Optimism, Happiness and Revenge – emotion and the politics of ‘urban renewal-speak’ in an Australian suburb

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Abstract
This paper argues that through an examination of the affective and emotional dimensions of ‘urban renewal-speak’ we can see how the political mood of the present is underwritten by an investment in future happiness (often to the detriment of the present). Situating the revenge of urban renewal within this frame throws new light on the motivations of such revenge, which is cast here, not so much as retaliatory retribution, but as a desperate attachment to the optimism of renewal in the face of an unpromising neoliberalism.

Keywords: Urban renewal, Footscray, revenge, revanchism, cruel optimism, happiness

Introduction
This paper examines the affective dimensions of urban renewal in Australia. It focuses on how emotion circulates through ‘urban-renewal-speak’ in Footscray, an inner western suburb of Melbourne. Urban renewal, considered here as a paradigm of market-led remediation, both orchestrates and coheres with an ambience of the historical present—what Raymond Williams called a ’structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977).

As the social conditions of advanced capitalism fluctuate in the face of large scale de-industrialisation, economies increasingly turn to real estate (re)development to drive growth (Harvey, 1989; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, Rodriguez, 2002). In this precarious context, urban renewal is optimistically cast as a strategy for happy futures. This optimism is however paradoxically entwined with a host of gloomier emotions, and this paper attends in particular to the entanglement of revenge and optimism in the urban renewal of one Melbourne suburb – Footscray. I suggest the optimistic attachment to urban renewal by local and state government, and by those who are charged with its design and implementation, is one that depends on revenge to sustain it.
In the course of my research revenge surfaced as an unacknowledged, perhaps even unconscious force. It presented itself in the optimistic ‘speak’ of urban renewal, through a discourse that fixated on approaches and policies to remove all perceived obstacles to the optimism it promoted. Uncovering such revanchism or urban revenge is not in itself novel. Smith’s (1996) assertion that vengefulness overtook gentrification as the script for urban renewal in the 1990s has since been analysed for its relevance in a range of settings (Atkinson 2003; Davis 1990; MacLeod 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Thörn, 2011). Revenge in the renewal context refers to policies that claim to solve social problems, but instead pursue their disappearance and displacement (Atkinson, 2003; Smith, 1996). Disappearance is achieved by means of urban cleansing, implemented through revenge policies such as policing, criminalising and dislocating the deviant and deprived who are alleged to have ‘stolen’ the city from others (Smith, 1996). Smith argues that this revenge is motivated by malevolence, the bourgeoisie asserting that its entitlement to particular space is greater than that of the poor. However, the revenge discerned in Footscray appears to be driven less by conscious ill-will than by a logical imperative to hold on to a fragile optimism. It is not the conscious retribution for injury that generally characterises this modality of revenge, but as I will argue, it is a particular form of revenge that emerges from an equally particular form of optimism.

The optimism of urban renewal can be productively understood by considering Lauren Berlant’s (2006, 2011) concept of cruel optimism, and Sara Ahmed’s (2010) notion of the happiness duty. The modifiers of cruel and duty point, in advance, to the gloomy emotional elements underlying the affective nature of these conceptions. These modifiers encapsulate the very dependence of urban renewal optimism on revenge, but not so as to suggest that revenge is the cruelty referred to. The cruelty of the optimism, which I explore later, inheres in the very necessity to sustain the optimism. The impulse to sustain the optimism is therefore a greater affective force in urban revanchism than is the desire for revenge.

This paper unfolds through three necessarily condensed sections. A brief sketch of a research project on urban renewal is followed by a discussion of Berlant’s public feelings (2011) and Ahmed’s political emotions (2010), both of which I draw on to evoke the sensorial milieu of urban renewal-speak where revenge inheres with optimism. Some brief examples from my research will show how revenge presents itself and how it emerges from optimism.

**Urban Renewal in the suburbs**

Urban renewal programs in Australia have historically been modest in scope, focusing largely on the remediation of housing stock and social mix of residents (see: Gleeson and Randolph, 2000). The urban renewal addressed here is more extensive, both in scale and intent, with aspects such as social mix and estate renewal incorporated into these larger programs. In Footscray, the local council has adopted ‘a more whole of city approach … to replace previous approaches’ (Maribyrnong City Council, June 2012).

Urban renewal is a major state-sponsored strategy for increasing private investment in cities, suburbs and neighbourhoods, with the explicit promise of improving opportunities for residents, employees, and business (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Imrie and Raco, 2003; Imrie
In contemporary Australia large scale urban renewal is mostly associated with post-industrialism, tending to focus on neglected or declining deindustrialised suburbs offering opportunities for ‘brownfield’ development. The largest such programs in Victoria in recent times have been the development of a decaying waterfront, ‘Docklands’, and the imminent development of its post-industrial neighbour, the Fisherman’s Bend Urban Renewal project, lately heralded as the largest renewal program in Australia (Minister for Planning, September, 2012).

The Footscray program is smaller than Docklands and Fishermans Bend, but still involves hefty state sponsorship. Footscray, adjacent to Melbourne’s container port, is considered one of Melbourne’s last untapped inner urban areas. The pressure for re-generation has been intense, if constantly stalled by problems of ‘image’. Thus a state government brochure that promises Footscray is Changing, commits to ‘improv[ing] Footscray’s image and investment feasibility… to build a new brand, and an initiatives-driven investment attraction campaign’ (DPCDa, 2011).

Since 1980, Footscray has been transformed into a classic post-industrial suburb, characterised by high levels of poverty and social inequality. Industrial employment has declined during the 1980s and by 1990, Melbourne’s West had the highest unemployment rates in the metropolis (Dodson and Berry, 2004). In the decade that followed, ‘new industrialisation’ rhetoric circulated without realisation, and as Dodson and Berry point out Melbourne’s West remains economically vulnerable (2004). Official data portray Footscray as deeply disadvantaged, located as it is in Greater Melbourne’s second most disadvantaged LGA (ABS, 2006), and is exceptionally diverse, with 42 per cent of the population speaking a first language other than English (ABS, 2012).

Footscray is also persistently presented as unsafe and dangerous. It is represented as a centre of illicit drug dealing and usage, and is typified by the public consumption of alcohol (Dwyer, 2007; Oakes, 2012a). It continues to be regarded as one of Victoria’s ‘heroin capitals’ (Milovanovic, 2010; AIC, 2012). Footscray is a busy transport hub, and a meeting place for those who may have once lived there but who have now been pushed to the outer urban fringes (Fieldsite interviews 2009, 2011). The ongoing media attention paid to the street presence of potentially ‘dangerous’ African men who gather communally in particular parts of the suburb (Oakes, 2012b) increases public perception of the area as unsafe.

Urban renewal in Footscray is coeval with concerns about public safety, and proper utilisation of public space. These issues are not framed as arising from structural disadvantage, inadequate service provision, or the availability of stable and affordable housing, but rather as threats to public safety and the income and investment opportunities foregone by the public presence of undesirable people and behaviours (Seymour Strategists, 2010). Urban renewal programs are thus loaded up with particular challenges in places like Footscray and it is through the power of ‘urban renewal-speak’ that an atmosphere of optimistic futurity circulates.
The study and its methods

The study utilised a multi-disciplinary team from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, social geography and urban planning. Our key priority was to explore the tensions between, on the one hand, policy responses to the needs and aspirations of existing residents, inhabitants, businesses and services; and what we saw as the contrasting imperative to frame urban policy for future visions to attract new money, increased commercial investment, and new consumers, residents and businesses.

We undertook participant observation in several designated public sites including street malls, shopping complexes, railways stations and plazas; 22 structured interviews were conducted with people who lived, worked or visited the suburbs. Participants were recruited opportunistically through existing contacts, service organisations and people we met during participant observation who we invited to participate. Four focus group discussions were held with retailers in both suburbs and 40 informal conversations with people in public places took place. We also interviewed 18 local government personnel (land use planners, urban designers and community planners), four state government planners, three managers in two state planning statutory authorities overseeing the renewal programs in each suburb, and two property developers who continue to have commercial interests in renewal projects. We attended council meetings in Maribyrnong over a four-month period during 2009 and 2010 and analysed a significant amount of written material on the urban renewal missions and program implementation in each area, including public records of council meetings and official government documents.

Political emotions, public feelings—the entanglement of revenge and optimism

The ‘revanchist city’ is Smith’s (1996:42) term for the revenge tactics of moral and material cleansing. His point is that despite the optimism attached to gentrification, the city is underwritten by gloom, issuing from the effects of deregulation, privatisation, welfare cuts and shrinking social budgets. Revanchism has by now had extensive treatment in the urban studies literature. In the US, resonant with Smith’s (1996) attention to the cleansing policies of a vengeful public, Davis (1990) highlights the design-led punitiveness against the homeless in Los Angeles, while Mitchell (2003) points to the increasing laws and regulations introduced to criminalise the homeless. In the UK ‘actually existing revanchism’ (MacLeod, 2002) and the ‘competing forms of revanchism’ or the relative ‘degrees of revanchism’ (Atkinson, 2003) have been analysed alongside the processes of legitimating revanchism through discourses of ‘public safety’ and ‘security’ (Raco, 2003). European revanchism is variously understood as either more or less ‘heavy-handed’, ‘softer’ or more ‘ambient’ and ‘seductive’ than the revanchism that emerges from the US and UK (Atkinson, 2003; MacLeod, 2002; Thörn, 2011; Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008). Atkinson imaginatively sums up these approaches as domestication of public space by either cappuccino or revenge (2003). That is, the cappuccino design-led soft approach of exclusion through an increasingly aestheticised symbolic economy of public space (Zukin, 1995) or more direct vengeful acts of expulsion (Smith, 1996). Atkinson (2003:1830) acknowledges that whatever the approach ‘it is likely that part of the reality behind these programs is mundane: organisations and people simply doing their job.’
The upshot is the same—the elimination of undesirables, for the purpose of increasing the marketability of the city through ‘an ideology that seeks to displace rather than tackle social problems in order to clean up the city’ (Atkinson, 2003:1831).

Revenge is cast here as a public and political emotion, yet there is plenty of conjecture about whether revenge can even be considered an emotion. These arguments pivot (philosophically) around whether revenge should be understood as an action brought about by an emotion (such as anger) or giving rise to an emotion (such as pleasure) but not as an emotional state itself (see Newberry, 2001). On the absence of extensive discussion of vengeance in psychology Frijda (2007) notes that although it may not be considered an emotion itself, the desire for revenge or the urge to retaliate, most certainly is. ‘The desire is an emotion’ (Frijda, 2007:260 – my emphasis) Similarly for Weber, ‘Emotion is in the need for revenge’ (Barbalet, 2001: 52).

Urban revenge emerges, therefore, from both need and desire—to sustain optimism in renewal’s capacity to deliver a version of the good life after industrialism. Sustaining this optimism, which, via Berlant, may be identified as its cruelty, is a self-preserving rather than retaliatory gesture. This self-preservation becomes clearer through cruel optimism and the happiness duty.

Starting with her claim that public spheres are affect worlds, Berlant (2006, 2011) theorises the historical present as an emotionally charged time. When she characterises the ‘structure of feeling’ of this historical present as ‘cruel optimism’, she is not referring to the experience of optimism but to its affective structure, or its relationality. Cruel optimism, she says, is ‘a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility’ (2011:13). For Berlant, all attachment is optimistic—for example attachment as love, intimacy, sexuality; or attachment to voting and even a belief in the meritocracy of capitalism. Optimism is cruel though when the kind of relation or attachment (to something) impedes the flourishing that motivated the initial attachment. Cruel, she argues, is not the same as disappointing.

The cruelty of such optimistic attachment lies in the crushing sense of incoherence experienced when the object invested in starts to reveal itself as deficient, or in Berlant’s words begins to ‘fray’ or ‘fade.’ Yet the very presence of the object represents the possibility of happiness. Losing the object therefore might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it. Even, or more precisely especially, in the face of evidence that advanced capitalism is no longer able or willing to produce the conditions or opportunities conducive to attaining the good life (e.g. forms of participatory democracy or prospects for social mobility), attachment to unachievable fantasies of the ‘good life’ persist.

We might think here of those charged with rolling out renewal programs bureaucrats, urban planners and designers, local councilors and workers, whose professionalism and skill are attached to urban renewal as an object that will, at some time in the future, produce some form of the good life. These implementers areoptimistically attached to urban renewal in ways that are damaging to themselves, to particular groups of people and for communities. This is characterised by Berlant (2011) as the impasse – when attachments are injurious to ourselves and others yet we remain attached for fear of having or being nothing. Cruel optimism means
that ‘the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation’ (Berlant, 2011:2).

This optimism corresponds to some extent with the promise of happiness that Ahmed (2010) has outlined. In the midst of the deteriorating social and economic conditions of advanced capitalism, Ahmed (2004, 2010), suggests that emotion does a good deal of political work. Creating particular objects and people as desirable, valuable or virtuous is a crucial part of that work. Moreover, responding to the slew of ‘happiness studies’ and guidebooks on the market, Ahmed critiques the imperative to be happy - the ‘happiness duty’. This duty orients us towards what she calls ‘happy objects’ because happiness is promised to follow our proximity to such objects (2010:21). She explores the association here between value, virtue, and happiness asking ‘not only what makes happiness good but how happiness participates in making things good’ (Ahmed, 2010:13).

While inhabitants, planners and local bureaucrats might sometimes express reservations about urban renewal’s virtue, some of them reported to us that the cost of raising questions about aspects of the policy and its logic, is to produce oneself as an outsider, a spoiler, or, as Ahmed coins it, a ‘killjoy’—not just as someone who has questions, but someone who is politically and professionally irresponsible. It becomes a normative duty to participate in the register of happiness. “How could you possibly object to improving this place?”

Footscray, produced as an unhappy place, now, through the promise of urban renewal, considers itself rather virtuously as ‘open for business’. According to one local bureaucrat we interviewed, such free market language represents an approach which has recently insinuated itself deeply in the ethos of local government. This occurs through the register of happiness. He says:

> We are ‘open for business’, we want ‘street activation’, we want new retail outlets...we rarely talk about people, we rarely talk about communities, we talk about making a place to consume, to walk through, to leave, but never a place in which to ‘be’...this is a really significant shift...we have had a major shift in our organisation from citizenship engagement to stakeholder relationships, where stakeholder means the private sector or the captains of industry… (Local Government Planner, June 2011).

The process of reproducing happiness out of unhappiness in this urban domain relies on an unspoken revenge against those blockages to happiness. Revenge as repair, is adopted as a strategy to remove the gloomy elements of place. This is expressed in policy speak that now pervades the suburb—‘improving perceptions of safety’, ‘enhancing the image’, ‘removing barriers’ to urban investment, ‘producing modern, vibrant streetscapes’. In the register of optimism and happiness, these slogans also trigger negative (not happy) emotions that become attached to specific objects, places, people and practices. An example of this revenge/repair strategy is given here:

> In Footscray where we have state government interest in the ‘central activities district’ combined with a traditional street based drug trade and public drinking, one of the principals that guides street based urban planning and placemaking now is to reduce and get rid of all public amenity seats…because we don’t want these people staying….but we don’t have a culture now where we can debate this. These are powerful values [of urban renewal] that are not unpacked (Local Government Planner, June 2011).
This is a renewal strategy of vengeful banishment, not because the urban renewers are personally hostile to ‘undesirable’ people, but because their presence stands in the way of the programmers’ own (cruel optimistic) relational attachments to the future that renewal promises. The scenes of happiness they seek to deliver don’t stand a chance in the face of the intensifying marginalisation and inequality that neoliberalism spawns (see Wacquant, 2009, 2010). Their fixed attachment however resembles the frantic movement-while-standing-still of Berlant’s ‘impasse’ and the persistently active orientation towards Ahmed’s ‘happy objects.’ Here it is possible to comprehend a particular type of revenge, not one so much of entitlement, in the vein of Smith (1996), but one of self-protection from crumbling self-coherence amid the obvious incapacity of contemporary capitalist societies to deal with underlying causes of the unhappiness that must (now) be banished.

The constant surfacing of revenge in urban renewal speak

To illustrate the above argument I give four examples of the surfacing of revenge in urban renewal-speak in the suburb of Footscray. First, observing people at the busy Footscray railway station, I engaged a local inhabitant in conversation as he complained about the poor design of the new railway overpass. His grievance related to the large, ‘decorative’ holes in the roof design that allows the rain to flood the path. He told me:

I have hated this design since it was completed, as I have nearly slipped and hurt myself many times. I’ve seen it happen to other people too. I know it’s supposed to make the place look fancy and encourage us to think we’re becoming something in Footscray, but its horrible. But recently I happened to be talking to a bloke I play soccer with and I found out he worked on the design and construction of this bridge. I asked him why on earth they designed it like this, and he told me it was to keep the homeless out. I was so shocked.

(Local resident, October 2011)

Here revenge surfaces as an intrinsic element of urban renewal.

Second, at a council Planning Meeting, a local councilor was decrying the concentration of African people and their shops in the centre of the activities district, which he considered a deterrent to potential investors.

I’ve tried to tell the Africans that they could make more money if they go somewhere else. All their cafes and small shops are in one area; they are all competing against each other; that’s not how you do business. If we encourage them to move and explain things to them that area may change. (Local Councilor, Planning Meeting, February 2010)

This is not angry retribution. Nonetheless the congregate presence of marginal African businesses is an obstruction to the renewal fantasy.

Third, in a similar but more vengeful register, at a consultation meeting between residents, local councilors, council urban designers and planners, to discuss proposed design changes to the area surrounding the railway station, ideas about creating a better, more modern and friendly feel were being canvassed. The tenor of the discussion is reflected by these comments:
We need to attract different people here, that is the only way we will deal with what happens in the CAD now...We can’t say who, but we have to change the make up of the suburb. (Local Government Planner, September 2009)

If only those anti-social type people didn’t take over the mall...there are more and more of them here really...and as for the shops in the area, they are appalling. I’m sorry. The whole area is just awful and really needs some work. We need cafes and nice places. (Local resident at community meeting. September, 2009)

“We can’t say who” but certainly not those who are here at the moment. This is a quintessential moment of ‘cappuccino and revenge’.

Fourth, to end this discussion, an example from the strategic reimaging of Footscray. Since 2004 the state government and the local council have been developing strategies to promote a new image of the suburb. The initial approach was based on the views of residents, local businesses and other regular visitors. The city was affectionately promoted as ‘safe, artsy, edgy, affordable, diverse’ (DPCDb, 2010). This translated into a representation of the suburb as ‘gritty’, in an attempt to reconcile urban renewal aspirations with the reality of those who inhabit the suburb. As Shaw (2006: 198) identifies in gentrifying inner Sydney, for some real estate marketing, this ‘edge of danger is part of the attraction of city living’. More recently however, marketing consultants have recommended a removal of those ‘gritty’ elements from the suburb’s self-branding, recommending instead action for ‘tangible change’. Two of the most pressing changes recommended are to (i) disaggregate the needle exchange (a critical service for drug users in Footscray) and (ii) promote greater police patrolling of central public areas – plaza and railway (Footscray Central Activities District – Investment Attraction Strategy -Seymour Strategists, December 2010).

Conclusion

In this brief excursion I hope to have provided an indication of the affective and emotion-laden dimensions of ‘urban renewal-speak’. Implicit here is the orchestration of and by an ambience of the political present. I have briefly explored the entanglement of optimism and revenge in urban renewal, where revenge emerges, not so much from a malevolent desire for retribution, but as an inevitable consequence of the need to sustain optimism in urban renewal. If not renewal, then what? This ‘structure of feeling’ or ambience of the historical present, as grasped through urban renewal is indeed one of cruel optimism.

Footnotes

1. I have been conducting researching in Footscray and Dandenong since 2000. I began collaborative research on urban renewal in 2008 and continue to work in both suburbs. The University of Melbourne provided funding for the research project: Urban Revitalisation, Public Space and Intercultural Encounters – Investigators: Ghassan Hage, Ruth Fincher, Maree Pardy (2008-09). Seed funding for a new phase of the project was provided the University of Melbourne: Placemaking: Social Equity and Cultural Diversity in Urban Renewal (2011-12) – Investigators: Ruth Fincher, Haydie Gooder, Maree Pardy, Kate Shaw.
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