

What is Urban Character? The Case of Camberwell

**Kim Dovey,
Ian Woodcock
Stephen Wood**

Faculty of Architecture, Building & Planning
University of Melbourne
Email: dovey@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Urban development in Melbourne over recent years has been driven by two primary yet contradictory imperatives. The first is that of urban consolidation—within the *Melbourne 2030* planning framework development is to be contained within urban growth boundaries and focused on a number of activity centres including suburban transit nodes. The second is the protection of urban and neighbourhood 'character' which has also become a key plank of the planning code. This paper is part of a larger research project which seeks to explore the phenomenology and discursive construction of urban character and place-identity.¹ It focuses on the middle-ring suburb of Camberwell where one of the city's primary transit nodes and development sites is juxtaposed with fierce resident resistance to change.

Interviews with those involved in this resistance reveal a range of dimensions to the experience and meaning of Camberwell's 'character' and the ways it is seen as threatened by development. This character is identified through a series of themes such as 'consistency', 'modesty', 'taste', 'comfort', 'security' and 'custody', themes that apply at once to both spatial and social identity. The identity of Camberwell is constructed in part by struggles for symbolic capital within the socio-spatial urban field, framed by differences of ethnicity and class. The proposed redevelopment of the Camberwell Railway Station has become a trigger that stimulates many of these concerns about the loss of 'character'. The phenomenon of urban character, like its cousins ('place', 'home', 'community', 'neighbourhood') is not easily defined nor contained within the spatial field of urban planning regulation.

This case is riddled with paradoxes and foremost among them is that the railway station site comprises a large excavation largely surrounded by commercial and retail functions; the formal and spatial character of residential areas is not under threat from the redevelopment. Indeed one threat in this regard is that the desire to protect an urban character identified with 'modesty' and 'taste' is producing a proliferation of mock-historic styles. The claims for Camberwell's 'character' are often immodest and the vigilant policing of anything that ruptures the 'comfort zone' (from crass tastes to ethnic differences) can reveal a certain anxiety. A further paradox is that resistance to new development prevents the ideal of 'aging in place'; the attempt to preserve Camberwell's 'character' may lead to a loss of its characters. The paper is more broadly aimed at a critical re-thinking of theories of place identity and the politics of the character/consolidation debate.

INTRODUCTION

In April 2004 about 500 people attended a town hall meeting to protest against the redevelopment of Camberwell Railway Station. The crowd and media presence was guaranteed by Camberwell's most famous resident, Geoffrey Rush, who has long lived in the area and is a regular user of the train station. The oscar-winning actor spoke briefly of how he values the 'atmosphere' of the

Camberwell neighbourhood; of Camberwell's rarity and of the need to protect it.ⁱⁱ A number of other interviewees spoke about why they had chosen to live there and how they were not about to let it be destroyed. There was an hour of comment from the floor with a queue of locals venting their displeasure. A girl of about 12 suggested that the project will attract 'the wrong kind of people - druggies and criminals'. The placards reflected a range of other fears:

'No chicken-coop high-density housing for Victoria'
'There is much to fear if we create new urban ghettos'
'Devouring open space in your suburbs'
'Affordable Housing - yes, High-Density Housing - no'
'Protect our future migrants from urban ghettos in the sky'

The obvious omission of the evening was any real development proposal; the protest was entirely based on an understanding that the site had been put out to tender.



Figure 1: Railway Station Protest, April 2004

About a month later the Boroondara Residents Action Group (BRAG) organised a march from Camberwell Junction to the train station where two thousand people rallied. The march was led by Rush who dramatized the issue, portraying both Camberwell and the railway station as a female 'star' who has 'always remained ladylike and always known when to say no'. The railway station was presented as the embodiment of Camberwell character, a woman of moral virtue and 'ladylike' modesty who was to be transformed with a new face and a false smile. Rush concluded: 'It's nothing short of an obliteration of identity; we will no longer know her, if we let this happen we may no longer even recognise ourselves'. Also featured was comedian Barry Humphries (aka Edna Everage) who had flown into Melbourne for the event. He explained that he had grown up in Camberwell and knew every street. He then adopted the persona of a city planner and recited a poem he had written for the occasion; it concluded:

*'And we'll build a lovely plaza to entertain the local thugs,
Why should the kids of Camberwell go to Box Hill for their drugs.'*

The poem incorporated a number of the fears that were already apparent whilst inflaming others that had hitherto remained largely unspoken, including fears of crime and ethnic difference. The train was referred to as the 'orient express' and Box Hill, the next major train station on this line, has

a significant Asian population. Humphries' talk was not without its ironies, most prominent among them that he left the suburb over 50 years ago and subsequently constructed an entire career on lampooning the narrow suburban attitudes he grew up with. A more glaring irony was apparent in the staging of the rally at the street entrance to the station where the backdrop was formed by the ugly 4-storey office buildings that have long dominated the site (Figure 1).

CONTEXT

We will first sketch the urban morphology and context before proceeding to compare this with the interviews with residents. Primary methods used for the study involve a combination of layered morphological mapping and semi-structured interview.ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 2: Camberwell and context

The settlement of Camberwell, about 10 kilometres east of central Melbourne, began in 1853 but remained primarily agricultural until the advance of the railways in the 1880s driven by a suburban land boom. The railway was aligned to service the adjacent land with a prospect back to the city; it was eventually excavated through the hill in a deep cutting. 'Prospect Hill' was swiftly subdivided and marketed during the 1880s and 90s driven by the typical desire of the time to recreate an English landscape. The burgeoning wealth of the colony meant that the generously scaled blocks were soon filled with Victorian and Edwardian houses with large gardens. The shopping centre which developed along the 500 metre north/south strip of Burke Road adjacent to the station has long been one of the most economically vibrant of suburban shopping areas in Melbourne. The precinct contains about 2.5 kilometres of small grain retail frontage with a broad mix of shops, a lively vegetable market, supermarket, large retail store, proliferating cafes and cinema complex.

The area is well serviced with trams and buses in addition to the trains and there has long been pressure for intensification due to this multi-modal accessibility.



Figure 3: Typical streetscapes in the Prospect Hill area

The local Council undertook a Neighbourhood Character Study in 1996 in response to community concern over the impact of new development and a perception that its character was being eroded. The study divided the City into 158 different 'neighbourhood character areas'; the area we are concerned with here is the precinct immediately east of the Burke Road shopping strip and station, extending both north and south of the railway cutting. It includes the Prospect Hill area where the resistance to redevelopment is centred and the home of all of our interviewees (Figure 2). This area closely corresponds with a local heritage overlay that has protected the area from substantial change since 1992. House prices in this particular area are about three times the Camberwell median and five times the Metropolitan median. The Character Study describes the area as '*...notable for quality Victorian and Edwardian period houses, its gardens and quality streetscapes.*'^{iv} The character elements flagged as 'significant' are walkability, consistent 'single-family' houses, visible exotic front gardens, heritage streetscapes, period style buildings and dense canopy trees (Figure 3). The 'period style' buildings do predominate but a large number of them are of the inter-war

Bungalow style with a sprinkling of post-war and contemporary styles (Figure 4). The most common recent style is neo-traditional and entire streets of such new housing now line the western edge of the study area as a border zone between residential and retail zones. About 30 multi-unit developments have been built over the years within this heritage and character area. About half of all houses are largely or fully hidden from the street behind walls, fences or hedges. The precinct is almost entirely 1-2 storeys in height although the commercial precinct has buildings ranging up to 6 storeys.

CHARACTERIZING CAMBERWELL

When defining the 'character' of Camberwell, interviewees invariably begin with emphases on the area's 'feel', 'atmosphere' or 'ambience': *'character is almost the, the feeling it creates in you ... you walk through an area and you feel comfortable with it ... it's just this feeling of feeling internally satisfied or confident with the area ...'* Character is often described as a 'general atmosphere' or 'ambience' that is seen to be manifest in both the 'physical' environment and the 'social' environment:

'to me urban character... is probably made up of a combination of things such as types of buildings in the area, vegetation around the area ... what's the actual lifestyle of the area ... as well the social structure of the people living there ...'

'Character' is rarely described in terms of one of these categories alone but slips between them with the idea of 'feel' or 'atmosphere' acting as intermediary. This 'feel' is at once objective and subjective, personal and impersonal. It is seen as an objective property of the environment (the 'feel') that evokes an affective or emotive response (a 'feeling') linked to a socially shared experience of place. These slippages between social and formal issues suggest that 'character' is not easily reduced to a collection of elements, whether social or physical; the attempt to define and stabilize the 'character' in particular 'characteristics' persistently fails as it slides from one to the other. We will pursue the issue through a series of themes or threads — consistency and comfort, modesty and taste, class and ethnicity, custody and community— all of which are seen as linked to this 'feel' or 'atmosphere'. If this description seems to go in circles without quite defining the 'character' it is because that is what the interview discourse does. In what follows, it should be stressed that all quotes derive from interviews with those most concerned to defend Camberwell's character, undertaken during a period of political heat surrounding the railway station redevelopment. They are not necessarily representative of the views of Camberwellians in general.

One of the most important threads here is that Camberwell is seen as a place that stands out as different from surrounding suburbs yet is strongly characterized by consistency over both space and time:

'I think Camberwell's probably a little different to some of the more inner suburbs and some of the more outer suburbs, in that its character has been reasonably consistent in the type of people of people living here. Their type of domicile is similar as well, they'll generally like reasonably nice, well-kept houses, separate houses, gardens, trees, street tree, etcetera and I think that's really what ... to me creates what is generally referred to as... urban character...'

This passage is typical in the ways in which it moves from the character of the suburb to the types of people to house and garden tastes and back again. Character is identified as a consistency between formal types (buildings and vegetation) and types of people. An established norm is recognized as both social and formal, and it applies to both values and behaviours:

'[Character] really is the benefits you get from living in a particular area, how you feel about it, how people react to you, how you react to the people in the area, what you get from it ... the lifestyle. Most important thing I think for me ... is that I'm surrounded by PLUs, people like us. I see that as a comfort zone.'

The phrase 'comfort zone' recurs a number of times and is resonant of homeliness and security, of a spatial zone which is at once socially and physically predictable and consistent. Deviations from this comfortable consistency are discouraged for behaviour and buildings alike:

'Around the area [one can find] what might be described as 'nice' houses, not, not new modern monstrosities, not totally derelict old places, not high-rise, low-cost type housing. I think that's where residents in this area fight very strongly against anything like that as they see it changing the general feeling ...'

The definition of 'nice' here is primarily construed from a series of 'nots'. 'Nice' houses are typically 'period homes', most often of Victorian, Edwardian and (to a lesser degree) inter-war Bungalow styles. Such houses are seen to embody a set of standard values which are mirrored in the resident population:

'[Camberwell is] Old world, traditional, well preserved, and the people who make it up are of a solid base.'

While such housing styles are found all over Melbourne it is the perceived consistency of them that largely constructs the character of Camberwell. There are many answers to the question of where this character stops, ranging from the boundaries of the Neighbourhood Character Area up to about 20 square kilometres. While the boundaries are unclear, the centre is not and the values seen to be concentrated in the Prospect Hill area are viewed as present to a lesser degree for some distance. The prevalence of Victorian, Edwardian and Bungalow housing styles in this symbolic heart of the comfort zone is repeatedly exalted by interviewees and often contrasted with an urban context outside this zone where:

'it doesn't have quite the same 'feel' from style of housing and vegetation ... they haven't got quite the same mix of definitely pre-second world war dominance and going back to the Victorian kind of period ... you start to get into the cream brick veneer ...'

When we map the housing styles of the study area (Figure 4) we find that there is considerable consistency of Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war Bungalow styles that coincide closely with both the heritage and neighbourhood character overlays. Yet there is also an intermixing of post-war, contemporary and neo-traditional styles; the consistencies are at times more imagined than real, a contradiction that is recognised by some:

'... a lot of the people like to think of the area as being almost, even though it no longer is, but almost as a Victorian-Edwardian bastion in, in the centre of Melbourne.'



Figure 4: Building Styles

Nonetheless, the ideal continues to be entertained and there is considerable anxiety about intrusions into the area of different types of both housing and people. Slippages between the physical and social character enable concerns about social difference to be voiced through a discourse of urban form:

The very big concern that I have about low-cost high-density housing is the long-term social ramifications. If we have migrants coming to this country who think they're coming to a land of wide open spaces and they find themselves living in urban ghettos in the sky are we doing the right thing by our future migrants? ... pushing people into closed environments where you can hear the argument in the next flat... the idea of raising children or elderly people isolated in some of those environments, I find very disturbing.'

Here 'low-cost' is conflated with 'high-density' before being matched to 'migrants' and 'public housing'. An opposition to affordable housing is couched in terms of benevolence for children and the elderly; not an opposition to public tenants or migrants, only to certain forms of housing identified with them. The defence of 'character' enables a benevolent attitude to social difference to co-exist with its practical exclusion.

One of the most pervasive interview themes centres on the idea that Camberwell has a 'modest' identity:

'There are people who have very modest incomes around here and others who are well to do, but it's not really splashed out. People are very modest about the way they live and who they are.'

'A lot of people here around the area are reasonably affluent,,, (but) they're not flashy about it, they don't ... flaunt it, rather they are comfortably affluent.'

Camberwell is seen as distinguished by being unassuming, its values embodied rather than expressed, understated rather than flaunted. Modesty links to comfort and consistency through this

'comfortable affluence' and an imperative applying to both people and buildings not to 'stand out'.
With regard to people:

'most people ... fit in the Camberwell tribe ... without sort of standing out too much and so you could support one another and recognise a type of people ... if a punk rocker walks past with, you know, bright orange hair and fifty-five earrings, they're going to stand out in this area ... same thing if a guy drives a bright gold ... Mercedes or BMW around here and parked out in their front driveway, people ... would walk past and say "what a tasteless individual" ... and that again I think is part of the character.'

Here the idea of the 'tribe' is held together by a sense of modest 'taste' that is noticed more in its violations than in its consistencies; a character that is paradoxically recognized by being undifferentiated. Concerns about new housing can be linked to this endorsement of modest identity:

'There aren't any extreme architectural forms really that really says "Well, look at me" sort of thing. I just think it's a very pleasant neighbourhood with its tree-lined streets and architecturally-speaking very modest but elegant houses.'

While there is no opposition in principle to new housing, any proposal which fails to 'blend in' provokes an instant campaign of resistance. A significant number of new houses in period revival styles go largely unremarked while almost anything that draws attention to itself also draws criticism. As a general rule, the assertion of architectural identity on the street attracts objection unless it is congruent with the Victorian/Edwardian ideal. In this context, interviewees are quick to sanction large setbacks with densely planted exotic gardens due to the veiling effect they create; some of the most common complaints focus on reductions in setbacks and removal of garden foliage. While interviews reveal the importance of house type and style, the streetscapes show an increasing number of high and opaque front fences. These blank frontages are never referred to as part of the character and there is negligible opposition to them. So long as they are not continuous, the blank street frontages do not disrupt the character because they present a 'modest' identity to the street; they can signify a presumed consistency of taste while at the same time hiding differences. The idea of 'taste' is generally introduced as part of a broad resistance to new money:

'... we're objecting to this modern thing they want to put on ... I said ... to the owner woman ... "Obviously you like the area and you paid a lot of money to come here" and she [said] "Oh I don't consider it a lot of money" ... the trouble is we're getting all these people in who all they've got is money, you see, no taste.'

This defence of Camberwell against the common tastes and perceived crassness of new money often plays out as a contrast between Camberwell and those up-market suburbs that are seen to have been invaded by the *nouveau riche*. Once again this contrast applies to both people and buildings:

'... when I think of Armadale and, you know, Toorak and Brighton, I think it's all very, very showy and ostentatious... [People in Camberwell] don't have to find their security in being ostentatious.'

Armadale, Toorak and Brighton all have substantially higher median property values than Camberwell but the struggle for social status is played out in an urban field where the comfortably affluent show this status by not displaying it; new money and its symbols can lower the tone of the neighbourhood. Whilst a certain scorn is at times poured on other upmarket suburbs for their loss of taste, interviewees reveal more nuanced attitudes towards suburbs regarded as downmarket:

'A person who's lived and been brought up in Camberwell may not like to live in some other areas because it's not what they're used to, and you may go to some other areas where people say, "God I couldn't stand it with all of those trees they've got in Camberwell, all the leaves and stuff floating around, I really like this here in ... West Coburg ... because it's, you know, all nice and flat ... and I don't have trouble with the trees or anything like that. The neighbours don't talk to me, they don't bug the hell out of me or anything like that, you know, those people in Camberwell must be mad." ... There is something bred into them from having the exposure to that particular environment [that] moulds their own feelings of what is nice and what isn't ... and if you move into another area they can feel uncomfortable with it ... '

Here Camberwell is portrayed on the surface as different but equal. Yet the references to 'nice and flat', the 'trouble with the trees' and the 'neighbours don't talk' reveal a socio-spatial hierarchy and a desire to keep it in place within the framework of 'different but equal'.

Threats to character are seen by some interviewees to come from different values based in ethnicity:

'Some of these Chinese moneyed people have ruined parts of Kew ... the Chinese, with money, come in and they build this wall to wall thing, no garden, just concrete, you know, because they're not used to gardens in Hong Kong, they're not. So they change the character'

Such people are tolerated or even welcomed, but only under conditions of assimilation; in response to an Asian family who moved into the Prospect Hill area the same interviewee says:

'Oh, this awful thing they were going to do to this nice house and ... I thought ... I'm not going to do it the official way, I wrote her a letter ... I said: "I'm so glad you like our area well enough to have bought into it ...as you can see it's a, you know, very special area because of the old, the old houses and the character we've got here. And I see that you're going to make changes to your house. Now if I may make a suggestion, if you want anybody to like you here, you will get a new architect who understands the area and put up a plan that suits the area, otherwise you'll be very unpopular ... "'

The Asian woman employed a new architect and was then welcomed into the neighbourhood over Christmas drinks. But not everyone is pleased to assimilate:

'an Italian concrete contractor ... had this vision of pillars and ... fake Georgian things that have been built all through Balwyn and Doncaster ... I said "Look, don't you understand it doesn't fit in here, now get a different architect and ... listen to the heritage advisers" ... he said: "But this is my dream house"; and I said "Look, you know, if you were just a bit further away like Balwyn or Doncaster you could do it without even asking, you know, take it over there ..." and that's what he did ... We fight to keep our character.'

One of the distinctions about Camberwell that all interviewees appreciate is its heritage; the 'feel' that comprises the character is a 'feeling of history'. The perceived consistency of built form and social profile has a temporal as well as spatial dimension. Conservation movements have operated in the area for a very long time and interviewees see a responsibility as custodians of this legacy. The threat of new development is more than a threat to the existing place since it threatens the legacy. Camberwell's history is seen to have an order and consistency that is, once again, linked to

both the buildings and the people. Considering the built environment first, the area's architectural history is presented as a decorous progression of smooth transitions between styles:

'There seems to be a follow-on, you get the Edwardian house... and then from then on you get, perhaps, the Bungalow; but there seems to be a gradual transition between the periods and that's what I think makes it harmonious to look at... a contemporary home... looks out of place because that transition has been broken, I think, between the styles.'

Here the 'break' primarily occurs about the mid-twentieth century when inter-war Bungalow styles give way to post-war and contemporary styles. Yet the idea of Camberwell as a 'Victorian/Edwardian bastion' indicates that this legacy can be traced to the first layers of development when Camberwell was settled as an imaginary English landscape.

One of the primary responses to this legacy in terms of architectural style has been to tacitly encourage a reproduction of period styles as the only new houses deemed to 'fit in'. Such mock-historic styles have been popular in the area since the mid-twentieth century (and well lampooned in Humphries' work), more recently narrowing to a focus on neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian as a response to local politics. Nearly all of the new housing on the western edge of the study area is in such styles with varying levels of reproduction. Yet there is considerable ambivalence in the interviewees about this approach: *'They don't stand up to the original.... In some ways you're better to go with a new design... they fit in but they're not, they're not the same.'* The new architecture in period style may be formally consistent with the older period, but it signifies a consistency that is only superficial; in other words it directly contradicts the ideals of modesty and taste. The more it tries to 'fit in' the more 'pretentious' and tasteless it becomes.'

The idea of Camberwell's character as a legacy enables the resistance to change to be seen as selfless and motivated by the concern for future generations: *'it's not as though we're fighting just for ourselves, we're fighting for... our future generations.'* For some there is a nostalgia for a golden age:

'... I would have loved to live in Camberwell at the turn of the century when the grace and charm of the city would have been quite interesting to see. I don't think it's going to get better, no. I think it's a holding pattern rather than an improving pattern ... I think people had better manners in those days and they weren't pushing and shoving ...'

This imagined character of the past is also both social and physical, part of the struggle to maintain character is to prevent the fall from grace. Yet when wealthy Melburnians first build their houses on Prospect Hill in the 1880s this was a place and time that lacked the modesty now being enforced. The Victorian and Edwardian houses and gardens were displays of new wealth for their time; the expressions of identity that originally created Camberwell have been inverted into expressions of modesty. There is a sense in which some interviewees discover themselves in the past while defending the legacy on the basis of selflessness. And this selflessness at times has a rather immodest scope:

'... it is not just a Camberwell issue. It's a Melbourne issue and it's a Victoria issue and it's an Australia issue because it's our future populations who are going to have to live with this... with the social dislocation issues that will arise ...'

A part of the perceived threat to character lies in a concern that larger scale buildings change the social character:

'I think in a low-scale area like this where a lot of people walk, you become familiar with a lot of the faces, even though you mightn't know the names, and so you say

“Good morning, how are you?” ... where people are still living in a space that doesn't dwarf them, they still feel a sense of self-importance, they haven't become ants where they just have towering buildings on either side... the urban character contributes immeasurably to the neighbourliness and the sense of community.’

Not everyone in Camberwell is wealthy and consistency of values can mask insecurities of wealth:

'There's two sorts of people here. Down the road, in a really nice old house that's looked after by her son, there's a lady who takes in ironing to live, right? Whereas there's people spending two million dollars on a house. So there's two different sorts of people, but this is the community, it's great.'

This is a community that protects those with taste but no money while defending itself against those with money but no taste. The regulation of appearances unfolds through the interplay of two dualisms: modesty-pretence and security-insecurity. To appear secure you must not stand out; if you do stand out then you are pretentious and insecure. There is a sense of buying into a community where money is not supposed to matter, and then living with the anxieties and illusions of that condition. The comfort zone is more fragile than it looks and is easily ruptured. One recurring metaphor is the idea that certain aspects of the place can 'scream' in a manner that punctures the comfort zone and signifies a loss of control; there is a desire for an architecture that '*won't scream at you as out of character when you walk past*'. A certain vigilance is required to police and discipline expressions of difference.

PROSPECTS AND SPECTRES

We now return to the issue of the railway station redevelopment and the ways it has focussed on the defence of urban character. The station is sited immediately east of Burke Road in a cutting about 6 metres below ground level, abutted by an open area used as a marshalling yard and public car park, resulting in a break in the continuity of the Burke Road streetscape. The potential redevelopment of the site has long been recognised and in 1988 a proposal was developed for mixed-use buildings of 2-3 storeys along the Burke Road frontage stepping up to 8 storeys at the rear. A community-based report concluded that:

'Such a development would receive wide support from the community ... as a proposal for bringing more community life to the station, generating off-peak patronage, and combating vandalism.'^v

This earlier support for development was based on the fact that the site is integrated with the shopping precinct, surrounded by 3-4 storey buildings and does not overlook or overshadow existing residential properties. A 1993 Camberwell Junction Structure Plan also incorporated the idea of a development over the railway station. By the late 1990s such developments were being supported by Save Our Suburbs, the main voice of conservative resident opinion, on the basis that such development served to protect neighbourhood character by redirecting potentially damaging development away from residential streets. Yet by 2003 when it became known that further plans were afoot to redevelop the station, the mood had changed. Resident resistance was building to any redevelopment at all and the discussion became largely centred on issues of urban character. While the late-Edwardian station building has some heritage value, it has been altered beyond recognition to cope with modern traffic standards and sits within a large excavation lined with advertising and graffiti. While the ugliness of this gap is acknowledged, those who oppose any development tend to see it as 'open space' (Figure 5). There is a sense in which the station has assumed an iconic status for Camberwell as the part that stands for the whole, the hole that stands for the hill.



Figure 5: Railway Station and Site

The resistance to development is often framed in contrast with a major existing activity centre about 5 kilometres east on the same train line. Box Hill has an underground railways station, two large shopping malls, very substantial commercial development and a radically different demographic with a strong Asian component. There is no chance of Camberwell ever becoming the size of Box Hill but it operates as the 'other' against which Camberwell defines itself. This concern is played out mostly in a discourse of public safety, a fear of youth gangs and drug-use:

'I haven't used Box Hill for years. It looks unsafe I wouldn't travel on it, I wouldn't like my husband to be going through tunnels at night. The police do foot patrols. Creates a feeling of angst. Reputation for drugs. Adolescents hanging out is quite visible. That doesn't happen at Camberwell.'

This sense of not knowing Box Hill well but being frightened of becoming like it is paralleled by a belief that the enclosure of the train station produces dark and unknown spaces that encourage crime:

'I fear Box Hill, that every time my children as teenagers will walk down that strip I'll be saying don't go near the station, there are people there I don't want you to mix with.'

Yet many Camberwellians know that the kids of Camberwell don't have to go to Box Hill for their drugs and one interviewee is quite candid that the 'spectre' of youth related crime is largely a political tactic:

'The thought of an activity centre there raises the spectre of, or has been handy to raise spectre of, drug deals going on and young fellows congregating, drinking and so forth. These can be spectres that can be very handy to bring in as arguments.'

Geoffrey Rush's personification of the Railway Station as a female figure whose modesty and dignity are under threat is also closer to the truth than a glance at the building might indicate. Camberwell was settled at a time when the suburbs were contrasted with the city along gender lines. The suburb was a retreat from the masculine city, a safe place for women and children. A part of the threat of the railway station is that Camberwell will become a city rather than a suburb, that it will have an urban rather than suburban character. While the station site is already surrounded by relatively dense development the opposition to redevelopment is driven by a perception that it will change the character of Camberwell as a whole, with effects well beyond its boundaries. The railway station has been called on to stand for the whole of Camberwell, just as the suburb is said to stand for the whole of Melbourne and Australia.

DISCUSSION

We have portrayed Camberwell's urban character as a series of intertwining threads:- comfort and consistency, modesty and taste, class and ethnicity, custody and legacy, community and security. Yet this is no simple nest of meanings and one thing which binds them together is paradox and contradiction. The themes of 'comfort' and 'consistency' suggest an easy-going and relaxed lifestyle. Yet the interviews also reveal a certain anxiety about fitting into the surroundings and a vigilance to ensure that others do likewise. Elements of the environment that stand out—the minutiae of building finishes and the colour of recycling bins—are described as 'screams' that rupture the 'comfort zone' along with the orange hair and gold Mercedes. Yet the character of Camberwell is also formed from such vigilance; the persistent identification of exceptions is a way of proving and clarifying the rule; the ideal is constructed as a response to its exceptions.

'Modesty' is a paradoxical way of identifying a place; Camberwell distinguishes itself by not 'standing out'. The pretence to 'taste' represented by new money is held in disdain yet the social code of 'modesty' also demands pretence. Wealthy and poorer residents alike pretend that their pecuniary state is other than what it really is. And the only new architecture that gains easy approval either pretends to be from another era (neo-traditional styles) or else largely disappears from public view (behind high, opaque fences). The politics of resident resistance pursued in Camberwell also often conflict with the themes of 'modesty' and 'taste'. Whilst eschewing any 'look at me' imagery in urban form, resident groups have used celebrity and drama to gain the media spotlight. Claims that stopping the station redevelopment has a broader importance for the nation are scarcely modest. And while existing residents are described as self-effacing, newcomers can be met with intimidatory action to enforce conformity.

When discussing issues of 'class' and 'ethnicity', interviewees are often accepting of differences so long as they are not differentiated from the rest of the Camberwell 'tribe'. The politics of enforcing all new development to fit with the existing framework leads to a repression of differences; the neo-Georgian houses and Chinese gardens are not welcome although the people who hold those values are welcome if only they will become more Camberwellian. Like Procrustes of Greek mythology who would tailor his visitors to fit the guest bed, Camberwell has a Procrustean character, open to difference under condition that differences be renounced.

Through the notions of 'custody' and 'legacy' interviewees are able to claim no personal investment in their agenda. The 'Victorian/Edwardian' ideal they seek to bequeath to their descendents was never experienced by the interviewees and it never existed in the form they conceive. Some interviewees admit that this ideal is more imagined than real whilst simultaneously working to 'preserve' it. Likewise, the fear that Camberwell Station might someday resemble Box Hill is often unaccompanied by direct experience of the latter. Interviewees express sincere concern for the future of their community even as they discuss the cynical deployment of 'spectres'. Resident groups claim to be defending the community's 'comfort zone' whilst conjuring up fear campaigns that unsettle it.

A final paradox is that many of the older defenders of Camberwell character may soon be in the market for smaller housing. The walkability and accessibility that is so necessary to the ideal of 'aging in place' could be provided above the station. The 'prospect' of the city that drove early layers of development could be available to many more Camberwellians without overlooking or overshadowing anyone's backyard. With minimal effect on the character of the wider neighbourhood, the railway station site could be redeveloped in a manner consistent with the ideals of 'prospect hill', retaining its older citizens and increasing their amenity. The defence of Camberwell's character may lead to a loss of its residents.

There is no suggestion here that the residents of Camberwell are somehow 'wrong', nor that the focus on the issue of 'character' is misplaced. However, as with related concepts like 'place', 'home', 'neighbourhood' and 'community', the concept of 'character' is a very slippery one to use in urban development debates. The slippages between social and physical character tend to confound any attempt to operationalize it as a code of urban regulations. How might a character policy for 'modesty' be drafted? To what extent is the very slipperiness of the term attractive to proponents of 'deregulated' and 'flexible' planning systems? To what degree is 'character' created through the politics of resistance? When the term is invoked in urban development debates, are resident groups, policy makers, and experts talking about the same thing? How, if at all, should the 'social' dimension of 'character' be addressed?

While planning codes and consultants' studies generally try to reduce character to a set of formal elements, the ways it is experienced in everyday life and constructed in political struggles defies any attempt to separate the social from the physical. It is the tendency to presume that urban or neighbourhood 'character' is somehow embedded in built form, waiting to be defined, nailed down and protected that needs to be re-thought. The pursuit of it is akin to Lewis Carroll's 'Hunting of the Snark':

*'They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap.'*

Just as the pursuit of the 'snark' slides between 'thimbles' and 'care', 'forks and hope', 'smiles and soap', so the pursuit of urban character slides between such ethereal and corporeal categories.^{vi} In this case they threatened its life with a railway station, yet a more real threat to character may lie in the desire to reduce it to a series of fixed features which turn character into caricature.

ⁱ This case study is part of an ARC Discovery grant entitled 'What is Urban Character?: Defining, Constructing and Regulating Urban Place Identity'. For an account of the context to the broader study see: Woodcock, I., Dovey, K. & Wood, S. 'Limits to Urban Character', in Edquist, H. & Frichot, H. (Eds) LIMITS: SAHANZ Proceedings, Vol 2, Melbourne, 2004, pp.545-550.

ⁱⁱ All quotes from this and subsequent demonstrations were recorded by the authors.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morphological mapping documents building typology, style, grain size, spatial structure, height, streetlife, function, graffiti, multi-unit developments and public interface. A total of nine extended interviews were conducted with residents involved in the protection of urban character.

^{iv} Boroondara City Council, (1996) *Residential Urban Character Study*, Consultant's report by Urban Initiatives, Neighbourhood Character Area 104, accessed via website <<http://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au>> May 2005.

^v Camberwell/Hawthorn Planning Watch Inc. (1988) *Concept Plan for Redevelopment of Camberwell Railway Station Site*, limited publication, p.8.

^{vi} This parallel is drawn from: Deleuze, G. (1990) *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia U.P.