“The Home of the Borough”
The use and value of Port Melbourne Football Ground in the 21st century

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“The revolution is in full swing.” So wrote commenter “Matt” in October 2013 underneath an online report that the State Liberal government was considering proposals to alter the form and use of the Port Melbourne Football Ground. “Matt’s” point was primarily that Port Melbourne was changing irrevocably, and that both adult residents and their children had interests less clearly focused firstly, on localism (Port Melbourne football team is an old VFL, rather than nationally-focused AFL, team) and on Australian Rules football itself: “Matt” was of the opinion that soccer was becoming more popular in the area. For him, sad as it was, “Port” locals could not be “stuck in some 1950s time warp dream world”.

This paper uses personal reminiscences, social media and local history to examine the changing conception of what it might mean to “belong” to the increasingly gentrified suburb of Port Melbourne in the second decade of the 20th century. In doing so it examines the putative legends of Port Melbourne football and, specifically, the Port Melbourne football ground itself. How might an ardently pro-development planning minister tackle the public relations quandary of adding urban housing and infrastructure for 80 000 residents to a well-known and well-loved inner-city environment? The paper examines Port Melbourne’s past, present and future through the lens of this icon of local sporting and social infrastructure: the ground’s, the players’, and the supporters’ legends.

Keywords: football, gentrification, community, social media, belonging
“A fight on your hands”

I was born in South Melbourne and grew up in Port Melbourne. The AFL ripped the heart out of South Melbourne Community when they sent the Swans to Sydney and now you want to take the only Football Club we have left and turn it into a recreation playground. Well, it won’t happen. The Port Melbourne football club and Port Melbourne Colts football club are like Shrine’s to the Port Melbourne and South Melbourne Communities. Games or Battles have fought on there won and lost, the Clubs are just not Club’s they carry a lot of History. Our Fathers have played there and our Grand fathers have played there and also our Great Grand Fathers or have been members and buy rights. Both grounds should be protected by Historical Society because the Club’s and grounds are Historical to the Community. It is the only local Football Club the Port Melbourne Community has left and they won’t take lying down, so try to think of another location and also its the Clubs give all children and teenagers some physical exercise. [PLUS EXPECT A FIGHT ON YOUR HANDS] because we aren’t losing another Club (“Wayne”, 2013).

The changing nature of Australian suburban loyalties and culture is a phenomenon often commented on and rarely seriously investigated, perhaps in part because of the difficulty in tracking or quantifying such changes. The demise of inner-city working class culture is typified as a by-product of gentrification. The fact that such culture is often aligned to related networks such as kinship and religious adherence, which have undergone so much alteration that they are no longer seen as a cornerstone of working class (or most Australians’) lives, also impacts on the way such loyalties are seen. This is to say: the common understanding of Australian inner city life before the demise of manufacturing and the rise of middle-class appropriation of the inner city in the 1970s and 80s, can typically be ascribed to such a large range of social changes as to appear a foregone conclusion.

One particular aspect of inner-city life which may provide insight into local “belonging” is that of football (or other sporting) support. In Melbourne, football patronage and, to a lesser extent, participation is a rite of passage for many and to hold out against at least token allegiance to a team is cause for comment. AFL aficionados will point to the game’s embrace of gender diversity in its long-held openness to female spectators and in more recent years females in administration and conduct of the game (all, that is, aside from players although there is a small but robust women’s football league). The game’s openness to racial diversity is still a thorny question, particularly given racial abuse incidents at AFL games in 2015 which spread to broader media debate. In these and other respects, however, it is true that football reflects and impacts on society at a host of levels, many of which objectively seem to have nothing to do with the actual game or even its players.

Football is also one of the sporting institutions with local affiliations that have long served communities as a rallying point. Many organized sports – including tennis, cricket and lawn bowls – became a locus of belonging for local suburban living and allegiances, and have provided a site for the reinvention of local attachment to community and ideas about its character. In time, these locally grounded affiliations have also become a potent focus on loss, change and the drawbacks (or benefits) of gentrification (Lewi and Nichols, 2010). Here we concur with the view that a sense of community can be in part defined by a sense of membership in terms of feelings of having a “right to belong” (Talen, 1999, p. 1370) and that participation in or affiliation with collective groups and
networks in a local community is one agreed dimension of community sustainability. (Dempsey et al. 2009)

“Belonging” has been developed in the last twenty years as a key concept in the context of urban, cultural and social theory to further elaborate on places and their attachment. (Leach, 2002; Butler, 1990; Probyn, 1996; Bell, 1990). Following Probyn, for example, we adopt the term “belonging” loosely here rather than say “identity”, as she suggests that it captures “more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment be it to other people, places, or modes of being and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong in a process that is fueled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state” (Probyn, 1996, p. 19).

Therefore alongside existing scholarly inquiries into urban belonging through the lenses of, say, gender and ethnicity, football in Australia and its spectatorship is regarded in this paper as a potent ritualized activity and performance typically grounded in particular local areas. The history of the Port Melbourne Football Club – often known as “the Borough” – and the recent controversy over its ground, is one such indicator of local belonging and its ensuing nostalgia. This story has been researched through local oral histories, newspapers and recent social media, in particular Facebook and other place-specific online sites, which become a valuable tool in helping to reimagine a group of people’s attachment to particular places, things and rituals (Fortier, 1999, p.42).

North Port Oval has been used as a cricket and football ground since 1874. Initially an ad hoc space, by 1927 the erection of the Norman Goss Pavilion saw it entrenched as the chief venue for both these sports in the area. It has ebbed and flowed in importance since. When North Port was threatened with transformation to an all-purpose sports ground as part of the Fishermans Bend redevelopment project launched in 2012 by the newly elected Baillieu government, Port Melbourne traditionalists were inspired into heated discussion and dialogue. That Port Melbourne itself has become largely gentrified (including a substantial area to a putatively new urbanist template) adds depth to the passionate honour of ‘tradition’ in inner-city Melbourne.

**Frequent melees and tea in china cups**

Indicative of such passions, in 1949 an incident took place at North Port oval which some described as “one of the worst in Association football history.” It began in the final quarter of a game between Port Melbourne and Oakleigh; rover Nick Bloom “was awarded a free kick near the Port Melbourne supporters’ grandstand boundary.” Three Oakleigh players objected, and “punches were swung”:

[A] spectator knocked unconscious was felled by a “hay-maker” from an Oakleigh player...

Police had to separate players and spectators, and escort the spectators from the ground before the game could continue.

...A man jumped the arena fence and ran to an Oakleigh player as if to strike him. The Oakleigh player wheeled around and felled him, knocking him out.

About 40 spectators then jumped the fence, and joined in the fight. They ran at players and more punches were thrown. (“Players and Spectators”)
Similar reports were made during this era, and confusion over veracity of reportage was also rife ("Incidents"). The reputation for violence at games is a part of the PMFC’s heritage as it is understood in Melbourne. But it is only one part of a historically entrenched institution that brings both positive and negative connotations and territorialities (Al Hamoud and Tassinary, 2004).

The team’s nickname dates from its time as Sandridge Borough (1860-1884) and then Port Melbourne Borough until 1893 when it was designated a Town. Reasons for retention of the arcane ‘Borough’ designation are obscure and it seems unlikely even that it is related to a historical disappointment: the decision made in 1896 to form a Victorian Football League from six clubs which broke away from the VFA but which left Port Melbourne somewhat on the outer (“After the Ball”; Keenan, 2001). The club was strong in the 1890s and remained fairly consistently so, remaining one of the more successful VFA teams throughout the 20th century (“Weak VFA Clubs”). It became something of a renegade organisation in the 1930s, when police were not tolerated at Port Melbourne games after the police shooting of a striking dock worker.

There were threats in mid-century to the ground’s “exclusive” use. Two of these came in the early 1950s, just before the introduction of television brought a major change to the way Australians experienced spectator sport and may have derived from new sporting ventures jostling for position in viewing habits. One is a 1953 proposal to install lighting to allow for night baseball games (at North Port Oval at a cost of up to £6000) – in Adelaide, it was said, the game could attract audiences of up to 12 000 (Night baseball). Another – apparently far more contentious – was an offer of £3000 (presumably, per year) by the “soccer authorities” to appropriate the oval for soccer games, apparently at a time when “the Football Association [was] losing ground both in its spectator appeal and its playing standard” and its use of former VFL players were likened to supping on “the crumbs which fall from the rich man’s table” (“Soccer Unlikely”). However lucrative this might have been, abandonment of the local VFA team by any Port Melbourne councilor was seen as political suicide.

By the mid-1990s, as the VFL and its various teams underwent significant recalibration to face the 21st century (most VFL teams, for instance, became “feeder” clubs for AFL teams) Port Melbourne notoriously retained its reputation for on-ground violence yet also reputedly continued to serve tea at its kiosk in china cups.

Big city plans

In February 2011, Planning Minister in the new Baillieu government, Matthew Guy, announced as one of the government’s first major projects the rezoning and “urban renewal” of Fishermans Bend. Guy’s vision for the area effectively remade the area between the CBD and Port Melbourne in its entirety – including old former residential but latterly largely industrial areas such as Montague – as high-rise apartment housing. New suburb names were applied and street patterns sketchily rolled out. Guy has been criticised frequently since that time for what has recently been described as a “preference for ad hoc, laissez faire development” and most specifically for failing to institute any “mechanism to capture any of the hundreds of millions of dollars in immediate uplift in land value in the area” (Millar et al). It was later revealed that Guy had received, but ignored, a report on toxic groundwater in the area (Lucas, 2015).
From both planning and political perspectives, this project was hamfisted; a report commissioned by the successor government to the Baillieu/Napthine administration has been harshly critical of Guy’s handling of Fishermans Bend (Millar et al 2015). Yet Guy’s actions at Fishermans Bend are symptomatic of a legacy of big-picture residential projects slated for Port Melbourne, and arguably more in number than any other part of Melbourne.

One of the best-known historical residential projects in the area was the reclamation of a “sandy, windswept expanse of crown land” (Harris, 119) in Port Melbourne’s north-west to create the first tranche of what was to become known as Garden City. The “State Bank Houses” produced in the 1920s have come to be some of Port Melbourne’s most valuable real estate. They came with a promise of further major developments to enhance the grandeur of the area’s major roads and also to reduce congestion for the port (Fisherman’s Bend: extensive development plan, 1924). There was to be a tunnel under the Yarra linking North Port and Williamstown (Fisherman’s Bend: Plan for Model Suburb, 1924).

The major infrastructure was not forthcoming, but the area developed further as a sought-after residential district: “Port Melbourne,” the city declared in its centenary celebrations in 1939, “is a complete local community” (COPM 1939: 33). It grew substantially when the Housing Commission of Victoria built its first large-scale greenfield development to the original Garden City’s north. The Commission envisaged football and cricket grounds, tennis and netball, in Fisherman’s Bend at this time.

Known as a primarily working class area – the Housing Commission added more stock in the 1970s, this time in the form of low-rise clustered units – the City nevertheless began to strive towards a greater social mix within its boundaries. With a peculiar lack of interest in recognising “migrants” as “people” it noted in 1974, for instance, that the “people of Port Melbourne form a closely knit group and are very loyal to their area. The migrants also form strong groups and do not like having to leave Port Melbourne either.” (npn)

A contemporaneous Loder and Bayly report professed a desire for “An increase in the Housing Stock, New Houses Designed and priced for Higher Status, White Collar Families or Couples” – requirement that “a sufficient middle-class population is established for it to develop some self identification and consequently some degree of local and internal cohesion and inter-action” (Loder and Bayly 1974 p. 10). This paper was inferentially critical of a major proposal from this period by the architect-developer Meldrum, for a Sandridge Mega-City across 900 acres housing 54000 people (p. 12).

While the Meldrum proposal did not eventuate it set a course for a range of iterations of proposed large-scale housing projects. Perhaps the most peculiar of these was music industry magnate Glenn Wheatley’s Seaport Village, based on San Diego’s shopping and residential precinct and including a 5,000 seat entertainment centre, eight hectare shopping village, and a 500 room hotel (Millar 1987). Mirvac’s winning proposal was architect Robert Peck’s design; similarly to Melbourne’s Southbank, it was initiated under the Cain/Kirner government of 1982-92 but developed by the succeeding Kennett government (1992-99). Sandridge aka Bayside was a $250 million development of 850 houses and apartments, eight “Southbank-style” restaurants and “a marina and the proposed immigration museum” (Gallagher, 1995). The “immigration museum” is perhaps the most intriguing proposal here, promoting a narrative of Port Melbourne avoiding local community in favour of the
area’s importance to the national story as the first disembarkation point for millions of migrants to Australia.

The Sandridge project collapsed in 1993, and the elite canal development gave way to the less ambitious, though still contentious, Beacon Cove – a “new urbanist” brownfield development inserted alongside the Housing Commission and “State Bank House” estates of the 1920s-70s and 19th century Port Melbourne. One casualty of Beacon Cove was the “Dutch modernist” Missions to Seamen building from 1937, which had been used as a community arts space, but which was demolished in the late 1990s despite determined protest from the Bayside Development Action Group (Porter 1994).

**Saving the Borough**

Within this context of urban redevelopment proposals and gentrification, what role has the local football team played in retaining a character for Port Melbourne? Clearly there are no hard and fast rules for the establishment of a successful nexus between sporting team and local identity; and the Port Melbourne reputation for violence is not something often valorized by football, or local, historians.

The ground’s location is perhaps itself part of the story. It is not “in” Port Melbourne per se (though it was within the boundaries of the old City of Port Melbourne). Rather, it is near North Port station, closer to the suburbs of Montague and South Melbourne than to bayside Port Melbourne. Montague changed radically throughout the 20th century from dense residential to largely manufacturing and other industrial use; what might once have been a relatively central location for many became a 20-30 minute walk for most Port supporters. The ground was therefore untouched by the changes in, and green- or brownfield residential additions to, Port Melbourne itself, while remaining a frequent part of many Port Melbourne lives, as seen below.

The present authors have written elsewhere on the use of social media in cultivating a version of a preserved and remembered Port Melbourne amongst its putative working class members, many of them no longer living in the suburb (Nichols and Lewi, 2015). Port Melbourne Football Club’s status as a VFL, not AFL club, has perhaps marked it as even more important in the local sense (confusingly, the “A-list” teams in Australian Rules were “VFL” clubs until 1989).

Port Melburnites would traditionally support Port Melbourne in the VFA, and South Melbourne in the old VFL. It may well be that the move, in 1982, to force South Melbourne to become “Sydney” impacted on Port Melburnites’ determination to retain possession of their team and ground. Andrews writes that the relocation, and renaming of South Melbourne:

> demonstrated a total disregard for the traditional local roots and cultural significance of the club. Indeed, the move proved so unpopular with certain sections of the South Melbourne “community” that they became embroiled in an ultimately doomed three-and-a-half month court battle to keep the club in Victoria (Andrews, 114).

There are, perhaps unsurprisingly, a range of Facebook pages and groups dedicated to the Port Melbourne Football Club in various ways. These are illuminating in considering the importance of the physical setting of the club and its memories (Gregory, 2015).
One of these, “Save the Home of the Borough – North Port Oval Port Melbourne” began in October 2013 in direct response to the Fishermans Bend Urban Renewal Project: “Page 57 shows North Port Oval as a [sic] open space” the first post declared. The second was a link to a Herald Sun article announcing that Port Melbourne Football Club (and its spokesmen, general manager Barry Kidd and president Peter Bromley) “fears it could be wiped off the map” under the renewal plan:

The Bend’s draft vision shows North Port Oval marked as public open space and one of several “new or expanded parks... “If this proposal was to materialize it is likely to lead to the end of the Port Melbourne Football Club” Mr. Kidd said. He said if the oval’s perimeter fence was removed, the club would lose at least $250, 000 a year in ticket sales (McCauley 2013).

In addition to fears for the club’s finances, both Kidd and Bromley opined that were the club’s ground to be made accessible to schoolchildren, it would undoubtedly become “unplayable”. These kinds of debates between particular clubs’ claims to amenities and sporting grounds, versus the push towards opening up ovals and parks to more universal access and use, in particular for children, have been played out all over Australia in the 20th century as recorded in local newspapers and club minutes (Lewi, 2010 p. 167)

Andrews (1998, 112) writes of the “football communities”... based upon specific inner-city locales... which produced a strong sense of identity that was sharpened against the identities of rival suburbs and clubs. The Facebook page urged all supporters to have their say in feedback forums and to help “Keep Port at Port”. On the page, over two years of postings, we find an encapsulation of a remarkable range of ways history can be used in arguing for preservation of a space.

There remained a modicum of engagement amongst supporters until the page’s moderators sparked interest by asking “What are your most Memorable Moments at North Port Oval?” Many responses were directly related to the physicality of the ground, and the position at which contributors were placed; comments ranged from “Standing on the hill at the Willi rd [Williamstown Road] end with family watching Freddy slot through goals” to “The old grandstand behind the goals watching the games with Mrs Charles” and “Selling one and two cent lollies from the stall under the historical scoreboard in the days of Freddy Cook, Arms Anderson, Biff Dermott, etc, etc”.

A similar wave of memories was provoked in September 2014 with an image – seemingly a still from a videotape – of the well-loved, but now gone, “donut van” on the prominent “Port Melbourne Football Ground” page. Responses included:

I recall getting donuts on the way out... and we had a smile cause Port had won. My primary school days footy memories going to South on a Sat with my Nan thinking we will probably lose then off to Port on a Sunday with Margie knowing we would win... Shy girl on Saturdays then very confident girl on a Sunday.

It is notable that children’s early experience of football as both spectators and competitors are frequently cited in discussion of the value of North Port in the 21st century. There are numerous photographs of young (pre-teen) fans on the Port Melbourne Football Club site (the following quotes are from this site and attributed only to online “pen-names”). “Jane”, arguing in favour of retention of the ground on the Herald Sun’s report of its imperilment suggests that many children have their
“first kick of the cherry” on the ground; a peculiar, yet engaging, turn of phrase. Her further point was clear: “It is one of our oldest and finest football clubs and continues to serve us all very well. Leave it alone.” In the same brief thread, another correspondent suggests that Aussie Rules’ time at Port Melbourne has passed. Provocatively, he uses the term “football” to denote that which most Australians would still call “soccer”:

Thems the breaks, times are changing, the oval should be turned into football pitches to reflect what is really going on in Melbourne. Football is growing like never before, especially with kids & Aussie Rules is in decline. The stats back this up & this sort of explains the old guard media & their vicious attacks on football. But the people are speaking & councils must do what the will of the people is, not be stuck in some 1950’s time warp nostalgic dream world. The revolution is in full swing.

This correspondent is, unsurprisingly perhaps, in the minority. Most of those engaged in the debate were conservative in their approach. Another “Save the Home of the Borough” correspondent provided a lifetime’s worth of reminiscences, summing up not only affection for the team and players but also a life in Port Melbourne now largely gone:

I have so many after 40 years;- seeing us unfurl 7 flags, commiserating after 6 gf losses, my mum cooking burra burgers, all the volunteer jobs, bashing the nails out of tin on the fence, the great old players, our exciting young kids, banter with opposition supporters, abusing umpires, advising opposition players how to kick for goal, making friends with players and their families, friendships with other burra supporters, the great wins, the close loses, the games we were robbed in, winning finals, the rivalries, and now sharing it all with my fiancé, and some government department thinks they can take that all away - good luck trying - GO BURRA!

Indeed, a modicum of the old testiness rears up amongst the respondents. One, for instance, recalls “The many punch ons in the crowd and on the ground.” The importance of Port Melbourne in the national evolution of Australian Rules football is also emphasized; a short list published on the page under the title “Some firsts for the Borough – truly VFA’s most innovative club.” Here it is claimed that Port Melbourne players pioneered the wearing of numbers on guernseys (in 1905) and that the ground was the first to use a time clock (in 1896). “These are some of the most important innovations in the world,” a commenter suggests. Another adds that the North Port oval is important to the game generally, and not just to Port Melbourne itself. “It should not matter which VFL team you support,” writes one contributor, “this iconic ground needs to be kept open and viable. In an era [sic] that doesn't have a lot of its history preserved - this must be kept to preserve the history of the game in a heartland of it.”

Port Melbourne’s association with working class pride is identifiable as a key element in this discussion. This is well contrasted with another “Port” team – Fremantle Dockers, created as the “second” West Australian AFL team – who, Ray Jones writes, fabricated and inserted a working class history for itself into the fabric of gentrifying Fremantle. For Jones, this is starkly illustrated by the “near socialist realism” of the team’s logo (Jones 275); he claims that “the club has worked hard and relatively successfully to create the appearance of an apparently long-standing relationship between the team and the town” (276).
Another writer sums up much of the angst of old Port Melbournites in the face of gentrification:

I, like many would of loved to of bought in port but the new port has pushed prices so high that blue collar workers have to look 20 + k away with the new folk not having as much appreciation of the area as the people were born and bred there. This is evident at the footy. How many of the new folk buy a membership, attend games or even watch the team on tv? Hardly any and its that kind of lack of community support from the new people that the traditional port people think is just not good enough. If these new folk cant respect the people who have been in the area for years ... then they will ruin the feel of the area. I’m not saying that port should only be for people who have been in the area for years, if new people want to come in then by all means do so however they need to respect the people who have been there long before them... and perhaps blend in with the community instead of trying to change it.

Conclusion

The controversy over North Port Oval – a storm in a china tea cup, as it transpires – is one more example of the political charge attendant on Sports Clubs, their facilities and grounds. They have long been seen as markers of differentiation and belonging in a suburban context often characterized for its ubiquity. The allegiances and attachments they inspire are often not made manifest until these ordinary facilities and grounds are threatened or gone. This loss has been magnified in Australia with the change away from local football leagues, towards a fabricated national code, and most recently a shift (real or imagined) away from the AFL all together towards the international code of soccer.

Sporting history resonates therefore with histories of places that were once locally distinctive - in the case of Port Melbourne’s working class port and manufacturing economy – towards a gentrified and globalised community. Recreation moves, therefore, to gastro-pub lunches on café tables by the bay, instead of tea in china cups – or spectator fights for that matter – at the ground. These tensions and shared memories are being recorded, arguably more than ever before through social media platforms. Facebook and other local nostalgia sites therefore provide a potent resource in understanding attachments to local places that “matter” to local people, both in terms of potentially lost histories and in the face of urban redevelopment and regeneration. Potentially they can represent a (perhaps ad hoc) cataloguing of evidence of significance when arguing for the physical preservation of such sites of belonging and social sustainability (Dempsey et al, 2009).

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