



POSTCODE 3000

From Contested Space to Sacred Space

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INTRODUCTION

'A day in town.' That's what my mother always called it; our occasional but routine pilgrimage into the heart of Melbourne. For me, it was the highlight of school holidays. It meant a 50-minute train journey from my outer suburban home in Dandenong. Given how rarely I rode a train as a boy, this only added to the sense of intrigue. As our string of red carriages snaked along the track, I watched—my nose pressed up against the window and my breath forming patterns on the glass—as the landscape slowly changed. The lines of perfectly spaced 1960s cream brick veneers, all with matching front fences and appended garages, gradually gave way to factories, graffitied walls and ever smaller back yards tucked behind late 19th century

terraces. As the intensity of the residential landscape increased, so too did my fascination.

As we emerged from the platforms of Flinders Street Station, the hub of the city's rail network, we entered another world. Navigating the ticket barriers in the arrival hall, we moved from the shadows of the domed space into the daylight beyond and stood together under the clocks that kept time for departing trains. As my mother ensured that every member of the brood was accounted for, I dodged the stream of commuters brushing past to look out on the intersection below. With Young & Jackson's Hotel on one corner and the spires of St Paul's Cathedral on the other, this junction was more alive than anywhere else I knew. The constant

sound of car horns mingled with the clang of the trams that rattled by. An eternally replenishing pool of pedestrians gathered at the corner ready for their turn to cross Flinders and disperse into the anonymity of the city grid beyond.

Taking our place at the corner, we would cross with the mid-morning hordes and continue up the main artery of Swanston. My most enduring boyhood memory of the city is of suits, briefcases and umbrellas; a place of heels, hats and handbags. Everybody was on the move, many who looked as though they belonged. Important and self-assured people, they moved with purpose and an urbane indifference to everyone around them. There were those, too, who looked anything but important, disgruntled and dishevelled in fact, but equally at home, standing at corners with half-empty bottles or crouched on the ground with crumpled blankets by their sides. And then there were the boys who spruiked newspapers on every corner. Though they looked barely older than me, I assumed they knew the ways of this world better than I ever could.

We passed the city square and the Town Hall with its grand clock tower, the streets lined with buildings that rose endlessly toward the sky. Bourke Street was our initial destination with the Myer Department Store at its heart. First was our visit to the 6th floor toy department followed by lunch in the cafeteria. I remember pushing my tray along the run, mesmerized by the lurid red and green jellies set in tall parfait glasses. Topped with whipped cream and glace cherries, they made lunch feel like a carnival. I remember window shopping in the Royal Arcade, lingering outside the Houpton Tearooms where beautifully dressed women from Camberwell sipped tea, and watching the private school boys rowing on the Yarra. I remember our mandatory visit to the Bible Society bookshop in Flinders Lane, and of course, the underground toilets on Elizabeth. An

elderly attendant always stood in a corner, a dark room of supplies behind him and a mop at the ready. It was all very subterranean ... and very Melbourne.

I looked forward to our 'day in town' all term. The city was a place in which I felt markedly my lack of sophistication and yet where life and possibility seemed endless. For me, it was a place of fantasy, one in which I imagined myself as more at home than anywhere else. I determined then that one day I would belong to this place, and it would belong to me.

Today this city is my home. For more than a decade I have lived with my family within the boundaries of the City of Melbourne, many of those in the CBD (Central Business District), Postcode 3000. Indeed, I do belong to this place, but I cannot claim it belongs to me.

Postcode 3000 is an easily defined space built on a parcel of land 'purchased' in 1835 by a Tasmanian opportunist John Batman. The unsuspecting 'vendors' were the local Duttigalla Aborigines. The price: a collection of scissors, beads and blankets and the promise of a yearly rent of similar kind. Soon after, in 1837, two government surveyors, Hoddle and Russell, were charged with the task of laying out the form of this new settlement. What they devised was an intimate but tightly ordered grid of streets that sets the boundaries for Postcode 3000 today. This mix of broad tree-lined boulevards, narrow streets and an interconnecting web of laneways takes up no more than 1.5 square kilometers yet has been the heart of the wider metropolitan region for more than 180 years.

FROM CONTESTED SPACE

Postcode 3000 is a very real place, tangible and concrete; one that daily plays host to around 800,000 people: residents, workers and visitors.¹ It is a centre of finance, commerce, government and education. It's a place of tall buildings,

wide streets and narrow laneways; home to churches, courts and libraries. It is endless arcades of shops, sidewalk cafes, galleries and five-star hotels. It is a place that you can see, feel, hear and smell. But it is more. As my childhood memories attest, the city of Melbourne is an imagined landscape, a place of fantasy in which its inhabitants, routinely or momentarily, re-imagine themselves. Though as a landscape of the imagination Postcode 3000 is much less tangible, it is just as real.

- A corporate executive drives into the city from the domestic and mundane obligations of his suburban home. After ascending in the elevator to his office high above, he stands at his window and surveys the city spread out below. As he does, he daily re-imagines himself as a person of power, position and influence.
- An international student arrives in the city from a far away land, leaving behind family but bearing their hopes and expectations. This city is a place that embodies the uniquely Western versions of opportunity and freedom, a place to access education, prosperity and new beginnings. In the city he re-imagines his future and himself.
- A city resident, an empty nester who moved into her penthouse after raising a family in a more suburban place, entertains friends on her balcony overlooking the riverside marina. As she sips her champagne, the lights of the city skyline dancing behind her, she re-imagines herself as an urban sophisticate with the trappings of culture and success at her fingertips.
- A middle-aged couple, tourists from overseas, come to this exotic urban landscape to photograph its vistas, imbibe its culture and purchase an experience of transcendence and difference. They do not come in search of the ordinary, but of cultural diversity, energy and otherness.

- A suburban homemaker travels into the city for a day of shopping. As she wanders the laneway boutiques and grand department stores, she is happily distracted by the alluring promises of glamour. In every purchase, she re-imagines herself as a woman of style, noticed and desirable. Or perhaps she comes to enjoy the feast of concerts, theatres and restaurants—a momentary escape from an otherwise predictable domestic routine.

- A young man from the outer suburbs invests considerable time re-making himself as masculine and virile. He primps and preens, gels and sprays before travelling with his mates into the city for a night of drinking, dancing and, if he's lucky, passion. For him, the city is a land of promise, an imagined place of transition from childlike constraint to the freedom of young adulthood.

From every perspective, the imaginative power of this landscape runs deep. Yet these imaginations—these competing visions of urban promise—are what makes Postcode 3000 a highly contested space. One does not have to participate in its life for very long to feel the consequences. Overwhelmingly, the city's diverse constituencies envision themselves as adversaries competing for priority, space and resources.

Last year I was invited to participate in a community forum at the Town Hall on the administration of liquor licenses. In recent years the city has struggled with increasing levels of alcohol-fuelled violence on its streets and the reputation that goes with it. There to represent the interests of residents, I was seated alongside licensees, community service and law enforcement personnel, representatives of retail and cultural associations, business leaders and elected members of local government. What ensued was a heated and ultimately

fruitless clash of imaginations. More regular participation in the City's advisory committee on children and families only casts the divides in greater relief. Multiple proposals come before Council vying for the affirmation of Melbourne as an international city, a residential city, a 24-hour city, a city of literature and the arts, a child-friendly city, a world-class city of fashion and food, and more. Yet each proposal carries with it an implicit critique of competing visions for Postcode 3000.

As a city resident and pastor of a city church, I am compelled by the gospel call of Jesus to ask what part the church and I can play in this contested space. In his context, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams warns the urban church against becoming nothing more than one interest group among many bidding competitively for the same resources, recognition and priority that every other interest group seeks. According to Williams, the church is operating most closely to its vocational identity when it provides a 'radically different imaginative landscape', one in which all constituencies can discover an alternative way of being and sharing life.²

Herein lies a word of vocation for people like me and for the faith communities that inhabit Postcode 3000. The city church is ideally placed to model a way of being in community that is genuinely inclusive and hospitable, a community of presence that can facilitate what Williams describes as 'a conversion of sorts, a turning around of values and priorities that grow from trust in God.'³ Rather than settling to be an interest group cradling its own agenda, the church by its nature has the capacity to provide a radically different imagining, one of community, hospitality and cooperation. In doing so, perhaps the church can be part of enabling a gradual transformation of the urban landscape from contested space to something more genuinely human, inclusive and life-affirming.

TO SACRED SPACE

The respected proponent of public spirituality, Philip Sheldrake, argues that the urban environment has a formative impact upon the human spirit. Places like Postcode 3000 shape the soul. City making, he says, is about the functional, the ethical and the spiritual. Good cities—cities that nurture the individual and collective spirit—are those that (i) enable the human person to flourish through the stages of life; (ii) nurture belongingness and connection; (iii) facilitate relationship with natural environments; and (iv) offer access to the sacred or relate us to life as sacred.⁴ It is this idea of the city as a facilitator of the sacred, an environment that potentially relates us to life as an integrated whole that may well provide a renewed sense of the church's place and purpose in the city.

In a contested space, the preferred narrative of arbitration centres around the notion of tolerance, 'the catchword of liberal societies.'⁵ Tolerance carries with it a sense of forbearance, endurance or indulgence. In essence, it allows the 'other' to be. A tolerant society is indeed a worthy aspiration; it stands in sharp contrast to a parochial and bigoted community intolerant of difference. But the word tolerant falls well short of describing the nature of sacred space and, within it, a community able to celebrate both its differences and common identity.

Sacred space is hospitable space. This more challenging notion of hospitality lies at the heart of the church's identity and mission. Henri Nouwen has described this mission as offering 'an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast of their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.' Such open sharing of space and place carries with it an obligation of surrender. Those in power and possession must be willing to relinquish ownership and allow others to fully inhabit space with them. My colleague, Mark G Brett, writes of the

need for a 'divine counter empire of kenotic hospitality',⁶ a hospitality of surrender and self-emptying; one that enables a genuine sharing of space and resources and a much more profound expression of community. It is a costly business for it requires a giving away of self-interest in the interest of others.

How might the church in Postcode 3000, through the expression of hospitality, facilitate such an opening up of the city as sacred space? I offer three limited suggestions.

1. Hosting conversational space

Melbourne has its share of grand ecclesial buildings. Every Good Friday, I join thousands of others who make the pilgrimage of the cross from station to station around the streets of the city; from St Francis to St Paul's, from St Patricks to Scots Presbyterian and the grand white columns of Collins Street Baptist, the church of which I am a part.

There is much that can be critiqued, and often is, about the presence of such buildings, their 'dwindling congregations', the never ending costs of maintenance and the sheer monetary value of the real estate upon which they stand. I have often wondered, though, what the city would be like if all of these structures were razed. What would be lost? Due to the sheer force of economics they would be replaced, no doubt, with yet more towers of glass and steel that pay homage to the powers of commerce and profit. But in the process something of the city's heart would be gone. Even among those who never darken the doors of such buildings, their presence is routinely affirmed. If nothing else, such buildings remind us of an alternative set of values, of possibilities that lie beyond the cold and rational dictums of the marketplace. Their dramatic spires point not to the glory of human industry, but to a reality beyond and to the sacredness of life itself, even in the city's urban heart.

In large part, the movement from contested space to sacred space depends on the power of conversation around values that bind us together; values that prioritize the dignity of humanity and community. In my view, the city church is uniquely placed to host and facilitate such conversations, inhabiting a space that is neither commercial nor public, neither partisan nor civic, but a space of genuine and open hospitality. For a church to take on such a role, to open its doors to conversations which are not explicitly religious in nature and which it cannot necessarily control, requires an element of self-emptying. To play the role of host is an act of intentional vulnerability, but one that has the capacity to impact well beyond the walls of the church building.

2. Nurturing local connections

In recent years, much has been said about the complexity of our place-identity and its importance to individual and collective wellbeing. This identity, especially for urban dwellers, is multi-faceted, a complex mix of the most local, micro-place connections of home and neighbourhood and macro-place relations to a wider, sometimes global, sense of place. For city residents, moving contested space into sacred space has to do with nurturing both connections.

Residential life in Postcode 3000 is unique. To those who look on from a suburban distance, it is a style of life easily caricatured, sometimes glamorized and commonly misunderstood. Today Melbourne's CBD is home to some 18,000 people, an increase of no less than 11,000 in the last six years. By 2031, the residential population is projected to be close to 40,000 people.⁷ Given that in the early 1980s, there were a mere 700 people who called the city home, the growth in residential life is nothing short of extraordinary.

As in any residential context, city living can be an anonymous business. The majority of residents live in 'vertical

neighbourhoods', tall residential buildings that may be home to hundreds of individual households. More often than not, these residents have a strong sense of global identity. Their identification with the city as a whole is strong. As they look out of their living room windows or stand on their balconies, the perspective is broad, their sense of space defined by distant horizons and surrounded by towers of global industry. What's more, 42% of the city's population speak a language other than English in their homes. The more pressing challenge for city residents is the nurturing of those micro-place connections, connections to the immediate neighbourhood. Lacking some of the shared and contained spaces that define suburban communities—places such as schools, cul-de-sacs and corner stores—urban neighbourhoods need a stronger sense of local space and neighbourhood institution to thrive.

The churches of Postcode 3000 have always played an important role within their wider denominational traditions, 'cathedral' churches with a central identity and a unique relationship to the wider metropolitan region. With the rebirth of the city centre as a lived-in community, and one that anticipates continuing growth, the city churches are faced with an extraordinary opportunity. By rediscovering their local parish identity, churches can play a significant role in the re-birthing of local neighbourhood. Doing so will require a considerable degree of surrender on the part of these churches. Self-identity runs deep. To embrace the immediate and local expression of their life may require their more regional identity to take a back seat for a while. But the commitment to hospitality, of the most practical and immediate kind, may well be its own reward.

3. Modelling practical inclusion

In the past few months, the plight of Indian students who come to Melbourne

seeking skills, qualifications and the possibility of long-term residency has had a high profile in the media. The incidences of racial vilification, workplace exploitation and the inadequacy of educational programs set up to profit from their aspirations has caused considerable debate. This has only piggy-backed on the wider story of tertiary education in Melbourne and the extraordinarily high number of international students, primarily from Asia, who call the city home.

In the past 7 years, 31 apartment blocks have been built on the northern fringe of the CBD (between RMIT and University of Melbourne), the majority along Swanston Street. These apartments are now home to nearly 10,000 students, 95% from overseas. On a broader scale, the City of Melbourne is home to some 25,000 international students.⁸ In a research project conducted by the University of Melbourne, it was found that these students rarely make friends with Australians and commonly will never see the inside of an Australian person's home. Most often, they will live alone in very small rooms found for them by overseas agents. Furthermore, if they have them, their roommates will be other international students.⁹

All too often, the voices of such people go unheard in the public forums and conversations about city life. Though their presence adds a richness of life and diversity to the city landscape, they are not considered full participants. Most never have a vote, struggle with barriers of language and culture, are routinely exploited by opportunists and at the receiving end of passive racism and discrimination.

Though these students are just one group that sits on the margins of life in Postcode 3000, they represent a very tangible opportunity to the church. What other city-based communities are as well set up as the churches to provide space, support and intercultural relationships to

these young people? It is often said that the transient nature of the international community makes serious investment in its welfare an act of no permanent gain for the church. But if the church is to play a key role in the movement of the city from contested space to sacred space, it has the opportunity to model a form of life that is genuinely hospitable, that seeks nothing in return and is willing to surrender its own comfort for the sake of others. Perhaps in so doing, the church can show the way, a different way, to the city as a whole.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Postcode 3000 is a highly contested space, one of competing imaginations. In the movement of the city from contested space to sacred space—space that is affirming of our shared humanity and community—I have suggested that the church has a key role to play. Flowing out of its commitment to self-giving hospitality as the expression of its identity and mission, the church can (i) host conversational space in which constituencies can hear and be heard, (ii) nurture local connections by re-embracing its parish identity, and (iii) model practical inclusion that brings the marginal into the centre of its life and mission.

Personally, I remain deeply committed to the welfare of Postcode 3000. My boyhood experience of 'a day in town' and the imagined sense of self that came with it has slowly morphed into a life in town and an imagined sense of what this city might become. My imagined self and my imagined home remain connected as a landscape of faith.

Spirituality in the City, edited by Andrew Walker, 15-26. London: SPCK, 2005, 17.

³ Williams, 17.

⁴ Philip Sheldrake, "Cities and Human Community: Spirituality and the Urban." *The Way* 45, no. 4, (2006), 108-109.

⁵ Sheldrake, 115.

⁶ Mark G Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible and the Tides of Empire*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008, 184-185.

⁷ Nick Casey, Melbourne City Research, "Analysis of Population and Housing 2001 – 2007." Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 2008.

⁸ Nick Casey, Melbourne City Research, "City of Melbourne 2006 Student Demographic Profile." Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 2008.

⁹ Adam Morton, "Foreign Students Living on the Edge of Society: Towers of Segregation on CBD Fringe." *The Age*, Saturday May 5, 2007, 4.

¹ Boreak Silk and Jo-Anne Bell, City Research, "Melbourne City User Estimates and Forecasts, 2004–2020." Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 2009.

² Rowan Williams, "Urbanization, the Christian Church and the Human Project." In