

## GRAFFITI AND URBAN CHARACTER

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## Abstract:

Public debate periodically erupts over definitions of urban graffiti as either 'street art' or 'vandalism'. Our focus in this paper is on the ways graffiti is seen by residents to contribute to or damage urban character or place identity. Through interviews and mapping in two case studies of inner-city Melbourne we examine the ways graffiti infiltrates particular urban contexts. The paper maps the ways the potential for different types of graffiti – tags, throwups, stencils, pasteups and pieces – is mediated by the micro-morphology of the city and its public/private interfaces. We explore the ways graffiti negotiates ambiguous territories combining public/private, visible/invisible, street/laneway and art/advertising. The paper also explores the intersecting and often conflicting desires to establish territory, to avoid arrest, to create art, to purify the neighbourhood, to create and protect urban character. The paper concludes that the contribution of graffiti to urban character and place intensity in some locations is seen by residents as profoundly, but not exclusively, positive. The desire to erase graffiti is productive of new work; the desire to promote or protect it is more problematic.

## INTRODUCTION

Parts of inner city Melbourne have long held a reputation as graffiti hotspots. In 2003 the famous British graffiti artist known by the pseudonym 'Banksy' visited Melbourne and sprayed a series of stencils on various parts of town. In June 2008, after Banksy's work began to sell for high prices in galleries, a perspex sheet was installed by the building owners to protect one of the Melbourne stencils from overspraying (Houghton 2008). However, later that year grey paint was poured down behind the perspex, probably destroying the image. Around the same time a furore erupted over the use of images of graffiti covered laneways by the state tourist authority for international place marketing (Dowling 2008). When this story broke in the mass media there was a public outcry from conservative quarters and the Minister for Tourism rebuked his own department saying: "graffiti is not the way we want Melbourne to be promoted to a global audience" (Mitchell 2008). Graffiti has both positive and negative symbolic capital, it adds and diminishes streetscape value. Graffiti cannot be fixed in any simple category. Its place in the city, as art practice, vandalism and sometimes advertising, needs to be more carefully considered. The focus of this paper is on the role of graffiti in the construction and experience of urban character and place identity.

## READING GRAFFITI

There is an extensive and growing field of literature devoted to graffiti and street art, spanning popular culture, academic writing and urban policy. While much of this work is limited to recent decades, graffiti has a history as long as Western urbanism (Stahl 2009). Ellis (1975) published some of the earliest photos of Australian graffiti over thirty years ago including many from inner-city Melbourne. Prior to the 1980s this graffiti consisted primarily of political slogans, anti-billboard campaigns and some gang tagging. A major transformation came with the advent of punk, metal and hip-hop movements in the 1980s fuelled by MTV and other new media. This led to a rapid global spread of primarily railway graffiti from the New York subways (Castleman 1984). The new Melbourne graffiti of the 1980s was mainly along railway lines and on railway carriages (Cubriolo et al 2009). In 1993 the railways were privatized bringing new regimes of control and many urban artists moved into the streets. Melbourne's graffiti scene has often featured in lavishly illustrated books and photo surveys for a global audience.<sup>i</sup>

There is a substantial academic literature which deals with the vandalism-versus-art question. Without entering deeply into this debate, it is worth noting that vandalism and art are defined as opposites (destruction versus creation), yet can also be seen as different forms of transgression. While vandalism transgresses the law, art is often defined by a poetic licence to transgress aesthetic boundaries. However, a key difference between graffiti and legal public artworks is that the latter are rarely transgressive.<sup>ii</sup> The identification of graffiti as vandalism is based in the judgement that it damages the image of a neighbourhood. That

graffiti is considered by law to be a criminal act is unambiguous.<sup>iii</sup> However, there are many authors who defend the artistic merit of graffiti despite its illegality, and discuss its place in an art-historical lineage.<sup>iv</sup>

The majority of sociological, ethnological, criminological and anthropological accounts of graffiti engage with the question of who writes graffiti, and why they do it. Graffiti has been linked to youthful rebellion (Sanders 2007; Austin 2001) and the construction of subcultural identities (Macdonald 2001; Iveson 2007; Castleman 1984; Rahn 2001). The urban context of graffiti has been much less examined. Some have considered context in terms of the territoriality of urban youth gangs where graffiti functions primarily as communication between gangs and gang members (Ley & Cybriwsky 1974). Gang-related graffiti is uncommon in Australia, although 'crews' of graffiti writers do work together but without clear territories.<sup>v</sup>

Where territory is considered in the literature, graffiti is commonly compared to animals marking their territory through urination, inevitably linking graffiti to dirt and bodily waste. This in turn has been linked to the seminal work by Douglas (1966: 35), who famously defined dirt as 'matter out of place'. For Douglas the ways we categorize material things and spaces are primarily based in social categories; in eliminating dirt we are 'not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea' (Douglas 1966: 2). The term 'place' in that famous phrase is a social ideal wherein anything foreign represents danger. Cresswell (1992) picks up on this theme to argue that the spatial context of graffiti is vital in understanding how it will be received and defined. For instance, graffiti on the Western side of the Berlin Wall was seen as a legitimate expression of freedom. He also compares the reception of graffiti exhibited in New York art galleries with that on the streets and trains, sometimes created by the same artists - the place of exhibition defines graffiti's status as art or vandalism. Graffiti not only transgresses the purity of a place but often also the authorised symbolic meanings and practices of power (Cresswell 1992: 342) – it signifies a loss of formal authority. Graffiti quite literally 'takes place' in the sense that it appropriates the street and is "uncalled for" (Stahl 2009). Unlike the artwork of the gallery or salon, graffiti has a captive audience – a condition and an audience that it shares with architecture and advertising while it differs from them in its informality, illegality and transgression of codes.

There is a good deal of literature in environmental criminology that links graffiti to other forms of criminal behaviour that cluster in derelict urban locations (Eck and Weisburd, 1995); Brantingham & Brantingham 1993; Reynald & Elffers 2009). Graffiti is conceptually treated in the same way as more major crimes such as theft and violence, and is unambiguously seen as a negative factor needing control. Newman's (1972) defensible space theory argued that crime can be reduced by changing the physical environment of cities, especially through enclosure and symbolic reinforcement of territories. From such a viewpoint graffiti is seen to signify danger and policies of erasure are seen to make the city safer. This presupposition of

graffiti as a crime, however, produces fear where there is no danger and closes off more sophisticated understandings.

From a framework of Deleuzian social theory Halsey and Young suggest graffiti has less to do with vandalism than with the “desires”, “pleasures” and “capacities” of the body of the writer (Halsey & Young 2006: 289). Through interviews with writers they explore the affective dimension of graffiti, the intensity of feelings and material processes associated with the act of creating images in public space. They suggest that graffiti writers experience urban space differently to others; they see blank walls as unfinished spaces of potential to support expression, and graffiti is the outcome of the intersection between desire and potential (Young 2005). Our approach in what follows, while also informed by a Deleuzian perspective, investigates two questions that have scarcely been researched. First, where is the graffiti and how do these desires map onto particular of particular morphological arrangements? Second, how is graffiti understood in everyday urban life and how does it shape the character of urban places.<sup>vi</sup>

## URBAN MORPHOLOGY

In order to examine the relationships between graffiti and urban character we undertook a detailed survey of graffiti in two inner-city Melbourne suburbs, Fitzroy and Brunswick. These sites were chosen as part of a much larger study of intensification and changes in urban character.<sup>vii</sup> We choose to explore them here because they are examples where graffiti was seen by residents to be an integral part of the character in contrast to other parts of Melbourne where graffiti was largely regarded as vandalism.<sup>viii</sup> Both Fitzroy and Brunswick have a rich mix of residential, retail, entertainment and light-industrial uses, well serviced by public transport. Both are fine-grained neighbourhoods with a diverse array of building stock, but they are undergoing a change in land-use and resident demographics through gentrification, with consequent strains on residents’ perceived sense of character. Residents commonly describe both Fitzroy and Brunswick as edgy, funky and diverse, terms that refer to both the social and physical character of the areas (Dovey, Woodcock & Wood 2009a; Woodcock, Dovey & Wollan forthcoming).

### **[insert image near here] Figure 1: Types of Graffiti**

The graffiti we have mapped in our study areas conforms loosely to a broadly consistent lexicon that has emerged globally to describe categories of graffiti.<sup>ix</sup> The most commonly recognised types are tags, throw-ups, stencils, paste-ups, slogans and pieces (see Fig.1). Tags are a graphic signature written as a very fast and simple way to get a name onto a surface with a primary content of ‘I was here’. Throw-ups are enlarged versions of a tag, and generally take longer to complete but remain rough rather than finished images. Stencils and paste-ups are sprayed and stuck on respectively. Like the tags and throw-ups they can be reproduced very quickly but the designs are more complex (often poetic or obscure) and they seek a broader audience. The production of the artwork primarily happens in private and the

application to the wall is relatively unskilled. Slogans are textural rather than graphic and are highly legible - content is generally political or poetic and they address a broad public. In all of these types safety from prosecution is achieved through speed of application. The piece is a larger scale, complex and time-consuming work often involving multiple colours and complex graphic design. The design of a piece is often the name of the writer but stylized until it is almost illegible to non-writers.

The distinctions between these categories are blurred - tags slide into throw-ups which slide into pieces; stencils, paste-ups and pieces can incorporate slogans. As we move through this typology from tags and throw-ups to pieces there is a major increase in both the time of application and display of skill. Pieces, stencils and paste-ups are often semantically rich but with ambiguous meanings - in this they take on characteristics of the fine arts. The best examples of these categories are widely regarded as street-art rather than vandalism. In cases where they have been informally legalised through arrangements between writers and property owners, there is not the same pressure to complete a work in the shortest time possible. We also begin to see other forms of slippage as pieces can be legally commissioned as wall murals or student art-projects, paste-ups can slide into bill posters and art slides into advertising.

**[insert full page image near here]**

### **Figure 2: Graffiti and Morphology of Brunswick and Fitzroy**

The maps in Figure 2 show the primary locations of graffiti in key sections of the urban morphology of Fitzroy and Brunswick. This morphology can be construed as a framework that mediates some complex fields of visibility and opportunity. At the most basic level graffiti requires access to relatively blank wall surfaces and both traditional and recent development processes in Brunswick and Fitzroy tend to produce large amounts of such surfaces visible in the public realm. The street network of both places can be loosely divided into main streets (largely lined with retail) side and back streets (lined with a mix of residential, warehouse, industrial and some retail); and laneways (primarily rear entries). Since both suburbs were developed in an era when night carts collected the sewage they are well provided with rear lanes lined with publicly accessible blank walls and fences. In some parts of Fitzroy and Brunswick laneway edges are roughly equivalent in length to street frontage. When we add the blank side walls that corner properties often present to one street, the amount of blank side and rear walls can exceed entry frontage. There are also many blank streetwalls produced by non-residential buildings such as warehouses, workshops and offices as well as the blank facades and garage doors of new infill housing (Fig.3). Most of the older housing stock is row housing with small front gardens. Patterns of pedestrian movement within this morphology are primarily along the streets although the public gaze regularly penetrates into and through the laneways. While the lanes are often derelict and little used, in Fitzroy they

are regarded by residents as integral to the urban character and are legally protected by heritage legislation.

**[insert image near here]**

### **Figure 3: Gentrification and Blank Walls**

The location of graffiti is mediated not only by the potential wall surfaces but also by a key dilemma faced by graffiti writers: there is a desire for the performance to be hidden from the public gaze but for the results to be exposed. Tagging is widely understood to be driven by desire to maximize exposure within a peer group. Since the higher quality pieces have a level of legitimacy as street art, the desire for seclusion is lessened. While laneways have the advantage of safety from surveillance, they lack publicity – plenty of surface but not enough gaze. The public streetwalls have plenty of exposure but this exposure carries the danger of arrest.<sup>x</sup> There is thus a dynamic balance between being inconspicuous in the act but creating a very visible and recognisable product. The more time one spends on a piece the less likely it is to be quickly erased but the more likely one is to be apprehended.

As is evident in the maps, tagging and throwups tend to occur wherever there are potential surfaces, even in the deepest laneways with low visibility. When such graffiti does occur in highly visible locations it is often immediately and relatively easily erased. The more complex pieces occur in a series of relatively specific location types. What most distinguishes these locations is the degree to which the wall is territorialised or identified with a specific household, institution or enterprise. Legal ownership is not sufficient to define the territoriality of a surface - a complex interplay of rules, customs, uses, building forms, materials and ethical codes mediate the degree of appropriation by graffiti.

**[insert image near here] Figure 4: Row ends**

**[insert image near here] Figure 5: Graffiti in the Streetscape**

One highly visible location for elaborate works of graffiti is the end of a row of terrace houses, where blank brick walls face the street or laneway (Fig.4). These row ends are generally visible in oblique view as they punctuate the streetwalls of row housing (Fig.5). In such locations the pieces quite often run right up to the corner but not onto the front of the house. These end walls may or may not include windows but are more likely sites for pieces if they do not. Such locations have an ambiguous quality in that the identity of the house is primarily expressed through the front. The Victorian style of most of these buildings reinforces the distinction between a decorative front and a blank side of exposed brick wall. Some of these pieces become wall murals (or 'legals') since they are likely to have been commissioned by or negotiated with the residents and are signed by well-known graffiti artists. They often last for a number of years if they have enough credibility to deter tagging and over-writing.

**[insert image near here] Figure 6: Competition**



Row-end walls to shops that occur adjacent to the main streets have a largely identical morphology to that of the residential rows but offer a substantially different opportunity for graffiti. The very high visibility of these walls lends them a capital value that both excludes and co-opts graffiti. Any tagging or throw-ups in these locations is likely to be erased because it damages the brand of the shop; and any major piece is likely to be over-pasted with advertising bills because there is so much pedestrian traffic (Fig.6). In a parallel to the residential row-ends there are a number of locations where large pieces have been either authorized by the shop-owner or incorporated into the advertising regime for its products. In such cases there is generally a close connection between the youth subcultures who identify with the street art and the clientele of the outlet.

**[insert image near here] Figure 7: Graffiti and Advertising**

On the main shopping streets the wall surfaces are largely saturated with advertising and display; graffiti is largely confined to tags and stencils located on the boundary columns between shopfronts. It is also not surprising that the main street in Brunswick, which has less intensive retail development, also has significantly less graffiti than its Fitzroy counterpart as can be seen in the maps. The slippage that occurs between legal/illegal and art/advertising on the end walls of shops sometimes extends to the shopfront and interior design of the shop (Fig.7). Again there may be a level of ambiguity involved as the art/advertising slippage lends a certain street-cred to the products within the store. The steel roller doors that cover the fronts of shops after closing are sometimes covered with what appear to be commissioned pieces that serve as out-of-hours decoration/advertising. This slippage of street-art into advertising can also be practised across the larger neighbourhood and on pavements. In 2009 stencils advertising fast food, mobile phones and the dangers of ecstasy began to appear in Fitzroy. Stencils advising safe sex practices appeared on Brunswick's commercial strips at the same time as a government-sponsored poster blitz on public transport. Graffiti production is here co-opted by top-down advertising and public health campaigns precisely because it has the attention of the target market – like an 'advertorial' this is advertising camouflaged as street art. Interestingly the commercial companies conceded their role but the state would not admit to using stencils in the public health campaign.<sup>xi</sup>

**[insert image near here] Figure 8: Informal Gallery**

While most laneways are lined with a mix of tags and throw-ups with pieces appearing only where they intersect with the public gaze, some laneways emerge as highly developed but informal graffiti 'galleries' (Fig.8). These galleries generally occur close to the shopping strips in locations with a highly permeable spatial structure. Though the content of the graffiti may change regularly, these locations continue to be used for a very long period. As with many subcultural districts these galleries may drift or disappear as newer ones emerge.

**[insert image near here] Figure 9: Frames and Layering**

The practices of graffiti writing go well beyond the logic of visibility and are mediated by the microscale material and morphological potentials of particular wall surfaces. These surfaces are rarely smooth or continuous, but are always framed or interrupted by windows, doorways, columns, niches, ledges and pipes that can serve as the edge to a piece or can be incorporated into it. This micro-context can be used to add meaning to graffiti that then becomes inextricably grounded in place. This micro-geography of graffiti includes the ways that graffiti is layered like a palimpsest with new work responding to the work beneath it with transformed meanings and partial erasures (Fig.9). These layered effects of graffiti have a parallel in the way that partial erasures of old advertising and street signs form a significant part of the heritage of Fitzroy in particular. This practice of layering links to the erasures that occur when residents attempt to keep the walls of their houses clean or when one graffiti writer erases older work with a new layer. Some residents have a practice of instant erasure and writers soon learn not to bother.

## URBAN CHARACTER

We now summarize resident attitudes to graffiti in these two case studies. This material is based on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, as part of a series of larger studies into place and urban character (Dovey, Woodcock & Wood 2009b; Woodcock, Dovey & Wollan forthcoming). These studies involved an attempt to understand the different ways that 'character' is experienced by residents in different parts of Melbourne. In all cases character is described in general terms as the feel or atmosphere of a particular place that is at once objectively based in urban form and subjectively experienced – a feel rather than just a feeling. Character is slippery because it is inseparably both social and physical. Attitudes to urban form are strongly aligned with attitudes to people, support for or opposition to certain buildings and certain people can become blurred (Dovey, Woodcock and Wood 2009c). Neighbourhood character is not a fixed and stable condition, but emerges from the dynamics of urban and community life. While character is experienced as the unselfconscious 'doxa' of everyday life, it becomes something else (a para-dox) as it enters into formalised discourse as 'neighbourhood character' when defended by resident groups and written into planning statutes. The attempt to codify character tends to reduce it to a set of characteristics or even to caricature. The character of both case studies here was primarily portrayed as a diversity of both people and buildings where dynamism and change are integral to place identity.

Interviewees are not a random sample of residents but include those most involved with resident groups and most likely to hold strong opinions on place identity and urban character. The discourse on graffiti emerges here as one dimension of urban character. Fitzroy's character is defined in terms of a rich social and spatial mixture - different people

as well as different building types and styles. This is not seen as a stable or necessarily harmonious mixture but a somewhat seedy, edgy and transgressive character:

*[Fitzroy] is different, it is...it has that 'edge' that people are interesting, that it has a good atmosphere. It has a sort of a seedy side, a sort of an underbelly that is in a way a little bit scary, but it also has a community, it has character and it has depth (F7).*

Brunswick is also seen as characterized by a spatial and social mix rather than consistency:

*Brunswick is chaotic and its crazy and its noisy and its smelly and its all that stuff, sometimes that stuff really gets to me, but ... if we got rid of all the trams and the traffic and the light industry it wouldn't be Brunswick ... And the people are crazy and chaotic and all over the place (B2)*

In both places attitudes to graffiti are decidedly ambiguous:

*I admit that when I see it on my own wall here, you know I have a flitter of irritation. If my whole wall got painted like that, I would (care)... but I really don't care. If I'd tidied up the front of the house and then they sprayed it, I'd be irritated. But there's a big wall there... No, I don't mind the graffiti. I like the graffiti. (F7)*

*Well, I don't like this stuff [tags] it's not - but if it's done properly, then, yeah, there's nothing wrong with that, it adds a bit of character really. We don't want it all spick and span. (B1)*

In both of these cases the attitude moves from irritated to neutral and then to positive in a single response. The distinction between good and bad graffiti is linked to both where it is and the artistic quality. A good number of resident responses reflect the idea that graffiti, like dirt, becomes vandalism when it is 'out of place'. The most trenchant opponents tend to link graffiti to abjection, rubbish and obscenity, but always qualified with the sense that it has a place somewhere else:

*the one thing I really really don't like is the graffiti, I find that really obscene... is it art or is it vandalism?... Some of it's very clever but they put it on private property... it is vandalism, bottom line. (F4)*

*It's just vandalism. If it was their home or their place, I'm sure they wouldn't like someone coming to do it to their place. It's vandalism. I like it when I see it on, sometimes inside or under a bridge or something like that and if it's done nicely. (B15)*

While it is acknowledged that all graffiti conveys meaning, it is often the resident's exclusion from this aesthetic field that marks graffiti as vandalism.

*I suppose for some people it means something. Personally I feel it's an eyesore. You see some of the stuff and it's a real work of art, others it's just this shit with a texta. (B9)*

The opposition is sometimes linked to the idea that graffiti writers are outsiders:

*I think that's a bit of a problem about Fitzroy, that that it's so acceptable to actually go around and write slogans on people's property... It sort of adds to it and it makes it Fitzroy, but most of them are not even people that live there, just people that come in and put their labels on ... I do appreciate some of it, I think the template stuff is brilliant—visually very clever—but the obscenities and the spray can stuff is just rubbish... (F4)*

Note again the essential ambivalence – the graffiti is a ‘problem’ that also ‘makes it Fitzroy’; this identity is seen as mostly produced by outsiders but is nonetheless appreciated for its aesthetic contribution. Graffiti in Brunswick is also widely seen to contribute to character, however, one resident suggests the opposite.

*It's just recent this graffiti business, windows getting smashed, graffiti, I think some of that has to do with the little bars that are opening everywhere... the graffiti in the area is taking away from the character... (B15)*

Here, as in some of the literature discussed earlier, graffiti is conflated with other forms of crime and even bars. While long-term residents may see graffiti as an intrusion, newer residents see it as an inherent part of the character and even part of what attracted them there. The very sense of disorder that upsets some residents is valued by others, albeit at a distance:

*We're inner-city people. Graffiti, as long as it isn't on the side of my car, I don't care about the rest of it... Look, I think a certain amount of disorder is a positive thing. It provides some sort of creative energy. Places that are too orderly and neat aren't great. (B12)*

There is considerable evidence that graffiti brings a creative edge to these neighbourhoods, making it more attractive for gentrification. Yet the very residents who move in can become the ones who then clean it up:

*if more people like me move there eventually it will become maybe cleaner and smarter and nicer and it will lose some of that character that was actually the reason we moved there ... and that's why I don't complain about .. the graffiti because I don't want it to change.. (F4)*

We see in this quote the way that graffiti produces a kind of productive discomfort - the ambivalence is a result of conflicting desires to keep graffiti at a distance yet to remain part of a rich urban mix. For some residents graffiti writing embodies the edginess of new ideas:

*I've actually accepted it as a form of urban entertainment and I must say, when I see a new genre of it I ... genuinely look at it and think 'that's different!' (laughter) 'that's clever!'. I don't have a problem with it, which doesn't mean to say that I might not have it painted out (F10)*

For some residents the acceptability of graffiti is more about social or legal agreement:

*It can look effective if its done right or if its someone comes and asks you "Can I put a picture on your wall?" and you agree if its a shop or something and if they draw something that complements the shop and its something to do with the shop, advertisement for the shop or something, I don't see a problem with that. (B15)*

In other words, it would be more acceptable if it were a wall mural or advertisement rather than graffiti. The categories of art and commerce thus provide social legitimation for what are otherwise perceived as transgressive acts of personal expression signifying social decay and a loss of authorized control.

## THE PLACE OF GRAFFITI

This discussion of the place of graffiti and its acceptability to residents has been framed and mapped through a series of dimensions or constructs: public/private space, visible/invisible walls, legal/illegal practices, vandalism, art and advertising. In each case graffiti is shown to make multiple connections, both within the urban fabric and in the attitudes of residents; it is not simply one or the other of any pair of terms but usually both. Graffiti is variously regarded as both street-art and vandalism, it seeks both the privacy of crime and the publicity of exhibition. Graffiti takes on both positive and negative symbolic capital; it both sells and pollutes these places, streets and buildings. A key point to this paper is the degree to which graffiti is ingrained and integrated with the senses of place and urban character. While it is applied to and erased from urban surfaces, it is more than a veneer applied to the urban fabric because of the deeper social identifications it both facilitates and expresses. In both Fitzroy and Brunswick the valued urban character is defined by residents in terms of various kinds of social, functional and morphological mix – in other words the place identity is constructed by differences of people, practices and built forms. The differences of views on graffiti – the kinds of contributions it makes to the place – are integral to this mix. Graffiti will continue to be created and erased because it is an integral part of ongoing conversations between different parts of the community and between these communities and their others. The graffiti is not only produced in opposition or competition to gentrification and commercialisation but is also re-iteratively produced and transformed by them.

### **[insert image near here] Figure 10: Welcome to Fitzroy**

The graffiti is also thoroughly integrated with the urban morphology of these places – the degree to which the street grids, building types and architecture produce public or semi-public

blank surfaces is crucial to the production of graffiti. Public walls are largely a side effect of density – the suburb with detached houses, perforated fences, setbacks and no lanes is an effective way to deter graffiti. Brunswick and Fitzroy embody not only a mix of people, functions and forms, but also a mix of public and private interfaces. The graffiti covered walls become connections not just between writers, but between different parts of these communities and between these communities and broader worlds. Many discursive fields thread through graffiti: law, criminology, design, commerce, community and art. The graffiti and its artists spin off into advertising, graphic design and art galleries. Graffiti is often an integral part of creative clusters or productive ensembles that have come to form key node points of the cultural economy. Such clusters are now well known to work in concert with neo-liberal agendas of gentrification and place branding (Peck 2005; Hutton 2009).

A major public wall in Fitzroy has been recently covered with a giant mural (Figure 10) that integrates the place branding of Fitzroy (“Welcome to Fitzroy”), an advertisement for the adjacent entertainment venue and promotion of the graffiti crew, whose website is selling graffiti-themed tee-shirts.<sup>xii</sup> By overstepping the codes of property (who ‘owns’ blank walls?) and behaviour (what forms of representation are ‘appropriate’?) graffiti calls these codes into question (Stahl 2009: 74). The graffiti that is uncalled for constructs a sense of place where sociality is in question and such places have social value. Graffiti becomes integral to urban character in places where it helps to construct this legitimization of transgression. And yet it cannot do this without also and at the same time becoming a form of symbolic capital and place branding. Graffiti that emerges and is practised in opposition to advertising is tolerated under condition that it partially becomes its nemesis. This dance with the devil between graffiti and advertising is echoed in the relations of graffiti to the legitimate art of the gallery. Artists often become torn between fields, earning an income from one to subsidize the other.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **[insert image near here] Figure 11: Transformations**

The adaptive game of move and countermove is also played out between writers/artists and residents. Some residents allow their houses to be written on to deter gentrification; others commission large pieces to deter tagging. Near the main streets writers compete with advertising bills and billboards; some shops commission pieces to accrue cultural cachet within their niche market. It is often the struggle between different desires to territorialize that produces intensity – taggers tag and residents erase; one writer overwrites another (Figure 11). Erasures play a key role here; they stimulate both new work and a higher quality of work that will not be erased quickly. Inevitably all work is erased in time and by the weather.

Graffiti finds a place in those parts of our cities where identities and practices are open and unfinished. So long as it remains genuine, graffiti will be forever caught in paradox. As we

write this piece the press publish another round of 'is it art or vandalism?'. A Lonely Planet poll suggests that graffiti covered laneways are Melbourne's number one tourist attraction and other Australian cities discuss how they can emulate this success (Westbury 2009). The Victorian Premier is adamant that graffiti will not be tolerated and will not be used for place marketing. This is how it should be – nothing will kill graffiti more effectively than promotion and preservation. Meanwhile out on the streets of Fitzroy a small Banksy survives for now, camouflaged in the mix. Graffiti cannot be fully defined or preserved without becoming purified and killed; a quality it shares with urban character and place identity.

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<sup>i</sup> Dew (2007), Smallman and Nyman (2005) and Lunn (2006), as well as international photo surveys such as Manco (2002, 2004) and Ganz (2004)

<sup>ii</sup> Public art often serves instrumental roles in public space including place branding, stimulating consumption or celebrating a particular history.

<sup>iii</sup> In Victoria, the Graffiti Prevention Act 2007 makes it a crime, punishable by a \$550 fine, to be found in public space in possession of a spray can and imposes a maximum fine of \$27,000 and up to two years in prison if a person is convicted of property damage ([www.justice.vic.gov.au/graffiti/](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/graffiti/), accessed July 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> See for instance: Heathcote 2000; Gopnik 1990; MacDowell 2006; Dew 2007; Foster 1985.

<sup>v</sup> The distinction between a 'gang' and a 'crew' is that gangs mark territory to enforce a zone of control. Graffiti crews may have a home range but there is no clear boundary and no attempt to enforce territorial rights. (Halsey & Young 2002: 170)

<sup>vi</sup> The concept of 'place' here is linked to the assemblage theory of Deleuze & Guattari (1987); see also: DeLanda (2004) and Dovey (2009: Ch. 2).

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<sup>vii</sup> The Character of Urban Intensification is an ARC-funded linkage project based at the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, with the Victorian state Department of Planning and Community Development, and the Cities of Melbourne, Moreland and Yarra.

<sup>viii</sup> Earlier work by this research group examined the processes of urban character formation and the ways the concept is understood and used by residents and professionals across six case studies in Melbourne. See Dovey, Woodcock & Wood 2009b.

<sup>ix</sup> See: Dew 2007; Halsey & Young 2002; Kasino 1997.

<sup>x</sup> This relation is in some ways similar to that faced by injecting drug users, who need to be out of view for privacy during the act but close enough to public space to be found by passers-by in case of an overdose (Dovey & Fitzgerald 2009).

<sup>xi</sup> Melbourne Times 3/6/09: p.10 'Smith Street cops a spray from canny marketers'

<sup>xii</sup> See Everfresh Crew <<http://www.everfreshstudio.com>>

<sup>xiii</sup> See for example, the documentary film by Levraut and Sena 2009.



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Figure 1: Types of Graffiti



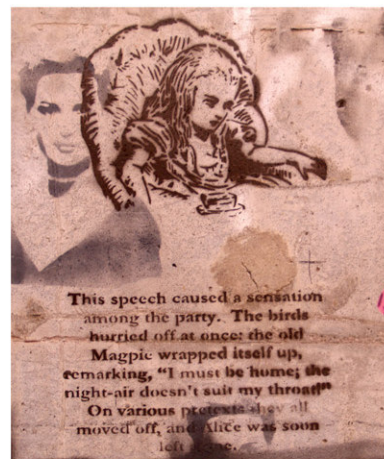
Tags, Paste-up, Stencil



Piece



Stencils, Tags, Slogans



Stencils



Throw-up



Slogan, Stencil



Graffiti Maps: Fitzroy (above) & Brunswick (below)

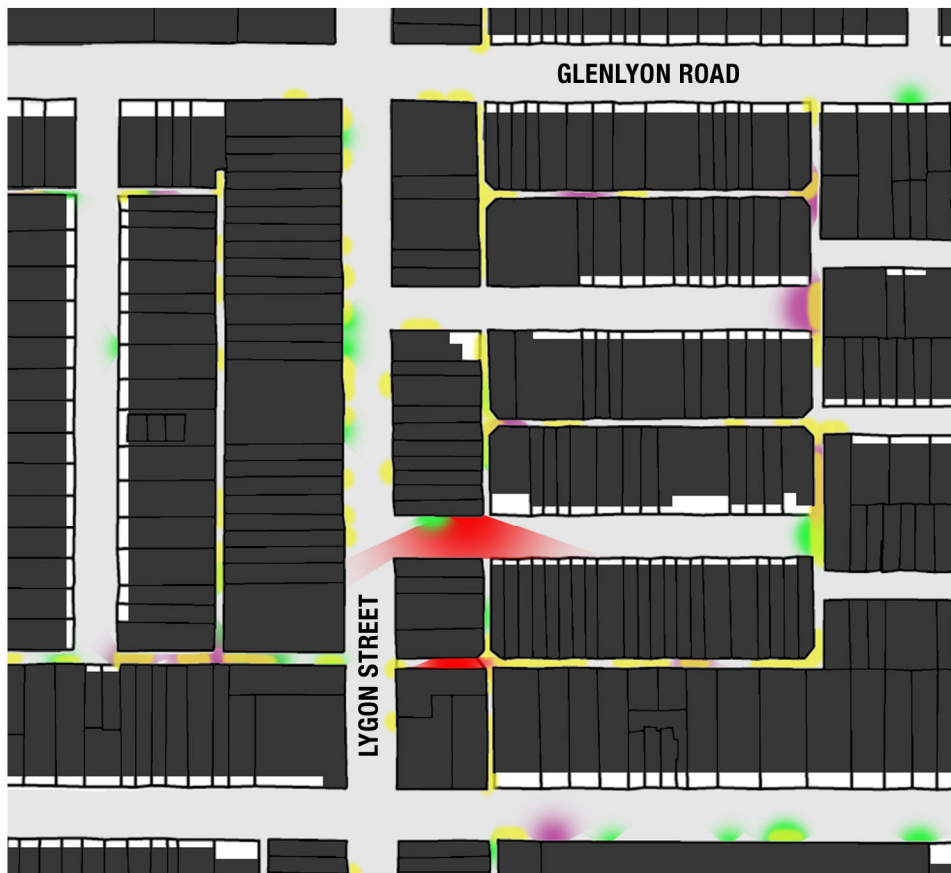


Figure 2: Graffiti and Morphology of Brunswick and Fitzroy



**Figure 3: Gentrification and Blank Walls**





Figure 4: Row ends





**Figure 5: Graffiti in the Streetscape**





Figure 6: Competition





Figure 7: Graffiti and Advertising





Figure 8: Informal Gallery





Figure 9: Frames and Layering



Figure 10: Welcome to Fitzroy





April 2008



April 2008



June 2009



June 2009

**Figure 11: Graffiti in Continual Transformation**