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Australia's 'high performance' cities? Motorsport and sustainable urban environments

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INTRODUCTION

Many politicians and business interests now view major sports teams and mega-events as important engines of economic growth (Cagan and deMause, 1998; Noll and Zimbalist, 1997; Hiller, 1989; Molotch, 1976). Civic leaders argue that it makes good economic and cultural “common sense” to invest public resources in showcase sporting events, which are supposedly essential in projecting a world-class image of their city (Lowes, 2002a; Rowe and McGuirk, 1999). One type of major sporting event that is becoming a constitutive feature of image making in cities throughout the world is motorsport events in city street circuits.

The general population typically favourably perceives major motorsport events in city locations, though for many residents the location of the events is a critical consideration in their level of support (Fredline and Faulkner, 2001). City motorsport events are widely regarded as successful event tourism strategies to boost the image of cities involved, to contribute to the local economy and to create “winner” images for the politicians who champion such spectacles (McDonnell et al., 1999; Kyriakopoulos, 1996).

Despite the widespread acceptance of motorsport in Australian society, we argue in this paper that it is crucial for research to be undertaken that systematically investigates the environmental and public health impacts of motorsport events held in major urban public spaces (for a study of the Olympics Games in this context see Lenskyj 1998, 2000). Currently there is a paucity of sustained critical analysis along these lines. Indeed there has been very little critical scholarship that examines the role of motorsport in the broader context of urban space. An exception here is Lowes' work which examines the conflict that arose between a Vancouver, Canada, community and the civic and corporate boosters who wanted to move the Molson Indy Vancouver motorsport event to their neighbourhood park (Lowes, 2002a; Lowes, 2002b).

Whether staging motorsport events in significant public spaces within Australian cities actually does make good economic and cultural common sense is open to debate (Lowes, 2002a). However, this question is not the focus of this paper.

Instead this paper focuses on the question of whether the strategy of staging major

motorsport events makes sense in terms of public health and environmental health outcomes.

Sustainable sport, notes Lenskyj, is a relatively new concept in both sport and environmental circles (Lenskyj, 2000). There is little scholarly research on the complex relationship between sport and the environment generally, and virtually nil with respect to research concerning the impact of motorsport events on the natural urban environment of their host cities – a problem we hope to at least begin to address with this paper.

Major sports events have a range of symbolic (and actual) impacts as well their supposed impact on the status or prestige of their city. They can operate to support or undermine policies on sustainable cities. Different types of sports events will have hugely differing impacts on and symbolism for cities in terms of their sustainability.

Sport is undoubtedly an integral component of Australian society. It is part of Australia's cultural identity. It seems understandable then, that sporting events would be given pride of place in our major cities. However, if city, state and national governments are serious about a policy agenda which ranks public health and sustainable environments above the profits of private companies, then there are grounds for being selective about the types of sporting events that are allowed to be staged in a city's significant public spaces.

Staging any major event in a city's major public spaces involves some disruption to the normal running of the city. This includes traffic congestion, disruption of access to certain locations and an increase in pollution and litter associated with a concentration of large numbers of people (Robertson, 1995). However, certain events, including motorsport events, have significantly greater negative environmental and public health impacts and messages than other events.

The particular characteristics of motorsport spectacles as they are currently conducted in Australian cities may intensify any impacts that the sport has on environmental and public health. For example, unlike France, Australia continues to allow tobacco sponsorship to occur with motorsport. Motorsport in Australia has also

been allowed in locations that increase both its physical and symbolic impacts on public health. Melbourne's Grand Prix is unusual by world Formula One racing standards in being a street circuit located in a high-density urban area. Canberra's V8 Supercar motorsport events were also unusual in that national monuments such as Parliament House were used as a backdrop for the events and their associated advertising. Other major motorsport spectacles in major Australian cities include the various motor racing events that have been held in parkland in central Adelaide (including Grand Prix Formula One events and V8 Supercar events), as well as the Gold Coast Indy event in public streets in Surfer's Paradise, which has recently also incorporated V8 Supercar events. (The motor racing formula of V8 Supercars is a formula that is unique to Australia, and is exclusively for Holden Commodore and Ford Falcon V8-engined cars that are similar in appearance to cars of the same name available to members of the public for use on public roads.)

This paper argues that these motorsport events have a range of impacts on public and environmental health, and that their very location in significant public spaces is a major factor in understanding the cultural, political and environmental impacts on their host cities.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF SPORT

The notion of sustainable cities speaks to the recognition that the kind of environments that future generations will inherit from our own are directly affected by the kinds of decisions with respect to urban growth strategies which feature the hosting of major sporting events.

For instance, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) amended its Charter in 1991 to include language that ensures that Olympic Games were held under conditions that demonstrated a responsible concern for environmental issues. Among other initiatives the IOC introduced an environmental requirement for bidding cities, issued an environmental policy, and created a Commission on Sport and the Environment. Writing in 1993, IOC Executive Board member Richard Pound (1993) argued that:

It is natural that the International Olympic Committee, as leader of a world-wide humanistic Movement, should be concerned with the integration of the activities of

the Olympic movement with the wellbeing of the world in which we live. Indeed, the Olympic Movement is predicated on holistic principles of balance between body and mind, between action and contemplation, between sport and culture. It would be inconceivable for the IOC to divorce itself from recognition of the desirable balance between the needs of the present and those of the future. Expressed in more concrete terms, the IOC must seek a balance between the needs of our generation and those of the next and succeeding generations. It is, after all, the youth of the world who will inherit the earth which we leave them (Pound, 1993, March).

Subsequently, the Sydney Olympic Bid Committee (1993) recognised in its Environmental Guidelines document that Olympic host cities have “a great opportunity to promote the principles of sustainable urban development” (Sydney Olympic Bid Committee, 1993). In this sense, hosting the Olympic games can be used as “a catalyst for the transition to ecologically sustainable cities, by going beyond formal compliance with current environmental requirements.”

Shifting our attention back to the specific Australian context, in her study of the relationship between sport and corporate environmentalism, Lenskyj (1998) notes that Australia has a longstanding tradition of conservation awareness and activism. A signal moment of this was the founding in 1963 of the Australian branch of the World Wildlife Federation – one of the first formal steps towards Australian involvement in the international environmental movement. “Living on an island,” she writes, “with a fragile ecological balance, unique flora and fauna, and regular extremes of weather – droughts, floods and bushfires – Australians can hardly afford to ignore the environment” (Lenskyj, 1998). Such concerns must be central to the development of sport and the sustainability of Australian cities and their public spaces.

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) has developed a policy on sport in Australia. Though this does not specifically mention motorsport, it does recognise that different sporting events have different environmental impacts. It divides sporting activity into three areas by reason of their environmental impacts: “sports that are currently largely ecologically sustainable, but can still be improved in some form;

“sports that are currently not ecologically sustainable, but which may be significantly improved in sustainability because their core activity is not inherently unsustainable; “sports that can never be ecologically sustainable, nor made significantly more sustainable, due to the inherent nature of their core activity” (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2003).

The ACF policy document goes on to recommend that certain sporting activities should be encouraged in preference to those “that require external processed sources of energy ... or require significant modification to environmental conditions and processes” or that “generate significant ecological impacts through the manufacturing of new equipment necessary for that activity” or that “require the construction of specific facilities and infrastructure”. It also argues that sports that “promote environmental improvements in sectors such as transportation” should be encouraged (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2003).

Given the ACF policy on sport, it is likely that most motorsport events (particularly those currently staged in Australia's urban street circuits) would not rate highly in terms of their ecological sustainability. The inherent nature of motorsport's core activities usually involves considerable pollution and use of energy: in the manufacture of the equipment needed for the sport, including the vehicles themselves and the construction (and subsequent removal) of the race infrastructure in city street circuits; and in the operation of the vehicles during the events. When motorsport events are held in street circuits, they can also disrupt ecologically supportive activities such as walking and cycling as well as (at least in the case of Albert Park in Melbourne) participation in other sports.

SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN CITIES

Locating motorsport events in significant urban public places can magnify any environmental messages or impacts of motorsport in two ways. First, the total local impact of the motor racing events (e.g. through pollution or disruption to healthy modes of transport) is greater in city street circuits than in dedicated racing circuits away from urban areas, because of the greater density of human activity around city street circuits. Second, the symbolic characteristics of locations with special significance and meaning can enhance the impacts on health by adding legitimacy to

the events, thus helping to promote products or activities that either undermine or support sustainability.

A city's public spaces are of remarkable symbolic and ideological importance since they are the primary sites of its public culture (Zukin, 1995; Lowes, 2002a, 112). When any activity is given priority in a city's public spaces, this suggests that this activity is an acknowledged part of the local culture. Staging major motorsport events in important public places adds to the public approval of this sport, and of all its attendant commercial interests, including motor vehicle, alcohol and, for some events, tobacco industries. This has the effect of advancing a city culture that favours the consumer over the citizen as the central point of city life. Commodifying public space serves the interests of hegemonic groups in society, which may not concord with public health or environmental goals.

When a city's most significant public spaces are handed over to the motorsport industry and its key sponsorship interests, these spaces are imbued with the discourses of consumption and the relentless promotion of "the good life" that motorsport culture celebrates. This serves to "naturalise" these vested commercial interests as self-evident, as part of the general "common sense" of society and, therefore, as something to be taken for granted (Lowes, 1999). Promotional messages that celebrate "life in the fast lane" – fast cars, hyper-masculinity, smoking and drinking – are privileged. Those messages that might call attention to the negative aspects of privatising public spaces are downplayed, marginalised or excluded all together.

We can see this play out over a number of significant public places in several Australian cities. For most motorsport spectacles, the events themselves last only a few days and are often associated with other festivals or activities, including concerts, balls and exotic car parades. However, the impact on these public places is felt over a much longer period. The time for setting up and removal of race infrastructure and for the restoration of the spaces can be several months (as is the case in Albert Park for the Grand Prix). The huge amount of time and public money that is devoted to motor racing in public places is indicative of the influence of motorsport in Australian culture.

Indeed the hosting of motorsport mega-events has similar material and symbolic significance for places eager to re-image themselves and re-invigorate their local economies (Rowe and McGuirk 1999). The pursuit of hallmark events of sporting or other kinds – which in Australia has become a particularly vigorous contest since the early nineties' election of the brashly entrepreneurial Kennett Government in the State of Victoria – is now a common part of a battery of place-competition strategies deployed by cities jostling for position in the “global fray” (Stevenson, 1998).

While major motorsports spectacles in city streets are seen as an important aspect of image making for the city involved, they can also be seen as an important part of the image-making for the sport of motor racing. An excellent example of this is the motorsport event held in the Parliamentary Zone in Canberra. While it was claimed that the V8 Supercar event provided an opportunity to promote Canberra to the rest of the nation, and to showcase the national icons (e.g. Parliament House) to the rest of the world, this argument can be reversed. Parliament House provides powerful national symbolism to help sell Australian cars and other products, and to help promote car racing. It seems likely that the organisers of the race (as well as the various sponsors) were aware of the way in which sponsors benefited from the race venue. Evidence for this can be found in the television coverage of the 2002 race. One commentator was explicit about how the location of the race gave status and national prominence to car racing:

“It’s fantastic kudos for the V8 Series – to have a V8 race around the Houses of Parliament – that doesn’t happen anywhere else in the world. It’s a great circuit. It’s hard on cars, but its great publicity for the V8 series”.

In other words, it was not so much that the motor race showcased Canberra, but that the Parliamentary Zone gave status to motorsport (and its associated corporate interests).

SYMBOLIC ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGES FROM MOTORSPORT

There is potential for motorsport to provide positive environmental messages (Tranter, 2003; Procar Australia, 2003). For example, motor racing personalities could promote environmentally responsible behaviours such as planting trees and recycling beer bottles and cans.

Opportunities for promoting environmentally and socially supportive behaviours through motorsport are as yet poorly developed. However, an awareness of the environmental impact of motorsport is developing within the motorsport fraternity. There have been recent efforts to curb the environmental impact of this sport, and to use motor racing as a way to promote environmental awareness. For example, GreenMotorsport.com was set up to promote the concept of “environmental racing”, where “zero carbon electric race cars” are operated and fossil fuel generators are discouraged in the racing paddock. In Britain, a series of “green motorsport” racing events was established in 2003 (Green Motorsport, 2003).

In Australia, some motor racing personalities have attempted to reduce the environmental impact of motor racing. Two famous motor racing drivers have given their support to the non-profit Formula Green Foundation, which aims to encourage organisations (starting with motor racing) to plan for an environmentally sustainable future. One initiative of this is to plant several thousand trees at the Mount Panorama Circuit in Bathurst (central western New South Wales) to offset the likely levels of carbon dioxide produced by racing drivers and spectators (Procar Australia, 2003).

However, such messages may be counteracted by the various negative messages that come from motor sport, particularly in its current forms in Australia. Also, while planting trees is a commendable environmental initiative, it is not sufficient to reverse the actual and symbolic impacts of motor racing on public and environmental health. An increased level of carbon dioxide is only one of the environmental impacts of motorsport and motor vehicles. While it may be possible to improve the environmental image of motor racing, this may even have long term negative impacts, particularly if it simply contributes to the glorification (or at least the legitimisation of) motor vehicles.

There is a growing awareness of the health damaging impacts of motorised transport (Dora, 1999; Godlee, 1992; Haines et al., 2002; Mason, 2000). Motorsport contributes to the glorification of an environmentally and socially unhealthy form of transport, and also glorifies a range of driving behaviours that are defined in the road safety literature as “driving violations” when practiced on public roads. These

behaviours include high speed driving, tailgating and dangerous overtaking. In normal on-road driving, all of these behaviours are related to higher accident levels (Horswill, 2001; Parker et al., 1995; Parker and Stradling, 2001).

Concerns about the way in which racing car drivers provide role models relate to both sponsorship issues and driving behaviours: the winners of car races, decorated with the names of alcohol and tobacco companies “become role models for young boys who identify with the ‘guts and glory’ images they provide” (Blum, 1991). United States research indicates that racing drivers may be poor role models in terms of their own safety record on public roads (Williams & O'Neill, 1974). Yet, a survey of 200 young Australian drivers revealed that “17 percent reported that a racing driver is their role model for driving” (Proton Cars Australia, 2000).

Motorsport also glorifies fast and powerful cars. If this encourages Australian drivers to purchase faster and more powerful cars, then this has negative impacts on the environment and on road safety. More powerful cars use more energy and create more pollution than cars with more modest performance. Also, not only do drivers who take more risks purchase more powerful cars, but high vehicle performance leads independently to higher levels of risk taking (Horswill and Coster, 2002).

Motorsport on street circuits in urban areas sends particular messages about road safety. Watching racing cars (especially if they are V8 Supercars that are similar in appearance to Australian road cars) drive on city streets at speeds of 160 km/h above the speed limit undermines the road safety message “there's no such thing as safe speeding”. Motor races on public street circuits may reinforce the view of some drivers that current speed limits are too low. This also has important environmental implications, if it increases public opposition to measures to reduce urban speed limits.

Professor Ian Johnston (Monash University Accident Research Unit) recently argued that one issue that should be more thoroughly considered by researchers and road safety policy makers is the impact of car advertisements and motor racing spectacles that glorify speed, as well as car advertisements that use links with motorsport to sell cars through a glorification of speed. He argues that it is difficult for road safety

messages regarding the dangers of speeding to be successful when competing with powerful and well-funded advertising campaigns which use speed as a selling feature for motor vehicles (Johnston, 2003).

Apart from messages about road safety, the speed, power and excitement of motorsport are used as marketing tools for tobacco and alcohol. These two drugs have widely recognised and well-researched negative health impacts (Chikritzhs et al., 2001; Collins and Lapsley, 1996; Tai et al., 1998; Teesson et al., 2000).

Some international sporting events are granted exemptions from the ban on tobacco advertising in Australia. Most of these events are motorsport events, including the Australian Formula One Grand Prix at Albert Park in Melbourne, the Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix at Phillip Island, the Australian Indy Car Championship at the Gold Coast, and the Rally Australia event in Western Australia. By allowing the continuation of tobacco sponsorship in international motor racing events, Australian governments also allow motorsport to undermine public health.

Research in the United States shows that motor racing has become a high priority for brewing companies, who use motorsport sponsorship to “condition the psyches of their young targets, reshaping their social environments to actively but unobtrusively associate beer, cars and speed” (Buchanan and Lev, 1988, 2) see also (Wright, 2002). Breweries seek links with sport as this offers them a macho vehicle (literally in the case of motorsport) to appeal to young males (Crompton, 1993). Australian brewing companies appreciate the value of sponsorship of motor sport. The major sponsor for the Australian Grand Prix is a brewing company. An important sponsor for Australian V8 Supercar racing is another brewing company, which promotes a full-strength beer as the “Official Beer of V8 Supercars”. Large signs advertising this beer are located on racing circuits, including the street circuit in Australia’s Parliamentary Zone, where these signs appeared with Australia’s Parliament House as a backdrop.

Alcohol sponsorship of Australian motorsport provides a subliminal message associating full-strength beer with power and fast driving – an especially noxious form of lifestyle advertising (Tranter and Keeffe, 2001). Given the popularity of

motorsport for many teenagers (especially males), this is a highly questionable message for young people about to reach drinking age and driving age. Given that alcohol is the second biggest cause of drug-related death in Australia (after tobacco) (Mattick and Jarvis, 1993), it is difficult to justify any activity that promotes alcohol use.

ACTUAL IMPACTS OF MOTORSPORT

As well as the various messages associated with motor sport, there is also evidence of actual impacts on environmental and public health. While some of these impacts may be positive, available evidence suggests that the total impact of motorsport on health and on the environment is negative. Motorsport is credited with assisting in the development of 'safety features' of modern cars (e.g. better occupant protection) as well as contributing to the development of engine technology to reduce emissions (Procar Australia, 2003). However, advances in such features of motor vehicles can still occur independently of motor sport, and it is not necessary to stage motorsport events in city street circuits for such advances to occur. The negative impacts of motorsport include air and noise pollution, disruption to medical services, increased road accidents and the loss of freedom for pedestrians and cyclists. If equity and ecological sustainability are considerations, a better approach than protecting car occupants would be to make car travel less attractive to motorists. Staging motor racing events in city street circuits may simply add to the culture of the glorification of motor vehicles in urban areas.

There are dangers to the racing drivers and to nearby spectators from the pollution created by motor racing vehicles (Graham-Rowe, 2001; Urie, 1994). Exhaust fumes are a particular problem on city street circuits, where fumes are trapped in concrete enclosed circuits. Another important source of pollution from racing cars is the particles of rubber from skidding tyres, which produce fine black dust containing carcinogens. This dust may persist for some time after a motor racing event (Urie, 1994).

Noise pollution is another environmental issue in motorsport. The noise from Formula One racing cars is similar to the noise level experienced when standing next to a jet plane taking off. The low frequency noise of racing cars also penetrates

buildings more easily than high frequency noise. This problem is heightened when motor racing is held on street circuits in areas of high population density. One of the world's most extreme examples of this is in Albert Park in Melbourne, where more than 100,000 people live within 3 kilometres of the Grand Prix circuit and 30,000 live within one kilometre.

Motorsport events may also be linked to increased accident levels on public roads (Bannerman, 2000; Fisher et al., 1986; Williams and O'Neill, 1974). Williams and O'Neill (1974) examined the driving records of 447 licensed race car drivers in three states in the United States. The racing drivers, who all held national competition licences, were more likely than other drivers to have been involved in crashes or to have speeding and other driving record violations. Road accidents in South Australia around the time of the first Formula One Grand Prix in Adelaide were found to be significantly higher than average, even allowing for other factors such as increased traffic levels and weather conditions (Fisher et al., 1986, 151). It was estimated that between \$3.2m and \$5.8m in accident costs could be "attributable to the glorification of speed and daring brought about by the media attention to the Grand Prix" (Burns et al., 1986, 27). Another study (Bannerman, 2000) found that accident rates are higher on roads that are known by motorists to be motor racing circuits at particular times of the year: "risks will be taken by motorists testing their skill as potential racing car drivers" (Urie, 1994).

High profile motorsport events held in urban locations can compromise opportunities for healthy activities or forms of transport. Motor sports events in urban parkland contribute to the long-term degradation of the quality of such parks, and interfere with other sporting activities normally occurring in them. In some cases, such as in Albert Park, active sport and informal recreation can be disrupted for months while the infrastructure for motor racing events is constructed and later removed. Major urban parkland such as Albert Park has the health-supporting role of providing a tranquil area of escape from the pressures of urban life to a place of peace and relaxation providing contact with nature. The Grand Prix event in Melbourne is incompatible with such a role, and contributes to the long-term degradation of the natural quality of an important public park. Pedestrians and cyclists can also be further marginalised

by major motorsport events in urban areas, when pedestrian and cyclist access is disrupted (Tranter and Keeffe, 2001).

CONCLUSION:

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH ALTERNATIVES TO MOTORSPORT SPECTACLES

This paper has argued that the geography of motorsport in Australia is a significant factor in the impact of this sport on the sustainability of Australian cities. Allowing motorsport events to be held in significant public places indicates that particular values are dominating Australian society. The glorification of motorsport through its location in significant public spaces indicates that our society privileges speed, power, private profit, energy wasteful activity and spectacular consumption. Such glorification undermines the values of sustainability, equity, democracy and the promotion of public health.

The Canadian sociologist Jean Harvey poses a useful question for us to consider: is the city a place to live or a showcase? (Harvey, 2002). When motorsport events are located in symbolically important urban public places, this leads to the loss of these as "public" space. They become privatised spaces, subject to the demands of the marketplace, and this occurs for much longer periods than for the period of the race itself. For several months each year, places such as Albert Park lose much of their role as urban parks, and become construction sites before they become racing circuits. To this end, do we preserve the truly public quality of urban public spaces for the well being of our citizens, or do we promote world-class sports entertainment spectacles in these spaces to attract tourist consumers (as is the prevailing philosophy among business and political elites)? This question is a major dilemma for urban policy today on an international scale.

The location of some of Australia's most spectacular motorsport events indicates that state and federal governments are willing to support the staging of environmentally damaging events in significant places, places that have been imbued with a special meaning. This special meaning has been developed either through a deliberate planning process (the Parliamentary Zone), through the historical development of

tourism (the Gold Coast) or through the long-term use of parkland as public recreational and sporting space within cities (e.g. Albert Park).

If we accept the argument that the location of motorsport spectacles in Australian cities boosts the image of the sport of motor racing and reinforces all of its negative impacts, then there may be an important lesson here in terms of making our cities healthier and more sustainable. If motorsport spectacles in a city's public spaces can be moved to purpose built racing circuits away from urban areas, these major events can be replaced with other events (including other sporting events) that are largely ecologically sustainable and help promote activities that have positive environmental and public health messages. Examples of such activities include major international bicycle racing events or walking or running racing events in city street circuits. Not only would these have minimal environmental impacts compared with motorsport events, but they would also be helping to raise the public profile and acceptance of active and sustainable modes of transport.

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