

# EVOLVING PLACES IN CITIES

by Anna Chauvel, published in:

## *Drawing the Line*

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### Deliberations on Density



URBAN DESIGN FORUM WA

The book includes some other wonderful articles and a number of thought providing discussions. The book can be bought at **Boffins Books**, 88 William Street, Perth and via [Amazon.com.au](https://www.amazon.com.au), category Books / Urban & Land Use Planning.



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*“As a designer of the public realm – I want nothing more than to create great places. But what on earth is a great place? Our profession has been searching for an answer to this question since we began drawing plans from a bird’s eye view. Oh wait – perhaps that’s part of the problem. Top down thinking...!”*

# Evolving Places in Cities

It's a curious thing to have lived through an urban renaissance. I mean it's not like I'm a centenarian...I'm a female landscape architect in my late 40's...well actually just turned 50.... but nonetheless the urban renaissance I've witnessed hasn't taken centuries to unfold but only a decade.

The renaissance I'm talking about is the fundamental shift away from the omnipresent masterplan – the master hand of one person (predominantly male) – to a focus on people and their wellbeing in the design of places. If we are honest as a profession, the old school, top down approach to spatial planning has often resulted in vacuous places without soul or character.

As a designer of the public realm – I want nothing more than to create great places. But what on earth is a great place? Our profession has been searching for an answer to this question since we began drawing plans from a bird's eye view. Oh wait – perhaps that's part of the problem. Top down thinking....

Thinking about contemporary design, can great places be measured by the straightness of the bitumen boulevard, the land axis, or the street grid? Can it be measured by the precise placement of street trees, car bays, and street lights? Or is it the beautiful symmetry of the radial kerb designed to suit the perfect garbage truck?

The answer of course will be different depending on the context – but generally my personal measure of a great place is based on how much the place is loved and enjoyed.

Loved and enjoyed...strong terms for inanimate objects! But when we consider the implications of creating great places based on emotions and

experience, it is not difficult to draw comparison to other industries that place a great deal of emphasis on the emotive aspect of design. Consider the desirability of mobile phones, tablets, cars and watches. All of these are loved, valued and enjoyed by millions of people throughout the world.

For urban designers like myself, the idea of creating desirable places has lead our studio to think about 'experience' in the public realm. We began our place making journey over 10 years ago. Since then place making, place activation, place programming and place planning have become common terms in our vocabulary. It's all about place!

But wait a minute – is there a risk that PLACE is becoming the planner's panacea? Take for example the proliferation of 10-point plans, 5 steps to Place(ness), the idea that creating loved places can be codified and simplified.

The notion of codifying place making is nothing more than another version of top-down planning. While place making is a positive design tool, it's end goal is to ultimately create meaningful experience for people in public spaces. Human experience defines whether a place is great or not. Our perception of how good a place is formed from our personal memories, moments and stories. It is intrinsically linked to emotion.

But why is experience important? Over the last decade 'experience' has out stripped 'ownership of belongings' as the perceived source of happiness and life satisfaction. This is particularly true for millennials who seek to make, capture and share their daily experiences with friends as a status symbol of happiness. Their best memories are from those events or

activities that allow them to feel connected to people and community. Both real and digital.

Many businesses have cottoned onto the desirability factor of experience over ownership. This is impacting the way we relate to our environment and the real world in which we live. Take for example the way in which product designers describe themselves. They often refer to themselves as 'designers of experience'. Their design process is focused on improving user interaction and enjoyment, usability, access, and engagement with the senses. Typically, the deeper the emotional connection created between a person and a product, the greater it will be remembered and valued. It is also built upon a deep understanding of the customer, their behaviours, values, needs and motivation in life.

## What if we started applying this philosophy to the design of our cities?

The primary focus switches from a birds eye view and the usual town planning criteria of traffic planning, parking, yields and density, to the design based on the experiential qualities of the built environment. Just like product design, urban experience needs to be built upon a deep understanding of users, their behaviours, what they need and value, and what motivates them.

In a similar vein to product design, this process can be supported with data to identify their personas, quantify sentiment and emotion, identify patterns, and forecast future trends.

As I walk around the city I am often reminded of the town planner's devotion to the macro-scale. Big city blocks, long continuous inhumane frontages and endless windowless facades at street level, wide hot pavements. How people experience a place seems to be a total oversight at this macro-level. As a result, our cities are often filled with generic streets devoid of interest, comfort and vibrancy, and any compelling reason to linger. Why have we forgotten the human scale in city design?

The disconnect however is best highlighted when we compare the processes of other design industries that map 'user experience' to create rich personalised experiences. Why has planning and design theory become so disengaged from community reality? Why have we become laggards in respect to the creation of rich human experiences?

A counterpoint to the current paradigm of macro-scale, top down planning would be to design our cities based purely on experience - what would people see (visual) , feel (emotional + comfort) and do (activity), and how would they behave and interact with other people if they had enriched personal experiences?

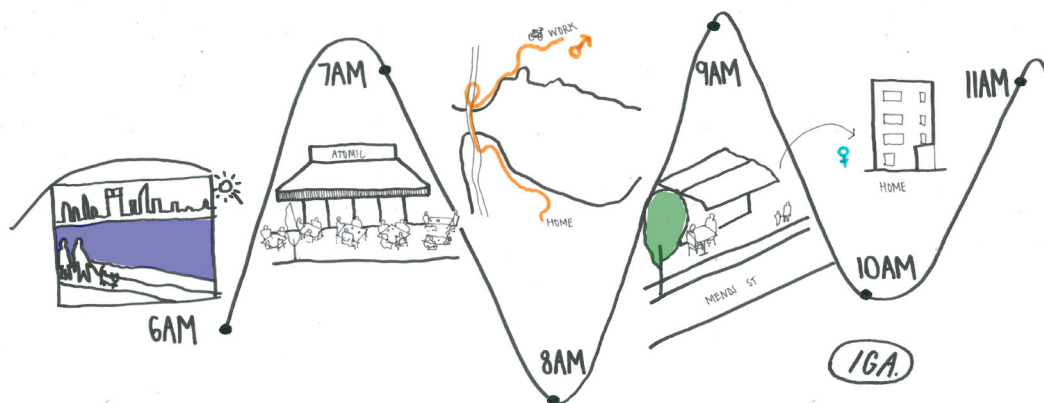
How would that change planning and architecture, the scale, identity, street layout, and land use? How might we then conceive of a better community connected to place and culture? And how might it be valued in the development of next generation cities?

The contemporary answer today perhaps sits in the nexus between subjective design theory and the use of data mining to determine real-time societal trends using technology to feel the pulse of a generation. The use of data to see trends,

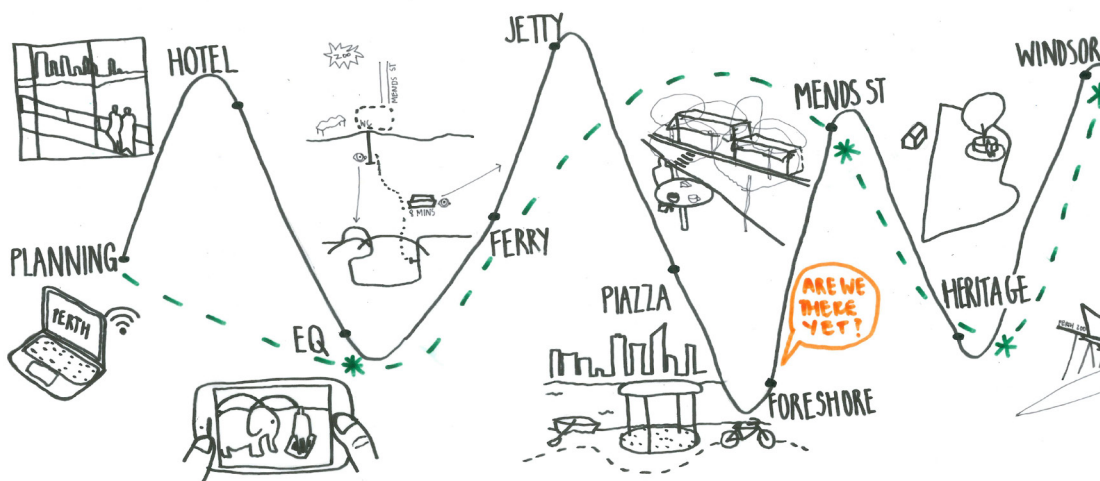
hear the issues of the moment and to translate these into city making objectives will transcend current top-down planning techniques in the long run. Localised data-rich stories about ourselves and what we believe in will result in cities that are spatially relevant, locally enticing to our individual beliefs and add personal value to the experiential enjoyment of cities.

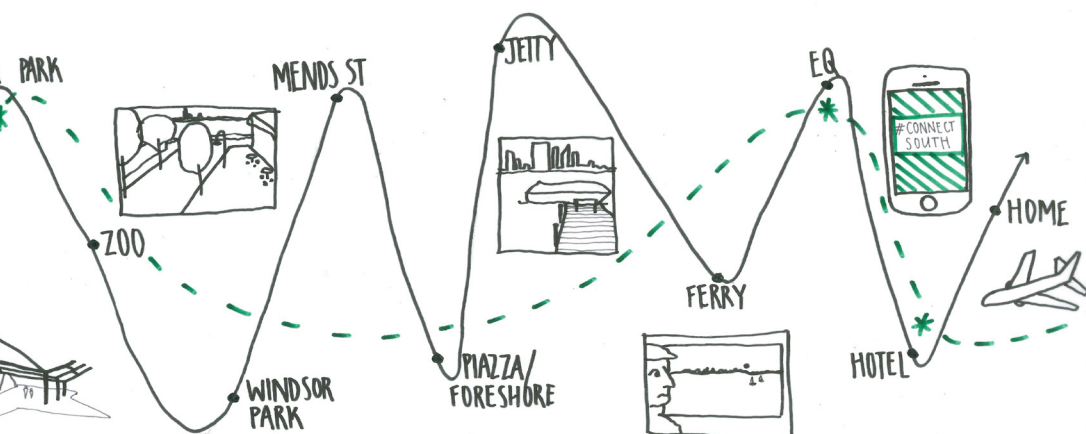
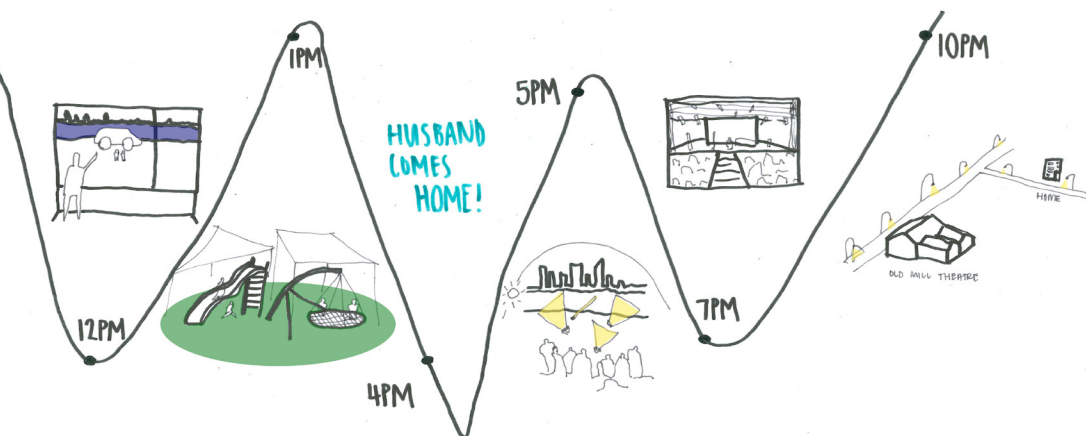
Sophisticated data analytics are already playing a role in product design, tailoring products to personal profiles. There is little reason to doubt that cities and their structure, layout and design intent will also succumb to the evolution of cities as places based on individual experiences. Place making for this generation is less likely to be top-down imposed spatial decisions but rather data driven analytics that captures the desires of a generation and creates places that are responsive, immediate and humanely connected.

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