

HOW DIFFERENT ARE AUSTRALIAN CITIES?

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INTRODUCTION

Do Australian cities share a unifying essence that permits us to speak of them collectively as a distinctive constellation within the global urban galaxy? How are Australian cities both similar to each other and different to cities elsewhere? What might it mean to consider and respond to such questions? How might Australian urban scholarship be informed by a nuanced appreciation of Australian cities as having a distinctive character? How can Australian cities speak to an international scholarly audience and what should they say? These rather simple and general questions motivate the present paper. We seek to provoke debate both at SOAC and beyond by querying the status of 'The Australian City', accompanied by the offer of some preliminary insights into the nature, character and state of 'Australian Cities' as a prospective *definite* – whether absolute or relative – category within a global array of territorially and nationally defined city assemblies. In doing so we hope also to engage with important questions about the status of comparative urban analysis in relation to the position of 'the Australian city' within an international context.

Our motivation in querying and exploring the distinctiveness of the Australian city derives from a number of intellectual impulses. The first is the role of the SOAC conference itself which over five biennial meetings has re-energised Australian urban scholarship by offering what is now the principal venue for communal scholarly debate about Australian cities. Yet over the course of these five SOACs there have been precious few assessments of 'The Australian City' as a unified category. The original intent of SOAC was to illuminate and articulate the conditions within our cities, but beyond the self evident imperative of reflective localism there has been modest intellectual justification over successive SOACs for the use of the Australian nation-state as the container for urban inquiry, even if common sense may indicate such questioning is unnecessary. In this sense the present paper hopes to support the SOAC project by encouraging and drawing an engagement with the object of the conference from a more deliberately explicit and engaged point of reference. That is, in a sense, to place and interrogate the Australian city as a category within wider urban social science and thus assesses the value of this term and its usefulness in aiding understanding of cities both in Australia and elsewhere.

A second, more scholarly intent motivating our paper is to engage with the methodological question of comparative scholarship. While urban scholars frequently make comparative observations of conditions within cities the theoretical intent and methodological basis for comparative urban analysis remains underdeveloped – a point that as Robinson (2011) notes, seems strange in a 'world of cities' in which any attempt to make a general point about urbanisation inevitably depends on some degree of comparative reflection. In contradistinction we might note the provocative universalism in Bettencourt et al's (2007) assessment, who argue that the social organisation and economic dynamics differ between cities with 'nontrivial quantitative regularities', as a function of their scale. Despite sporadic attempts to offer a methodological foundation for comparative urban inquiry (Pickvance 1986) urban scholarship has been less active in pursuing comparative methodological foundations, although the past decade has seen a resurgence of interest in such questions (Ward 2010).

The remainder of this paper explores selected features of these questions which are posed as a spur to a debate on the general validity of the category of 'The Australian City' as a construct. Given the multifarious nature of these questions and the equally multifarious ways in which they can be addressed we do not expect to entirely resolve the questions we pose within this paper. In that sense while the paper offers the invitation to debate it makes no promises of a resolution. Our method is largely discursive, in part because the multiple angles from which the problem can be addressed are themselves driven by argument about the approach to the question as much as the means of answering them. There is no 'self-evident' means of determining the comparative status of 'The Australian City' other than to begin debating it, and necessarily along multiple lines of contention. This slant in part also reflects the particular disciplinary concerns that the authors bring to the topic and which fall within the area of urban planning theory, broadly defined. The structure of the paper itself is also driven both by this method and by the contributors' interests. We have arranged our response to the question of whether the Australian City can be considered a distinctive class within urban social science according to two general areas of comparative interest. First we appraise the shifts towards comparative urban research and their utility for understanding the distinctiveness of Australian

cities. Second we highlight emergent features that appear to characterize 'The Australian City' marked out in the content of urban structures, forms and land-uses. For the purposes of this conference paper the intent is not to knit the two sections seamlessly together, but rather to offer two emergent but connected research areas – methodological and empirical - for better understanding Australian city distinctiveness as a scholarly agenda. In conclusion we reflect on the nature and effects of 'difference' in Australian cities. While we offer few firm conclusions we close the paper with a proposal for further inquiry in this vein.

COMPARING CITIES –A CONTESTED METHODOLOGICAL AGENDA

The challenges faced in comparing Australian cities with each other or those overseas find similar recognition within wider understandings of comparative analysis within urban studies. After a long period without having received much attention the question of the comparative nature of urban inquiry has recently strengthened in geographical and planning debates leading Ward (2010) to suggest urban studies is now gripped by a 'comparative (re)-turn'. This has raised new questions around the value of comparative urban research and the changing nature of the urban question including an emphasis on questions of polity, epistemology and methodology: How and why are cities across the world changing, and with what consequences? What new research tools and methodologies are appropriate to making sense of the changes occurring in contemporary urban society? Are current theories appropriate for the study of contemporary urban form and society, especially in the global South where we often apply theories of the global North without regard to the specificities of old and new urban contexts in the South? (see RC21, 2011)

This section focuses on the challenges and opportunities of comparative urban research. The difficulties of comparing (global) cities are well documented in the urban literature and include: problems of explanation; issues of organizational identity, theoretical coherence, and methodological integrity; data sources that are incomparable and inaccessible: institutional frames of reference that vary from place to place; and different dynamics of growth and decline between cities and regions (Dear, 2005; Pickvance, 1986; Ward 2008). The need to navigate between the Scylla of grand theory and the Charybdis of the pristine case-study' has been highlighted by Abu-Lughod (1976, p.14). The capacity for comparative research to 'lump together the unrelated and the inessential' has also been noted (Sayer, 1992; Ward, 2010). There are dangers in over-generalizing and/or overemphasizing particular spaces and representations of 'ordinary cities' (Amin and Graham, 1997; Thrift, 1996).

As part of the return to comparative urban research there has been a shift from grand and overarching theory which sought to emphasize patterns and regularities, to what Ward (2008) argues is the next-generation of comparative urban studies that incorporates some of the insights of transnational studies. This relational conceptualization is "unlike comparative methodologies which search for similarities and differences between two mutually exclusive contexts...but instead use one site to pose questions of another" (Roy, 2003, p. 466). The future of the comparative studies of cities according to Ward (2008, p.408) might rest on pursuing "a *relational comparative approach* to urban studies, one that acknowledges both the territorial and the relational geographies of cities". This has a critical comparative edge as Robinson (2011) highlights:

The very fact that cities exist in a world of other cities means that any attempt at a general or theoretical statement about cities either depends upon or invites comparative reflection. What constitutes a city, how are cities organized, what happens in them, where are they going? I suggest that revitalizing the comparative gesture is an important requirement for an international and post-colonial approach to urban studies."

Work by Massey (1993, p. 64) has argued that whilst cities are deeply embedded within global systems that emphasize the interdependence of urban places and spaces, the distinctive features of individual places must also be understood in relation (and tension) with the other. The post-positivist approach infers a greater appreciation of the complexity of urban processes including an emphasis on: interactions as opposed to objects; relational webs and layers over physical patterns; structure *and* agency; institutions *and* individuals; dynamics not statics; embedding *and* emergence; multiplicity of relations versus homogeneity; and the friction of conflict not equilibrium (Healey, 2007). This involves an understanding the spatialities of globalization as a multidimensional, contextual and inherently relational undertaking (Amin, 2002). Relational space must be understood as: open and fluid (Thrift, 1996); multiple processes that combine to bring particular spatial formations into being and can facilitate movement and access, as well as marginalization and exclusion (Amin and Graham, 1997).

The challenge for future scholarship on comparative urbanism according to Ward (2008, p.407) is to "move away from understanding cities as discrete, self-enclosed, and analytically separate objects...to understand cities rather differently as open, embedded, and relational". The key characteristics of the 'relational'

approach can be summarized as follows: space cannot be held fast in fixed compartments, or regular, measured intervals but is in a constant fluid process of being formed and transformed; space is a turbulent field of structures, solidarities, disruptions and dislocations; is produced or constituted through 'action' and 'interaction'; necessarily entails plurality and multiplicity; and inseparable from the structures and functioning of capitalism (Johnston et. al., 2000, p.770-771). Within these shifts the question of scale has emerged as a core concept, and in particular the complex relationships between scale, economy and governance within the context of globalization that require a more explicit scale-sensitive urban comparative research response (c.f. McGuirk, 2003, Wood, 2006).

Building on these 'relational' developments a more radical praxis is outlined by Roy (2009) who calls for comparative urban research to "blast open theoretical geographies to produce a new set of concepts in the crucible of a new repertoire of cities". For Roy the transnational comparative project focuses on the EuropeanAmerican dominance of urban theory which has proffered the rise of particular cities as the global role- models for urban theory and policy (i.e. Amsterdam, Berlin, Chicago, Los Angeles, London) to the exclusion of others, and in particular the global South. This is theorization that emphasizes place but holds with it a capacity to engage with a variety of urban relationalities: comparative urban research that combines both urban specificity and urban generalizability.

What is important here "is not the mapping of bounded and located city regions but rather an analysis of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of metropolitan modernity's" (Roy, 2009, p.821). Within the context of globalisation this involves moving away from simple core-periphery models towards a more nuanced understanding of 'differentiated zones of sovereignty' (see Ong, 1999) through attentiveness to the production of space, extraterritoriality and reconfigurations in the relationship of cities with the role of the nation as sovereign state. In Brenner's (2004, p.21) terms this is the capacity for comparative urban research to "relate contextually specific institutional dynamics and outcomes to broader, meso-level transformations". The ambition of dislocating the centre in terms of EuropeanAmerican dominance is an aspect that resonates with Australian urban research and scholarship.

Comparative urban research has the capacity to raise important questions about the role of cities or metropolitan areas within a broader global milieu. How do Australian cities fit into this agenda? As Dear (2005, p. 248) notes "the task of comparative empirical analysis inevitably begins with a first case study, necessary for establishing a viable template from which comparative work can proceed". Australian urban studies are often witness to such methodological approaches. In the urban transport area for example, Newman and Kenworthy's (1991) work on automobile dependence is underpinned by a comparative methodological approach in which the extreme cases of car dependence found in US cities are recorded against lesser extremes in European and Asian cities. Such methods deployed on similar themes have sometimes hinged on the selection of sufficiently 'matched' comparators. However what is distinctively Australian often not made clear, nor the comparative theorization or methods explicated. Work by Mees (2000) used the case of Toronto to explain public transport conditions in Melbourne, on the basis of what he argued were similar historical developmental patterns among the pair. Despite devoting much of a book to the Melbourne-Toronto contrast, Mees however offered little in the way of theoretical discussion of the value of comparisons, presuming, it seems to take them at face value. This approach is also reflected in Thompson's (1977) classic text on urban transport in which the transport conditions in the world's 'great cities' were compared and contrasted.

The urban literature has highlighted that a variety of urban pathways exist and are pursued by different cities within different scalar contexts (Harding, 1991; DiGaetano, 1997; Stoker and Mossberger, 1994; Ward, 2010). Nijman (2007) points to the need for comparative urban research to be practiced in a conscious manner. This includes scholarly attentiveness to the lessons gleaned from past research focused on comparative urban work as well as the challenges of 'theorizing back' – reflecting on what empirical findings from comparative research might mean for existing theories and methods (Ward, 2008). This involves invoking the 'comparative imagination' (see Walton 1981) as a means of addressing "the difference the diversity of cities makes to theory" (Robinson, 2002, p. 549). In the following section we turn to focus on some of the 'distinctive' characteristics of the Australian City. We see this as a first step towards a broader conversation about Australian cities that seeks to build towards what Robinson (2009, p.2) describes as the "active learning from scholarship in different contexts".

THE DISTINCTIVE AUSTRALIAN CITY? AN EMERGENT AGENDA

The development of Australia's cities is well understood both in terms of historical pattern and process and resulting structure and form (Statham 1989; Hamnett and Freestone 1998, Troy 1995). But to what extent

can this group be identified as a single category? What unifies Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide while also differentiating them from Vancouver, Auckland, San Francisco, Manchester, Boston, Frankfurt, Stockholm, Hangzhou or other than the national context in which they are contained and a particular pattern of historical development?... Whereas the literature contains a considerable volume of material reporting on the development of individual Australian cities, commonly within compendium volumes, (McCarty and Schedvin 1978; Hamnett and Freestone; Statham; Troy 2000) deliberately structured comparative analyses however are much less frequently presented.

A rare example of methodical comparative analysis of Australian cities' development is Frost's (1990) text which remains among the few expressly international comparisons of Australian cities, although in this instance they are subsumed within a larger containing category of the 'new urban frontier' settler cities of Australasia and North America. Likewise Frost (1990) noted the value of assessing Australian cities comparatively, but mostly within the confines of the 'Anglo-Saxon' world (ie Australia, New Zealand, North America and the UK) typified by the preference for suburban living, accompanied by not a little concern to ensure that Australian cities provided as good a life for their residents as did those back in Britain. Frost (1991) noted the rarity of comparative urban analysis, a lament that retains considerable contemporary validity, as does the problem he observed of aggregating meaningful explanations from individual 'city biographies' in which the intensity of illumination invites excessive focus on the particularities of a given city. Frost's intent was partly explanatory such that comparative analysis should assist to comprehend the conditions within one city by reference to the similar or counterfactual development of another.

An assessment of the distinctiveness of Australia's major cities involves consideration of the influence of several fundamental sets of forces that produce urban landscapes. At base, cities are produced by a combination of factors of history and geography, as agents and structures, that combine to steer city trajectories. These produce particular social and economic formations, plus framing political and institutional elements, that contextualise urban outcomes in specific time and space locations. As an initial consideration here, there is a need to separate out those characteristics that are common to New World European settled cities, especially Anglophone ones, from those that are unique to Australia. Thus while all large Anglophone New World cities have high rise CBDs and extensive suburban development, it might be that Australian suburban development has unique features. While this might be argued, we leave that particular possibility to further research. Overall, Australian cities show major features that illustrate some degree of national path dependency on Anglophone city development in particular. The Garden City movement, for example, has been a highly significant influence on suburban development in all Anglophone countries, though with local nuances. This has produced low density suburbs characterised by semi- or detached housing and high car use. Anglophone New World suburban development has also been significantly influenced by American ideas such as Radburn development and, latterly, New Urbanism.

Acknowledging such derivative influences, this paper argues that a number of distinctively Australian city-structuring influences that need to be understood because of their demonstrable effect in producing identifiably 'Australian' city features. In the first place, Australia's geography and history have produced a particular national character. The generally mild climate, the abundant spaces, and a nineteenth century immigrant population with particular cultural attitudes have generated a national love of outdoor sport and a predilection for gambling, inter alia. Secondly, the major role of the state in assisting urban and regional development in Australia has been distinctive. Unlike North America, for example, governments built the railways that promoted development in and beyond the cities from the nineteenth century. The central role of the state in controlling and facilitating Australian urban development has continued to the present (Searle and Bunker, 2010). This has meant, for example, that particular Australian versions of neo-liberal public-private partnerships have had the potential to produce distinctive impacts on the urban landscape. Related to this degree of government influence over development is the very large size of state land holdings in the cities and elsewhere, stemming largely from the colonial decree of terra nullius whereby prior indigenous claims to land ownership were ignored. The combination of state power and state landholdings has had the potential for the state to generate urban outcomes that allow the state to respond directly to national cultural preferences, for instance, as we show below. It could be argued, perhaps, that Australia's distinctive compulsory voting system requires political parties to propose policies which reflect broad national preferences rather than those of certain sections of the population.

The following sections discuss features of Australian cities that can be argued to be globally distinctive: an over-scaled upper urban hierarchy, private motorways, large casinos, major stadiums, and agricultural showgrounds. The features discussed here are not necessarily exhaustive, and are proposed as an initial assay into the case for considering Australian cities as a separate kind of urban development. All of the features analysed have required significant state influence to come about. Most have also involved the use of public land holdings. We also argue that national cultural preferences have been significant in the development of state-sponsored casinos and stadiums.

An Over-Scaled Upper Urban Hierarchy

One distinctive feature of Australian cities that has received attention from scholars is the top-heavy nature of the urban hierarchy. The biggest five cities each have more than a million people, and in total contain well over half of Australia's total population, a feature that has prevailed for many decades. While this is not unique in national urban systems, it is the combination of this dominance and the relative lack of urban centres between a quarter of a million and a million population that constitutes the distinctiveness. Thus Australia's urban hierarchy in its upper levels shows little conformity to the classic rank-size rule. The outcome is that Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide are larger than would be expected in other countries that conform more closely to the rank-size rule.

This feature has been noted by scholars for some time. Rose (1967) argued that the resulting failure to replicate a central place hierarchy meant that people in small country towns went directly to the large cities for higher order needs. The antecedents of this big city dominance stemmed from the reinforcement of the initial advantage of the biggest cities as the main locations of early settlement and as colonial capital cities by colonial/state government rail systems that radiated out from these cities, and by freight rate structures that made it cheaper for agricultural products to be processed in the cities than where they were grown (Linge, 1979). Later mechanisation of manufacturing generated economies of scale that reinforced the advantages of production being located close to the main markets, the big cities, especially while Australia retained high tariff barriers against manufacturing imports. The capital cities were further advantaged as state government jobs increased their share of total employment from the middle of the twentieth century.

The dominance of the big cities has been reinforced in the post-tariff contemporary era of global competition. Large cities are now seen to have competitive advantages because their size offers greater possibilities of information exchange and specialised support services. Indeed, McCann and Acs (2011) have argued that city size above 1.5 million is now required to achieve sufficient knowledge-related agglomeration effects to sustain local multinational companies. In Australia, the state governments have responded to such imperatives and switched from focusing on regional development to initiatives to increase economic development in the large cities. These have ranged from mega urban development projects such as Darling Harbour (Sydney) and Docklands (Melbourne) to international stadiums and subsidies for company headquarters. Such measures have reinforced the primacy of the large capital cities within each state.

Private Motorways

Australia's three largest cities have the biggest concentration of private sector funded urban motorways in the world. This has been largely driven by the emergence of neo-liberal ideology within state governments from the 1980s, and the related objective of minimising debt to retain high credit ratings that signify business-friendly government, while also reducing interest payments (Searle, 1999). In Brisbane the City Council, Australia's largest, has used its traditionally powerful infrastructure role to carry out its own 'five tunnel' motorway strategy in which privately funded roads are the main element. The immediate effect of using significant private sector funding has been to bring forward the implementation of long term metropolitan road strategies. More generally, because it has involved user payments it has reduced distributional equity in the cities and accelerated the emergence of the 'splintered city' (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Searle, 1999; O'Neill, 2009).

At the same time, it has become apparent that private funding has generated an over-building of motorways. After the success of early privately-financed projects such as the Sydney Harbour Tunnel, large investors started to bid enthusiastically for the rights to develop and operate new motorways, and generated often exceedingly optimistic traffic forecasts to justify their project costs (Haughton and McManus, 2011). The result has been the financial failure of several of the motorway companies – two in Sydney and one in Brisbane. Traffic on the motorways they have built has fallen well short of forecasts, with the Cross City Tunnel (Sydney) and the Clem Jones Tunnel (Brisbane) being relatively empty for most of the day in contradistinction to city motorways in the rest of the world.

Large Casinos

Australian cities are distinctive for the recent development of prominent state sponsored casinos in their central areas. These have spawned clusters of associated activities, and have been planned as the foci of major tourism precincts at Darling Harbour in Sydney and Southbank in Melbourne. Indeed, the state costs of redeveloping Darling Harbour as a major leisure destination were intended to be largely defrayed by the casino licence fee (Searle and Cardew, 2000, p. 370). City casino development in Australia has been a major response by the states to develop new consumption-based sources of development in a post-protection, postmodern era reifying individual experience in which consumption has become an economic driver (see Harvey, 1989).

The first state-sponsored casino in Australia was opened in Hobart in 1973. It was intended to provide a new type of attraction that would increase tourist visitation to Tasmania, and at the same time increase state government revenues via an operating licence fee and taxes on revenue. Other states eventually all followed Tasmania's initiative, recognising the dual benefits of new casinos. This insertion of large casinos into the built fabric of all major cities is absent in other developed countries. Most large western cities would have small private casinos, legal or illegal, tucked away in and near CBDs, but big casinos in major cities are rare. In Canada, where a number of provincial government-sponsored casinos have been developed, most are in relatively modest buildings, with the large Casino de Montreal an exception (Smith and Hinch, 1996). Hall and Hamon (1996) have noted that the Perth and Adelaide casinos, opened in the mid-1980s, were the first large casinos in the world to be built in major population centres and aimed at the local market. The socio-political reasons for this Australian distinctiveness have received little attention. We argue that factors that underpin Australian society's distinctive character are fundamental. The most important of these is an Australian penchant for gambling that was apparent from the earliest days of European settlement (Australian Institute for Gambling Research, 1999; Caldwell, 1985). In the beginning it was mainly centred on horse-racing; much later lotteries became significant, and then the introduction of poker machines into New South Wales clubs in the 1950s presaged the potential attractions of large Las Vegas-style casinos.

In addition, as in other distinctive elements of large Australian cities, the role of the state has been fundamental in generating significant urban impacts. Firstly, to maximise the licence fee, state governments have given casino operators a regional monopoly, while allowing them large numbers of poker machines to increase casino revenue and state taxes. This has encouraged the development of very large casinos. Secondly, state governments have used special planning provisions to facilitate development where necessary. In Sydney, the government removed power to approve casino development from the city council when the council objected to the design and potential local impacts of the proposed casino (Searle and Byrne, 2002). Further, most casinos have been developed on state land, which has increased the potential for state control and state support.

Major stadiums

Nearly all western governments have funded and sponsored the construction of major sporting stadiums for international competition. Major Australian cities, however, are distinctive for their proliferation of state-funded large stadiums built for national sporting leagues, as well as state funding for smaller stadiums for local leagues. While cities across developed nations have stadiums for their various teams in national leagues, extensive state funding for stadiums in Australia has meant that the size and number of stadiums for national and local sport has been disproportionately large. In other western nations, stadiums for national league teams are usually primarily funded by the teams themselves, as in the case of football stadiums across western Europe. In the US, Baade (2003, p. 587) estimates that public subsidies have funded over \$20 billion of the total \$26.5 billion (1997 prices) cost of 139 professional sports stadiums built since 1945. But many of these stadiums have been smaller indoor sports stadiums, while the net increase in large outdoor stadiums of the kind financed by Australian state governments has been largely restricted to growing southern and western US cities to which franchised teams have moved. Overall, the much lower number of outdoor national league teams per capita in the US compared with Australia (c.f. Wilson and Pomfret, 2008, pp. 10-11) has meant that the built environment significance of US public subsidies for major stadiums has been much less. Thus Sydney, for example, has four state-funded outdoor national league stadiums and a fifth (ANZ Olympic Stadium) that required significant supporting state infrastructure; similarly-sized Boston, by contrast has two such stadiums in which state funding was relatively minor.

In Australia, the development of national sporting leagues has been relatively recent. Prior to this, state governments gave significant assistance to local councils for the development of small stadiums (for example, helping to finance grandstands at council-owned ovals) that accommodated local league matches. With the emergence of national leagues and greater professionalization, the role of the states in stadium development expanded. The national leagues used their wealth for similar development only in isolated instances, such as the Australian Football League's stadiums in Melbourne and Adelaide. The state governments' role took several forms. A number of the old stadiums for the local leagues were upgraded and expanded, as at Parramatta Park (Sydney) and Suncorp Stadium (Brisbane). New stadiums that could cater for international as well as national matches were built, as at the Sydney Football Stadium. In Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and as proposed in Adelaide, state government funding of upgraded facilities at the international cricket grounds has been driven to a large extent to accommodate national football league crowds.

The main rationale for state subsidies for professional sporting stadiums has been seen by Wilson and Pomfret (2008) as the belief of politicians that this will gain more votes from rabid sports fans than will be lost to taxpayers uninterested in sports. Providing new stadiums can thus generate important popular legitimation for governments, drawing on a long national cultural history of enthusiasm for sport that has

become increasingly commodified. In addition to financial support, state governments have used their planning powers to override opposition to new stadiums where necessary. For example, special state legislation was passed by the NSW government in the 1980s to enable the construction of Parramatta stadium following a successful court challenge by opponents of the development.

Agricultural Showgrounds

The rural economic base that underpinned Australian cities in the nineteenth century had a number of significant effects on city structure. One that has continued to have a significant influence is the presence of large showgrounds of state agricultural societies in what are now inner city locations. The sites for these were generally given over by colonial/state governments from original Crown land holdings. In turn, the huge extent of such holdings was allowed by the colonial imposition of terra nullius. The size of the showgrounds and their government provision reflects the dominance of the large capital cities within each state, with the annual shows being the states' centrepiece agricultural competitions. In turn, they constitute a globally distinctive element of city structure.

Today, these showgrounds occupy large areas that continue to host annual agricultural shows (except in Sydney, where new showgrounds were developed on another state site at middle west Homebush to accommodate year 2000 Olympic events) as well as other shows and trade exhibitions. Their economic viability has been increasingly questioned as governments have developed their own specialist conference and exhibition centres adjacent to CBDs. In Brisbane, the current redevelopment of a significant part of the showgrounds site for apartments and offices by the state Urban Land Development Authority will help finance continuation of Royal National Association activities there. In Sydney, the move of the Royal Agricultural Society to its new state-provided facilities at Homebush averted the need for a costly upgrade of the old showgrounds (Darian-Smith, 2010) and allowed them to be redeveloped as Fox film studios. The recent history of the Brisbane and Sydney showgrounds shows their importance as sites for actual and potential state-led regeneration on what are major inner city public land holdings, collectively representing a globally unique state-sponsored urban restructuring opportunity.

CONCLUSION: THE AUSTRALIAN CITY IN A WORLD OF CITIES

As Australian urbanists we are interested in the recognition and articulation of 'The Australian City' within international urban debates and to ensure that any such categorisation is both well founded and visible. This ambition speaks in two directions – the first seeks to articulate to our Australian international peers the 'difference that difference makes' in theorising, investigating and reporting on Australian cities and the implications this distinctiveness for the importation of blueprints and narratives from overseas. Conversely this intent may assist those from elsewhere offering such blueprints and narratives to Australian cities to better understand the context to which they speak and thus craft their pronouncements sensitively. In particular we are interested in exploring what are the drivers for distinctiveness, particularly in more theoretical terms. Such effort must also recognise that given their small number, modest size and peripheral location relative to cores of greater scholarly mass – if not necessarily centres of global urban pre-eminence however defined – Australian cities risk being dismissed as a curious 'other' among the dominant Anglo-American "spatial politics of knowledge production" (Berg and Kearns 1998) even if they remain 'on the radar' relative to those found in less economically advanced nations (Robinson 2002).

As we have highlighted this involves two interlinked agendas: a methodological agenda around comparative urban research with an emphasis on Australian cities in a world of cities; and an emergent empirical agenda that focuses on features that characterize the distinctiveness of the Australian city. To this end a number of key areas of distinctiveness emerge. The centrality of the state governments in producing distinctive elements has been critical. The states' city-shaping influence has arisen through a concentration of development powers that hark back to colonial times, and their strategic land holdings, which also emerged from that era through the precept of terra nullius. An Australian version of neoliberalism has produced the biggest global concentration of private urban motorways. Australia's distinctive social attitudes and preferences are evident in such features as state-sponsored casinos and major stadiums. The interplay of climate and the state is reflected in the colonial origins of major city dominance within states particularly via the transport of rural produce on state rail systems, and in the agricultural showgrounds that exhibit this produce.

Raising questions about the distinctiveness of Australian cities is thus also an exercise in raising questions about their 'difference' within global urban debates about different cities. This concern must necessarily also address a further element of current urban thought that describes the 'flattening' of global space and the 'dissolution' of boundaries and limits. Within this context cities – or more typically city-regions – are viewed as having become placeless spatial containers for a largely uniform set of globalised land-uses and infrastructures through which flows of footloose financial, commodity and labour capital pass within

international circuits (eg Graham and Marvin 2001; Gospodini 2006), diminishing their individual distinctive character (cf Gospodini 2006). Where might Australian cities be 'placed' upon what is often framed as an homogenous urban plane?

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