

## Mansplaining Australian cities – we can do something about that

Written by Kerry Brown, Professor of Employment and Industry, School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University

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"I don't think there are many women who think, 'Oh, my ideal project would be a massive tower.'"  
" [Anthony Delanoix/Unsplash](#) , [CC BY](#)

The American writer Rebecca Solnit, in her groundbreaking collection of essays, including the eponymous [Men Explain Things To Me](#) , first used the term “mansplaining” to describe how men claim superior knowledge and control making the meaning of things.

In [her book](#) , she describes it as:

... the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence.

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**Further reading:** [Mansplaining the word of the year &ndash; and why it matters](#)

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With mansplaining in mind, men who created big visions about places have shaped our sense of the city. Think, for instance, of Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House and Robin Gibson's Brutalist architecture of the contemporary arts buildings across Southbank in Brisbane.

From its parks and gardens, to roads and traffic light systems, to iconic buildings, cities are known to be created by men.

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By capturing the narrative of the city's places through mansplaining, our experience of cities is dominated by towering office buildings, monolithic civic structures and efficient, looping steel transport networks. As a result, we often experience the world through what men say and decide the world is and does.

For women, these city structures don't hold so much design interest. As architect Fiona Scott [said](#) :

... I don't think there are many women who think, 'Oh, my ideal project would be a massive tower.'

The vibe of a city that makes us feel welcome, safe, happy and relaxed from the first moment is more than just the sum of how men plan and engineer a city. Women's voices and stories are present in the city but are missing from the mainstream.

Architect Paula Whitman, [writing](#) about the career progression of women architects, highlights that women want to be involved in benchmark projects but mostly in those projects making a cultural and environmental difference. As a result, women architects are often relegated to help-mate roles in building cities.

Solnit wrote about the place names of men and their exploits forming the fabric of New York City. She reimagined the city by renaming subway stations after women who contributed to history.

In Australia, from colonial times, women have built our cities, but their names and achievements went unrecognised. By naming places after them, inserting women into the landscape and language of the city, we can demonstrate women's contributions more clearly and fairly.

## Women's contribution to our cities

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Women have contributed to shaping our cities by being commissioned to create statues and memorials and designing communities, but their roles have become obscured.

Sydney-born [Daphne Mayo](#) was a sculptor commissioned to work on the Brisbane City Hall. With the Queensland-born artist [Vida Lahey](#), she established the Queensland Art Reference Library at the University of Queensland in 1936.

The pair set up an art acquisition fund, the Queensland Art Fund, sourcing important works of art – including William Dobell's [The Cypriot](#) – for the Queensland Art Gallery. Public sculptures Mayo created included the Queensland Women's War Memorial in Anzac Square and a statue of Sir William Glasgow.

Mayo was awarded an MBE in 1959. Yet the name of Daphne Mayo and the pioneering work of Queensland's first female sculptor are not well known outside of architecture and academia.

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***You can explore Daphne Mayo's Brisbane on the public interactive map below. If you find yourself in the area, you can use mapping pins to contribute your own observations and upload snippets of multimedia. (Click at top right to enlarge the map, then select Edit to the left of the map.)***

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Likewise, Western Australia's first qualified town planner, [Margaret Feilman](#), has largely disappeared from public knowledge. Among her many achievements, she led her town planning team in the government of Western Australia to establish Kwinana, a refinery dormitory town for 25,000 people 40 minutes south of Perth.

While politicians pressed to industrialise and boost the state's economy, Feilman was adamant residents should be housed away from the refinery and the fumes blown by the prevailing wind.

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In the 1950s, she established the state's first formal environmental group, the Tree Society, and adopted a holistic approach to heritage, promoting a robust connection between the natural, built and indigenous environments.

[Dolores Hayden](#), in her 1980 essay, asked “[What would a non-sexist city be like?](#)”. For Hayden, the arbitrary division between home and city should be blurred, open and more accessible. Community space for childcare, recreation and communal activities should be in close proximity.

Hayden advocates for communal services, especially child care, aged care and health, with a focus on co-operatives to supply household services. She reinvents the neighbourhood to give people connection and spaces to play and interact, and to prevent them living in isolation.

in her 2016 book [Places Women Make](#), [Jane Jose](#) examines how the spaces we inhabit shape our happiness. She [writes](#) :

Shared public places and the way they are created will be crucial to successful, enjoyable urban life.

Jose cites the contribution of women to our cities, seeing liveliness, vibrancy and liveability as hallmarks of this influence. According to Jose, men are the “hero architects” creating city buildings. But surprising, inspiring, delightful places – sea pools, museums, libraries, gardens and walks – are ways women add meaning to cities.

## A way forward

Psychogeography refers to the intimate relationship between psychology and geography. Typically, it involves wandering – or *dériving*, a term from the French referring to drift – unplanned journeying through a landscape, typically urban. It can be a way to make the invisible visible, or the unseen observable.

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When used with a purposeful theme such as “women’s contributions to shaping the city”, it can help to focus attention on what is present in a place and what is missing. Siobhan Lyons recently [discussed](#) the techniques in relation to uncovering the “soul of a city”.

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**Further reading:** [Psychogeography: a way to delve into the soul of a city](#)

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Dorothy Wardale and Linley Lord used psychogeography to reveal the corporate culture of a university. They found, for example, men’s achievement dominated images around the university.

[Deborah Knowles employed it](#) to see how organisations are experienced from a feminist perspective and to give back visibility to women’s roles in the workplace.

Anyone can easily use the process:

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Choose a topic or a theme.

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Start to wander or *dérive* around a location. If you don’t want to wander solo, possibly find a walking buddy.

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As you wander, note artefacts, buildings, graffiti, signage, conversations, noises, smells – anything, really – and do it with a sense of fun.

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When you've had enough (allow at least 60 minutes, but you could *dérive* for hours or days), try to make sense of your observations.

Record your observations by taking photos, making a voice recording, or writing down your impressions, ideas and feelings. You may like to try taking photos without using the viewfinder, according to the principles of [lomography](#) : "Don't Think. Just Shoot."

By tapping into psychogeography, rather than accepting the mansplained version of our cities, we may find it is women after all who have created the conditions for liveability.

Women have made significant contributions to cities from colonial times, when [Lady Jane Franklin founded Ancanthe](#) , a museum in Hobart, Tasmania, in 1842, to the modern era, with the work of Margaret Feilman in designing entire townships. If men build cities and claim a heroic narrative, women build communities and the stories of connection.

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