they were consistently making a loss – this is artistic production fully embedded in the market economy, in which art is a mode of entertainment. ‘Indie’ activities might be sporadically profitable, but would accept financial losses – placing them in a hybrid position on the periphery of market capitalism, selectively engaged and disengaged from its workings. ‘Community’ activities are to a high degree exempt from market logic, because they receive sufficient public or private funding, are engaged in non-profit activities or present the artistic works by the members of their own community with community-building goals (Table 2).

Since we were mapping music venues, theatres, studios or shops and cinemas – that is the sites of the activity, rather than trying to list bands, plays, artists and films – we identified curatorial policies that match each business model, and if it was not obvious, gauged it from band line-ups, language used in publicity materials, observing the clientele and if necessary, informal interviews with the staff. Wherever possible we avoided taste-based judgement, in which indie status would be awarded only to ‘edgy’ or ‘cool’ artworks and artforms.

The logic of profitability and curatorial policy is slightly different in each category:

* in MUSIC, most venues and events are commercially viable (as they tend to derive their profit from liquor sales); therefore, we focused on the bands and artists programmed. Since music venues do not bear the production costs of the music they programme and are likely to make a profit even if the band makes a loss, an ‘indie’ venue had to show consistent support of independent music in order to qualify (this entailed indie artists programmed on Friday and Saturday nights or occupying at least 50% of the total programming space or consistent support of niche tastes, such as heavy metal or progressive electronic music). As music is rarely publicly subsidised, ‘community’
venues are comparatively few in number and generally specialise in classical music or traditional music as part of community festivals (e.g. Melbourne Recital Centre and community arts centres).

• PERFORMING ARTS are labour-intensive, expensive to produce, and very rarely commercially viable. Only the large theatres specialising in musicals were considered commercial (e.g. Her Majesty’s Theatre) as they are the only ones operating without any subsidy. We also made an exception for those large theatres that derived most of their profit from the box office and whose programming showed a heavy commercial slant (e.g. The Melbourne Theatre Company). ‘Community’ were venues with assured government (or institutional) funding, especially when this resulted in a programming bias: for example Victorian Arts Centre or Melbourne University Student Union Theatre. Most performance spaces, which rely on patchy funding from multiple sources and are staffed by volunteers, were classified as indie.

• in VISUAL ARTS, ‘community’ galleries have a secure source of funding and are run by artist collectives, a government body, a school or a non-profit organisation. They exhibit mainly the work of their members or members of their community and do not normally engage in selling artworks (e.g. National Gallery of Victoria, Jewish Museum, various university galleries). The difference between ‘commercial’ and ‘indie’ galleries is predominantly in the curatorial process and the calibre of artists exhibiting: those galleries that exhibit only by invitation (not accepting proposals) and choose not to represent emerging artists are classified as ‘commercial’. We recognise that a number of galleries we classified as ‘independent’ had long-term commercial aspirations: however, as long as they were prepared to accept proposals and exhibit works by emerging artists and yet retain a curatorial policy which did not consider belonging to a group membership (either professional or demographic) we classified them as ‘indie’.

• in CINEMAS, the only ‘community’ (i.e. fully publicly-funded cinema) is in the Australian Centre for Moving Image and its various incarnations, as all others are profit-making enterprises. ‘Commercial’ cinemas are owned by chains (Hoyts, Village) and homogeneous in programming, whilst ‘independent’ cinemas have single owners and a curatorial policy – they may programme short films, arthouse programmes, support Australian film-makers, and engage in other activities unlikely to pay off financially, but cross-subsidised by their normal programming.

Since many venues host different artforms in different ways, the same venue sometimes appears in different categories, sometimes under different names, for example FAD and Eurotrash are, despite the different addresses, one and the same place which operates both as a bar and gallery and occasional performance space. As long as both enterprises were serious efforts, we allowed the entry to double up so that, whilst the dot appears only once on any one map, it may appear on multiple maps specific to the medium.

The information was entered into spreadsheets and sorted to produce a range of maps in Geographic Information System, including separate maps for each medium, for each level of formality, and combinations of all of these, in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2009 (Figures 1–5). What follows now are five maps combining indie
and community cultural activities involving all four media in inner Melbourne over the 20 years.
What’s going on?
The maps show a clear emptying out of the arc from the southern suburb of St. Kilda through the south-eastern suburbs of Windsor, Prahran, South Yarra and Richmond. A northward trajectory appears in the last two maps. Most interesting to this particular analysis is the consolidating and intensifying clusters of indie and...
community cultural activity in the Melbourne city centre and in and around two key streets in the City of Yarra: Gertrude Street, in south-west Fitzroy, and Johnston Street in Collingwood.

The maps were cross-referenced with three further sets of time-series maps showing rates of change of property values (house and apartment prices from the Australian Bureau of Statistics), demographic shifts (income, education and
occupation from census data) and voting patterns in Victorian state elections (1992–2010, from the Victorian Electoral Commission). The combination is a set of maps of gentrification: showing the south-eastern suburbs in inner Melbourne as the most advantaged and rapidly gentrifying, and the suburbs to the north as most disadvantaged and least gentrified. All the inner-city suburbs show significantly higher levels of advantage than the outer suburbs.

Figure 4. The location of indie and community arts activity, Melbourne (2006).
The expectation for the indie subcultures was that they would move to where the rents are lowest, meaning further north or even off the map to the metropolitan fringe where land is cheapest. But Melbourne is a sprawling city and the outer suburbs lack public transport and infrastructure, significantly reducing their attractiveness. The desire for centrality and easy access for audiences is evidently as important as the rent – the ready potential for interaction with others in the scene was highlighted in interviews with those located in the clusters. It is telling that all

Figure 5. The location of indie and community arts activity, Melbourne (2009).
three areas with intensive clusters – the city centre, Gertrude Street and Johnston Street – show weak but distinct patterns of a lower rate of increase in property values than in surrounding areas. Residential and commercial rents and sale prices are increasing throughout Melbourne, but according to our analysis of land value data from the Real Estate Institute of Victoria, these three areas contain some of the lowest (and highest) rents in the inner city.

The city centre has a great diversity of building types, sizes, ages, uses and rents, largely due to being the focus of urban development for over 150 years. Heritage and height controls have contributed further to a strong supply of ambient, highly adaptable and easily subdivided spaces, which creates relative affordability for small leasable areas. It is interesting to note that prior to the city council’s highly successful campaign in the 1990s to bring residents into the city, the streets were empty at night after the office workers left, but down the laneways and up the fire escapes were the long-time, usually informal homes of artists and musicians and various legal and illegal performance spaces and clubs. These kinds of spaces still proliferate through the city and are still used for cultural activities, although as the number of well-heeled city residents increases, so do the noise complaints. The mainly industrial areas to the north and west of the city centre also have embedded cultural uses, protected in part by industrial and business zonings that prohibit residential use.

For a more complex range of largely social and historical reasons, which are the focus of further papers, Gertrude and Johnston Streets, like the city centre, have remarkable diversity in rents. One of the most striking aspects of both streets and their surrounding areas is the strong concentration of community services such as drug and alcohol programmes, support programmes for indigenous people, and public and community housing and services for their tenants. There appears to be a connection between the cultural activity and community services, with the substantial local appreciation of the less marketable elements of indie subcultures (tolerance of graffiti and loud music) also providing the support necessary for the persistence of community services that may be perceived as carrying greater negative side-effects (such as the local needle exchange). The community services in turn act as something of a brake on gentrification, contributing to the continued presence of the cultural activity.

It is not entirely surprising then that the demographic analysis over time reveals an increase in educational and occupational advantage of residents in the clusters, but a lower rate of increase in economic advantage compared to the rest of the inner city. These residents and business people are Rose’s (1984) marginal and early gentrifiers several decades on, well educated but once economically marginal, and still with left-leaning social sensibilities (Ley 1996) that continue to influence the locality. All three areas are safe Australian Labor Party seats, as is the rest of the inner city, with the exception of the north of St. Kilda, Prahran and South Yarra, which are swinging seats and correlate closely with the emptying of the arc.

The implications of these findings for governments wishing to retain or gain creative city status are considerable.
Discussion

The desire for interaction with others in the scene and the need for accessibility for audiences are crucial factors for indie creative subcultures in finding their place. These have to be carefully balanced with their need for cheap rent. The consequence is that the dark pockets of the inner city, with their centrality and relative affordability, are the province of the indie scene. Of course, these dark pockets are also the subject of what Hackworth and Smith (2001) argue is state-sponsored third wave gentrification: under-capitalised sites that with a little planning intervention in the interests of economic development, often with a creative city-inspired inflection, can quadruple in realised value. The dramatic increase in the residential population of the city centre – the successful result of a dedicated government campaign that encourages residential conversion of warehouses and office blocks and also facilitates new-build – not only puts upward pressure on rents but puts new residences right next to existing creative spaces including live music venues.

The retail and industrial areas on the west and northern city edges and in Gertrude and Johnston Streets are the least recapitalised in inner Melbourne. Whilst Gertrude Street is steadily gentrifying without government assistance, the western edge of the city is kept out of the residential land market by its land use zoning, and Johnston Street is still a bit too rough, not quite safe enough – both as a place to consume and as a financial investment – for Florida’s (2002) creative class. These latter precincts are the now focus of government concern, and urban renewal strategies are being devised for both.

The city councils responsible for these areas have to make a choice. They can pursue the usual urban renewal/economic development strategy which creates a safer environment for capital investment and increases opportunities for residential development, in which case the indie creative subcultures that both councils celebrate will be displaced far more rapidly and effectively than they anticipate. Or they can grapple with the possibility that maximising the value of land in their municipality not be their primary objective. Inner Melbourne councils are in fact remarkably fortunate by global standards: Australia was relatively well-insulated from the global financial crisis and the inner municipalities have steadily increasing land values and reliably growing rate revenues. Local interest in maintaining the place of creative subcultures in the areas where they currently cluster, and in ensuring there are new areas to allow their continuing evolution, can be supported by a range of planning and policy interventions.

Some of these interventions are already occurring in both municipalities with local and state government cooperation, mainly via the provision of government-managed buildings for low and non-profit creative uses. The more common practice of funding these activities in private buildings continues apace. The siting of such initiatives is crucial: an inspired decision to make the former Collingwood Technical School campus on Johnston Street into a multi-arts complex including a new home for Circus Oz has also created the conditions the Tote Hotel needs to continue as a live music venue (Figure 6). A residential conversion of the old school building, immediately next door to the Tote, would have been disastrous for music at the Tote. As it is, thoughtful intervention seems to have assured the future of both these institutions.

A planning policy that local government can enforce but state government must strengthen is the ‘agent of change’ principle in the Victorian planning system,
which requires the initiator of a new use that might bring about noise complaints (e.g. a new residence next to an existing music venue, or a new music venue next to an existing residence) to provide adequate sound-proofing. The object here is to create a broad urban environment in which multiple uses can co-exist. More effective would be an increase in acceptable music levels in certain locations and contexts, as the live music scene is particularly vulnerable to displacement from increasingly dense and contested inner-urban space.

Most important for councils however is to resist pressures to rezone land to facilitate residential use. As residential use in inner Melbourne is highest and best (economic) land use, and therefore increases the value not just of the land on which it is located but the land around it, and as it is, in addition, the single most incompatible use with independent subcultural activities, there should be areas in the city where it simply does not occur.

Finally, governments at all levels can consider the conditions under which gentrification appears to be limited. Maintenance of community services, provision of social housing where residential use is to be enabled, persistence of industrial uses and fine grain retail areas protected by height and heritage controls all act to varying degrees in different contexts as a brake on gentrification. These conditions, to varying degrees, allow real diversity to shine through – not just cultural diversity but socio-economic diversity, which in various, complex and iterative ways, feed each other.

Figure 6. The new home for Circus Oz in Johnston Street, Collingwood, next to the live music venue the Tote Hotel.
Conclusion

Melbourne’s indie creative subcultures, like similar scenes elsewhere, rely on cheap space and centrality. The ability to co-locate or find spaces big enough to hold multiple uses in order to allow cross-media collaborations, and accommodate the many different roles involved in performance and other activities, is what place-based scenes thrive on. Interaction with others and accessibility to audiences are as important as low rent, and in gentrifying inner cities these can become mutually exclusive. The idea of the creative city as urban renewal strategy creates a paradox: with the success of such strategies measured by decreasing vacancy rates and increasing property values, the primordial soup at the base of all cultural activity dries up. When low and no-profit creative activities are displaced from the city, the evolutionary pool shrinks.

The driving neoliberal imperative for highest and best use of land is anathema to creative subcultures. Governments embarking on urban renewal initiatives have to consider whether their objective is to facilitate maximum capitalisation of land or encourage cultural diversity. Relatively small reforms can be made in the interests of one or the other, with remarkably rapid response in terms of either encouraging gentrification, or creating the conditions for socio-economic diversity – thereby maintaining existing cultural scenes and nurturing new ones. The discussion section of this article details a few such reforms and initiatives. More important is that governments making these decisions appreciate the fundamental contradiction in the concept of the creative city as a means to simultaneously delivering economic development and cultural vitality.

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