

Flat white urbanism: there must be better ways to foster a vibrant street life

Written by Timothy Moore, PhD Candidate, Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne



The flat white experience is so ubiquitous that it could be anywhere. [mavo from www.shutterstock.com](http://mavo.from.www.shutterstock.com)

Iconic architectural pieces may attract large numbers of tourists but are not the only things that live in the memories of visitors to Australian cities. Everyday experiences also endure. In fact, eating is one of the top tourist activities.

It's also where the money is spent. According to Tourism Research Australia's [Tourism Satellite Account 2015-16 report](#), tourists spend the largest percentage of their money – about 21 cents in every dollar – on takeaways, restaurant meals and beverages.

It isn't just international tourists searching for memorable cafe and dining experiences – leisure-seekers from nearby suburbs or towns are too. According to Food Industry Foresight's [Coffee & Beverages In Australia](#) annual tracking study, Australians drink about two coffees out per week. That equates to about 1.8 billion espresso-based coffees a year, costing A\$7.3 billion.

So that cafes, restaurants and bars remain competitive, the architecture becomes part of the attraction. This has led to some ubiquitous design signifiers: white subway tiles, reclaimed timber, austere pendant lighting, white anodised SHS steel and exposed brick.

Additionally, cafe names often echo a civic rhetoric – see Common Ground, Public House, New School Canteen.



Cafes, for example Fitzroy's New School Canteen, often include a civic language in their names. [Google Streetview](#)

The replication of the cafe typology – each must have the right owner, the right coffee, and the

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right baristas, business name and interior designer – can be as tedious as the desire of city authorities to have a leisure landscape, a stadium, or an event to fill it.

Cities use these precincts and events as strategic tools to project an attractive image of themselves as they compete for tourist dollars, business investment, professional talent and the coveted high ranking in [liveability indexes](#) .

And Australia has many tourist leiscapes under construction. There's [Darling Square](#) , a A\$3.4 billion neighbourhood near Sydney's Darling Harbour; Perth's

[Elizabeth Quay](#)

, a mixed-use development of office, entertainment and residential buildings around a 2.7-hectare artificial river inlet; and the

[Gold Coast's expanded cultural precinct](#)

of 16.9 hectares, with Stage 1 to be delivered in time for the 2018 Commonwealth Games. And each comes with those ubiquitous cafes.

Leveraging the lure of the cafe

Property developers have recognised how to leverage the popularity of this “flat white tourism”. A nearby “cappuccino” strip can increase land values. It also helps with marketing apartment buildings: the promise of a cafe that anchors a new development is enticing for home buyers and investors.



The Artist complex in Melbourne, designed by Rijavec Architecture, includes ground-level apartments alongside a corner cafe. Google Streetview

Local councils also see cafes as desirable. To maintain street life, planning regulations often require active, public-facing street fronts, rather than blank walls, car parks, gardens or fences. The aim is to accommodate activity that encourages pedestrian interaction and casual surveillance.

Paired with changing consumer habits (such as online and mall shopping), the result is that many high streets are now dominated by the cafe, a sort of “high street lite”. The cafe appears

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to be a market-driven solution to achieve an active street front in Australian cities. This is flat white urbanism.

Consider the alternatives

Australians are not just consuming coffee. In fact, people are not just passively consuming cultural or leisure activities (such as going to bands or watching sport). Australians are making, doing and playing; active participation is on the rise around the country.

For example, the Australia Council study [Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts](#) highlighted that about one in three Australians is involved in creating visual art or craft. The Australian Bureau of Statistics'

[General Social Survey, 2014](#)

shows that 31% of Australians are also volunteering. This has put pressure on council services and raised questions about how councils can help enable community activity.

The availability of affordable and accessible space is a looming issue in major Australian cities. There is demand for more diverse uses at ground level – studios, live-work apartments, community rooms, kindergartens, ateliers, small-scale light industrial zones, education facilities.

But the desire among lessors for the maximum rental return means less profitable businesses or civic users can't afford street-fronting leases.

A way to fund diverse activity

The concept of the developer contribution offers an opportunity to reimagine the ground plane of apartment buildings, to diversify away from look-alike cafes. The developer contribution is a percentage of a building budget that goes to community infrastructure (for the health, safety or wellbeing of the community).



Berlin's many street-level artist workshops and studios attract visitors from far and wide. [La Citta Vita/flickr](#)

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At present, this money is generally channelled via council towards building libraries, multipurpose community centres, maternity health centres, sporting facilities or neighbourhood parks with play equipment. Cultural infrastructure seldom comes into the frame.

It is at the level of developer contribution that local councils can intervene. This could be through an ad-hoc process of negotiating more floors for the development in return for providing community space. Or it could be through rezoning, which is tied to developer contributions.

For example, developers could be granted a larger floor-area ratio through rezoning if they give a percentage of the building over to community use. This could include social housing.

A redefinition of what comprises community infrastructure could underpin this shift. This might extend to redefining public art contributions – developers are often required to provide a percentage of their project budget to public art. Would a subsidised artist studio be more valuable than a sculpture?

Urban policymakers have to be careful to maintain the uniqueness and distinctiveness of a place for both locals and tourists. Responding to the proliferation of cafes by creating incentives for, or regulating, other uses could be one way to diversify street life.

Then, cafes might not only give the appearance of a cultural scene, or of it being made somewhere nearby, or of it happening on the first floor. It is happening next door. This brings benefits to both the local and non-local coffee tourist.

The Conversation is co-publishing articles with [Future West \(Australian Urbanism\)](#), produced by the University of Western Australia's Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts. These articles look towards the future of urbanism, taking Perth and Western Australia as its reference point. The third issue launches next week. You can read other articles in the ongoing series [here](#).

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